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"Spring and All": Forging a Link to the Present Moment

Travis P. Timmons



FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

“SPRING AND ALL: FORGING A LINK TO THE PRESENT MOMENT”

By

TRAVIS P. TIMMONS

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Travis P. Timmons defended on March 28th, 2008.

R.M. Berry
Professor Directing Thesis

Robin T. Goodman
Committee Member

Barry Faulk
Committee Member

Approved:

Stanley Gontarski
Director of Graduate Studies

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.

I dedicate this thesis to Katie, my lovely wife, for her love, infinite patience, emotional and intellectual support, endless ideas, and commitment to helping me complete this project.

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ABSTRACT

In *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams asserts that his readers' perception is alienated from the world by a "barrier." In particular, he argues that these readers are alienated from the present moment. This state of alienation is affected and maintained, in part, by a version of false art, which Williams deems the "the beautiful illusion." In this thesis, I argue that *Spring and All* is Williams's attempt to both articulate the alienation problem through the text's prose and resolve the problem by creating the present moment through the text's poems, thus presenting readers the opportunity to remove "the barrier" to their perception of the world.

In order to provide a framework for theorizing about our perception of temporality, I turn to Jean-Francois Lyotard's essay, "The Sublime and the Avant Garde," for his philosophy of the present moment. Lyotard's essay, which theorizes the impulse driving modernism, characterizes the present moment as simply "the event," an occurrence preceding our understanding of what that occurrence means. Lyotard argues that such an artist event is sublime in its incommensurability to our understanding, demonstrating the notion that something, rather than nothing has occurred. I argue that the stake of Williams's aesthetic in *Spring and All* is embedded in this impulse. I examine how the impulse to create the present moment is at work in four of the text's poems, revealing that *Spring and All* is firmly set within the modernist impulse that Lyotard articulates.

INTRODUCTION

“*Spring and All* is a fooling-around book that become a crucial book.”

—Webster Schott (“Introduction” 85)

In 1923, William Carlos Williams published *Spring and All* through his friend Robert McAlmon’s Contact Publishing Company in Dijon, France. This occasion was the sole instance that the text was printed, aside from its inclusion in the 1971 multi-work posthumous volume *Imaginations*. With a print run of 300 copies, *Spring and All* was received with little fanfare—a humble beginning for a text that James Breslin deems “one of the major documents of modern literature” (Breslin 51) and Charles Altieri declares to be “probably [Williams’s] best volume” (Altieri 45). Critical attempts to assess *Spring and All*’s significance range from arguments about the text’s formal innovations, such as Williams’s treatment of the poet line “to distribute emphasis” on each word and image (Breslin 81), to arguments about Williams’s own attempt “to make contact” with the world in the process of creating this text (Duffey 136-7).

Regardless of the specific argument, critics are united in recognizing the groundbreaking format of Williams’s experimental text: *Spring and All* is a curious and unusual reading experience due to a number of experimental elements that defy literary conventions. The text is filled with both prose and poetry. Indeed, some of Williams’s most beloved and anthologized poems—such as “Spring and All,” “The Farmer,” “The Rose,” “To Elsie,” and “The Red Wheelbarrow”—were published in *Spring and All*. These poems along with the text’s twenty-two others, however, appear untitled on the page and are simply numbered chronologically in an orderly fashion. The poems are sprinkled throughout *Spring and All*’s prose, sometimes interrupting a narrative or marking a thematic division between prose paragraphs. On the other hand, *Spring and All*’s prose is characterized by frequent fragmentation and self-interruption, a narrative moving discursively from one theme to another, and typographical oddities, such as chapter titles that are numerically out of order.

Spring and All discusses a number of themes related to the creative process and the reception of art, especially poetry. The text is concerned with what art does and where it comes

from. In a basic sense, the text resembles a literary manifesto in that Williams stridently advocates, sometimes quite shrilly, a specific aesthetic position. On the surface, the major tenants and themes of the aesthetic he affirms can be paraphrased roughly as follows: the right sort of art and poetry affirms reality in a sense more fundamental than any other form of expression; modernist art is the aesthetic most concerned with affirming reality; the distinction between prose and poetry is the reality-affirming function of the latter; artistic tradition is lifeless and stultifying. In a quantitative sense, however, *Spring and All* is largely a celebration of the imagination, especially in praising this faculty's ability to connect humans to reality through the creation and experience of art and poetry.

With all these prominent themes and its twenty-seven poems, *Spring and All* offers a unique opportunity to experience Williams's aesthetic both as it is stated and then executed in the text's poems. Although it is common for avant-gardists to pen "explanations" of their art, I cannot think of another instance where the author includes the theory so close to the practice. This side-by-side proximity of theory and practice offers readers an enriched experience for taking stock of Williams's aesthetic. Indeed, the expression of Williams's aesthetic is what draws me to *Spring and All* in the first place.

As J. Hillis Miller notes, to evoke the broad and customary organizing metaphors that characterize literary epochs, the prose passages of *Spring and All* "are [Williams's] fullest expressions of a subtle theory of poetry which rejects both the mirror and the lamp, both the classical theory of art as imitation, and the romantic theory of art as transformation" (Miller 97). Miller, along with other critics, asserts that instead of being classical or romantic in a conventional sense, Williams's aesthetic follows an alternative path of capturing "the thing itself" (97). For Williams, poems are things. Jennifer Ashton summarizes this philosophy when she states that for Williams a poem "can only be a thing" as opposed to a representation of something other than itself (Ashton 134); Hugh Kenner adds that for Williams, "words share thinghood with things" (Kenner 81).

Williams himself provided much of his own fodder for this assessment of his aesthetic. For instance, in *Spring and All* he advocates poems that "have as their excellence an identity with life since they are as actual, as sappy as the leaf of the tree which never moves from one spot" (Williams 101). "As actual, as sappy as the leaf," indicates the place that Williams assigns in the world for poetry and language: words themselves have material properties; they are not

merely representations of material properties. Summarizing the ontological status of a Williams's poem, Rod Towney describes it as "a natural object," becoming "another object under the sun" possessing an independent existence like any object from the natural world (Towney 141). Added to the notion that poems are things is the notion that, for Williams, poems harness dynamic energy as they are composed and experienced by the imagination. Miller notes that a Williams's poem "is a growth, a process" (Miller 97).

Although I believe these accounts of Williams's aesthetic are correct, especially in differentiating Williams from the classical and romantic notions of art, I believe that these accounts risk merely summarizing what Williams himself already states about his aesthetic, rather than engaging what is at stake in the aesthetic. Williams's aesthetic begs us to consider questions such as: what does it mean to call a poem a thing? In what sense is a "thingy" poem dynamized? What is at stake by asserting that a poem is a thing, etc.? My thesis is an attempt to address the stakes in Williams's anti-classical and anti-romantic aesthetic as it emerges on the fascinating pages of *Spring and All*.

I propose that Williams's poems are best understood, not simply as static things, but as events. This unifying concept allows us to consider jointly the "thingness" of a Williams's poem along with its dynamism. To speak of a poem as an event is to say that a poem is an event as opposed to being a message, a statement, or a reflection of reality or an expression of the poet's inspiration or mood. Thus, the poem resembles a thing in being an end in itself, not an instrumentalized vehicle for conveying messages or statements. Breslin nicely summarizes this state of being for the poem: "The chief theme of Williams's critical prose ... is that the poem is not a vehicle for thought, or for the recitation of events, but a physical object, an organization of sounds and rhythms" (Breslin 79).

To develop the notion of Williams's poems as events, it is necessary to explicate our temporal relationship to events. Such an account allows us to more precisely locate a poem's temporality in relation to our experience of it. Jean-Francois Lyotard's essay, "The Sublime and Avant Garde," provides precisely this explanation in relation to modern art. In a broad sense, Lyotard's essay is an account of the impulse propelling modernism. Essentially, Lyotard characterizes modernism and the avant-garde as movements concerned with the happening, in temporal terms, of the present moment; Lyotard's accounts formulates modernism as a movement dedicated to and concerned with expressing the present moment through art. In

Lyotard's framework, the artistic object of this impulse is simply an "event" or an "*it happens.*" The "event" exists in a state of indeterminacy, arresting our understanding of consciousness; the event challenges the certainty that art will continue in the future—it raises the possibility of nothing further happening. Evoking various accounts from Longinus to Edmund Burke and Barnett Newman, Lyotard argues that this quality renders modernism a sublime art, due to the condition of our mind becoming agitated at the incomprehensibility of the artistic "event" that has just occurred. In a certain sense, sublime art is incommensurable with understanding; the sublime artistic event resists predetermined systems and rules which would attempt to measure up the significance of the artistic event.

My notion that the poems of *Spring and All* are "events," in Lyotard's terms, is an attempt to redirect critical reception of Williams's text. That is, I offer my thesis as a corrective reading to critical readings that engage *Spring and All* merely at the level of the text's celebrated discussion of the imagination—a reading that Williams himself, perhaps more than anyone else has initiated, thanks largely to his extensive discussion of the concept. As I will demonstrate, I believe that this fixation is only as substantive as the surface of the wildly discursive prose of *Spring and All*. That is, Williams's account of the imagination in *Spring and All* simply describes the state necessary for artistic engagement—whether it is for an artist creator or for the audience of art. Thus, by diverting our attention from the imagination, which I feel can at times become something like an inadvertent "red herring" in *Spring and All*, I hope to guide our attention to situating *Spring and All* within the discourse of modern avant-gardism that Lyotard articulates. By situating Williams's text within this discourse, we are able to see its contribution to the temporal impulse of modernism as conceived by Lyotard.

Hugh Kenner states that *Spring and All* is a book "about the domain of the Imagination" (Kenner 62). Such a statement bears testimony to the consuming attention that the concept/faculty receives in *Spring and All*. References to this faculty abound. Indeed, the imagination is the most cited concept in the text, appearing on virtually every page of prose. The thematic importance of the imagination is underscored when Williams dedicates his text to the imagination. He states:

To whom then am I addressed? To the imagination To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—

the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see. (Williams 89)

Williams's dedication champions the imagination as a faculty clarifying our experience of the world, especially of the present moment, "that eternal moment in which we alone live."

Readers expecting a clear, definitive, and unified account of the imagination, however, will probably be disappointed with *Spring and All*. Williams's account of this faculty (or force) is characterized by indeterminacy in which Williams must take recourse to a series of explaining metaphors, figures, and definitions in an attempt to describe the imagination. These attempts reveal, perhaps, that Williams himself lacked the conceptual clarity with which to work out his own understanding of the imagination.

At times, Williams refers to the imagination in hyperbolic and metaphoric terms, such as when he constructs a fictive apocalyptic narrative depicting the imagination's potent agency: "The imagination, intoxicated by prohibitions, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future have been, are and will be dedicated" (Williams 91). In this episode, the imagination destroys civilization then recreates it in a spring-like moment. The imagination is personified in cosmic, god-like terms, not unlike classical deity. "It" possesses emotion—being "intoxicated by prohibitions" and full of "rage." At other times, Williams uses natural and scientific imagery when characterizing the imagination: "The imagination uses the phraseology of science. It attacks, stirs, animates, is radio-active in all that can be touched by action" (149). Here the imagination is equivalent to a force of nature, akin to electricity.

I find Williams's account of the imagination to be most compelling when he discusses his own engagement with it. Williams discusses his inability to remain firmly in the imagination:

But though I have felt "free" only in the presence of works of the imagination ... yet being of slow but accurate understanding, I have not always been able to complete the intellectual steps which would make me firm in the position. So most of my life has been lived in hell—a hell of repression lit flashes of inspiration, when a poem such as this or that would appear. (116)

While *Spring and All* celebrates and advocates the imagination as the context in which art ought to be created and received, this passage demonstrates, perhaps ironically, the impossibility of remaining in an "imaginative" state. Thus, for all Williams's own exuberance about the

imagination, this passage cuts to the reality of Williams's own situation as a poet. To borrow Kenner's phrase, the passage demonstrates that in his early poetic career, Williams stumbled around with his "homemade philosophy."

Indeed, by the text's conclusion, Williams eventually disavows any attempt to ultimately account for the imagination: "Sometimes I speak of the imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place. It is immaterial which: for whether it is the condition of a place or a dynamization its effect is the same" (150). Williams disavows the notion that there a single correct way in which to describe the imagination—such an attempt is "immaterial"—since regardless of description, he declares that what matters is this effect.

Kenner argues that Williams's disavowal of a single unifying account is not necessarily an artistic or philosophical failure; rather it is a reflection of the complex entity with which Williams wrestled. He states: "Williams had no idea how to arrange and phrase what he wanted to say. ... He was writing homemade philosophy, and floundered [...] grievously explaining the imagination" (Kenner 66). Kenner, however, understands Williams's floundering to underscore a struggle to express reality: "Williams'[s] gesturings around the Imagination are not random nor self-contradictory but compatible with the existence, located and perceived by him, of a reality he may not succeed in making us see" (66). Kenner's charitable assessment of Williams is helpful in instructing readers what to make of the imagination in *Spring and All*. Kenner's assessment casts Williams in a somewhat humble and human light, struggling to find the right words and an adequate philosophical framework for his project. On a pragmatic note, Rod Townley adds: "Williams'[s] meaning is a process more often of pursuing inferences than of ingesting immediately usable information" (Townley 137). That is, *Spring and All* certainly is not an instruction manual for poets. Rather, it functions more like a diary in which Williams wrestles with constructing an aesthetic ground. On this level, it is a private text more for Williams's own benefit than for the public at large.

At its very best, Williams's account of the imagination reminds readers of the vital importance of this faculty in the modern world for creating and experiencing not just art, but everything. As such, Williams's imagination is simply the conduit or context through which life ought to be lived and art experienced. However, beyond this realization, Williams merely provides us with a hodge-podge account consisting of a nexus of metaphors and analogies belying the substance of the concept he pegs supreme importance upon. Thus, Williams's

preoccupation with the imagination constitutes an inadvertent red herring, a diversion deflecting us from *Spring and All*'s stake—a stake that I seek to make clear in chapter one.

My reading of *Spring and All* is divided into two chapters. The first chapter examines the text's prose, particularly key passages in the opening section, in order to characterize the problem of temporal alienation that Williams presents to us in *Spring and All*. Revealing this problem and aiding readers in recovering from it is the stake upon which *Spring and All* is constituted. Williams's solution lies in turning to the present moment—a turn that aligns his work with the contemporary sublime aesthetic outlined by Lyotard. The second chapter argues that *Spring and All*'s poems represent Williams's attempt to create an experience of the present moment. The impulse that Lyotard identifies with modernism is enacted in these poems, and it is enacted in a way that develops our understanding of Lyotard's account of modernism and the sublime event.

CHAPTER ONE

SPRING AND ALL AND THE PROBLEM OF TEMPORAL ALIENATION

“The better work men do is always done under stress and at a great personal cost”

—William Carlos Williams (*Spring and All* 101)

“Because something is happening here, but you don’t know what it is. Do you, Mr. Jones?”

—Bob Dylan (“Ballad of a Thin Man”)

Curiously, I have yet to encounter a critical work that engages deliberately with the narrative frame—the opening two page section—of *Spring and All*. Instead, critics select discrete passages from this section, which then are read in concert with other preceding thematic passages from the text. For instance, Williams’s dedication to and description of the imagination in the opening section linked with his discussion about the imagination in general. This method is certainly not wrong, given that throughout *Spring and All* Williams traces a number of disparate themes in a discursive manner. In this regard, critics find it sensible to turn to the opening section for traces of these themes. This approach, however, has the drawback of failing to consider how this opening section functions in terms of foregrounding and framing *Spring and All*.

What is significant about considering the opening section wholly is that this section functions as an introduction underscoring two fundamental notions about Williams’s avant-garde text. The first notion reveals that Williams’s text emerges in a context in which there exists a gap between Williams’s aesthetic practice and his potential audience. In *Spring and All*, this gap is conceived as a temporal problem in which Williams’s audience is alienated from the present moment that he is attempting to create in *Spring and All*’s poems. The second notion reveals a characteristically modernist impulse deeply embedded in the text as a work concerned with creating the present moment. I believe these notions, in turn, define the *modus operandi* of *Spring and All*; that is, it is a text that must work toward bridging the gap between itself and its potential audience by overcoming a specifically temporal dislocation or disjuncture. In turn, the presence of these two fundamental notions is explicated by the discourse about modernism provided by Jean-François Lyotard’s essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.”

This chapter discusses primarily three key passages from *Spring and All*'s opening section that highlight these two notions at work in the opening section. Thus, we will see that the opening section foregrounds the challenge facing Williams in *Spring and All* of connecting to readers by overcoming the temporal disjuncture between them and his text. After discussing these three passages, I turn to Lyotard's account of modernism as an impulse to create an experience of the present moment, which allows us to see that this is the stake embedded in *Spring and All*'s opening section. As will be seen, the first notion is fairly self-evident from the opening section itself, while the second notion remains unseen until examined in light of Lyotard's account of modernism.

The problem Williams sees confronting his readers in *Spring and All* is a loss of contact with the world, which I am naming the problem of alienation. In two of the three key passages I am examining from the opening section, Williams constructs a portrait of the reader who is dislocated from his or her own experience of the world. Essentially, this alienation is temporal—it is an alienation from the present moment.

In the first of these two crucial passages, Williams describes the alienation problem by using the metaphor of a barrier:

There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa,—all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon. (Williams 88)

What emerges from this passage is the basic contour of the problem: the loss of what Williams calls “consciousness of immediate contact with the world.” The key word from this passage is “contact,” a word which is mentioned twice elsewhere in *Spring and All*.

It is worth dwelling on one of these passages, which makes clearer what prevents us from making “immediate contact with the world.” Williams discusses the loss of contact brought about by “[c]rude symbolism,” which intends “to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning” (100). Williams says “[s]uch work is empty” for the reason that it creates “vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover” (100). As an instance of this, Williams cites when the sky is used as an associative symbol, rather than when it is simply acknowledge at being itself—the sky. It is not surprising, then, that Williams decries literary

similes, “typified by use of the word ‘like’” (100). Williams opposes crude symbolism on the philosophical grounds that it is “designed to separate the work from ‘reality’” (102).

According to Williams, a corrective to the loss of contact between the word and our consciousness is modeled by the relationship that a farmer and fisherman have with the sky:

The farmer and the fisherman who read their own lives there [the sky] have a practical corrective for— [...] they rediscover or replace demodé meanings Among them, without expansion of imagination, there is the residual *contact* between life and the imagination which is essential to freedom[.] (100 emphasis mine)

By “read their lives there,” I take Williams to mean that the farmer and fisherman depend upon their ability to understand weather patterns for their livelihood and survival. Their contact with the sky considers the sky in itself, not for what it symbolizes or evokes; that is, their contact with the sky is unmediated, unlike consciousness being deflected by “the barrier.” Additionally, the farmer and fisherman make “immediate” contact with the sky in a temporal sense, since they must constantly “read” the sky in the present moment as the sky changes. The farmer and fisherman adjust their work to accommodate these changes. Thus, they have a temporally contemporary relationship with the sky marked by an awareness of what happens in the present moment, rather some “prepared” (or mediated) knowledge they have of the sky. The farmer and the fisherman, then, are the model that Williams envisions for our involvement with “the immediate world.” Williams constructs a tentative analogy to illustrate what this means in relation to our experience of art:

The work [of art] will be in the realm of the imagination as plain as the sky is to fisherman—A very clouded sentence. The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature, but a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized. (102)

Hence Williams disavows literary devices—such as “rhyme, meter as meter,” “strained association, and “complicated ritualistic forms”—that mediate between our experience of the “plain” words (102). Such devices mediate the occurrence of words in an artistic event, preventing us from making “contact” with the actual words.

Returning to the “barrier” passage, the loss of contact triggered by the “barrier” is described metaphorically and figuratively by Williams: it is vast like an ocean and it distracts readers from noticing the present moment and the present place. Notice that “now” or “today” is

absent from the list. Again, the farmer and the fisherman are a corrective to this sort of involvement as they engage the nature world in the present moment by “reading” the sky in an immediate sense as the weather unfolds in the present moment or “now.” Also, the Americas are absent from the list of continents which Williams lists—signaling that, presumably, Williams is speaking to Americans in this passage. He concludes his description of this situation by declaring that under the effect of the barrier “all things [are] removed and impossible.” The picture that emerges from this passage is one in which the reader is distracted and detached or essentially alienated from the world. In other words, the barrier makes into us foreigners or “aliens” in our own home. So, “the barrier” Williams speaks of prevents us, not from knowing reality, but from inhabiting reality.

By *alienation* here, I refer to a concept taken from critical discourse and derived primarily from Marxian thought. As such, it describes a loss of or estrangement from reality (Marx 765). Furthermore, the concept implies a division between the subject and the world, in which one is an “alien” in one’s home condition. Marx’s account is political and economical as it centers upon the material conditions of the laborer in the industrial capitalist economy in which there exists a gap between the producer and the product or the creator and the product of creation. His usage of the concept, as a description of the loss of or dislocation from reality, has become a crucial category for articulating discourses concerned with discussing the relation between the subject and reality in modernity. My use of the term borrows from this latter notion, rather than the political meaning embedded in the term. I am examining alienation on aesthetic lines in *Spring and All*, rather than as a political reality of modernity.

A crucial transformation of the concept for articulating the mediating effects of alienation was developed by the Frankfurt School, especially in the work of Theodor Adorno. Adorno, along with Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, broadens out “alienation” to signify essentially the mediating effect of “mass” culture on the subject. This is argued in their chapter on the “culture industry,” a moniker they use to describe the conglomerate of entertainment businesses such as radio, the film industry, popular music, and advertising. These elements converge to create a sort of tacitly propagandized mass art in service of reinforcing the status quo or, to use their phrase, “the idolization of the existing order” (Adorno and Horkheimer xix). Adorno and Horkheimer conclude that the resulting product is “a society alienated with itself” (95). This state of affairs is partially what Williams is getting at in “the barrier” passage. That is,

Williams's "barrier" is described as an existing order that problematizes our link to reality by preventing our consciousness from making contact with "the immediate word." As we will see, like Adorno and Horkheimer, Williams does not mince words in implicating the whole art culture in perpetuating the alienation problem. The result, in Williams's eyes, is that whole cultures are alienated from themselves in a sort of pandemic situation.

Taken from both Marx and Adorno and Horkheimer, alienation describes the condition afflicting humankind in modernity. In this context, the concept of alienation means something like living in an inauthentic relationship with one's self and the world. This is a state of false being because of a mediating factor standing between human beings and the world or between one's relationship to oneself.

Not only is the reader barred from the world, but also the reader is barred from knowledge of oneself as asserted in the second of the three key passages from *Spring and All's* opening section. In this passage, Williams's account reveals that alienation is essentially the result of a skewed relationship to time. In a hyperbolic pronouncement, Williams explains that his potential readers are temporally alienated. That is, the reader inhabits time with an alienated relationship to the present moment:

The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a vision of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested. (Williams 89)

In this passage, Williams specifically reveals a dislocation between the reader and the present moment. Williams's hyperbolic suggestion is that an anachronism underscores the reader's self-knowledge, which Williams estimates to be twenty years removed from the present moment. Rather than knowing the present moment, the reader knows the past ("twenty years ago") and the future ("what he would be"). By the repetition of "Oh, some day!" Williams emphasizes the reader's sense of dissatisfaction, or wistful longing for a better future, rather than contentment in the present.

Furthermore, with the phrase, "never dares to know what he is at the exact moment that he is," Williams seems to imply that the reader not only is alienated from the present, but also fears the present moment. We can tease out Williams's meaning here by considering the temporally alienated (and fearful) reader in contradistinction to the farmer and the fisherman,

who utterly depend upon the momentary transformation of the sky for their livelihood. They depend upon what happens each moment—a dependence that the alienated readers “dares” not to know. The farmer and fisherman live in and are aware of the present moment as it is being made, since their livelihood depends on an utterly contemporary relationship with the sky in order to discern weather patterns.

Williams claims emphatically to be *not* like his potential readers. He is a man of the present moment, concerned with creating an experience of the present moment in his own work. In a rhetorical and perhaps flippant fashion, Williams declares that “this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.” This passage is the single most important passage in linking *Spring and All*—as a work concerned with creating an experience of the present moment—with Lyotard’s account of modernism being characterized precisely by such an impulse. Later, however, Williams humbly expresses the difficulty of consistently executing such an aesthetic. He states: “So most of my life has been lived in hell—a hell of repression lit by flashes of inspiration” (116). Nonetheless, regardless of the difficulty, Williams does not waiver in his commitment to the present moment, and as this opening section reveals, his stance is worlds apart from the expectations of his readers.

Before moving to the final key passage from *Spring and All*’s opening section, it is worth developing in more depth Williams’s notion of the temporally-alienated reader in more concrete terms by taking an excursus in Gertrude Stein’s essay, “Composition as Explanation.” This maneuver has the benefit of moving us beyond the hyperbole of Williams’s account into a broader account of modernism. Stein frames Williams’s problem of temporal alienation in broader cultural terms in her profoundly important essay (for theorizing modernism), which was composed in 1926. Stein’s essay elucidates—in more concrete terms—the notion of temporal alienation that Williams describes.

Not only does Stein’s essay put temporal alienation in more concrete terms, it also illustrates that the aesthetic problem is really a broader cultural affliction, leading to tragic consequences. Stein uses the example of how WWI was fought as an analogy for illustrating her thesis that the audiences of art were “several generations behind themselves.” She asserts that until the First World War, human perception was thirty years behind the making of the present moment (Stein 521). Stein uses the historical example of Lord Grey’s comments about the WWI generals to make her point:

Lord Grey remarked that when the generals before the war talked about the war they talked about it as a nineteenth century war although to be fought with twentieth century weapons. That is because war is a thing that decides how it is to be when it is to be done. It is prepared and to that degree it is like all academies it is not a thing made by being made it is a thing prepared. (513-514)

Lord Grey's comments reveal an anachronism infecting the perception of WWI in which there existed a discrepancy between how the generals understood the war to be fought—as a nineteenth century war—and the present reality of the war being fought with new twentieth century weapons, like machine guns, tanks, and mustard gas. Thus, the requirements of the present moment were misunderstood, and absurd situations could arise, such as soldiers charging machine guns as if conducting a nineteenth century cavalry charge. Lord Grey's comments illustrate a literal and lethal cost to not inhabiting the present moment. This passage suggests that the anachronism infecting the generals caused them to prepare in advance for the war, rather than perceiving what the war required of them as it unfolded in the present. This attitude was a mistake since, as Stein claims, war itself decides how it is to be fought when it is being fought. That is, the war required an absolutely contemporary—i.e. present-minded—awareness from those engaging in warfare. A corollary to this notion is that approaching the present moment with “prepared knowledge” is a mistake—evident in the generals' anachronistic approach to WWI—leading to alienation with the reality of the present moment. If one accepts Stein's historical argument, then Williams's statement about the alienated reader is not merely rhetorical, but grounded in a basic problem afflicting human perception of the present moment. It is little wonder, then, that Williams notices the gap between his potential readers and his own aesthetic—Stein demonstrates that this gap is a pervasive epistemological problem.

Stein's passage reveals that the problem is not so much that people do not live in the present moment, rather the problem lies in one's ability to respond and act according to the demands of the present. That is, in the WWI example, the generals responded to the war as if it was the past (i.e. a nineteenth century war) and the war's realities were overlooked as the generals “prepared” according to nineteenth century standards and procedures. Aligning Stein's argument with Williams's alienated reader reveals that one's anachronistic relationship to the present causes one to respond to the present as something that it is not.

Next, I want to turn to the third and final key passage from the opening section of *Spring and All*. This passage casts the problem of temporal alienation in aesthetic terms, revealing that art is complicit in erecting and maintaining “the barrier.” Williams characterizes the aesthetic inflection of the barrier when he speaks about “the beautiful illusion,” which is the aesthetic manifestation of the barrier:

In fact to return upon my theme for the time nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment. It has always been a search for “the beautiful illusion.” Very well. I am not in search of “the beautiful illusion.” (Williams 89)

In a sweeping generalization, Williams asserts that writing and the arts play a crucial role in maintaining the barrier. In fact, Williams seems to think that writing is “especially designed” to do this. By implicating “nearly all writing ... if not all art” in “the beautiful illusion,” Williams clearly differentiates his poetic from the norm. This gesture, again, obviously underscores the gap that Williams perceives between himself and his potential readers. He is not a producer of the “beautiful illusion,” yet his readers want to be consumers of it.

From the three key passages I have discussed—“the barrier” passage, the temporally-alienated reader passage, and “the beautiful illusion” passage—emerge the notion that Williams’s potential audience is alienated on a number of accounts: from conscious contact with the world, from the present moment, and even from Williams’s own text. Williams’s explanation for this situation lies in the three passages I mentioned above, that is, what Williams conceives himself doing in *Spring and All* opposes the situation of his audience. Hence, Williams explicates the problems he poses to us in the opening section.

What we will see next is that the temporal alienation problem that Williams identifies in the opening section is generated precisely by the impulse driving *Spring and All*: namely, the text’s concern to create an experience of the present moment. It seems that this impulse necessarily separates Williams from his readers. Although Williams himself has already expressed such an impulse in the opening section, the alienating effect of this impulse upon his readers can be seen in the light shed by Lyotard’s account of the impulse driving modernism.

Lyotard’s essay, “The Sublime and Avant-Garde” describes the impulse driving modernism in general and the avant-garde in particular. His claim is that modernism and the

avant-garde are concerned with creating the present moment in art. As we have already seen, Williams aligned *Spring and All* as a modernist text with this very goal as its impetus in the opening section. Furthermore, Lyotard deems the experience of the present moment to be a “sublime” experience. Hence, he argues that modernism is constituted as a sort of “contemporary sublime.” In his essay, he sees the abstract paintings of Barnett Newman as the culmination of this impulse, an impulse with its roots as far back as Kant’s formulation of the sublime.

Lyotard’s thesis is built upon his theoretical account of what an event is—i.e., a happening, an occurrence, etc. A phrase that Lyotard uses to describe the event is simply “*It happens*” (Lyotard 245). His notion of the present moment is borrowed from Barnett Newman’s essay “The Sublime is Now,” in which the present moment is simply the event that happens when there is no necessity for it to happen, even when it might not happen, which Lyotard later characterizes as a sublime event (Newman 170-173).

The event or “*it happens*,” is defined by Lyotard according to what it is not. First, he paradoxically declares that Newman’s notion of the present moment is probably not what we would expect it to be:

Newman certainly had not been thinking of the “present instant,” the one that tries to hold itself between the future and the past, and gets devoured by them. This “now” is one of the temporal “ecstasies” that has been analyzed since Augustine’s day and since Edmund Husserl, according to a line of thought that has attempted to constitute time on the basis of consciousness. Newman’s *now* which is no more than *now* is a stranger to consciousness and cannot be constituted by it. (Lyotard 244)

The present moment is not an awareness of time or an understanding achieved by the mind. It is not even an experience of “nowness.” In fact, Lyotard argues that there is an antagonistic relationship, in some sense, between consciousness and “the event”: “[I]t is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate, and even what consciousness forgets in order to constitute itself” (245). Indeed, “*it happens*” is precisely what cannot be formulated by consciousness: “What we do not manage to formulate is that something happens Or rather ... that it happens Not a major event in the media sense, not even a small event. Just an occurrence” (245).

In order to distinguish between an event's happening—*it happens*—and our consciousness of an event, Lyotard distinguishes between the simple occurrence of an event and consciousness's attempt to grasp what this event *means* or determine what is significant about it. Lyotard notes, that in a temporal and logical sense, an event must happen *before* its significance can be determined (245). He puts this thought into a neat proposition: "That it happens 'precedes,' so to speak, the question pertaining to what happens" (245). In other words, "*it happens*" precedes "*it happens that ...*," since this final phrase represents the mind's attempt to grasp the significance or meaning of what has just happened by classifying or categorizing the event.

Borrowing Heidegger's notion of the event, "*ein Ereignis*," Lyotard argues that the event "is infinitely simple, but this simplicity can only be approached through a state of privation" (245). That is, it is first necessary to realize that encountering the event is to be done in a state of lack: "That which we call thought must be disarmed" (245). Speaking of "thought," Lyotard emphasizes its epistemological tyranny when he states: "Thought works over what is received, it seeks to reflect on it and overcome it" (245). This passage reveals "thought" to be a violent force, striving to make determinate that which it receives. In a later passage, Lyotard refers to thought as "grasping intelligence," a phrase that captures consciousness's almost desperate (or greedy) need to understand and make meaning of the world (247). So thorough and complete is this activity of the mind that, as Lyotard observes, grasping intelligence leaves no remainder, even the indeterminate is understood as something, namely a question mark, predetermining its status as that which provokes a question (245).

To combat the possibility of nothing further happening, Lyotard argues that we "strive to determine this something [the event] by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project" (245). Through tradition, these principles determine what sort of art ought to be created in the future through a series of aesthetic rules and regulations. This activity is premised on the notion of an "after," in which it is presumed that there will be a future. Lyotard boldly asserts:

What all intellectual disciplines and institutions presuppose is that not everything has been said, written down or recorded, that words already heard or pronounced are not the last words. "After" a sentence, "after" a colour, comes another sentence, another colour. (245)

Thus, rules are an institution's way of assuring that something always will happen in the future. In this regard, Lyotard observes, "[t]here isn't an enormous difference between the avant-garde manifesto and a curriculum at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, if one considers them in the light of this relationship to time" (245-6). Such rules and institutions characterize our relationship to time. Later, Lyotard names this attitude presumptive when he asserts that the "avant-gardist task remains that of undoing the presumption of the mind in respect to time" (256).

Stein's essay provides an example of this principle at work in the art world. Her idea is that "a classic" is something made according to a prior rule or expectation. That is, it is simply "accepted" by everybody because it is recognized to possess beauty, which Stein calls "[t]he characteristic quality of a classic" (515). According to the standard of "the beautiful," all new art is judged, including the modern composition, which subsequently is deemed to be "irritating annoying stimulating" (515). Hence, Stein declares that until WWI human perception of the arts lags behind the present moment, operating on what one might call tradition. Art of the present moment is "refused" until enough time passes for its beauty to be recognized (515).

Stein's notion of "the classic" and Lyotard's assertion about the need for systems to determine the future is, I want to argue, embodied in the imagined voice of a literary critic that Williams parodies in *Spring and All's* opening section. The stance of this critical voice is situated from a position entrenched in convention and tradition. The "critic" is unsettled about modernist poetry, condemning Williams's own poetry in shrill terms. The critic declares:

I do not like your poems; you have no faith whatever. ... There is nothing appealing in what you say but on the contrary your poems are positively repellent. They are heartless, cruel, they make fun of humanity. ... Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why is there none in your work whatever. Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation.

You moderns! it is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing. (Williams 88)

As a figment of Williams's imagination, this voice is obviously not literal. Indeed, Williams's imitation of a histrionic tone renders this passage into a parody of charges one might level at Williams and the modernists. In general, however, a somewhat substantive critique of Williams's

poems does indeed emerge, judged according to a system dependent on beauty and humanism. In this regard, the imaginary critic exemplifies the refusal confronting art created from the present moment. Hyperbolically, Williams declares that his poetry is the death of what is poetically typical. Hence, this passage only serves to reinforce the gap that Williams perceives between himself and his potential readers.

While the imaginary critic functions as Williams's self-created foil, more significant is Williams's reply to his critic. Williams says this of the critic's ranting: "I interpret it to say: 'You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?'" (89). If, as I argue, we understand Williams' aesthetic to be concerned with creating an experience of the present moment—strikingly, the imaginary critic passage is sandwiched between two paragraphs discussing the theme of the present moment—then the imaginary critic's ranting is a rhetorical cloak for what lies underneath: namely, discomfort toward or even fear of the present moment. When confronted with the experience of the present moment in Williams's poetry, the critic feels "naked" and "robbed."

From the text of *Spring and All* alone, it is not evident what motivates the fear embedded in this sense of nakedness. In its one other occurrence in the text, "naked" does not carry such pejorative connotations. Jumping ahead to poem "I" ("Spring and All"), "naked" refers to the conditions of the emergence of new spring growth: "They enter the new world *naked*, / cold, uncertain of all / save that they enter" (16-8, emphasis mine). In this passage, Williams personifies the new growth, which becomes "cold" and "uncertain of all." In this poem, there is simply an *it happens*; new growth has happened. Williams does not explain the "*it happens that*" of this simple event. Beyond the occurrence of this event, there is no certainty about what comes next. In a parallel situation, the imaginary critic seems "uncertain of all" when confronted with Williams' poems. The critic does not know what will come next. Instead, the critic shrilly intones about the death of poetry—of the possibility of there being no further poems. Williams has shown us that the critic with her "system" for evaluating his work has overlooked this possibility. Lyotard explains: "What these institutions overlook, however, is "the possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming; of this sentence being the last, of bread not coming daily" (Lyotard 246). Confronted with the possibility of privation—of there being no more poetry—the critic is "naked."

The mind or “grasping intelligence” undertakes all this grasping, since, as Lyotard reveals, “*it happens*” curtails the necessity of a future event—it does not guarantee that another event will follow. This process introduces the “sublime” element of “*it happens*” (or simply the event). In order to construct his account of the sublime, Lyotard draws primarily upon Edmund Burke’s theory of the sublime, from Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Lyotard argues that the “major stake” of Burke’s aesthetic is “to show that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening” (251). Burke links the experience of the sublime—which is, as Newman says, “expressive witness to the inexpressible” (246)—to terror, which in turn, is linked with privation: “[P]rivation of light, terror or darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death” (251). In regard to the event, Burke reveals that “[w]hat is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening” (251). In Kantian terms, the mind fails to provide a representation of what has just occurred due to the immeasurability or incomprehensibility of the sublime (250). In response to this situation, the mind becomes agitated, even pained; however, the paradoxical effect of sublimity is that it also sometimes engenders pleasure in the mind’s attempt to figure something it recognizes as unrecognizable, indeterminate, or inexpressible (250). Lyotard observes that “[a]vant-gardism is thus present in germ in the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime . . . [it is] essentially made up of attempts to represent sublime objects” (250).

Returning to Burke, Lyotard shows, however, that it is Burke who recognizes the temporal stakes of the sublime experience—that is, he shows “that the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening” (251). This is where sublime art becomes important. Art “distanc[es] this menace, procures a measure of relief, of delight” (251). So, although the sublime experience raises the possibility of nothing further happening, it simultaneously suspends this threat temporarily through its own occurrence as an artistic event. Thus, sublime art intensifies our experience of time. What this experience of time intensifies is “that there is an unrepresentable” or perhaps more precisely “an immeasurable” (252). Intensity produces surprise and even shock. The audience is uncertain of what has occurred; it, like Williams’s imaginary critic, is “naked.” Lyotard concludes that what remains is “the witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy” (252). To aesthetic institutions built upon rules which relegate art to the role of imitation or humanistic recognition of humankind’s greatness, sublime art, in figuring

that which halts the system of making “classics” and “beautiful art” (as Stein states), is “incomprehensible.” The sublime art object resists systems.

Such intensification of “*it happens*” constitutes Lyotard’s account of the avant-garde and the impulse at work driving modernism. Thus, in Lyotard’s account, modernism is a discourse concerned with creating the present moment; hence it is a movement in which one risks losing one’s audience. Williams’s statements in *Spring and All*’s opening sections bear testimony to this danger. Williams senses the gap dividing him from a potential audience. Lyotard shows us that for modernists this gap is constituted in respect to our relationship with time—a relationship that until the emergence of a sublime aesthetic (and perhaps until WWI according to Stein) is anachronistic toward the present. We could say that modernism is the aesthetic movement at which the reception of art finally met up with what was being made at the present moment. The opening section of *Spring and All* demonstrates the discomfort of this encounter for the alienated reader. In the light shed by Lyotard’s account, we now understand that the readers’ discomfort with Williams’s work stems from their state of being alienated from the present.

Thus far, we have followed out Lyotard’s account of the sublime artistic event in a theoretical sense without discussing what such a poem would look like on the page. Lyotard identifies some general traits such work possesses. Of course, these traits are grounded in the fact that *it happens*. Lyotard explains by describing how this would work in painting:

The inexpressible does not reside in an over there, in another world, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens. In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the ‘it happens’ is the paint, the picture. The paint, the picture as occurrence or event, is not expressible, and it is to this it has to witness. (246)

Implicit in this passage is opposition to “the classical rule of imitation” in which art is a mirror to reality (251). This is another way of saying that it is, in some sense, a non-representational aesthetic. However, Lyotard’s aesthetic is non-representational in an unconventional way. His point is, not that art cannot feature figurative representations of things, rather his point is that a work of art occurs, which is more significant than what that the figure that the art represents; it is the significance of this simple fact of occurrence that is inexpressible.

Sublime art, then, is self-referential in that the artistic medium itself is what can be considered significant to that artistic event, rather than what that event might “mean.” Sublime poetry will try out “surprising, strange, shocking combinations” of words. Or, as Lyotard

paraphrases Burke, poetry becomes “the field where certain researches into language have free rein, the power to move is free from the verisimilitudes of figuration” (251). For the poem and poet, this is an aesthetic free from pre-determining rules, which would harness the poem’s happening. For the reader, this is an aesthetic of privation in which the exercise of “grasping intelligence” is frustrated.

Reading *Spring and All* in line with this aesthetic of privation, then, reveals that Williams’s desire to create an experience of the present moment is really a negative aesthetic, one which advocates the possible—and likely—privation of understanding if the reader is to approach the present moment. For readers situated in the place of comfort brought about by the “beautiful illusion,” reading *Spring and All* is unsettling and requires “daring.” If these readers are to bridge the gap between themselves and the present moment, they must do so without grasping intelligence. In this sense, reading *Spring and All* with Lyotard’s account of modernism reveals that “the barrier” Williams characterizes is certainly not a superficial inability on the part of readers to notice the present moment. The theory of the sublime provided by Lyotard and Burke probes into the compulsion for comfort and determinacy that bars readers from the present moment. From its first step, *Spring and All* recognizes this problem in its opening section.

Williams, on the other side of the gap, sees his potential readers’ alienation. On one hand, he is ambivalent about this state of matters, as evident in the opening sentence. On the other hand, he attempts to bridge this gap by extending a hand to readers in a Whitmanesque gesture (in Williams’s characteristically hyperbolic tone) as the opening section closes:

In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. . . . And so, together, as one, we shall begin. (Williams 89)

In retaining one final remaining visage of classicism—the bond between reader and author—Williams launches off into his text. He seems to say that a simple act of imagination (reading on) is sufficient for encountering his text as he leads readers to overcome their alienation.

Conversely, Williams’ gesture becomes sympathetic when interpreted in light of his almost tortured attempt to capture the present in his own poetry as he explains later in *Spring and All* (115-6). While condemning the condition of temporal alienation, Williams seems to understand the difficulty confronting his readers, who must overcome it.

What this chapter has demonstrated is that if modernity can be characterized as a condition of alienation—as the likes of Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer and others believe—then Williams’s *Spring and All* offers itself as a contribution in exploring and resolving this problem. Furthermore, Williams’s significant and specific contribution is to characterize the alienation problem as a specifically temporal problem. Thus far, the stake of *Spring and All* has been to reveal the problem of alienation to us. However, Williams does not simply open our eyes to this problem. As we will see, *Spring and All* also functions prescriptively by striving to recover from this problem—with a good dose of poetry.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATING THE PRESENT MOMENT: A READING OF *SPRING AND ALL*'S POEMS

“How easy to slip
into the old mode, how hard to
cling firmly to the advance”

—William Carlos Williams (*Spring and All*, “V” 38-40)

We saw in chapter one that *Spring and All* is concerned with the problem of temporal alienation, which Williams characterizes as “the barrier.” In particular, the text is concerned with the aesthetic inflection of this problem, which he names “the beautiful illusion.” In this chapter, I examine Williams’s attempt to oppose these problems through the means of *Spring and All*’s twenty-seven poems. As Williams himself states in the text’s opening section, he is attempting to capture the present moment in *Spring and All*. In the previous chapter, I attempted to show that this concern aligns Williams with the modernist impulse to create the present moment, as identified by Lyotard. This chapter explores how Williams enacts this impulse through *Spring and All*’s poems. My argument is that Williams attempts to create the present moment in his poems. As such, the poems can be called “events” in the Lyotardian sense of the word. This chapter explicates this process at work in Williams’s poems while revealing that the poems, in turn, develop Lyotard’s account of the event in more depth by providing concrete instances of the aesthetic he articulates.

Readers might wonder why I have divided my chapters between *Spring and All*’s prose and poetry. I am not alone in making such a distinction. Indeed, other critics have relied upon this distinction as a way of determining the relationship between *Spring and All*’s prose and poetry. For instance, Charles Altieri asserts that the poems oftentimes make concrete sense of the prose (Altieri 100). While Webster Schott observes that Williams “enunciates his literary principles in the prose” and “demonstrates them in the poetry” (Schott 86). My division is derived from the division that Williams himself creates between poetry and prose in *Spring and*

All. That is, Williams envisions distinct roles for the two forms. The difference between prose and poetry, however, is not what one might expect. The difference does not lie in how each form appears on the page; rather, the difference is functional. Williams argues that prose deals with the “statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts—technical expositions, jargon, of all sorts—fictional, and other—” (Williams 133). On the other hand, poetry deals with “the dynamization of emotion into a separate form,” since it “is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words” (133). It is striking that Williams characterizes poetry in such active terms—“dynamization” and “movements”—which serve to reinforce my argument in the introduction that the best way to think of Williams poems is as events.

In order to explore Williams’s attempt to create an experience of the present moment in *Spring and All*, I have chosen to discuss four poems that enact this impulse in a variety of ways. My sampling of poems allows us to see various ways that a poem can be constituted as an event happening in the present moment. I examine the following poems: “I” (“Spring and All”), “VI” (“To Have Done Nothing”), “VII” (“The Rose”), and “IX” (“Young Love”). In *Spring and All*, each of these poems appears untitled and is simply numbered with a roman numeral—except for “The Rose,” which is neither titled nor numbered. The poems’ titles later appeared as the poems were published separately, as in the case of poem “I,” or in Williams’ *Collected Poems*.

Appropriately, as a first poem, “Spring and All” is a poem about beginnings. The poem accrues an illuminating contextual valence when it is noted that this beginning immediately follows a sardonic and hyperbolic narrative in which the imagination, like a vindictive classical deity, destroys everything: “The imagination, intoxicated by prohibition, rises to drunken heights to destroy the world. Let it rage, let it kill. The imagination is supreme” (91). Strikingly, the target of this apocalypse is Europe, where all visages of culture, save the animals are annihilated (90). For all the absurdity of this dada-esque narrative—“Children laughingly fling themselves under the wheels of the street cars, airplanes crash gaily to the earth” (92)—it is important to note that with the narrative, Williams, through a literary act, is endeavoring to erase the mark of European influence upon *Spring and All*. Essentially, he is symbolically discarding tradition with this narrative, creating a vacuum from which his own poems will emerge. This condition of newness is confirmed within the apocalyptic narrative itself: “None to remain; nothing but lower vertebrates, the mollusks, insects and plants. Then at last will the world be made anew” (91). A paragraph down Williams notes, “and it is spring—” (91). Later he declares: “Yes, the

well. The atmosphere of death is only reinforced by the mention of “the contagious hospital” in the first line.

Although the poem clearly depicts a scene—i.e. a “representation” of a landscape—its formal arrangement subtly forces us to take in the event of this poem on its own terms, apart from any predetermining notion of what a “spring poem” is. Critics, like Altieri and John Lowney, have noted Williams’s careful lineation in these first stanzas. The lineation is effective in breaking up preconceived notions and rules about the poetic line. Notice that many of lines end with a word whose semantic companion begins on the next line, leaving the initial line incomplete. For example: “the // northeast” (3-4), “the / waste” (4-5), “fields / brown” (5-6), and “fallen // patches” (6-7). Altieri notes: “From the start, this verse is not reporting on a scene but carving out the edges by which one takes in energies produced by the conjunction of details” (Altieri 46). Lowney observes that Williams’s lineation here intensifies one’s experience of these words; for example, one cannot simply read “blue mottled clouds,” but must consider, due to the line break, that “blue is in itself an entity” (Lowney 62-3). Additionally, William Marling notices that the line break “blue / mottled” intensifies each of these words, since attention is drawn to each word (Marling 183). Indeed, the intensifying effect of lineation upon individual words is a formal device repeated throughout *Spring and All*, enabling Williams to realize an aesthetic in which individual words receive attention for their happening within a poem. In “Spring and All” this intensification of words moves the reader to take the poem on its own terms in its own language. Harkening back to the farmer and fisherman “reading” the sky for their livelihood, Williams uses lineation to encourage to read the words themselves, not as part of a system of crude association or “strained associations” (Williams 102). As an event, then, the poem subtly resists the reader’s attempt to hold the poetic line to preexisting rules and conventions.

The relatively determinate depiction in the first three stanzas is somewhat jolted by the eruption of an indeterminate happening. In the fourth stanza, a cumbersome event occurs, transforming the gloomy landscape: “Lifeless in appearance, sluggish / dazed spring approaches—” (14-5). The event continues: “They enter the new world naked, / cold uncertain of all / save that they enter” (“I” 16-8). In a strict sense, within the poem an event has occurred. The vague (antecedent-less) pronoun “they” renders indeterminate what exactly has entered the scene. Readers are left to puzzle over the identity of “they,” which becomes clearer in a few lines.

Williams's ambiguous diction is significant in reinforcing our awareness that something indeterminate is happening in the present moment. Lowney observes that using "they" suggests "a more general concept of birth, physical rebirth that is spiritual in the sense of absolute faith in rebirth" (Lowney 63). Williams's diction here opens up the referent from merely signifying new plant growth. Christopher MacGowan seizes upon this point to demonstrate that the indeterminate pronoun possesses multiplicity: "'They' are simultaneously the poet's perceptions, the first growths of spring, [and] the poem's newly minted words" (MacGowan 97). As perceptions, "they" is indeed personified by Williams since he uses words like "naked" and "uncertain." We have already examined the word "naked" as it occurs in *Spring and All* in chapter one, now we see at work in a poem. Here, the word accentuates the "bareness"—in the sense of being stripped—and vulnerability of encountering a present moment, albeit from the personified perspective of a plant, yet there is a "double" nakedness here as the reader is also left "naked," being stripped of the significance of the event that has occurred. Again, Williams has subtly forced us to encounter this poem on its own terms as it unfolds, rather than according to a set of traditional rules determining the scene in front of us. To borrow Lyotard's phrase, the poem simply presents an "*it happens*."

The event of growth marches forward into the next stanza, gaining clarity: "Now the grass, tomorrow / the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf / One by one objects are defined— / It quickens: clarity, outlines of leaf" ("I" 20-3). "They" have come to signify multiple plants—grass and wild carrots. The event develops in pictorial clarity from indeterminacy ("they") to determinacy ("wildcarrot leaf") as it unfolds. However, while pictorial clarity is disclosed, the event's significance is withheld. Altieri argues that it is the occurrence of "now" in this stanza that "forcefully introduces the sense of time, of event, into this hitherto purely spatial field of descriptions" (Altieri 47). He astutely observes that once "now" occurs, a number of action verbs follow in the poem. This is reinforced by the occurrence of "now" again a few lines later. Thus, the happening of the event depicted in the poem is intensified through the presence of these verbs. So rather than receive a pronouncement about the event's significance from the poet, we continue to read the poem as about a present moment.

By returning to the present moment occurring in the next few stanzas, Williams shifts the focus of the poem away from the *telos* of the new growth, almost as if to remind us that just before we have determined what is significant about this poem, its happening continues,

provoking us to abide with the poem on its own terms. The poem concludes: “But now the stark dignity of / entrance—Still, the profound change // has come upon them: rooted they / grip down and begin to awake” (24-27). The conjunctive phrase “But now” returns us to the depicted event’s happening, restoring the element of time’s movement. Again, Williams uses precise lineation to ensure that individual words are noticed (“of / entrance” and “they / grip”), intensifying our reception of each word. I find Williams’s return to the present moment surprising in these stanzas, since he has taken us away from what would be conventionally expected of a spring poem: the future growth that gives springtime its significance, i.e., blossom, fruit, harvest, new life, etc. Williams frustrates this expectation by wrenching us back to the event depicted in the poem: “Still, the profound change // has come upon them.” Williams leaves us with “them” to remind us of the ultimate incomprehensible nature of the event. Thus, as readers, we are placed in an almost passive position of receiving the change without knowing what it signifies or where it will lead. We experience the poem as it unfolds, not just stanza-by-stanza or line-for-line, but word for word, as an event happening on its own accord.

Williams’s emphatic use of the word “entrance” captures a final aspect of the modernist impulse to create the present moment that Lyotard speaks of. “Entrance” is the grammatical subject of the first clause of stanza nine (25). This unexpected grammatical emphasis transforms this usually unnoticed word into an entity important in its own right—perhaps for one of the first times in American poetry. Again, Williams demonstrates his ability to place emphasis upon single words, allowing us to experience each word on its own. Additionally, I believe this moment is Williams’s subtle way of celebrating “entrance,” which means, in the context of this poem, the miracle that something rather than nothing has happened in this once fallow landscape of brown earth and weeds. In this sense, the poem celebrates “*it happens*,” the simple occurrence of an event. In a meta-sense, “entrance” also points to the poem’s own entrance in the narrative of *Spring and All* as a poem that embodies the “stark dignity of / entrance” of which it speaks. Vivien Koch asserts that these lines form the main theme of *Spring and All*, which she claims is a text about emergence and “entrance” (Koch 46).

The poem ends with open punctuation as if to emphasize the idea that the present moment perpetually unfolds itself to us in an indeterminate and open fashion. This reminds readers that we do not know what will happen to the new growth or even what is significant about the event that has occurred—no guarantees are made for the future of this new growth and

this seems to be the point. Rather than the closure provided significance, Williams leaves the event open to our assessment of it. To use Lyotard's notion, with open punctuation at the end there is no guarantee that significance will happen in the future. "Spring and All" concludes by refusing complicity with a determining system of rules and conventions which would guarantee something happening in the future. For the moment, we are simply given the poem's depicted event and the event of the poem occurring itself.

Thus, upon the new ground symbolically cleared by the imagination's apocalyptic destruction, we encounter an event—a poem that Williams forces us to receive on its own terms. It is almost as if Williams is tacitly teaching us how to really read a poem, or at least read a poem in the way he needs us to read his poems—as an "*it happens*," bearing testimony to the present moment's need to be taken on its own terms, else we overlook the new growth emerging below our feet. The triumph of this poem is how Williams achieves this effect through lineation and diction, which intensifies the poem's language and confounds our activity to grasp the poem's happening according to predetermined rules.

Finally, while "Spring and All" enacts the present-oriented impulse driving modernism that Lyotard describes, the poem concretely demonstrates that "*it happens*" is a sublime event that does not necessarily preclude depiction and representation. Thus, the poem offers itself as a slight revision to Burke and Lyotard's claim that the sublime "is free from the verisimilitudes of figuration" (Lyotard 251) or that bearing "expressive witness to the inexpressible" means that a poem will be free any sort of representation. On the other hand, the poem's sublimity is located, not in what it represents or what it is "about," but in our experience of its occurrence, which we are made to experience as a present moment. The poem is sublime in the incomprehensible moment of growth it both depicts and enacts for readers. That is, it is sublime because readers must simply transverse through the present moment created in the poem, rather than mediating ourselves from the poem in a detached exercise of determining its significance according to the rules of what a "spring poem" is. I cannot think of a more effective way of easing "alienated" readers into an experience of the present moment than this opening poem.

On a spectrum from conventional to avant-garde poetry, "Spring and All" appears almost conventional compared with some of the text's other poems. On the more avant-garde end of the spectrum stands Poem "VI" (later entitled "To Have Done Nothing"). This is the sort of poem that might cause a reader to hurl *Spring and All* at the wall in frustration. It is a poem seemingly

about “nothing.” However, I believe that this poem, more than any other in *Spring and All*, embodies Lyotard’s notion of the sublime event. In a sense, the poem is the most coherent modernist statement of the text’s poems.

Although critics have discussed this curious poem, it usually receives minimal attention compared to other poems like “Spring and All,” “The Rose,” or “To Elsie.” I think this situation bears testimony to the bewilderment any reader will likely feel when confronting the poem. That is, to borrow Stein’s notion, the poem is not “beautiful” in the academic sense; rather, it is “irritating annoying [yet] stimulating” (Stein 515). In fact, I believe that previous critical engagement with the poem has been somewhat superficial, failing to engage the poem for what it is: an event. For instance, James Breslin reads the poem’s opening as an allusion to the inability of Eliot’s Prufrock to act (Breslin 69). Meanwhile Henry Sayre and William Marling claim that it is a poem with Dadaist ambitions. The later critic states that the poem “is far removed from Williams’ style” and asserts that it “is paired with a better poem [“Black Winds”], presumably to indicate the contrast” (Marling 177). In all fairness, these comments are not surprising given the difficulty of this poem. I believe, however, that the poem’s significance is clear when examined in light of Lyotard’s account of modernism and the present moment.

“To Have Done Nothing” has 40 lines and not a single mark of punctuation. The poem begins with a negative declaration: “No that is not it / nothing that I have done // nothing / I have done” (1-3). The first line indicates the speaker’s dissatisfaction, while the subsequent lines express a denial that the speaker has done anything at all. At this point, it is unclear what the speaker has not done. Paul Mariani highlights the ambiguities of these lines: “And the reader expects what? A sort of confession? Some universal statement?” (Mariani 128). This question, however, is not clarified since the poem suddenly turns to describing the very language which it has just used in an utterly self-reflexive turn. The poem turns to deconstructing the third line when it states that this line “is made of / nothing / and the diphthong // ae” (“VI” 5-8). The poem continues this deconstructing process: “[T]ogether with / the first person / singular / indicative // of the auxiliary verb / to have” (9-15). Thus, line 3 has been reduced to its bare material and grammatical properties: the narrative “I” becomes a diphthong, while the phrase “to have done” is analyzed into its bare grammatical function and elements. MacGowan states: “The poet is subsumed into the letters of his poem” (MacGowan 108). That is, the poem is transposed into the very materials upon which it is constituted. The next stanza further complicates the poem when

the speaker states: “[E]verything / I have done / is the same” (“VI” 16-18). Essentially, this statement declares that all the speaker’s “doing” is equivalent to the “nothing” that the speaker has just done—a bewildering state of affairs for the reader.

What is signified by this shift from “nothing” to “everything”? What has not been done? These appropriate questions are answered, I believe, if we read “VI” as a poem that literally depicts the poet’s creative composing process at work as the poem itself is being written. That is, the poem exhibits self-reflexive sophistication as it documents the process of its own creation. This interpretation becomes more plausible in light of the next stanzas, which explain how “nothing” and “everything” can be understood equivalently: “[I]f to do / is capable / of an / infinity of / combinations // involving the / moral / physical / and religious // codes” (19-28). Here “codes” seems to refer to writing, texts, and possibly to language itself. These stanzas imply that the composing process has limitless potential and freedom in combining these various codes into the writing product. Furthermore, my argument is bolstered by the speaker’s attempt to break the poetic lines into their linguistic and grammatical elements, which serves to reveal the “vitals” and “innards,” so to speak, of the poem itself. Thus, at the very least, the poem seems to be occupied with the act of writing itself and occupied with discussing this writing process.

In light of the reading I propose, the first line illustrates the poet’s dissatisfaction with his start: “No that is not it.” The poet seems to say that this first line is not what he intended or envisioned to compose. Rather than tossing away this first line, however, as would be expected, Williams shocks us by moving forward. Although we might expect the poem to end here—it is an unpromising beginning, after all—raising the possibility that nothing more will happen in the future, the present moment that Williams creates surprises us since something actually does occur from this prosaically flat first line, namely the poem’s next lines. The next three lines demonstrate the poet’s additional frustration with matters. In the context of the unfolding composition, these lines reveal that the poem has amounted to “nothing” thus far. The speaker repeats these lines in a way that expresses something like writer’s block or the despair at having no words for the page. He seems to fear that nothing further will happen.

After four lines, “VI” documents a poet estranged or alienated from the poem unfolding on the page. The poet is dissatisfied with the result, which seems to contradict his inclination of what the poem is supposed to resemble. In a temporal sense, the poet is barred from the present event due to his desire to compose something else, something that is not already “here” and

“now” on the page. What the poet overlooks, however, is that a poetic event is already happening on the page.

The poet analyzes his negative claim by reviewing what is contained in the phrase “nothing / I have done.” Rather than uncovering some underlying “meaning,” the poet uncovers the linguistic and grammatical material constituting the phrase “nothing I have done”:

nothing

I have done

is made up of

5

nothing

and the diphthong

ae

together with

the first person

10

singular

indicative

of the auxiliary

verb

to have (“VI” 3-15)

15

Thus, the poem turns reflexively on its own condition as a linguistic occurrence. Mariani comments on the poem’s self-reflective turn: “Looked at this way, ‘nothing,’ has lost its abstract immensity to become a word, a pigment on the page, equal to its opposite ‘everything’” (Mariani 198). That is, the poet has found “nothing” to be an occurrence, composed of words indicating that a poetic event is occurring. In other words, the utterance of “no” and “nothing” is composed of *something*, namely the words constituting the statement that I am doing nothing. By laying out the linguistic properties of his phrase, the poet realizes that he has done something; he has brought “the diphthong // ae” and “the first person / singular / indicative // of the auxiliary verb / to have” into existence by uttering that he has done nothing. Simultaneously at this moment of

paradox, the poet's frustration and despair seem to be allayed. Indeed, something, rather than nothing, is happening. The poet has realized that a poem is already happening under his nose on the page. Turning to the materiality of the words has the effect of moving the poet past the anxiety of creating poetic lines whose significance lies in what they mean.

Next, we see the poet bearing witness to this event. When the poet reaches line 16, the discovery that "nothing" is equivalent with "everything" makes sense. Williams states that "everything / I have done / is the same" (16-18). In other words, every previous poem has been created by the same: combinations of words. Thus, in the sense that any poem is given form by its materiality, the current poem occurring is no different. Williams elaborates by positing a hypothetical statement about what constitutes the act of composing a poem: "[I]f to do // is capable / of an / infinity of / combinations // involving the / moral / physical / and religious // codes" (19-28). If we read "to do" as shorthand for "to compose," then the poem is that which holds together the particular event of codes being combined.

The poem concludes with a statement reaffirming the equivalence between nothing and everything: "[F]or everything / and nothing // are synonymous" (29-32). The poet explains the condition necessary for this equivalence to occur: "[W]hen/ energy in vacuo / has the power / of confusion // which only to / have done nothing / can make perfect" (33-39). These lines are enigmatic, partially due to their abstractness. When read in light of my argument that "VI" documents the creative process, however, these final lines reflect the poet's relationship toward what he uses to make poetry. If poetry is way of harnessing "energy," as Williams seems to imply in the statement that poetry expresses the movement of the imagination, then this energy is "made perfect" when the poet simply does "nothing," as achieved in this poem. Breslin observes that "to do 'nothing' is to experience 'everything'" (Breslin 68)—hence, Williams's choice of the word "everything," which reveals the open stance of this poem.

Lyotard's account of the event illuminates the transformation from nothing to everything, which characterizes this poem. Essentially, the first four lines portray a poet concerned with the possibility that nothing might happen this time around; no poem will appear. In this regard, the poet confronts the question of privation or "the possibility of nothing happening ... of words ... not coming; of this sentence being the last" (Lyotard 246). In the terms of Edmund Burke's formulation of the sublime, the poet in "To Have Done Nothing" confronts the terror of possible silence—that there might be no more poems. Lyotard notes that this situation faces the artist

every time a new work is begun: “Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the ‘beginning’ of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms a question at every point of questioning ... at every ‘and what now?’” (246). As an answer to this question, “To Have Done Nothing” suggests that the event of articulating this question is in fact something, and that something is already present and “here”—in “nothing” and the diphthong “ae,” for instance. This poem demonstrates that entering the present moment involves noticing what is present when nothing seems to be here. Indeed, this moment of discovery astonishes, since we thought that nothing was there originally. In “To Have Done Nothing” this revelation occurs through the celebration of the materiality of the poem’s words.

This paradoxical conclusion, that “nothing” is equivalent to “everything,” however, is discovered only after the poet overcomes his initial state of alienation from the present moment by realizing that something is happening *already*, namely, a poem. Likewise, readers should not ask *what* this poem means, but should ask the question: *what* has happened? The temporal answer to this question is that, somewhat miraculously and paradoxically, nothing becomes everything.

Williams’s attempt to create the present moment continues in the very next poem, actually unnumbered (it is number seven in the order) and later entitled “The Rose.” This poem is unique in that it represents Williams’s attempt to overturn one of art’s predominant symbolic icons, the rose, by unmooring it from its conventional associations. Williams frees the rose from the “crude symbolism” it has accrued as an artistic symbol, in which our experience of the rose is detachedly mediated by a system of symbolic representations, by creating a present moment in which the rose becomes an artistic event. MacGowan, noting Williams’s attempt to liberate “the rose”—a hackneyed word—observes that the poem’s theme is freedom (MacGowan 112). “Crude symbolism” prevents us from making contact with and engaging the rose. So Williams’s poem seeks to recover this sort of encounter with the rose.

The poem begins with a startling proposition: “The Rose is obsolete” (“The Rose” 1). By “rose,” here Williams means, not a literal rose flower, but the nexus of symbolic connotations that the rose carries, such as love and beauty, clearly an example of “crude symbolism”—which is to associate emotions with “natural phenomena such as ... flowers with love” (Williams 100). To recall, “crude symbolism” mediates our experience of the object so that conscious “contact” cannot be made with it. Williams’s solution in this poem is to disavow the “crude symbolism”

the passage. The lineation carries the semantic meaning across the line breaks, yet the presence of the line breaks interrupts the semantic meaning by provoking us to read to linger on the individual words.

For instance, the lineation draws attention to words such as “edge” (5) and “ends” (9). The poem enacts the edges of a rose petal and the surrounding air. As the poem draws attention to itself, readers might notice that an edge that “cuts without cutting” or “ends—” could refer to the words on the page. That is, the rose *is* the poem. Its edge is the end of the poetic line. Its edge *is* a dash mark, ending at the white space of the page. Not only this, but the position of these words adds self-reflexivity to the poem, which encourages us to simply notice the poem happening on the page, rather than reducing the poem merely to a vehicle for “meaning.” Readers experience these words free from the conventional expectation that the edge is meant metaphorically. The edge happens in reality—on the page. Thus, the poem happens as something that undoes any prepared knowledge of what is rose is that we might bring into the poem.

In the proceeding ten lines, Williams figures the rose in tactile and metallic imagery in which a rose is “figured in majolica,” a “broken plate / glazed with a rose” (15-17) or “the sense / makes copper roses / steel roses— (18-20). Critical speculation ranges as to which broken plate, etc., Williams is referring. However, more significant is the unexpected turn the poem has taken in describing a depicted rose, rather than an actual rose. Additionally, the poem introduces a sensory element through the tactile imagery. Ashton observes: “The pun on sense is relevant here ... for the senses of this new rose (what we see, touch, and smell) serve precisely to foreclose all the things the obsolete rose used to mean” (Ashton 127). Not only does the sensorial element foreclose “the obsolete rose” of “crude symbolism,” however, the element reveals the register upon which readers receive the poem. Such a register requires more engagement from readers, since it demands more from them—sensory perception. The poem, however, moves beyond the static representation of the rose “figured in majolica.” Ashton notes that the rose cannot remain geometric in this poem; it must achieve its existence as a separate object from the plate, thus freeing itself from its existence as a representation or type on the plate (134).

To underscore his foreclosing of “crude symbolism,” Williams asserts in the next stanza: “The rose carried weight of love / but love is at an end—of roses” (21-22). These lines introduce one of the poem’s central notions: that of separation. First, Williams has separated the actual rose from its emotional associations. Second, the words in the line enact the separation, enacted by

the dash, which in effect moves “love” and the “roses” apart. In a temporal sense, the poem states that *now*, at the present moment, the cleavage is occurring. Separation is emphasized again in the next line: “It is at the end of the / petal that love waits” (23). Here the separation is again conceptual and graphical—on the page. Williams will not let readers predetermine the event of a rose by associating it with love; the poem’s form prevents such an association from occurring.

Critics, like Bernard Duffey and Breslin, observe that the theme of separation is discussed in the prose immediately preceding this poem. Williams explains that the cubist Juan Gris’ painting *The Open Window* exemplifies “the modern trend”: “[T]he attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker but to invite him in” (Williams 107). Gris’s influences has led Duffey, for example, to conclude that “The Rose” is reconstructed in cubist-like forms (137), and Breslin to state that the poem is a form of “literary cubism” (Breslin 76). While this has validity, Williams’s nod to Gris in the prose passage suggests that the point of the poem is to free the figure of the rose from the imposition of symbolism. Williams achieves this freedom through dynamic form, allowing the rose to “happen” as we traverse the rose by reading forward.

This aspect is only heightened two stanzas later, as Williams again introduces more sensory imagery:

Crisp, worked to defeat	25
laboredness—fragile	
plucked, moist, half-raised	
cold, precise, touching	

What

The place between the petal’s	30
edge and the	

From the petal’s edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely

rigid penetrates
the Milky Way
without contact—lifting
from it—neither hanging
nor pushing— (“The Rose” 25-39)

35

A host of sensations are present here: crispness, wetness, coldness, etc. Williams carefully omits commas following each word at the line turn so that readers are left to linger a bit longer on each individual word. A number of action verbs are employed—“touching” (28), “starts” (32), “penetrates” (35), “lifting” (37), “hanging” (38), and “pushing” (39)—which, like the first stanza, sets the rose in motion. The rose’s activity is highlighted by the poem’s open form. Additionally, Williams startlingly uses the white of the page to signify both the air next to petal’s edge and the white of the page. Williams labors to produce the conditions—that he mentions in the prose passage about Gris—of keeping things separate, yet open and free. Like “Nothing I have Done,” the poem is highly aware of itself so that readers become more aware of the poem itself as it occurs on the page. Meanwhile, Williams’s lineation and diction prevent us from mastering what this poem “means.” Rather than pin down the rose to a symbolic meaning, we simply bear witness to the fact that a poem is happening. The final stanza states:

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates spaces
(40-2)

40

To the very end, the poem remains faithful to freeing the rose from conventionality. The rose retains a strikingly indeterminate nature, fixed between polarities like hardness and softness, and, in the final stanza, between fragility and penetrability. Ashton states that “the point of producing the flower that appears at the end of this poem is to make it be what it is precisely by keeping it from meaning what it used to mean, or for that matter, from meaning anything at all” (Ashton 127). I take Ashton to mean that the rose does not mean “anything” symbolic, which is not to say that the poem is utterly senseless or does not mean anything at all. Instead, by the poem’s end, readers will not have mastered the poem by putting all these stanzas together and composing a single unifying picture of a rose. The happening of the poem works against this sort of view of the rose.

Although Gertrude Stein's famous adage "a rose is a rose is a rose" renews our perception of the rose, it is Williams's poem that dynamizes the rose, setting in motion, so to speak. Williams's rose possesses activity, occurring through the happening of this poem; the rose here is more than the idea of a rose. Like Lyotard's "*it happens*," the question could still be posed: has it happened? Or even, what precisely has happened? That is, after reading this poem, one could very well still ask what the poem was about. In a simple sense, it is *about* a rose, yet the activity of this rose remains out of the determining reach of our consciousness. The fact that these questions can be raised even after one reads this poem testifies to the poem's sublime nature in that the rose, contrasted with its determinate status as a "crude symbol," which provokes us to engage in its occurrence without attempting to determine it. However, the rose's sublimity is not primarily registered on the level of the poem's indeterminacy. Instead, the rose's sublimity is registered temporally in that it is constituted as an "action" poem. We do not come understand Williams's rose through a preexisting system of conventions that we take into the poem as we read it. Rather, we simply bear witness to the rose as an occurrence and let "*it happen*" by reading through the poem.

"The Rose" demonstrates that the sublime can originate from something previously considered to possess great traditional or conventional value. The sublime event allows us to see this object anew. In Lyotard's terms, the sublime can emerge from something possessing a system of rules for what it is supposed to mean and for what it will mean in the future. We see that the poem, by drawing attention to itself as an event, is able to preserve the freedom necessary to constitute itself as "*it happens*." Once freed from the system of "crude symbolism," the rose becomes sublime in its transformation into an event that did not necessarily have to occur after Williams declares an end to the iconic rose, and in its occurrence the rose becomes something that is too much for our understanding to grasp in a determinate sense.

Our next poem, Poem "IX" (later entitled "Young Love") reveals Williams battling to renew a biographical memory into the poetic present he is creating in *Spring and All*. The poem provides an interesting moment to examine Lyotard's account of the event in light of something that has *already* occurred. Critics, like MacGowan, read "Young Love" as "an exercise in liberating words [and subject] from their emotional implications" (MacGowan 105) since the poem depicts an alleged affair Williams had fifteen years prior with a nurse, Margaret Blake Jarvis (Ahearn 148). Naturally, such a goal is difficult to achieve given that our recall of

memories is typically predetermined—a memory’s meaning and significance has usually been determined in part by the mind. Thus, such subject matter seems antithetical to the undetermined nature of the “it happens.” Poem “IX,” demonstrates, however, that this is not necessarily the case.

Curiously, “Young Love” opens with a question: “What about all this writing?” (“IX” 1). The poem interrogates itself before anything else occurs. Like “To Have Done Nothing,” “Young Love” exhibits self-reflexivity at its first step. The question invites readers to actively engage in the poem as it calls own significance into question. The poem continues: “O Kiki / O Miss Margaret Jarvis / The backhandspring” (2-4). Lines 2-3 include a possible nickname and the nurse’s name. Line 4 is a sort of announcement in which Williams states that, as an act of recollection, the poem is a “backhandspring.” The choice of this word dynamizes the poem, identifying it as an activity being undertaken by the poet. Williams runs the two words together (“back” and “handspring”) to emphasize movement in e.e. cummings-esque fashion. Barry Ahearn observes that the compound word, like the opening question, opens the poem to an awareness of itself:

[T]he dexterity required to participate in and then extricate himself from this disastrous affair resembles the dexterity required of the modern poet. The joys and travails of love become a training ground for the trails of composition.
(Ahearn 148)

Thus, the poem reenacts Williams’s own recollection of the event, equivalent to an acrobat’s movements. These first few lines introduce an almost documentary-like frame in which we are about to witness the poet at work in the present moment composing his poem in order to reconfigure his memory of the affair. However, like “Nothing to Have Done” and “The Rose,” readers cannot merely witness the poem, but must do so actively by engaging continuously with the poem’s at-first bewildering sense and organization.

Williams continues with a fragmented set of general memories about New York City in a sort of synecdotal shorthand:

I: clean
clean
clean: yes ... New-York

5

Wrigley's, appendicitis, John Marin:
skyscraper soup—

Either that or a bullet! ("IX" 5-10) 10

He repeats the word "clean" thrice, as if washing his hands, ensuring that he begins the poem on proper footing—clean from emotional association he might have with the emotion. Ahearn notes the multiplicity of this word: "[C]linical asepsis for doctors and nurses, the ideal condition of a hospital, a clean separation from unwanted emotional entanglement, words stripped of emotional attachment, and placed on the page" (Ahearn 149). "Young Love" is like "The Rose" in that it functions to strip the poem away from emotional associations, thus undoing whatever set of rules he (and we) might bring with as we think about memories. Williams's collage of New York memories contains snippets of experiences ranging from chewing gum to a Marin painting, concluding with a bit of speech that Williams might have heard from a movie or on the street—perhaps a hold up?—yet the snippet also exposes Williams' adamant either/or stance in the poem of keeping things "clean." MacGowan observes that Williams seems to regurgitate these New York memories, like his roman feasters seven pages prior (MacGowan 106). For Williams, the idea is to purge himself of them before moving onto the actual memory.

Finally, Williams begins describing the affair in a sentimental and conventional manner, only to interrupt himself and set things "straight" or "clean":

Once
anything might have happened
You lay relaxed on my knees—
the starry night
spread out warm and blind 15
above the hospital—

Pah!

It is unclean
which is not straight to the mark—
("IX" 11-19)

comment on the progress he is making in detaching from the emotionally-laden memory. This moment coincides with the final shift toward the poem's resolution.

In the next single-line stanza, Williams poses the question: "But what would you have?" (45). From here, the poem develops to Williams' final cleavage from the emotional association of this memory. His response to the woman's distress is somewhat indifferent: "All I said was: / there, you see, it is broken // stockings, shoes, hairpins // your bed ..." (46-9). Williams' dispassionate engagement increases to voyeuristic emotional detachment:

...I wrapped myself around you—

I watched

50

You sobbed, you beat your pillow
you tore your hair
you dug your nails into your sides

I was your nightgown

I watched! (49-55) 55

The exclamation point seems to accentuate Williams's triumph in his ability to detach—in both the actual event and his recollection of the event. His detachment is a refusal to engage in nostalgia over the woman's violent heartbreak in the affair. MacGowan comments upon the effect of reading these sections of the poem: "[T]he reader is obliged to follow the enforced direction, although it cuts against the nostalgic or narrative pattern that his own sympathies might want to impose" (MacGowan 108). The poem demands that our emotions remain free from determining both Williams's memory and the poem's presentation of this memory. We must follow the path that Williams has set out for us as we receive the memory. The poem resists any systems of classification that we might bring into the poem. Rather Williams recreates the memory as a poetic event whose significance lies simply in how it is assembled in the present moment he creates for us.

With a proverb-esque utterance, the poem winds to its conclusion. Williams declares:

Clean is he alone

After whom stream

unhinge him from the present moment by returning him to romantic nostalgia about the event. Williams strives to remain separate from this sentiment. To this end, Williams adopts a stance of self-reflexivity; he must be aware of what he is doing in the present in order to keep the poem “clean” from the prepackaged nostalgia of romantic memories. In this regard, the present moment created by the poem opposes “the beautiful illusion,” mentioned on the page previous to the poem (Williams 112), in which the poem constructs an illusion of the memory as a beautiful humanizing moment. Hence, the poem is Williams’s attempt to make contact with what “really” happened, so to speak, thus he clings to “cleanliness” in the poem.

When the four poems I examined are paired with Lyotard’s essay on the sublime and the avant-garde, it becomes clear that Williams’s aesthetic in *Spring and All* is not accidental nor conceived of in a vacuum. We see that Williams is an active participant in modernism’s impulse to create the present moment. By freeing his poems and the individual words in these poems from the impositions of tradition and conventionality, Williams allows his poems to occur as events in their own regard. He wants readers to see what is happening *now* on his page and for the readers themselves to see what they are themselves doing when they see the poem; essentially, Williams himself strives for an absolutely contemporary awareness for himself and for his readers, overturning the condition of alienation from the present moment that he mentions in the opening narrative frame (89). Thus, Williams’s “action” poems—that is, poems that draw attention to themselves as actions occurring on the page—are his prescription for overturning our alienation to the present moment.

By freeing his poems from the systemic aesthetic rules of tradition, Williams demonstrates, in the occurrence of the *Spring and All* poems, that when poems are allowed to exist in the state that Lyotard describes as “*it happens*,” they necessarily accrue a degree of indeterminacy in their meaning. Williams does not attempt to cover this up or hide this in his poetry; instead, he allows indeterminacy of meaning and significance to remain in his poem. He allows his poems to cause us to ponder: what’s significant about this poem? Therefore, we should not be discouraged when we do not “get” a poem, like “Nothing to Have Done,” in *Spring and All*. Such moments should remind us that something has been allowed to occur which is sublime in the sense that it is larger than whatever systems of thought we employ to grasp the significance of artistic events. In this regard, *Spring and All* readily exemplifies the modernist discovery, or more broadly the aesthetic discovery of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

according to Lyotard, that the sublime is that mode in art which bears “witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy” (Lyotard 252).

Williams, by allowing poems to occur freely as events, partakes in the discovery mentioned by Lyotard. Hopefully, I have demonstrated that Williams is an appropriate candidate for the avant-garde artists interested in capturing the sublime that Lyotard speaks of in his essay. In this light, *Spring and All* exemplifies the developing impulse of creating the present moment that Lyotard characterizes as modernism. Thus, the achievement of Williams’s *Spring and All* can be situated within Lyotard’s account.

On the other hand, however, Williams develops our own understanding of the modernist impulse through the concrete example of his poems. While Lyotard spends a good deal of time emphasizing the indeterminate nature of the “*it happens*” at the moment of its recurrence, we have seen, through the four poems I examine, that Williams helps us develop Lyotard’s account of the event to incorporate aspects that at first might appear antithetical to creating the present moment. I think this occurs simply because Lyotard’s essay is a theoretical account providing a descriptive narrative for the contours of modernism. When examined in light of the particular occurrence of Williams’s poems, his account is developed to encompass the reality of actual poems. In “Spring and All,” we saw that the aesthetic of the present moment is not antithetical to representational poetry in which a person, thing, or occasion is depicted in the poem. This poem depicts a springtime scene of new growth; however, the poem’s significance is not reducible to this one aspect. Rather, the poem creates a present moment through the manner in which readers read about the springtime event. Williams’s use of lineation and diction were instructive in this regard. While in “The Rose” and “Young Love” we saw that an event can interact with subject matter—whether a hackneyed symbol like the rose or a potentially nostalgic memory from the past—in a way that redeems these things from the deadened context into which they have previously been received. Essentially, Williams demonstrates the renewing activity of the present moment, or “*it happens.*” This renewing activity is captured in his text’s title, *Spring and All*, which bears testimony to the potential contained in the happening of the present moment—as we saw, a potential figured powerfully in the poem bearing the same name.

Thus, Williams’s *Spring and All* illustrates the modernist impulse to create the present moment that Lyotard identifies, while simultaneously demonstrating the scope and range of possibility inherent in the modernists’ impulse—or more accurately, inherent in the occurring of

the present moment itself. *Spring and All*'s achievement draws from this scope and its ability to remain firmly and bravely in the present.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Travis Timmons was born in 1983 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Literature from Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, and a Master of Arts in English from Florida State University. He specializes in modernism, the avant-garde, avant-garde feminism, and critical theory. Currently, he is employed as the Professor of English and Literature at Southwest Georgia Technical College in Thomasville, Georgia. He and his wife live in Tallahassee.