THE POSTHUMANISM
OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

by

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Figure 1: Unknown. *William Carlos Williams wearing beret (fragment)*. n.d., Photograph. Beinecke Rare Books & Manuscript Library, New Haven.
ABSTRACT

There is a torn fragment of a black and white photograph in the Beinecke rare book room at Yale University, showing American poet William Carlos Williams wearing a beret and tie (see figure 1). A tear cuts off the right two thirds of the original image, but Williams himself has been cut in half by the framing of the shot itself. What remains of the image of the poet has, in turn, been beset by time and mishandling; a white crease bisects Williams’s face a second time. Yet of all the images that exist of Williams, it is this unusual photograph that, more than any other, sums up Williams’s most significant, and most significantly unrecognised, achievements as a poet. Despite his reputation as a poet of clarity, of economic and discrete images of wheelbarrows, chickens and plums, it becomes clear upon closer reading that Williams’s poetics actively resisted notions of unity, clarity and stability of forms—even at the level of his own subjectivity. Rather, Williams’s poetics is predicated on the assumption that all objects, all words, and all human subjects are, like the man in the beret in the photograph, unstable and fragile components of the continuum of the material world. So much so that Williams’s poetics preempts many of the interrogations of the nature of language and human subjectivity that would later constitute the critical movements of posthumanism. Based on this premise, I argue that the critical lens of posthumanism provides an unprecedented and productive means of answering some of the enduring questions surrounding Williams’s poetry. The central challenge that Williams’s poetics has always posed is how to reconcile the tension between Williams’s humanistic ethos and the profound materialism of his work. In other words, how can we speak of a poet who pushes human consciousness to the periphery of his poems in favour of material reality, who destabilises distinctions between the human mind and the natural, mechanical and bodily worlds, who reveals, by virtue of his experience as a physician, humankind to be fragile, temporal, mortal compositions of flesh, blood and bones—but whose poetry and prose also embody a deep-seated humanistic ethos, premised on ideals of democracy, charity and empathy? I argue that, from the perspective of posthumanism, the tension between materialism and humanistic values is not a tension at all; rather, the two are intertwined and even at times
continuous. Williams’s poetry provides an early example of a particular contemporary notion of posthumanism, championed by Julie Clarke, N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe, in which the contingency and instability of language, human subjectivity and the borders between self and other serve as a valuable means of destabilising oppressive notions of authority and unity. Through an analysis of Williams’s approach to the relationship between the human subject and modern technology, the natural world, politics and medicine, I examine the ways in which Williams challenged, both thematically and at the level of language, humanist assumptions of the authority, autonomy and sovereignty of the human subject: assumptions that were used throughout the twentieth century to justify and perpetuate the subjugation of women and peoples of colour, the exploitation of the natural landscape, and the rise of fascist, nationalist and eugenic ideologies. I will suggest that the theories of writers such as Haraway, Wolfe, Clarke and Hayles offer the chance of reading Williams’s radical materialism and his posthumanist deconstruction of the humanist cogito not as a rejection of the humanity altogether, but as a poetic response to the various ethical, social and political challenges that defined the early twentieth century.
DECLARATION

This is to certify that
i. the thesis comprises only my original work except where indicated in the preface.
ii. due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used.
iii. the thesis is less than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of bibliographies, and footnotes.

Signed: Christopher Glenn Edwards

Date: 16/03/2017
PREFACE

Some of the findings from Chapter 1 have been accepted for publication, in a modified form, in my essay “‘Then He Kissed It With His Bumper’: The Autovehicular Posthumanism of William Carlos Williams” in the *William Carlos Williams Review*. Furthermore, some of the findings in Chapter 4 regarding *Yes, Mrs. Williams* were included in my essay “Translation, Fragmentation and Cosmopolitanism in William Carlos Williams's *Yes, Mrs. Williams*” in *New Scholar* (2016).
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Anne Maxwell, whose patient and inspiring supervision made both my honours year and this PhD candidature much less daunting and much more rewarding than they otherwise would have been. Thanks also to Deirdre Coleman for her insights and her guidance along the way. It has been a privilege and a delight to have spent this time with you both.

Thanks to Sarah Blood for managing to be both a good mate and a good proofreader, without letting either role get in the way of the other. I am also very grateful to Laura Henderson for her faith in me, her support, her strength, her love, and the lovely reflective glow that her great, bright intelligence lends to those who know her. Also, thanks for looking after me when my laptop got stolen. Thanks to my parents, Marg (Mum) and Glenn (Dad). You told me to do what makes me happy and I called your bluff. Let’s see what happens next.

Finally, thanks to the Melbourne live music scene: to all the people who I played music with, whose gigs I looked forward to during long days at my desk, whose shoves in the mosh pit shook me out of my own head, whose sweaty hugs meant the world to me, and whose company over beers taught me that ideas are only valuable when shared with good people. Thanks.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declaration.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: ‘It is the death of poetry you are accomplishing’</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Literary Posthumanism from the Ditch.</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. ‘Then he kissed it with his bumper’: Williams’s Posthumanist Relationship with the Modern Machine</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. ‘He who has kissed a leaf’: Williams’s Posthumanist Ecopoetics</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. ‘The Mutability of Truth’: Williams, Posthumanism and Democracy</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. ‘Was I not interested in Man?’: Williams as Doctor and as Poet</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Williams, Twitter and Posthumanism in the Twenty-first Century</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited.</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (1951)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AG</td>
<td>In the American Grain (1925)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP1</td>
<td>The Collected Poems, Volume One (1986)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CP2</td>
<td>The Collected Poems, Volume Two (1988)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DS</td>
<td>The Doctor Stories (1984)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EK</td>
<td>The Embodiment of Knowledge (1974)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Imaginations (1970)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IWWP</td>
<td>I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet (1958)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ML</td>
<td>Many Loves and other plays (1961)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Paterson, revised edition (1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams (1954)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SL</td>
<td>Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams (1957)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WM</td>
<td>White Mule (1937)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Yes, Mrs. Williams (1959)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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INTRODUCTION: ‘IT IS THE DEATH OF POETRY YOU ARE ACCOMPLISHING’

In the introduction to *Spring and All* (1923), American poet William Carlos Williams anticipates an outraged reaction to his latest collection of poems. Taking on the voice of his imagined critics, he berates himself for his own affront to the metric, rhythmic and thematic conventions of English verse:

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. (*I*, 88)

As this statement suggests, the formal processes of poetic composition are not easily separated from matters of morality and human experience; the poem, and indeed literature in general, is commonly held up as the ultimate evocation of the redemptive powers of the human spirit. Throughout the history of Western literary theory, the work of literature has been prized for its capacity to reflect, and even shape, the idea of universal human nature; in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), Harold Bloom credits the work of William Shakespeare, as well as other canonical Western texts by Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Tolstoy and “perhaps Dickens” with the creation of the universal category that we now refer to as the human (3). What is more, for Bloom, the creation of the human is the primary responsibility of literature: “the representation of human character and personality remains always the supreme literary value, whether in drama, lyric or narrative” (3–4). The frantic voices that chastise Williams in *Spring and All* are likely to agree. Poetry, for them, goes “hand in hand” with human life (*I*, 88). Even today, the conflation of literature and the human experience is seen

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1 Presumably, no Western literature was written in the period of almost two millennia between Sophocles and Dante.
as little more than common sense. But the idea that literature can capture something universally human, “our deepest promptings” (I, 88) is not without historical context. Neither is the notion that there is even a universal “human character and personality” (Bloom, 3) to be captured in the first place. Rather, these concepts are inextricable from the philosophical traditions of early modern and Enlightenment humanism.

The term “humanism” is a broad one, with as many definitions as it has historical contexts; in the period of the late fifteenth century commonly known as the Renaissance, a humanist (or humanist in its native Italian) was merely a person interested in those subjects known as the humanities: grammar, rhetoric, poetry, philosophy and, in particular, classical studies (Davies, 10). The humanist, anachronistically referred to as Renaissance humanists, directly inspired the neo-humanistic education reforms of nineteenth-century Germany. These reforms were led by philosophers and educators such as G. W. F. Hegel, Wilhelm Humboldt and Friedrich Philipp Immanuel Niethammer, the latter of whom used the term humanismus to denote a high school and university curriculum focused largely on ancient Greek, Latin, literature and philosophy (Davies, 10). For these German humanists, the culture of the ancient Greeks represented all that was unique to humanity: rationality, democracy, philosophy and art. And, as Tony Davies writes in his book Humanism, the Hellenism of the German humanists was based on the utopian belief that the study of classical humanities could bring about redemptive social progress: “For them, the modern Germany they were engaged in building, cultured, orderly and modern, would be the fruition of what the ancient Greeks had dreamed” (11). Despite the national specificity of this project, humanismus soon made it to the English-speaking world where it became the liberal humanist education system of the nineteenth century. It was at this point that English critics began to look backwards at their own literary history in an attempt to form a canonical lineage between classical literature and English writers. Writers such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare gained unprecedented critical prominence during this period due to their supposed capacity to capture some essence of a universal human character. Nineteenth-century humanist educator and cultural critic Matthew Arnold expresses this critical climate when describing Chaucer in his 1888 “The Study of Poetry”:
His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life—so unlike the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human (emphasis mine) point of view. (Essays in Criticism, 27-28)

As this quotation suggests, the nineteenth century saw an unprecedented focus on universal human subjectivity within literary studies. The role of the author, in turn, increasingly came to be seen as the exploration and representation of the universal human mind. This increasing focus on the centrality of subjectivity to literature in turn inspired, in its own way, the Romantics of the nineteenth century. When English Romantic poet John Keats writes, in an 1818 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, that “axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses” (Selected Letters, 122), he expresses one of the central tenets of English Romanticism: that subjective human experience and the human imagination are the rightful focus of the work of literature. In this sense, Western humanism can be broadly described as a secular “religion of humanity” (Davies, 16), an attempt to forge a narrative of history, albeit a largely Eurocentric and patriarchal one, centred around the emancipatory powers of human culture and the human mind. As English poet and literary critic J. A. Symonds describes in his Revival of Learning (1898):

The essence of humanism consisted in a new and vital perception of the dignity of man as a rational being apart from theological determinations, and in the further perception that classic literature alone displayed human nature in the plenitude of intellectual and moral freedom. (52)

It is this very same narrative that Bloom participated in exactly a century later when he claims that the lineage from Ancient Greek literature to the Western canon: from Homer, to Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Tolstoy and, to “perhaps Dickens” (3) is humanity’s only protection from the “anti-elitist swamp of cultural studies” (7). Williams’s imagined critics appeal to it when they speak of the poetry that “led us towards new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltations” (I, 88). And it is this narrative that, with his “antipoetry” (I, 88) Williams seemingly disrupts.
As Symonds’s reference to humanism’s belief in “the dignity of man as a rational being” (52) suggests, a focus on the redemptive power of the humanities is not all that the term humanism entails. A preoccupation with classical culture and an emphasis on the significance of literature to human existence does not explain the universalism with which Williams appeals to “our deepest promptings” (I, 88) and Bloom to “human character” (8). And indeed, Wilhelm Humboldt’s humanism was not just inspired by the humanisti of Renaissance Italy, but also the philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment, particularly the works of Bacon, Descartes, Kant and Hegel (Davies, 120). In their attempt to rid philosophy of the inaccuracies and superstitions of the past and forge a secure foundation for human knowledge, these philosophers appealed, in one way or another, to the rationality of the human mind. In order to do so, they required a new model of the human subject: one capable of viewing the world with rational and objective clarity. As such, these philosophers all drew an unprecedented distinction between the non-rational world of nature and objects and the rational, sovereign authority of the human mind. In his famous proclamation “I think therefore I am” or “cogito ergo sum”, Descartes distinguishes the rational, knowing mind, the cogito, from the material and bodily world, arguing that only the existence of the cogito can be logically deduced (Principles of Philosophy, 5). Kant, taking this idea further, emphasises humanity’s capacity for pure transcendental rationality: a rationality that could afford an understanding of the world that is not possible by means of the sort of empirical induction that derives from sense-based stimuli:

Certain of our cognitions rise completely above the sphere of all possible experience, and by means of conceptions, to which there exists in the whole extent of experience no corresponding object, seem to extend the range of our judgements beyond its bounds. And just in this transcendental or supersensible sphere, where experience affords us neither instruction nor guidance, lie the investigations of reason, which, on account of their importance, we consider far preferable to, and as having a far more elevated aim than, all that the understanding can achieve within the sphere of sensuous phenomena. (Critique of Pure Reason, 4)
As such, these theorists laid the foundation for what would later be known as the Western humanist subject. As Davies argues:

> The ‘Man’ around whom the discourses of enlightenment are articulated, rational, sovereign and unconditional, betokens the emergence of a fully-fledged humanism in all but name. (121)

Indeed, while the term humanist was not yet available to Enlightenment philosophers, these theorists are directly responsible for the model of human consciousness most commonly associated with Western humanism. As Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley argue in their book, *Critical Humanisms* (2003), humanism is broadly defined by three main assumptions: the uniqueness and rationality of human subjectivity, the capacity for language to serve as a transparent means of representing this subjectivity, and the inherently redemptive quality of such an endeavour (Halliwell and Mousley, 3). In short, within Western discourses of humanism, the human subject is repeatedly framed as a transcendental consciousness, capable of pure reason and the instrumental use of language, a being who is both removed from, yet sovereign over, the material world.

Halliwell and Mousley do however caution that, due to the diverse history of the term, one needs to be careful when lumping a number of assumptions and ideals under the single term “humanism” (3). A belief in the redemptive powers of the humanities, for example, does not automatically imply in a belief in the Enlightenment model of the universal and transcendental human subject. Conversely, a critique of the universality of the humanist subject does not necessitate an abandonment of humanism’s emancipatory goals. However, while it may be anachronistic to lump such a broad spectrum of assumptions into a single term, as Davies points out, humanism per se

> is an anachronism that is still deeply ingrained in contemporary self-consciousness and every day common sense, to the extent that it requires a conscious effort, every time
someone appeals to ‘human nature’ or ‘the human condition’, to recall how recent such notions are. (25)

While it is important to avoid reducing humanism to a broad caricature, it is equally important to note the degree to which the humanities, and in particular literature, are seemingly inextricable from both questions of human morality and the Enlightenment humanist model of the universal subject. As the passage from Spring and All suggests, literature is so conflated with an abstract and universal understanding of human subjectivity that Williams’s supposed attack on the traditions of poetic form is equated with the annihilation of the human altogether. Any attack on this traditionally humanistic conception of poetry is, as such, a challenge to the ideals of Western humanism itself. But it is here, I argue, that the power of Williams’s poetry lies. By rejecting traditional metrical and symbolic conventions of English verse, by drawing attention to the materiality of both language and human subjectivity, and by marginalising the representation of human psychology in favour of a representation of natural and technological objects, Williams’s poetry seemingly enacts the “death of poetry”; consequently, his “antipoetry” raises the possibility of the death of humanism and even the human, as we know it, itself.

I. The Death of Poetry and the Death of the Human

The death of the human is, of course, not without a history of its own. As Halliwell and Mousley argue, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the figure of the human come under unprecedented attack:

The sovereignty of the subject (a key feature of liberal humanism); the transparency of language; and rationalism. Each of these was persistently questioned during the high period of critical theory’s anti-humanism. (Halliwell and Mousley, 4)

Halliwell and Mousley identify three discrete phases to this period of anti-humanism. In the first, the proliferation of the theories of thinkers such as Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber in the latter half of the nineteenth century threatened conventional understandings of humanity
by the “privileging of impersonal systems over human agency and individuality” (6). The Enlightenment humanist ideal of the human subject as a disembodied rationality was repeatedly undermined by theories that placed human consciousness as just one component within larger cultural, linguistic, psychological and economic systems (5). These theories, in combination with the technological mastery of the early twentieth century, and the resounding echoes of Newtonian physics, raised the troubling yet extremely pervasive idea that human consciousness was subject to the exact same mechanical laws as the natural and technological world; put simply, the end of the nineteenth century ushered in the distinctly anti-humanist idea that human subjectivity (and, it seems, poetry) could be reduced to a purely material and mechanical level. By the time Williams began his poetic career in 1909, the idea of the human subject as both sovereign to and distanced from material reality had become increasingly hard to reconcile with the perception of an increasingly mechanised world, in which the human subject was at the whims of mechanical, social, psychosocial and even linguistic and literary systems beyond their control or understanding. His famous remark that “a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (CP2, 54) seems to indicate, at the very least, his awareness of this reality. While Darwin, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche and Weber challenged the veracity of humanism’s detached, rational subject, the rise of global warfare and the threat of fascism throughout the twentieth century shook the humanist ideal that the human spirit and imagination would necessarily lead to the perfection of human society. In the wake of World War II, the German humanists’ celebration of the Greco-German lineage and the value of the empowered human mind became inevitably associated with unspeakable cruelty. As Davies writes, twentieth-century society was forced to confront the darker side of the humanist project:

On one side, humanism is saluted as the philosophical champion of human freedom and dignity, standing alone and often outnumbered against the battalions of ignorance… it is synonymous with the ‘culture’ to which we must look as the only bulwark against the materialistic ‘anarchy’ of contemporary society… On the other, it has been denounced as an ideological smokescreen for the oppressive mystifications of modern society and culture, the marginalisation and oppression of the multitudes of human beings in whose
name it pretends to speak, even, through an inexorable ‘dialectic of enlightenment’, for the nightmare of fascism and the atrocity of total war. (5)

The second phase of anti-humanism, according to Halliwell and Mousley, took place in the 1960s, as French critics such as Barthes, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Derrida, Foucault and Guattari began to question the anthropocentric premises of Western knowledge (6). It was at this point that Derrida wrote “The Ends of Man”, Barthes severed the univocal link between the poetic imagination and the literary work in “The Death of the Author” and in *The Order of Things* Foucault exposed the historicity of the human subject, wagering that soon “man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” (387). The third phase, which spanned the 1970s and 1980s, involved the translation of these theorists into English by critics such as Catherine Besley, Geoffery Bennington, Terence Hawkes, Christopher Norris, Peggy Kamuf, J. Hillis Miller and Paul Rabinow (Halliwell and Mousley, 6). In Halliwell and Mousley’s words, these critics

helped to shape the complex strands of French poststructuralist thought into a narrative that treated logocentrism, phallocentrism and humanism as the cardinal sins of Western metaphysics. (6)

In their efforts to purge theory of the anthropocentrism and universalism of humanist thought, these theorists came to reject any concept that appealed to the notion of the human. According to Halliwell and Mousley:

terms like ‘experience’, ‘consciousness’, ‘testimony’, ‘life’, ‘individual’ and ‘human’ were not just endangered concepts, but perceived to be endangering to the refinement of theory. (6)

Miller is a notable name. His book *Poets of Reality* (1965), which is discussed later in this introduction, provides the foundational anti-humanist reading of Williams’s work. For now, suffice it to say that, for these critics, the once broad and idealistic criticism of life that was humanism came to be seen as merely a single, monolithic set of antiquated illusions. According to Halliwell and Mousley, it was in this era that the terms “classical” and “liberal” humanism
were first used as a means of simplifying and generalising the diversity of Anglo-American humanism into a series of easily critiqued assumptions (3).

Williams’s career sits conspicuously between the first phase of anti-humanism and the subsequent two phases. His poetic career begins with the release of *Poems* in 1909 and spans the Great Depression, two world wars and the invention and deployment of atomic weaponry; his poetry emerges from a context in which the human mind is repeatedly revealed as subject to biological, linguistic and mechanical systems beyond its control and understanding. His last collection of poems *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* was released in 1962, a year before Williams’s death and four years before Foucault announced the erasure of the human subject. Williams’s declaration of the “death of poetry” and “annihilation of life” seems fitting in a time in which humanism, and indeed humanity itself, seemed more precarious than ever.

II. Williams and Anti-Humanism

But does Williams’s “antipoetry” equate to anti-humanism? Does the “death of poetry” necessarily signify, within Williams’s work, the death of the human? There are some who would say that it does. Indeed, the rise of American anti-humanist theory in the 1960s and 1970s coincided with a renewed critical interest in Williams’s poetry. This is perhaps not surprising; after all, Williams is known as a poet who emphasises the significance of material objects (most of us are familiar with the wheelbarrows, the chickens, the plums and the fire trucks of his most famous poems) over human psychology, who repeatedly blurs the boundaries that distinguish humanity and poetry from common machinery, who speaks unflinchingly, through his experience as a physician, of the abject realities of our existence as fragile, temporal, mortal compositions of flesh, blood and bones, and who questions, in *Spring and All*, whether it would, after all, be tragic if humanity were to disappear altogether:

Then at last will the world be made anew. Houses crumble to ruin, cities disappear giving place to mounds of soil blown thither by the winds, small bushes and grass give way to trees which grow old and are succeeded by other trees for countless generations. A
marvellous serenity broken only by birds and wild beast calls reigns over the entire sphere. Order and peace abound. (91)

Even on a formal level, his most quoted statements regarding poetry (“a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” (CP2, 54), “There are no sagas—only trees now, animals, engines: There’s that.” (Notes in Diary Form, 302) and “Why even speak of “I,” he dreams, which / interests me almost none at all?” (P, 18)) seem to reject altogether the humanist notion that poetry’s central dedication should look towards a universal human nature. In poems such as “Rapid Transit” (1923), Williams seems to reject the uniqueness of both poetry and human subjectivity altogether, rather framing them both as mere continuations of the material world:

To hell with you and your poetry—
You will rot and be blown
through the next solar systems
with the rest of the gases (CP1, 231-232)

As such, many of the most influential readings of Williams’s work stress the materialism (and subsequent anti-humanism) at the heart of his poetics, even going so far as to claim this as Williams’s primary achievement. In the mid-twentieth century, Williams gained significant critical attention as a pioneer and champion of the material and anti-humanist “realism” favoured by critics such as J. Hillis Miller, James Breslin, Richard Macksey and Joseph N. Riddel. These critics argue that, within his poetry, Williams abandons a universal or transcendent sense of humanity altogether, focusing instead on material objects and the particulars of place. A majority of these readings identify Williams’s 1914 poem “The Wanderer” as the point at which Williams rejects the centrality of human thought and emotions within his poetry and instead forms a poetics derived, both stylistically and thematically, from material reality. In his book The Inverted Bell (1974), Riddel describes the speaker in “The Wanderer” as “one deprived of all hope of self-transcendence, or even of an identity apart from place, of a self apart from the field it walks” (63). Similarly, in his essay “‘A Certainty of Music’: Williams’ Changes” (1966), Macksey suggests that,
for the speaker, “any transcendence beyond the immediate field of experience is unthinkable” (132). But it is J. Hillis Miller, one of the critics dubbed “anti-humanist” by Haliwell and Mousley (6), who provides the seminal materialist interpretation of Williams’s work. As Carl Rapp claims in his book William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism.

Almost everyone who has had anything to say about the subject since 1965 has been forced to come to terms with Miller’s view in one way or another, and it remains, on the whole, the most stimulating conception of Williams yet to appear. (4)

In his book Poets of Reality (1965), Miller begins by establishing that the Romantic movement, which inspired Williams’s earlier poetry, was characterised by “an opposition between the inner world of the subject and the outer world of things” (288). He argues that Williams’s greatest poetic achievement was to reject this Romantic dualism between mind and world in favour of an objective and material aesthetic. According to Miller, in Williams’s early poem “The Wanderer” “this obliteration of distinctness is poetically enacted” as the speaker plunges himself into the filthy waters of the Passaic river (289). Miller famously reads this event as a “leap into things” in which Williams symbolically and literally breaks down the boundary between his own internal, creative consciousness and the external world (289). As such, Miller argues that Williams entirely rejects the idea of a poetic alter ego and, by extension “those dramas of interchange of subject and object, self and world, which have long been central in Western philosophy and literature” (278). He writes that “Williams’ work expresses, quietly and without fanfare, a revolution in human sensibility. When he gives himself up to the world he gives up the coordinates and goals which had polarized earlier literature” (288). Once again, literature and humanity are spoken of as if they are one; not only does Williams’s poem disrupt Enlightenment distinctions between the mind and the material world associated with humanism and Romanticism alike, but also the “coordinates and goals” of the humanist project itself. For Miller, Williams’s poetry becomes one of objects: of wheelbarrows, cars, trains and rivers, and no longer the ethereal abstract processes of the human mind.
III. Williams and the Human Imagination

Not all critics are comfortable with such an anti-humanist reading. Many emphasise Williams’s dedication to humanistic values that are seemingly incongruous with the detached materialism described by Miller: to Romanticism, to empathy, to charity, to democracy and to the profound power of the imagination. Donald W. Markos, in his book *Ideas in Things* describes the “life-affirming mood” of Williams’s work, which emphasises “pleasure, gratitude, curiosity, wonder and trust” (17). Indeed, despite its dramatic declaration of the death of life and poetry, Williams’s introduction to *Spring and All* is itself an outright declaration of the poet’s esteem for humanity and the human imagination: “I love my fellow creature. Jesus, how I love him: endways, sideways, frontways and all the other ways” (89). In his book *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (1984), Carl Rapp argues that, in his eagerness to develop a materialist understanding of Williams’s work, Miller ignores the profound significance of ideas such as transcendence and the imaginative mind that continue to linger in Williams’s work (5). Rapp argues primarily that Miller’s insistence on Williams’s rejection of Romanticism causes him to overlook a number of underlying Romantic themes that are central to Williams’s poetics (13). He claims that, far from altogether abandoning a sense of self, the speaker in “The Wanderer” actually expands the reach of his ego, to form an extended, albeit pluralised, poetic identity.

He *does* give up his private consciousness or ego, but only because that ego or consciousness has suddenly expanded to the point where it now contains everything within it. Just as earlier in the poem the goddess seemed to embody the essence of all things, so now, because of his immersion, the narrator himself has become the essence of all things. (13)

Rapp argues that Williams’s poetics embodies not a rejection of interiority but an expansion of consciousness itself. Instead of rejecting outright the significance of human experience, Williams offers, according to Rapp, a Romantic model of the human consciousness based, not upon an antagonism with material reality, but upon a world structured around the human spirit:
Naturally, this involves a certain renunciation of self, but the self renounced is merely the
finite self, the delimited, servile consciousness of the ordinary man or woman. In
recompense for the renunciation of this ordinary self, the poet gains access to many selves,
in fact to the whole range of human experience. (16)

In one sense, the distinction between Miller and Rapp’s reading of Williams is minute. Both
argue that Williams conceives of the modern human experience as a merging of mind and world.
On the other hand, the distinction between the two models, which lies in the question of the
direction of the immersion, is immense. On one hand, Miller and the materialists suggest that the
ego is dissolved into the material world. On the other, Rapp’s Romantic humanist reading
suggests that the material world, in turn, is absorbed into an expanding human consciousness.
For Miller, the ego is sublimated; for Rapp, the human, by virtue of the powers of the
imagination, becomes the sovereign authority of the once mysterious and distant material world.

But the humanist affirmation of the powers of the human imagination is not always so closely
linked with an organic, Romantic connection to the material world. In her book *Shifting Gears*
(1987), Cecelia Tichi presents an altogether more modern reading of the role of the human
imagination within Williams’s work. Tichi situates Williams within a modern context in which the
human imagination is, first and foremost, responsible for the creation of unprecedented modern
technologies. Furthermore, she argues, “In an age that no longer felt the presence of an
omniscient and omnipotent deity, the engineer replaced God as the designer with whom the
writer could identify” (194). She adds that, within this new discourse, the creative act becomes a
process of assembling components in order to achieve a product of maximum efficiency:

The power of a poem, like that of a machine or structure, could be viewed as a function of
the efficient operation of its integrated components, all designed to work for maximal
strength and energy output. (258)

Tichi argues that Williams’s famous description of poetry as “a machine… made out of words”
(*CP2*, 54) suggests that language, like steam, steel and electricity, is merely a natural phenomenon
at the disposal of the sovereign human mind, whose role is to manipulate it to achieve maximum efficiency (267-268). In this sense, Rapp and Tichi’s arguments are more similar than they seem. Just as the immersion of mind and world in “The Wanderer” does not negate the sovereignty of the subject for Rapp, for Tichi, the presence of material and mechanical objects within Williams’s poetry does not supplant the human mind; rather, Williams’s poetry is a modern articulation of the humanist distinction between humanity and the material world, in which the sovereign and rational “engineer” has mastery over the material machine.

IV. Beyond Humanism and Anti-Humanism

So far, two distinct possibilities have emerged. The first, championed by theorists such as Riddel, Macksey and Miller, suggests that Williams’s poetry enacts the death of humanism; within his verse, human subjectivity is forcibly removed from its pedestal by the inevitable material realities of contemporary society. The anthropocentric Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century is supplanted by a “poetry of reality” in which all humanist goals and ideals are unsustainable. The second possibility, posited by theorists such as Rapp and Tichi, reinforces the traditional humanist ideal of the sovereignty of the subject; it is the mind of the artist, the unique capacity for artistic design, that is the true subject of the poem. However, while Miller’s reading fails to account for the “life affirming mood” of Williams’s poetry, such a privileging of the human imagination in the work of Rapp and Tichi ignores the degree to which Williams’s poetry repeatedly breaks down the boundaries between the human mind and the mechanical, natural and bodily world. As I demonstrate within this thesis, Williams’s poetry highlights the profound interrelationships between technology, the natural word, the human body and human subjectivity, language and poetry. Neither of the approaches we have addressed so far, neither humanism nor anti-humanism, seems to adequately explain the relationship between the life-affirming themes of Williams’s poetry and its materiality. Tichi herself notes this tension in Williams’s work, saying:

> It is ironic, for instance, that William Carlos Williams, a man of deeply liberal social sympathies, would nonetheless define the poem impersonally as a machine made of words.

(xv)
What is needed is a theoretical approach to Williams’s work that can explain and articulate the humanistic “liberal social” impulses within his work, without ignoring the degree to which the human subject is usurped by the material object as the focal point of his poetry. In his book *William Carlos Williams and Transcendentalism* (1992), Ron Callan provides a model of reading that refuses such a distinct direction of authority. He proposes that Williams’s poetic immersion within the material world does not suggest an abandonment of ego, nor does it signify the sovereignty of the human imagination over material reality, but rather a harmony between self and nature (1). In this regard, Callan sees Williams as belonging to the tradition of American Transcendentalist poetry that includes Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman, a tradition which attempts to express “a truthful reconciliation between spirit and matter” (1). According to Callan, Williams’s refusal to establish a poetic dominance over the material world or to succumb to it fully is part of his general aim to achieve a complex relationship of synthesis between world and spirit:

To achieve a position of domination is to lose touch with the elemental factors of growth. Just as the flower dies if it is isolated from the earth, so too the body uncovers love only in the act of relating, of reconciling. To exclude oneself from the dangerous give and take of the touch is to face sterility and hence the death of the imagination. (103)

In this sense, Callan touches upon one of the central contradictions inherent within Williams’s approach to the relationship between self and world:

This paradox exists in the nature of relationships, of how lovers can truly love without negating their individual identities, or how the poet can engage his world without manipulating it. The point of focus becomes, with the Transcendentalists I have discussed, the area of conjunction, the area of love, of imagination. Progress is therefore not about metamorphosis but rather transcendence, about how one can be ‘I’ and still speak of ‘us’. (104)
For Callan, Williams’s sense of self is situated in the paradoxical space that exists between pure interiority and pure objectivity, between self and world, between humanism and materialism. Callan’s appeal to Transcendentalism is questionable in this context, considering the anthropocentrism and (obvious) transcendentalism at the heart of the Transcendentalist aesthetic; Emerson did, after all, describe the whole of nature as a “metaphor for the human mind” (17). However, what is significant about this reading is Callan’s emphasis on relationships. He uses matrimony as an extended metaphor for Williams’s approach to material reality, suggesting that the relationship between self and other within Williams’s poetry consists of a fine balance between unity and individuality, between the ‘I’ of the imagination, and the ‘us’ of the fully immersed and extended material consciousness. Callan suggests that, to Williams, experience is, by definition, not an autonomous, solipsistic activity. Instead, it is a marriage between the subjective self, and the objective other (104). In his book *Ideas in Things*, Donald W. Markos expresses a similar idea when he proclaims that, instead of Miller’s materialism or Rapp’s opposing subjective idealism, it is best to understand Williams’s mature writing in terms of what Alfred North Whitehead refers to as “objective idealism”, in which the universe is both ideal, because it contains human consciousness and ideas, and simultaneously also objective (Markos, 25).

In his book, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1994), Peter Halter, like Callan, contends that Williams’s poetry exists at the point where self and material reality merge:

> In those moments of revelation, in which Williams manages to transcend his empirical self, he moves beyond the Romantic dichotomy between subject and object and recognizes in himself ‘the same forces which transfuse the earth’. (14–15)

Like Rapp and Callan, however, Halter emphasises the role of the human imagination in this process. He argues that, despite the profound extent of Williams’s “leap into things”, it is ultimately the power of the poet’s imagination, and not physical reality, that is the central focus of the poem (Halter, 3). In poems such as “The Great Figure”, Callan argues, Williams uses the
physical world of “things” as merely a setting against which he can demonstrate the transcendent power of the writer’s imagination:

In Williams’s poem, on the other hand, the environment is the dramatic setting that enhances the epiphanic effect of the golden figure on the “I”, the individual whose special sensitivity enables him to be thrilled by something that is “unheeded” by all those around him. (98)

In this sense, Halter aligns Williams’s “leap into things” with Marcel Duchamp’s practice of objet trouvè. Just as Duchamp used everyday objects to return art to the service of the mind, so too, according to Halter, does Williams use objects, not to decentralize his own subjectivity, but to highlight its unique capacity for elevating previously mundane items:

The golden figure 5 is a veritable objet trouvè, discovered by the poet among the innumerable things that belong to the neglected “soulless” present-day technological environment so systematically bypassed by the more traditional artists. (98-99)

Yet, as Halter demonstrates, such a use of objet trouvè is not without contradiction. While the practice of elevating a commonplace object within the poem can be read as an affirmation of the power of the human imagination, the emphasis on material objects over the human element necessarily undermines the significance of human subjectivity:

In 1920, when the poem was published for the first time, a reader probably expected it to be about a figure of public importance rather than about a number, or immediately realized the clash between what one could generally expect to find in poetry and what one found here—a poem that violated the basic poetic conventions by almost any standard. (99)

The question then becomes, who is the subject of a poem such as “The Great Figure”: Williams or the fire engine? Is “The Red Wheelbarrow” about a wheelbarrow and some chickens, or is it about the poet’s unique capacity to elevate otherwise unimportant items to the level of art? If we
are to fully appreciate Williams’s understanding of the place of humanity within the material
world, we must answer the question: is Williams’s “leap into things” (Miller, 289) a manifestation
of the sovereignty of the human imagination, or does Williams, as Miller suggests, afford a sense
of agency to the various material objects that feature in his poetry? More importantly, is it
possible to move beyond Enlightenment dualisms and speak of a relationship between human
imagination and poetry and the “things” of the material world without privileging, or even
distinguishing, any one of them?

In the past decade, these questions have been taken up by the critical perspective of thing theory,
which was founded by Bill Brown in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* (2001). In his follow-up
manuscript, *A Sense of Things* (2003), Brown writes:

> … I was convinced that cultural theory and literary criticism needed a comparably new
> idiom, beginning with the effort to think with or through the physical object world, the
> effort to establish a genuine sense of the things that comprise the stage on which human
> action, including the action of thought, unfolds. (3)

Brown notes that presence of material “things” within the modern world has been, within the
context of critical theory, almost exclusively described in terms of the rise of consumer culture;
the category of the “thing” carries connotations of commodification, of superficiality, clutter,
waste and the dehumanising force of capitalism. As a result, he argues, contemporary ideas of
value and authenticity have been, consciously or not, situated outside the material “world of
things”:

> I wanted criticism to avoid succumbing to the state of affairs described by Georges Bataille,
> where the very fact that capitalism is “an unreserved surrender to things” means that
capitalist cultures “place what is essential” beyond or outside “the world of things.” (3)
Instead of framing the “thing” as merely an object of consumption with a capitalist economy, Brown’s text seeks to complicate the relationship between culture and the various objects that it produces and by which it is produced:

I imagined a kind of cultural and literary history emanating from the typewriter, the fountain pen, the light bulb—component parts of the physical support for modern literary production. (3)

Plainly, such an approach lends itself to an examination of Williams’s work. As Brown points out:

William Carlos Williams always hovered in our midst as the poet most responsible for making poetry what it was in the twentieth century, and no less responsible than Whitman for making poetry American. He also seemed responsible, however unwittingly, for fostering a kind of neglect—a refusal to assume responsibility for ideas, a willingness to be satisfied with mere things. (1)

For Brown, Williams’s famous insistence that there are “no ideas but in things” (P, 9) is commonly misread as a dismissal of ideas and values in favour of the superficial world of the object. However, Brown points out that such a reading is premised on the very distinction between objects and ideas, between exterior and interior, that Williams’s poetry seeks to overturn:

The answer, of course, is that this literalization of Williams’s creed violates his own poetic practice of rendering things—“a red wheel / barrow” in their opacity, not their transparency. “No ideas but in things” should be read as a slip of the pen: a claim—on behalf of replacing abstractions with physical facts—that unwittingly invests objects with interiority, whereas Williams meant to evacuate objects of their insides and to arrest their doubleness, their vertiginous capacity to be both things and signs (symbols, metonyms, or metaphors) of something else. (11)

Williams’s poems are by no means devoid of ideas. Brown begins his book by quoting Ken Fields’s remark: “It’s not no ideas. ‘No ideas but in things’ doesn’t mean no ideas” (1). Williams
does not simply abandon ideas or human values in the name of wheelbarrows and chickens. But at the same time, as Brown points out, objects are not subservient to ideas; the “things” of Williams’s poetry are not passive receptacles to be filled with the ideas, impressions and emotions of the poet. The relationship between ideas and things within Williams’s work is far more complex, and it is one that cannot be understood within the framework of Western humanist hierarchies between human thought and the material world.

V. Materialising Language and Subjectivity

In recent decades, a number of other critical perspectives have been used to approach Williams’s work, not merely as the product of a disembodied human spirit, but as the material creation of an embodied mind that has value, meaning and impact upon the world in which it exists. Cognitive literary studies has undermined humanist distinctions between subjectivity (and its representation in literature) and the corporeal and material world by demonstrating that cognition and language are both embedded within the physical world. The field of literary ecocriticism, on the other hand, attempts to deconstruct the anthropocentrism of literary studies and recognise that human subjectivity and literature are merely a part of a larger natural context, a context upon which words can have a dramatically violent impact. Tellingly, Williams’s work has received renewed attention from both these fields.

It was in the early 1970s, in the wake of the third phase of anti-humanism, that theorists first began to deal critically with the significant intersection of literature, humanity and the natural world in what became known as the school of ecocriticism. As Greg Garrard defines in his book Ecocriticism (2004), this new school of critical enquiry consisted of

the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself. (5)

As such, ecocriticism entails a deconstruction of the various dualisms, hierarchies and assumptions that underpin the humanist subject. Ecocritics notably view the anthropocentrism
central to Western humanism and Western poetry, and the distinctions between the human imagination, literature and the natural world, not as a given, but as a historical and cultural paradigm that deserves criticism. As Robert Kern argues in his essay *Ecocriticism – What is it Good For?*

Representations of nature in literature… have typically been dealt with and understood in the twentieth century not as images of literal or factual reality (regarded as interesting or valuable in itself) but in terms of the formal or symbolic or ideological properties of those representations—which is to say that nature… is important not for what it physically is but for what it conceptually means or can be made to mean. (Kern, 9)

Significantly, when the movement of ecocriticism first started to examine the way in which writers conceived of the relationship between the human subject and the natural landscape, Williams’s poetry came under renewed focus. As Mark Long argues in his chapter on Williams in *Ecopoetry*:

It will come as no surprise that among postwar American poets with environmental and ecological concerns, one finds a renewable source of interest in Williams’s work. (Long, 67)

Long recognises that, for many critics, the quality of Williams’s work that Miller describes as a “leap into things” and Long himself terms “a poetics of presence” naturally aligns his poetry with environmental concerns:

The distinctive modernist project of William Carlos Williams provides an exemplary occasion for reflecting on contemporary American poets with ecological and environmental concerns. Williams can help us to reflect on the ambitious attempts to link a poetics of presence with an ecologically informed project for social change. (Long, 60)

However, he cautions that readings that assume an unmediated immediacy between the poem and the natural world run the risk of assuming that the tensions between humanity and nature can be transcended:
We go nowhere when we seek to use poetry to transcend itself—to misuse language as a vehicle for a remedial course in immediacy. (Long, 64)

Unfortunately, this is a mistake that often accompanies ecocritical readings of Williams’s work. In his essay “The Ecopoetics of Perfection: William Carlos Williams and Nature in Spring and All”, Josh Wallaert argues that Williams’s reluctance to impose what he increasingly saw as the artificial syntax and structures of human rationality upon the natural subject matter of his poetry constitutes a radical “ecopoetics of perfection”, which anticipates the critical movements of anti-humanism and ecocriticism by several decades (8). He argues that Williams, more than any poet of his time, was aware that literature belonged not just to human subjectivity, but existed upon the same material plane of nature. As such, words, like all other human technology, were capable of violence against the natural world:

When it comes to nature, it should always be remembered that the verb “to do” facilitates a power that is not merely grammatical, a power that has measurable effects in the physical world. When we “do” unto nature, we are agents of change; we clear forests, we drain watersheds, we move mountains with dynamite and drills. (86)

Wallaert then examines Williams’s poem “Rigamarole” from Spring and All, using Williams’s comparison of moonlight and sunlight to suggest that, like the gentle light of the moon, Williams’s poetic voice is capable of illuminating the natural landscape without damaging it (89):

so that now at least
the truth’s aglow

with devilish peace
forestalling day

which dawns tomorrow
with dreadful reds
the heart to predicate
with mists that loved

the ocean and the fields—
Thus moonlight

is the perfect
human touch (CP1, 227–228)

According to Wallaert, the “perfect human touch” described, and arguably achieved, by Williams is one that allows objects to exist outside the limiting perspective of human perceptions of time and space “without temporalizing them, without making them do or even be anything” (Wallaert, 89). This is an idealistic claim, and it is one whose limitations I address at greater length in the third chapter of this thesis. For now, suffice it to say that the main issue with Wallaert’s idea of the “perfect human touch” is that it falls back on a transcendence that is arguably not apparent within Williams’s poetry. To assume that the poet can tread lightly, can use language without trace, is to assume that the human imagination can be abstracted from the natural world. And, as Long puts it, such an interpretation belies the complexity of Williams’s poetics:

Williams’s formulation does not obscure the important fact that immediacy is logically equivalent to an absence of relation. (Long, 60)

Put simply, Wallaert’s argument fails to the degree that it fails to address the transcendental humanist assumptions regarding subjectivity and language upon which it is based.

While ecocritics expand the scope of literary studies beyond human subjectivity to include the natural world, cognitive literary studies challenges the humanist model of the disembodied subject by recognising that subjectivity and literature are both material processes. In his doctoral thesis “Nerves in Patterns: Synaptic Space, Neuroscience, and American Modernist Poetry (2010), Derick
Corlew offers a new understanding of the relationship between materiality, plurality and imagination within Williams’s poetry based on a neurological model of consciousness. According to Corlew, Williams’s medical career coincided with a revolution in the neurological sciences, in which physicians came to understand the material nature of the conscious mind. While previously, consciousness and with it subjectivity had been described in an abstract sense, neurological science described for the first time, in detail, the physical basis of conscious thought. Corlew argues that, in the case of Williams, the physical embodiment of consciousness was a central, and often overlooked, idea within his poetry:

Because traditional readings of Williams tend to compartmentalize mental and physical functions, they cannot fully appreciate the importance of the embodied mind to his poetry and to his concept of the imagination. (73)

As such, Corlew argues that Miller’s materialist theories, together with the Romantic models of Rapp, Markos and Callan, are limited due to their inability to recognise the synonymy of the physical and the mental within Williams’s work. As Corlew writes, “If Miller's argument denies the power of the mind, both Rapp and Markos ignore the presence of the body” (75). By contrast, Corlew’s neurological reading of Williams describes creative consciousness simultaneously, without contradiction, as both mental and physical. He argues that the mind, to Williams, is not a single abstract entity, but an interaction of multiple physical objects: synonymous with both the objects of the material world and the words on the page:

Williams expands consciousness not by replacing material objects with mental abstractions, but by recognizing the materiality of brain, mind, and reality. Williams elevates objects such as neurons, clay, iron, and words, using them to extend the boundaries of comprehension and meaning. (92)

As such, the boundaries between consciousness, material reality and poetry break down; all three components of Williams’s experience are interchangeable and inextricably interrelated. The human subject loses its privileged place at the centre of the system.
A similar point was made by Alba Newman in her essay “Paterson: Poem as Rhizome” (2006). Newman argues that Williams’s poems, particularly Paterson, are best understood in terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s model of the Rhizome (62). She explains that Deleuze and Guattari use the botanical category of a Rhizome to describe “an anti-hierarchical means of organizing knowledge and of recognizing intersections and engagements between seemingly disparate ideas and things” (62). As Newman describes, Deleuze and Guattari contrast this model with an “arboreal” system of knowledge in which

the trunk is understood as the origin, the source of authenticity or authority. Its branches are mere iterations or representations of their own content; they grow out of the trunk, and are completely dependent upon it. (62)

In terms of poetry, this arboreal model suggests that all creativity, all poetic imagery is merely an extension of the poet’s mind. According to Newman, this model, which emphasises the singularity and critical distance of the poet’s voice, is incompatible with the heterogeneity of Williams’s poetry:

In their writings, Williams, Deleuze, and Guattari resist the authoritarian or “scientistic” privileging of a single perspective, a single voice—the self over the other, or the other over the self—the enforced “clarity” which interrupts contact. The blurring of distinctions between the voice of the author and subject describes both the fusing of Paterson as man, poem, and city, and Williams’s incorporation and manipulation of passages by other writers throughout his poem. (64)

For Newman, the model of the rhizome captures the displacement of human subjectivity at work throughout Williams’s poetry. Within Paterson, and indeed within a number of Williams’s other works, the poetic voice is interrupted, overruled, fragmented and in constant interaction with a number of textual and material processes.
VI. Williams and Posthumanism

There is little doubt that Williams’s poetry constitutes a radical reassessment of what it means to be human within the technological, environmental and political context of twentieth-century America. His representation of both language and human identity challenges the universalism, transcendentalism, the stability and the centrality of both human subjectivity and language upon which post-Enlightenment humanism is based. But this is not to say that Williams’s poetry is anti-humanist, nor is it to say that humanism itself is not capable of adaptation. The conflation of the abstracted, rational and disembodied subject of Western humanism and the ameliorative humanist project is, no doubt, both overly simplistic and anachronistic. Halliwell and Mousley argue that, far from remaining a static set of beliefs, humanism constitutes a broad and diverse range of approaches to the study of humanity, many capable of transforming themselves to meet the critical challenges of the twentieth and twenty-first century. They argue that:

The critical theory of the 1970s and 1980s made the humanism of the Anglo-American tradition much less amorphous, by identifying what was perceived to be its underlying premises, and by eliding it with a longer history of humanism, that is often thought to have originated with Renaissance scholarship and to have gained momentum through the Enlightenment. (Halliwell and Mousley, 3)

Countering this trend, they argue that, while the 1970s and 1980s saw notions of value, experience and humanistic ideals become taboo within the critical discourse of anti-humanism, a number of theorists sought to combine the emancipatory project of Enlightenment humanism with the critical edge of theory. In Critical Humanisms, Halliwell and Mousley reassess the narrative of the death of humanism, suggesting instead that many of the theorists who questioned some of the assumptions of humanism, such as Foucault, Baudrillard and Haraway, proved themselves capable of deconstructing the outdated humanist subject without losing track of the overall coordinates of the emancipatory project of humanism.
However, the problem with including names like Foucault, Baudrillard and Haraway into a renewed definition of humanism is that it fails to address the aggressiveness with which the humanist subject came under attack by these critics. Foucault did, after all, claim that the category of the human was soon to be washed from history. Furthermore, many of these critics don’t just see the deconstruction of the Western humanist subject as ameliorable with the emancipation of humanity; they see the deconstruction of the subject, as well as the various ideals of Western humanism, as essential to it. In a 1979 interview with *Le Monde*, Claude Lévi-Strauss characterised Western humanism, not as a positive project for the improvement of human existence, but as an oppressive historical force, responsible for many of the greatest atrocities of modern Western history:

> All the tragedies we have lived through, first with colonialism, then with fascism, finally the concentration camps, all this has taken shape not in opposition to or in contradiction with so-called humanism in the form in which we have been practising it for several centuries but, I would say, almost its natural continuation. (qtd. in Todorov, 67)

Indeed, as I demonstrate in the first chapter of this thesis, a number of postcolonial, feminist, ecocritical and disabilities-studies theorists have, in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, used the anti-humanist theory identified by Halliwell and Mousley as a means of undermining and destabilising the anthropocentric, patriarchal, Eurocentric, ableist and general oppressive narratives of Western humanism. Put simply, in the work of critics such as Donna Haraway, Frantz Fanon and Nirmala Erevelles, anti-humanism (and perhaps antipoetry) is seen as a radical and emancipatory gesture. To claim such theorists, and their critical predecessors, as both humanist and anti-humanist suggests, more than anything, the need for a more precise term for this form of critique. What is needed is a term that can describe the destruction of the humanist “self” but also the reconstruction of human values from its ruins, a word that can speak simultaneously to both Williams’s materialism and his “social sympathies” without suggesting, as Tichi does, that the coexistence of the two is “ironic” (xv). Fortunately, a term already exists to describe such an approach: posthumanism.
Posthumanism, it must be clarified, is not simply synonymous with the anti-humanism described by Halliwell and Mousley.² As Herbrechter and Callus explain:

Posthumanism does not imply a simple turning away, either from humanism or from theory, but rather a continued ‘working through’ or a ‘deconstruction’ of humanism for which something like theory is needed more than ever. (3)

Rather than being a matter of pure theory, this deconstruction is often associated with a moral or social goal. As Sherryl Vint states in her book *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), “the category of the human has historically been used in exclusive and oppressive ways” (172). For posthumanists, the notion of the universal human, as well as being anthropocentric, is also read as a patriarchal, Eurocentric, classist and ableist concept that has been used, since the Enlightenment, to justify the oppression of women, the disabled, people of colour and abuse of the natural world. Fittingly, posthumanism emerged, not merely from poststructuralist theory, but from the feminist criticism of the 1980s. As Julie Clarke explains in her book *The Paradox of the Posthuman* (2009):

Posthumanism could be viewed as a continuation of a postmodern feminist critique of master narratives, the attempt to erode binary divisions and the stress on the validity and recognition of human and non-human others. (Clarke, 32)

As such, for posthumanists, an attack on the abstract, rational and universal humanist subject does not necessarily go hand in hand with the abandonment of value or the “annihilation of life” (I, 88). Quite the opposite; the deconstruction of the humanist self is a means by which the oppressive metanarratives of the Enlightenment can be replaced with a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of what it means to be (post)human. This, I argue, is what is happening in Williams’s work. In this thesis, I demonstrate that, within Williams’s work, the breaking down of barriers, whether physical or linguistic, between the human subject and the social, natural,

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² Halliwell and Mousley do use the term, albeit in a narrow sense, to discuss critical approaches to biotechnological and cyborg realities of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (187-190).
mechanical or bodily world is repeatedly represented as a means of overcoming divisive hierarchies and achieving a meaningful and respectful sense of intersubjectivity with his world. As Brown points out in *A Sense of Things*, the logic that dismisses the value of “things” is the very same logic responsible for the objectification and marginalisation of otherness:

Not to forestall doubts about how addressing such “object matter” might distract attention away from the ethical enter of recent criticism, let me nonetheless recall Theodor Adorno’s claim—made very late in his career, as yet another answer to Hegel and Heidegger, and in belated concert with Benjamin—that *granting the physical world its alterity is the very basis for accepting otherness as such* (my emphasis). (18)

As such, Williams’s refusal to dismiss either the significance of “things” or the thingness of his own subjective existence can be equated to a refusal to comply with Western narratives of oppression.

And yet the posthumanism of Williams’s poetics has received little critical attention. Indeed, posthumanist theory is rarely applied to the study of canonical literature, much less to the study of poetry. When focusing on literature, posthumanist criticism most commonly takes a thematic approach to analysing the portrayal of the posthuman within science fiction texts. As Callus and Herbrechter⁶ suggest in their essay “Humanity Without Itself”:

As science fiction is a genre of choice for the posthuman imagination, it must follow that posthumanism itself must be relatively unconcerned by high literary values or the texts sustaining them. (146)

While the lack of focus on canonical and poetic texts within posthumanist critique may be largely due to posthumanism’s general anti-hierarchical and anti-canonical attitude, it is also possible that

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⁶ Callus and Herbrechter themselves, however, have conducted posthumanist readings of the works of both Borges and Shakespeare.
posthumanism’s general indifference to these texts stems from the fact that literature, and in particular poetry, is still often imagined to be linked to the same, stable, unified idea of the author’s voice that posthumanism rejects. As Hayles argues in her book *Writing Machines* (2002):

> Literary studies has generally been content to treat fictional and narrative works as if they were entirely products of the imagination… By and large literary critics have been content to see literature as immaterial verbal constructions. (19)

On the other hand, when the authority, unity and agency of the human voice within poetry is challenged, as it was significantly throughout the anti-humanist period of contemporary critical theory, it is often done so at the cost of pushing all human concerns to the periphery. Charles Altieri argues in the introduction to his essay collection *Canons and Consequences*:

> The “hermeneutics of suspicion” that accompanied the rise of critical theory trap us in impoverished languages for talking about values. Unwilling to overthrow deconstruction, these positions bind themselves to semantic models and attitudes towards human agency that cannot sustain an adequate theory of value or provide goals for political action. (2)

Consequently, readings that emphasise themes of materialism, deconstruction and postmodernism within Williams’s work often gloss over the social and political goals of his poetics. Miller’s influential reading of Williams, which clearly and convincingly delineates the materialism at the heart of Williams’s poetics, does so at the expense of a clear understanding of how such materialism might be reconciled with any meaningful humanistic ethos within Williams’s work. Williams, argues Miller, simply “gives up the coordinates and goals” of humanity (288). Arguably, an analysis of Williams’s posthumanist poetics can offer an escape from both the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that defines critical anti-humanism and the unsustainable anthropocentrism of humanism. The posthumanist theories of Donna Haraway, Cary Wolfe, Julie Clarke and N. Katherine Hayles offer the chance of reading Williams’s radical materialism and his deconstruction of the humanist *cogito* not as a rejection of the “coordinates and goals” of humanity altogether, but as a poetic response to the various ethical, social and
political challenges of the twentieth century. Conversely, the application of posthumanist theory to Williams’s work can demonstrate the capacity for posthumanism to be extended beyond its usual scope of contemporary and science fiction works and to challenge more broadly the humanist principles enshrined within the Western canon.

In this thesis, I argue that the critical lens of posthumanism provides an unprecedented and productive means of answering some of the enduring questions surrounding Williams’s poetry. As we have seen, the central challenge that Williams’s poetics has always posed is how to reconcile the tension between his humanistic ethos and the seemingly anti-humanist materialism of his work. In other words, how can we speak of a poet who emphasises the significance of mechanical, natural, biological and otherwise material systems over human consciousness—but whose poetry and prose also embody a deep-seated and profound social, democratic and humanistic empathy? I argue that, from the perspective of posthumanism, the tension between materialism and humanistic values is not a tension at all; rather, the two are intertwined and even at times continuous. Williams’s poetry provides an early example of a particular contemporary notion of posthumanism, championed by Julie Clarke, N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe, in which the contingency and instability of language, human subjectivity and the borders between self and other serve as a valuable means of destabilising oppressive notions of authority and unity. Through an analysis of Williams’s approach to the relationship between the human subject and modern technology, the natural world, politics and medicine, I examine the ways in which Williams challenged, both thematically and at the level of language, humanist assumptions of the authority, autonomy and sovereignty of the human subject: assumptions that were used throughout the twentieth century to justify and perpetuate the subjugation of women and peoples of colour, the exploitation of the natural landscape, and the rise of fascist, nationalist and eugenic ideologies. I conduct this argument over the course of five chapters.

Chapter 1, “Literary Posthumanism from the Ditch”, delineates precisely what I mean by posthumanism. Contemporary understandings of posthumanism encompass a multitude of different and, at times, contradictory definitions and connotations. The term is inextricably
entangled within contexts of science fiction and bioethics, and has been used to represent everything from authoritarian fantasies of human perfectibility and eugenic ideology to the anti-hierarchical feminist ethics of theorists such as Donna Haraway. I clarify my use of this elusive term through a comparison of a pair of seemingly similar, and yet vastly different, early twentieth-century car crash narratives: F. T. Marinetti’s violent “Founding and Manifesto of Italian Futurism” (1909) and Williams’s poem “Romance Moderne” (1927). Through an examination of the ways in which the relationship between the human subject and the external world is problematised by the traumatic event of the car crash within each example, I draw a distinction between two competing and contradictory definitions of posthumanism. Using the definitions established by Julie Clarke, N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe, I distinguish between the transhumanism of Marinetti, which is defined as a continuation of the humanist dedication to the autonomy and agency of the \textit{cogito} within the modern technological landscape, and the posthumanism that defined Williams’s work. In contrast to the cold, impersonal will to power evident within Marinetti’s transhumanism, I suggest that Williams’s posthumanism frames the modern deconstruction and fragmentation of the humanist subject, and the recognition of the inevitable mortality and contingency of human subjectivity, as a valuable means for undermining oppressive hierarchies and distinctions between the self and the other. Furthermore, while such an upheaval is not in itself always an emancipatory gesture, within Williams’s work this disruption of traditional categories heralds an ethics and poetics based on ideals of empathy, compassion and democratic inclusiveness.

One of the most glaring distinctions between humanist, transhumanist and posthumanist theories of humanity’s place in the world is the way in which the movements conceptualise the relationship between the human subject and the modern machine. In my second chapter, “‘Then he kissed it with his bumper’: Williams’s Posthumanist Relationship with the Modern Machine”, I analyse the way in which the representation of the modern machine within Williams’s poetry and prose is used to critique and deconstruct such notions of authority and autonomy at the heart of humanist and transhumanist notions of both technology and language. Western humanism, like transhumanism, conceives of the relationship between humankind and
technology as one of mastery, in which the disembodied and sovereign human exercises his will through the instrumental use of a passive and subservient object. Through an examination of the appearance of the automobile, the typewriter, the dynamo and the steam train within works such as *Kora in Hell*, *Spring and All*, *A Novelette* and *The Great American Novel*, I argue that Williams disrupts traditional hierarchies between the human subject and the technological object and subverts humanist paradigms which emphasise humans as autonomous and sovereign subjectivities capable of purely instrumental uses of technology. Instead, through the lens of cyborg theory, I contend that the use of technology, as well as the act of writing itself, is portrayed by Williams as an unstable and contingent process in which the agency and autonomy of the subject is repeatedly called into question. As such, I challenge Cecelia Tichi’s notion that the engineer, a figure of almost omnipotent and omniscient authority over the machine, is the perfect analogy for the modern writer. Rather, I emphasise that the more complex images of Williams at the wheel of a car, Williams at a typewriter and Williams as a passenger on a train provide clearer articulations of his creative process. These symbolic models for the writing process, ingrained with instability, chance, and a constant feedback loop of sensory information that resists definitive notions of origins, reject humanist paradigms of technological mastery, embracing instead the idea of an empathetic and intersubjective engagement with the modern technological landscape and, by extension, those who share it.

In my third chapter, “‘He who has kissed a leaf’: Williams’s Posthumanist Ecopoetics”, I conduct a posthumanist and ecocritical reading of Williams’s poetic representation of nature. I trace his relationship with the traditions of Romanticism and Transcendentalism, movements which were based in large parts upon humanist assumptions of the sovereignty of the human imagination and the separation between human culture and the natural world. I argue that it is in the wake of the First World War, as Williams becomes increasingly aware of the fact that nature could not be considered separate, nor immune, from the violence of human culture, that he abandons the Romanticism of his earlier poetry and begins experiments in a prototypical ecopoetics. In his book *Kora in Hell* (1920), Williams comes to the realisation that language, like fire, pollution, axes and bulldozers, can be used as a tool of violence against nature. Though he initially experimented
with poetic forms that could represent nature outside the limiting confines of human perception and language, Williams eventually develops an ecopoetics that recognises that the human mind, poetic language and the natural world are subject to the name natural laws of flux and decay. Through an analysis of his 1955 poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”, I argue that the arbitrary line breaks of Williams’s famous “variable foot” metre constitute a poetics that recognises the inevitable temporality and decay of the natural world, the human subject and poetic language itself.

So far, I have suggested that Williams’s poetic challenge to traditional humanist ideals, particularly his grounding of language and human subjectivity in the material realm, was largely informed by a social and democratic ethos. In my fourth chapter, “The Mutability of Truth: Williams, Posthumanism and Democracy”, I explore this idea directly through a posthumanist examination of the relationship between Williams’s poetry and the twentieth-century American political landscape. I begin by establishing a connection between linguistic ideas of stability, clarity, translation and intertextuality and more concrete political concepts of political authority, social stability and unity, racial diversity, individualism and interpersonal responsibility. In doing so, I establish a link between Williams’s posthumanist representations of language and human subjectivity, and John Dewey’s political pragmatism, which emphasises the significance of perpetual linguistic and social flux and the “mutability of truth”. I critique a number of readings of Williams’s work which connect a perceived emphasis on clarity and focus on individual objects within his work with political notions of radical individualism. Through a rereading of Williams’s famous poem “The Red Wheelbarrow”, I demonstrate that Williams’s imagery actively destabilises linguistic and political notions of individual autonomy. Rather, I show that, particularly within Williams’s most overtly political work An Early Martyr And Other Poems, the subjects of Williams’s poems are fragile, temporal, corporeal and unstable. In contrast to Ezra Pound, for whom stability and clarity of language is necessary for social stability, Williams emphasises the fragility, contingency and temporality of both the human subject and language, as well as the fundamental mutability of all notions of truth, as necessary for successful democratic
discourse. This much is demonstrated through a close reading of Williams’s later works *Yes, Mrs. Williams* and *The First President.*

In my fifth chapter, “‘Was I not interested in Man?’: Williams as Doctor and as Poet”, I examine the relationship between Williams’s posthumanist poetics and his medical practice. I begin by arguing that, within Williams’s work, medicine has a contradictory relationship with humanism. On one hand, the materiality and abject nature of the human subject revealed by medical science subverts humanist notions of the rational disembodied subject. On the other hand, the authoritative figure of the doctor seems to reinforce patriarchal humanist notions of agency, authority, detachment, control and human perfectibility. I contend that Williams’s medical writing draws attention to the humanist ideals ingrained within the discourse of modern medicine and denaturalises the resulting power structures and hierarchies of Western science. I look primarily at *The Doctor Stories,* a collection first published in 1932, in which Williams presents a number of different, at times contradictory, representations of his time as a local physician in Rutherford, New Jersey. I argue that, through these stories, Williams expresses his discomfort with the implicit hierarchies of the doctor-patient relationship, deconstructs and subverts the authority of the modern figure of the doctor, and denaturalises the patriarchal violence, authority and panopticism at the heart of the act of diagnosis. I move subsequently from Rutherford to *Paterson,* and examine the ways in which Williams’s relationship with more contemporary understandings of the nervous system challenged his position as doctor and allowed him to break down the narratives of authority and unity central to twentieth-century biomedical and modernist discourses. As such, I suggest that Williams’s poetics is not merely complicit in the cosmology of twentieth-century medical practices, but instead preempts a more contemporary, and perhaps posthumanist, understanding of medicine and poetry that breaks down the barriers and hierarchies between subject and object, doctor and patient, poet and poem.

I conclude my thesis by looking to the present and attempting to contextualise Williams’s posthumanism within the social and critical context of the twenty-first century. Through an examination of Williams’s recent popularity on Twitter, I argue that Williams’s poetry is best
understood, not as a relic of the history of modernism, but as a continuing source of radical
disruption in our world. In this sense, I draw a lineage between Williams’s work and the various
postcolonial, feminist, ecocritical and disabilities studies movements that arose in the decades
since his death. In these movements, as in Williams’s work, we see a deconstruction, a sweeping
aside of the traditions, assumptions and oppressive ideals of the past; but, I conclude, we also
can see the need for reconstruction, for the forging of new, inclusive understandings of humanity.
In this sense, I argue that Williams’s so-called “antipoetry” can provide for us today a radical
eexample of how humanist values of empathy, compassion and democratic inclusiveness can be
expressed and explored without the colonising and oppressive assumptions of Western
humanism.
CHAPTER 1. LITERARY POSTHUMANISM FROM THE DITCH

I. A Pair of Car Crashes

In his iconic manifesto of 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti describes the founding of the Italian Futurist movement through the mythic narrative of an ill-fated joyride. In the bombastic manifesto, Marinetti and his accomplices acquire powerful automobiles, described as “three snorting beasts” (40), and become immediately intoxicated and inspired by the overwhelming speed and power offered to them by the modern machine:

Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind! Let’s give ourselves utterly to the Unknown, not in desperation but only to replenish the deep wells of the Absurd!! (40)

The climax of the narrative comes, significantly, when Marinetti loses control of his vehicle and crashes into a ditch:

As soon as I had said these words, I turned sharply back on my tracks with the mad intoxication of puppies biting their tails, and suddenly there were two cyclists disapproving of me and tottering in front of me like two persuasive but contradictory reasons. Their stupid swaying got in my way. What a bore! Pouah! I stopped short, and in disgust hurled myself—vlan!—head over heels in a ditch. (40)

Dragging himself from the “maternal ditch”, (40) Marinetti is injured but elated, and pledges his fealty to the principles of a movement based on mechanical speed, violent energy, perpetual conflict and the rejection of human culture, history, tradition and sentiment. Twelve years later, William Carlos Williams evokes a tellingly similar scene in his poem “Romance Moderne”. The speaker in the poem is in the back seat of a car, gazing longingly through the window at the dynamic dance of the passing trees:

Trees vanish—reappear—vanish:
detached dance of gnomes—as a talk
dodging remarks, glows and fades.
—The unseen power of words—
And now that a few of the moves
are clear the first desire is
to fling oneself out at the side into
the other dance, to other music. \textit{(CP1, 147-148)}

Though he wishes to cross over and join the dance, he is ultimately confined by a seemingly
impenetrable border: “the windshield a blunt barrier” \textit{(CP1, 147)}. Cut off from the external
world, the speaker withdraws, at least momentarily, into solipsism: “Back into self, tentacles
withdrawn” \textit{(CP1, 148)}. But ultimately, like Marinetti, the speaker in the poem finds the
liberation he desires in the trauma of a violent car crash:

\begin{quote}
Lean forward. Punch the steerman
behind the ear. Twirl the wheel!
Over the edge! Screams! Crash!
The end. I sit above my head—
a little removed—or
a thin wash of rain on the roadway
—I am never afraid when he is driving—
interposes new direction,
rides us sidewise, unforseen
into the ditch! All threads cut!
Death! Black. The end. The very end— \textit{(CP1, 148)}
\end{quote}

As in Marinetti’s manifesto, the crash into the ditch leads to an awakening of the speaker’s
vitality and senses. The speaker can no longer claim to “sit above my head” or have his
“tentacles withdrawn” but is instead forced into a direct relationship with his companions and
his environment:
I would sit separate weighing a
small red handful: the dirt of these parts,
sliding mists sheeting the alders
against the touch of fingers creeping
to mine. All stuff of the blind emotions.
But—stirred, the eye seizes
for the first time—The eye awake!— (CP1, 148)

In both of these car crash narratives, the violent rupturing of barriers (the borders of the human body, the glass and steel shell of the automobile and the traditional limitations of human experience and reasoning) offers the radical possibility of transcending and undermining, in one manner or another, the traditionally demarcated borders of the human. Marinetti blurs the distinction between humanity and the machine, describing his union with the car as “the centaur’s birth” (39). In a similar sense, Williams’s poem conducts an abject disruption of the internal and the external, a confusion of the once-distinct borders between the self and the environment. It becomes increasingly unclear whether the “small red handful” refers to the literal dirt of the ditch, or to the blood and organs of the speaker’s abjectly ruptured body:

I would sit separate weighing a
small red handful: the dirt of these parts, (CP1, 148)

But with the rupture of these boundaries comes the possibility of transcending the confines of human experience and rationality. As Marinetti puts it, the sight of streetlights speeding by “taught us to distrust the deceitful mathematics of our perishing eyes” (40). Having broken down the boundaries of the human, both Marinetti’s and Williams’s depictions of their respective car crashes seem to herald a poetics based on the rejection of human psychology and the traditionally privileged position of the cogito within art and literature. In his “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” (1912), Marinetti calls on writers to “destroy the I in literature: that is all psychological” (87). Williams would later make a similar remark in the first book of Paterson:
“Why even speak of “I,” he dreams, which interests me almost not at all? (P, 18)

In place of human subjectivity, both these writers take material objects, such as cars, planes, engines, dynamos, wheelbarrows, stones and trees, as their primary subject matter. In “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”, Marinetti calls upon modern poets to capture the breath, the sensibility, and the instincts of metal, stones, wood, and so on, through the medium of free objects and whimsical motors. To substitute for human psychology, now exhausted, the lyric obsession with matter. (87)

Similarly, in 1927, Williams wrote “This is modern, not the saga. There are no sagas—only trees now, animals, engines: There’s that” (SE, 68). For both of these artists, the traumatic event of the car crash served as a literary device for transgressing the boundaries of the self, exposing the limits of human rationality, exploring the cyborgic interpenetration of humanity and modern machine and reflecting upon the potentially peripheral status of human subjectivity and will within the technological and cultural landscape of the twentieth century. On close examination of these two car crash narratives, it becomes increasingly apparent that, several decades before poststructural critique, feminist cyborg theory, science fiction studies and the fields of cybernetics and biotechnology pushed the term “posthumanism” into our collective lexicon, two early yet distinct visions of the posthuman were already crawling up out of the ditch.

But if a car crash can be said to destroy the boundaries of the traditional humanist subject, then it is destruction in the Heideggerian sense, a sense in which something is always left over—for example, with the destruction of a building the rubble is left, even if it is pulverised into the finest dust and blown away. So there is no “remainderless” destruction, any more than there is a round square. Even the most extreme destruction is but a change of condition, whereby something always remained preserved. (Heidegger, 12)
As Rae Gavin points out in his essay, “Heidegger’s Influence on Posthumanism” (2013), it is impossible to displace a concept as deeply entrenched within the Western imagination as the humanist subject without some trace of the original concept remaining (51). If the violent car crashes within both Williams’s and Marinetti’s narratives can be said to rupture, to some degree, the humanist paradigm of an autonomous, rational, unified, and sovereign human subject, then a posthumanist critique must grapple, not just with what has been destroyed, but with the traces of humanism that emerged, persistent, from the ditch. To do so is to negotiate the contested term of posthumanism itself.

In *The Paradox of the Posthuman*, Julie Clarke defines posthumanism, in general terms, as the artistic and critical interrogation of the cultural distinctions and hierarchies that have historically separated humanity from the natural, technological and otherwise material world:

> Historically humanist discourse has defined the human in opposition to the animal or technological, however this has been complicated by the emergence of posthumanists who do not draw such clear distinctions. Indeed posthumanists expose the posthuman as a condition that humanity has always occupied, that is, of a continued reliance on technology and non-human others. (2)

However, as Clarke argues, the term posthumanism has been applied to a number of different, and at times contradictory, theoretical positions. Contemporary understandings of posthumanism encompass a multitude of connotations. It is a term inextricably entangled within contexts of science fiction and bioethics, and has been used to represent everything from authoritarian fantasies of human perfectibility and eugenic ideology to the anti-hierarchical and empathetic feminist ethics of theorists such as Donna Haraway. What is significant about my two chosen crash narratives is not just the extent to which they preempt the contemporary posthumanist critique of the boundaries of the subject. Rather, it is the degree to which the difference between these two examples serves to illustrate some of the paradoxes and tensions embodied within the term “posthumanism” even today. It is a difference tied to ideas of unity,
authority and agency. And, far from being a matter of pedantic academic distinction, it is a
difference with very real social and political implications.

II. Marinetti’s Transhumanism

Marinetti’s manifesto envisions technological modernity as a means of transcending the limits
and limitations of the “perishing” human body and mind (40). Yet despite his frequent disavowal
of human consciousness and psychology, Marinetti also paradoxically dedicates his new
posthuman aesthetic to the sovereignty of the human subject. A narrative about a man losing
control of his vehicle somehow gives way to a discourse of human agency and control. In his
manifesto, Marinetti repeatedly emphasises the agency of the technologically empowered
masculine subject:

5. We want to hymn the man at the wheel, who hurls the lance of his spirit across the
Earth, along the circle of its orbit…

7. Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive
character. Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow
before man (emphasis mine). (41)

Such a posthuman aesthetic directly corresponds to what Clarke refers to as “transhumanism”.
According to Clarke, while transhumanism does involve a disruption of the boundaries between
the human and the nonhuman, its continued emphasis on the unity and agency of the
technologically empowered human subject can be read as a continuation of the more
problematic principles of humanism itself:

Transhumanism is a form of secular humanism, which extends the major tenets of
humanism. It proposes the idea of an augmented, enhanced human enacting a kind of
Nietzschean prophecy of the superman, a human that not only embraces but encourages
technological development to enable greater human capabilities and possibilities for
permanent physical and mental enhancement. (Clarke, 25)

The transhumanist imagination sees technology as a means, not of challenging the unity or
agency of the human subject, but of transcending its natural physical and mental capacities and
breaking free from any seemingly superfluous humanistic sentiment that might impede its all-
powerful and rational will. In his essay “Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine”,
Marinetti describes his own vision of the transhumanist “nonhuman” as a “mechanical being,
constructed for an omnipresent velocity” that “will be naturally cruel, omniscient, and
combative” (91). As Clarke argues, the transhumanist imagination merely supplements humanist
ideals of the unity and sovereignty of the human subject with the contemporary fantasy of
technological transcendence and empowerment (37). Significantly, this is a fantasy that is, more
often than not, associated with a desire for domination and control. Transhumanism, Clarke
argues:

applauds concepts such as the unity of the species, the perfection of humanity through its
own effort and the colonization, domination and ultimately the assimilation of other
cultures. (Clarke, 37)

Marinetti’s manifesto serves as a clear early example of the potential violence of transhumanist
thought. The intersection of the humanist deification of the masculinised human “spirit”
(Marinetti, 41), combined with the potential for technological empowerment, refinement and
control of the human body, translates into a worldview that is exclusionary, violent and cruel:

9. We want to glorify war—the only cure for the world—militarism, patriotism, the
destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill. (41)

According to Clarke, many of the major horrors of the twentieth century can be attributed, to a
degree, to the very fantasies of control, unity and human perfectibility that define both humanist
and transhumanist thought (15). The legacy of the humanist emphasis on the agency of the
subject, articulated in twentieth-century transhumanism, includes the horrors of fascism and eugenic ideology:

The relationship between the Eugenics Movement at the beginning of the twentieth century and contemporary biomedicine at the end of the century, is the value that was and is still placed on the attributes of hereditary genes; this represents a stress on the value of biomedicine to cure or modify genetic traits to combat disease and the possibility of developing a new species of human who will surpass those who have not been genetically modified. (Clarke, 15)

If transhumanism, such as that seen in Marinetti’s manifesto, can be termed posthuman, it is not post- the exclusionary legacy of Western humanism’s deification of the abstracted and sovereign human cogito. Rather, it situates itself as being post- the natural limitations and vulnerabilities, including the seemingly superfluous sentiments of empathy and compassion, that once inhibited the now-liberated human will.

III. Williams’s Posthumanism

In her book Bodies of Tomorrow (2007), Sherryl Vint similarly identifies the problematic traces of humanist ideals within the contemporary posthumanist (or, more precisely, transhumanist) imagination. According to Vint, transhumanism’s emphasis on the autonomous agency of the individual is antithetical to a meaningful sense of collective social responsibility:

This emphasis on individualism and isolation evacuates our model of society from any ethical sense of intersubjectivity and collectivity, which is also what I suggest is lacking from many models of the posthuman. (13)

While such a criticism can easily be levelled at Marinetti’s “cruel, omniscient and combative” transhumanist vision, the same cannot be said for Williams’s poetry, described by Lisa Siraganian as a “language of democratic inclusiveness” (81). Throughout his career, Williams’s poetic approach to the relationship between humans, technology and the natural world raises a number
of challenges to notions of the autonomy and authority of the human subject. The intrusion of modern machines such as cars, typewriters, trains and dynamos within works such as “Romance Moderne”, “The Right of Way”, A Novelette and The Great American Novel inevitably raises questions as to whether we can consider Williams’s narrative voice to be that of an autonomous and detached human consciousness, or whether we must consider Williams’s writing to be the product of an engagement with the various technologies that enable his writing. In a similar manner, poems such as “The Wanderer”, “The Rose”, “The Trees”, and “Asphodel, that Greeny Flower” challenge humanist notions of humanity’s sovereignty over their environment and raise questions about the extent to which the human mind and human poetic language can ever meaningfully represent, comprehend or control the natural landscape. At the same time, Williams’s inability to distance his own subjectivity and, with this, his use of language from the environment and the same natural forces of decay and flux that operate on the natural world has significant implications for any abstract notions of language as the transparent medium of human rationality. Fittingly, in texts such as “Yes, Mrs. Williams” and “The First President”, Williams draws attention to the contingency of language and its capacity to serve as a productive social and political force. Why, we must ask, in “The First President” does Williams portray the monolithic figure of George Washington as a blinding, weary man whose command over language is failing and whose words are often lost in the crowd? What is it about the imperfection, the incompleteness and the instability of human language and human subjectivity that fascinates Williams so? And, most importantly, why is such a posthumanist scepticism regarding the agency, unity and sovereignty of the human subject so often linked to Williams’s own personal ethics of empathy, charity and democratic inclusiveness? In Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America, Cecelia Tichi recognises the tension between Williams’s arguably posthuman sensibilities and his seemingly deep-seated humanistic ethos as one of the central enigmas of Williams’s poetry:

It is ironic, for instance, that William Carlos Williams, a man of deeply liberal social sympathies, would nonetheless define the poem impersonally as a machine made of words.

(xv)
Ultimately, the central question raised by Williams’s poetics is this: how do we reconcile Williams’s deconstruction of the human subject with his dedication to the celebration and amelioration of human life? How can we speak of a posthumanism that is inherently humanistic?

Williams’s deconstruction of the humanist subject is one that resists authority, distance and unity of subject in favour of polyphony, plurality, empathy and democratic inclusiveness. As such, Williams can be read as a precursor, not just to the posthumanist critique of the stability and autonomy of the humanist subject, but to a more contemporary movement towards an embodied, ethical and empathetic understanding of what the posthuman can offer. This notion of ethical posthumanism, developed within the work of theorists such as Julie Clarke, N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe, is situated not as “post” the limits of the human body, but “post” the problematic hierarchies and dualisms of Western humanism itself. As Wolfe puts it in her book *What is Posthumanism?* (2009):

> Posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all—in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended—but it is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy inherited from humanism itself…

(xv)

As Clarke argues, this notion of posthumanism arose, not strictly from technological developments, but from the critique of the inherent social and ethical inequalities at the heart of the principles of Western humanism itself (32). While Marinetti saw the posthuman as an opportunity to move past the physical and moral limitations of humanity, postcolonial, feminist, and disability-studies theorists have seen the destruction of the centred, rational subject of Western humanism as a chance to deconstruct the patriarchal, colonial, racist and ableist assumptions upon which Western notions of humanity are based. For postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, the Western humanist subject is little more than an alibi for colonialist oppression, in which non-white people are deemed subhuman by virtue of their inability to conform to universalised Western standards of what it means to be human (*The Wretched of The Earth*, 131). For feminist critic Haraway, the notion of a stable, rational and unified human subjectivity is...
inextricable from colonial and patriarchal discourses of control. As a result, only the destruction of the totalising narrative of the human can give rise to a “feminist science” (A Cyborg Manifesto, 173). From this view, the critical decentering of the humanist subject provides a valuable opportunity for a posthumanism that can deconstruct the traditional hierarchies that privilege particular (predominantly, white, Western, male and able-bodied) subjectivities over others. Posthumanism, understood in this sense, is a means of developing an ethical approach to difference:

Posthumanists, rather than perceiving the advancing technological age as an opportunity for domination and control over individual’s bodies, applaud new communication technologies to promote and provide collaborative rather than autonomous action, challenging the humanist notion of individuality. They believe that human machine interaction creates a blurring or effacement of the borders between self and other, inside and outside, subject and object, advancing the notion of a hybrid body in an attempt to dissolve physical, sexual, cultural, political and social differences which have marginalised individuals. (Clarke, 38)

As this thesis demonstrates, Williams’s poetry and prose is replete with images that efface the various borders that separate the human subject from the technological, natural and social environment. Thus, contemporary posthumanist theory can offer my analysis a much needed clarification of the relationship between Williams’s posthumanist transgressions of the borders of the subject and the deep-seated humanistic ethos that underpinned his poetry.

IV. Materialism and Posthumanism

The earliest published draft, written in 1927, of what would later become Williams’s long poem Paterson contains the now-famous line: “—Say it, no ideas but in things—” (P, 9). These words are commonly interpreted to express Williams’s rejection of human subjectivity in favour of material objects as the central subject matter of his work. In terms of Williams’s relationship with contemporary understandings of posthumanism, I take his remark as a precursor to
posthumanist critiques of the idea that human consciousness can be abstracted from the material, historical and linguistic context in which it is embedded. As Hayles demonstrates in her book *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), the Western distinction between subjectivity and embodiment is central to the ideals of humanism and transhumanism alike:

Indeed, one could argue that the erasure of embodiment is a feature common to *both* the liberal humanist subject and the cybernetic posthuman. Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality. (Hayles, 4)

As Hayles suggests, such a distinction, as found within Western humanism and transhumanism alike, allows the human subject to assume possession and authority over the material world. We can see this quite clearly in Marinetti’s assertion that “poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man” (41). For Marinetti, the empowered will of the disembodied human “spirit” (Marinetti, 41) becomes the tool of oppression, violence and fascistic visions of control. It is for this reason that, according to Sherryl Vint

the ‘post’ of posthumanism should not be a post-biological embodiment. The ‘post’ of posthumanism should be a ‘post’ to the heritage of humanism, which makes humans the only subjects in a world of objects. (Vint, 189)

While materialism is often framed within humanist discourse as a nihilistic worldview due to its renunciation of transcendent notions of objective ethics or the human spirit, within posthumanism it is reframed as a valuable ethical discourse:

Central to my arguments in this book is the contention that we need an embodied notion of posthumanism if we are to return ethical responsibility and collectivity to our concept of self. The body occupies the liminal space between self and not-self, between nature and culture, between the inner ‘authentic’ person and the social persona. (Vint, 16)
Williams, interestingly enough, is positioned perfectly to serve as a precursor to such an embodied posthumanism. As a professional physician, Williams came face to face with the abject truth of human materiality on an almost daily basis; by his own estimates, he delivered over two thousand babies in his career, and no doubt witnessed almost as many deaths. Fittingly, in contrast to Marinetti, who sees transhumanism as a means of transcending the temporality and materiality of “our perishing eyes” (40), Williams frames mortality as central to his understanding of the human subject. When, in 1956, author Warren Allen Smith wrote to Williams, asking whether Williams considered himself a humanist, Williams replied

“...The death of every man is for him the end (my emphasis); knowing nothing about it, I am forced by common observation to believe it… As a physician I do not find any basis for believing in the supernatural… Nor am I interested in the existentialists, whose more or less complex beliefs are of no more importance to me than the demonstrations of Descartes. Since I can’t exclude what I do not know and can’t at the same time believe in it, I am forced to spend my time on earth with other occupations… All that is left to me, being forced back from any knowledge except the report of the senses, is a humanistic naturalism, lit by the lightnings which play about the minds of saints and sinners.” (qtd. in Mariani, 723)

With one gesture, Williams rejects Catholicism’s promises of eternal transcendence, Existentialism’s emphasis on individualism and subjective autonomy, as well as the unbridgeable gulf between human consciousness and the material world implicit in the theories of Descartes. By contrast, Williams’s distinctly humble view of humankind embraces the inevitable limitations of human knowledge and rejects all claims, be they spiritual or Cartesian, of a higher transcendent truth. His “humanistic naturalism” is one that embraces the inevitable materiality of the human subject and reframes this as the basis of his personal ethics. It is important to note that, in “Romance Moderne” material vulnerability and intersubjective love are presented as almost inseparable. Love is represented through primarily physical imagery: it is analogous in its
materiality to both “the touch of fingers creeping / to mine” (149) and the physical trauma of a car wreck:

Will you love me always?
— A car overturned and two crushed bodies
under it.— Always! Always! (CP1, 149)

I argue throughout this thesis that the “humanistic naturalism” that Williams mentions in his letter is, in contemporary parlance, an early form of an embodied, ethical and material posthumanism, one founded primarily on the humble recognition that, as Williams puts it, “the death of every man is for him the end” (qtd. in Mariani, 723). Williams’s is a posthumanism founded, not upon the empowerment of the human subject, but upon the recognition that there is value in its vulnerability.

V. The Posthumanist Ethics of Vulnerability

Among the William Carlos Williams papers, housed in the Beinecke rare book room at Yale University, there is a black and white photograph, taken by an unknown photographer, of Williams wearing a beret (see figure 1). The photograph has been torn in two, but even within the original composition, Williams is not presented as whole; the photographer has cut the poet in half. The photograph seems a fitting representation of Williams’s poetry; despite his reputation as a poet of clarity, of economic and discrete images of wheelbarrows, chickens and plums, it becomes clear upon closer reading that Williams’s poetics actively resisted notions of unity, clarity and stability of forms—even at the level of his own subjectivity. Rather, Williams’s poetics is predicated on the assumption that all objects, all words, and all human subjects are, like the man in the beret in the photograph, unstable and vulnerable components of the continuum of the material world. What makes Williams’s poetry posthumanist is that it represents this vulnerability, not as a source of anxiety, but as a valuable means for destabilising the various hierarchies that inhibit meaningful connections between people and things.
Donna Haraway is the theorist who perhaps most clearly positions posthumanism’s capacity for highlighting the limitations and instability of the human subject as a valuable ethical tool. For Haraway, Western humanist ideals of sovereignty, agency and unity of the human subject, as well as its capacity to use language as a transparent medium of its rationality, can be read as part of a larger system of domination. In *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1983), she writes:

> The… dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one. In that sense, dialectics too is a dream language, longing to resolve contradiction. Perhaps, ironically we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos. (Haraway, 173)

For Haraway, to “be Man” is to embody the myths of unity, control, stability, purity that have, throughout Western history, been used as pretexts for the exclusion and oppression of all those subjects (women, the disabled, people of colour, animals and the natural environment) that fall outside these categories. Haraway’s response is to dispel these myths and remind us of our own contingency, our own impurity and own heteronymous reliance on the material world. Haraway’s posthumanism is, in her words

> the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly. (Haraway, 176)

Similarly, Cary Wolfe’s posthumanist ethics is also based on an emphasis on the inevitable vulnerability of the human subject. He builds upon Jacques Derrida’s suggestion that intersubjective ethics ought to be based, not upon an understanding of common capabilities, but on a recognition of shared vulnerabilities: “mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion” (qtd. in Wolfe, 81). Like Marinetti, Derrida attributes compassion and empathy to the mortal and finite human body; but while Marinetti seeks to transcend such sentiments and limitations, both Derrida and Wolfe see them as valuable. Wolfe
argues that, in order to think ethically about others, we must be reminded of our heteronomy with the world and this can only occur through a recognition of our shared vulnerabilities. Like Haraway, Wolfe recognises that such a vulnerability comes, not just from our material existence, but from our reliance on imperfect and imperfectible language:

The first type (physical vulnerability, embodiment, and eventually mortality) is paradoxically made unavailable, inappropriable, to us by the very thing that makes it available—namely, a second type of “passivity” or “not being able” which is the finitude we experience in our subjection to a radically ahuman technicity or mechanicity of language, a technicity that has profound consequences, of course, for what we too hastily think of as “our” concepts, which are therefore in an important sense not “ours” at all. (Wolfe, 88)

Language, for Wolfe, is an inevitably contingent and intersubjective process. No language is possible without the acceptance that, to a degree, our words and our thoughts are not our own:

“We” are already radically other, already in- or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, our mammalian existence but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity. (Wolfe, 89)

The speaker in “Romance Moderne” is faced with many such levels of otherness; the automobile escapes human control, the speaker’s organs seemingly escape the confines of his body, and language itself escapes the speaker, as emphasised by the scattered dashes and the non-linguistic interjection of “agh”:

God how I love you!—or, as I say, a plunge into the ditch. The End. I sit examining my red handful. Balancing—this—in and out—agh. (CP1, 149)
Unlike Marinetti’s empowered transhuman, the speaker in “Romance Moderne” is faced with the instability and contingency of his own being. This is by no means an isolated incident; throughout his career, Williams’s poetic voice is repeatedly challenged, threatened, fragmented and drowned out by the material world. Significantly, as we see throughout this thesis, it is at these moments of vulnerability that the social, democratic and empathetic ethos of Williams’s work becomes all the more clear. For Williams, “a plunge in the ditch” is presented as a synonym for “God how I love you!” (CP/1, 149) and vulnerability is synonymous with an empathetic openness to the world. While Marinetti dreams of a world in which technology, nature and language “bow before man” (41), Williams arguably takes a more productive message from his mythical car crash. For Williams, to be vulnerable and to lose control, whether it be of an automobile, of one’s body, or of language itself, can serve as a valuable means of denaturalising the illusion of the human subject as a sovereign, disembodied and autonomous will. Williams’s posthumanism is, no doubt, a destructive gesture, a violent sweeping-aside of humanist ideals of the autonomy and stability of the subject. But it is this deconstruction that allows for a new understanding of human subjectivity, human language and poetry to be retrieved from the ditch.
CHAPTER 2. “THEN HE KISSED IT WITH HIS BUMPER”: WILLIAM'S POSTHUMANIST RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MODERN MACHINE

Williams’s creative response to the evolving technological landscape of modern America embodies a complex reassessment of what, if anything, it means to be human (and a poet) within the twentieth century. Since he purchased his first automobile in 1911, William Carlos Williams’s experience of modernity has revolved around the presence of the machine (A, 127). In works such as Sour Grapes, The Great American Novel, Spring and All and A Novelette, the technologies of automobiles, trains, telephones, typewriters, dynamos and fire engines are given unprecedented voice, and afforded a startling degree of agency over Williams’s work. Within these works, the voice of the once-sovereign human subject is often pushed to the periphery by the rhythms, structures and voices of the technological landscape, from the rhythm of a speeding automobile to the “UMMMMMMM” of the dynamo (I, 162) and the “Trrrrrrring” (I, 276) of the telephone. As such, Williams's relationship with ideas of humanity and humanism are inevitably tied up with his complicated relationship with technology. To read Williams’s poetic and prosaic portrayals of the modern machine is to question what place, if any, is reserved for the human subject within the technologised modern world.

Within the existing literature, two potential answers to this question emerge. The first, markedly humanist, reading of Williams’s work positions the creative mind as an all-powerful designer capable of manipulating the various technologies of the material world to create new, efficient, designs (Tichi). Within this reading, modern technology is understood as a set of tools, designed and used to supplement the efficiency and potency of the human imagination. From the other perspective, Williams’s work constitutes an abandonment of the very idea of humanity in favour of a pure technological materialism (Miller). The once-discrete boundaries of the poet’s unified subjectivity are eroded by the agencies of various modern technological and material structures. As human agency becomes more and more difficult to distinguish, Williams’s work can be said to abandon human concerns in favour of the rhythms of the modern machine. Ultimately,
however, neither of these categories offers a satisfactory explanation of the complex relationship between Williams and the technological landscape of modern America. To read Williams as a “designer” of poems, who approaches technology as merely a formal tool at his disposal, would be to neglect the complex confusion of human and mechanical agency within his work. However, to dismiss Williams as either a pure materialist or early posthumanist would necessarily preclude a productive discussion of Williams’s dedication to humanist ideals such as charity, empathy, and the redemptive power of the human imagination. Rather, for Williams, the modern machine serves as a powerful, violent and potentially subversive force of disruption: a means of challenging traditional notions of the sovereignty and authority of the Western humanist subject. By challenging humanist ideals of humankind’s mastery and control over technology, Williams’s posthumanist poetics represent the machine, not as a dehumanising force, nor as a means for human empowerment or transcendence, but as an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct patriarchal Western narratives of authority and power.

I. Technology and (Post)humanism

In his book *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (1962), C. B. Macpherson argues that the essence of the Western humanist subject is “freedom from the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession” (3). In a similar sense, N. Katherine Hayles argues, in her book *How We Became Posthuman*, that one of the fundamental premises of humanist ideals is that the subject “possessed a body but was not usually represented as being a body… the body is not identified with the self” (4). Rather, the body is imagined to be a tool, to be possessed and controlled by the imagination. In order to affirm the autonomy and freedom of the human subject, humanism must distinguish human agency from all external influences, whether cultural, biological or technological. As such, the humanist imagination conceives of the machine (like the material body itself) as merely a tool of the sovereign human mind. In her book *Shifting Gears* (1987), Cecelia Tichi argues that within the various technological revolutions of twentieth-century America, the modern subject, and in particular the modern writer, is defined by its sovereignty and authority over the material world of technology. Tichi suggests that the
technological era of American modernity signified the human subject’s omnipotence over the material world. She characterises this omnipotence in the figure of the modern engineer:

In an age that no longer felt the presence of an omniscient and omnipotent deity, the engineer replaced God as the designer with whom the writer could identify (Tichi, 194).

Unlike many of her contemporaries, Tichi does not interpret the technological revolution of modernity as a threat to the sovereignty of the human subject. Rather, modern technology “afforded new formal opportunities to contemporary artists” (Tichi, 172). For Tichi, Williams is a perfect example of her model of the poet as engineer. She argues that Williams’s famous description of poetry as “a machine… made out of words” suggests that language, like steam, steel and electricity, is merely a natural phenomenon at the disposal of the human mind, whose role is to manipulate it to achieve maximum efficiency (267-268). As such, Tichi places William Carlos Williams’s work firmly within a Western humanist tradition by emphasising the uniqueness and power of the human imagination, and its capacity for masterful and instrumental use of technology. But the role of the engineer does not merely signify a mastery of steam, steel, electricity or words. Within the context of early twentieth-century America, the role of the engineer became increasingly ideological. The slogan of the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair reflects a social climate in which the modern engineer was in control, not merely of the machine, but of the modern human: “Science Finds. Industry Applies. Man Conforms” (qtd. in Codgell, 84). In her book *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s*, Christina Codgell traces a continuity between the role of the modern engineer and the twentieth-century eugenicist:

Both considered themselves to be agents of reform, tackling problems of mass (re)production, eliminating “defectiveness” and “parasitic drag” that were thought to be slowing forward evolutionary progress. Both were obsessed with increasing efficiency and hygiene and the realisation of the “ideal type” as the means to achieve an imminent “civilized” utopia. (4)
Just as the role of the engineer is to shape the resources of the material world to an efficient design, and just as (according to Tichi) the role of the modern poet is to arrange words to achieve maximum efficiency, the role of the eugenicist suggests that human beings are materials to be controlled, refined and perfected by the sovereign mind of the eugenicist. As Codgell suggests, the role of both the modern eugenicist and the modern engineer are premised on the ideal of control: “control over evolutionary progress, control over social problems plaguing middle- and upper-class whites, and even control over the future” (5). Thus, implicit within modern narratives of the engineer’s mastery over the machine, or the poet’s mastery of the poem, is the impulse to control. This impulse is inextricable from humanist understandings of the divide between the mind and the material world. In his essay “Heidegger’s Influence on Posthumanism”, Gavin Rae associates the concept of instrumental technology use as one of the central tenets of humanism’s conception of the human-technology divide:

Humanism maintains a human-technology division which suggests that humans (1) have a purely instrumental relationship to technology and (2) can live without technology insofar as the human’s use of technology appears to be dependent on its freely chosen goals. (62)

Western humanism, in this sense, represents the mind of the technology user as both autonomous and sovereign to the material world of technology. In Tichi’s characterisation of Williams as an engineer, and in Codgell’s description of American eugenics, we can see that these humanist narratives of univocal mastery can also be applied to the sovereign humanist subject’s power over both language and humanity itself.

Posthumanism, by contrast, is premised upon a deconstruction of the divide between humanity and technology, and a recognition that the relationship between the machine and the human is never simply one of univocal and instrumental mastery. Rae argues:

Posthumanism tries to overcome the humanist human–technology opposition by showing that human being does not simply have an instrumentalist relationship to technology, but is, in fact, intimately and ontologically connected to technology. (52)
As this chapter demonstrates, Williams is not a detached and sovereign “engineer”, but merely a participant in a series of technological systems, many of which constantly escape his own understanding and control. While humanist models of technology use are premised upon a clear hierarchy between the human who designs, owns and uses and the machine that is designed, owned and used, posthumanist approaches to the machine complicate this hierarchy by revealing the relationship between the human mind and the machine to be dialogic, cyborgic and fundamentally unpredictable. And, implicitly, by destabilising the hierarchy between humanity and the machine, posthumanism also upsets other hierarchies that rely on the sovereignty and autonomy of the humanist subject, such as that between mind and body, coloniser and colonised, and man and woman.

II. A Dance of Locomotives

Decades before Williams’s description of the poem as a machine made of words, the modern machine made its first notable appearance in Williams’s poetry at the 1917 New York Independents Exhibition, when he first read “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” (A, 136). Williams’s portrayal of the titular locomotive is underscored by a cautious technological optimism, based on the premise that the modern technological landscape could serve as the context for a revitalisation of poetic form. The poem opens with a misleading and incongruous image of men shouting the names of cities in a “huge gallery” (CP1, 146). It is soon revealed that the “gallery” in this scene is not a traditional art gallery, as imagined, but a train station; the artworks, in this sense, are not paintings or sculptures, but the locomotives themselves, which perform a mechanical, yet beautiful, dance:

-rivers are tunneled: trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively
stationary: rails forever parallel

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4 In his autobiography, Williams mistakes the Independents Exhibition with the 1913 Armory Show.
return on themselves infinitely.
The dance is sure. (CP1, 147)

As well as subverting the reader’s expectations of the contents of the “gallery”, the image of the men shouting in the gallery signifies a disjuncture from the traditional hushed galleries of the past and, as such, from conventional understandings of art itself. In stark contrast to the traditionally reserved world of the art gallery, Williams’s gallery is a noisy, exciting and dynamic space. As John Timberland Newcomb argues in his book How Did Poetry Survive?

The overall impression it creates is of enormous potential energy. Forces of space and time “pull” against one another, as the observer is drawn towards the track by the promise of distant destinations; as porters dart to and fro directing people to trains; as the cylindrical cars, dingy yet inviting, are “packed with a warm glow” of vitality and plenitude. (259)

In rejecting the controlled space of the art gallery in favour of the noisy, energetic train station as the primary location of his art, Williams emphasises the role of technology as a means of adding vitality and immediacy to the art of the modern era. In “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”, the locomotive, and its peripheral technologies, offer utopian possibilities. Each city name, chanted by the station workers, offers another possible destination for the modern subject who is empowered by the train to be, in a short period of time, almost anywhere. The technology of the train, though non-human, offers a vast range of possibilities and freedoms for the human subject. As Newcomb puts it:

Williams thus draws from the railway system an incipiently utopian view of industrial modernity, discerning in the indifferent laws of physics and in the specific uses extrapolated from them an integrated design marrying the freedom of art and the precision of technology, a balance he articulates in the poem’s final line: “The dance is sure” (CP1, 147).

In this capacity, Tichi’s model of the poet as engineer holds true; the poem, like the locomotive exists as a well refined machine, capable of harnessing existing resources (in this case language
instead of coal and steam) in order to efficiently transport the modern individual to a new, exciting experience. The beauty of the “dance” of the locomotive is found in the creation of dynamism from stasis; by virtue of its precise design, courtesy of the modern engineer, the wheels and the rails remain “relatively stationary” but interact with one another to propel the locomotive across the landscape (CP1, 147). In a parallel feat of design, Williams’s mastery of line pacing produces energy and movement from the static words on the page. Just as the commuters are drawn underground by the promise of the train, and the train is propelled across the American landscape by the power of pressurised steam, so too is the eye of the reader drawn from one line to the next by Williams’s use of enjambment:

Men with picked voices chant the names
of cities in a huge gallery: promises
that pull through descending stairways
to a deep rumbling. (CP1, 146)

In the act of taking inanimate matter and, through efficient design, creating energy and motion, the modern poet and the modern engineer do, as Tichi suggests, supplant the traditional role of God. The men “chant” and make “promises” not in honour of a supernatural deity, but in celebration of the achievements of the human imagination. In this sense, the technological advancements of the modern world serve to reinforce humanist ideals of the sovereignty of the modern human subject.

In her suggestion that the engineer and the modern poet are analogous to God, Tichi’s model falls back of the humanist assumption that humanity is capable of a purely instrumental use of both technology and poetry. While this premise is central to Tichi’s understanding of modernism, no such mastery is assumed within Williams’s work. Williams seems to recognise that, while technology may empower the modern subject, such empowerment inevitably necessitates a relinquishing of agency to the machine. In one of the more challenging images of the poem, Williams demonstrates the increasing power of technology over the modern world. A
shaft of sunlight, streaming in through a window, is described to move across the floor, not in accordance with the natural rotation of the earth, but in pace with the rhythm set by the clock:

A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing out at a high window, moves by the clock: disaccordant hands straining out from a center: inevitable postures infinitely repeated— (CP1, 146)

Here, humanism’s idea of the subservient machine is inverted. The capacity for technology to overthrow nature and dictate the subdivisions of time and space within the modern world is unsettling; the clock no longer measures, but “covertly” controls time, while the unaware humans are portrayed as unaware “shuffling… ants” (CP1, 146). And it is not only the commuters of the poem who are subject to the rhythms of the machine. Periodically, Williams’s poetic voice also takes on the rhythmic cadence of the clock and the locomotive. When describing the rhythm of the steam engine, the otherwise fluid rhythm of the poem assumes a regularity (“two—twofour—twoeight!”), which eventually transforms into a mechanically precise iambic rhythm, mimetic of the movement of the train wheels:

In time: twofour!
In time: two eight! (CP1, 147)

In this sense, the structures of the machine are presented as analogous to the traditional poetic structures of Western culture that Williams famously rejects. As H. T. Kirby-Smith argues in The Origins of Free Verse, “for Williams… the elimination of predictable rhythm, especially the iambic rhythm, was equated with energy and freedom” (9). However, in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”, the iambic rhythms of traditional cultural forms find modern articulation in the equally iambic rhythms of the locomotive.
And yet, overall, the locomotive is, quite paradoxically, presented as a mechanism of liberation. For Williams, the possibility that the machine may impose some nefarious agency over human life is, at this point, balanced by its capacity to empower the modern individual. As Newcomb argues, even the ominous prospect of a mechanical subdivision of time and space seems to offer possibilities, rather than limitations, for the human subject:

This motion-in-time is clearly railway time, ordering our lives in ways we sometimes resist or deplore yet also offering access to speeds, distances, spaces, and experiences unimaginable a few decades earlier. (259)

There seems to be, at the heart of this poem, a contradiction or, at the very least, a sense of indecision in Williams’s approach to technology. On one hand, the train exists as a symbol of freedom, energy and optimistic excitement; Williams’s enthusiasm for the possibilities of the energetic modern technological landscape is reflected in a dynamic verse that generates kinetic energy, pulling the eye of the reader from line to line. On the other hand, when the train’s rhythms are directly described, Williams’s poetic voice becomes subject to mechanical rhythms that are directly analogous to the cultural poetic forms that he seems so desperate to escape. The poem, as such, represents a clash of order and freedom that is played out in both form and content. We have here one of the central tensions of posthumanism: how can a discourse that decentres subjectivity and reveals the human will as inextricable from systems and technologies beyond its control or understanding, purport to offer any form of meaningful liberation or value to the modern human?

Though undecided and contradictory, “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” does ultimately offer a seed of optimism in the idea (which would return in a far more developed form in his later works) that technology could offer an escape from the pernicious narratives of modern culture and society, not through its mastery, but certainly through its use and misuse. In the poem, a porter attempts to impose order upon a woman in the crowd:

This way ma’am
important not to take
the wrong train! (CP1, 147)

These lines present two alternatives to the woman: board her correct train and go wherever she was supposed to go that day, or board the wrong train and break free of the culturally imposed narratives by throwing one’s fate to the whims of the railway. As Newcomb argues (albeit in a discussion of another, later poem, “Rapid Transit”) Williams’s use of trains presents a distinctly modern understanding of freedom to the modern individual: “if they switch lines enough times and keep on riding, they can get anywhere in the city they want to go” (261). The train is, within “Rapid Transit” both a source of structural constraint and a means to achieve freedom; after all, a train can serve as the vehicle for both a mind-numbing daily commute and a thrilling vacation. Furthermore, there is an optimism in Williams’s notion that, through the misuse of technology, by boarding the wrong train, it is possible to disrupt the pernicious narratives of culture and, ultimately, to create something new, energetic and exciting. This notion becomes even more subversive when the gender dynamic of the poem is considered. Significantly, this moment does not merely establish a conflict between human culture and the machine; rather, it dramatises an opportunity for the woman on the platform to escape the authority of the male porter by refusing to follow his “important” designs: “—important not to take / the wrong train!” (CP1, 147). Technology, in this sense, is framed as a means by which the narratives of patriarchal society may be, at least temporarily, disrupted. As to whether this disruption is necessarily a good thing, Williams seems unsure; as the title suggests, this poem is only an “overture”. Williams seems to recognise that he has not yet seen the full potential of the modern machine, nor does he fully understand the implications of its “dance” for modern humanity; in the years that followed the poem, as America entered into the First World War, Williams came to see his initial optimism as naive.

III. Technological Pessimism and Kora in Hell

Williams’s technological optimism, like that of many other avant-garde artists of the time, was shaken by the onset of the First World War. The excitement of the pre-war years, founded upon
the idea that the various technological and cultural revolutions of American modernity could enhance the human experience, was supplanted by a sense that the mechanisation of modern life was incompatible with human existence and poetry. In his autobiography, Williams reflects:

Damn it, the freshness, the newness of a springtime which I had sensed among the others, a reawakening of letters, all that delight which in making a world to match the supremacies of the past could mean was being blotted out by the war. (A, 158)

In 1918, when the horrors of war were most obvious, Williams related himself to “Kora, the Greek parallel of Persephone” (I, 3) whose springtime optimism was being dragged into hell. On top of the spectre of global warfare, Williams had to contend with an influenza epidemic, which, in his capacity as a doctor, pushed him to his physical and mental limits. Williams’s recollections of this year, in his autobiography and his later works, resemble a modern dystopia: telephones ringing frantically, speeding cars, death, desperation, exhaustion and a profound feeling of being helpless, at the mercy of powers beyond one’s control and understanding:

We doctors were making up to sixty calls a day. Several of us were knocked out, one of the younger of us died, others caught the thing, and we hadn’t a thing that was effective in checking that potent poison that was sweeping the world. I lost two young women in their early twenties, the finest physical specimens you could imagine… They’d be sick one day and gone the next, just like that, fill up and die. (A,159-160)

In writings from or about this year, there is a strong sense of disillusionment: a sense that the various technological, medical and cultural revolutions of American modernity had done little to improve the life of the modern human. The optimism and wonder of “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”, read only a year prior, is supplanted by a sense that the violence and frenetic pace of the modern technological landscape was incompatible with human existence and happiness.

It was at this time that Williams wrote the improvised portions of what would later become Kora in Hell. Throughout the year, Williams resolved to write a passage each day, recording the
spontaneous ideas and images of early twentieth-century America. The result is a particularly bleak work, characterised primarily by an underlying sense of physical and emotional detachment from the modern world. In the improvisations, technology is portrayed in an entirely different light than in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”; rather than serving as a representation of humanity’s creative ingenuity, the machine becomes a symbol of detachment and alienation. In one disturbing passage, an unnamed man is speeding along in a car (“Speed! Speed!”) with his friend “whose brain is slowly curdling due to a syphilitic infection” (I, 40). As he approaches the city, he sees the order of the natural world overthrown by modernity as the city lights rise on the horizon “in a reverse direction to the sun’s course” (I, 40). Moved by this artificial inversion of natural order, the man abandons his previous sympathy in favour of nihilistic scorn. He is “inclined to scoff derisively at the city’s prone stupidity and to make light indeed of his friend’s misfortune” (I, 40). The man looks from the window of the car to the world outside with contempt. In this scene, the speeding car and the bright city lights do not inspire the same wonder and excitement present within “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”; the metal shell of the automobile becomes a symbolic boundary, from behind which the subject is at liberty to view the world with a cold indifference, safe from any physical, emotional or empathetic impact. As Williams states in a later passage, “The trick is never to touch the world anywhere” (I, 53).

The theme of cold indifference within Kora in Hell is inextricably linked to the image of the machine. In another passage, the narrator compares his experience of the world with the modern development of cinema:

In the mind there is a continual play of obscure images which coming between the eyes and their prey seem pictures on the screen at the movies. Somewhere there appears to be a mal-adjustment. The wish would be to see not floating visions of unknown purport but the imaginative qualities of the actual thing being perceived accompanying their gross visions in a slow dance. (I, 67)

The narrator of this passage yearns for some meaning, some imaginative quality, beyond the physical world before him. However, due to the “mal-adjustment” of modernity, he is left with
nothing but “gross visions”. All that remains is the flat superficial flickering of images of the cinema screen, “floating” free of any deeper meaning or ideal. Cut off from idealism by the materiality of the modern technological landscape, the narrator of *Kora in Hell* finds it difficult to put any meaningful value on human experience. In one particularly powerful passage, a physician delivering a baby considers, with disturbingly detached humour, the prospect of harming the child:

> In his warped brain an owl of irony fixes on the immediate object of his care as if it were the thing to be destroyed, guffaws at the impossibility of putting any kind of value on the object inside… *(I, 66)*

If, as many critics have suggested, “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” embodies the excited technological optimism of the Futurists, then *Kora in Hell* plays out the ugly inevitabilities of a modern art based upon the rhythms of the machine. As F. T. Marinetti argues in his text *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine*, modern technology will inevitably give rise to a nonhuman man, who, “constructed for an omnipresent velocity, will be naturally cruel, omniscient, and combative” *(91)*. Though Williams’s narrator in *Kora in Hell* is by no means synonymous with the “mechanical being” imagined by Marinetti, there is a common association between the proliferation of modern technology and the death of human values in favour of cold, mechanical, anti-humanist indifference. This association would haunt Williams’s work for some time, even when, in works such as *Spring and All*, he was able, in some capacity, to resolve it:

> In the offices of the great newspapers a mad joy reigns as they prepare the final extras. Rushing about, men bump each other into the whirring presses. How funny it seems. All thought of misery has left us. Why should we care? Children laughingly fling themselves under the wheels of the street cars, airplanes crash gaily to the earth. Someone has written a poem. *(CP1, 180)*
The last sentence of this passage is as enigmatic as it is jarring. Is the “someone” who has written the poem complicit in the horrors of the modern world? Is their poetry intended to provide a contrast or a remedy for such violent nihilistic chaos? Can the poem offer some sense of optimism within the technological landscape of twentieth-century America?

IV. A Return to Springtime and Spring and All

From the end of 1918 onwards, as the influenza epidemic abated and the war reached its conclusion, Williams did indeed begin to salvage some of his earlier optimism for the modern world (A, 170–174). Indeed, by the time Kora in Hell was published in 1920, Williams felt that the pessimistic portrayal of the modern experience was no longer relevant: “That book as soon as it was printed entered a world which I didn’t feel I could betray so that I did not at first want it to be published” (I, 30). By contrast, Williams was overcome with a great optimism for the direction of American art, feeling “that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself” (A, 174). Central to this optimism was the idea of contact. In stark contrast to his bleak resolve “never to touch the world anywhere” (I, 53) in Kora in Hell, Williams’s post-war work was based upon the renewed possibility for a meaningful contact between the human, natural and mechanical worlds. These ideas were developed, tested and explored through Contact, a literary magazine established by Williams and Marsden Hartley in 1920, featuring the works of poets such as Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Robert McAlmon and the poetry and theories of Williams himself. In his manifesto in the first edition of the magazine, Williams turns his back on the despair of Kora in Hell and attempts to restore a sense of value to the material reality of the modern world:

For if there are standards in reality and in existence if there are values and relations which are absolute, they will apply to art. Otherwise any standard of criticism is a mere mental exercise, and past art signifies nothing. (1)

For Williams, these absolute values cannot be found through either cultural or ephemeral means; they exist in the material world. While cultural conventions serve only to obstruct humans from
truth, these truths can be uncovered through sincere and meaningful “contact” with the external world. Mina Loy elegantly sums up this attitude in the first edition of the magazine, in two lines of her poem “O Hell”:

Our person is a covered entrance to infinity
Choked with the tatters of tradition (7)

These “tatters” represent the cultural and artistic structures that impose distance between artist and world; more broadly, they can be said to represent the conventional Cartesian dualisms of Western humanism. With the idea of contact came a rejection of distance in favour of the assumption of artistic heterogeneity. The poet could no longer be understood as an autonomous mind, detached from the material realities of his environment. In contrast to the alienation of Kora in Hell, Williams’s post-war work is founded on the optimism that humans were capable, through communication, empathy, extension and contact, of achieving an honest and meaningful relationship with the material world around them.

Tellingly, it was at this moment of revived optimism for a new American art form based on proximity and contact, that technology emerged with unprecedented significance in Williams’s work. In his autobiography, Williams’s description of his newfound optimism is immediately followed by a pair of anecdotes concerning his fascination and excitement for the modern machine. The first describes the scene that inspired his 1921 poem “The Great Figure”:

On a hot July day coming back exhausted from the Post Graduate Clinic, I dropped in as I sometimes did at Marsden’s studio on Fifteenth Street for a talk, a little drink maybe and to see what he was doing. As I approached his number I heard the great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forcful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it. (A, 172)
The second captures Williams’s excitement at the power of the modern express train:

> I remember once, returning to New York from a visit to us in Rutherford, Marsden and I were waiting on the Erie platform when an express train roared by right before our faces—crashing through making up time in a cloud of dust and sand so that we had to put up our hands to protect our faces. As it passed Marsden turned and said to me, “That’s what we all want to be, isn’t it, Bill?” I said, “Yes, I suppose so” (*A*, 172).

At this time, in *Contact*, Williams was echoing Marcel Duchamp’s famous assertions of the artistic virtues of American mechanical culture:

> It has been by paying naked attention first to the things itself that American plumbing, American shoes, American bridges, indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, farm implements and a thousand other things have become notable in the world. (15)

Fittingly, his major works of the following years, *Sour Grapes*, *Spring and All* and *The Great American Novel* provided an unprecedentedly nuanced exploration of the significance of various modern technologies (typewriters, dynamos, locomotives, cinema, advertising and automobiles) to the modern subject and to modern literature itself.

It was in *Sour Grapes* (1921) that “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” was first published. The inclusion of this work, which had sat unpublished throughout the war, seems to signify Williams’s renewed dedication to developing a meaningful relationship between mechanical and human concerns. Within *Sour Grapes*, the human subject is frequently displaced from its traditional place at the centre of the poem, to be replaced instead by the material voice of the technological modern landscape. This displacement is enacted perhaps most dramatically in

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5 In their 1917 article in *The Blind Man*, “The Richard Mutt Case”, Beatrice Wood and H.P. RochŽ (presumed to be a pseudonym for Duchamp himself) claim: “The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges” (5).
Williams’s poem “The Great Figure”. As Peter Halter points out in his book The Revolution in the Visual Arts and William Carlos Williams, the title of this poem establishes a false expectation on the part of the reader:

In 1920, when the poem was published for the first time, a reader probably expected it to be about a figure of public importance rather than about a number, or immediately realized the clash between what one could generally expect to find in poetry and what one found here—a poem that violated the basic poetic conventions by almost any standard. (99)

Foremost among the conventions that Williams breaks is the traditional anthropocentrism of the poem. While poetry was traditionally understood as a medium for expressing the inner workings of the human spirit, Williams shocks his readers by presenting instead a “figure” and a poetic subject that is nothing more than a common material object:

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city. (CP1, 174)
A parallel inversion of expectations is enacted in the poem’s metre. The first four lines of the poem, which focus on the act of observing the firetruck, establish an iambic metre. The reader, familiar with the conventions of Western poetry will naturally assume that this recognisable metre will continue throughout the poem. This poetic order, however, is subsequently displaced by the energy of the scene. From the fifth line onwards, the speaker of the poem is largely forgotten among the barrage of imagery. Within the fast-paced poem, the lyric “I” is given no pause for reflection or contemplation. As indicated by the abrupt lines and the sparse nature of Williams’s imagery, the speaker is either unable or unwilling to impose any sense of order or logic, or any traditional poetic form, upon the chaotic modern scene. The beauty of this poem, then, is not of the human mind; the poem’s beauty is derived instead from the freshness of a seemingly unadulterated experience of the modern machine, unmediated by the ideals and structures of human culture. Like in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives”, the modern machine offers the exciting possibility of an experience that escapes the traditional limitations of the human imagination. This poem, in short, is not about using technology as a tool on human agency, but opening oneself to an empathetic appreciation and understanding of the innate poetics of the machine itself.

V. The Voice of the Machine

As if to reinforce the diminishing focus on the human mind and voice in favour of that of the machine, Williams misleadingly describes his 1923 novel *The Great American Novel* as “a satire on the novel form in which a little (female) Ford car falls more or less in love with a Mack truck” (I, 155). Whether Williams is joking, or whether he has simply imagined a novel that he never wrote, this description is far from accurate. The novel focuses instead upon the experiences of a doctor living and working in twentieth-century America and, more specifically, the relationship between language and the modern American experience. Williams’s description, however, does hold true in its suggestion of a confusion between human agency and modern machinery. Throughout the novel, there is a tension, half in jest, half legitimate, over the growing agency and autonomy of
the machine. In one scene of the novel, the protagonist, having successfully assisted a birth, peeks out of the window to make sure that his car is still there:

He went to the window to see if his car was still there... There it was as still as if it were asleep. Still as could be. Not a wheel moved. No sound came from the engine. (I, 163)

The passage seems to suggest that the narrator is not merely concerned about car thieves, but by the idea that his car may, at any moment, become autonomous.

Fittingly, in *A Novelette*, machines increasingly occupy roles traditionally reserved for humans. In another scene, the narration itself is conspicuously punctuated by the insistent voice of a nearby dynamo:

I'm new, says the great dynamo. I am progress. I make a word. Listen! UMMMMMMMMMMMM— (I, 162)

Tichi identifies this scene as a revolutionary appearance of a mechanical voice within a literary text. However, she dismisses the dynamo as nothing more than a part of a contemporary backdrop: “a character in a boffo opera vignette, as a possible source of one new monosyllabic word, and as a backstage functionary in domestic life” (242). What Tichi ignores, however, and what bears noticing, is the significance that Williams places upon the ability to make even a monosyllabic word. Earlier in the novel, Williams muses

Words are indivisible crystals. One cannot break them—Awu tsst grang splith gra pragh og bm—Yes, one can break them. One can make words. Progress? If I make a word I can

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6 The dynamo has been linked with an almost apocalyptic sense of technological modernity since Henry Adams’s recount of seeing one at The Great Expedition of 1900 in his book *The Education of Henry Adams*. Adams describes the dynamo as a terrifying force, capable of making human culture and human expression obsolete: “To Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamo as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross... Among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy, the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive” (380).
make myself into a word. Such is progress. I shall make myself into a word. One big word. One big union. (I, 160)

This passage raises significant ideas regarding the linguistic basis of identity. Williams suggests that language, far from being an immutable reflection of meaning, is a primarily material phenomenon. Language can be broken and reassembled, much like a machine can be broken down into component parts and put back together. Furthermore, the construction of a word from scattered component parts is inseparable from the construction of coherent and discrete concepts. To form the word “I”, for example, is to form a multiplicity of potential subjectivities into a single coherent ego: “I shall make myself into a word. One big union” (I, 160). Thus, in The Great American Novel, the power to make a word is imbued with the power of selfhood. By demonstrating the dynamo’s capacity for linguistic expression, through its onomatopoeic vocalisation, Williams allows the machine to form a rudimentary notion of selfhood and agency. As such, the dynamo’s “UMMMMMMMMM” can be read as a challenge to traditional ideas of the limits of subjectivity. Western humanism’s, and indeed literature’s, elevation of human subjectivity is challenged by a world in which the machine is increasingly autonomous and expressive.

And yet, The Great American Novel does not merely displace human subjectivity in favour of mechanical voices. At one point, the narrator is delivering a child as the dynamo hums in the background; even against the drone of the dynamo, the human voice, the screams of the woman in childbirth, ultimately wins out:

Ow, ow! Oh help me somebody! said she. UMMMMMMM said the dynamo in the next street UMMM. With a terrible scream she drowned out its sound. (I, 162)

This scene could be read as a victory for humanity, in which the human voice competes with, and eventually overcomes, the demands of the modern machine. But such a reading would be overly simplistic; in fact, the confrontation between the pregnant woman and the dynamo is one that has
been historically used to express the supremacy of the masculine will over the natural and feminine world. As Joseph Tabi argues in his book *Postmodern Sublime* (1995):

> Typically, the romantic male ego has appropriated force and terror of woman’s labor to itself, as in Adams’s famous conversion from the reproductive labor of the virgin to the productive labor of the dynamo. (4)

Here, Tabi is referring to Henry Adams’s 1907 autobiographical work *The Education of Henry Adams*. In it, Adams recounts his visit to the Great Exposition of 1900, where he first encountered a “forty-foot dynamo” (380) and became enraptured by its power: “among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy, the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive” (380). For Adams, the power of the dynamo as a cultural symbol lies in its fecundity, the very same fecundity to which Adams attributes the worship of ancient goddesses:

> Every one, even among Puritans, knew that neither Diana of the Ephesians nor any of the Oriental goddesses was worshipped for her beauty. She was a goddess because of her force; she was the animated dynamo; she was reproduction—the greatest and most mysterious of all energies; all she needed was to be fecund. (384)

For Adams, the dynamo, by virtue of its productive power, has supplanted the goddess in the American imagination: “An American Virgin would never dare command; an American Venus would never dare exist” (385). The masculinised imagination of the human engineer has, through the creation of the modern dynamo, taken the productive power attributed to femininity and, in the words of Tabi, “appropriated force and terror of woman’s labor to itself” (4). In this sense, Western literary depictions of the dynamo are inextricable, not just from modernist ideas of mastery over the mechanical world, but the patriarchal drive to control women.

But in *The Great American Novel*, Williams does not assume mastery over either the woman or the machine. In fact, Williams’s novel rejects such narratives of mastery even at the fundamental level of its form. In his book *Modernism, Medicine, & William Carlos Williams*, Hugh T. Crawford writes:
Williams’s machine made of words is inefficiently designed. It bumps, shakes, grinds, screeches and halts. This is not to say that it does not produce, but that there is waste. Its lines are not clear or streamlined, making problematic any assertion that Williams wholeheartedly embraced a machine aesthetic. (94)

As Crawford argues, if the book does embrace a machine aesthetic, it is certainly not one of control: “The Great American Novel is cobbled together from cast-off parts designed for other purposes; in a sense, no one is in full control” (Crawford, 94–95). Indeed, it is just as the woman gives birth, and drowns out the dynamo, that the narrator peers out the window to check on his car. His paranoia is unusual; as a car owner and a physician, the narrator is seemingly in a good position to assume a role of authority over both the car and the woman’s body. But something about the technology, the groans of the dynamo and the possibility of the car’s autonomy, prevent him from doing so. In A Cyborg Manifesto, Donna Haraway associates man’s increasing paranoia of the autonomy of his machines with the increasing instability of the idea of the sovereign, autonomous human subject:

Pre-cybernetic machines could be haunted; there was always the spectre of the ghost in the machine… But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late-twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally defined. (152)

While it may be somewhat of a stretch to describe the car and the dynamo in The Great American Novel as “cybernetic”, it is clear that Williams’s representation of the machine presages some of the ideas that Haraway would articulate half a century later. The paranoia of the narrator is the fear of challenged sovereignty: the fear of the motorist losing control of his car, the fear of a doctor losing authority over his patient’s body, the fear of an author whose own narrative voice

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7 See chapter 5 for a more thorough discussion of the modern doctor’s presumed authority over the body of the patient.
is displaced by hums and screams of those not traditionally given voice within the narratives of patriarchal Western humanism. And, indeed, this fear seems justified. He is, as Haraway would describe, no longer “an author to himself” (152). Other voices have joined the conversation.

The machine makes its voice most clearly heard in Williams’s 1923 book Spring and All. The most experimental of his books, Spring and All takes inspiration from Dada in its radical use of typology, absurd manifestos, radical attitudes towards ideas of artistic form and a provocative approach to modern American society (IWWP, 123). In poems such as “Rapid Transit” and “The Right of Way”, the machine is directly engaged within the process of writing itself. If The Great American Novel is a satire on the novel in which a Ford falls in love with a Mack Truck (and even if it is not), then “Rapid Transit” in Spring and All is best described as a meditation on the human experience, as written by a train. The poem opens with a bold reminder of human mortality:

Someone dies every four minutes
in New York State— (CP1, 231)

Faced with the issue of death, the poem provides two potential perspectives on the situation, which seem to snarl antagonistically at one another. The first emphasises the materiality of human experience, the humbling idea, born in the modern era, that no meaningful distinction exists between human life (and human art) and any other matter:

To hell with you and your poetry—
You will rot and be blown
through the next solar systems
with the rest of the gases (CP1, 231–232)

The other voice responds, deriding the authority of the first and suggesting that, by contrast, the transcendent human mind is the measure of all things:

What the hell do you know about it?
AXIOMS

Do not get killed (*CP1*, 232)

There is ambiguity as to whether the last two lines are to be read, as I have done, as a single phrase. I do not doubt that this ambiguity is intentional, for it signifies the tension that I have already identified, between a confidence in the immutability of the disembodied human subject (Axioms do not get killed) and the urgent anxiety that comes with realising you are nothing but mortal matter (Axioms. Do not get killed!) Indeed, the argument between the two voices seems to be the argument, central to Williams’s work, between a material or idealist understanding of the human subject and poetry. Put simply, are humans one of “the rest of the gases” or are they “AXIOMS”, the measure of all things?

What complicates this tension further is the fact that, to a large extent, the poem is not written by the human mind at all. As Newcomb describes, the poem is composed from a polyphony of found phrases:

Consisting of roughly fifteen utterances, most delivered from advertising materials on subway walls, the poem generates collisions among seemingly random and incongruous discourses, including the news factoid, the public-service message, and the cranky interior commentary of a self-doubting poet. (261)

The polyphony and heterogeneity of this poem naturally challenges the autonomy of the poetic voice. Indeed, the final line “Interborough Rapid Transit Co.” reads more like an author’s signature than the final line of the poem, as if to confirm suspicions that the poem is written, not by the mind of the poet, but by the movement of the train itself (*CP1*, 232). Rather than following a coherent train of thought, the poem is structured around a fragmented flickering of images and snippets of conversations:
What’s the use of sweating over this sort of thing, Carl; here it is all set up—

Like the images on the cinema screen, the fragmented utterances that make up the poem are without context or depth; the poem is, in essence, a pastiche of fragments of the world seen from a speeding locomotive. Fittingly, the traditional poetic techniques, such as the alliteration of “Careful Crossing Campaign”, the idyllic imagery of “wonderful shade trees, rippling brooks”, and the trochaic metre of “Interborough Rapid Transit Co.” seem to come, not from the poet himself, but from the external sources of the advertisements around the train (CP1, 232). As Newcomb describes, there is a distinct confusion of the traditional roles and affective positions of the human and the material world:

Empathy for the suffering of others is confined to statistics, communication to advertising messages, conversation to self-alienated interior dialogue. (262)

As such, “Rapid Transit” constitutes a significant challenge to the autonomy of the poetic voice. Even the most nonhuman and nonpoetic characters of the modern landscape seem to display more artistic agency (and certainly more panache) than the poet himself. The very idea of a poetics of the locomotive threatens the very ideas by means of which the humanist subject is distinguished from the rest of the material world. Yet, despite the lack of an authorial human voice, the fragmented pastiche of sights and sounds created by Williams and the train is not devoid of humanity altogether; the meeting of train and poet does not result in the cold indifference seen in Kora in Hell. By breaking down the meaningful distinctions between the human and the material, the poem opens up the possibility that the voice of the machine can be a productive and redemptive force in human life. If a train can write a poem, if advertising can give meaningful advice, a heterogeneous relationship with the material external world may be the key to, not the antithesis of, the humanity that the speaker seeks.

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8 These lines are included in the version of “Rapid Transit” in Imaginations, but not in the version published in The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams.
VI. The Poet as Motorist

Plainly, Cecelia Tichi’s model of Williams as an “engineer” does not adequately address the confusion of agency within “Rapid Transit” and The Great American Novel. While Tichi represents the various technologies within Williams’s work as merely tools at the disposal of the human imagination, it becomes apparent that, within his poetry, Williams’s use of technology cannot be explained by a univocal model of agency. In order to properly understand the relationship between the human subject and the machine within Williams’s work, it is necessary to adapt a more dialogic model of the relationship between human consciousness and material technology.

In this sense, Brian McHale’s essay Poetry as Prosthesis is most relevant. McHale’s work focuses on the ways in which several modern avant-garde writers and artists, such as Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp, Franz Kafka and Raymond Roussel, subverted the conventional notion of the machine as a means of producing speed and power (1). McHale examines the way in which these writers used the machine as a direct means of transgressing traditional understandings of the autonomy of the creative process. By relinquishing creative authority to mechanical systems outside their own agency, these writers use the model of the machine to break free from the confines of culture and rationality ingrained upon the human mind (1). Interestingly, though McHale does mention Williams, he does not include Williams as one of these artists:

When in 1944, William Carlos Williams defined a poem as “a small (or large) machine made of words,” he has in mind as a model for poetry the precision machines of speed and power celebrated by other modernist writers and visual artists. 9 But this was not the only machine model current in the modernist era, for on the margins of mainstream modernism were “alternative machines, machines of reproduction and simulations—writing-machines, imaging-machines, duplicating-machines—such as those of Alfred Jarry, Marcel Duchamp, Franz Kafka, and, especially, Raymond Roussel. (1)

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9 As we have seen so far in this chapter, this is a vast oversimplification of Williams’s relationship with the machine.
McHale understands writing machines as external systems that impose a level of constraint upon the text that is outside the agency of the author. Furthermore, he argues that all modern texts exist on a spectrum between total human and total machine agency:

The most nearly satisfactory typology of machine poetry would seem to be a scale calibrated in terms of the relative proportions of writer to machine participation in the composition of the text. (20)

The existence of such a scale, the ability to put works on a spectrum between full human agency and full machine agency reflects the inevitably collaborative nature of such works and, as such, breaks down any essential dualism between the human mind and the material world. Seemingly, even the most autonomous human work signifies an inevitable collaboration with the machine, whether it be a pen, a typewriter or something altogether more complex. Such a collaboration, termed by McHale as “prosthetic poetry” (25) raises a number of challenges to traditional ideas of authorship:

The most direct and obvious consequence of the phenomenon we can now call prosthetic poetry is its undermining, or at least dilution, of authority. If the poet renounces part of his or her prerogatives, sharing his or her authority with a machine (actual or virtual), then who stands behind the words? Who’s in charge here? (25)

The idea of prosthesis necessitates a radical reassessment of the boundaries of the human subject. In “Rapid Transit”, the locomotive and the advertisements can both be considered as prosthetic extensions of Williams’s poetic consciousness, which penetrate outwards from mind to world, and inwards from the world to the mind. In contrast to a humanist understanding of the creative process, such as Tichi’s model of the writer as engineer, the prosthetic model allows for a more meaningful empathetic relationship between the artist and the external world.

As such, the idea of technology as prosthesis is an inevitable source of tension for theorists who aim to posit the humanist subject as the sole source of Williams’s poetry. Such tension is clearly
present within John Chatlos’s 2006 essay “Automobility and Lyric Poetry”. This essay focuses on Williams’s poem “The Right of Way”, from *Spring and All*, in which the speaker reports the sights that meet his eye as he drives through town. Chatlos provides two readings of the poem. The first suggests the possibility of a dispersion of poetic agency between Williams and the automobile; the second, on the other hand, dismisses this dangerous idea in place of a model that presents the poem as the unified and deliberate design of Williams’s creative mind. In the first reading, Chatlos stresses that the position of the speaker within the automobile constitutes an inevitable subversion of traditional poetic expectations. Western poetry, he argues, is traditionally expected to follow the movement of the human mind: “first a report or description of the outside world, then a reflection on it” (143). By contrast, “The Right of Way” seems structured, not by the movement of the imagination but by the movement of the car itself:

- an elderly man who
- smiled and looked away
- to the north past a house—
- a woman in blue
- who was laughing and
- leaning forward to look up
- into the man’s half
- averted face
- and a boy of eight who was
- looking at the middle of
- the man’s belly
- at a watchchain—
The supreme importance
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them
without a word— (CP1, 205-206)

Within the poem, images appear and then disappear without comment as the car moves onwards. As Chatlos describes, “Williams’ speaker refuses to reflect, and then he simply looks again” (143–144). The car, in this sense, seems to serve as the moving force of the poem. However, seemingly dissatisfied with this reading, Chatlos provides a secondary interpretation, in which the poem does indeed follow a conscious, albeit subtle, logic:

On this second reading, the two images that the motorist sees are related by a subtle narrative about voyeurism and passing. To unfold a pun that the poem makes, the structure of the poem is a “watchchain”: an eyeline match in which the motorist watches the old man, who watches the girl (and the reader watches the motorist watching). (146)

This argument is seductive. However, what is noteworthy is Chatlos’s reluctance to seriously entertain the dangerous idea that Williams may not be in full conscious control of his poem. I argue that Chatlos’s preference towards his second reading is endemic of a general reluctance, also present within Tichi’s theories, to assume that the creative mind of the poet may not be the sole source of poetic agency within Williams’s work.

In contrast, I believe that “The Right of Way” constitutes a radical prosthetic confusion of poetic agency between human and machine that is, in many ways, central to Williams’s aesthetic. The poem is underpinned by a balance between control and chaos and a fundamental confusion of poetic agency. It is not in the reference to the “watchchain” but in the lines “the supreme importance/of this nameless spectacle/sped me by them/without a word” that the poem expresses the key to its form (CP1, 206). The first two lines establish an expectation, common to
Western verse, that the poet will offer a reflection on the scene at hand; the poet, having surveyed the scene, will illuminate the reader as to the “supreme importance” of the events he has witnessed. The second two lines not only disappoint these expectations but also seem, on first reading, to render the clause nonsensical. The “supreme importance”, initially assumed to be an abstract concept, becomes the physically active subject of the line, speeding the speaker away from, rather than illuminating, the importance of the scene. The ambiguity of these lines raises an important question: what, then, is the “supreme importance” of the poem? The apparent answer is that the supreme importance of the poem is that force that moves the poem forward, the force that draws the reader from one image to another and sets the pace of the poetic voice. As Sebastian Lockwood argues in his essay *Savage Servility: Cars in the Psyche*, up until technological modernity, the driving force of Western poetry has been based upon the natural rhythms of the human. Poetic forms such as the sonnet and the ballad are crafted to mimic the conflict of the human mind, please the human ear, and keep pace with the human gait. As Lockwood describes:

> Poetry measures its lines in feet—that is the meter of walking. Possibly the last great poet to be raised before the onslaught of the car was Yeats, and in his majestic lines—that read with the certainty of climbing a marble staircase—we hear the last of those rhythms… (54)

Lockwood suggests that, in the era of the automobile, the rhythms of the human body and mind are lost amongst the rhythms of the machine. The “supreme importance” is no longer the human mind, nor even the rhythm of the human breath or footstep; the force that dictates the timing and pace of the poem is, in this case, the car itself.

No longer solely the work of the human mind, this poem enacts a complex and unresolved balance of various poetic agencies: biological, mental, cultural and mechanical. The poem ends with the lines:

> Why bother where I went?
> for I went spinning on the
four wheels of my car
along the wet road until

I saw a girl with one leg
over the rail of the balcony (CP1, 206)

What is often overlooked in these final lines is the subtle implication that the speaker has lost control of the car. The speaker “went spinning” on conspicuously “wet” road “until” seeing the girl. The word “until” clearly suggests that the speaker does not continue “spinning” down the road after spotting the girl. This leaves two possibilities: either the speaker has stopped the car to observe the girl or, more likely, the motorist, speeding along a wet road spots a provocative sight and, in a moment of distraction, loses control of the car. This episode has inevitable implications for our understanding of poetic authority within the poem. The poet is not in control of the flow of images because the poet, quite apparently, is not fully in control of the car. For Williams, writing and driving are processes that demand a relationship with technology that is forever beyond one’s control: a relationship that is both constructive and potentially destructive. And, once again, this moment of instability, in which the speaker faces his lack of control over the machine and the poet recognises his lack of complete authority over his work, coincides with an attempt to exert power over a female body. The power of the speaker’s objectifying male gaze is apparent as he effectively amputates the girl through his use of line break:

I saw a girl with one leg
over the rail of the balcony (CP1, 206)

Yet, it is at this moment, as the girl is objectified and fragmented into component parts, much like an engineer would examine a machine, that the speaker loses control of his vehicle. The narration, already largely driven by the movement of the automobile, ends abruptly without a full stop or a concluding thought; the speaker has seemingly reached the limits of his expressive capacity. It is at

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10 Even the imagination seems unwieldy in its potency. In the section of prose immediately following the poem, Williams writes “the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam, it is not a plaything” (I, 207).
this moment that the reader is reminded that the authority of the humanist subject, humanity’s control over machines, man’s dominion over woman, and the poet’s authority over his texts, are inevitably mutable. This is a reality that Tichi’s model cannot fully cover. A motorist, quite simply, is not an engineer, and neither is Williams.

The automobile also plays a significant role in Williams’s later work *A Novelette*. This work of prose, published in 1932, explores the impact of the frenetic pace of the modern world on the human subject. The narrator, a plain analogue for Williams himself, is a doctor (and a poet) caught in the midst of a flu epidemic. Pushed to his physical and mental limits by a constant stream of patients, the narrator finds himself increasingly dependent on modern technology, particularly his car and his telephone, to perform his work. In a parallel dilemma, the narrator is unable to find the time or solitude to pursue his writing in a traditional sense:

*The rush that simplifies life, complicates it. There is no time to stop the car to write when only the writing that comes of an intense simplification would be actual. (I, 275)*

As such, the narrator rejects the traditional paradigm of the writer as a critically distant figure, locked away in a study; instead he decides to write while driving: “What then? Take a pad in the car with me and write while running” (I, 290). According to Tichi, the narrator, and Williams by extension, turns to the car as a tool to facilitate, and potentially enhance, the efficiency and potency of his writing: “Williams finds he can sometimes ‘step up’ his ‘energy’ and utilize the car as a mobile private study” (I, 246). As such, according to Tichi, in *A Novelette*, the car becomes a tool at the disposal of the creative imagination of the modern writer, which can be used to overcome limitations of the busy modern body, without compromising the imagined integrity of the human subject.

However, Tichi’s assumption that the seemingly omnipotent figure of the author/engineer was capable of refining, controlling and utilising the technological world of modern America without compromising his or her own subjective autonomy, cannot be fully sustained by a close reading of Williams’s work. Williams’s portrayal of the relationship between humanity and the machine
cannot be explained by a univocal model of human agency over technology. While Tichi
presumes that Williams’s “utilization” of the automobile within A Novelette is analogous to the
univocal agency of the designer over the design, in actuality this relationship is portrayed by
Williams himself as a far more complex balance between control and chaos. In one particularly
striking scene of A Novelette, the narrator takes joy in momentarily losing control of the vehicle:

wanting to turn—he spun the wheel around to the left in the narrow street—in the dark.
The big car skidded as he intended it should, the front end riding up over the curb on the
candied grass to a tree, not quite touching it. Then he kissed it with his bumper—for no
reason in the world but idleness and pleasure, before he backed out. (I, 290)

The pleasure that the narrator is experiencing is not the joy of control, of sovereignty over the
machine, but the joyful balance of barely contained chaos: of “kissing” but not crossing the limits
of one’s personal agency.

As such, the suggestion that the car is a tool that can be “utilized” as a protective “study” belies
the significance of Williams’s unique practice. As A Novelette shows, the process of writing while
driving serves primarily to break down the boundaries between the writer and the physical act of
writing:

And nothing—opens the doors, inserts the key, presses the starting pedal, adjusts the
throttle and the choker and backs out, downhill. Sees the barberry gouts. Seize the steering
wheel and turn it sharply to the left, the lilac twigs that have lost prestige through the loss
of plumage—scrape the left front fender sharply. (I, 278)

What is most striking about this passage is the homophony of “sees” and “seize”. This
homophony, which aggressively defies consistency in inflection, is very much deliberate; in a late
draft of A Novelette, kept among the Williams papers at the Beinecke library, we can see the
moment when Williams crossed out the s in “seizes” to make “seize” (see figure 2). The
implication, within this context, is a synonymy between observation and interaction. To observe
a scene is to intrude upon it, and to be intruded upon. In this sense, Tichi’s characterisation of the car as a “study”, a space where the writer’s creative mind is sealed off from the influence of the external world, a model enshrined with Cartesian dualism, is easily exposed as outdated. At the wheel, Williams does not merely observe and record the “lilac twigs”; rather, he scrapes against them, and they, in turn, scrape against him. If the car is, as works such as Kora in Hell and “Romance Moderne” suggest, a symbol of the boundary of the self, then it is by no means a stable one. The car, thus, is not merely a means of autonomous observation, but one of interaction and heteronomy. The replacement of study with car as the primary location of writing has profound significance for our understanding of the autonomy and agency of the modern writer and, by extension, of the sovereignty of the modern human subject. The car is a tool, no doubt, but it is not a tool of detached voyeurism as Tichi suggests. Rather, it is a tool whose sole purpose is to disrupt traditional ideals of authorial agency and distance and challenge the stability of the human subject.

Figure 2: Draft of A Novelette, William Carlos Williams Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale
The themes of proximity and contact present within Williams’s use of the automobile are, in *A Novelette*, not merely abstract philosophical concepts; rather, they are weighted with an implicit humanitarian sentiment. As Crawford argues:

> The “essence” of the automobile is not, regardless of the claims of the futurists, speed for speed’s sake. The instrumentalist view is that the machine is used for specific ends—in this case, to go from point A to point B. (Crawford, 90)

As we have seen, Williams’s use of technology, from the automobile to the English language, is far from instrumental. Nevertheless, Crawford’s point stands: the difference between Williams and the futurists in this sense is that Williams’s autovehicular trips had real intent outside narcissistic self-empowerment. While the futurists seemingly pursued speed for its own sake, the car was, for Williams, a means of helping people. As well as breaking down the boundaries of the self, the technologies of the automobile and the telephone break down the distance between people. Technology does not merely promote an epithetic extension of the ego, but actually empowers Williams to reach out to his fellow humans. As such, the voice of the machine seems implicitly humane:

> This is Mrs. Gladis, will you come down this morning. I’ve got two or three children sick. Trrrrrrring. Can you make a call this morning? (I, 276)

In *Sour Grapes*, *The Great American Novel*, *Spring and All* and *A Novelette*, the automobile is indeed a destructive force. It breaks down boundaries of the self, confuses agency and, as such, threatens the very premises of control and instrumental technology use on which Western ideals of humanism are based. But this destruction of boundaries, more often than not, is associated with contact and intimacy: lovers’ hands touching, bumpers kissing trees and even a doctor helping a patient are presented as moments of intimacy only made possible when one realises that they are a part of, and reliant on, the larger material world that exists outside their own subjective will.
VII. Language Machines

In a world recently ravaged by the First World War, the ability to break down cultural and social boundaries becomes a powerful means of turning aside the traditions and ideals that gave rise to “the stupidity, the calculated viciousness” of modern Western society (4, 158). In this sense, technology can serve as a means of escaping the traditions of human rationality. As Ronald E. Martin argues in his book *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge*, Williams is part of a vast history of modern artists who, disillusioned with the failure of modern society in the wake of the World Wars, attempted to escape the confines of rational thought:

Certainty—spurious, artificial, and confining—grew, as he saw it, from all the habits and reflexes by which the mind ordered experience; and certainty inevitably became, in the course of time and tradition, certainty purely about the ordering and not about the experience. Williams consequently put himself at odds with the very process of ordering, the very techniques of arriving at knowledge. (273)

For Williams, rationality and certainty are confining forces, imposed upon the human consciousness. In *A Novelette*, he suggests that the various revolutions of the rational age of Western thought have seemingly amounted to nothing more than authoritarian constraint:

Mercury shrinks in the cold, as water, when it freezes expands and floats.

When these things were first noted categories were ready for them so that they got fast in corners of understanding. By this process, reinforced by tradition, every common thing has been nailed down, stripped of freedom of action and taken away from use. This is the origin of trips to the poles, trips of discovery, suicides and the inability to see clearly. (I, 296)

Martin argues that, in a world ravaged by corrupt and authoritarian rationalism, Williams’s disruption of abstract thought was intended to serve an emancipatory social purpose:

Not only did he have a humane bias and an occupation that kept him in constant touch with people and their problems, but he seems to have perceived that a world better suited
for these people could be attained only through an infrapolitical revolution; revolution of the word and the process of conceptualization. Williams felt he needed to think a world without thought because thought was corrupt, an instrument of distraction, reductionism, control. (309)

The problem for Williams is that the ideals of rationality exist at the very heart of the English language. As Marshall McLuhan argues in his essay *Living at the Speed of Light* (1974): “This Platonic universe of abstract truth and abstract ideas is inconceivable without the phonetic alphabet” (228). As such, the English phonetic alphabet, as a tool of abstraction, is antithetical to meaningful contact with the world. In order to reject the rationality of Western society, it is necessary to attack the very basis of language and literature itself. There are precedents to such an attack, of which Williams was no doubt aware; the chance based writing of Dada artists such as Tristan Tzara, or the automatic surrealist writing of Breton both emphasised a relinquishing of artistic agency to forces beyond the scope of the human mind in order to disrupt the syntax of reason itself (Matthews, 41). Williams aligns himself with these movements, describing *A Novelette* as “automatic writing” (*I*, 268). Central to his automatic process was the technology of the typewriter:

> I had my typewriter in my office desk. All I needed to do was to pull up the leaf to which it was fastened and I was ready to go. I worked at top speed. If a patient came in at the door while I was in the middle of a sentence, bang would go the machine… When the patient left, up would come the machine. (*A*, iix–ix)

By emphasising the materiality, temporality and collaborative nature of the act of writing, Williams’s use of the typewriter wrests language away from the sole realm of abstract thought; the mind’s dominion over language is inevitably complicated by the chaos, instability and flux of the physical world.

At one stage in *A Novelette*, the narrator is musing about the nature of the alphabet:
This is the alphabet q w e r t y u i o p a e d f g h j k l z x c v b n m. The extraordinary thing is that no one has yet taken the trouble to write it out fully. (I, 282)

Quite plainly, the alphabet presented by Williams does not belong to the rational human mind; it is not arranged by the cultural frame of the traditional alphabetical order. Rather, the alphabet presented by Williams belongs to the typewriter; the qwerty sequence that Williams presents is a contemporary invention, based primarily on the efficiency of the physical relationship between the hand, the keys, and the gears of the typewriter (Ludmark, 16–17). Williams rejects the idea of language as a transparent and abstract articulation of human rationality. Rather, language is both temporal and material; it exists, and is constantly changed and distorted, by the physical manners in which it is used. The sequence “q w e r t y…” is not conceived in the mind, but rather in the physical act of Williams running his fingers across the rows of the typewriter keys. In this gesture, Williams shows that the writer, no matter how powerful his imagination, can never wield absolute authority over the world, but must instead cooperate with the various material structures, both organic and technological, that frame his existence. The typewriter can by no means be considered a tool to be “utilized” by the disembodied authority of the author, as Tichi might suggest. By extension, all literature is not merely the product of the human mind, but it is the result of a complex collaboration of mind, culture, body and technology.

This example demonstrates the extent to which even the smallest material occurrence can easily overpower the rational “designs” of the human mind. This much becomes clear when one looks closely at the string of letters: “q w e r t y u i o p a e d f g h j k l z x c v b n m (emphasis mine)” (I, 282). Within the edition of A Novelette published within the popular New Directions collection Imaginations, there is an error: there is a second “e” where the “s” should be. It is difficult to tell when, exactly, this error occurred. It is present in the 1932 Imprimerie F. Cassabon publication of A Novelette. It is absent, however, in early drafts of A Novelette in the Williams Carlos Williams Papers. At some point in the writing, editing and publishing process, between the moment that Williams decided to write out the alphabet and the time that the book was published, an unknown finger slipped slightly upwards and pressed an “e” by mistake. There are several
possible scenarios for how and when this could have occurred: Williams may have made the mistake himself and not noticed; Williams may have made the mistake on a later draft and, charmed by his mistake, decided to keep it; an early publisher may have made the mistake, which made its way into the canon. In each of these scenarios, the designs of the rational human mind are overthrown by the chaos of the material writing process; the hand and the typewriter make their presence known.

VIII. “The jet plane had totally eliminated the barrier between the sexes”

In an undated draft of an unpublished introduction to a collection of short stories, filed away in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, Williams reflects upon the various ways in which the radical technological and scientific developments of the twentieth century have reshaped the structures of modern social interactions. At one point, taking a particularly utopian tone, Williams proclaims that “The airplane the jet plane had totally eliminated the barrier between the sexes”\textsuperscript{11}. This dramatic statement is characteristic of a particular sense of excitement that characterised the American imagination of the early twentieth century: the utopian notion that humankind’s increasing mastery of the material world through science and technology could offer a transcendence of the various inequalities, intolerances and inadequacies that had plagued human history. The stories that America told itself in the early half of the twentieth century were, as a result, largely focused on mastery and control; the humanist imagination, empowered beyond precedence, seemed capable of shaping the material world to its will. As evident in his claim that the jet plane could eradicate sexism, Williams did indeed for a moment entertain the idea that such refinement, such control could allow humanity to transcend the various limitations of our bodily and natural existence and, as such, escape the oppressive traditions of the past. But, in this case, as quickly as the idea was typed, Williams seems to recognise his own naivety; the entire sentence is erased.

\textsuperscript{11} Document found in Folder 1123, Box 54, William Carlos Williams Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
That is not to say that Williams’s poetic approach to the modern machine is apolitical. But it can also not be said that Williams is complicit (except in the case of a hastily crossed-out sentence) in the humanist assumption that humankind’s mastery of technology would result in radical social progress. As Audre Lorde writes, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (110). Similarly, Western humanist narratives of mastery and subservience cannot be undone by the introduction of other humanist narratives of mastery. But Williams is no master; Williams’s poetic voice is not in control of or empowered by the modern machine, nor is it necessarily alienated by it. Rather, technology exists within Williams’s work as a destabilising force that repeatedly escapes the poet’s control and authority. As such, for Williams, the modern machine disrupts the narratives of control that lie at the heart of modernist and humanist understandings of technology. And, more often than not, this disruption of conventional narratives of mastery serves to deconstruct other social hierarchies. It is no coincidence that the modern train system offers the possibility of escape to a woman being directed by a male porter, or that the automobile and the dynamo are at their most active, uncontrollable and irrepressibly expressive when Williams’s poetic voice attempts to objectify women. Nor is it a coincidence that the typewriter and the car disrupt Williams’s narration precisely at the point where Williams is most disillusioned with the corrupted traditions of human rationality. Those voices and subjectivities, the woman, the racialised other, the nonhuman, excluded from the narratives of humanism and modernism alike, cannot be liberated by the same humanist discourses of mastery and control that sought to master them. The invention of “the jet plane” has, quite obviously, not “eliminated the barriers between the sexes”. And, it is important to note, neither has
Williams’s poetry. But in the deconstruction of mastery and the destabilisation of authority that comes with his representation of the modern machine, we can see the first traces of a posthumanist ethics that frames technological modernity not as a dehumanising dystopia, nor as a means for the humanist subject to transcend the limitations of the human body, but as an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct our understandings of authority and power.
CHAPTER 3: “HE WHO HAS KISSED A LEAF”: WILLIAMS’S POSTHUMANIST ECopoETICS

As previously mentioned, Williams saw the twentieth century as a time in which the sagas of human history were to be replaced by “trees now, animals, engines” (*SE*, 68). As this statement suggests, the human imagination was to be challenged for its place at the centre of Williams’s poetry not just by the modern machine, but by the natural world. Williams’s poetry emerged from an era in which the discursive boundaries between humankind and the natural world were being constantly reassessed by the development of modern empirical science. As Patrick Moore explains in his essay “William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Attack on Logical Syntax” (1986), Williams’s poetic development took place within a socio-cultural context in which the traditional structures and hierarchies once thought to govern the relationship between humanity and the natural world came under significant challenge:

Thanks to Darwin and modern physics… the tidiness of the natural world was disrupted. Plants, animals, and humankind had not been fixed in a hierarchy of relations since the beginning of time, but had evolved. Objects were not fixed or solid; they were “events,” full of whirling atoms. After the attack on logic and the advances in science and psychology, the prevalent conception of reality changed from the notion of a static hierarchy of objects to one of dynamic movement of events. (899)

While Moore’s characterisation of the disruption of modernity is compelling, his assertion that the hierarchies that were disrupted had remained stable “since the beginning of time” is largely oversimplistic. In fact, the scientific and cultural paradigm of the natural world as a fixed hierarchy of stable objects that defined Western thought throughout the nineteenth, and in many ways into the twentieth, century can be traced back to very specific post-Enlightenment humanist assumptions of humanity’s sovereignty over and distinction from the natural landscape. Furthermore, while scientists such as Darwin significantly overturned the perception of human’s stable place in the universe within the natural sciences, it took somewhat longer for literary
nature writing to shake off its humanist roots. The Western poetic traditions of Romanticism and American Transcendentalism that dominated American literature through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relied heavily on humanist hierarchies between the human mind and the natural world.

These movements rely on a distinction between humanity and the natural world, a distinction that emphasises the power and sovereignty of the human imagination, while portraying nature as a mysterious and redemptive source of otherness. In his essay *Nature* (1836), Ralph Waldo Emerson, father of American Transcendentalism, explicitly draws a strict Cartesian distinction between self and nature:

> Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. (28)

In his emphasis on the distinction between the human subject and the physical world, Emerson reveals the humanist precedents of his Transcendentalist principles. Emerson himself draws an analogy between the Romantic notion of “Spirit” and the equally abstracted Enlightenment humanist notion of “Reason”:

> That which, intellectually considered, we call Reason, considered in relation to nature, we call Spirit. Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries, embodies it in his language, as the FATHER. (35-36)

Thus, Emerson characterises the poetic imaginations as a benign and disembodied “transparent eye-ball” (29), analogous to the empirical eye of Western science. Inevitably, such a sense of

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12 “I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” (*Emerson*, 29)
detachment between the human imagination and the physical natural world manifests itself in the
naive characterisation of nature as all that is untouchable by humankind:

Nature, in the common sense, refers to essences unchanged by man; space, the air, the
river, the leaf. (28)

But Williams’s poetic style in the early twentieth century came to reflect a different
understanding of humanity’s relationship to the world. The human subject, once understood to
be a stable, rational and transcendent “spirit”, is instead recognised as merely another (albeit
impressive) “natural” phenomenon, indistinguishable from a natural world in which discrete
forms gave way to a dynamic continuum of growth and decay. At the same time, humankind’s
proximity to, and exploitation of, nature was becoming painfully clear as humanity was, with
increasing efficiency, inflicting unprecedented violence upon the natural world, through the
various mechanisms of industrialisation and global warfare. Within this context, the
Transcendentalists’ characterisation of the human imagination as a benign “transparent eye-ball”,
(Emerson, 29) the characterisation of nature as that which is “unchanged by man” (Emerson, 28)
and the Romantic assumption of nature’s benevolence to humankind seems impossible to
sustain.

So much is this so that, in the introduction to his 1923 *Spring and All*, Williams speculated that
the natural world may well be better if human beings were to disappear entirely:

Then at last will the world be made anew. Houses crumble to ruin, cities disappear giving
place to mounds of soil blown thither by the winds, small bushes and grass give way to
trees which grow old and are succeeded by other trees for countless generations. A
marvelous serenity broken only by birds and wild beast calls reigns over the entire sphere.
Order and peace abound. (*CP1*, 179)

Plainly, the various developments of early twentieth-century America called for a dramatic
reassessment of the traditional understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature;
no longer could the human subject be considered a distinct sovereign power, nor even a har- monious member of the natural landscape. Consequently, the poetic traditions of the Romantics and the Transcendentalists of the nineteenth century no longer seemed applicable; what was needed was a radically new understanding of the intersection between poetry, humanity and nature.

Williams’s response to the changing role of the natural world in modern society reflects not just his ecological conscience, but his shifting attitudes towards the very nature of human subjectivity, humankind’s relationship to the natural world and the role of poetry in articulating and shaping this relationship. It wasn’t until several decades later, in the early 1970s, that theorists first began to deal critically with the ecological implications of traditional understandings of language, literature and human identity in what became known as the school of ecocriticism. As Greg Garrard defines it in his book *Ecocriticism*, this new school of critical enquiry consisted of

> the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself. (5)

As such, ecocriticism necessarily entails a critique of the humanist assumptions that distinguish humanity from the natural world; in this way, the critical traditions of posthumanism and ecocriticism can be said to go hand in hand. Certainly, within the context of Williams’s modern nature poetry, it would be remiss to speak of one without the other. Ecocritics notably view the anthropocentrism central to Western humanism and Western poetry, not as a given, but as a historical and cultural paradigm that deserves criticism. As Robert Kern argues in his essay *Ecocriticism – What is it Good For?*:

> Representations of nature in literature... have typically been dealt with and understood in the twentieth century not as images of literal or factual reality (regarded as interesting or valuable in itself) but in terms of the formal or symbolic or ideological properties of those representations—which is to say that nature... is important not for what it physically is but for what it conceptually means or can be made to mean. (Kern, 9)
Significantly, when the movement of ecocriticism first emerged, Williams’s poetry came under renewed focus. As Mark Long argues in his chapter on Williams in *Ecopoetry*:

> It will come as no surprise that among postwar American poets with environmental and ecological concerns, one finds a renewable source of interest in Williams’s work. (Long, 67)

And indeed, decades before the first coherent traces of environmentalism or ecocriticism emerged, Williams’s poetics launched an interrogation into the distinctions and hierarchies between the human “self” and the natural “other” that allow humanity to exert its destructive agency over the natural world. Central to Williams’s poetics is a critique of the cultural dualism between the natural object and the traditional humanist subject. While the human subject is traditionally understood as rational, stable, cultural and masculine, nature exists in the humanist imagination as all that lies outside the traditional boundaries of this subject: the temporal, the organic, the permeable, the abject, the bodily and the feminine. While Williams’s earlier Romantic poetry relies heavily on this binary, delighting in the feminised otherness of the natural world as a source of temporary escape from the confines of human rationality, his later work began to deconstruct the very concept of nature as other. As such, the otherness of nature within Williams’s poetry gives way to a posthumanist ecopoetics that, as its primary axiom, assumes the synonymy of human subjectivity and natural phenomena. In place of the exoticised otherness of his earlier work, Williams develops a poetics of participation and communication that allows him to move beyond the distinction between the humanist subject and the natural object, and explore the various subjectivities of the continuum of the material world. And yet Williams’s concerns are far from merely ecological. Despite Williams’s pessimism regarding humanity’s impact on the natural world, human experience is always a central concern within his writing. In fact, in his book *Ideas in Things: The Poems of William Carlos Williams* (1994), Donald Markos posits Williams’s humanistic ethos as the central indicator of Williams’s Romantic sensibilities: “The romantic and transcendentalist influences on Williams are manifested in the life-affirming mood of his work. Pleasure, gratitude, curiosity, wonder, trust” (17). While I also recognise this “life-affirming mood” within Williams’s work, I will argue that Williams manages to explore these ideas of
pleasure, gratitude, curiosity, wonder, trust, empathy and love outside the anthropocentric perspectives of Romanticism and humanism. Rather, Williams’s establishes a posthumanist ecopoetics similar to that described by Kern:

What ecocriticism calls for, then, is a fundamental shift from one context of reading to another—more specifically, a moment from the human to the environmental, or at least from the exclusively human to the biocentric or ecocentric, which is to say a humanism (since we cannot evade our human status or identity) informed by an awareness of the “more-than-human.” (Kern, 18)

Williams’s ecopoetic development and experimentation are underscored by a drive to establish the framework for a posthumanism, based not on an exclusionary imperative, but upon a mutual participation with the various human and non-human agencies that make up the material world. Through a close ecocritical reading of Williams’s poetry, this chapter examines the way in which Williams stripped his poetics of what he perceived to be the divisive, exploitative and destructive paradigms of Western humanism, and their reverberations throughout the otherwise environmentally conscious literary traditions of Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, and developed instead a poetics and a humanism that embraces the synonymy of humanity and nature, not as an alienating modern truth, but as a vital means of establishing positive relationships between humankind and the modern world.

I. Williams the Romantic

As we have seen in the previous chapter of this thesis, Williams’s work is largely distinguished by an emphasis on material objects over any explicit representation of human emotion, sentiment or reflection. However, despite the profound materialism of his poetry, there have been a number of critical readings that emphasise the prominence of the Romantic ego within Williams’s work. Carl Rapp, Donald Markos and Ron Callan all align Williams, to varying degrees, with the poetic

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13 My use of the term “posthumanism”, as distinguished from “transhumanism” in the first chapter of this thesis is, quite arguably, a clearer articulation of what Kern means when using the term “humanism.”
traditions of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. In his book *William Carlos Williams and Romantic Idealism* (1984), Rapp argues that, despite Williams’s emphasis on material things over human psychology within his poems, “Williams cannot be properly understood apart from two major nineteenth-century traditions: romanticism and idealism” (6). Rather, Rapp argues that the various common objects (wheelbarrows, cars, chickens, plums, trees and flowers) that inhabit Williams’s poems are little more than “receptacles of his innermost feelings” (89). As such, materialist readings that emphasise the intrinsic worth of the objects within Williams’s poems miss the point entirely:

The momentary eminency of “things” in the imagist poem has little or nothing to do with the intrinsic importance of the things themselves. Rather, it signalizes a momentary intensification of the mental powers of the poet, so that the resulting poem may be construed as merely the conclusion or the end point of an action which cannot, by the very nature of the case, appear within the poem and of which the poet himself is the protagonist. (84)

Indeed, Williams’s early approach to the relationship between the human subject and the natural environment primarily treats nature as a redemptive means of escaping the rationality of modern American society. His nature poems of the early decades of the twentieth century rely heavily on the Romantic trope of the pastoral, in which the natural world exists as an antidote to the unnatural chaos and alienation of modern urban existence. As Keith Thomas argues, the pastoral arose as a reaction to the increasing urbanisation and industrialisation of modern life:

The growth in towns had led to a new longing for the countryside. The progress of cultivation had fostered a taste for weeds, mountains and unsubdued nature. (301)

English Romantic poets such as John Keats, an influence on a number of Williams’s early poems, used the pastoral landscape as a setting for human renewal. In his poem “Sleep and Poetry” (1816), Keats depicts the natural landscape as a soothingly passive setting, surpassed in its tranquillity only by the stasis of sleep:
What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
What is more soothing than the pretty hummer
That stays one moment in an open flower,
And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?
...
What, but thee Sleep? Soft closer of our eyes!
Low murmurer of tender lullabies! (37–38)

From an ecocritical perspective, the portrayal of nature as a static and soothing backdrop for human renewal is problematically anthropocentric. As Greg Garrard argues:

From the outset, pastoral often used nature as a location or as a reflection of human predicaments, rather than sustaining an interest in nature in and for itself. (35)

Within such representations, nature is stripped of all agency, dynamism and voice and becomes little more than a static stage upon which poets contemplate the nature of their own subjectivity. In much the same way that cultural ideals of female purity and gentleness marginalise all other expressions of female agency and sexuality, the Romantic pastoral representation of the tranquil natural world served to silence the more dynamic voices and agencies of nature. The very same criticism can be easily levelled at much of Williams’s earlier nature poems, in which the natural landscape exists solely as the passive backdrop for the poet’s own epiphanous musings. In his poem, “Pastoral 2” (1914), the speaker decides that he is better off addressing a passive audience of natural objects:

If I talk to things
Do not flatter yourself
That I am mad
Rather realize yourself
To be deaf and that
Of two evils, the plants
Being deaf likewise,
I chose that
Which proves by other
Attributes worthier
Of the distinction.\(^\text{14}\) (\textit{CP1}, 45)

Though the poem idealises nature and highlights its virtues, the speaker’s interaction with the plants serves only to reinforce traditional structures of power between the active, evolutionarily complex, human subject and the simpler passive natural object. In fact, Williams lauds the natural landscape as “worthiest of the distinction” of the role of addressee precisely due to its passivity. For the speaker, the virtue of the natural object lies in its mercuriality, permeability and stark lack of any recognisable subjective agency:

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You do not drive yourselves,
It is the wind’s knives
That battle at you
From the outside—
You do not generate
Your own poisons. (\textit{CP1}, 46)
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Faced with the passivity of the natural world, the assertive voice of the speaker delights in dominating the receptive ear of the landscape with his own inner dialogue. The repeated imperative “hear me” firmly establishes a univocal relationship between the receptive natural object and the active human subject:

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Hear me
You who listen without malice.
Hear me
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\(^\text{14}\) Interestingly, here, the hierarchy between the vocal speaker and the silent and receptive landscape is revealed as somewhat analogous to the relationship between the poet and the reader. Poetry is, in both cases, is presented as primarily monologic.
You crusts of blue moss,
And black earth
In the twisted roots
Of the white tree!
...
Hear me
For I am wise,
Wiser than you—
Though you have virtues
Greater than mine. (CP1, 45)

As in Keats’s “Poetry and Sleep”, all that is dynamic and vocal in nature is silenced within “Pastoral 2” in favour of a depiction of the natural landscape as primarily passive. The primary state of the natural world in each poem is that of stasis, a peaceful stillness that comes with the complete abandonment of subjective agency and the dissolution of all clearly defined borders of the self. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker yearns to experience this stasis for himself:

I long
To fling aside clothes
And crawl in naked
There among you
Cold as it is! (CP1, 46)

Ultimately, however, the speaker contends that, while the natural object may be capable of achieving a passive fluidity and receptivity with the rest of the world, the boundaries of his own subjectivity are too stable to allow for any such interpenetration:

Were it not
That this hide
I have drawn around myself
To shield me
Has bound me more subtly
Than you have imagined. (CP1, 47)

As such, this poem highlights the contrast between the human subject and the natural object. Within “Pastoral 2”, nature exists solely as a passive and receptive object, worthy of its distinction precisely due to its contrast to the poet’s own human subjectivity. The speaker represents the classical humanist subject, abstracted from the natural world by the stable and impenetrable boundaries of a single unified subjectivity; he is both removed from nature and sovereign to it. And yet, the natural object offers other “virtues”. In contrast to the agency of the human subject, the permeability of the natural object offers the exciting, yet elusive, promise of a posthuman existence without borders: an existence outside the limiting “hide” of the humanist subject.

It is important to note that the distinction between the stability of the human subject and the passivity, fluidity and permeability of the natural object is, for Williams, at this point synonymous with the binary opposition of the sexes. In his essay, “The Great Sex Spiral” (1917), Williams draws a contrast between the naturalised, bodily female and the stable, abstracted male subject. Williams argues that, save for the occasional sexual function, the male subjectivity is primarily disembodied:

Man’s only positive connexion with the earth is in the fleeting sex function. When not in pursuit of the female he has absolutely no necessity to exist. But this chase can never lead to satisfaction in the catch, never to objective satisfaction… Thus the male pursuit leads only to further pursuits, that is, not toward the earth, but away from it—not to concreteness, but to further hunting, to star-gazing, to idleness. (SE, 111)

In contrast, Williams idealises women for their proximity to the natural world. The feminine, like the natural landscape in “Pastoral 2”, is valued for its objecthood, which serves primarily as a remedy for the abstracted subjectivity of the male humanist subject. As Rose Lucas argues in
“The Great Sex Spiral: The Poetics of William Carlos Williams”, Williams uses the feminised natural world to represent all that lies outside the strict boundaries of his own abstracted male subjectivity:

Woman is nature, the earth, the nurturer—and indeed, all the stereotypical attributes of ‘femininity’ with which the poet is unable or unwilling to identify himself. She is also associated with the deepest, darkest regions of the unconscious, in terms similar to that of the Jungian ‘anima’ or ‘soul’; ‘woman’ becomes representative of all that is unknown or unknowable, both in the external world of nature and experience, and in the internal world of emotional and psychic phenomenon. (21)

Though Williams appears to be drawn to the otherness of the natural and the feminine, he is careful to keep it distant from his sense of self. The qualities of stasis, fluidity, objecthood and intersubjectivity that fascinate him are kept at a safe distance under the dual titles of “woman” and “nature”, a Romantic distinction that, according to Timothy Morton, is as exploitative as it is arbitrary:

Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration. (Morton, 5)

The emphasis on the creative mind of the poet within the traditions of Romanticism and Transcendentalism inevitably echoes this “sadistic admiration” of nature; by emphasising the humanist oppositions between the stability of the human mind and the permeability and femininity of nature, and by framing nature as merely a receptacle for the imagination or, as Emerson puts “a metaphor for the human mind” (37), Williams’s early nature poetry falls back upon humanist binaries that subjugate, even as they valorise, all that lies outside the strict boundaries of the detached, rational, masculine humanist subject.
II. “And the filthy Passaic consented”

A number of critics argue that it was in 1914, with the publication of “The Wanderer: A Rococo Study”, that Williams abandoned the Romantic distinctions between the self and the natural world. The poem begins with a recognisable Romantic trope: that of titular wanderer. The wanderer, also the speaker in the poem, is at odds with his time. He feels alienated from the industrial artificiality and bureaucracy of the modern world, encapsulated in the towers of New York City and the faces of its lifeless inhabitants:

But one day crossing the ferry
With the great towers of Manhattan before me,
Out at the prow with the sea-wind blowing
I had been wearying many questions
Which she had put on to try me:
How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?

There came crowds walking—men as visions
With expressionless, animate faces;
Empty men with shell-thin bodies
Jostling close above the gutter, (CP1, 27-28)

As in a number of Romantic works, escape from this alienation comes in the form of an idealised nature. The speaker meets an enigmatic female figure: an immortal and all powerful spirit of nature. Seeing this woman as a solution to his woes, the speaker pledges himself to her:

“I am given,” cried I, “now I know it!
I know now all my time is forespent!
For me one face is all the world!
For this day I have at last seen her,
In whom age in age is united— (CP1, 28)
His declarations of loyalty initially seem to echo the task of the Romantic poet. He promises to articulate the beauty of nature through his words, to illuminate its transcendental truth to the crude industrial human world:

At which I answered her, Marvelous old queen,
If I could only catch something of this day’s
Air and sun into your service,
Those toilers after peace and after pleasure
That toil and pleasure drive, broken at all hours—
Would turn again worshippers at all hours!— (CP1, 29)

In return, he asks only for the transcendent experience that nature may offer:

May I be lifted still up and out of terror,
Up from the death living around me!
Torn up continually and carried
Whatever way the head of your whim is! (CP1, 30)

The speaker’s relationship with nature embodies some of the contradictions of the Romantic imagination. He expresses his devotion to nature, but speaks of it only in terms of transcendence, of being lifted away from the terror and death of the natural world.

But, at the climax of the poem, the speaker’s salvation does not come from an ascension from the crude realities of the world. Rather, significantly, it comes from an immersion in the materiality of the natural landscape, as the speaker plunges into the filthy waters of the Passaic river:

Stand forth river and give me
The old friend of my revels!
And the filthy Passaic consented!
Then she leaping up with a great cry—
Enter youth into this bulk!
Enter river into this young man!

Then the river began to enter my heart
Eddying back cool and limpid
Clear to the beginning of days!
But with the rebound it leaped again forward—
Muddy then black and shrunken
Till I felt the utter depth of its filthiness,
The vile breath of its degradation,
And sank down knowing this was me now.
But she lifted me and the water took a new tide
And so, backward and forward,
It tortured itself within me

Until time had been washed finally under,
And the river had found its level—
And its last motion had ceased
And I knew all—it became me. (*CP1*, 35)

In *Poets of Reality*, J. Hillis Miller argues that, as the water of the Passaic “found its level” within the body of the speaker, Williams achieves a natural equilibrium with the world, one that could be likened to the stasis he yearns for in “Pastoral 2”. Most notably, Miller argues that

Williams’ work expresses, quietly and without fanfare, a revolution in human sensibility. When he gives himself up to the world he gives up the coordinates and goals which had polarized earlier literature. Romantic poetry, like idealist philosophy, had been based on an opposition between the inner world of the subject and the outer world of things. (Miller, 288)
According to Miller, Williams throws off the “hide” that separates his own subjectivity from the material world; from this point on, argues Miller, Williams draws no distinction between the physical world and his own creative imagination.

Though Miller’s description of Williams’s poetics is positioned as the exact opposite of the Romantics and Transcendentalists, the Romantic characterisation of nature as “unchanged” by human contact seems to persist. Miller writes:

> Words as the expression of man’s separation from things disappear with the poet’s plunge into the Passaic, but this does not mean that language vanishes. It reappears in the new silence as something which already exists, like trees and rocks. Williams’ poetry takes language for granted, just as it takes chicory, daisies, plums, and butterfish for granted. (Miller, 292)

Miller’s assumption is that Williams’s representation of language, human subjectivity and the natural world on the same material place results in a silence, a peaceful stasis, in which the previous tensions between subject and landscape are resolved.

As Cheryl Glotfelty writes in her introduction to the 1996 ecocriticism reader:

> If we agree with Barry Commoner’s first law of ecology, “Everything is connected to everything else”, we must conclude that literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, and ideas interact. (Glotfelty, xix)

Within Miller’s reading of “The Wanderer”, the dualisms of Romanticism that Glotfelty criticises are merely replaced with an almost meaningless sense of immediacy that erases the complexity of the interactions between humanity, language and nature. In this way, discourses of both distance and immediacy can be used to ignore the impact that language and human activity has on the natural world.
That is not to say that Miller’s reading of “The Wanderer” is inaccurate. After all, the poem ends with the creation of an ideal and atemporal space, a physical incarnation of the romantic image, a space sealed off from time, from civilisation, and from the inevitable violence of the relationship between humanity and nature:

   But by you I leave, for happiness,
   Deepest foliage, the thickest beeches
   Though elsewhere they are all dying:
   Tallest oaks and yellow birches
   That dip leaves in you mourning
   As now I dip my hair, immemorial
   Of me, immemorial of him,
   Immemorial of these our promises!
   Here shall be a birds’ paradise—
   They sing to you rememb’ring my voice;
   Here the most secluded spaces
   For wide around, hallowed by a stench
   To be our joint solitude and temple,
   A memory of this clear marriage
   And the child I have brought you in the late years!
   Live river, live in luxuriance
   Rememb’ring this our son,
   In remembrance of me and my sorrow
   And of the new wandering. (CP1, 35–36)

As the wanderer enters the river, his body is borne off into its depths. As his body is carried off, all that remains is his spirit and the river, which in turn become static, timeless, ideal and, most importantly, untouchable. All that can harm it, the human body, the city, and time itself, are sealed off from this “joint solitude” of spirit and landscape—this contact without impact, where
the poet and the river can remain blissfully distant from that place “elsewhere” where “they are all dying” (CP1, 35). While critics such as Miller highlight this poem as the turning point in Williams’s move away from Romanticism, it is apparent that, from an ecocritical perspective, the poem is premised upon a number of assumptions, found in Romantic poetry, of the benevolent, transcendent and unchanging nature of the natural world. By characterising the Passaic as “consent[ing]” (CP1, 35), Williams’s poem falls back on a characterisation of nature as a willing accomplice in the elevation of the human spirit, and ignores the very real violence that humanity was exerting upon the natural world.

III. The Destructive Force of Language

It wasn’t until the height of America’s involvement in the First World War that Williams became critical of the ecological impact of his own ideas and practices. In Kora in Hell (1920), significantly named in reference to the rape of Persephone by Hades, Williams reflects for the first time on the capacity for human actions to have a violent impact upon the natural landscape:

Leaves are beginning to fall upon the long grass. Their cold perfume raises the anticipation of sensational revolutions in my unsettled life. Violence has begotten peace, peace has fluttered away in agitation. A bewildered change has turned among the roots… (I, 52)

In stark contrast to Emerson’s naive characterisation of nature as “essences unchanged by man”, Williams became acutely aware of the interdependence and interconnectedness of the natural and the human world. For Williams, humanity’s destructive intrusion upon the natural landscape is not limited to the activities of wartime. In Kora in Hell, poetry itself is recognised as a form of violence against nature. The imposition of cultural ideals, symbolic value and recognisable poetic structure upon an object of the natural world is increasingly seen as synonymous with a violent sexual assault. In one passage from Kora in Hell, Williams reflects:

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15 This is not to say that all Romantic poetry unanimously characterises the natural world as benevolent, transcendent and unchanging. These are just features that are shared by both “The Wanderer” and the Romantic tradition from which Miller seeks to distance it.
There is nothing more difficult than to write a poem… The empty form drops from a cloud, like a gourd from a vine; into it the poet packs his phallus-like argument. (*I*, 75)

For the first time, Williams seems to reflect upon the moral implications of his distinction between masculinised culture and feminised nature. In contrast to the joyful interpenetration of river and poet in “The Wanderer”, or the whimsical fantasy of crawling naked into the bushes in “Pastoral 2”, Williams now seems to recognise that any representation, interaction or interpenetration with nature has the potential to be destructive. As Rapp identifies, the Romantic extension of the ego into the natural world, of taking nature as a symbolic receptacle for the human spirit is “primarily an aggressive act, an act of mastery” (Rapp, 68).

Significantly, at the same time, *Kora in Hell* also begins to problematise the very binary between the abstracted humanist subject and the objectified natural object upon which this extension is predicated. One of the most critically neglected aspects of *Kora in Hell*, the cover art, is highly significant in this regard. The cover image, which Williams personally commissioned, and which he proudly mentions in his autobiography, the prologue to the City Lights edition of the book, and his book *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, depicts a human being in its earliest moments: as an ovum surrounded by spermatozoa of various shades.

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16 Considering the frequency with which Williams mentions the cover within his autobiographical writing, it is safe to assume that he considered it highly relevant to the work as a whole.
The image of conception (see figure 4) poses a significant challenge to any understanding of the human subject as transcendent, autonomous, unified or unique. The image of sperm and ovum, abject extensions of their corresponding parents, is given as evidence that the human subject, rather than existing as a unified and discrete form, is merely a composition of material components within the unending continuum of natural reproduction. Williams recognises that, in conception, there is very little distinction between a human being and any other living organism. While in “The Great Sex Spiral”, Williams suggested that the male human’s only
meaningful physical experience with the world is in the sexual act, the cover of *Kora in Hell* reminds us that it is this same physical act that comprises all human subjectivity: that all men, no matter how abstracted their rational minds may seem, are nothing more than a complex biological system, grown from the meeting of sperm and ovum. As such, in one passage of the book, Williams humbly reflects that “A man’s carcass has no more distinction than the carcass of an ox” (*I*, 62). Williams’s playful description of the freshly published *Kora in Hell* as “my own spillings” indicates a reconsideration of the hierarchy of poetic practice. By conflating sexual reproduction with poetic creation Williams extends the idea of the “fleeting sex function” to even the seemingly abstract processes of writing poetry (*A*, 159). While “Pastoral 2”, and “The Wanderer”, play upon the distinction between the subjectivity of the poet and the objectivity of the natural world, in *Kora in Hell* Williams raises the suggestion that all activity, natural, material, subjective and objective, may occur on the same plane. Within *Kora in Hell*, the “fleeting sex function”, as an analogy to the creative process, takes on a new, altogether more critical significance. While, in “The Great Sex Spiral”, Williams uses it to foreground the binary, and implicit power dynamic, between the natural, feminine and material world and the abstracted male subject, in *Kora in Hell*, Williams uses the sex function to stress the synonymy and proximity of human subjectivity and natural phenomenon.

It is in his 1923 book *Spring and All* that Williams makes his first sincere poetic attempt to forge a meaningful and respectful relationship between the human subject and the various agencies of the natural world. Central to this attempt is the sobering premise that the post-Enlightenment *scala naturae*, which distinguishes humanity from the rest of the natural spectrum, is no longer a viable way of understanding the world:

> The inevitable flux of the seeing eye towards measuring itself by the world it inhabits can only result in himself some crushing humiliation unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. (*CP1*, 192)

The “crushing humiliation” of modern life, in which humankind discovers its own undeniably empirical insignificance, not only undermines the basic premises of Western humanism, it also
undermines the very anthropocentric paradigms of nineteenth-century American poetry. For Williams, poetry has traditionally been founded upon the presumption that cultural systems of logic, and the poetic metres and forms that represented them, could be seamlessly applied to the natural world. For Williams, the imposition of symbolism, rhyme and metre upon the natural landscape is symptomatic of the classical humanist assumption that humanity and culture are the measure of all things. As Christopher Manes argues in his essay “Nature and Silence”, traditional Western forms of communication, which are the legacy of Enlightenment humanism, can never adequately be used to represent a non-anthropocentric worldview without marginalising, objectifying or silencing the natural world:

We need to find new ways to talk about human freedom, worth, and purpose, without eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying the nonhuman world. Infused with the language of humanism, these traditional fields of knowledge are ill-equipped to do so, wedded as they are to the monologue of the human subject. (Manes, 24)

For Williams, the “crushing humiliation” that comes with discovering that the natural world is, at best, indifferent to the concerns of humankind necessitates a dramatic reassessment of the role of the human within the poetic process:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained association, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from “reality”—such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words. (CP1, 189)

17 In his essay “The American Background” (1934), Williams would later critique Emerson for refusing to accept the very same “crushing humiliation”: “Even Emerson did not entirely escape, his genius as a poet remaining too often circumscribed by a slightly hackneyed gentility… The wrenchings of fate at his elbow, occupation with which would have put him beside the older efforts on a first-rate, if cruder, basis, he avoided or missed by rising superior to them into a world of thought which he believed to be universal only because he couldn’t see whence it had arisen.” (155).
It is in *Spring and All* that Williams conducts his most dramatic experiments, in an earnest attempt to discover a poetic form that, far from encaging natural objects within the anthropocentric “monologue” of Western verse, could serve to promote a meaningful “co-extension with the universe” (*CP1*, 192). It is on these grounds that Williams attempts to develop an ecopoetic and, implicitly, a reconsideration of human subjectivity, that can embrace the sobering reality of humankind’s egality with the natural world.

IV. “The rose is obsolete”

As such, the central problem that Williams attempts to solve in *Spring and All* is the question of form: how to explore the dynamic continuum of the natural world without allowing it to become distorted, diluted and reshaped by the anthropocentric structures and conventions of English poetry? It is the question of how to develop a form that can address humanistic concerns without, in the words of Manes, “eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying the nonhuman world” (24). For Williams, the metrical conventions, recognisable symbolism and logical syntax of the English language are obstacles to any meaningful connection with the natural world. In his essay *A1 Pound Stein* (1935), he writes:

> Everything we know and do is tied up with words, with the phrases words make, with the grammar which stultifies, the prose or poetic rhythms which bind us to our pet indolences and medievalisms. (*SE*, 163)

As we have seen, Williams had come to understand that to use a natural object as the passive vessel of cultural ideals, structures or forms constitutes little more than a violent assault upon the natural world that must be avoided at all costs. It is to this end that, in the seventh poem of *Spring and All*, “The Rose”, Williams attempts to liberate a natural object, the rose, from its burdensome function as a symbol in Western verse. After first proclaiming that “the rose is

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18 The rose is arguably the flower most excessively burdened with symbolism within English literature. In her book *The Language of Flowers: A History*, Beverly Seaton provides a comprehensive list of the numerous cultural associations of various breeds of rose, including beauty, ephemerality, love, scandal, study, freshness, bashful shame, secrecy, grace, voluptuousness, caprice, war, infidelity, silence and simplicity. (190–193)
obsolete”, the speaker goes on to clarify that the rose has not lost all value in itself; rather it has been, or rather should be, stripped of its role as a passive symbolic receptacle for abstract human emotions:

the rose carried weight of love
but love is at an end—of roses (CP1, 195)

Thus, in this poem, Williams attempts to wrest the rose away from what he later describes as “its function of accessory to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover” and approach it upon its own terms. (CP1, 187)

Williams, however, does not do this by attempting to define any essential objective character of the rose. Rather, he aims to situate the rose outside the limiting structures of human logic and perception, embracing the dynamism and multiplicity of its potential forms. Stripped of the single, static perspective of the cultural imagination that would use it as a vessel for abstract human ideals, the rose becomes an undefined multiplicity of fleeting and disjointed material features:

Sharper, neater, more cutting
Figured in majolica…

Plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching (CP1, 195)

In this sense, it is not the rose itself that is obsolete; rather it is the rigid conceptual frames of reference, both spatial and poetic, imposed by classical human logic, that Williams deems incompatible with a meaningful understanding of the natural object. Williams’s rejection of classical logic is inherent in the use of paradox within the poem (“cuts without cutting”, the “infinitely rigid… fragility of the flower”) and also in the syntactical disruptions of the verse. As Moore suggests, Williams uses incomplete clauses, parataxis and interjections to disrupt the
paradigms of linear logic implicit in conventional syntax (904–905). For example, consider the following lines:

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

What
The place between the petal’s
end and the (CP1, 195)

Williams’s paratactical listing of adjectives to describe the rose challenges the reader’s expectation of an underlying linear logic to the description; the list of disjointed attributes refuses to form a cohesive “phallus-like argument” and, as such, refuses to confine the object of the rose to a single idea. The interjection of “What” is anacoluthic; it is cut off from the preceding and succeeding lines by the capitalisation of both “The” and “What” respectively. Furthermore, the absence of a question mark (as in the earlier line “whither?”) suggests that the line should not be read as a logical interjection. Thus, stripped of all syntactical value, the word stands, like the rose itself, as a mere object, freed from its subservience to the syntax of human logic. The unfinished clause beneath it, “the place between the petal’s end and the” invites the suggestion that there is a truth to the natural object of the rose that lies beyond the limits of human expression and can, as such, only be expressed through silence. In this sense, the “crushing humiliation” of humanity’s cosmic negligibility is manifested in a profound humility to the poetic voice; Williams recognises that to privilege a single, human experience over the multiplicity of the natural environment is, at best, hubristic and, at worst, an intrusive act of limitation.

For this reason, Williams attempts to rid the poem of a single, human perspective; the spatiality and geometry of the rose is depicted as fragmented, multiple and undefined:
—cuts without cutting
meets—nothing—renews
itself in metal or porcelain—
whither? It ends—
But if it ends
the start is begun
so that to engage roses
becomes a geometry— (CP1, 195)

With the assertion that “to engage roses / becomes a geometry (emphasis mine)”, Williams addresses the possibility, first raised by nineteenth-century mathematicians, that the static Euclidian geometry of classical Western thought need not be considered the only means of understanding space. The poem raises the possibility that the ancient Greek tradition of subdividing space into an infinite grid of parallel lines may not be the best way of understanding the complexities of the natural world. In its place, Williams evokes a new non-Euclidian geometry, one in which the very structures of spatiality extend outwards from the edge of the flower:

From the petal’s edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way (CP1, 196)

The logic of this fragmented verse, then, if not coherent with Enlightenment rationality, seems to emerge, like the infinitely fine spatial threads within the poem, from the rose itself. We can see here Williams’s self-conscious deviation from the traditions of Romanticism and Transcendentalism, which posited the human imagination as the centre of all things:
He [the poet] is placed in the centre of beings, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him. And neither can man be understood without these objects, nor these objects without man. All the facts in natural history taken by themselves, have no value, but are barren, like a single sex. But marry it to human history, and it is full of life. (Emerson, 36)

The rational structures of Western humanism, Romanticism’s emphasis on the sovereignty of the human mind, the metronomic poetic metre and the Euclidean spatial grid, structures intended to fragment the continuum of the material world into discrete chunks for rational human consideration, are thrust aside in favour of a poetics of indeterminacy and fluidity. The implication is that if the rose is to be understood as less than obsolete, then the poet must not use it as a passive receptacle for human ideals, but explore the ideas, logic and forms that permeate outwards from the natural object itself, when freed from the idealist constraints imposed by human perception.

And yet, by assuming that it is possible to free the rose from human perception, Williams runs the risk of falling into the same naive idealism that, 87 years before, lead Emerson to characterise nature as “essences unchanged by man”. The image of the infinite rose suggests a natural object that can be abstracted from the ravages of both the human gaze and, coincidingly, from the passage of time itself. Fittingly, the poem itself was reportedly inspired by Juan Gris’s 1914 cubist collage, Flowers (see figure 5). Like Gris’s collage, Williams’s poem rejects the Renaissance tradition of single fixed-point perspective in favour of a fragmented plurality of angles and perspectives. While such a representation does, seemingly, free the rose from the tyranny of the poet’s gaze, it also problematically situates the natural object outside of time. As Edmund Husserl establishes in his essay “Lectures on Internal Time-Consciousness” (1905), objects are rarely perceived in a single moment; rather the perception of an object is a temporal process. Husserl famously demonstrates as much using the example of a musical melody:

When, for example, a melody sounds, the individual notes do not completely disappear when the stimulus or the action of the nerve excited by them comes to an end. When the
new note sounds, the one just preceding it does not completely disappear without a trace; otherwise, we should be incapable of observing the relations between the notes which follow one another. (30)

Similarly, when perceiving objects in space, the limited perspective of the human eye can only present one facet, one image, in any given instance. Thus, the perception of an object, such as a rose, in its entirety, requires time, movement and memory:

If, in the case of motion, the body moved were to be held fast unaltered in its momentary position in consciousness, then the space traversed would appear to us to be continuously occupied but we should have no idea of motion. We arrive at the idea of succession only if the earlier sensation does not persist unaltered in consciousness but if the manner described is specifically modified, that is continuously modified from moment to moment. (32)

As Roger Friedland and Deirdre Boden argue in their book Now Here: space, time and modernity, the cubists sidestep this notion, flattening the four dimensions of space and time onto the two dimensions of the canvas and presenting the object as a polyphony of simultaneous fragmented spatial and temporal perspectives:

The cubists fractured the space-time barrier itself, providing simultaneous images of the same moment from different points in space and multiple views of a single scene at various points in time. (2)

In a similar sense, through his use of exhaustive parataxis and illogical syntax and through his evocation of non-Euclidian space, Williams creates a sense of atemporal simultaneity to his imagery. “The Rose” strives, in this sense, to present an image of what the rose might look like outside the confines of a single, temporal, human perspective. However, by representing the rose as atemporal, Williams inevitably situates it outside a context in which human language, human actions and even the natural passage of time can harm it. As a result, the rose is hard, static and distant; it has “facets” like a gemstone, it is “metal or porcelain” and “steel”, it is “figured in
majolica”, it is “cold” and it penetrates the world “without contact” (CP1, 195–196). Like Emerson’s idealised “unchanged” nature, the rose is left “unbruised” by the poem:

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates space (CP1, 196)

By representing the rose as timeless and infinite, the poem loses sight of the fragility of nature and the capacity for humankind to wreak violence, poetic or otherwise, upon it that inspired the poem in the first place. Williams’s representation of the unconstrained, infinite rose suggests that there has always been, and always will be, roses.

Figure 5: Gris, Juan. Flowers. 1914. Collage. Private collection.
V. “The perfect human touch”

In his essay “The Ecopoetics of Perfection: William Carlos Williams and Nature in Spring and All”, Josh Wallaert argues that Williams’s reluctance to impose what he saw as the artificial syntax and structures of human rationality upon the natural subject matter of his poetry constitutes a radical “ecopoetics of perfection” which anticipates radical poststructuralist concerns by several decades (8). Wallaert argues that, in Spring and All, Williams attempts to strip the human voice of the transformative and destructive agency implicit within the active verb “to do”:

> When it comes to nature, it should always be remembered that the verb “to do” facilitates a power that is not merely grammatical, a power that has measurable effects in the physical world. When we “do” unto nature, we are agents of change; we clear forests, we drain watersheds, we move mountains with dynamite and drills. (86)

According to Wallaert, Williams recognises that to define the action of a natural object by confining it to a single moment is to preclude all potential experiences of the object and, as such, to render the phenomena of the natural world solely as the static phenomenological experiences of a single human perspective. As such, according to Wallaert, Williams frequently turns to the present perfect tense “to have done” to allow for a sense of temporal indeterminacy within his poetry. Just as Williams’s use of parataxis in the poem “The Rose” refuses to constrain the rose to a single, static set of qualities, so too does his use of the present perfect tense signify a refusal to constrain a natural object to a discrete notion of the present. Williams makes this point clear when, in poem “To Have Done Nothing”, he claims:

> which only to have done nothing can make perfect (emphasis mine) (CP1, 192)
While Williams does not make specific use of the present perfect tense quite as often as Wallaert would have us imagine, Wallaert’s suggestion that the ethics implicit within this particular tense, namely the idea that the only acceptable poetic approach to the natural world is one of indeterminacy, is central to the poetry of *Spring and All*:

> **Perfective ethics** is an ethics of indeterminacy. If to “do” is to “determine,” Williams would have us do “everything” by doing “nothing” within the poem. “To have done nothing” is the “perfect” approach to poetry in both the colloquial and the linguistic sense of the word. (86)

Indeed, within the poem “Rigamarole”, Williams creates poetic force, not through the exactitude of his descriptions, but through the potential created by poetic images that are ambiguous, dynamic and indeterminate, as in the first two lines, which introduce a subject for which a conclusive predicate is never offered:

> The veritable night
of wires and stars (*CP1*, 226)

Wallaert argues that the power of these images derives largely from Williams’s reluctance to attribute a specific time, space, action or purpose to his images. Freed from their once-burdensome roles as passive receptacles for human thought, the objects are imbued with a powerful potential and possibility:

> An uncertain tension between moment and movement is foregrounded in the syntactic dislocation of the lines, while a parallel tension is suggested by the images themselves. The telephone wires and stars are quiet and motionless in the night sky, and yet they contain the potentially infinite energy of electricity and gas. (87)

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19 Of the 19 counts of present perfect tense in *Spring and All*, only 5 served the function of giving an object, natural or otherwise, a sense of temporal indeterminacy. The remaining instances focus on the poet himself. 3 instances appeared in quotations, as the antagonistic voices of Williams’s imagined detractors.
As Wallaert argues, Williams represents his own perfective ethics and poetics as analogous to the passivity of moonlight. According to Wallaert, like the gentle light of the moon, Williams’s poetic voice is capable of illuminating without damaging (89).

so that now at least
the truth’s aglow

with devilish peace
forestalling day

which dawns tomorrow
with dreadful reds

the heart to predicate
with mists that loved

the ocean and the fields—
Thus moonlight

is the perfect
human touch (CP1, 227–228)

According to Wallaert, the “perfect human touch” is one that allows objects to exist outside the limiting perspective of human perceptions of time and space “without temporalizing them, without making them do or even be anything” (Wallaert, 89). When, in “The Avenue of Poplars”, Williams claims that

He who has kissed
a leaf
Wallaert argues that such contact, much like the passive light of the moon, is presented by Williams as primarily unobtrusive:

The kiss is “perfect” not only because it is rendered in the perfect tense, but because it is suspended at the iamb. It is as if Williams wants to remind us that the speaker does not kiss the leaf itself; he kisses the white space at the end of a line on a page. (90)

Thus, for Wallaert, the “perfect human touch” is barely a touch at all; it is “to have done nothing” (86).

Wallaert’s interpretation of Williams’s ecopoetics is certainly compelling, particularly to those, myself included, who may wish to cast Williams as a radical precursor to environmentalist and ecocritical thought. However, it is apparent that there are a number of key flaws in Wallaert’s argument. Most significantly, Wallaert’s assumption that the moon serves for Williams as a symbol for a passive and unobtrusive “perfect human touch” is misleading. Wallaert is certainly correct in saying that Williams establishes the moon as an analogue to the poet’s imagination. But if we examine the first mention of the moon “Rigamarole”, it becomes apparent that neither the moon, nor Williams’s poetic voice, is as passive as Wallaert would have us believe:

the moon is in
the oak tree’s crotch (CP1, 226)

The placement of the moon in “the oak tree’s crotch” suggests two things. Firstly, the mildly euphemistic nature of this image suggests that, as Williams argues in Kora in Hell, the creative process is analogous with sexual intercourse, in which the poet, with varying degrees of violence, fills the natural world with “his phallus-like argument” (I, 75). Secondly, the position of the moon within the tree reveals that, despite Wallaert’s argument to the contrary, the poetic voice is not, and can never be, removed or anonymous; the moon finds itself within the crotch of the oak tree only when seen from a particular position by the active gaze of a specific observer.
Despite the seeming absence of the mind of the poet within the poetry, this line reveals that the truth of the scene is based primarily on the subjective experience of the poetic voice. Though Williams’s work does indeed appear to strive to approach the beauty of nature on its own terms, Williams is very much aware that his only means of exploring the natural world is strictly phenomenological; the moon and the tree of the poem cannot exist outside the limitations of the poet’s brain and his senses. Williams’s comments in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* suggest as much:

> The tree as a tree does not exist literally, figuratively or any way you please—for the appraising eye of the artist—or any man—the tree does not exist. What does exist, and in heightened intensity for the artist is the impression created by the shape and color of an object before him in his sensual being—his whole body (not his eyes) his body, his mind, his memory. (*EK*, 24)

In this sense, Williams recognises that the goal of “The Rose”, the attempt to wrest the rose away from the realm of human perception and language, is impossible. Significantly, despite Wallaert’s claim that the moon is held up by Williams as a symbol of a gentle, unobtrusive poetic touch, the reality is far less idealistic; in the poem “The Sea”, Williams shows that the moon, like the poet, is never passive, but rather is forever engaged in an intimately physical relationship with the natural world:

> Oom barroom—

> It is the cold of the sea
> broken upon the sand by the force
> of the moon— (*CP I*, 195)

In *Spring and All*, Williams seems to realise that, while it is hubristic for the poet to impose his own structures upon the objects of the material world, it is also equally delusional to assume that the poet can transcend the very mechanisms of the English language and achieve a pure and objective representation of the natural world. Williams instead recognises that the poet is an
inextricable part of the material world. The poet can be neither passive nor anonymous, but must recognise his own physical connection with the world and move in cooperative harmony with nature’s laws if he wants to form a “co-extension with the universe” (CP1, 192). As I argued in the second chapter of this thesis, for Williams there is no observation without contact, no activity of consciousness that can be disconnected from a physical context. As such, the moon serves as a perfect analogy for Williams’s creative relationship with the natural world. No matter the extent to which both the moon and the poet seem distant or disconnected from the world, they are always intimately connected by a very real, very kinetic force. If Spring and All constitutes an ecopoetics, it is not one of perfection and doing “nothing”, it is one of contact and communication: an ecopoetics that recognises the human subject as a necessarily active, even if not destructive, participant in the material world.

The recognition that neither nature nor human subjectivity can be distinguished, segregated or transcended from one another is one of the basic premises of Williams’s poetics in Spring and All. It is the nature of this interaction, the development of a relationship that is positive and respectful, to which the experiments of the book are dedicated. As Mark Long argues, ecopoetry is not merely about testing the extent to which poetry can interact with the natural world, nor is it about avoiding all contact altogether; it is about discovering new ways of constructing positive relationships between the self and the other:

A poem is understood here as not merely a site for reflecting on our limits but as a space in which we might learn to construct alternative ways of thinking and acting in the world. Seeking primarily preverbal experience, then, is perhaps a necessary but in no way sufficient end for the environmentally or ecologically inclined poet. (Long, 59)

VI. The Material Imagination

In Spring and All, the negotiation of this complex interaction between the human self and the natural other is presented as the primary role of the poet. Furthermore, for Williams, it is only
through the “imagination” that such a task is possible. The “imagination” (which I have enclosed in quotation marks to emphasise Williams’s non-conventional use of the term) is a significant concept within Spring and All. In the introduction of the book, Williams dedicates the entire work to the concept: “To whom then am I addressed? To the imagination” (CP1, 178). Within the mythology of Spring and All, Williams establishes the imagination as a means of resolving the “crushing humiliation” of the modern experience and forging a meaningful understanding of humanity’s place within the natural world (CP1, 192). As Williams argues: “This is possible by aid of the imagination. Only through the agency of this force can a man feel himself moved largely with sympathetic pulses at work—” (CP1, 192). Just as gravitational forces hold the moon in orbit with the earth, so too does the imagination allow the human subject to forge an “approximate co-extension” with the natural world.

And yet, one of the reasons that Spring and All causes confusion among critics is that there is often ambiguity as to what Williams means by the “imagination”. Williams himself points out that, in common understanding of the word, the act of imagination is thought to entail an abstract detachment from reality:

And if when I pompously announce that I am addressed—To the imagination—you believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. (CP1, 178)

Indeed, the act of imagining is often seen as a solipsistic act, antithetical to any meaningful physical interaction with the world; the opposite is true in Williams’s use of the word. Williams’s use of the term “force” is quite telling here. Just as the aforementioned “force of the moon” is a tangible kinetic force that impacts upon the natural world, so too does Williams conceive of the imagination, not as the abstract musings of the disembodied consciousness, but as a fundamental physical interaction with the physical and natural world: “That is, the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam” (CP1, 207). Fittingly, Williams’s poetic composition seems to take place primarily on the physical plane of the page. His words are not the vessels of
abstract thought, but physical objects, made from ink or air, collected from the material world and arranged upon the page. In the words of Miller, “Most of his vocabulary can be found in any pocket dictionary” (292). Williams’s reluctance to abstract his poetry from the material world is perhaps best captured in the line of “The Avenue of Poplars”, when Williams claims

it is a wordless
world (CP1, 195)

On first inspection, these lines seem to call for the poet to transcend the mediating force of the written word and achieve a preverbal immediacy. And indeed, many critics mistake the economy and precision of Williams’s words for a pure objectivity of language, the dissolution of the tension between signifier and signified. But, in these lines Williams cleverly shows that he has moved beyond such naivety; his description of a “wordless world” relies on the very visceral techniques of both alliteration and assonance for its force of argument. As such, Williams ridicules the hubristic notion, arguably the cornerstone of Enlightenment rationality, that the human imagination could in any way remove itself or place itself above the materiality of language.

In the third poem of Spring and All, “The Farmer”, Williams demonstrates what the imagination is by showing us precisely what it is not:

    The farmer in deep thought
    is pacing through the rain
    among his blank fields, with
    hands in pockets,
    in his head
    the harvest already planted.
    ...
    Down past the brushwood
    bristling by
the rainsluiced wagonroad
looms the artist figure of
the farmer—composing
—antagonist (CP1, 186)

In this poem the farmer, clearly denoted as an analogous figure of the artist, is perhaps a perfect embodiment of Wallaert’s idea of the “perfect human touch”; his harvest exists solely within his mind, he has not made a single mark upon the “blank” field and even his hands are sheathed in his pockets where they can do no harm. He is a man of abstract thought, a model of rational Western humanism. And yet, far from presenting this figure as a model for a positive relationship with the landscape, Williams casts him as the “antagonist”. Seemingly, the “antagonist” farmer’s crime is not his physical assault on the landscape, but the position of distance and authority that he assumes. In contrast to the sense of unfinished continuity within the other poems of Spring and All, the full stops within this poem appear as unnatural impositions of order onto the continuum of the natural world, which break the landscape into unnaturally discrete components. Significantly, these grammatical impositions occur primarily when Williams is speaking about abstract thought:

    On all sides
    the world rolls coldly away:
    black orchards
    darkened by the March clouds—
    leaving room for thought. (CP1, 186)

It is not the farmer’s physical action upon the world that has created such unnatural fragmentation; it is his reluctance to physically engage with the natural landscape. Contrary to Wallaert’s views, Williams seems to suggest that “to do nothing” is, in this sense, an unnatural act in itself. Indeed, in the introduction to Spring and All, Williams portrays a horrific apocalyptic vision of the future, caused, not by humankind’s interaction with the natural world, but instead by its desire to abstract its conscious mind from the material world:
Together the human race, yellow, black, brown, red and white, agglutinated into one enormous soul may be gratified with the sight and retire to the heaven of heavens content to rest on its laurels… With what magnificent explosions and odors will not the day be accomplished as we, the Great One among all creatures, shall go about contemplating our self-prohibited desires as we promenade them before the inward review of our own bowels— (CP1, 179–180)

For Williams, abstract thought is not synonymous with the imagination; it is the dangerous “antagonist” of the contrastingly physical force of the imagination. For Williams, to think is to abstract; to imagine is to engage. “To have done nothing” is to suggest the possibility that the human subject can transcend the physical world; such a thought is presented, within Spring and All, not just as absurd, but as threatening to the existence of both humanity and nature. The modern poet instead must recognise that human subjectivity takes place upon the same plane as the natural object. In “The Avenue of Poplars”, Williams draws no distinction between the wandering of the speaker’s imagination and the physical movement of the speaker:

I ascend

through

a canopy of leaves

and at the same time

I descend

for I do nothing

unusual—

I ride in my car (CP1, 228–229)
In *William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Attack on Logical Syntax*, Moore argues that Williams draws a distinction between the atemporal movement of the imagination and the temporal movement that typifies everything from the movement of a motorcar to the cadence of an iambic verse:

The movement that Williams values is that of the freely playing intelligence, ranging wherever it wishes. All other movements—time, grammatical sequence, the iambic pentameter—mark the limits of our perceptions. (Moore, 904)

Moore’s distinction, however, misses the point. Williams does not draw a distinction between the physical movement of the temporal world (in which syntax, metre, motorcars, and even roses exist) and the abstract movement of the imagination; rather, for Williams the movement of a motorcar is the same as the movement of the “freely playing intelligence” precisely because the human imagination is a physical and natural process in itself. After all, as Williams demonstrates in *Spring and All*, even the most seemingly abstract or transcendent phenomena of human subjectivity are, essentially, grounded in some form of natural process: “The voice of the Delphic Oracle itself, what was it? A poisonous gas from a rock’s cleft” (*CP1*, 185). It seems that, for Williams, a meaningful and productive connection between humanity and the natural world does not require the poet to “do nothing”, as Wallaert suggests. Rather, to remember the succeeding line in the poem, Williams’s poetic requires the poet to “do nothing / unusual”, or (to substitute a synonym) to do nothing *unnatural*. Williams’s poetry does not aim to reflect upon, distil, or describe the natural world from a safe distance; it *kisses* the leaf and *engages* the rose. The physicality of these transitive verbs cannot be ignored. And indeed, from an ecocritical perspective, such a stance is perhaps preferable to Wallaert’s theory of Williams’s gentle, unobtrusive touch; in both Williams’s apocalyptic imagery and in his poetics there exists a common idea: that the philosophical and physical separation of human subjectivity from the natural world leads primarily to alienation, exploitation and destruction. Williams’s is a poetics

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20 The dual meaning of “leaf” seems to suggest a physical relationship with both the natural world and the page on which the poem is written.
that recognises that “to have done nothing”, though perhaps perfect, is impossible. As Leonard M. Seigaj defines in his book *Sustainable Poetry*, the eco-poet “persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as a dynamic, interrelated series of cyclical feedback systems” (37). Williams’s poetry does not hide from this reality, nor seek to transcend it. Instead, he uses it as a theoretical basis to engage in a positive conversation with the natural world: a conversation that, in contrast to the monologic tirade of “Pastoral 2”, becomes increasingly dialogic.

VII. Corporeality in 1930

In the years after the radical experimentation of *Spring and All*, Williams’s primary preoccupation seems to have been the establishment of a common ground, a common unit of syntax, through which to enable intersubjective communication between human and non-human natural subjects. In 1930, Williams published three poems, “The Flower”, “The Botticellian Trees” and “The Trees”, each of which contributes to this goal in a particular way. Each of these poems disrupt, in one way or another, the boundaries between human subjectivity, the natural world, and the medium of poetic language. The primary goal of “The Flowers” is to reconcile the natural world with the seemingly alienating unnatural forms of the urban landscape. He achieves this by forming an analogy between the city and a flower:

> It is the city,
> approaching over the river. Nothing
> of it is mine, but visibly
> for all that it is petal of a flower—my own. (*CP1*, 322)

By forming an analogous relationship between the city and the flower, Williams naturalises the human creation. He once again blurs the line between natural and unnatural, reinforcing the idea that, as Greg Garrard argues:
if any building or machine, however technologically advanced, must be made by evolved animals (*Homo sapiens*) of materials of natural origins in accordance with natural ‘laws’ of mechanical physics, then it follows that all our vaunted cultural constructions are, in a sense, natural constructions. (10)

In this sense, any object, even the city can be considered natural, as long as we recognise its place within a larger material context. Any object that is subject to the natural laws of time and decay can, as a result, be considered natural. As such, the city no longer exists as a series of strictly defined forms, as in the human imagination. Instead, due to its materiality, it becomes unstable, undefined and softened:

A petal, colorless and without form
the oblong towers lie

beyond the low hill and northward the great
bridge stanchions,

small in the distance, have appeared,
pinkish and incomplete— (*CP1*, 322)

In this sense, “The Flower” attempts to unify the organic with the inorganic, the human with the nonhuman, by finding a common ground that unites them. Significantly, this common ground is temporality, flux and physical decay. Both the artificial constructions of humanity and the natural forms of nature are united in their engagement within the rules of material world, a plane in which solid, discrete forms collapse into a fluid and soft natural continuum.

It is in “The Botticellian Trees” that Williams’s naturalisation of human structures is extended to language itself. This poem presents the idea that, if all structures that exist within the material and temporal world can be considered natural, then it is possible to conceive of poetic language, not as transparent or transcendent, but as a material, temporal (and as such, organic) phenomenon.
In the same year that Williams materialised the act of writing in *A Novelette* through the “q w e r t y” order of the typewriter,21 “The Botticellian Trees” wrested the written word away from the abstract subjective mind and returned it to the material world of nature:

The alphabet of the trees

is fading in the song of the leaves (*CP1*, 348)

By representing the letters of the alphabet, not as the building blocks of abstract thought, but as physical and natural objects, sprouting as twigs from a tree, Williams naturalises his verse. Within the poem, language exists not as an inorganic imposition of cultural forms upon nature, but as a structure that is fundamentally natural, temporal and impermanent. Williams recognises that, once introduced into the physical world, language is no longer made up of indestructible abstract units, but physical lines upon the page:

the crossing bars of the thin letters that spelled winter

and the cold have been illumined

with pointed green

21 See Chapter 2.
by the rain and sun—
The strict simple

principles of
straight branches

are being modified
by pinched-out

ifs of color, devout
conditions (CP1, 348)

The strict regularity of the branches of winter, most alike to our own alphabet, gives way to the constantly changing, permeable, flourishing branches of springtime that are “illumined” within the poem as a model for modern poetic language (CP1, 348). As such, Williams recognises that a natural poetics is one that places language within the temporal and material world, allowing the once-stable signifiers that constitute his poems to become unstable and fluid. Once language has left the human mind and exists on the material plane of the page, it becomes once again a part of the natural landscape. The language of the trees does not offer itself up clearly to the poet, but is instead constantly “fading” away, resisting clarity (CP1, 348). By situating language as a natural and dynamic force that escapes the will of the poet, Williams preempts the posthumanist approach to language that Wolfe describes as the recognition of not just “our physical vulnerability and morality” but “also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a precondition of our subjectivity” (Wolfe, 89).

Fittingly, while Williams still emphasises the fluidity and permeability of the natural landscape, such traits are no longer associated with the inactive passivity seen in “Pastoral 2”. Rather, in
“The Trees”, fluidity and instability are portrayed as dynamic and sensual traits that escape the poet’s own understanding or control. Within the poem, the natural state of the tree, even in comparison with the human, is dynamism:

The trees—being trees
thrash and scream
guffaw and curse—
wholly abandoned
damning the race of men— (CP1, 337)

In a reversal of the structure of “Pastoral 2”, in which the poetic voice lectures the natural world, in “The Trees” it is humanity that receives the admonishing:22

Christ, the bastards
haven’t even sense enough
to stay out in the rain— (CP1, 337)

Humankind is berated for its unnatural urge to divorce itself from the redemptive and vitalising forces of the natural world. According to the voice of the trees, in their attempt to preserve the boundaries of their own selfhood, humanity has rendered themselves:

—ghosts
sapped of strength (CP1, 338)

By contrast to the disembodied “ghosts” of humanity, the trees are presented as violently animate, embodied and sensual:

knocking knees, buds
bursting from each pore

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22 There is a noticeable departure here from Emerson’s confidence in nature’s benevolence and respect towards humankind: “The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them” (29).
even the trunk’s self
putting out leafheads— (CP1, 338)

When the trees speak directly, their utterances come out in an ecstatic non-verbal non-lexical onomatopoeia:

Wha ha ha ha

Wheeeeee
cracka tacka tacka
tacka tacka
wha ha ha ha ha
ha ha ha ha (CP1, 337)

The vocality of the trees is striking; the poem gives unprecedented degrees of poetic voice to natural objects that are traditionally silenced by humanist discourse. As Christopher Manes argues:

The language we speak today, the idiom of Renaissance and Enlightenment humanism, veils the processes of nature with its own cultural obsessions, directionalities, and motifs that have no analogues in the natural world... It is as if we had compressed the entire buzzing, howling, gurgling biosphere into the narrow vocabulary of epistemology. (Manes, 15)

For Manes, the problematic dualism of the terms “man” and “nature” is based primarily on the contrast between the vocal human and the “not saids” of nature (17). Williams’s frequent use of non-lexical onomatopoeia throughout his poetry and prose breaks this silence, and allows the marginalised voices of the natural world to participate once more, be it goats in *Kora in Hell* (“Baaaa! Bah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”) (I, 75), the ocean in *Spring and All* (“Oom barroom”) (CP1, 137) an elephant seal in “The Sea Elephant” (“Blouaugh!”) (CP1, 343) or a “fat dog” in *A Novelette* (“Phuagh, houfgh, pfauagh, ka woof!”) (I, 284). These onomatopoeic interjections,
though at times comical, have a democratising effect as they expand the scope of the poetic voice from merely the musings of the human subject to a polyphonic dialogue of the various voices of the material, natural world. In “The Trees”, these marginalised “not saids” are welcomed into the poem as valuable voices within a collective poetic dialogue. The trees’ utterances are underscored by an inexpressible ecstasy, a pagan-like frenzy of unadulterated and uncontainable sensation. It is a sensation that, within the poem, comes with meaningful continuity between subjectivity and bodily experience:

— a cold wind winterlong
in the hollows of our flesh
icy with pleasure

no part of us untouched (CP1, 338) \(^23\)

Significantly, the poem contends that, while post-Enlightenment thinking would have us believe that such ecstatic interpenetration of self and world is the domain of the natural other, whether it be the feminine, the divine, or the non-human, such fluidity is entirely natural. It is the cultural myths and binaries, the cornerstones of Western humanism, that divorce humankind from its natural, physical existence, that are unnatural:

There were never satyrs
never maenads
never eagle-headed gods—
These were men
from whose hands sprung
love
bursting the wood—

\(^23\) Contrast this line to the stasis of the “unbruised” rose in “The Rose”, the farmer’s “blank field” in the third poem of *Spring and All* and Emerson’s description of nature as “essences unchanged”.

150
Trees their companions (CP1, 338)

Just as Donna Haraway’s 1983 *A Cyborg Manifesto* reframes the fictional figure of the cyborg as a symbol for the productive transgression of the borders of the self, Williams here draws upon the mythical figures of satyrs, maenads and eagle-headed gods as a way of recognising that an interpenetration between nature and human subjectivity is, and always has been, central to human life. Thus, Williams recognises that it is the conception of the male humanist subject as a singular, autonomous and impenetrable unit that is unnatural and isolating. Central to Haraway’s contention is the idea that, rather than being challenging to our human existence, the transgression of the traditional confines of the humanist subject is a sensual, exciting and pleasurable intersubjective experience:

> The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed. Far from signalling a walling off of people from other living beings, cyborgs signal disturbingly and pleasurably tight couplings. (152)

And indeed, in the sensual onomatopoeia of the trees, and in the apparent synonymy of the two consecutive lines “love” and “bursting the wood—” the transgression of boundaries is conflated with ideas of intimacy. The qualities of nature that Williams admires: permeability, instability and fluidity are, within his posthumanist poetics, inseparable from humanistic notions of empathy, contact, intimacy and love.

**VIII. Pressed Flowers**

One of the more unusual items within the William Carlos Williams papers at the Beinecke Library is a notebook of pressed flowers that Williams gathered in Switzerland and Italy. The object presents an enigmatic image, particularly within a discussion of Williams’s ecopoetics. On one hand, it indicates an appreciation of natural forms, and a desire to preserve the beauty of the natural object. On the other hand, the act of pressing flowers within a notebook constitutes, not just a violent act of force against a natural object, but also the futile attempt to abstract the
flower from the natural process of decay. Unlike the infinite, atemporal rose imagined in “The Rose”, even the most well preserved pressed flowers will inevitably fade and decompose. The presence of this ambiguous object among Williams’s other seemingly more significant papers, seems to suggest a truth that Williams would come to terms with by the end of his career: that all forms of creation, including poetry, are predicated upon the same processes of growth, flux, decay and death that defines the natural world. The perpetual flux of the organic world is a problem for the idealism of the Romanticists and the Transcendentalists. It is also, according to Markos, a problem for Williams:

Williams knows that change brings loss and death as well as renewal, but in his overall picture of the universe, Williams tends to be an ameliorist. The dilemma for the romantic idealist is that his or her impulse to celebrate growth towards perfection comes into conflict with the recognition that an achieved perfection is static. (175)

The natural world consistently resists any notion of static or ideal beauty that may be imposed upon it; time passes, flowers dry up and decay, and even the one-detached and sovereign spirit of the poet inevitably dies. Markos suggests, quite insufficiently that, when faced with nature’s complex rhythms of growth and decay, the Romantics, Williams included, merely give greater emphasis to those fleeting moments of natural beauty that reaffirm their own idealism:

Although the organic universe is in a state of becoming and is therefore imperfect, there are moments recorded by romantic poets in which the universe does appear so beautiful as to be wholly satisfying, thus confirming man’s place in it and hinting also at its ultimately ideal character. (176)

Yet Williams’s interest in dried flowers, as evident both in his personal collection and in his poetry, indicates that he recognises beauty and the value, not merely in the ideal and the static, but also in the temporary, in the processes of death and decay. Markos’s suggestion that imperfection, flux and decay were unfortunate realities that Williams attempted to ignore vastly
oversimplifies Williams’s approach to the complex reality of temporal existence. As Williams writes in his essay “Revelation” (1947):

    I am advancing no brief for immortality; rather the opposite. I am speaking of the
    necessity for revelation in order that we may achieve mortality. In order, briefly, to get at
    the actual values that concern man where they frequently lie buried in his mind. (SE, 271)

Indeed, within Williams’s poetics, as in most posthumanist literature, transformation, fragmentation and even death are dealt with as prerequisites for any meaningful form of intersubjective intimacy.

This is nowhere clearer than in Williams’s collection *Journey to Love* (1955). In stark contrast to the “unbruised” rose in *Spring and All*, this collection is replete with images of ruptured, damaged and compressed natural objects. Flowers are pressed and dried in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (*CP2*, 310), children violently pick and crush flowers in “The Ivy Crown” (*CP2*, 287), weeds are attacked in “Pink Locust” (*CP2*, 299), a sparrow is flattened into the pavement by a car tyre in “The Sparrow” (*CP2*, 291) and the sky and horizon are severed from the world by the framing of a photograph in “View by Color Photography on a Commercial Calendar” (*CP2*, 290). Within these images, the human imagination and the natural world are forced into close proximity; the “human touch” presented within the book is certainly a physical, and often violent, force. And yet, as in *Spring and All*, the poems are also underscored by a deep appreciation for the beauty of the natural world. This tension is perhaps best embodied in the image of the pressed flowers in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”.

    Give me time,
    time.
    When I was a boy
    I kept a book
    to which, from time
to time,
I added pressed flowers
until, after a time,
I had a good collection.
The asphodel,
forbodingly,
among them. (CP2, 312)

This image embodies a complexity that vastly surpasses the naive desire to respectfully distance oneself from nature that underpins “The Rose”. Unlike the “unbruised” and timeless rose, the flowers in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” cannot be preserved within a book without being crushed. The poet’s act of preservation is a violent one. Furthermore, not even this act of preservation can protect the drying flowers from the inevitable processes of decay.²⁴

Yet what is interesting about Journey to Love is that Williams no longer distances his own subjectivity, nor his own poetry from these processes. The poet’s voice is revealed as both complicit and subject to the destructive forces of humanity and nature. Temporality and mortality drive the poetic voice. In his book William Carlos Williams: An American Artist, James E. Breslin notes “the strong sense of loss, fading, and mutability with which the poem begins”, and indeed, the poetic voice is underscored by a profound sense of fragility:

      Today
      I’m filled with the fading memory of those flowers
      that we both loved, (CP2, 311)

Time impacts upon the rhythms and structures of the poetic voice. The urgency of the narration gives a very real sense that the poem is being composed within a temporal space, by a poet whose time is rapidly coming to an end:

²⁴ The passage of time inhabits the poem both figuratively and literally. Not that the word “time” appears a total of five times within the quoted passage above.
There is something
    something urgent
I have to say to you
    and you alone
    but it must wait
while I drink in
    the joy of your approach,
    perhaps for the last time.
And so
    with fear in my heart
    I drag it out
and keep on talking
    for I dare not stop,
    Listen while I talk on
against time.
    It will not be
    for long. (CP2, 311)

Unlike the seemingly-detached observed in “The Rose”, in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” the poet himself is finally revealed as organic, temporal and material. His subjectivity, and his poetry, like any other natural phenomenon, appears for a moment only to be dissolved into time:

    But the words
made solely of air
    or less,
that came to me
out of the air
    and insisted
on being written down,
I regret most—
that there has come an end
to them. (CP2, 325)

As Long points out, when Williams’s nature poetry succeeds, it succeeds not by bridging the gulf between the binary opposites of humanity and nature, rather it recognises the synonymy and proximity of human activity and the natural world:

The crucial point is that Williams’s poetics looks not back at re-establishing a lost connection with the world because, as I have said, we are always already in that world. Rather the problem the poet faces is looking forward to the ways we are able to become present to the possibilities of the phenomenal world where we have been living all along. (Long, 65)

This is certainly what is being achieved in Journey to Love. This too, according to Julie Clarke, is precisely the point of posthumanism:

Historically humanist discourse has defined the human in opposition to the animal or technological, however this has been complicated by the emergence of posthumanists who do not draw such clear distinctions. Indeed posthumanists expose the posthuman as a condition that humanity has always occupied, that is, of a continued reliance on technology and non-human others. (Clarke, 2)

In Journey to Love, Williams has stripped himself of many of the comforting illusions of humanist thought. He recognises that he is not a disembodied subjectivity, nor is he in full command of his poem. Rather, he, and his words, are members of a material system, capable of exerting violence and capable of being subject to violence.

Most interestingly, in Journey to Love, the violent crushing of flowers, weeds, sparrows, horizons, and even the fragmentation of the poet’s aging mind, is represented as directly analogous to the act of writing poetry itself. In “The Sparrow”, Williams describes the flattened body of the bird as the “poem / of his existence”:
Practical to the end,
    it is the poem
    of his existence
that triumphed
   finally;
    a wisp of feathers
flattened to the pavement
    wings spread symmetrically
    as if in flight
the head gone,
    the black escutcheon of the breast
    undecipherable, (CP2, 294–295)

Here, Williams gives us a valuable key to interpreting the crowning achievement of his later career: the variable foot. In his book *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, Sayre rejects the notion that the variable foot is implicitly connected with the material world. Most significantly, he refutes the association of the variable foot with Charles Olson’s theories of breath:

   It is vision, not sound, that the “variable foot” depends on. And his form is arbitrary, imposed upon his subject matter, not organically derived from it. (Sayre, 4)

As such, Sayre claims that the structure of the poem derives from the human mind and not, as Olson might claim, from the physical world: “In the simplest terms, the visual is the mind’s dimension; the aural, the world’s” (Sayre, 4). Though I agree with his emphasis on the arbitrariness and impositional quality of the variable foot, Sayre’s distinction between the visual and the physical worlds both rests on outdated humanist dualisms between body and mind and ignores the physicality with which Williams describes his visual poetry. The sparrow, after all, is described with “head gone” (295). For Williams, the process of creating visual poetry was an inherently concrete task. During a discussion with Allen Ginsberg, Williams described the
process of creating poetry as: “I just try to squeeze the lines up into pictures” (qtd. in Ginsberg, 4). The writing of a poem is never an abstract mental task for Williams.

As suggested earlier, Williams equates poetry with taking material words “made solely of air” and compressing them into a structure based primarily on the arbitrary beginning and ending of lines. Like Sayre, I agree that this process is “arbitrary, imposed on his subject matter.” However, I do not believe that it is imposed by some abstract human sensibility. Rather, the arbitrary and material cessation of lines, disconnected from any greater significance, seems to follow the same logic of natural mortality that inhabits the books. Like the crushed sparrow, the pressed flowers, the fragmented horizon, the fading mind of the dying poet, even the lines of verse are crushed, confined, and brought to an end by the sudden and arbitrary end point that all natural, temporal and mortal objects share. It is no surprise that, in Journey to Love, Williams abandons the free verse that defined works such as Spring and All. To be truly free is to escape all external forces, and such a concept is no longer possible. Here Williams recognises that, just as nature cannot be free of the violence of humankind, just as humankind cannot be free of its entwinement in the material world, neither can a poem even be truly free of formal constraint. The variable foot then, in my mind, is no more than the poetics of the mortal human who, in a surprisingly radical gesture, refuses to turn a blind eye to his own mortality, nor the fragility and materiality of his word and, rather than appealing to a transcendent or idyllic meaning, or escaping into illusions of objective rationality, instead bases his own poetic structure upon the natural arbitrariness that he believes unites all participants upon the material plane. The common ground between the poet, the poem and the natural object can only be found in the forces of the material world that break down the barriers between the no-longer discrete forms of words, humans, animals and plants. For Williams, these are the forces that drive his poetry: death, the imagination and, ultimately, love:

    It was the love of love,
    the love that swallows up all else,
    a grateful love,
a love of nature, of people
animals,
a love engendering
gentleness and goodness
that moved me
and that I saw in you. (CP2, 317)

In *Journey to Love*, we can see that Williams’s ecopoetics combines a profound humanistic empathy and respect for the humans, animals, plants and objects with whom he shares the world with a posthumanism that refuses to abstract human subjectivity from the material realm of nature. And in this refusal, the figure of the human, traditionally isolated by humanist thought as uniquely rational, self-determining and sovereign to the world, is brought to a sense of egality with the other subjects of the material world. Williams’s posthumanism, and his ecocriticism, is founded not upon humanity’s capacity for transcendence, but upon the virtues of recognising its vulnerabilities and limits.
CHAPTER 4. “THE MUTABILITY OF TRUTH”: WILLIAMS, POSTHUMANISM AND DEMOCRACY

In the introduction to his book *Writing The Radical Center* (2001), John Beck argues that, by situating his poetics so explicitly within the material world, William Carlos Williams naturally assumes an engagement with the social and political context in which his poetry exists:

Williams insisted on the precise location of art as a concrete substance in the world, an object occupying so much space, so much time, displacing other objects by the measure of its own dimensions, shaped by and shaping the forces around it. Such a conception of art inevitably involves a consideration of art’s responsibility… responsibility in terms of being responsive to what is outside itself, and responsible for its effect on the world of which it is a part. (1)

Throughout this thesis so far, I have been moving towards the idea that Williams’s poetic challenge to Enlightenment ideals, particularly his grounding of both language and human subjectivity in the material, was largely informed by a democratic, egalitarian and social impulse. In my second chapter I argued that Williams’s poetic representation of the relationship between humanity and the modern machine constitutes a posthumanist disruption of the barriers of human agency, as well as the traditional power structures between humanity and machine, poet and poem, and man and woman. In my third chapter, I contended that Williams’s poetic approach to the natural world seeks to rupture the traditional dualisms and power structures that humanity uses to separate itself from the natural environment, as well as the masculine from the feminine, by demonstrating that all human subjectivity, all human ideas, as well as their articulation in poetic language, are subject to the same natural processes of flux and decay that define the rest of the material world. The common theme within these chapters is that Williams’s poetic rejection of the Cartesian and Kantian ideals that had underpinned Western humanism and poetry since the Enlightenment was primarily informed by a desire to enact a positive and mutual dialogue with the various other bodies, voices and subjectivities traditionally excluded
from the narrow humanist conception of the self. The implication here is that Williams’s posthumanism is a democratic one; as Lisa Siragianian puts it, Williams’s poetry is founded upon a “language of democratic inclusiveness” (81). In this chapter, I give this idea the critical attention and historical contextualisation it arguably deserves. Democracy, in this context, refers not only to a general system of governance; it is also a term that is inseparable from a series of complex and at times contradictory ideals: equality, individual liberty and collective social responsibility. Within Williams’s writing, democracy emerges as an imperfect and imperfectible process of mediation between the needs of the individual and the greater whole: a process that is played out, on both the thematic and formal level, within his poetry. As Alexander Leicht points out in his book The Search for a Democratic Aesthetics (2012), while it is common to pay lip service to Williams’s charitable, social and democratic sympathies, it is less common for the relationship between his political ideals and his formal poetic experimentation to be given significant critical attention (11). While critics such as Alec Marsh, Mike Weaver and John Beck have focused on Williams’s thematic treatment of concepts such as individualism, Jeffersonianism, Socialism and the plight of the working classes, Leicht’s book is one of the few to provide a specific examination of the ways in which Williams’s use of formal features within his poetry reflect a number of ideas within political theory. Such a formalistic approach seems particularly relevant to Williams’s own understanding of poetry’s political function; in a letter to Ezra Pound, sent in 1946, Williams asserts that it was not the poet’s job merely to theorise about politics, or to make political events the focus of their poems. Rather, if poets are to have a political impact, they must do so on the level of their formal use of poetic language:

Nevertheless, right or wrong, government is a major subject for the aging poet, and your work strikes along the path with some effect, if weak since you step outside the means of poetry very often to gain a point. You deal in political symbols instead of actual values,

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25 The correspondence between Williams and Pound is an extraordinary record of a friendship strained by a tense political climate. Despite their increasingly opposed politics throughout the 1940s, and their subsequent frustration with each other, both writers maintained contact throughout the war. As Pound becomes increasingly more fanatical (and incoherent) in his dedication to fascism, Williams takes the tone of a concerned parent, beseeching the childish Pound to return home before he gets himself into too much trouble.
poetry. You talk about things (which you yourself have sufficiently damned in the past) instead of showing the things themselves in action. (SL, 249–250)

In this sense, I follow Leicht’s methodology of reading the poem as a space in which ideas of plurality, unity, freedom and interdependence, central to democratic theory, can be explored and shown “in action” at a linguistic level. However, I also contend that Leicht’s argument is limited to a degree by his overemphasis, albeit a self-conscious one, on formal analysis over historical contextualisation:

The question of what kind of democratic political philosophy, if any, might have influenced Williams in the creation of his art is quite different one from the question pursued here… I opt for a systematic and not an historical approach in this study. (Leicht, 18)

While Leicht’s formalist approach provides a useful framework for my own analyses within this chapter, I am also mindful that in order to fully understand the political and social implications of Williams’s poetic development, it is necessary to consider the ways in which Williams personally responded to the dramatically dynamic social and political landscape of early-twentieth-century America. As Leicht argues, Williams understands poetry to be inextricable from its own historical context, and the context from which his poetic experimentations emerged was largely defined by a number of significant historical events: the rise of uninhibited market capitalism from the late nineteenth century onwards, the Great Depression, two world wars and the rise of Fascist and eugenic ideology both in the United States and abroad. It is unwise to speak of the political implications of Williams’s poetry without taking such contexts into account; a formal emphasis on uniformity and order within a poem, for example, would carry a far different connotation in the wake of the chaotic 1929 stock market crash than it would during the rise of Fascist ideology a decade later. By combining close formal readings of Williams’s poetry and prose with a close analysis of Williams’s personal correspondence, essays and autobiographical material, I aim to delineate the ways in which Williams’s understanding of
language, human subjectivity and poetry evolved in response to the significant political events that defined his experience of the twentieth century.

I. Democracy after Humanism

So far in this thesis, I have made two overarching claims. Firstly, I have argued that Williams’s poetics anticipates a posthumanist critique of traditional humanist understandings of the self and its relationship to the linguistic, natural and cultural environment in which it is situated. Secondly, I have argued that this critique is underpinned, to a large extent, by a democratic and social impulse. In order to demonstrate a connection between these ideas, I draw on the theories of American pragmatist and outspoken advocate of American democracy, John Dewey. Dewey’s remarks on politics in texts such as his essay “Philosophy and Democracy” (1918) and his books Democracy and Education (1915), The Public and Its Problems (1927), Freedom and Culture (1939) and, in a more general sense, Experience and Nature (1929) provide a theoretical framework for delineating the relationship between language, human subjectivity, democracy and the material world that is both contemporaneous and highly consonant with Williams’s own beliefs and practices.26 As John Beck argues in his book Writing the Radical Centre (2001), Dewey’s work provides “a vital articulation of the liberal democratic ethos shared and valued by Williams” (2). In this chapter, I argue that this democratic ethos shared by both Dewey and Williams is based primarily upon a critique of humanist models of the political subject as an autonomous, individual and rational mind. In “Philosophy and Democracy”, Dewey argues that one of the major stumbling blocks to discussing democracy is an antiquated understanding of the autonomy of the human individual: “For when [democracy] has tried to achieve a philosophy it has clothed itself in an atomistic individualism” (52). In a similar sense, as William R. Caspary argues in his book Dewey on Democracy, “Dewey’s thought shares the emancipatory aspirations of The Enlightenment, but not

26 Both Dewey and Williams are only recently gaining recognition for being ahead of their time. In the introduction to his book, Dewey and Democracy Caspary claims that “far from having left Dewey behind, we may just now be catching up to him” (2). The remark seems to echo Brian A. Bremen’s remark in his 1993 book William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture: “The more seriously I pursued Williams as a theorist, the more it became clear that we are just now learning to be Williams’s contemporaries” (7).
the mechanistic and atomistic view of human beings” (17–18). In this sense, the radical individualism that, for theorists such as Dewey, plagued American political discourse can be read as the legacy of a set of Enlightenment ideals that isolate the individual human mind from its social and material context. Kristen Case makes a strong case for a comparison of Dewey and Williams in this manner in her book *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice* (2011), arguing that Williams’s poetics constitutes a rejection of the Cartesian dualisms of Western humanism in favour of a Deweyan poetics that favours the connection and interdependence of people, not their autonomy:

one in which self and world, mind and object exist within a single field. In this paradigm, meaning is not generated through the mind’s power to transcend nature but arrived at collectively, through the shifting relations among writer, reader, words and objects (Case, 87).

The parallel with Dewey’s work allows me a valuable opportunity to speak about Williams’s politics in a way that doesn't rely merely on pure formalism or a historical analysis of Williams’s views, but upon the pragmatic Deweyan notion that all understandings of politics and humanity are inevitably embedded within a historical and linguistic context. Significantly, Dewey’s understanding of democracy was predicated, like much of Williams’s poetics, upon distinctly non-humanist understandings of both the role of language and the human subject.27 Dewey’s understanding of democracy was based on the belief that, far from being a transcendent, autonomous and immutable unity, the human subject was inextricably embedded within a social, historical, linguistic and material context and was, as such, capable of perpetual transformation

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27 I understand that it is highly contentious to suggest that Dewey was critical of humanism. He did, after all, add his signature to Raymond B. Bragg’s *A Humanist Manifesto* (otherwise known as *Humanist Manifesto I*) in 1933. I would stress, however, that the humanism described within the manifesto differs in a number of ways from the humanism discussed within this thesis; a number of the arguments raised by Bragg pre-empt a number of ideas central to posthumanist theory. Dewey would most likely have agreed with the manifesto’s rejection of “the traditional dualism of mind and body” and the declaration that “man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process” (1–5). In this sense, Bragg’s manifesto, while advocating a religion of humanism, also positions itself against a number of conventional and traditional understandings of the human subject.
and change. Dewey’s liberal democracy, then, becomes not the search for unity, stability or truth, but a constant process of conflict, resolution, transformation and interpretation. As Dewey puts it in *Democracy and Education*: “The heart of political democracy is adjudication of social differences by discussion and exchange of views” (273). Such an adjudication, such an exchange, is not the means towards a perfect democracy; it is, for Dewey, the essence of democracy itself. Within this context language is understood, not just as an imperfect means of representing ideals, but as the very context in which all social and democratic interactions take place. Both Williams and Dewey share, in their understanding of democratic and social interactions, a belief that at the heart of democracy is a sense of the imperfectability, mutability, historicity and perpetual flux of human identity, language and culture. As Dewey puts it:

> To such a philosophy any notion of a perfect or complete reality, finished, existing always the same without regard to the vicissitudes of time, will be abhorrent. (*The Middle Works*, 50)

A comparison of the way in which both Dewey and Williams approached the relationship between language and politics illuminates a democracy situated after and beyond the static and atomistic ideals of Western humanism: one that is predicated upon a posthumanist understanding of the materiality of language and human subjectivity.

### II. Individualism, the Individual and the “Thing”

It becomes clear that poetry, like democracy, is premised upon a careful balance between freedom and order, between the value of individual elements and their place within a larger whole. Leicht’s *The Search for a Democratic Aesthetics* is perhaps the most coherent attempt to forge a theoretical connection between the formal features of Williams’s poetry and the balance between individual liberty and collective responsibility at the heart of American democracy. As Leicht argues, most of the existing discussions of Williams’s democratic poetics are focused on the extent to which Williams’s use of language reflects an underlying respect for the intrinsic value of the individual:
The most obvious way into a discussion of William Carlos Williams’s egalitarianism is the fundamental role that the attention to particulars plays in his poetry. (Leicht, 180–181)

Most of these “obvious” discussions rely on a conflation of the individual political subject and the various objects that occupy Williams’s poetry. During his Imagist phase, primarily throughout the 1920s, Williams tended to focus on traditionally non-poetic objects such as street signs, wheelbarrows and fire engines, as well as ordinary working Americans, as the primary subjects of his poems. He also commonly represented these objects, not as symbolic receptacles of the poet’s internal musings, but as valuable poetic entities in their own right. As Leicht argues,

> In these poems, Williams—like many other poets in the twentieth century—focuses on traditionally unpoetic subject matter. This non-hierarchical stance is enhanced through the frequent focus on rubbish and discarded objects. (Leicht, 182)

This focus can be read as a dramatic rejection of traditional poetic and political hierarchies in favour of an “aesthetic egalitarianism” (Leicht, 180). Within the specific context of American literature, Williams’s “attention to particulars” can be read as a celebration of the distinctly liberal ideals of American democracy which emphasise, above all, “the individual, his or her rights, and the need for self-fulfilment as the goals of the political order” (Hudson, 6). As William E. Hudson argues in his book American Democracy in Peril (1995), the celebration of individual autonomy is one of the central distinctive characteristics of the cultural mythology surrounding American democracy:

> The United States is very egalitarian in the opportunities it offers ambitious individuals to use their own initiative, talent, and energies to get ahead. (106)

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28 In their 1937 criticism of his poetry, William Phillips and Philip Rahv complained that Williams “merely added the proletariat to his store of American objects” (qtd. in Filreis, 140), I address this concern later in this chapter.
Williams himself speaks of American democracy as if it is synonymous with individual freedom. In his 1917 essay “America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry”, he writes that American verse “must be truly democratic, truly free for all (emphasis mine)” (SE, 92). Thus, the treatment of “particulars”, the extent to which the various objects within the poem are represented as having individual worth, agency and liberty, is an inevitable starting point of any examination of an American poetics of democracy.

The most commonly discussed example of Williams’s egalitarian presentation of non-poetic objects is his 1923 poem “The Red Wheelbarrow”:

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so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens (CP1, 224)
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A term that is commonly used to describe this poem is “elemental”. In his book William Carlos Williams and Alterity (2012), Barry Ahearn compares the red wheelbarrow to numbers because they “both are elementary” (4). Similarly, in his book Sing with the Heart of a Bear: Fusions of Native and American Poetry, 1890-1999 (1999), Kenneth Lincoln describes the poem as “elemental—a figure/ground design scanned in twenty-two slim syllables” (188). These interpretations clearly align the poem with the principles of Imagism, a movement with which Williams was closely associated. It suggests, firstly, that the poem embodies the economy of language demanded by F. S. Flint’s second rule of Imagist poetry “to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the
presentation” (199). Secondly, the use of the term “elemental” implies a lack of constituents and, as such, relies on substantive existence of the “thing”. Flint’s first rule of Imagism calls for a “direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective” (199). This principle assumes that the “thing”, whether it be a wheelbarrow, a chicken, an idea or a person, exists as a solid and discrete unit, and that reality can be understood as a collection of discrete, individual and elemental “things”. The role of the Imagist poet, then, is to allow these individual units to exist in their own right within the poem, without distorting their unique existence with sentiment, associations or dogmatic poetic structures. It is this goal, according to Stanley Coffman in his book Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry, that Williams, of all modern poets, most coherently set about realising within his work:

His poetry is often closer to what seemed to be the Imagist idea than any in the three later anthologies. One quality that has always dominated his work is its objectivity: he has tried to bring the word as close as possible to the object, cutting away any conventional, sentimental, too human associations it might have. He is interested in objects, using language to reproduce their appearance as concisely, exactly, scientifically, as possible. (222)

Furthermore, according to many critics, what distinguishes Williams from many of his contemporaries within the movement is the implicitly political nature of his Imagist aesthetic. As Coffman recognises, many of Williams’s poems
go far beyond Imagism in their implications, and… may be read as an expression of the fully developed, humanitarian sympathy which underlies Williams’s poetry. (222)

Expanding upon this idea, Leicht draws an explicit connection between Williams’s Imagist clarity and fidelity to the object and the egalitarian and individualism of the American political landscape. Firstly, Leicht interprets Williams’s presentation of the objects in their own right, with minimal mediation from the poet, as a fundamentally egalitarian gesture:

20 Flint’s rules were published in the manifesto “Imagisme” in a 1913 edition of Poetry.
The way an artist is treating his or her subject matter—representing it directly, respectfully, for its own sake—is as important to a democratic aesthetics as the actual choice of what is represented. (182)

In doing so, Leicht compares the poem to the photography of Alfred Stieglitz:

It is telling that Williams, in the way he represents things is orienting himself towards photography and the visual. The photographic clarity of “The Red Wheelbarrow” poem gives an indication with regard to how Williams looks at subject matter. What is characteristic of the poem is the impression that the poet does not assert or emphasize his presence, but rather steps back and lets the object speak for itself. (183)

Leicht draws a distinction between the iconic medium of photography from the symbolic medium of poetry, framing Williams’s search for a photographic aesthetic as a desire to escape the inevitable mediation and abstraction at the heart of written language. The photographic analogy suggests a non-hierarchical poetic structure, in which objects appear in parallel upon the same plane, subservient to no structure or logic except for their own physical appearance and location within space. According to Leicht, such treatment of particulars is self-consciously political: “Thus, the intrinsic worth of the wheelbarrow that the poem expresses…is a metaphor for the intrinsic worth of any supposedly insignificant individual” (185). In this sense, Williams’s “aesthetic egalitarianism”, as Leicht describes it, seems to emphasise the necessity for the individual to remain uninhibited by the larger political powers of government, in this case symbolised by the overarching poetic ego (185). To this extent, Leicht’s interpretation of Williams’s democratic poetics has a distinctly American flavour; the idealistic notion of representation of a common object in its own right, with minimal mediation or distortion from a

30 Iconic implies a direct correspondence or resemblance between signifier and signified, whereas symbolic suggests an arbitrary relationship. Leicht’s argument is premised on the idea that iconic representations, such as photography, are less mediated than symbolic ones and, as such, are a more faithful and less obtrusive representation of their subject matter.

31 This analogy is, of course, founded upon a number of erroneous assumptions about the medium of photography, which is addressed later within this chapter.
poetic structure or overarching poetic ego, runs parallel to the idealism at the heart of the American Declaration of Independence, which emphasises the equal value and freedom of all individuals, as a basis for calling for the dissolution of any political structures that might threaten individual freedom:

> Whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to affect their Safety and Happiness. (Us Declaration Ind.)

However, the simple emphasis on the intrinsic value of the individual does not necessarily equate to a democratic or even pluralistic poetics. Democracy, after all, as a political ideal was founded not merely upon individual agency but also upon a careful balance between individual liberty and the collective order. This tension is particularly acute within the democratic context of the United States; as Hudson argues, one of the central challenges facing American democracy is its emphasis on individual autonomy at the expense of any meaningful sense of social responsibility:

> Recognition of the dark side of individualism raises the question of whether American celebration of the autonomous individual has been carried to such an extreme that the United States has become a society of isolated individuals. (107)

Williams himself was very much aware of the dangers of radical individualism. In both poetry and politics he saw the need for a balance between freedom and formal structure. To quote again from Williams’s “America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry”, American verse “must have a certain quality of freedom, must be ‘free verse’ in a sense… It must be truly democratic, truly free for all—and yet it must be governed” (SE, 92). As this quote suggests, the unresolved

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32 The seriousness of American individualism was no more evident than when Williams was writing much of his poetry; as Hudson argues: “During the 1930s, for example, in the throes of the social disaster of the Great Depression, unemployed American workers were likely to blame themselves for their unemployment… most American see themselves as the sole authors of both their achievements and their failures” (106).
tension between individuality and unity at the heart of American democracy echoes the tension within modern poetry between “free verse” and the need for an overarching and unifying formal structure. As Lisa Siraganian points out in her book *Modernism’s Other Works*, while many of Williams’s contemporaries, such as Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp and Mina Loy, articulated their own modernism by emphasising the significance of radical individual agency and freedom through a subversion of formal structuring devices within their work, Williams sought to embody within his poetics a more nuanced balance between freedom and order:

Williams could either discard the idea of frames or sustain it, but it’s not clear how he could permit both possibilities at once. Perhaps this contradiction also explains why criticism of his work since the 1960s has largely alternated between versions of these two poles, shifting between a materialism that rejects the frame and a formalism that requires it.

This attempt to find a balance between a “free” verse and a “governed” verse, between individual liberty and social unity, characterises much of Williams’s early work. Leicht argues that “the randomness of objects and observation are balanced by order, composition, and a specific layout that joins the individual elements together—in that sense, the poem can be seen to have a pluralist structure” (Leicht, 180). In a similar sense, in *Poets of Reality*, J Hillis Miller writes that Williams’s words “stand separately and yet together” (Miller, 298). This balance is also, significantly, central to John Dewey’s understanding of a true Democratic society. As Caspary argues, Dewey often describes the ideal democratic state as one that effectively and skillfully balances, without negating, the tension between the individual and the collective society:

Self-realization, in Dewey’s view, is not “free,” if that means being unconstrained by social obligations. Nor does Dewey go to the other extreme, and advocate the submergence of the self in a social whole. It is the creative interaction and tension between individual and society that Dewey proposes. (13)
Dewey understood that there could be no *a priori* solution to the question of how to balance this tension. Rather, democracy must be founded on an ongoing process of discussion, experimentation and negotiation. The role of the poet, as Williams claims, involves “showing” these processes “themselves in action” (*SL*, 250). I argue that, for Williams, “The Red Wheelbarrow” constitutes one such demonstration.

While “The Red Wheelbarrow” is read by critics such as Ahearn, Lincoln, Coffman and, to a lesser extent, Leicht as a prime example of an Imagist aesthetics that emphasises the intrinsic value of individual objects, these interpretations fail to address the extent to which the poem emphasises the relationships and the interactions between objects and words. As Case points out, when poems such as “The Red Wheelbarrow” are read out of context, interpretations of Williams’s poetry tend to miss the tension and the dynamism at the heart of his verse:

> The selective reprinting of lyric passages such as “By the Road to the Contagious Hospital” and “The Red Wheelbarrow,” divorced from their context, has given most students of American poetry a partial picture of Williams’s work, devoid of the tension that animates a text like *Spring and All*. (Case, 85)

Even regardless of context, it is apparent that many interpretations of “The Red Wheelbarrow” neglect to recognise the tension and the relationships between “things” at the heart of the poem. Leicht makes some progress in this direction, examining the way in which Williams’s use of enjambment within this poem can be seen as symbolic of the balance between individual liberty and collective responsibility that he thinks must exist within a democratic society:

> Enjambment, the unexpected line-break in a poem, can function to separate units from one another, and thus to highlight the individuality of each unit. However, enjambment also has the effect of drawing our attention to the fact that individual units are related. The conspicuous link between lines and stanzas could also be read as providing a metaphor for how individuals hang together in a tight, close-knit, organic society. (Leicht, 204)
Despite this, in his overall emphasis on the significance of individual freedom, Leicht underemphasises the significance of the relationships between objects and words within the poem. Charles Altieri, however, does not. In his book *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (1989), he questions “why begin with that abstracting opening clause, if one is committed to the dominant force of the particular images?” (232). To put it another way, how can we interpret the poem as a symbol for individualistic American liberal democracy when the opening lines, “so much depends/upon” (*CP1*, 224) so plainly allude to the interdependence and heteronomy of individuals?

Indeed, while the poem is commonly held up as an example of Williams’s economical use of imagery, many of Williams’s words are not necessary to the individual image. Rather, they can be seen as meaningful only in the context of a series of diverse and overlapping relationships. In the second stanza, for example, Williams’s establishes one image, only to playfully dissolve it into another. The first line evokes the image of “a red wheel”. The second line, however, contradicts this initial image, replacing it instead with

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a red wheel} \\
\text{barrow} \quad (\text{*CP1*, 224)}
\end{align*}
\]

This word play demonstrates, firstly, that Williams’s use of imagery is neither as static nor as photographic as Leicht would have us believe. Secondly, and most importantly, it shows us that an image, or an object, gains meaning only when viewed within a wider context of relations. Between the first and second line, the word “wheel” shifts from noun to adjective, and the adjective “red” moves from describing the “wheel” to describing the “wheel / barrow” (*CP1*, 224). The wheel loses both its colour and its autonomy as, in an instant, it becomes a mere constituent of a larger machine, a larger visual image and a more complex semantic structure. A word, in this sense, holds no fixed or inherent meaning or value, but instead takes on a variety of roles determined by its relationships with the words around it. To a subtler degree, by splitting the word “rainwater” over two lines in the second stanza, Williams creates two very similar, though distinct, images: a wheelbarrow “glazed with rain” (*CP1*, 224) and a wheelbarrow
Thus, Williams emphasises the interdependence and heteronomy of even the most seemingly individual and discrete units of language. Indeed, at times, words seem to serve little purpose other than to interact with one another. In the third stanza, for example, the word “white” seems to be largely chosen to create a sense of stanzaic unity through assonance:

beside the white
chickens (CP1, 224)

This example challenges the notion that the goal of the poem is solely to evoke a photographic fidelity that respects the innate qualities of Williams’s chosen objects. One could question: are the chickens white for their own sake, or are they white so that the stanza, held together by the assonance of the “I” sound, feels like a coherent whole? While this may sound like a trivial question, it is this balance between respect for particulars and the necessity for an overarching poetic cohesion that is central to Williams’s poetic experimentation and his understanding of democratic society. I argue that, far from highlighting the intrinsic value of the elemental, atomistic individual, the poem highlights the inevitable interdependence and interpenetration of even the most basic individual elements.

Such a reading highlights the reductiveness of Leicht’s photographic analogy, which is posited upon the assumption of the static and objective nature of Williams’s imagery. However, that does not mean that the analogy has to be abandoned altogether. I have argued that Williams does not merely present a static, objective and unmediated representation of reality, but neither, of course, does photography. Leicht’s analogy both underemphasises the role of both the poetic and the photographic eye and overemphasises the discrete and “elemental” nature of the object. On the contrary, even the most seemingly realist or “straight” photography, as Leicht puts it, does not merely offer immediate access to the thing (183). Stieglitz himself said that his own photographs “are a picture of the chaos in the world, and of my relationship to that chaos. My
prints show the world’s constant upsetting of man’s equilibrium, and his eternal battle to reestablish it” (14). A photographer such as Stieglitz cannot distance himself from the objects that he captures; he must participate actively in defining and establishing the boundaries and relationships between the objects. The boundaries that distinguish one object from another within photographs (whether blurred or made more sharp and discrete) are inevitably imposed by the camera and the photographer, and the manner in which the photographer represents these boundaries has a significant impact on how the viewer understands the relationship between forms. For example, a comparison of Stieglitz’s 1903 photograph of the New York Flatiron building (see figure 6) with Walter Gropius’s 1928 photograph of the same building (see figure 7) evokes two very different impressions about the relationship between the human, the city and the natural world. While Stieglitz’s more pictorialist style emphasises the natural softness of even the most artificial man-made structure, suggesting a unity of the urban environment and the natural word, Gropius’s modernist photograph, with its hard lines and dramatic angles, emphasises the forceful power of modern architecture. While Stieglitz blurs the boundaries between the building, the trees, the snow and the sky, Gropius portrays the structure in terms of a sole heroic feature on the blank canvas of the white sky.
If we are to describe “The Red Wheelbarrow” through the analogy of photography, it is clear that the poem shares more in common with Stieglitz’s photograph than with Gropius’s. There is no denying that the poem strives to faithfully represent a series of common objects. What is at question is the manner in which Williams represents the elements that both distinguish and connect these objects. As I have demonstrated, “The Red Wheelbarrow” dramatises the profound interconnectedness of even the most static objects; it is a poem in which objects do not stand alone but “depend” upon one another at the most fundamental level. The rain-glazed wheelbarrow, like Stieglitz’s fog-shrouded Flatiron building, seems inextricably interconnected with the objects around it. As Case points out, in contrast to the traditional static “elemental” interpretations of “The Red Wheelbarrow”, the poem actually emphasises the dynamic and shifting interrelationship between forms, reader and poet:
the red wheelbarrow is not a static emblem of everydayness, but an object glimpsed by a moving eye, recorded by a working mind. In the context in which Williams placed it, the red wheelbarrow is a moving picture… This movement of the perceiving eye and the working mind among the objects of the world reflects the Deweyan belief in the essentially interactive, interdependent nature of subjects and objects, a belief that dissolves any absolute boundaries between them (Case, 91-92).

Thus, if the analogy between Williams's poetics and the medium of photography shows us anything at all, it is that the idea of the individual “thing” is largely meaningless outside a larger system of relationships. The existence of the “wheelbarrow” is dependent on the simple constituent machines (the wheel and the inclined plane) that combine to make it; the words (“wheel” and “barrow”) that merge together over the gulf of an enjambment to form a compound; the photographic eye of the poet who identifies and names the objects; and, later, the eye of the reader in whose mind the enjambed compound is once again reforged to form an image. As Dewey argues in his book *Experience and Nature* (1828), it is only through collaborative and social processes that “events turn into objects; things with a meaning” (166). In this sense, Williams represents things, not as individual or discrete objects in their own right but as constituents that are defined by their ability to connect, interact and combine in various ways (linguistically, aurally and visually) to form a number of larger structures. If we are to assume, as Leicht does, and as Williams himself states, that the political poet works by “showing the things themselves in action”, by creating upon the page formal analogies for larger social and political structures, then we can say that “The Red Wheelbarrow” serves primarily to deconstruct the American myth of the autonomous and atomistic “individual” by demonstrating the underlying constituent nature of even the most seemingly elemental units.
And yet, while Williams’s early poetry does seem to emphasise the interrelation and interdependence of individual relationships, it also seeks to resist any sense of totalising unity. Williams arguably achieves this balance quite successfully in his “Young Sycamore” (1927). The poem depicts a tree growing through the crack in a footpath:

I must tell you
this young tree
whose round and firm trunk
between the wet

pavement and the gutter
(where water
is trickling) rises
bodily

into the air with
one undulant
thrust half its height— (CP1, 266)

Once again, Williams challenges the notion of singular and discrete or individual units; even the pavement, symbolic of all that is solid, discrete and man-made, is fragmented by the natural force of the growing tree. Furthermore, the poem blurs the line between unity and plurality as the singular trunk of the young tree divides repeatedly into thinner and more numerous branches. This image subverts the Imagist trope of the discrete “thing”, instead suggesting the near-infinite divisibility of any material object into smaller and potentially conflicting components:

 dividing and waning

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33 “The Red Wheelbarrow”, I suspect, holds such a prominent position within the canon largely due to its sense of internal coherence and unity. However, it is important to notice that most of Williams’s other poems of the time were by no means as neat.
sending out
young branches on
all sides—

hung with cocoons—
it thins
till nothing is left of it
but two

eccentric knotted
twigs
bending forward
hornlike at the top (CP1, 266–267)

If we are to take it as a symbol of social and political structure, one might assume the image of a tree suggests the need for the sublimation of individuality in service of a larger social hierarchy. This would not be a new motif; an 1862 lithograph by N. Medal Shafer, “Diagram of the Federal Government and American Union”, shows the distinctly arborescent hierarchy of authority that still defines the United States government, in which the supreme authority of the constitution is maintained by the three branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial, which are further subdivided into smaller constituents (see figure 8). However, the image of the tree as a model of social or governmental structure inevitably implies a society based on hierarchy, uniformity and homogeneity. Though such a formal structure does emphasise the need for collective responsibility over individual autonomy, Williams seems dissatisfied by the neat, linear hierarchy implicit within such a form.
Indeed, what is most significant about “Young Sycamore” is that Williams manages to subvert the implicit hierarchy of his chosen image. While the structure of the poem is indeed based upon the shape of the tree, it consciously resists the neat uniformity of this structure by emphasising an incompleteness and non-hierarchical nature. As many critics have noticed, the poem itself is structured around an incomplete clause. In *American Poetry and the Twentieth Century* (1976), Richard Gray summarises:

All of the poem from the third line on ('whose round and firm trunk') is a subordinate clause; Williams never returns to the main clause of the first two lines; the reader is consequently left (whether he is consciously aware of the reasons for it or not) with
feelings of openness and incompleteness utterly appropriate in a world governed by change. (186)

It is significant that the noun that never receives a qualifying verb is “tree”, the very noun that ought to signify the completeness and unity of the poem:

I must tell you
this young tree
whose round and firm trunk
between the wet (CP1, 266)

The effect is a displacement of the centre of authority. In “Young Sycamore”, lines emerge from one another and take on a life of their own, never seeming to return to complete the original phrase. They are related, connected, and yet never form a coherent whole; they are never subservient to a single overarching structure.

Such a poetic form is consonant with Dewey’s assertion that a peaceful democratic society is founded, not on a unanimous and unified will, but upon a multitude of overlapping common interests. As Caspay summarises:

Dewey’s account of multiple common interests, arrived at through deliberation and political struggle, will be distinguished from Rousseau’s idea of a single a priori general will, with its decidedly illiberal overtones… Dewey is not advocating a unitary state. (13–14)

Dewey understood democratic society as a web of overlapping mutual relationships between individuals or groups, with no distinct centre of authority. He writes in his 1916 essay “Force, Violence and Law” that “the energy of the world is plural . . . there are different centers of force” (The Middle Works, 212). In a similar sense, in “Young Sycamore”, Williams distorts what is otherwise a straightforward motif of arborescent hierarchical authority and turns it into a non-hierarchical metaphor for a truly pluralistic society. Though a sense of interrelation and cohesion are important to Williams, it is formed, not from any central unity, but through a series of
interconnected relationships. As such, the form of “Young Sycamore” both creates and resists cohesion and unity. As I demonstrate later in this chapter, Williams’s democracy, like Dewey’s, is one that constantly and diligently resists ideals of totality, fixity, completeness, unity and perfection. Williams shares Dewey’s assertion, in “Philosophy and Democracy”, that a free society is one in which “there is real uncertainty and contingency”, one that is perpetually “incomplete and in the making” (The Middle Works, 51). Williams is by no means a utopian; unlike many modernists he holds no illusions that his poetic form might hold the secret of a perfect political structure. For Williams and Dewey, democracy, like poetry, is an ongoing conversation that must, for the good of humanity, remain forever incomplete.

III. Social Sympathies in the 1930s

I have spoken so far about wheelbarrows, chickens and sycamores. But it was in the 1930s, in the wake of the 1929 New York Stock Exchange crash, that Williams’s personal and poetic writing became more overtly political. As a physician catering primarily to the working class immigrant community of Rutherford, New Jersey, Williams had significant firsthand experience of the catastrophic impact that the recklessness of the market, which culminated in the Great Depression, was having on the common American. As a consequence, Williams became increasingly disillusioned with the individualistic rationality of liberal capitalism. In a 1936 letter to The Partisan Review, Williams blamed the country’s economic instability on

> the essential good humor of the American democratic spirit which permits the brutality of the self-seeker to go its way in the perhaps misguided notion that essential democracy will triumph finally. (SL, 157)

While Williams’s “America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry” conflates democracy with individual liberty, here democracy is presented as synonymous with the uninhibited laissez-faire

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34 It is this humility, among other things, that would later distinguish Williams from his close contemporary, Ezra Pound.
capitalism that lead to the Great Depression. In his novel *White Mule*, published a year after the letter, Williams expresses his distrust for the stock market through the character of Joe Stecher.  

For Joe, and no doubt for Williams, the stock market represents a “swindle” (*WM*, 241), a means of acquiring wealth from others without providing anything valuable in return:

> There’s only one way to get money honestly, and that’s to work for it. If you don’t it has to come out of some other poor sucker’s pocket. That’s why I don’t like the stockmarket. It’s a swindle. (*WM*, 241)

Like his friend and contemporary, Ezra Pound, Williams became increasingly suspicious of modern banking institutions and wary of the modern abstraction of money from any meaningful notion of value. In a 1935 review of Pound’s recent Cantos, Williams writes:

> Usury—the work of double-crossing intellectual bastards in and out of government and the church—rules the world and hides the simple facts from those it torments for a profit. The poet sees, links together and discloses in the symmetry of his work this bastardy of all ages. (*SE*, 167)

As Alec Marsh demonstrates in *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams and the Spirit of Jefferson*, both Williams and Pound were heavily influenced by the ideas of Jeffersonianism, particularly its critique of modern finance capitalism:

> The poets’ Jeffersonianism made them sharply aware of the social contradictions of modernization, and this committed them—in different ways—to a highly politicized, often polemical poetry that criticized finance capitalism and its institutions—notably banks—in the strongest terms. (1)

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35 The Stechers are a family of half-German half-Norwegian immigrants to America, based on the family of Williams’s wife.
For this reason, both Pound and Williams were drawn to C. H. Douglas’s Social Credit movement: a shared cause that would nonetheless inevitably lead them to adopt dramatically opposing politics:

Pound and Williams, through their work for Social Credit, believed in a form of state capitalism: the critique of capitalism that they share finds its roots in a Populistic version of Jeffersonianism that understood the necessity of government intervention in the market. Pound’s eventual turn to the Italian version of state capitalism, Mussolini’s Fascism, and Williams’s more indigenously American belief in economic democracy derive from the same ideological sources. (165)

While Pound’s politics veered dramatically to the right, Williams developed a guarded affinity with the radical left. Despite Williams’s belief in the need for social economic reform, he presents, as Milton A. Cohen argues in his book Beleaguered Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost and Williams in the 1930s (2010): “the most paradoxical case is his relations with the Left” (148). Although, as his article in The Partisan Review suggests, Williams believed that the economic freedom allowed to the individual by “essential democracy” was “perhaps misguided” (157), Williams was also uncomfortable with any totalising systems, both in terms of politics and poetry. As such, Cohen argues, while Williams had, at times, radical social sympathies he was ultimately averse to the totalising structures of leftist ideology (148). If we continue to take poetic structure as analogous to social structure, as we have been doing, then it is not surprising that the criticism of Williams's poetry from the Left was primarily focused on the lack of structural coordination and overarching logic within his poetry. As Cohen puts it: “Leftist

36 Similarly, in White Mule, while Joe is distrustful of the stock market, he is equally averse to the corruption and greed of the Labour movement. (WM, 241)

37 In Renewing the Left (1996) Harvey M. Teres argues that, throughout the twentieth century, “the left’s ambivalence toward liberal values has also manifested itself in the persistent belief that the left will succeed only when it has built an all-encompassing national organization with enough power and authority to unify oppressed groups and wrest power from the capitalist class.” (6)
reviewers of *Collected Poems* frequently cited the visual emphasis of Williams’s poems and their abrupt and fragmentary quality. Not surprisingly, the critics were put off by these qualities” (158). For example, in a review in the far-left magazine *Dynamo*, Charles Henry Newman criticised Williams’s poetry for “the failure . . . to co-ordinate and organize experience”, arguing that Williams “sees details of poverty but he does not recognize or relate it to its cause” (29). For critics such as Newman, Williams’s failure is a failure to transcend the fragmentary material quality of his subject matter. Such a transcendence would impose a sense of structure or order that might combat the chaos of modern existence.

Perhaps the most iconic and most realised examples of Williams’s socially aware poetry at the time occur in his book *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935). This book presents a number of sympathetic portraits of proletarian existence. However, what prevents a straightforward socialist reading of the book, both at the time of publication and today, is the sheer corporeality with which Williams portrays working-class Americans; the characters that fill the book seem motivated and animated by the physical needs of their bodies rather than by their emotions or intellects. In his 2007 essay “Critical Portraits: Working Class Corporeality in Williams’s Poems of the 1930s”, Brian Brodhead Glaser argues that the materialistic representation of the American proletariat allowed Williams to achieve a critical distance from them:

Poems for Williams were validated by their structure, their bodies. But the bodies in his proletarian poems are not self-validating—they cannot be, because they are all corporeality without corresponding capacity for reflection. These bodies are merely animated; and what animates them is external and unquestioned. They seem to physically desire, perhaps even need, work, but not to own its value to them, or to be capable of taking responsibility for the labors they are absorbed by. (Glaser, 128)

This echoes the criticism that Williams received from the radical Left in the 1930s. Both claim that Williams’s poetry is unable to transcend the material particulars of proletarian existence in order to offer any meaningful source of structural empowerment. Williams’s poetry offers nothing but the material. While this may be so, these criticisms entirely miss the point of *An
Williams is actively trying to deconstruct. The non-corporeal self-reflection that Glaser longs for in the book is a direct legacy of a humanist tradition that emphasises the improvement of human life through rational, abstracted thought: a humanism that, in many ways, has served as a form of structural oppression of the working classes since the Enlightenment. By contrast, Williams uses *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* to invoke a political celebration of the corporeal and the rough, temporal and fragile nature of human subjectivity. In a letter written to Marianne Moore, who also criticised the book for its roughness and lack of unifying logic, Williams writes:

> In too much refinement there lurks a sterility that wishes to pass too often for purity when it is anything but that. Coarseness for its own sake is inexcusable, but a Rabelaisian sanity requires that the rare and the fine be exhibited as coming like everything else from the dirt. There is no incompatibility between them. (SL, 156)

While Glaser’s observation that *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* portrays the working class as primarily corporeal is beyond doubt, I contend that the book does not frame this corporeality as a deficiency of the lower classes, nor as a justification or cause for their oppression; rather, it constitutes a reassessment of the very notion of materiality itself. Within the book, corporeality is presented as a positive and redeeming trait, while its antithesis (the illusion of a stable, disembodied and autonomous human subject) is presented as harmful to democratic society. This is most evident within “The Yachts”, a poem that represents a fleet of pristine yachts, almost unanimously read by critics as a symbol of the upper classes, racing unheeded through a sea of agonised, fragmented and tortured working class bodies. Within the poem, the stability, perfection and unity of the yachts provide stark contrast to the fragile, corporeal working-class Americans. Portrayed as feats of engineering, the yachts are “fleckless” and “well made”, devoid of the physical imperfections of the common human body:

> as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and naturally to be desired. Now the sea which holds them
is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.

Today no race. The wind comes again. The yachts
move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas. (CP1, 389)

The yachts, with their smooth, flawless hulls, can be read as analogous to the traditional
humanist image of the individual as solid, discrete and autonomous. More specifically, within the
context of 1930s America, the yachts demonstrate the extent to which such an understanding of
the modern American citizen as individualistic, autonomous and disconnected could wreak
havoc upon the vulnerable classes of society. While the yachts may be unmoved by the impact of
the ocean, the unstable and permeable working-class bodies that constitute the ocean have no
choice but to face the implications of sharing a world with the yachts:

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering in the mind,
the whole sea becomes an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skilful yachts pass over. (CP1, 389)
Williams repositions the unstable ocean, commonly a source of fear and tension within American literature, as a sympathetic image. The poem enacts a transformation of the reader’s attitude towards the corporeal, as the heroic, disembodied yachts are revealed as unnatural antagonists. The physically flawless yachts are demonised by Williams due to their reluctance or inability to engage within the corporeal world. In this sense, they can be seen as analogous to both the traditional humanist ideal of the abstracted human subject, as well as its modern articulation as the detached, rational self-concerned individual envisioned by market capitalism that was, at the time, wreaking havoc on countless American lives. Within the poem, we are presented with two understandings of human identity. On the one hand is the yacht, signifying the rational humanist subject. With its impenetrable hull, it embodies a Cartesian separation from the material world and, with it, a sense of carelessly solipsistic individualism. Its perfection represents the humanist fantasy of unity, stability and control that through the power of humankind’s rationality enables human existence to be refined and perfected. On the other hand, the vague forms within the seething ocean represent humanity as seen by Williams and, indeed, by Dewey, who takes as a fundamental premise of his enquiry that “Man is within nature, not a little god outside” (Experience and Nature, 434). This human subject is imperfect, fragmented and subject to natural flux and decay. The first one is, for Williams, nothing more than the cause of alienation, inequality and suffering. Compared to this, the portrayal of the human as corporeal within An Early Martyr and Other Poems suggests the capacity for perpetual change upon which both Dewey and Williams’s understandings of a healthy democratic society are based.

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38 In a 1929 letter, in response to Ezra Pound’s glib suggestion that Williams travelled to Europe to spend time with a “human being” for once, Williams explicitly demonstrates that he had a distinctly different idea of what constitutes a human being: “The twenty five dollars I enclosed were paid me by a Jew named Katz. His wife had a baby last week. They own a steam laundry there. This is her third son. She leaned on the bed post and screamed enough to waken the saints—it was a Sunday afternoon. Before the baby came I made her go to bed. She shit on the bed. Then she bled all over the sheet. It leaked through the mattress [sic]. When a child is born the scrotum is—a male child—swollen and loose: like yours on a hot day at Lago de [sic] Garda” (58).
IV. Control, Eugenics and the Politics of Corporeality

The ruthless perfection of the yachts is no doubt ominous within early-twentieth-century America. Within the context of 1930s American society, the humanist ideal of the human subject as “a little god outside” of nature went hand in hand with a desire to control, refine and perfect humanity through the science of eugenics and the ideology of streamlining. The idea of the perfect democratic subject as a seemingly rational, empowered individual inevitably lead to the rejection and marginalisation of all those who did seem to fit this definition. Christina Codgell explains in her book *Eugenic Design* (2004):

> In the first few decades of the twentieth century and continuing into the 1930s, eugenics became widely popular by adding onto this solid ideological base the allure of control: control over evolutionary process, control over social problems plaguing middle- and upper-class whites and even control over the future. (5)

Within North America, the growing field of eugenic research, which reached a peak in popularity in the 1930s, developed alongside the movement of streamlining. Developed by Norman Bel Geddes, streamlining arose as an ideology that framed the scientific developments of the modern era as a valuable opportunity to accomplish the post-Enlightenment humanist project of refining human society and culture into its most efficient and rational form. Inevitably, both of these projects evolved, as Mark Haller puts it in his book *Eugenics: Hereditary Attitudes in American Thought* (1984) as “a scientific basis for a belief that those from the best race, class, and family should rule and should breed”, a dogma that allowed the powerful to justify their oppression of those they deemed scientifically inferior (6). Within the discourses of streamlining and eugenics, the social and democratic ideals valued by Williams were considered dangerously sentimental. As Haller explains:

> The popular notion that everyone ought to participate in government appeared to [Eugenics advocates] naïve; the American hope that the American environment and education would open opportunities so that even the lowliest could rise represented unscientific sentimentality. (6)
Within this context, the image of the pristine, perfect yachts passing dispassionately over the fragmented bodies that make up the sea can easily be read as Williams’s critique of an emerging ideological climate that privileged eugenic perfection over social and democratic inclusiveness.

Such a reading is quite likely justifiable; as a medical professional, Williams was certainly aware of the rise of eugenics within the American scientific community. As early as 1928, he had satirised American society’s growing infatuation with eugenic ideology in his essay “The Conservation of the Human Subspecies”:

> It is quite conceivable, my friends, unless we arm ourselves against such an eventuality, that within a measurable span of years the sperm on which we thus naively rely for our continuance may so diminish as in the end completely to disappear from the earth… It is not within the scope of this discussion to say whether this would be of cosmic benefit or otherwise. (SE, 281)

While parodying the discourse of eugenics, Williams’s essay also makes a subtle reference to his own position, ironically suggesting that the artistic appreciation of the material (plainly, one of the defining features of Williams’s poetics) represented what the eugenics movement saw as a dangerous sentimentality towards imperfect forms of the inferior lower classes:

> A democracy of understanding has certain prerogatives which it will exercise: accessibility of sentiment, an appreciation for the material thrown up by the breakdown of discipline in the lower classes (emphasis mine); but it has this glaring defect, that it cannot discover a satisfactory selective mechanism by which to discriminate in favor of the higher biological types. (SE, 283–284)

Once again, that which is material is positioned in opposition to the troubling humanist ideal of human perfectibility. Indeed, in *An Early Martyr and Other Poems*, Williams celebrates the corporeal and the fragile. The book is full of broken and imperfect things: the “face like a mashed blood orange” in “Item” (*CP1*, 379), the “wrecked car” in “View of a Lake” (*CP1*, 380), the “waves like words, all broken” in “The sadness of the sea” (*CP1*, 383), the woman with a nail
cutting her foot in “Proletariat Portrait” (CP1, 385), the “broken pieces of the city” in “Young Love” (CP1, 391), dead D. H. Lawrence in “An Elegy for D. H. Lawrence” (CP1, 392), “broken teeth” in “The Catholic Bells” (CP1, 379), and the suggestion of autovehicular violence and fragmentation in “The Right of Way (The Auto Ride)” (CP1, 398). Furthermore, poems such as “To be Hungry is to be Great” (CP1, 400) and “To a Poor Old Woman” celebrate the joy of non-transcendent bodily existence.

TO A POOR OLD WOMAN

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her (CP1, 383)

Here, hunger is not an embarrassing or shameful reminder of one’s own embodiment, but a valuable and pleasurable means of engaging with the physical world. As Marsh argues:

> It is about wealth and poverty, it is about enjoying the fruits of the earth. Here good taste tastes good, and the old woman, who is poor in money, is “comforted, solaced,” and, for a moment, made wealthy by the jouissance in the fruit. (39)

Williams himself is not, as Glaser suggests, critically detached from such pleasure. He himself takes a parallel physical pleasure in the manipulation of rhythm in his poetic lines through a playful use of enjambment:

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her (CP1, 383)

The woman is not admonished for her lack of consciousness; rather, these poems celebrate an enjoyment of the physical aspects of life that, in contrast to the disembodied value placed on money in liberal capitalist America, is meaningfully connected to the material properties of the written and spoken word. However, to say that Williams and the “Poor Old Woman” maintain a meaningful and pleasurable relationship with the physical world is not to say that Williams simply glamorises the physicality of proletariat existence; despite the glib title of “To be Hungry is to be Great”, the suffering within this book, particularly the destruction of bodies in the wake of the yachts, clearly demonstrates that social inequality is a crippling reality. However, by emphasising the fragility, the materiality of the world, Williams offers the possibility of renewal, growth, decay and change. The cast of broken, fragile and imperfect things that comprise An Early Martyr and Other Poems reinforce Dewey’s liberating notion that ours is “a universe in which there is real uncertainty and contingency” (The Middle Works, 51), a universe not made up of autonomous, critically distant and rational individuals, but fragile, corporeal and hungry people, a universe in which even the most systematic oppression may be temporary and even the most perfectly constructed yacht can sink.

V. Affectations of Authority and the Mutability of Truth

In his 1939 book Freedom and Culture, Dewey situated his dedication to uncertainty and contingency, and his subsequent aversion to ideas of linguistic, philosophical, social and political unity, in terms of a specific stance towards fascist politics: “uniformity of belief is possible only when a dictator has power” (128). At the same time, Williams’s initial distrust of poetic ideals of unity, uniformity and refinement was similarly refocused into a specific disdain for what he describes as the “affectation of authority” within the writing of his contemporaries. In a letter to Horace Gregory in 1944, Williams identifies this trait in T. S. Eliot’s writing:
I don’t know what it is, if I have not defined it, about Eliot that is so slimy. It is the affectation of authority, an offensive leaking from above so that the water is polluted whenever he appears in print. (SL, 225)

In the same year, in a letter to Robert McAlmond, Williams accuses Pound of having this very same quality:

Pound has it in the evocative power he has over words… To me it is an immoral quality. I suppose Napoleon and Alexander had it to perfection. It makes a man think he is better than anyone else. But unless he uses it for others, to make himself a servant in some sense for humanity, to man, to those about him who need him—he turns out to be a selfish bastard like Pound, like Napoleon. (SL, 223)

Contextually, Williams’s aversion to those who would use language as a source of authority over others was certainly justified. While his letter speaks of Napoleon and Alexander the Great, it is of little doubt that the figures of Mussolini and Hitler, with whom Pound was becoming increasingly infatuated, were weighing on his mind. The powerful rhetoric of these figures, and the resulting atrocities committed throughout Europe in the name of national solidarity and racial purity, demonstrated the powerful and horrific capacity of language to control and unite large groups of people.

Whereas Williams was repelled by this aspect of the power of language, Pound was inspired by it. As Marsh puts it, while Williams’s poetics embraces multiplicity, “temperamentally, Pound is for unity” (218). In his book *The Poetics of Fascism* (1996), Paul Morrison explicitly links Pound’s authoritarian political ideals to his equally didactic understanding of language:

Poststructuralist readings of Pound tend to attribute his fascism and anti-Semitism to a taste for fixity, totalization, and referential stability, everything that registers itself in his resistance to an ethos of tropological mobility. (Morrison, 9)
According to Morrison, Pound’s resistance to tropological mobility stems from his concern that modern liberal capitalism (and, in Pound’s mind, the Jewish race) had ruptured the connection between currency and human existence. As such, Pound’s antisemitism and his dedication to fascist ideology both emerge from a desire for semantic fixity:

The ascendancy of what Pound terms “unconvertible paper”… for instance, corresponds historically to the development of abstract or non-referential art. Pound’s economic project, which is to return the signs of wealth to their material basis in human productivity, in work done and goods produced, is one with his aesthetic project, which is to re-establish the lost connection between the order of words and the world, to repair the chasm between signifier and signified. (Morrison, 18)

Pound’s fascism, in this sense, stems from his modernist utopianism, the legacy of Enlightenment humanism, which is articulated in a need to impose structure and order upon what he sees as the mounting chaos of the modern world:

Pound seeks to impose his “will to order”—actually a brand of Enlightenment Reason—on Modernity and, failing that, accedes to its conquest by a yet more wilful Fascism. (Morrison, 225)

For Pound, the dream of a social and economic stability and unity that could combat the chaos of the modern market could only be achieved through the unifying will of a powerful leader. It is, thus, no surprise that during the 1930s and 1940s, Pound’s Cantos are replete with an endless cast of humanist supermen: strong, wilful masculine figures such as Mussolini, Thomas Jefferson, Odysseus, John Adams and Confucius, all of whom transcend their historical contexts to impose a sense of order and direction upon the world. In the words of J. J. Wilhelm in his book Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years (1994), Pound’s favoured subjects “were doers, who stood against the backdrop of inept or inert politicians around them” (97). In his Eleven New Cantos (1934), Pound presents the figure of Thomas Jefferson as a hero who, in the words of J. J. Wilhelm “seems to have dominated not only his own inner passions but history itself” (98). He describes how:
Thomas Jefferson in Cantos 31–34 is trying to build a country… Like the Odysseus of
Canto 1, who is the archetypal doer, he is polumetis, a Homeric word that Pound liked to
use: polymatic, interested in almost everything, with the kind of curiosity that impels the
race. The cantos are presented as a collage, with one event or letter overlapping another:
an ideogram of action, showing the “direction of the will” at its finest. (98)

Apart from their polymathy, their masculinity, their ability to transcend the forces of their
historical context and their intermittent anti-Semitism, one of the most defining features of the
mythologised “doers” inhabiting Pound’s Cantos is their command of language; they all seem to
possess that quality that Williams referred to as the “affectation of authority”. For Pound, the
perfect leader (and by extension, the perfect poet) should have the precision of language to “re-
establish the lost connection between the order of words and the world” (Morrison, 18). This is
no more evident than in Pound’s portrayal of Benito Mussolini. In his Guide to Kulchur (1938),
Pound describes Mussolini as a man whose very nature suggests direct and precise
communication: “the speed with which his real emotion is shown in his face, so that only a
crooked man cd. misinterpret his meaning and his basic intention” (105). Within Pound’s Cantos,
Mussolini’s presence as a solid, eternal and immutable figure, capable of remaining accountable
to his word, reaffirms once more Pound’s desire for stable definitions and fixed identities. In
Canto 78, Pound quotes Mussolini directly:

“wherein is no responsible person
having a front name, a hind name and an address” “not a right but a duty”
those words will stand uncancelled,
“Presente!” (499)

The suggestion that Mussolini’s words shall remain “uncancelled” suggests both that language,
and that a human leader, can be perfect and eternal, capable of transcending his historical
context and returning stability to the chaotic modern world.39

39 In her book Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime (2008), Jennifer Wawrzinek
attributes the twentieth-century myth of the “great leader” to a need for stability and unity on both a social and
That Williams was appalled by Pound’s growing infatuation with fascism is clear from a letter he wrote to James Laughlin in 1939, complaining of the extent to which Pound’s dedication to abstract notions of economic and social stability, combined with his underlying will to control and “affectations of power”, were leading his friend to justify increasingly cruel acts of war:

> The logicality of fascist rationalization is soon going to kill him. You can’t argue away wanton slaughter of innocent women and children by the neoscholasticism of a controlled economy program. (SL, 184)

Fittingly, Williams’s own approach to ideas of language and political authority was exactly the opposite of Pound’s. In the very same year that he criticised Pound’s excessive “rationalization”, Williams, in his essay “Against the Weather” called for a poetics and a politics based on instability, perpetual revolution and the mutability of truth:

> The mutability of the truth, Ibsen said it. Jefferson said it. We should have a revolution of some sort in America every ten years. The truth has to be redressed, re-examined, reaffirmed in a new ode. There has to be new poetry. But the thing is that the change, the greater material, the altered structure of the inevitable revolution must be in the poem, in it. It must shine in the structural body of it. (SE, 217)

While Pound believed that the role of the poet was to offer a stable voice of authority in a chaotic world, Williams had an altogether more pragmatic understanding of the relationship between truth, language and politics. For Williams, language is not just a means for communicating one’s views, opinions or perceptions, but a form of active participation with

subjective level: “The myth of der Führer (the leader) that was generated around Adolf Hitler, provided the ideal means through which this defeated and fragmented nation could reconfigure its sense of national unity and greatness—in other words, to reconsolidate the boundaries of German identity. It is this same process (one that overcomes a crisis of subjectivity in order to reinstate the autonomous individual) that we find in the traditional sublime” (20).
one’s environment and with those who share it. Similarly, in his book *Democracy and Education* (1915), Dewey instructed his reader to:

> Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude towards your experience changing . . . The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated [which] requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it. (5–6).

While Pound, in his dedication to the universal signified, would see this as a central problem of language, both Dewey and Williams perceive this as language’s greatest strength, particularly within a democratic society. Since language is a social process and the very nature of truth is formed collectively through discussion, no individual’s views can ever remain “uncancelled”. This, for Dewey, is the nature of democracy: the “adjudication of social differences by discussion and exchange of views” (*Democracy and Education*, 273). And, necessarily, for Williams at least, this adjudication of differences must be an unending process. In *In The American Grain* (1956) Williams warns of the dangers of unanimity of opinion:

> No opinion can be trusted; even the facts may be nothing but a printer’s error; but if a verdict be unanimous, it is sure to be a wrong one, a crude rush of the herd which has carried its object before it like a helpless condoning image. (*AG*, 189-190)

It is perhaps for this reason that Williams dedicates an entire chapter of *In The American Grain* to America’s third Vice President, Aaron Burr, a figure notorious for his political ruthlessness, for killing his long-term rival Alexander Hamilton in a duel and, later in life, for the accusations of treason levelled against him. For Williams, however, Burr’s infamy stemmed largely from his refusal to conform to popular or conventional opinion. He writes: “This is the charge against him: that he proposed nothing yet refused to abide loyally by the established order” (*AG*, 196). Rather than framing this “charge” as a failing of Burr’s, William argues that such a dedication to discord is central to a successful democracy:
Perhaps Burr carried into politics an element of democratic government, even a major element, those times were slighting—no matter what, an element so powerful and so rare that he was hated for it, feared—and loved. (AG, 190)

Williams plainly values those figures like Burr who, by contrast to Pound’s “uncancelled” leader, introduce discord and uncertainty, rather than stability and certainty, into the adjudications of differences that is American democracy.

Pound’s idea of a perfectible poetic language, a stable and eternal state, and a solid, immutable leader was, for Williams, merely an “affectation of authority”, used to mask the truly profound atrocities of the modern fascist state. In stark contrast to Pound, Williams’s writing emphasises both his own mutability as well as the mutability and instability of even his most admired political leaders. This is no more evident than in his opera The First President (1939). In the opera, the heroic figure of George Washington, whom Williams once described in his essay “The American Background” as “the blameless leader, the great emblem” (SE, 138) and in In The American Grain as “too strong to want to evade anything” (141) is now portrayed in a distinctly antiheroic sense: “often tired and always finding it difficult to express himself” (ML, 318). In one particularly striking scene, Washington endears himself to his company, not through the power of his oratory, nor the strength of his will, but by displaying his own physical limitations and fundamental mutability.

WASHINGTON:
As corroborating testimony of the good disposition in Congress toward the Army let me read to you from a letter.

[He takes out the letter but fails to make it out. He looks toward the light, which seems to have grown dim. The orchestra music has subsided. Then he fumbles in his pocket for his glasses which he brings out with a handkerchief and proceeds to adjust to his eyes. It is the first time he has worn glasses in public. In a pleasant and altogether natural voice he then says:]
You see, I have grown grey in your service.
And now I find myself growing blind.
[The music rises. The assembly is visibly affected, some wiping their eyes, etc. The music mounts to an increasing intensity of dramatic feeling as Washington turns again to his letter. As the curtain falls he is still reading.]

(ML*, 332)

In contrast to the “direction of the will” that possessed Jefferson or the “uncancelled” words of the fascist hero Mussolini, within Pound’s *Cantos*, the speech of Williams’s champion is inhibited by the limits of Washington’s aging body and, ultimately, drowned out by the crowd:

[He pauses and looks around, as if trying to discover who could have written the piece in question. Then he goes on—but nothing more is heard of what he says. (Perhaps a low chorus, expressing the feelings of the assembly, moves contrapuntally to the orchestra.) In any case, nothing more of what he says can be heard distinctly. Washington is seen to be talking, gently or violently, submerged in the music which carries on, pleading or rising at times to a strong note of condemnation of the desire to throw the country into confusion for private ends. Then the music stops as Washington says, in a dramatic pause, suddenly, strongly:]

My God! What can be in your hearts? (ML*, 331)

As a figure of Democracy, Washington is dramatically mutable. And yet, as Williams puts it, for many people “He was the meaning that wrested the fragments of events into a whole” (ML*, 313). As Beck argues, Williams believed that

It is through participation in public discourse that democracy is built, and no one voice or group of voices can be in ascendency if this discourse is to continue. As a consequence of this, however, it seems that the individual contribution must be subsumed into the throng and must to some extent become indistinguishable within it. (27)

Rather than an organising or ordering force, Washington’s speech becomes an embodied and emotive exchange of energies and intensities between himself and the crowd. Williams recognises that, in order for democracy to be truly open and free, in order for it to achieve the “mutability of truth” that prevented authoritarianism, then its leaders, its language, its poetry and its discourse must be understood as temporal, physical and mortal.

199
VI. The Imperfectible Language of Democracy

Morrison draws a parallel between Pound’s fascist ideology and his linguistic dedication to the idea of a “transcendental signified”, a notion of truth situated outside of language that can allow for a semantic and social stability that transcends the chaos of its historical and linguistic context (18). According to Morrison, this is nowhere more evident than in Pound’s attitudes towards translation. He argues that Pound, a prolific translator of a wide range of foreign texts, saw translation as a “labor of fidelity to the signified” and was staunchly opposed to ideas of translatio studii or translatio imperii, early modern traditions in which, through translation, the centre of linguistic authority is relocated in the specificities of a local vernacular. In this sense, Pound understood translation as a means of accessing the universal signified that could transcend the instability of the spoken and written word:

It is against this ideology of the portative—as it is inscribed in both interlingual translation or translation proper and intralingual translation or metaphorical displacement—that Pound advocates a poetics and politics of tropological stability, of fixed addresses and proper names. (Morrison, 22–23)

As we have seen, Pound’s desire for tropological stability stemmed primarily from the idea that the national economy, like a semiotic system, inevitably collapses into the chaotic flux of modern liberal capitalism if not anchored to a stable notion of human value and human labour. However, at the level of language, such stability, like Fascism itself, is inevitably as limiting and oppressive as it is unifying. As Jacques Derrida argues in Writing and Difference (1967), the notion of the transcendental and universal signified to which Pound’s theory of language is dedicated is “an oppression certainly comparable to none other in the world, an ontological or transcendental oppression, but also the origin or alibi of all oppression in the world” (102).

Williams’s own approach to translation is entirely different to Pound’s. His unique approach to both inter- and intralingual translation and its relationship with ideas of social and political
communication is presented most overtly in his book *Yes, Mrs. Williams* (1959). Williams first conceived of the book when he began translating Don Francisco Quevedo’s early modern novella, *The Dog and The Fever* (1626) from Spanish to English with the help of his West Indian immigrant mother, Raquel Hélène Rose Hoheb Williams. Throughout the translating process, Williams surreptitiously made copious notes, recording direct quotations of the unusual, interesting and even mundane things that his mother said in passing. In 1959, nine years after his mother’s death, Williams arranged these fragmented quotations with minimal mediation to form *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, a tribute to his mother that is at once prose, poetry, collage and biography. In contrast to Pound’s dedication to the “transcendental signified”, Williams, in *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, represents language and the process of interlingual translation as physical and performative activities based, not upon the search for a stable, transcendental or universal meaning, but upon an ethos of collaboration, cooperation and recognition of difference. Pound wanted to stabilise language by closing the gap between signifier and signified that had caused, in his mind, the catastrophic abstractions of modern liberal capitalism. In this sense, he sought to anchor his language to a stable and universal sense of meaning and value. In *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, language has none of this power. Language exists as a primarily social process, in which both signifier and signified are grounded within the physical and historical world. From the beginning of the book, Williams established language and meaning as primarily non-transcendent and non-universal phenomena. *The Dog and The Fever*, the novel whose translation forms the central narrative of the book, is portrayed, first and foremost, as a physical and temporal artefact:

> The various owners of the book since 1700 have scribbled their names and a few faded notes among the fly leaves at the front and back. A young librarian, a friend of mine, on taking up the book discovered at once—a thing I hadn’t noticed—that two of the front (flyleaf) pages had been gummed together. (Y, 37)

Similarly, the act of translation is depicted as a physical and collaborative process, subject to the availability of resources, the physical act of writing and the translator’s ability to see adequately in the light:
Before us we usually had the Spanish-English Dictionary, a straight Spanish dictionary, my paper and pencils, her two or three pairs of glasses which she’d try one after the other according to the light, her reading glass and the text. (Y, 38)

As Morrison argues, translation has historically been used as a tool to emphasise the local and non-universal nature of language, a means of escaping the oppressive force of the universalisation of meaning:

It served to relocate the source of linguistic gravity and value, in opposition to the “tyranny” of a “transcendental signified”, in the morphologies of national grammars, in language understood as the material production of sound. (18)

It is in this sense that Williams recognises that meaning is not a pre-existing condition, but rather something that is negotiated by people within the physical world. Through the figure of Mrs. Williams, Williams shows us that even the most basic experiences of reality are inevitably fragile material processes. For the ageing Mrs. Williams, seeing and remembering, like the act of translating itself, are physical labours:

Today just to pass the time, I was just trying to remember all the people that there were in Mayagüez, when the Dodds were living in Ponce… I was trying to squeeze my mind. (Y, 44)

As such, Williams understands that language cannot offer objective truth: “If I speak of the good, not a single word of truth is presumed here—nothing but the words I know and set down for what they may be worth” (Y, 31). More significantly, within the book, such a rejection of universals is inherently political. As his son, William Eric Williams, notes in the 1981 foreword to the book:

I am left with a tremendous curiosity about its reason for being—about the importance of this obscure little woman, this product of a tropical hotbed on a West Indian island, this multinational mongrel gentlewoman transplanted to a north temperate zone suburb of a
major metropolis that was infested with WASP entrepreneurs who cared not a centimo for her religious, social, or cultural background. Who cares? How does this multilingual Francophile senora married to an Anglophile travelling-man citizen of Great Britain rate a book about herself? (Y, ix)

William Carlos Williams not only gives voice to the traditionally marginalised multinational, female immigrant; but through his use of direct quotation, with minimal mediation, he diminishes his own authorial authority and allows his mother to speak for herself. By undermining his own capacity to access universal transcendental meaning through his own language, Williams rejects the “tyranny of the universal signified” which, as Derrida argues, constitutes little more than the universalisation, through language, of the hegemonic will of those in power. By presenting language as a fluid, material and primarily non-transcendent phenomenon, Williams puts himself in a position of vulnerability; like Washington in *The First President*, Williams’s own voice is joined and, at times, overwhelmed by other ideas, meanings, voices and subjectivities.

In one passage of *Yes, Mrs. Williams*, Williams reflects on his mother’s mixed ancestry with the aim of explicitly identifying Western society’s overemphasis on unity and purity as a principal cause of the horrors of the twentieth century: “It is precisely the racial solidarity, the traditional aloofness of the nomadic tribe, the ancient, the classic “purity of race” which forms the basis for Nazi action” (italics Williams’s) (Y, 137). Just as he does in *An Early Martyr and Other Poems*, Williams rejects such notions of human purity; the crude materiality of all humankind is reinforced throughout the book through Mrs. Williams’s constant reference to her own and her friends’ flatulence: “I ate too much, I feel—pough” (Y, 61); “Poor Toledo was pulling hard at a cork when a little wind escaped him. Blup!” (Y, 98); “I can remember a story of my mother-in-law. She would be troubled with gas too. Brummmm, brrrrup” (Y, 98);

She was so old that when she would lean over some wind would come out and she would make a noise, brrrrrrrp! So we would make fun of her: Avriette! tirez nous petez BOOM! le navire est arrive!
(Avriette! Fire us BOOM! the ship has come to port!)
Now don’t you go put that into your book—or I won’t tell you anything. (115)

Fittingly, towards the end of the book, Williams reminds us that even the most seemingly abstracted figures or ideas are, in the end, grounded in the material:

In Spain when they would have a religious procession—the way they used to be—everyone would take off his hat when the Saint was passing. I forget which one it was. But this man was walking with his chest out and his hat on. He was a carpenter, I suppose—the one that made the figures out of wood.
Take off your hat, they said to him, see the Saint is passing. But he swaggered and paid no attention to them. He merely said: Yo lo connosi ciruelo. Ciruelo is a plum tree. He meant he knew the figure—or the Saint—when he was still a tree. (Y, 73)

Within Williams’s work, no figure is immutable; Saints are revealed to be trees, beloved mothers are flatulent and even George Washington is shouted over; human bodies, human minds and human language repeatedly fail. But this failure, this materiality of both human subjectivity and language is seemingly celebrated within Williams’s political poetics. While the perfection of language and the reunion of signifier and signified is the linguistic dream of the Fascist, Democracy, at least within Williams’s poetics, is a condition that not only recognises that such perfection of language is impossible, but celebrates and engages productively with the inevitable linguistic instability that comes with a Deweyan understanding of a universe that rejects “any notion of a perfect or complete reality, finished, existing always the same without regard to the vicissitudes of time” (The Middle Works, 50).

Within this paradigm, the process of translation is shown to be valuable in its own right. The use, and transformation, of language is shown to be an inherently social process, not because it reveals fundamental truths but because it is a performance of sociability and mediating differences. Once again, such an idea can be quite easily aligned with the democratic theories of John Dewey. In Experience and Nature, Dewey argues that communication through language is not
merely a practical exercise of exchanging meaning, but a pleasurable and fulfilling communal activity in itself:

Discourse itself is both instrumental and consumatory. Communication is an exchange which procures something wanted; it involves claim, appeal, order, direction or request, which realizes want at less cost than personal labor exacts, since it procures the cooperative assistance of others. Communication is also an immediate enhancement of life, enjoyed for its own sake (183).

He suggests that the joy of communication comes from the feeling of “merging” one’s own subjectivity with those of others:

For there is no mode of action as fulfilling and as rewarding as is concerted consensus of action. It brings with it a sense of sharing and merging as a whole (184).

In one of the final passages of the book, Mrs. Williams tells the story of her friend, Marguerita, a Mexican immigrant who attends an American church despite not understanding English:

“No,” she says, “but that’s nothing. When they stand up I stand up too. And when they take up a book and open it. Me, too.”
“But you can’t read it,” said Mother.
Marguerita just laughed. “That’s nothing. When they turn the page, I turn the page.” (Y, 143)

For Marguerita, the communal, ritual and interactive nature of language is significantly more important than meaning itself. Language, in this sense, does not reach inwards, or upwards to a higher plane of objective truth, but outwards to form a necessary, albeit imperfect bridge between her and her community. As Beck argues, such social engagement, not the search for meaning, is the primary goal of Williams’s poetics:

Williams’s conversation of mankind conveys meaning through its form, as design, rather than through its message. This aestheticization of communication bypasses the problem of
intelligibility and accessibility by postulating a translinguistic space where shape, sound, color, and movement create a communal culture from the fragments of lived experience.

(34)

As is evident in his 1946 letter to Pound, Williams believes that it is the role of the political poet to show “the things themselves in action” (250). If this is so, then what Williams is showing in Yes, Mrs. Williams is that a truly pluralistic, equal and democratic society is one that emphasises communication and cooperation over stability of meaning (250). Thus Williams’s politics ultimately emphasises fluidity over purity, plurality over unity, mediation of differences over universal truth, and human empathy over humanist rationality.

VII. “So Long As Men Die…”

Charlie Chaplin proclaimed in his 1940 film The Great Dictator:

To those who can hear me, I say—do not despair. The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed - the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress. The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people. And so long as men die, liberty will never perish. (Chaplin)

A remarkably similar sentiment underlies both Williams’s and John Dewey’s linguistic and political ideals, all of which emphasise the “mutability” of truth, language and the human subject as the basis for an open, pluralistic democratic society. For Williams as for Dewey, a poetics and a politics, as well as an understanding of human subjectivity, based on stability and immaterialism will inevitably evolve into authoritarianism. Against this possibility, Williams advocates a poetics and a politics based on renewal, decay and human mortality. The very real limits of the human is a central theme in his poetry and prose, as is the difficulty of efficient communication between humans and, ultimately, the impossibility of a perfect language that would make such communication possible. Just as human subjects cannot be without fault or immutable, poetry, for Williams, can never be perfect or complete. In contrast to Pound, Williams is entirely
sceptical of the notion that any political leader can ever be anything more than a fallible, mutable human being; to have a leader whose words can remain “uncancelled” is antithetical to any form of democratic experience. For Williams, the fragility of the human subject leaves space for change, flux and evolution. Within Williams’s Deweyan understanding of the political landscape, dissenting opinions can overpower the voice of even the most iconic leader, and meaning is something that must be negotiated in a collective, albeit imperfectible, manner.
CHAPTER 5. “WAS I NOT INTERESTED IN MAN?” WILLIAMS AS DOCTOR AND AS POET

In box 45 of the William Carlos Williams papers at the Beinecke library, among the early drafts and notes for Yes, Mrs. Williams, there is a slip of paper; on one side of it, Williams has hastily recorded one of his mother’s anecdotes verbatim:

Machines? You heard about the little French old lady? They were talking about machines and they were saying they were going to make a machine to make the babies. And she said, No, I don’t think so, I think the best way is the old natural way! 40

While the quote in itself is certainly provocative, what is of interest within the context of this chapter lies on the other side of the paper. Upon turning the slip over, it becomes evident that Williams has jotted down his mother’s words on the back of a pathology report from the 11th of January 1932 (see figure 10). The subject of the report is a patient of Williams who was most likely suffering from chronic diarrhea. Williams had ordered his stool sample be tested for parasitic ova. The results of the test, as indicated by the pathology report, were negative. While the cause of the patient’s digestional distress is still unclear, this fading piece of paper does serve as a clear index of Williams’s dual role as both a doctor and a poet. These were two roles that informed and shaped one another throughout Williams’s life. In his autobiography, he writes:

As a writer I have never felt that medicine interfered with me but rather that it was my very food and drink, the very thing which made it possible for me to write. Was I not interested in man? There the thing was right in front of me. I could touch it, smell it. It was myself, naked, just as it was, without a lie telling itself to me in its own terms. (120)

While the doctor and the poet are both “interested in man”, the slip of paper within Williams’s archive serves to highlight two very different approaches to writing about the human subject. On

40 See figure 9. The quote ended up, unaltered, in Yes, Mrs. Williams (47).
one side of the slip, we have the poetic gaze, the autobiographical recording of Williams’s mother’s words, an empathetic attempt to preserve a meaningful memory of a loved one through her unique language. On the other side, we have the medical gaze of the doctor, a gaze that describes through quantification and objectification, a gaze empowered by various technologies (in this case the microscope) to see what the layman’s eye cannot see (in this case, the presence or lack of parasitic ova).

Yet, within discussion of Williams’s work and poetry in general, these two ways of seeing and writing are often conflated. In his introduction to *Medicine and Literature*, entitled “To Look Feelingly: The Affinities of Medicine and Literature” (1982), Edmund D. Pellegrino compares medicine to poetry: “Both are ways of looking at man and both are, at heart, moral enterprises. Both must start by seeing life bare, without averting their gaze” (19). This is no doubt so, but as I demonstrate in this chapter, within the discourse of modern medicine the purported ability of

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41 In fairness, I am deliberately oversimplifying Pellegrino’s statement. He goes on to add “Yet, neither can rest in mere looking. To be authentic they must look with compassion. Medicine without compassion is mere technology, curing without healing; literature without feeling is mere reporting, experience without meaning. Medicine and literature are united in an unremitting paradox: the need simultaneously to stand back from, and yet to share in, the struggle of human life” (19).
the doctor to objectively see life “bare” often serves as an alibi for more pernicious systems of aggression, authority and social control. The figure of the nineteenth and twentieth-century doctor is premised upon humanist ideals of rationality and clarity, as well as upon a subjugating distinction between the disembodied mind of the doctor and the objectified body of the patient. Williams’s purported interest in “man” (or humanity, more precisely) arises from a cosmology of modern medicine that, in the words of N. D. Jewson, is responsible for the “disappearance of the sick man” (622) in favour of a view of the patient as an object that needs to be refined, disciplined and made functional. As such, Williams’s medical writing occupies a complicated relationship with the notion of “man”. Is Williams interested in “man” as a disembodied subjectivity, “man” as a physical composition of organs, or “mankind” as a whole, as a functional and unified society? Who is allowed for in this definition of “man”: women, infants, the disabled, immigrants, the poor? In this chapter, I attempt to answer these questions by examining the representation of medical practice within Williams’s poetry and prose. I look primarily at The Doctor Stories, a collection first published in 1932, in which Williams presents a number of different, at times contradictory, representations of his years as a local physician in Rutherford, New Jersey. I argue that, through these stories, Williams expresses his discomfort with the implicit hierarchies of the doctor-patient relationship, deconstructs and subverts the authority of the modern figure of the doctor, and denaturalises the patriarchal violence, authority and panopticism at the heart of the act of diagnosis. I then move from Rutherford to Paterson, and examine the ways in which Williams’s relationship with more contemporary understandings of the nervous system challenged his position as doctor, in the process allowing him to break down the narratives of authority and unity central to twentieth-century biomedical and modernist discourses. As such, I suggest that Williams’s poetics is not complicit in the cosmology of twentieth-century medical practices, but instead preempts a more contemporary, and perhaps posthumanist, understanding of medicine and poetry that breaks down the barriers and hierarchies between subject and object, doctor and patient, poet and poem.
I. Doctor as Mind, Patient as Body

In his book *Modernism, Medicine and William Carlos Williams* (1995), Hugh T. Crawford characterises the spirit of modernism in terms of the figure of the virtuosic master. He writes:

> The contours of modernism are difficult to chart, but what has emerged… has been a concern for objectivity (and objectification), clarity, efficiency, and cleanliness. The mechanisms necessary to realize these ideals place a great deal of mastery and control in the hands of those in the center of the systems. There was, without a doubt, a utopian impulse to modernism—humankind was to be liberated from the outmoded, the yoke of the past, and so on—but the modern world would be one governed by visionaries. (Crawford, 135–136)

The emblematic figure of the modern visionary that Crawford identifies is the legacy of post-Enlightenment humanist assumptions of the sovereignty of human reasoning and imagination over the material, cultural, technological and natural world. The figure of the modern artist, architect, engineer, poet or doctor is imagined to be capable of exerting utmost authority over his or her medium in order to create an efficient and clear design: a painting, a skyscraper, a poem, a novel or a healthy patient. What makes Williams unique is that, as Crawford observes, he “belonged to two professions concerned with clearly established authority” (15). In a cultural landscape founded upon the presumed authority and mastery of visionaries, Williams held the prestigious roles of both a prolific poet and a well-respected physician. Just like the figure of the modern poet, the doctor is, within the modern Western imagination, established as a master of observation, capable of seeing what others cannot see, of “seeing life bare” (Pellegrino, 19). With medicine, however, the emphasis on objective observation is even more pronounced. At once a position of prestige and authority, the role of the modern doctor also demands an erasure of personal subjectivity at the service of a pure empiricism:

> The site for the production of knowledge in modern science contributes to and depends upon an ideology of clarity: the belief that one can see and understand an object
unmediated by language or theater… Medical empiricism depends upon the erasure of subjectivity and society. It is a celebration of sight. (46)

Thus the doctor’s authority relies upon the post-Enlightenment ideal of the rational, detached subject, sovereign to, yet critically detached from, the material world. Doctors, like all modern visionaries, must situate themselves outside the object of their studies; they must transcend in order to master. And yet while the figure of the engineer is imagined as the sovereign master of the machine, the poet as master of language, and the painter as master of his or her canvas, the doctor is imagined as the transcendent master of the human life-form itself.

Accordingly, while the doctor is framed within the discourse of modern medicine as a detached, omniscient and rational subjectivity, the patient is represented as the complete opposite: a purely physical body, devoid of subjectivity, psychology or language. As Bill Hughes argues in his essay “Medicalized Bodies” (2000):

For biomedicine, the body is defined in purely biological terms. It is pre-social and has no history. It is an essence, a timeless, material thing. It has no cultural meaning and cannot think, feel or relate to others. (12)

Such a characterisation of the patient as a “timeless, material thing” is itself a relatively modern phenomenon which can be traced to the emergence of the modern hospital in nineteenth-century Paris. According to Ivan Waddington’s analysis of “The Role of the Hospital in the Development of Modern Medicine” (1973), the space of the hospital that emerged in post-Revolutionary France heralded a change in the doctor-patient relationship that would define global hospital practices throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Waddington, while patients had traditionally occupied the role of patron, empowered to dictate the terms of their own treatment from the comfort of their own home, the rise of hospital-based medicine in the nineteenth century saw “the emergence of the doctor as the dominant figure in the doctor-patient relationship” (211). By enabling the development of localised pathology, based on the increasing refinement of physical examination and autopsy procedures, the emergence of
hospital-based medicine allowed doctors to privilege their own empirical observation over patients’ subjective experiences of their own bodies. Consequently, the patient became little more than a body to be examined, x-rayed, weighed, measured and dissected. Hughes attributes the distinction between the subjective doctor and the objective patient to the traditional Cartesian distinction between mind and body: “The biomedical body owes its birthright to Cartesian philosophy” (12) This distinction, traditionally a means of privileging the rational human consciousness over the material world of the body, is used within modern medicine to distinguish the “mind” that is the doctor from the objectified “body” that is the patient. This dualism is central to a scientific and empirical paradigm that posits a world of objects to be observed and understood by a rational, disembodied observer, and like all dualisms, it carries with it an implicit hierarchy; within modern medicine, the exclusionary humanist hierarchies that traditionally privilege the disembodied human subject over the material world of nature and technology are instead used to, quite explicitly, establish the unequivocal authority of the doctor over the patient. In his paper “The Disappearance of the Sick-man from Medical Cosmology, 1770-1870” (1976) Nicholas Jewson describes this phenomenon as a “shift away from a person orientated toward an object orientated cosmology” (626). Within the discourse of modern medicine, the doctor is framed as the archetypal humanist subject while the patient ceases to be human at all.

It is no surprise then that the shift towards empirical observation over personal interaction within modern medicine has been criticised as being incompatible with a meaningful and equitable relationship between doctor and patient. Within the bedside medicine of the eighteenth century, the view of the patient was, in the words of Jewson “that of a conscious human totality—a viewpoint that transcended, not merely united, the distinction of psyche and soma found in modern medicine” (623). By contrast, the very principles of empiricism, rationalism and Cartesian logic upon which modern hospital practices are premised require the renunciation of the subjective experience of the patient. In his book Phenomenology of Perception (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty critiques empiricism in general for its inability to conceive of the other as a subjective mind:
The existence of others is a difficulty for and an affront to objective thought...If the body is in fact a region of the world—if it is that object biologists describe for me, that conjunction of processes whose analysis I find in physiological studies, and that pile of organs described to me by anatomy charts—then my experience could be nothing other than the confrontation between a bare consciousness and the system of objective correlations that it thinks. The other’s body is no more inhabited than is my own, it is an object in front of the consciousness that thinks it or that constitutes it, and we—namely, other men and myself as an empirical being—are merely mechanisms moved by springs; the true subject has no peers. (Merleau-Ponty, 365)

In other words, if I am to assume, as the doctor must, that I can make observations and judgements “unmediated by language or theatre” (Crawford, 46), if I am to take myself to be a disembodied “bare consciousness”, then I must distance my own subjectivity from the “pile of organs” that comprise my material body. But in drawing a distinction between my own mind and the material world, I am left with no reason to assume that any of the other bodies I encounter are inhabited by subjectivity. Furthermore, the very possibility of a subjectivity outside my own challenges the distinction by which I assert the purity of my own “bare consciousness”. As such, as Merleau-Ponty puts it “there is no room, then, for others and for plurality of consciousnesses within objective thought” (365). Though this may seem purely theoretical, it is evident that, as the practice of modern medicine moves from bedside to hospital and laboratory, the subjective experience of the patient becomes an antiquated concept. As the distinction between the purely objective patient and the purely subjective doctor became more pronounced, and as the doctor’s authority solidified, patients increasingly became seen as component parts exhibiting varying degrees of disrepair. As such, notions of human empathy and intersubjective care became peripheral to notions of objective fact. As Waddington points out, René Laënnec, inventor of the stethoscope and early advocate of an empirical approach to medicine, was often accused of being “better at performing autopsies than he was at preventing them” (217). The reason for such

42 As Jewson describes, “the sick-man became a collection of synchronized organs, each with a specialized function” (625).
callousness, which is also evident within much of Williams’s own medical writing, is inseparable from the traditions of a Western humanism that privileges rational subjectivity over material existence. Within this framework, the Cartesian distinction between the disembodied physician and the objectified patient is inevitably a dehumanising one. As Merleau-Ponty concisely surmises: “another person is never fully a personal being if I am fully one myself” (368). What is at stake, then, when we talk about the relationship between doctor and patient, is the very nature of human existence and the impact of humanist ideals upon the possibility of meaningful human relationships. In this sense, modern medicine becomes a fertile ground for critiquing the ways in which our understanding of human subjectivity and embodiment inhibit our capacity for meaningful and, at times, life-saving intersubjective relationships.

Williams was very much aware of the implications of the empirical dualism that exists between doctor and patient. By the time that he began his formal medical training in 1902, the doctrines of objectivity and empirical observation that Waddington attributed to the Parisian hospitals of the nineteenth century had reshaped medical practices worldwide, including American doctor-patient relationships. As Crawford notes, Williams’s training took place in a period of transition from a traditional understanding of the doctor as a community-based apprentice to the modern figure of the authoritative, hospital-based physician (4). When he commenced his practice in 1910, Williams occupied a unique position between two traditions. Despite his modern hospital-based training, most of Williams’s medical career took place at the bedsides of the various working class and immigrant families of Rutherford, New Jersey. While certainly indoctrinated into the modern school of laboratory and hospital-based empirical medicine, Williams was, in practice, a traditional, community practitioner. As Crawford notes:

Williams was caught between two worlds—the doctor trained in laboratory technique and the rural practitioner who depended on the uncertain effects of an “unscientific” pharmacopeia and on *vis medicatrix naturae.* (5)

Fittingly, within his medical writing, there is an evident discomfort with the practices of modern hospital medicine. For Williams, the empirical dualism between doctor and patient effectively
inhibits a meaningful, and potentially medically beneficial, connection between doctor and patient. In his story “A Night in June”, a doctor who has been working in a hospital gets a rare opportunity to perform a home birth: “One gets not to deliver women at home nowadays. The hospital is the best place for it. The equipment is far better” (DS, 62). Despite his assertion that the equipment at the hospital is superior, the speaker romanticises the unrefined yet intimately familiar beauty of his home birthing kit, his casual attire and his soiled shirt:

I dusted off the top of the Lysol bottle when I took it from the shelf and quickly checking the rest of my necessities, I went off, without a coat or necktie, wearing the same shirt I had on during the day preceding, soiled but—better so. (DS, 63)

When attending the woman, the intimate details of childbirth, from the woman’s enema (DS, 65) to the burying of afterbirth, wrapped in newspaper, in the backyard (DS, 68), are described with care. The doctor of the story reflects that he is not merely immune to his own aversion to the abject nature of natural human existence; he finds beauty in it:

This woman in her present condition would have seemed repulsive to me ten years ago—now, poor soul, I see her to be as clean as a cow that calves. (DS, 67)

Instead of attempting to control or objectify the body of the patient from a detached position, the doctor instead engages in an intersubjective exchange with her. He is both the object as well as the subject of the process:

With my left hand steering the child’s head, I used my ungloved right hand outside on her bare abdomen to press upon the fundus. The woman and I then got to work. Her two hands grabbed me at first a little timidly about the right wrist and forearm. Go ahead, I said. Pull hard. I welcomed the feel of her hands and the strong pull. (DS, 67)

The birth is described as a cooperative activity between the doctor and the woman, who both “got to work” together. Rather than assuming a position of authority, the doctor encourages the woman to pull on his arm as he presses on her abdomen. After this experience, when the child is
born, the doctor seems reluctant to impose the sterility of medical science upon the natural scene:

Oh yes, the drops in the baby’s eyes. No need. She’s as clean as a beast. How do I know? Medical discipline says every case must have drops in the eyes. No chance of gonorrhoea though here—but—Do it. (DS, 68)

He reflects that the systems of control and standards of efficiency, imposed by medical science, have come at the cost of meaningful interactions:

Then I fell asleep and, in my half sleep began to argue with myself—or some imaginary power—of science and humanity. Our exaggerated ways will have to pull in their horns, I said. We’ve learned from one teacher and neglected another. Now that I’m older, I’m finding the older school. (DS, 66)

Williams’s doctor, however, is powerless to fight this. He wears his gloves, though they prevent direct contact; he administers the eye drops, as he must.

It could be argued that the doctor’s sentimental desire for meaningful interpersonal contact is at odds with the safety of the patient in “A Night in June”. However, within other stories, the impersonal empiricism of modern hospital medicine is shown to impede adequate treatment.43 In his short story “The Insane”, a father is talking to his son, a medical student, about his training.44 The son is part way through a Psychiatric rotation and has been troubled by a recent case of a boy who has been brought in for compulsive stealing. Having taken the boy’s psychological history, the son recounts:

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43 In the first poem of Spring and All, Williams evokes his famous image of the “contagious” hospital: “By the road to the contagious hospital / under the surge of the blue / mottled clouds” (CP1, 183).

44 Considering that Williams’s son, William Eric Williams, also trained as a doctor, we would be justified in reading “The Insane” as one of Williams’s more autobiographical doctor stories.
The story is this. The lad’s father was a drunk who died two years ago when the boy was just seven. A typical drunk. The usual bust up. They took him to the hospital and he died… (DS, 106)

The boy’s father, who had died two years previously, had been abusive. Soon after the boy was born, he had assaulted the boy’s mother, sending her back to hospital:

Anyhow, when she came home, on the ninth day after her caesarean, she found her husband under the influence, dead drunk as usual and he started to take her over—that’s the story… Naturally she put up a fight and as a result he knocked her downstairs. (DS, 106)

Having been attacked so soon after giving birth, the mother had come to resent her newborn son:

Yes, nine days after the section. She had to return to the hospital for a check up. And naturally when she came out again she hated her husband and the baby too because it was the child. (DS, 106)

Having a full appreciation of the child’s history, the son is able to form an empathetic connection to his patient and establish a clear connection between the boy’s environmental and psychological background and his current state of physical and emotional distress and misbehaviour:

As a result the child doesn’t eat, has lost weight, doesn’t sleep, constipation and all the rest of it. And in school, whereas his marks had always been good—because he’s fairly bright—after his father died they went steadily down, down and down to complete failure. (DS, 107)

However, what distresses the son is the lack of authority given to these insights by his medical peers, who dismiss the boy’s lived experience as irrelevant to the act of diagnosis:
But what gets me, said his son. Of course we’re checked up on all these cases; they’re all gone over by a member of the staff. And when we give a history like that, they say, Oh those are just the psychiatric findings. That gripes me. Why, it’s the child’s life. (DS, 107)

In a medical institution that sees the patient as a “timeless, material thing” (Hughes, 12), even the most enlightening and potentially helpful psychological history is rejected as unscientific. To a medical community increasingly defined by pure empiricism, the empathetic connection between the doctor and his patient is seen as valueless. For Williams, however, such a connection is both beautiful, as in “A Night in June”, and a valuable component of medical care. Even “The Insane” ends on an optimistic note, as the father praises his son for his empathetic insights and encourages him to pursue them in the future: “Good boy, said his father. You’re all right. Stick to it” (DS, 107).

II. Challenging the Doctor’s Authority

While “A Night in June” and “The Insane” shed light on Williams’s discomfort with the Cartesian dualism of doctor and patient within modern medical practice, his story “Mind and Body” destabilises this dualism altogether. In “Mind and Body”, a doctor is faced with a well-read and articulate, though potentially hypochondriac, patient who refuses to follow the traditional rules of the modern doctor-patient relationship. She repeatedly challenges the authority of the doctor, refuses to remain objectified, and actively asserts her own perspective and agency upon the diagnostic process:

They always get mad at me because I manage to find out what they are thinking. I got hold of the chart and I saw that it said “Neo-plasm.” I knew from my Greek what that meant, new growth. That means a tumor. But I don’t think the Doc himself knew when he read the report. (DS, 2)
Faced with the patient’s aggressive subjectivity, the doctor reveals his own insecurity over his position of authority. At one point, he finds himself referencing Socrates, in a defensive attempt to reassert his intellectual authority:

Yes, I agree with you, it is a comfort, no doubt. But what about Socrates? He took the cup quietly—without religion.
Oh, you have read that too, she said and seemed pleased. (DS, 7)

While his attempts to impress are successful, the doctor’s insecure need to demonstrate his own intellectual authority reveals the fundamentally rhetorical nature of the doctor-patient relationship. In his autobiography Williams concedes that, to a large degree, the role of the doctor relies on the constant reassertion of a fragile illusion of authority:

Many a time a man must watch the patient’s mind as it watches him, distrusting him, ready to fly off at a tangent at the first opportunity; sees himself distrusted, sees the patient turn to someone else, rejecting him. (DS, 120)

Here, Williams recognises the doctor’s vulnerability; while the doctor is traditionally imagined as a detached observer, here he is not merely the subject but also the object of the gaze. When faced with such scrutiny, the role of the doctor becomes focused not on his responsibility to the patient but on the maintenance of authority. The doctor’s use of medical language within the story serves precisely this rhetorical function. Notably, it is when his expertise is directly challenged that he resorts to a defensive barrage of obfuscating medical jargon:

I could find nothing.
Yes, she said, only two men have found the exact spot. And she pointed to a place in her right iliac quadrant. One was a young doctor at the Postgraduate Hospital who has become famous since then, and another was the surgeon who operated on me for the first time. The rest just feel around the abdomen as you have done.
But do not forget, I said in my own defense (emphasis mine), that there is a place in the abdomen in major hysteria which if it is pressed upon will definitely bring on a convulsive attack.

She looked at me with interest.

Yes, the Greeks connected it with those organs. That is its name. Perhaps I should have everything cut out. (DS, 10)

The doctor’s use of language when confronted with his own incompetence challenges the principles of objectivity, clarity and transparency upon which the doctrine of modern medical science is based. The doctor’s approach to the patient is by no means “unmediated by language or theater” (Crawford, 46). Instead, within Williams’s stories, language frequently serves as a means of reinforcing the seemingly-fragile authority of the doctor over the patient. As we have seen throughout this thesis, Williams by no means presents himself as a master of language. Rather, he recognises that language is, and always must be, an external system beyond the limits of his control. By demonstrating that the doctor’s authority is primarily reliant on such an unstable system, Williams exposes the doctrines of mastery and objectivity that privilege the doctor’s authority over the patient as primarily rhetorical.

Despite her frequent challenges, the doctor eventually diagnoses the woman with a spasm of the large intestine:

From what you say and the length of time that the symptoms have been going on, the fact that you have not lost weight, that you are ruddy and well—I believe that you are suffering merely—but that is quite enough—from what Llwelyn C. Barker calls—I have forgotten the term—what we used to call mucous colitis. It is a spasm of the large intestine which simulates all sorts of illnesses for which people are frequently operated on. (DS, 10–11)

Significantly, he offers no prescribed treatment to accompany the diagnosis. For this reason, Crawford refers to this outcome as a “placebo” diagnosis (17). He claims that the doctor has
done little more than pacify, through the convoluted jargon of medical science, the concerns of a hypochondriac:

Nevertheless, the diagnosis (which here is the equivalent of a cure, since he does not prescribe treatment) is effected. The doctor... can gleefully claim cure by mystification. (Crawford, 16)

From this perspective, both the doctor's authority and his treatment are revealed to be little more than rhetorical. Crawford generously attributes a therapeutic function to the “cure by mystification”. But, considering the competitive nature of the meeting and the doctor's defensive demeanour, the diagnosis seems less of a cure and more of a means of reasserting the doctor's authority over the patient's body. The question, then, is whether or not he succeeds. While the reader may easily dismiss the patient as an overly excitable hypochondriac who is ultimately put back in her place, “Mind and Body” is not merely a story about a doctor cleverly placating a difficult patient. Rather, a more productive reading of the story comes from an appreciation of the aggressive subjectivity that underpins the patient's supposed hypochondria. Throughout the story, she refuses to relinquish claim to her own experience of her body:

I know people think I am a nut. I was an epileptic as a child. I know I am a manic depressive. But doctors are mostly fools. I have been very sick. They say it is my imagination. (DS, 1)

While a majority of the patient’s ailments may indeed be in her imagination, there is no doubt as to the subversiveness of her challenge to the otherwise-uncontested authority of the doctor. As Jill Fisher points out in her 2006 essay “Playing Patient, Playing Doctor: Munchausen Syndrome, Clinical S/M, and Ruptures of Medical Power” the modern system of diagnosis depends upon the erasure of the patient’s own experience: “Diagnosing illness subordinates individuals’ expert knowledge of their own bodies to physicians’ technologically-mediated knowledge of bodies” (145). The patient in “Mind and Body” actively resists such subordination; even in the act of
diagnosis, she only accepts the diagnosis to the extent that she can experience it subjectively. The doctor’s attempts to claim her bodily experience as his own is thus thwarted:

Yes, I can feel it often, she agreed. The blood goes into my face or into my brain. I often want to run or scream out, it is so hard for me to stand it. (DS, 11)

Even the suggestion that the patient is no more than a hypochondriac does not diminish the subversiveness of her aggressive subjectivity. Fisher argues that hypochondriac patients and patients with Munchausen syndrome45 are seen as nuisances within the medical community precisely because they challenge the traditional rules and hierarchies that underpin the diagnostic process. She argues that, conventionally:

Physicians assume that part of the medical ritual is for patients to disclose truthfully all relevant information about their condition. Within the roles of doctor and patient, information becomes linked to dominance. Patients submit to physicians’ care and expertise by recounting their ailments; physicians gain authority in each medical interaction through their ability to effectively interpret and act upon these stories. (138)

However, in cases of Munchausen syndrome, this ritual is disrupted: “physicians are alarmed by Munchausen syndrome because it breaks some of the “rules” of medicine” (141). In breaking the “rules” of the doctor-patient relationship, Munchausen patients shed light upon the ultimately arbitrary and performative nature of the relationship itself:

Individuals with Munchausen syndrome are, in the view of the physicians, role-playing at being patients. And yet, the problem with this game is that it reveals that physicians too are already role-playing. (141)

45 I do not mean, here, to erase the distinction between hypochondria and Munchausen’s syndrome. What is significant is the similar ways with which sufferers of both of these illnesses subvert the traditional rules of medical diagnosis.
The patient in “Mind and Body” certainly breaks the rules; she conducts her own personal research, she exaggerates symptoms, she emphasises her own subjective experience of her own body and, as such, undermines a medical system that seeks to observe her as a generalisable object, devoid of subjectivity. Instead, she aggressively asserts the individuality of her own existence: “Everything works the opposite from what it does in anyone else” (DS, 2).

The title of “Mind and Body” is thus ironic; there is a confusion of the traditional expectation of which character is “mind” and which is “body”. The tension of the story comes, instead, from the doctor’s attempt to negotiate a relationship in which both members are actively subjective. Indeed, in the first line of the story, the patient highlights the sheer plurality of subjective experience: “For aren’t we not each of us the center of the universe? It must be so, it is so for me, she said” (DS, 1). She then ponders “we know that the rest of the world exists, but what has that to do with ourselves?” (DS, 1). By opening the story with these lines, Williams frames the narrative of the doctor and the patient as an exploration of the possibility of meaningful intersubjective experience. How, the story seems to ask, is it possible for the doctor to truly recognise his patient as a thinking subject? How indeed is any meaningful intersubjective experience possible? At the end of the story, the patient recognises “that we must live for others, that we are not alone in the world and we cannot live alone” (DS, 11). How, within the framework of the doctor-patient relationship, then, can this be achieved? According to Merleau-Ponty, the recognition of subjectivity in others, the recognition that every person is, for themselves “the center of the universe”, is premised upon the ability to recognise the objectivity of our own subjective experience. If we cannot recognise that our subjectivity is embodied, then we cannot accept the subjectivity of other bodies in the world. We can only do so by recognising our own embodiment:

46 In this sense, “Mind and Body” can be said to preempt more contemporary understandings of the role of the doctor in which, according to Hughes, “the medical body is changing from a passive to an active entity” (Hughes, 13).
If I experience this inherence of my consciousness in its body and in its mind, the perceptions of others and the plurality of consciousnesses no longer present any difficulty. If the perceiving subject appears (to me who is reflecting upon perception) as endowed with a primordial arrangement in relation to the world, drawing with it that bodily thing without which there would be no other things for it, then why should the other bodies that I perceive not be equally inhabited by consciousnesses? If my consciousness has a body, why would other bodies not “have” consciousnesses? (367)

Fittingly, within his medical writing, Williams seems to recognise that a meaningful relationship between doctor and patient is premised upon a recognition, not merely of the subjectivity of the patient, but of the objectivity and fallibility of the doctor. Much of Williams’s medical writing serves to critique the model of the doctor as a disembodied and rational mind. A number of Williams’s stories do this through the direct representation of a corporeal doctor. Stories such as “Old Doc Rivers”, “A Night in June” and “The Use of Force” represent the doctor as drug addicted, aging, increasingly blind, exhausted, enraged, lustful and, above all, fundamentally embodied.47 “Mind and Body”, however, challenges the disembodiment of the doctor on the level of language. Language is not a transparent and clear medium; it at times eludes him (“I believe that you are suffering merely—from what Llewelyn C. Barker calls—I have forgotten the term—what we used to call mucous colitis” (DS, 10)) and is often turned against him (“doctors are mostly fools” (DS, 1)). Williams’s narration refuses to privilege the doctor’s voice; it draws little formal distinction between the words of the doctor, his thoughts, the words of the patient, and the narrative voice itself. Both self and other, conscious thought and verbal speech, are registered on the same plane:

But Yates is afraid. Yates is her husband. He does not like lightning.

That’s off, I commented. For I knew him to be a steady Catholic.

47 “Work, in this case, through sheer intuitive ability flooded him under. Drugs righted him… A trembling in the arms and thighs, a tightness of the neck and in the head above the eyes—fast breath, vague pains in the muscles and in the feet. Followed by an orgasm, crashing the job through, putting it over in a fever heat. Then the feeling of looseness afterward. Not pleasant. But there it is. Then cigarettes, a shot of gin. And that’s all there is to it. Women the same, more and more” (DS, 38).
Yes, he is afraid of it. (DS, 5)

In passages such as these, it is never immediately apparent whether the words are coming from the mouth of the doctor, the patient or the narrator. In the instant of reading, they are initially one. Language, here, is presented as an external and material system, outside of the doctor’s possession. Just as the patient refuses to allow her own bodily experiences to be mastered by medical science, neither are Williams’s characters, nor even Williams himself, ever allowed to claim possession or mastery over language. Rather, it is in the instability, the insecurity and the rhetorical nature of language that the authority of the doctor is destabilised and the possibility of a more equitable relationship between doctor and patient emerges.

III. The Violence of Diagnosis

As we have seen, Williams’s medical writing demystifies the authority of the doctor and uncovers the discourses of domination and control at the heart of the diagnostic process. This is compounded by Williams’s frequent portrayal of diagnosis as an invasive act of domination and violence. This impression is no more evident than in Williams’s story “The Use of Force”. The doctor of the story is called to a family home to examine a young girl, Mathilda, who has a high fever. The doctor fears that Mathilda has diphtheria and decides to examine her throat. Despite the severity of the situation, both the parents and the daughter appear to be withholding information. The daughter is mute and the parents are, in the doctor’s mind, deliberately unforthcoming:

As often, in such cases, they weren’t telling me more than they had to, it was up to me to tell them; that’s why they were spending three dollars on me. (DS, 56)

When the doctor attempts to examine the girl’s throat, she reacts violently:

As I moved my chair a little nearer suddenly with one catlike movement both her hands clawed instinctively for my eyes and she almost reached them too. In fact she knocked my
glasses flying and they fell, though unbroken, several feet away from me on the kitchen floor. (DS, 57)

Once more, diagnosis is framed as a conflict between a patient that is reluctant to be objectified and a doctor who must assert control. The doctor is clearly frustrated by the lack of compliance. However, while he is angry at the parents, his aggression towards the girl is expressed in a far more lustful manner:

I had to smile to myself. After all, I had already fallen in love with the savage brat, the parents were contemptible to me. (DS, 58)

As he continues to try to expose the girl’s throat, the doctor begins to lose control of his actions. He marvels that he has “grown furious—at a child” and claims: “I tried to hold myself down but I couldn’t. I had to expose a throat for inspection” (59). As the doctor quite literally loses control of his bodily urges, the ideal of the rational, disembodied and benevolent doctor disappears altogether. At this point the reader begins to doubt that the doctor’s aggression stems purely from his medical concern for the girl. Rather, the doctor seems to take pleasure in exerting his own violent power over her:

But the worst of it was that I too had gone beyond reason. I could have torn the child apart in my own fury and enjoyed it. It was a pleasure to attack her. My face was burning with it. (DS, 59)

Eventually, Mathilda is overpowered and the doctor can successfully diagnose her with diphtheria:

In a final unreasoning assault I overpowered the child’s neck and jaws. I forced the heavy silver spoon back of her teeth (sic) and down her throat till she gagged. And there it was—both tonsils covered with membrane. She had fought valiantly to keep me from knowing her secret. She had been hiding that sore throat for three days at least and lying to her parents to escape just such an outcome as this.
Now truly she was furious. She had been on the defensive before but now she attacked. Tried to get off her father's lap and fly at me while tears of defeat blinded her eyes. (DS, 60)

As in “Mind and Body” the doctor is faced with a challenge to his authority and reacts, this time violently, to reassert his authority. The doctor is by no means rational or altruistic, but insecure, aggressive and violently sexual. The act of diagnosis is portrayed as a rape. But as Crawford points out, despite Williams’s overt portrayal of the act of diagnosis as a form of sexual assault, readers often choose to overlook the violence of the scene:

Why is the doctor not seen as a thoroughly contemptible cad? He lusts after a child, degrades her well-intentioned parents, and enjoys inflicting fear and pain. The argument that it is all for the child’s own good rings false in the face of overwhelming lust. Yet readers are loath to condemn him. (Crawford, 80)

Indeed, as readers, we are conditioned to assume that the doctor’s actions are always motivated by an altruistic care for the wellbeing of the patient. This is compounded by our knowledge that Williams himself was a physician; we take his stories to be at least partially autobiographical and, as such, feel reluctant to pass hasty judgement on the behaviour of his protagonists. When the doctor is dismissive of the concerns of his patient in “Mind and Body” we assume that she is being irrationally hypochondriacal; when the protagonist of “The Use of Force” admits to losing control of his body in his lustful aggression, we feel the need to accept that this behaviour is, in the end, for the good of the patient. As Fisher points out, medical treatment relies on an unspoken pleasure/pain paradox, which assumes that the degradation, objectification and suffering of the patient is a necessary part of their treatment:

The key to the pleasure/pain paradox is rooted in medicine’s tendency to involve some form of suffering in the process of creating benefits for the patient. Surgeries, conventional cancer therapies, and many diagnostic tests cause patients varying degrees of discomfort or pain in their attempt to cure the illness. (140)
When the patient suffers in “The Use of Force”, even at the hands of a lustful and aggressive doctor, we are inclined to assume that the doctor knows best. We assume that the patient needs to be controlled. Yet these stories, particularly “The Use of Force”, test the limits of our tolerance. By representing the doctor as a sexually aggressive being, and highlighting the potential for violent domination at the heart of even the most necessary diagnostic processes, Williams denaturalised the hierarchy of the doctor-patient relationship that we otherwise take for granted.

As we can see, Williams goes to great lengths to represent modern medicine’s desire to understand and reveal the secrets of the body through the act of diagnosis as a fundamentally invasive, violent, and gendered act, used primarily to reinforce the doctor’s patriarchal authority. We have also seen that the impulse to reveal is often privileged over concern for the patient. The paediatric doctor in Williams’s story “Jean Beicke” displays a striking lack of empathy for his patients, many of whom are neglected and abandoned children:

The poor brats are almost dead sometimes, just living skeletons, almost, wrapped in rags, their heads caked with dirt, their eyes stuck together with pus and their legs excoriated from the dirty diapers no one has had the interest to take off them regularly. (DS, 70)

Though he shows a degree of pity towards the children, the doctor is ultimately unable to find value in their lives:

I often kid the girls. Why not? I look at some miserable specimen they’ve dolled up for me when I make the rounds in the morning and I tell them: Give it an enema, maybe it will get well and grow up into a cheap prostitute or something. (DS, 71)

The concern that the nurses show for the children is portrayed as irrational, in contrast to the rational pragmatism of the doctor:

You ought to see those nurses work. You’d think it was the brat of their best friend. They handle those kids as if they were worth a million dollars. Not that some nurses aren’t
better than others but in general they break their hearts over those kids, many times, when I, for one, wish they’d never get well. *(DS, 71)*

The story focuses on one baby girl, Jean Beicke, who is brought in malnourished, with a stiff neck and a high fever. Despite their efforts, the doctors are unable to find the cause of her problems and she dies. It is at this point that the doctor becomes most engaged. While he seems relatively unconcerned about Jean while she is alive, he goes out of his way to ensure that Jean’s mother will consent to an autopsy:

> I hate to speak of such a thing now but to tell you the truth, we’ve worked hard on that poor child and don’t exactly know what is the trouble. *(DS, 75–76)*

In contrast to his dismissal of Jean while she was alive, he describes the autopsy with great intricacy and theatricality:

> I was amazed to see how completely the lungs had cleared up. They were almost normal except for a very small patch of residual pneumonia here and there which really amounted to nothing. Chest and abdomen were in excellent shape, otherwise, throughout—not a thing aside from the negligible pneumonia. Then he opened the head. It seemed to me the poor kid’s convolutions were unusually well developed. I kept thinking it’s incredible that that complicated mechanism of the brain has come into being just for this. I never can quite get used to an autopsy. *(DS, 76)*

Though the doctor claims that he is confronted by the autopsy, the ease with which he speaks of it suggests otherwise. Rather, it seems that he is unable to “get used to an autopsy” precisely because he is unable to reconcile Jean’s biological existence with a meaningful sense of human subjectivity. Like Waddington’s description of René Laënnec, the doctor in “Jean Beicke” seems much more at home at the autopsy table than at the bedside. While the aggressively subjective patient in “Mind and Body” required her doctor to revert to the patient-centred cosmology of earlier bedside-based medical practices, Jean is the archetypical patient of modern hospital medicine; within a medical cosmology that values the patient as a non-subjective, non-linguistic
object to be observed from a distance, Jean is mute, barely subjective and does not like to be touched:

She was just skin and bones but her eyes were good and she looked straight at you. Only if you touched her anywhere, she started to whine and then cry with a shrieking, distressing sort of cry that no one wanted to hear. (*DS*, 72)

Ultimately, in death, she reaches her final level of objectification. She is reducible to a head, referred to as “the” and not “her” head, to be examined. And significantly, it is only when she is reduced to the level of pure, dissectible object that the doctor is able to truly see what is wrong with her. The doctor is unable to empathise with Jean while she is alive; he is ultimately only able to do so by literally looking inside her head. In this case, the act of diagnosis determines that the truth must be found through the pure, abject dissection of the human body:

The first evidence of the real trouble—for there had been no gross evidence of meningitis—was when the pathologist took the brain in his hand and made the long steady cut which opened up the left lateral ventricle. There was just a faint color of pus on the bulb of the choroid plexus there. Then the diagnosis all cleared up quickly. The left lateral sinus was completely thrombosed and on going into the left temporal bone from the inside the mastoid process was all broken down. (*DS*, 76)

The language used to describe the diagnosis as “all cleared up quickly” is remarkably positive, seemingly suggesting a victory. And when it is suggested he could have saved her, the doctor is dismissive:

I called up the ear man and he came down at once. A clear miss, he said. I think if we’d gone in there earlier, we’d have saved her.
For what? said I. (*DS*, 77)

In “Jean Beicke”, the doctor is motivated by diagnosis, not care: the desire, not to help, or to save, but to understand, to know, to control, to get inside his patient’s head at all costs. In
Discipline and Punish (1975), Michel Foucault describes the process of medical examination, and indeed examination in general as a process that “manifests the subjection of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjected” (197). Power, within examination, comes from the ability to see without being seen. Objectification and subjection, on the other hand, comes from visibility. Significantly in both “The Use of Force” and “Jean Beicke”, the acts of violence that the doctor commits against the two girls are focused on making visible that which is hidden. In “The Use of Force”, the doctor’s frustration comes from the patient’s reluctance to disclose her throat to the doctor’s examination. More dramatically, in “Jean Beicke”, even the patient’s skull presents itself as an obstacle to the doctor’s gaze.

As Foucault points out, the observing, measuring and examining of the patient’s body within modern medicine results in the “constitution of the individual as describable” (202). The act of writing about an individual had traditionally suggested a degree of reverence, affection or idolisation of that individual. However, within the field of medical diagnosis, description becomes an objectifying force:

The turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. (203–204)

This distinction may be clear cut for the autobiographer and for the doctor. But for the doctor as writer, it is not so clear. As I demonstrated in the introduction, Williams himself was required to describe his fellow humans in the form of both tender biographies and embarrassing pathological reports. In “Jean Beicke”, both forms of writing exist simultaneously. At once, the choice to write about Jean suggests Williams’s sympathy towards the girl: “But anyway, we all got to be crazy about Jean” (DS, 73). On the other hand, the act of diagnostic writing in this story and in “The Use of Force” is violently objectifying and fundamentally dehumanising. And what is most disturbing about this process is the fervor with which the physician of each story pursues...
the diagnosis beyond the limits of patient care. The diagnostic gaze is driven by the desire to see, to understand and, implicitly, to control. Then the question that these stories raise is this: what, if not concern for the patient’s wellbeing, inspires such a desire?

IV. The Doctor, The Detective and The Poet

In *The Soul and The Harpy* (1983), Franco Moretti hints at a possible answer. In his chapter “Clues”, Moretti draws an analogy between the detective work of Arthur Conan Doyle’s famous character, Sherlock Holmes, and the process of medical diagnosis. Moretti draws a parallel between Holmes’s delineation of clues and the doctor’s association of symptom and illness, arguing that in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, the term “symptoms” is more apt than “clues” because “they are effects which are systematically and absolutely correlated to univocal and stable causes” (145). As such, for Moretti, Umberto Eco’s distinction between diagnosis and detection cannot be sustained by a close reading of Conan Doyle’s work:

> Eco writes, ‘As a matter of fact clues are seldom coded, and their interpretation is frequently a matter of complex inference rather than of sign-function recognition, which makes criminal novels more interesting than the detection of pneumonia’. This is not true of the archetypal detective. (145)

The purpose of Conan Doyle’s detective fiction, according to Moretti, is to apply the scientific stability of the act of medical diagnosis to the realm of society and human behaviour. By revealing a univocal connection between signifier (clue) and signified (criminal), Conan Doyle’s stories reassure the modern individual that life is predictable:

> Since Poe, the detective has incarnated a *scientific* ideal: the detective discovers the causal links between events: to unravel the mystery is to trace them back to a *law*. The point is

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49 From his 1976 *A Theory of Semiotics* (224).

50 Having just analysed a short story about the violent diagnosis on a case of diphtheria, I would suggest that medical diagnosis is not always as uneventful as Eco suspects.
that—at the turn of the century—high bourgeois culture wavers in its conviction that it is possible to set the functioning of society into the framework of scientific—that is, objective—laws. (144)

Moretti’s analogy between detection and diagnosis suggests that the process of diagnosis within Williams’s stories serves a similar social function. In this way, while Moretti uses the figure of the doctor as a means of understanding Doyle’s detective, the figure of the archetypal detective is equally useful for understanding Williams's representation of the doctor. Indeed, the similarities between Holmes and Williams’s doctor characters are numerous. Both share an active, excited lexicon; Holmes’ excited utterance that “the game is afoot” (763) from “Adventue of the Abbey Grange” is rephrased in Williams’s “The Practice”:

In a flash the details of the case would begin to formulate themselves into a recognizable outline, the diagnosis would unravel itself, or would refuse to make itself plain, and the chase was on (emphasis mine). (DS, 119–120)

Despite the strenuous nature of their roles, both Holmes and Williams’s doctor report to be revived and enlivened by their labours. Williams writes:

As a writer I have never felt that medicine interfered with me but rather that it was my very food and drink, the very thing which made it possible for me to write. Was I not interested in man? There the thing was right in front of me. I could touch it, smell it. It was myself, naked, just as it was, without a lie telling itself to me in its own terms. (DS, 120)

Similarly, in “The Sign of Four” Holmes remarks: “No: I am not tired. I have a curious constitution. I never remember feeling tired by work, though idleness exhausts me completely” (127). Both Holmes and Williams’s doctor are motivated by a quest for the truth, rather than any wider notion of benevolence. Just as Williams’s doctor often privileges diagnostic certainty over the lives of his patients, Holmes is primarily driven by the urge to solve the mystery presented by crime, rather than apprehending the criminal or preventing crime in the first place:
He is not moved by pity for the victim, by moral or material horror at the crime, but by its cultural quality: by its uniqueness and its mystery. (135)

This quest for truth manifests itself in both characters as a voyeuristic desire to see inside the private lives and private spaces of their fellow humans. Both Holmes and Williams’s doctor are fascinated by the complexities of others’ lives. In “A Case of Identity”, Holmes muses to Watson:

Life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind of man could invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplaces of existence. If we could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outre results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable. (194)

Similarly, in “The Practice” Williams speaks of the voyeuristic privilege offered to him by his own profession:

But the actual calling on people, at all times and under all conditions, the coming to grips with the intimate conditions of their lives, when they were being born, when they were dying, watching them die, watching them get well when they were ill, has always absorbed me. (DS, 119)

Their powers of observation and subsequent positions of authority allow both Holmes and Williams’s doctor to bear witness to the complexities of modern life and the modern subject. And yet, most significantly, both the doctor and the detective serve the function not merely of appreciating originality, but eradicating it. Abnormality, incongruity and divergence from the norm is, for Holmes, crime and, for Williams, illness. As for Holmes, Moretti writes:
The difference between innocence and guilt returns as the opposition between stereotype and individual. Innocence is conformity; individuality, guilt… A guilty party: crime is always presented as an exception, which by now the individual must be. His defeat is the victory and the purge of a society no longer conceived of as a ‘contract’ between independent entities, but rather as an organism or social body. (135)

Just as detection is presented as the process of identifying an abnormality within an otherwise normative and healthy social body, Williams represents his medical practice as a process of recognising and eradicating individuality. He writes in “The Practice”:

> Along with that the patient himself would shape up into something that called for attention, his peculiarities, her reticences or candors. Although I might be attracted or repelled, the professional attitude which every physician must call on would steady me, dictate the terms on which I was to proceed. (In, 357)

Both doctor and detective (and, indeed, poet) are imagined as individuals with profound capacities for observation, for noticing that which is out of the ordinary and unique. However, perhaps unlike the poet, the role of the doctor and the detective is to resist originality, to notice and then eradicate all that challenges the unity, coherence and functionality of the human or societal body. The doctor weaves uniting metanarratives, forming, in works such as “The Insane” and “Mind and Body”, a comforting sense of logical causality between the chaotic occurrences of modern life. At the same time, the medical gaze seeks out those “peculiarities… reticences or candors” that cannot be sublimated into the stable whole, and feels obliged to eradicate them.

In this sense, if we were to apply Moretti’s analysis of detective fiction to Williams's medical fiction, we could read both Holmes the detective and Williams’s doctor as socially conservative figures. The successful act of diagnosis (or deduction) is, at face value, about apprehending a criminal or curing a patient; but it also serves the secondary function of dispelling ambiguity and provide a comforting sense of linguistic and societal stability. As Moretti puts it:
For someone who feels ill, the doctor's diagnosis will always be spectacular, especially if reassuring. And Holmes is just that: the great doctor of the late Victorians, who convinces them that society is still a great organism: a unitary and knowable body. (145)

The implicit hierarchies within this image are plain to see. Like all organisms, the “great organism” of society is necessarily composed of organs: each with its own function and position within the overall structure. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari argue that the “organization of the organs called the organism” (158) is not merely a biological phenomenon but a political one; the organism is one of the means by which our otherwise “nonstratified, unformed, intense” bodies, referred to as the “body without organs” are stratified, organised and made useful:

The organism is not at all the body, the BwO; rather, it is a stratum on the BwO, in other words, a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation, and sedimentation that, in order to extract useful labor from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences. (159)

From this perspective, the idea that my body is a single, unified organism, composed of organs with discrete preordained functions within a larger hierarchy, is a form of stratification by which my body is made comprehensible, normative and productive within the larger social and economic context. If my hands were to refuse the command of my brain, if my stomach were to decide that it wanted to speak instead of digest, then I would cease to be able to perform labour. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, such a stratification of the body is the source of the doctor’s power: “The organism is already that, the judgment of God, from which medical doctors benefit and on which they base their power” (159). Similarly, the idea of society as a “great organism: a

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51 Deleuze and Guattari identify three such means: “Let us consider the three great strata concerning us, in other words, the ones that most directly bind us: the organism, signifiance, and subjectification. You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you’re just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you’re just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement—otherwise you’re just a tramp” (159).
unitary and knowable body” (Moretti, 159) is a form of stratification by which people are taught their rightful function within the larger social context. And just as a doctor assures that all bodily organs perform their functions, it is the role of the detective to ensure that all people within a society fulfil theirs.

Indeed, Holmes’s criminals are predominantly members of the working classes who disrupt the stability of the societal body by aspiring to wealth and power beyond their ordained positions. Detection, as such, serves the macroscopic function of maintaining the hegemonic social order. What is striking about Williams’s medical stories is the extent to which medical practice also serves to reinforce this arrangement. In particular, medical practice aggressively polices those “organs” of society that refuse to serve their preordained function. Within a number of Williams’s medical stories, there is a clear sense of animosity on behalf of the medical profession towards those who don’t seem to fit into the “unitary and knowable body” of American society: most often Jews, immigrants, women, the working classes and the poor. In “A Face of Stone”, the doctor describes one of his patients as “one of these fresh Jewish types you want to kill at sight, the presuming poor whose looks change the minute cash is mentioned” (DS, 78). He later wonders why such “dumb oxen” are allowed within the country at all:

People like that belong in clinics, I thought to myself. I wasn’t putting out for them, not that day anyhow. Just dumb oxen. Why the hell do they let them into the country. Half idiots at best. Look at them. (DS, 78)

In another story, “The Girl with a Pimply Face”, the narrator’s colleague expresses violent contempt for a poor immigrant family with a sick baby:

You make ‘em pay you. Don’t you do anything for them unless they do…
Don’t you let them put any of that sympathy game over on you. Why they tell me she leaves that baby lying on the bed all day long screaming its lungs out until the neighbors complain to the police about it. I’m not lying to you…
But what about the young girl, I asked weakly. She seems like a pretty straight kid.
My confreer let out a wild howl. That thing! You mean that pimply faced little bitch. Say, if I had my way I’d run her out of the town tomorrow morning. (DS, 54–55)

In both of these stories, there is a clear hostility towards those who might not function as useful components in larger society. Just as the doctor in “Jean Beicke” is reluctant to treat a patient that is likely to grow up to be “a cheap prostitute or something” (DS, 71), the doctors in these two stories seem only concerned with the wellbeing of those who can afford to pay for their own care. Furthermore, they are strikingly infuriated by all those who they deem useless. As Foucault argues in Discipline and Punish, within the modern era, bodies are required to be both functional and obedient: “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body” (173). From this perspective, the link between the doctor and the detective becomes all the clearer; detection and diagnosis are both “disciplines”, mechanisms of power, aimed to regulate bodies and to ensure that the anomalies of crime and illness do not impact upon the productivity of the “unitary and knowable body” of nineteenth- and twentieth-century society.

Fittingly, Williams’s story, “The Paid Nurse” demonstrates the capacity for the institution of medicine to become a tool of capitalist society, a tool used to maintain the productivity and subjugation of working-class bodies. The narrator is a doctor whose friend, George, is badly burnt in a workplace explosion at General Bearings Company. While the narrator advises George to take time off work to recover from his injuries, the company sends a nurse to ensure that he returns to his labours as soon as possible so that he is not fully compensated for his injuries:

Late in the afternoon the nurse called him up to remind him to report for duty next morning. I told her I’d been to you, he said, and that you wanted the compensation papers. She won’t listen to it. She says they’re sending the company car for me tomorrow morning to take me in to see their doctor. Do I go? (DS, 95)

The narrator, out of concern for his friend and patient, replies “Not on your life” (DS, 95) and attempts to advocate for George. In the resulting conflict between the narrating doctor and the
titular nurse, the story plays out the conflicting responsibilities of the medical profession. On the one hand, the narrator is motivated by legitimate care for the wellbeing of his patient:

You’re not to go to work, I told the boy. O.K., that settles it. Want to see me tomorrow? Yeah. And quit those damned capsules he gave you, I told him. No damned good. Here, here’s something much simpler that won’t at least leave you walking on your ear till noon the next day. (DS, 95)

On the other hand, medicine, in the form of the paid nurse and the company doctor, is bent on maintaining the order of the larger “organism” of the Bearings company, and of the capitalist society at large, by returning a body to functional work with minimal disturbance.

Most strikingly, however, the story demonstrates the extent to which the appearance of legitimate concern can be used, within the medical profession, merely as a means of masking more pernicious and conservative motivations. By the end of the story, the paid nurse’s demeanour changes to caring, but the claim for compensation is refused:

I don’t know, he said. I couldn’t believe it. You ought to see the way I was treated. I was all ready to be bawled out but, oh no! The nurse was all smiles. Come right in, George. Do you feel all right, George? …

I get it now, he said. It seems after you’ve been there a year they insure you, but before that you don’t get any protection. (DS, 96–97)

The story concludes with George uncompensated, still injured, still in pain, but functional and subjugated. Despite its claims to objectivity and benevolent disinterest, the discourse of medicine, like that of detection, can easily become a system used to eradicate abnormality and discord, render working bodies functional and dismiss those who are unable to serve a greater function. As Foucault puts it, a discipline such as medicine “increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body” (182). Within the story, the power of General
Bearings Company is not merely articulated in its ability to harm its workers with impunity; rather in its capacity to restore and apply his bodily strength, through medical science, to practical and profitable use. In this sense, just as the detective’s observational skills dispel the social and economic ambiguity raised by the act of crime, the diagnostic powers of the modern medical doctor ensure the utility of the working class. For Foucault, and certainly within a number of Williams’s stories, the capacity to understand the body is conflated with the capacity to control it: “The super-imposition of the power relations and knowledge relations assumes in the examination all its visible brilliance” (197). The “unitary and knowable body” of society is, by virtue of its comprehensibility by the panoptic doctor, a subjected body.

The difference between Holmes and Williams’s doctor, then, is perhaps their position within the “body” that is society. As Foucault argues, “the perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly” (191). Holmes, for one, fulfils this requirement. He is represented as a detached observer, “hover[ing] above this great city” (194). Though he often dons disguises, associates with criminals and even partakes in opium binges, he is never fully immersed within his social context because he sees himself as a disembodied and scientific observer. As he defiantly states in “The Adventure of the Mazarin Stone”, “I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix” (1057). Significantly, while Holmes prefers to see himself hovering over the city of London, peeking in from above, Williams’s observations, while potentially equally as voyeuristic, are certainly more reciprocal. As Crawford notes:

He is not a representative of the “sovereign profession”, nor a magisterial modern master. He is part of a community… and can only voice with any certainty his own uncertainty. (153)

Williams’s doctor enters the homes of his patients and becomes immersed in their lives. As he reflects in “The Practice”:

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52 Central to Foucault’s thesis in Discipline and Punish is the notion that the power to hurt, maim or destroy subjected bodies has been supplanted in the modern era by altogether more subtle, though nonetheless oppressive, modes of discipline.
I lost myself in the very properties of their minds: for the moment at least I actually became *them*, whoever they should be, so that when I detached myself from them at the end of a half-hour of intense concentration over some illness which was affecting them, it was as though I were reawakening from a sleep. (*DS*, 119)

At his most empathetic, Williams’s doctor experiences his relationship with his patients in terms of a bodily immersion in their lives. In “Comedy Entombed: 1930”, a doctor is assisting with the delivery of a stillborn child. Upon entering his patient’s home for the first time, he is advised by her husband to watch his head on the stairs. At first, he almost forgets to do so:

> I took my satchel and leaving him started to climb the stairs, remembering just in time to bow my head so as not to hit the back of the opening above. All short people in this house, I could see that. (*DS*, 109)

Upon his second visit, however, the doctor has familiarised himself with both the home and the people who lived there. His empathetic relationship with them is bodily and instinctual; he has become a part of the home and, as such, he does not need to remember nor be reminded to duck on the stairs: “I ducked my head instinctively this time” (*DS*, 115). It is such an immersion in one’s environment that, for Merleau-Ponty, allows us to escape the illusion of the pure, disembodied “I” and forge more meaningful intersubjective relationships with those who share our world. For Merleau-Ponty, the act of habituating one’s body to an unfamiliar space or object breaks down the binary between subjective and objective existence, confronting us with the sheer heteronomy and materiality of our existence in the world:

> To habituate oneself to a hat, automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments… Habit resides neither in thought nor in the objective body, but rather in the body as the mediator of a world. (145–146)
In this sense, by entering into his patients’ homes and allowing himself to be immersed within and transformed by their lives, Williams’s doctor is capable of direct and meaningful empathetic and intersubjective experience with his patients. By letting go of the rational detached figure of the doctor—the legacy of Enlightenment humanism and modern hospital based medical cosmologies alike—Williams is able to resist the dehumanising hierarchy between doctor and patient and forge meaningful doctor-patient relationships.

V. The Doctor, The Brain, The Body and Paterson

Williams’s doctor does not hover over his city like Holmes, scrutinising it from above. Nor does he, like the great detective, dismiss his body as “mere appendix” (Doyle, 1057) to his disembodied and rational mind. As a result, neither his approach to medicine nor his poetics can be fully understood through the cosmology of modern hospital medicine, and the ideals of clarity, unity and mastery that define it. While many critics conflate Williams’s dual positions as doctor and poet, very few take into account Williams’s reflexive criticism of the detached, panoptic, objectifying and subjugating gaze of the doctor. While the preservation of the “unitary and knowable body” of society may be central to the role of the modern doctor, the detective, and even to some modern poets, it should not be too quickly assumed that Williams dedicates himself to this task. Yet this assumption is all too common in Williams scholarship. In his doctoral thesis “‘Nerves in Patterns’: Synaptic Space, Neuroscience, and American Modernist Poetry” (2010), Deric Corlew draws a specific analogy between the modern poetics of writers such as Williams and the modern medical field of neuroscience. For Corlew, both the poet and the neuroscientist are united by their approach to the various fragmentations of modernity:

> Both “modern” neuroscience and modernist poetry thus faced similar growing pains, shattering experience into pieces while recognizing that, somehow, these pieces needed to be put back together again if their spatial revolution was to have any meaning. (Corlew, 19)

While, according to Moretti, the detective came about to reconcile anxieties about the social and economic instability of late nineteenth-century society, the modern neuroscientist had to grapple
with fragmentation on the level of the subject itself. Indeed, when in 1887, Santiago Ramón y Cajal first uncovered concrete evidence that the brain was not a continuous organ but rather a collection of independent units in constant communication, he shook the very foundations of Western understandings of subjectivity. In his own words:

> To affirm that everything communicates with everything else is equivalent to declaring the absolute unsearchability for the organ of the soul. (Recollections of my Life, 338)

Poets of the twentieth century, particularly those such as Williams with medical training, were increasingly aware of the implications of neurological science for our understanding of the human subject. In his essay “Revelations” (1947), Williams describes creativity in terms of the “lighting calculator” in our heads and the processes of “the brain at work” (SE, 268–269). In his autobiography, he reveals that the aspect of medicine that fascinated and inspired him the most was “the physiology of the nervous system” (A, 286). This was arguably more than just a matter of personal interest; according to Corlew, for the modern poet, the fragmentation of the once-reticular nervous system into a web of innumerable independent yet interconnected neurons aptly mirrored the various other social, political and cultural fragmentations of the modern era (26). If the body could no longer be understood to be organised around the unifying will of a single, coherent brain, then by what means could society be thought of as a stable and unitary organism?

Corlew, however, argues strongly against the assumption that modern poets merely reflected the disunity and fragmentation of modern subjectivity and society. Rather, he argues that, much as the modern neuroscientist had to reconcile the idea of human consciousness with the discovery of a pluralised and fragmented nervous system, the modern poet was left the task of forging, through poetic form, a sense of stability and coherence from the fragments of modern society:

> Like the neuroscientists of their day, these poets were torn between the material fact of the twentieth century (the neuron-like bits that figuratively compose modern experience and literally compose the modern mind) and the memory of the ideal systems of the nineteenth
century with complexity and meaning beyond human enquiry. As I will show in this dissertation, synaptic space provided a way to bridge the gap between ideas and things, imagination and reality, and thought and sensibility. In this way, the words of modern poetry are “nerves in patterns”, fragments artfully “shored” against ruin. (Corlew, 26)

As the final sentence of the above quotation suggests, Corlew’s argument focuses heavily on an examination of T. S. Eliot. Corlew describes Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as “a world imperiled by fragmentation and decay, a loss of cultural values and the unification they provided, and an ultimately hopeless quest for a figure powerful enough to restore order” (Corlew, 3). The “powerful” figure that Corlew mentions is the very same modern “visionary” that Crawford places at the centre of modernism. Within both these accounts, the figure is framed in terms of his or her ability to stand back and survey the fragmented landscape of modernity and return it to a sense of order and design: a detective delineates the solution to a case, a doctor sutures a wound and a poet crafts a poem. Neuroscience, however, complicates this process by problematising the powerful figure of the modern visionary more than Corlew would admit; while Holmes can happily claim to be “a brain”, a modern poet like Williams, fully aware that his own consciousness is comprised of a plurality of material units, distributed throughout his body, cannot. As we have seen over the course of this chapter, within the cosmology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century medicine, the body of the patient has been objectified, fragmented, compartmentalised, stripped of any internal unity, subjectivity or transparent use of language: rendered, to put it simply, as non-human. With the rise of neuroscience, the poet and the doctor, and indeed all supposed masters of observation and thought, had to face the same fate. The concept of the disembodied and rational subjectivity, upon which the authority of these figures relied, could no longer be sustained. As Corlew puts it:

> Whereas early nineteenth-century neuroscientists described a single anatomical object, the brain, as the centre of consciousness, the modern nervous system dispersed the mind throughout the body. (Corlew, 74)
Within the neurological model of the brain, there is no tower from which a panoptic observer can distinguish himself from the rest of the inmates. The once-disembodied mind of the doctor is now as corporeal as the patient. This was no doubt a source of anxiety among a number of modernists. But while poets such as Eliot may have desired a transcendent unifying figure to reform a sense of coherence, the assumption that Williams was uncomfortable with the unseating of the unified brain is perhaps taken for granted. Considering Williams’s discomfort with the increasingly authoritarian politics of the early twentieth century and his vocal objections to Eliot’s poetry, it is easy to see why neuroscience’s challenge to the once unified and sovereign subject might be exciting to a poet like Williams.\(^53\) In their book *Neurology and Modernity* Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail use political imagery to describe the birth of the neurological model of the brain:

> Much changed from the messengers of a dictatorship of the brain described by Willis in 1664; by 1906 the nervous system appeared as the public sphere of a body made up of many semi-autonomous units. (Salisbury and Shail, 30)

If we invert this model, then, it can be seen that the emerging neurological model of consciousness might present to the author, not a frightening source of disparity and fragmentation, but an exciting means of challenging and subverting authoritarian narratives. In a half-century scarred by dictators and modern masters alike, the upheaval of the brain as “dictator” allows the possibility of a more democratic or radical reading of human subjectivity.\(^54\) What’s more, by demonstrating that the brain can only function through a heteronomous relationship with the external environment, the neurological model challenges the very idea of an autonomous, rationally detached *cogito*. As Salisbury and Shail write:

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\(^53\) In his autobiography, Williams describes *The Waste Land* as “the great catastrophe to our letters” (146).

\(^54\) In her recent book *The Lyric in the Age of the Brain* (2016), Nikki Silman argues that, since the dawn of neurological science, poets have had to “evolve under the equal and opposing pressure to evoke the feeling of inner life and to dismantle the objective unity of the subject—to give sensuous form to the fluid, phenomenological content of self-experience while challenging the very category of the self, which appears to them ever less distinct from the physical forms and forces of the “exterior” world beyond it” (17).
The self could not be seen as capable of detachment from the world if the entire nervous system, including the brain, required the ‘interference’ of immediate surroundings to function. If the body was, by its nature, functionally connected to its environment, the modern neurological subject needed to be regarded as fundamentally attached to a world by which it could be nourished and harried. (Salisbury and Shail, 24)

As is becoming apparent, the field of modern medicine occupies a complicated relationship with the traditional humanist subject. At once, the practice of medicine is reliant upon the authority, rationality and objectivity of a seemingly disembodied observer, the doctor as a humanist subject par excellence. But on the other hand, medical science can also demystify the figure of the doctor by challenging the possibility of an objective and rational observer. Significantly, it is the latter quality of his medical studies that Williams most valued. In his autobiography, he writes:

I am grateful at least that I studied medicine (which is an idea: to study medicine but not to practice it) that I might know what goes on in myself as well as others. (A, 291)

By showing Williams what “goes on in” himself, medical science, particularly the modern field of neuroscience, problematises the great figure of the doctor. The modern doctor was left in an ambiguous position: at once required to conceive of himself as a rational, disembodied and authoritative mind and, at the same time, unable to reconcile the possibility of such critical distance with a neurological understanding of consciousness as plural, fragmented and constantly dependant on outside stimulus. While these latter ideas would certainly have confronted Eliot, who yearned for the unity and stability of earlier periods, the very same ideas excited Williams. In his autobiography, he professes his fascination for the possibilities offered by an understanding of the nervous system:

The reason people marvel at works of art and say: “How in Christ’s name did he do it?” —is that they know nothing of the physiology of the nervous system and have never in their experience witnessed the larger processes of the imagination. (A, 123)
What Corlew’s analysis fails to fully address is that the rise of a neurological understanding of consciousness was not merely a subset of the terrifying fragmentations of modernity; rather, it provided an exciting and radical reassessment of traditional Western conceptions of the subject.

The fragmentation of the neurological brain and the nervous system provides a valuable opportunity for poets like Williams to explore ideas of multiplicity and heteronomy while rejecting notions of unity and authority. It provided an opportunity for poets to overcome the hierarchies implicit in the relationship between subject and object, doctor and patient, poet and poem. These were opportunities that Williams ultimately embraced in his later masterpiece, *Paterson*.

*Paterson* is a lot of things. It is a city, it is a man and it is a poem. As Williams writes in his author’s note: “*Paterson* is a long poem in four parts” based on the conceit “that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody” (xiv). Its five books, published 1946, 1948, 1949, 1951 and 1958 respectively, are a collection of voices and fragments, some attributable to Williams, some not. Its ideas and images circulate around similar themes but ultimately refuse to cohere into any sense of unity. It is, as stated in the preface, a process of “rolling / up the sum, by defective means –” (*P*, 3) into the frame of a poem. No one voice, no one coherent idea unites the poem, the city, or the man. In her essay “*Paterson: Poem as Rhizome*”, Alba Newman describes the fragmented structure of the poem using Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome from *A Thousand Plateaus*.

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55 Four became five when, in 1958, Williams published the fifth and final book. Williams was working on a sixth book in the final years of his life. The incomplete, and potentially incompletable, nature of the poem seems fitting for a work that resists ideals of unity and mastery.

56 As Newman summarises: “Deleuze and Guattari contrast the acentered system of communication and proliferation found in the rhizome with the “root/radical” or arboreal system of the “tree,” in which knowledge is organized around and branches out of a central “trunk.” In the arboreal system, the trunk is understood as the origin, the source of authenticity or authority” (Newman, 62).
The model of the rhizome is well suited to revealing such a city/man/poem as Williams knew and expressed it. It allows for an openness, a flux that is critical to understanding Paterson not only as a representation, but as a place of rivers, a process, a defiance of authority, and as “an experimentation in contact with the real.” (Newman, 71)

While Pellegrino compares the poetic imagination to the scientific gaze of the doctor, Newman’s model implies that Williams’s poetics actively rejects such a scientific ideal:

In their writings, Williams, Deleuze, and Guattari resist the authoritarian or “scientific” privileging of a single perspective, a single voice—the enforced “clarity” which interrupts contact. The blurring of distinctions between the voice of the author and subject describes both the fusing of Paterson as man, poem, and city, and Williams’s incorporation and manipulation of passages by other writers throughout his poem. (Newman, 64)

Newman identifies Paterson as a poetic space without centre, in which thoughts and language are fluid, escaping certainty or definition:

Language, too, as thought enacted, becomes a fluid figure—flowing, falling, crashing down within the poem: “The language cascades into / the invisible, beyond and above; the falls / of which it is the visible part” (145). As the episodes focusing on the force of the Falls and the effects of the flood suggest, water is not easily contained, it has a power to resist stagnation, to resist the “designs: placed on it (unlike the sun which rises, ignorant, within the same “slot” each day). (Newman, 4)

It is unsurprising that Williams would choose a non-unified, non-heirarchical and decentred poetic form, considering his growing interest in the nervous system. At the end of Book 1 of Paterson, Williams quotes John Addington Symonds’s description of ancient Greek poet Hipponax’s use of choliambi from Studies of the Greek Poets. According to the passage, Hipponax creates deliberately “lame or limping iambics” to mirror common speech:
The choliambi are in poetry what the dwarf or cripple is in human nature… Deformed verse was well suited to deformed morality. (P, 40)

The inclusion of this passage is particularly telling of Williams’s approach to poetry in *Paterson*. Despite Corlew’s assertion that the goal of the modern poet was to forge unity among the fragments of the modern world, the inclusion of this passage suggests that Williams was not trying to unify or repair anything. Hipponax embraces abnormality in his poetics as a reflection of the diverse and non-normative in the world. Similarly, the non-hierarchical structure of *Paterson*, identified by Newman, can be said to reflect a fragmentation of the subject that should be embraced, not *cured*. Put simply, the fragmented, pluralised and rhizomatic form of the poem can be read as an exploration of the fragmented, pluralised and rhizomatic nervous system. After all, Deleuze and Guattari draw explicit comparisons between the structure of a rhizome and that of the brain:

> Thought is not arborescent, and the brain is not a rooted or ramified matter. What are wrongly called "dendrites" do not assure the connection of neurons in a continuous fabric. The discontinuity between cells, the role of the axons, the functioning of the synapses, the existence of synaptic microfissures, the leap each message makes across these fissures, make the brain a multiplicity immersed in its plane of consistency or neuroglia, a whole uncertain, probabilistic system ("the uncertain nervous system"). (15)

Interestingly, *Paterson* is not analysed in significant detail within Corlew’s discussion of synaptic space. Corlew’s chapter on Williams is focused primarily on pointing out the ways in which thought is represented as a material process within the earlier poems. But it is in *Paterson* that the materiality of cognitive processes become all the more explicit; the poem’s famous mantra “no ideas but in things” is taken very much literally (P, 9). The city of Paterson is described as a great body, “a nine months’ wonder, the city / the man, an identity” (P, 4) whose cognitive

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57 He does briefly mention the poem as a counterexample to his overall contention, conceding that *Paterson* “interrogates meaning much more than it creates unity” (249).

58 Corlew focuses on poems from works such as *Spring and All* and *Pictures from Brueghel*. 
processes are embodied in the various people and things spread throughout it: the river, as Newman identifies, carries thoughts from one part of the city to another. In Book 1, Paterson’s thoughts are described as people on a bus \((P, 9)\) and names in a telephone directory \((P, 10)\); in Book 2, Paterson “instructs his thoughts / (concretely)” \((P, 43)\) and “thoughts do meet / in the flesh” \((P, 52)\); in Book 3, thoughts are described as “a leaf, a / pebble, an old man” \((P, 117)\). But it is not merely the embodiment of cognitive processes that is striking about *Paterson*; rather it is the manner in which these thoughts interact:

> Say it! No ideas but in things. Mr. Paterson has gone away
to rest and write. Inside the bus one sees
his thoughts sitting and standing. His
thoughts alight and scatter— \((P, 9)\)

Paterson’s is a nervous system characterised by unpredictability and discord. His thoughts resist the predictable binary formations “sitting and standing” and instead “alight and scatter”. Paterson’s thoughts are not static ideas, but the result of an “uncertain, probabilistic system” \((\text{Deleuze and Guattari}, 15)\) of the neurological brain.

Significantly, Williams does not exclude himself from the chaos of this system:

> Who are these people (how complex
the mathematics) among whom I see myself (emphasis mine)
in the regularly ordered plateglass of
his thoughts, glimmering before shoes and bicycles? \((P, 9)\)

In this sense, *Paterson* is a poem that depicts a city, which is also a man, whose thoughts in turn are comprised of people, one of whom is the poet who composes the poem in the first instance. In a world where consciousness can be subdivided into the operations of countless individual neurons, the idea of a stable unified society, human subjectivity, or poetic voice is replaced by an
ever-repeating process of unpredictable pluralisation. The infinite divisibility returns on itself: for if Paterson’s ideas are comprised of plural bodies, then who is to say that those bodies are not themselves equally divisible? At the same time, the poet is inextricably immersed within the system. If thought is material, then the subjectivity of the poet can by no means be distinguished from its material context. As Deleuze and Guattari describe, within a rhizomatic structure:

Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first. (8)

As such, Paterson offers a reassessment of the figure of the doctor and the figure of the poet. The speaker in the poem is repeatedly referred to as a doctor; the Cress letters in book 2 are addressed to “Dr. P” (P, 91), the letters from Allen Ginsberg in book 4 are addressed to “Doctor” (P, 172), and in book 3 a patient asks “Doctor, do you believe in / “the people”, the Democracy?” (P, 109). Even the location of Paterson was chosen for its similarity and proximity to Rutherford, where Williams’s doctor stories take place (IWWP, 72). But the doctor of Paterson by no means possesses the disembodied authority that characterises the sovereign role of the doctor; he is not capable of manipulating the “puppet strings” of the patient or the “great organism” of society, because he himself is inextricably immersed within the system himself. By materialising consciousness, Williams ensures that the once-disembodied rational gaze of the doctor and the poet is part of the great “organism” of the city.

Crawford’s characterisation of the spirit of modernism and the modern visionary places “a great deal of mastery and control in the hands of those in the center of the systems” (135). But if thought is understood as a network of separate, but heteronomous, material objects, without a distinct centre, then poetry becomes a similarly decentred interaction of texts. The unseating of the dictatorship of the brain by the nervous system is paralleled by the unseating of the poetic voice by the various letters, quotations and fragments that comprise the text. Tellingly, the first inclusion of a letter comes in book 1, as if to serve as an immediate narrative rebuttal of the preceding claims of a single unified masculine subject:
But

only one man—like a city.

In regard to the poems I left with you; will you be so kind as to return them to me at my new address? And without bothering to comment upon them if you should find that embarrassing—for it was the human situation and not the literary one that motivated my phone call and visit. Besides, I know myself to be more the woman than the poet; and to concern myself less with the publishers of poetry than with . . . living . . .

But they set up an investigation . . . and my doors are bolted forever (I hope forever) against all public welfare workers, professional do-gooders and the like. (P, 7)

Like the difficult patient in “Mind and Body”, the interjection of letters and fragments within the text challenge, interrupt and, at times, are openly hostile to the voice of “Dr. P”:

You've never had to live, Dr. P — not in any of the by-ways and dark underground passages where life so often has to be tested. The very circumstances of your birth and social background provided you with an escape from life in the raw and you confuse the protection from life with an inability to live — and are thus able to regard literature as nothing more than a desperate last extremity resulting from that illusionary inability to live. (I've been looking at your of your autobiographical works, as this indicates.) (P, 90)

Unlike Eliot and his use of well-annotated quotations and references in The Waste Land, Williams makes no attempt to render his fragments legible or coherent. Voices appear out of context, unannotated, only to disappear without explanation. Paterson is indeed a body, and a nervous system, but it is certainly not a “unitary and knowable” one; “the / equation”, Williams writes, “is beyond solution” (P, 10). The various voices and texts, the neural fragments from which it is composed, exist not as the branches of a single tree, connected by a single idea or voice but are laid out in parallel, like names within a telephone directory:

59 By contrast, all of the characters of The Waste Land descend arboreally from a single unified “spectator.” As Eliot writes in the notes: “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a “character,” is yet the most important
They walk incommunicado, the
equation is beyond solution, yet
its sense is clear—that they may live
his thought is listed in the Telephone
Directory— (P, 10)

The “thoughts”, the identities, the people in this image are, for the time being, incommunicado. But the image of the telephone directory suggests an infinite potential for communication, for interaction. Each “thought” may choose to contact any other “thought”, and in Paterson, each image has the capacity to resonate with any other as the poem is read.

As Newman points out, the lack of unifying logic or coherent centre to Paterson provides a means of resisting hegemony:

Initially, the “defective means” seem a statement of failure; but there is a degree to which the inability to make a total sum is not a failure, but a necessary condition—it preserves a means of escape. (Newman, 70)

Indeed, within Deleuze and Guattari's work, notions of unity and coherence within a text exist, not as a sign of order but as the result of an imposition of hegemonic power: “The notion of unity (unite) appears only when there is a power takeover in the multiplicity by the signifier or a corresponding subjectification proceeding” (8). Eliot’s copious footnoting of The Waste Land, Holmes’s detection, Foucault’s disciplines and the doctor’s objectifying diagnostic gaze can all be read as attempts to impose hegemony on an otherwise pluralistic system. By situating his own consciousness within a neurological system that is material, fragmented, pluralistic and, as such, comparable to the functioning of the poem itself, Williams avoids the totalising narratives commonly associated with the figure of the doctor and the poet.

personage in the poem, uniting all the rest. Just as the one-eyed merchant, seller of currants, melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What Tiresias sees, in fact, is the substance of the poem” (23).
VI. No One is “Cured”

In his poem “To Elsie” from *Spring and All*, Williams describes an America that has lost touch with a meaningful sense of place, in favour of “crazy” excess:

> The pure products of America
go crazy—
mountain folk from Kentucky
...
sheer rags—succumbing without emotion
save numbed terror (*CP1*, 217)

At the centre of the poem is the titular figure of Elsie, Williams’s mentally handicapped nursemaid, and her “broken / brain”:

> some doctor’s family, some Elsie—
volutuous water
expressing with broken

> brain the truth about us— (*CP1*, 218)

Here we can see the intersection of Williams’s poetic and medical concerns, as a disorder within society is connected to a disorderly body. It is tempting here to conflate Williams’s poetic approach to the ideals of modern hospital medicine: to assume, simply put, that the description of a “broken” brain is a negative diagnosis, indicative of a society in need of a cure. But such a conflation results in a reading of Williams’s poetry that overemphasises his aversion to the instability, incongruity and plurality of the body, society, the subject and the poem. Such a conflation causes an overly diagnostic reading of both Elsie and the poem’s analogy of the driverless car:
No one
to witness
and adjust, no one to drive the car (CP1, 219)

Most critics have read the driverless car, and indeed Elsie’s “broken / brain” as a diagnosis of an
America that is out of control and order. William Breslin claims that the figure of Elsie
“embodies the national desire for quick, easy wealth” (234). Richard R. Frye argues that:

Williams was certain his friends and neighbors (and in particular the mentally handicapped
young nursemaid, Elsie, who came over from time to time to help Flossie clean house)
were out of contact with the “American place”, and the image that came into his mind was
that of a driverless automobile careening out of control. (61–62)

Bram Dijkstra explicitly links his similar critiques with the act of diagnosis. He writes:

The poem is primarily a diagnosis; its solution is implied. But there are the isolate flecks of
understanding which intimate some hope for the future, if only someone can be found to
"drive the car." (106)

Dijkstra, like Corlew, suggests that the role of the poet is to find coherence and stability among
the chaos of the modern world, to be the doctor who can cure a broken brain, to be the figure
who can “drive the car.” However, Breslin, Frye and Dijkstra fail to take into account the extent
to which Williams’s poetry and prose repeatedly critique the desire for stability and control at the
heart of modern medical cosmologies and the act of diagnosis. While these critics see Williams’s
diagnostic gaze as a means of “curing” American society, Williams expresses an altogether more
humble approach to medicine. In his autobiography he writes:

When they ask me, as of late they frequently do, how I have for so many years continued
an equal interest in medicine and the poem I reply that they amount to nearly the same
thing. Any worth-his-salt physician knows that no one is “cured.” (emphasis mine) We
recover from some somatic, some bodily “fever” whereas as observers we have seen
various engagements between our battalions of cells playing at this or that lethal maneuver with other natural elements. (A, 286)

The verb *cure* has a dual meaning, as it can be applied to two different objects. In one of its uses, the doctor, the subject of the clause, *cures* a patient, thereby restoring the patient to health. In the other usage, the doctor *cures* a disease or illness, thereby eradicating an incongruous element from an otherwise normative body. The combined implication of these phrases is that the role of the doctor is to normalise, to make congruent, to return to working order. Anything not in order, such as a “broken / brain” or a driverless automobile, must be cured. However, rather than supporting this cosmology, Williams’s experience—the humbling realisation of the complexity and contingency of the human body and its synonym with the human subject—destabilised the idea of the doctor as a master who could offer such a “cure”. By assuming that Williams is entirely uncritical of his own positions as doctor and poet, critics like Breslin, Frye and Dijkstra overlook the poet’s critique of authority itself. It is perhaps unsurprising that a more complex analysis of “To Elsie” comes from a feminist perspective. In her 1994 book *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser* Linda A. Kinnaham takes a more nuanced view of the figure of Elsie as an embodiment of “both the result of this system and the potential to disrupt or break it” (230). Elsie is subjected, not just to the chaos of “mad” capitalist America, but to the forceful and objectifying gaze of the doctor and the poet:

Her movement to better circumstances, financially speaking, retains much of the old, for as a young woman she remains “hemmed round” by the male-identified institutions that continue to define her: the agent who rescues her, the state who rears her, the suburban doctor who employs her—the “us” about whom Elsie’s “broken / brain” expresses the “truth.” (230)

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60 The logic that claims that America needs an authoritative “driver” to reconnect humanity with the natural landscape is likely the same logic that motivated Williams’s naive claim that the jet engine had eradicated the inequalities of the sexes, as discussed in Chapter 2.
According to Kinnaham, the disconnect between mind and world, the same disconnect that Breslin, Frye and Dijkstra believe that Elsie embodies, is also evident in the objectifying and subjugating gaze of the doctor poet:

The objectification and suppression of the female body is contextualized within a denigration of earth and nature, a binarism necessary to perpetuate such hierarchy. (231)

In this sense, “To Elsie” is not a diagnosis of a broken brain or a broken America, as Dijkstra suggests, but a critique of the objectifying processes of diagnosis itself. A “broken / brain” is merely a brain that is not under the control of a normative power. As such, like the rhizomatic nervous system of Paterson and the aggressively subjective hypochondriac of “Mind and Body”, a driverless car and a broken brain can offer radical possibilities:

Here, though, there is no adjustment, no control of the car’s movement; significantly, it is not that there is “no one to witness”, but that there is no one to witness and adjust when the “driver” opens to the imagination’s broken, isolate flecks. (234)

A closer critical examination of Williams’s relationship with medicine reveals that he was far from complicit in the Cartesian binaries between doctor and patient, the violent objectification and subjugation of the diagnostic process, and the totalising and panoptic gaze consistently reinforced by the cosmology of modern hospital medicine. Instead, Williams’s medical writing challenges the model of the disembodied and rational doctor, replacing it instead with a physical, neurological subject that is a part of, not a master of, the modern world.
CONCLUSION: WILLIAMS, TWITTER AND POSTHUMANISM IN THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In “Rapid Transit”, a poem comprised almost entirely of the collaged texts of advertising
material and snippets of conversation seen and overheard on a New York subway commute,
Williams’s own poetic voice intrudes only once. In these lines, Williams’s addresses himself,
dismissing any illusions of the significance of either himself or his poetry:

To hell with you and your poetry—
You will rot and be blown
through the next solar system
with the rest of the gases (CP1, 231–232)

Contrary to this bleak prediction, neither Williams’s poetry nor his legacy have yet been “blown /
through the next solar system” (CP1, 231–232). Williams’s presence is very much felt in the
twenty-first century; no poet writing free verse today can escape the influence of his use of line
breaks, his focus on the everyday, or his rejection of symbolism in favour of material reality. In
his essay “The New Thing: The object lesson of recent American poetry” (2009), Stephen Burt
cites Williams as a “common source” (41) for a number of twenty-first century poets, such as
Michael O’Brien, Graham Foust and Justin Marks, whom he associates with the movement he
terms “The New Thing”: “The new poetry, the new thing, seeks, as Williams did, well-made,
attentive, unornamented things” (41). In a panel discussion published in the William Carlos
Williams Review (2009), Neil Baldwin, Paul Cappucci, Ian D. Copestake, Edith Vasquez and Bill
Zavatsky were asked “what is Williams’s most important legacy for 21st century readers and
writers?” (91). Baldwin cites Williams’s exhaustive poetic output (93), while Cappucci suggests
that, whereas Williams is a “major poetic innovator who refashioned the line in modern verse” it
is his accessibility, the authenticity of his language, that is his greatest achievement (94–95).
Copestake contends: “Williams’s legacy is surely to show new generations of readers that poetry
can make a difference to the way we think, the way we see the reality around us, and that it can
continue to break through the conventions and clichés that block our appreciation of the world’s reality” (96). Vasquez argues that the most profound impact of Williams’s poetry lies in its capacity to articulate the experience of Americans, particularly immigrant Americans (99).

Zavatsky, on the other hand, praises the affective potential of Williams’s poetry: “Williams’s poetry is powerful, hot, and straight to the emotional mark. It moves us” (100).

These answers, while elegantly expressed and certainly accurate, are not particularly surprising; a poet of Williams’s standing and productivity will naturally have an impact on the minds of poets and critics alike. But, perhaps more surprising is Williams’s continuing presence among online communities; if you ask a user of online platforms such as Reddit, Tumblr or Twitter to summarise the poet’s significance, you will find that Williams has found a uniquely twenty-first century place within the twenty-first century. As Annie Lowrey explains in her 2015 article in New York Magazine, “A Poem Becomes A Meme. Forgive Me”:

If you are present on the internet—scrapbooking on Tumblr or, especially, tweeting on Twitter—you have probably seen this joke a lot lately, existing as it does in that snowballing space between “everyone making the same joke” and “full-on meme.” (Lowrey)

The “meme”61 that Lowrey is referencing here is the recent online trend of writing, posting and sharing parodies of Williams’s 1934 poem “This Is Just to Say”. Over the past decade these parodies have become increasingly popular. On Williams’s birthday this year, Sesame Street Muppet Cookie Monster tweeted the following poem:

Dis is just to say

Me have eaten

---

61 Internet memes are described by Limor Shifman in her 2014 book Memes in Digital Culture, as a form of “postmodern folklore,” or online “pieces of cultural information that pass along from person to person, but gradually scale into a shared social phenomenon” (19).
the cookies
that were in
the cookie jar

and which
you were probably
saving
for snack time

forgive me
they were delicious
so yummy
and om nom nom\textsuperscript{62} (Cookie Monster)

While, at first sight, the existence of this meme may seem inconsequential, the cultural practice of mimicking Williams’s poetic style seems to almost eclipse the cultural significance of Williams himself. Unlike writers such as Shakespeare, Poe and Dickinson, whose prominence in popular culture seems to be based on their positions as canonical literary figures, Williams’s internet fame seems solely based on the appropriation of a single poem. Indeed, many internet users are likely to have read a parody of “This Is Just to Say” before reading the original poem itself, or indeed any of Williams’s poems. One might imagine that such a reality would be distressing for a Williams scholar. And yet, I argue that, far from minimising the significance or impact of Williams’s original poetry, these mimicries throw light upon a number of ideas that are central to his poetic style. The practice of rewriting “This Is Just to Say” challenges conventional notions of poetic authority, the poet’s capacity to command or control language, the distinction between high and low culture and, ultimately, the very nature of human subjectivity and the human imagination, and their role within poetry. These challenges closely parallel the subversive

\textsuperscript{62} Due to Twitter’s character limit, Cookie Monster’s poem was published over three successive tweets.
posthumanist nature of Williams’s work that I have delineated so far within this thesis. This is so much the case that, quite arguably, the spirit of Williams’s attack on the humanist, elitist and authoritarian premises of modernism lives on most potently, not in the neo-modernism of his poetic successors, but in the irreverent work of his Twitter-based imitators. With their disregard for the sanctity and authority of the poetic voice and their deconstruction of Williams’s own poetic ego, these Twitter parodies give us a way of thinking about Williams’s poetry that escapes the humanist narratives of modernism and instead allows us to question the place of humanism, human subjectivity and the poet in today’s world. That is to say, these parodies give us a way to contextualise Williams’s poetry, not as a relic of modernist history to “rot and be blown / through the next solar system”, but as a body of work that speaks to us, to our values and to our vulnerabilities, even today.

I. Twitter, Poetry Bots and the Death of the Human

The titular “this” of “This Is Just to Say” is generally assumed to be a note, left by Williams for his wife Flossie, apologising for eating her plums:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold (CP1, 372)

The subject matter of the poem seems somewhat prophetic. For just as the speaker disregards Flossie’s ownership of the plums, misappropriating them for his own pleasurable consumption, writers and fans have since taken the form and vocabulary of “This Is Just to Say” and, without so much as a “forgive me”, made it their own. Critic Stephen Burt claims that the poem “has for years, maybe decades, been the most parodied poem in America” (qtd. in Lowrey). Yet it is important to note that the initial parody of the poem came from Williams himself, when he included Flossie’s “reply” to the original poem in the unpublished collection, Detail & Parody for the Poem Paterson (CP1, 536). The reply, titled “Reply (crumpled under her desk)”, was eventually published in 1982 in The Atlantic Monthly.

Dear Bill: I’ve made a
couple of sandwiches for you.
In the icebox you’ll find
blueberries—a cup of grapefruit
a glass of cold coffee.
On the stove is the teapot
with enough tea leaves
for you to make tea if you
prefer—Just light the gas—
boil the water and put in the tea
Plenty of bread in the bread-box
and butter and eggs—
I didn’t know just what to
make for you. Several people
called up about office hours—
See you later. Love. Floss.
Please switch off the telephone. (145)
The effect of the “reply” is twofold. Firstly, it reaffirms the impression that both this poem and the original are pieces of found art, not necessarily the unique creation and intellectual property of the poetic voice, but words that once existed in the material world, and played a part in a real relationship. Secondly, the publication of the reply frames the original poem as merely the opening gambit in what turns out to be an unfinished dialogue. Though, admittedly, it is Williams’s poetic authority that ultimately elevates Flossie’s words to the level of literature, the inclusion of these words suggests that Williams’s poetic voice is far from univocal; the world has a right to reply and these replies are no less significant than the original literary work. In 1962, poet Kenneth Koch took up this implicit invitation in his “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams”. In this piece, Koch takes the vocabulary of the original poem and crafts a series of new, and at times absurd, apologies:

1
I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next summer.
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do
and its wooden beams were so inviting...

4
Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg.
Forgive me. I was clumsy and
I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the doctor! (134)

In these variations, Koch demonstrates the openness and accessibility of Williams’s poetry, delighting in its capacity to be reused by other authors to express a multitude of different ideas.

While “This Is Just to Say” was parodied a number of times over the succeeding decades, the true golden age of the poem’s parodies began with the rise of websites such as Reddit, Tumblr and Twitter (Lowrey). When, in 2013, Twitter began allowing users to include line breaks in their tweets, a new generation gained the ability to apologise publically for their various faux pas by creating and sharing thousands of satirical reappropriations of the poem. Parodies of “This Is
Just to Say”, once the domain of poets and intellectuals like Koch, suddenly became significantly more populist, expressing increasingly everyday concerns. Twitter user Lindsay Small-Butera’s 2015 parody updates the plums of the original poem to more contemporary modern cuisine:

I have eaten
the chipotle
that was in
the fridge

& which
you were probably
saving
for 2am

Forgive me
it was delicious
so soggy
& so gross (Small-Butera)

User Stvnrly’s 2015 parody applies the form to the etiquette of shared computers, a social code that would have undoubtedly confounded Williams:

I have closed
the tabs
that were in
the browser

and which
you were probably
saving
Lowrey writes that the success of “This Is Just to Say” as a Twitter phenomenon “makes some sense”:

The poem is short, clocking in at just 149 characters in total, easily cut to under 140. It is iconic, quickly recognized if faintly remembered by anyone who took a high school English class. (Lowrey)

Indeed, the formal limitations of Twitter seem largely consonant with Williams’s use of form. As I argued in chapter three of this thesis, Williams’s use of the variable foot form in his later poem is presented, much like the 140 word limit of Twitter, as an arbitrary frame within which poets must “squeeze” the contents of their imagination. 63 Furthermore, Williams’s habits of jotting down poems on prescription pads while driving between the homes of his patients, as discussed in chapter two, has a closer affinity with the image of the modern Twitter user, sharing a tweet via their phone on their morning commute, than it does with the image of the poet at a desk, carefully crafting a work of literary genius. Even the thematic concerns of these tweets are remarkably similar to the content of Williams’s original poem; there is very little difference, aside perhaps from culinary taste, between stealing a plum, a cookie or a cold Chipotle burrito. This is one of the more peculiar things about the Twitter parodies of “This Is Just to Say”; it is uncommon for Twitter and modern poetry to seem such compatible bedfellows. Most analyses of the intersection of literature and Twitter assume that there is a natural tension between the two. In Alexander Aciman and Emmet Rensin’s 2009 Penguin Modern Classic *Twitterature: The

63 The term “squeeze” is taken from Williams’s statement to Allen Ginsberg regarding his approach to form: “I just try to squeeze the lines up into pictures” (qtd. in Ginsberg, 4).
World’s Greatest Books Retold Through Twitter, the artistry and reflective nature of canonical works of literature stand juxtaposed with the rushed, superficial, frantic postmodern lexicon of Twitter for comedic effect. For example, in their retelling of Hamlet, the prince’s famous Act 3 Scene 1 soliloquy—an icon of the subjective complexity of English literature—is stripped of all emotional impact and reduced to an embarrassing mess of abbreviations: “2bornt2b? Can one tweet beyond the mortal coil?” (33).

Conversely, poetry is often framed as a means to rehumanise the superficial mass-cultural world of Twitter. In her chapter in the 2015 collection The Contemporaneity of Modernism, “Modernist Poetics After Twitter, Inc”, Lisa Siraganian examines the role of Twitter in the poetry of Mark Leidner. Within her analysis, she seems unduly surprised that Leidner is capable of reconciling his modernist poetics with the technologies of the twenty-first century. She writes:

Rather than think that modernist poetry on Twitter constitutes a whole new death of modernism, or that Twitter poetry inevitably means the surrender of poetry to the market, Leidner and like-minded writers signal a renewal of both poetry and modernism in critical relation to the market. (205)

Like Aciman and Rensin, Siraganian’s language betrays a distrust for the twenty-first century, which she describes as a “degraded world of commercialism and mass media” (207) that can only be revived by the creative force of modernism. More specifically, for Siraganian, the degraded, commercialised and superficial world of twenty-first century internet culture can only be redeemed by the strong commanding voice of the modern master. This much is evident when she includes Williams in her narrative:

Williams can produce a poetry that gathers and juxtaposes degraded, mass-produced texts and write a poem. Fixed forms of poetry become one more found textual objects to be appropriated and controlled by the modern genius. (210)

64 The gulf between canonical literature and internet culture is here emphasised by the conspicuous use of the word “books” to describe a series of works of literature, a number of which are plays and poems.
Siraganian’s approach to Twitter operates upon a distinction between the “modern genius” capable of transcending and reordering the “degraded world” (207) of mass media and the common Twitter user who, presumably, is not. This is a distinction that is fundamentally challenged by the proliferation of Twitter parodies of Williams’s poem. The reappropriation of “This Is Just to Say” by twitter users blurs the boundary between modernist poetry and mundane everyday complaint; it brings the canonical “modern genius” down to the level of the everyday Chipotle-stealing tweeter. Furthermore, these parodies challenge the very uniqueness of Williams’s own poetic and subjective identity. If Williams’s poetic voice can be taken on by anyone, if it can be reappropriated and shared throughout the world and across the web over fifty years after the poet’s own death, then the uniqueness of his own subjectivity and his own poetry ceases to exist as a meaningful concept. With each parody of “This Is Just to Say”, the link between the literary work and the human subjectivity that created it is ruptured. The idea that there is a single and unified ordering force behind the language of the poem is lost.

If such a displacement of the subject of Western humanism and the centred role of the poet within Western verse can be said to be the legacy of Williams’s posthumanism, then this legacy was taken to a dramatic conclusion in 2013 when Mark Sample, an Associate Professor of Digital Studies at Davidson College, launched JustToSayBot. JustToSayBot is a Twitter bot designed to automatically tweet an original parody of “This Is Just to Say” every hour. The program takes the first and final stanzas of the original poem and inserts random nouns in the place of “plums” and “icebox”, random adjectives in the place of “delicious”, “sweet” and “cold” and, occasionally but not always, random verbs in the place of “eaten”. At the time of writing, Sample’s account has over a thousand followers and almost sixteen thousand poems have been produced. The first, published at 5:47 AM on the fourteenth of July 2013, reads:

I have eaten
the abstractions
that were in
the distinction
Forgive me
They were dominical
so midcalf
and so stall-fed (JustToSayBot)\textsuperscript{65}

From a Western humanist perspective, the existence of twitter bots such as JustToSayBot no doubt signifies the end of all that is valuable in poetry. In a world where Williams’s poetry is reduced to trivial and easily consumable units of mass entertainment produced by anyone or, more troublingly, by no one at all, the humanist notion of poetry as the ultimate evocation of human sentiment, capable of transcending our differences, emancipating us from oppression and bringing harmony to the chaotic modern world, can no longer be sustained. While Williams’s poetry and prose repeatedly revealed poetry to be, not the sole work of the human imagination, but a heterogeneous process that relied on a number of technologies, texts, voices and forces outside of human control, JustToSayBot removes humanity from the equation altogether. In doing so, it raises the concerning, yet increasingly significant, question: what place is left for the poet, and indeed for the human subject, in the twenty-first century?

\textbf{II. The Death of the Subject and the Birth of Posthumanism}

If we have learned anything throughout the course of this thesis, it is surely that Williams himself would not be overly alarmed at the decentring of his own poetic voice. As Harris Feinsod argues, Williams’s poetry has always been more compatible with populism than with the idea of the individual modern genius:

\begin{quotation}
There’s a populist nature to the idea that anyone can write a Williams parody… He really wanted to take poetry out of the hands of the Pounds and Eliots, with their classical references. He had this sense of poetry arising all around us. I think the proliferative nature
\end{quotation}

\textsuperscript{65} Just thirteen days after its first tweet, JustToSayBot was joined on Twitter by DependsUponBot, a remarkably similar bot that tweets parodies of “The Red Wheelbarrow”.
of it might have appealed to him. And if he produced the first parody of the poem, it wouldn’t surprise me if he weren’t happy to see other people doing it. (qtd. in Lowrey)

It is important to note that the anxiety that comes with the death of the individual and private self upon which both modernism and Western humanism are based, is premised upon the notion that humanity can only be redeemed by the archetypical humanist subject: the cultural elite, the powerful Übermensch, the great modern master (or “the Pounds and Eliots” as Feinsod aptly puts it), the unified, rational, sovereign cogito. For Siraganian, it is up to the individual “modern genius” (210) to sew together the fragments of degraded mass culture into a coherent whole. Similarly, in “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1991), Fredric Jameson argues that the individual centred subject is synonymous with affect and, as such, the displacement of the abstracted ego that takes place within postmodernism challenges the notion of feeling altogether:

The liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centred subject may also mean, not merely a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling (200).

But it is important to note that Williams did not share these concerns; rather, he was mocking such concerns as early as 1923. The voices of Williams’s imagined critics at the beginning of Spring and All and their aversion to the anti-humanism of modernism seem to preempt Jameson’s parallel fear of postmodernism:

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. (I, 88)

Here Williams ridicules those who assume that the displacement of traditional understandings of the relationship between human subjectivity and art equates to an abandonment of both
humanity and art altogether. What is more, as I have shown throughout this thesis, Williams’s poetry and prose exposes the very need for such a displacement. For Williams, the “centred subject” of Western humanism and modernism alike was, throughout the history of twentieth-century Western culture, as closely associated with authoritarian and oppressive discourses of control as it was with positive affect. As such, Williams’s poetry is heavily critical of the “modern genius” (210) that Siraganian speaks of. Within his work, the authority of the engineer, the eugenicist, the doctor, the dictator and even the poet are repeatedly called into question and, more often than not, linked to classism, authoritarianism, environmental destruction and the subjugation of female, non-white or disabled bodies. In this sense, Williams’s poetry preempts a critical position against the Western humanist subject that would only come to be fully articulated in the last half of the twentieth century. Jean-Paul Sartre sums up this position in his introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), when he describes the Western discourse of humanism as “nothing but an ideology of lies, a perfect justification for pillage; its honeyed words, its affectations of sensibility were only alibis for our aggression” (21). While humanism is traditionally thought of as an emancipatory philosophical position, it has since been revealed as just another means for hegemonic colonial and patriarchal authority to subjugate those who fail to fit within the narrow confines of the “human”.

As such, the liberation from the centred humanist subject is more than just a liberation from modernist angst or ennui, as Jameson describes it. It is a liberation from the totalising discourses of Western patriarchal thought. It is no coincidence that the critical movements of postcolonialism, feminism and disability studies, which arose throughout the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, share, at the core of their methodologies, a common deconstruction of the centred subject of Western humanism. In *The Wretched of The Earth*, Fanon frames the discourse of Western humanism as little more than a guise for the colonial oppression of people of colour:
The same Europe where they were never done talking of Man, and where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the welfare of Man: today we know what sufferings humanity has paid for every one of their triumphs of the mind. (251)

What is more, Fanon argues that the category of the universal human subject, rather than empowering colonised subjects, imposed oppressive Western standards of what one had to do or be to be considered human:

Bourgeois ideology, however, which is the proclamation of an essential equality between men, manages to appear logical in its own eyes by inviting the subhuman to become human, to take as their prototype Western humanity as incarcerated in the Western bourgeoisie. (131)

Later, disabilities studies scholars would take up similar concerns, describing humanism’s ideal of the autonomous and rational subject as a means by which disabled people who do not fit this ideal are effectively dehumanised. In her 1996 essay “Disability and the Dialectics of Difference” Nirmala Erevelles argues that Western notions of disability “sought to uphold the logic of liberal humanism (which presumes the free, rational, sovereign, autonomous, human subject) in efforts to produce more empowering meanings of disability (or deviance) so that disability can continue to exist at the margins of this humanist world” (522). For similar reasons, feminist critic Donna Haraway argues that the goal of feminism should not be to allow women to achieve humanity within the patriarchal and imperialist discourse of humanism, but to eradicate oppressive Western notions of what constitutes the human altogether:

The feminist dream of a common language, like all dreams for a perfectly true language, of perfectly faithful naming of experience, is a totalizing and imperialist one. In that sense, dialectics too is a dream language, longing to resolve contradiction. Perhaps, ironically we can learn from our fusions with animals and machines how not to be Man, the embodiment of Western logos (my emphasis). (173)
From each of these critical perspectives, the universal subject of Western humanism is certainly not a universally emancipatory figure that needs protecting from the ravages of the postmodern world. Rather, these critical perspectives see the humanist subject as a limited and limiting ideal that needs to be swept aside in order to emancipate those voices and subjectivities that lay outside the limits of its colonial, patriarchal, ableist and, obviously, anthropocentric definition of what it means to be human. It is for a similar reason that the school of ecocriticism, which arose as part of the environmentalist movements of the 1960s, also begins with a deconstruction of humanism. As Christopher Manes argues:

> We need to find new ways to talk about human freedom, worth, and purpose, without eclipsing, depreciating, and objectifying the nonhuman world. Infused with the language of humanism, these traditional fields of knowledge are ill-equipped to do so, wedded as they are to the monologue of the human subject. (Manes, 24)

All of these critical positions can be considered posthumanist as they all deconstruct the anthropocentric, eurocentric and patriarchal premises upon which Western humanism is based. From these perspectives, the death of the centred subject, the death of poetry and the death of the human are not causes for panic or mourning but gestures of radical resistance.

It is the embryonic traces of this radical spirit that I have attempted to draw out of Williams’s work. And it is this same spirit that I identify in the twenty-first century twitter parodies of “This Is Just to Say”. Both involve a deconstruction of the authority of the once-sovereign poet in favour of a pluralisation of voices. It would, of course, be overreaching to describe Williams as a feminist, an environmentalist, a campaigner for racial equality, or even an advocate for the disabled by contemporary standards. And, certainly, it cannot be said that Williams attacks the traditions of humanism with the same fervor of critics such as Fanon and Haraway. Nevertheless, throughout his career, Williams’s poetry and prose challenged, both thematically and at the level of language, those humanist assumptions concerning the autonomy and sovereignty of the universal Western humanist subject deployed throughout the twentieth century to justify and perpetuate the subjugation of women and peoples of colour, the
exploitation of the natural landscape, and the rise of fascist, nationalist and eugenic ideologies. In the second chapter of this thesis, I argued that Williams’s representation of the modern machine disrupts traditional hierarchies between the human subject and the technological object and, as such, subverts the humanist paradigms that emphasise humanity’s capacity for purely instrumental mastery of technology. Furthermore, I demonstrated that, by aligning these paradigms of mastery with traditional Western gender roles, Williams repeatedly destabilises his own patriarchal authority, representing both the female subject and the modern machine as outside of his control. In my third chapter, I argued that Williams preempts the critical school of ecocriticism by developing an ecopoetics that attempts to break down anthropocentric modernist and Romantic understandings of the relationship between humanity, poetry and the natural world. Like Manes, Williams recognised that, within the twentieth century, humanist distinctions between humanity and the natural world are used to justify exploitation and destruction of the natural world. As such, his poetry breaks down these distinctions by recognising that the human mind, poetic language and the natural world are subject to the same natural laws of flux and decay. In my fourth chapter, I argued that Williams’s political poetry emphasises the fragility, contingency and temporality of both the human subject and language, as well as the fundamental mutability of all notions of truth, as necessary for successful democratic discourse. Furthermore, I argue that his attack on the stability of truth and the authoritative power of language constitutes both a posthumanist critique on the twentieth-century discourses of antisemitism and authoritarianism and an attempt to make room for subjugated female and immigrant voices within his poetry. In my fifth chapter, I turned to examining the ways in which Williams’s *The Doctor Stories* denaturalises the humanist ideals ingrained within the discourse of modern medicine and the resulting power structures and hierarchies of Western science. Williams expresses his discomfort with the implicit hierarchies of the doctor-patient relationship, deconstructs and subverts the authority of the modern figure of the doctor, and denaturalises the patriarchal violence, authority and panopticism at the heart of the act of diagnosis. While, as I have said, it would be overzealous to credit Williams with too progressive a set of personal politics or even with an exclusively critical attitude towards the traditions of humanism, we can recognise that his poetic deconstruction of the humanist ideal of the subject as an abstract,
rational and sovereign subjectivity not only preempted the posthumanism of the critical movements of feminism, ecocriticism, postcolonialism and disabilities studies; it also shared their concerns for those typically left out of the narratives of modernism, humanism and Western poetry. Williams’s deconstruction of the humanist subject is, in this sense, inherently humanistic.

III. Deconstruction and Reconstruction

As we can see, Williams’s posthumanism doesn’t necessitate an abandonment of the human altogether. Posthumanism involves more than just the destruction of humanism; after all, in a century where cars are being programmed to drive themselves, wars are being fought by drones, machines sell us our groceries and JustToSayBot can write poetry, in a century where our critical vocabulary has been stripped of all notions of value, consciousness and human worth, could it not be argued that some form of humanism is more necessary than ever? In a lecture entitled “Humanism's Sphere” (2000), given at Columbia University three years before his death, postcolonial critic Edward Said reconfirmed his dedication to the project of humanism. He argued that while the critical theory of the late twentieth century had indeed shattered a number of the premises of Western humanism, the project of humanism still served a valuable emancipatory role in the twenty-first century:

On the contrary, as a fair degree of my own political and social activism has assured me, people all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality… and the affiliated notion that humanist ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well. (10)

Instead of turning our backs on the redemptive goals of humanism, Said argues that what is needed is a new kind of humanism that can move on from the Eurocentrism of the past, while still maintaining faith in the ideals of freedom, justice and equality:
I believe then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experiences of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language-bound… and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused, as well as uniquely American (11).

Similarly, in “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography”, Gayatri Spivak argues that the essentialism conventionally associated with humanism, and deemed taboo by anti-humanist critical theorists, can still serve a valuable political role. She concedes that critical theory’s attack on the assumptions of humanism has done valuable work in exposing the power structures behind the Western humanist subject:

These structuralists question humanism by exposing its hero—the sovereign subject as author, the subject of authority, legitimacy, and power. There is an affinity between the imperialist subject and the subject of humanism. (210–211)

Nevertheless, she argues that essentialist humanist notions, such as value and consciousness, while not reconcilable with the findings of critical theory, can also serve as valuable sources of empowerment for marginalised groups. Throughout her discussion of the Subaltern Studies collective, Spivak argues for a strategic approach to anti-humanism and humanism alike. While it is sometimes necessary to draw on critical theory to deconstruct oppressive humanist universals or essentialisms, it is often just as necessary to draw upon these essentialisms:

For readers who notice the points of contact between the Subaltern Studies group and critics of humanism such as Barthes and Foucault, confusion arises because of the use of the word “consciousness”… I am not trying to clear the confusion by revealing through analysis that the Subaltern Studies group is not entertaining “consciousness”… I am suggesting, rather, that although the group does not wittingly engage with the poststructuralist understanding of “consciousness”, our own transactional reading of them
[the group] is enhanced if we see them as *strategically* adhering to the essentialist notion of consciousness, that would fall prey to an anti-humanist critique, within a historiographic practice that draws many of its strengths from that very critique. (216)

The humanism of Spivak and Said is one that values the deconstruction of the eurocentric, patriarchal, centred subject of Western humanism. But it is also one that deems such a deconstruction insufficient on its own; subjectivity, value and humanity should not be abandoned outright. After all, it would not do to simply replace the traditionally patriarchal and colonial voice of Western poetry with the inhuman presence of JustToSayBot. Similarly, the outdated humanist values of the past must be replaced with new and improved human values. In this sense, the critical humanism of theorists such as Spivak and Said, and even Halliwell and Mousley, and the posthumanism of Julie Clarke, N Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe are remarkably similar; both are, first and foremost, social and political stances. The distinction, perhaps, is a matter of the strategic position and, resultantly, the intensity of their critique. Humanism is a constructive discourse; it imposes meaning and value, for better or worse, upon an otherwise unformed and meaningless world. Anti-humanism, by contrast, is a destructive discourse; it strips us of all the traditions, assumptions, biases and ideals that cannot be sustained by critique. Posthumanism, and indeed most forms of “critical” or “new” humanisms, on the other hand, can and should involve both. As Herbrechter and Callus explain:

Posthumanism does not imply a simple turning away, either from humanism or from theory, but rather a continued ‘working through’ or a ‘deconstruction’ of humanism for which something like theory is needed more than ever. (3)

Such a “working through” of Williams is what I hope I have achieved in this thesis. I have aimed to disrupt modernist and humanist narratives surrounding Williams’s work in order to examine new ways in which the formal experimentalism of his poetry may be reconceived, not merely as an exercise in abstract theoretical criticism, but as a force for social good. We can canonise Williams as a dead, white, English-speaking male modernist poet; we can talk about his unprecedented formal impact on the use of line breaks in English verse, allocate him a place
alongside Pound and Eliot within the canon, bemoan the desecration of his works by a bunch of young people on Twitter, and scoff at the idea that an automated computer program could ever write as well as the great modern master. Or, more productively, we can recognise the radical potential of Williams’s deconstruction of the Western humanist subject, his demystification of the ideal of the modern master, his destabilisation of linguistic and poetic authority, and his blurring of the boundaries between human subjectivity and the various objects of the modern world. We can recognise Williams as a poet who sought to dismantle the very humanist paradigms that would elevate his own subjectivity over the rest of the voices and subjectivities with whom he shared the modern world. And, perhaps more importantly, we can recognise that this posthumanist deconstruction was not merely an abstract linguistic exercise for Williams, but rather one premised upon positive humanistic ideals of charity, empathy, democracy and love:

It was the love of love,
the love that swallows up all else,
a grateful love,
a love of nature, of people
animals,
a love engendering
gentleness and goodness
that moved me (*CP2*, 317)

In doing so, we can draw a lineage between the beloved wheelbarrows, chickens, plums and automobiles of Williams’s poetry and the postcolonial, feminist, disability-studies and ecocritical forms of posthumanism that emerged in the decades following his death: movements that frame the deconstruction of the humanist subject, not as a threat, nor as a reason to abandon human value, but as a means of rebuilding a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be human. That is to say, we can recognise that there is a place for Williams’s poetry in the twenty-first century.


Koeth-Baker, Maggie (maggiekb1). “Using modified versions of William Carlos Williams’ “This Is Just to Say” to let roommate know you swiped his food will never not be funny.” 24 June 2009, 6:36 a.m. Tweet.


Monster, Cookie (MeCookieMonster). “Dis is just to say / Me have eaten / the cookies / that were in / the cookie jar.” 21 September 2016. 11:09 a.m. Tweet.

Monster, Cookie (MeCookieMonster). “and which / you were probably / saving / for snack time.” 21 September 2016. 11:09 a.m. Tweet.

Monster, Cookie (MeCookieMonster). “forgive me / they were delicious / so yummy / and om nom nom.” 21 September 2016. 11:10 a.m. Tweet.


Small-Butera, Lindsay (SmallLindsay). “I have eaten / the chipotle / that was in / the fridge / & which / you were probably / saving / for 2am / Forgive me / it was delicious / so soggy / & so gross.” 2 July 2015, 7:00 p.m. Tweet.

So Much Depends Upon. (DependsUponBot). “so much depends / upon / a tan cowboy / storage / glazed with good / satin / beside the posh / murderers.” 27 July 2013, 1:44 p.m. Tweet.


Stvnrlly (stvnrlly). “I have closed / the tabs / that were in / the browser / and which / you were probably / saving / to read / Forgive me / they hogged memory / and were / so old.” 30 June 2015, 9:06 a.m. Tweet.


This Is Just to Say (JustToSayBot). “I have eaten / the abstractions / that were in / the distinction / Forgive me / They were dominical / so midcalf / and so stall-fed.” 14 July 2013, 5:47 a.m. Tweet.


William Carlos Williams Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.


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