

**SO MUCH DEPENDS UPON A “VARIABLE FOOT”:
The Legacy and Conquest of ‘Free’ Verse
in William Carlos Williams**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the pursuit of a genuine form in modern American poetry, with a special focus on William Carlos Williams, and attempts to expose and characterize as lucidly as possible the diaphanous path the unique American poet trod as he followed his own metrical compass, namely the variable foot. A comparative analysis of French and English poems relevant to his metrical development will show that Williams’s early rebelliousness against conventional meters and free verse and his lifelong persistence in the discovery and rediscovery of rhythms reach a consummation in “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” (1955).

In Williams’s poetics, the variable foot comprises two inseparable aspects: the visual and the rhythmical. By expatiating on both of these, in equilibrium, I shall attempt a reevaluation of Williams’s poetic project, which tends to, in general, attract a bifurcate study, that is, assuming his lines to be either almost exclusively visual or else wholly rhythmical. The possible reason why Williams’s poems can be typically treated in this way seems to be attributed equally to the poet’s inexhaustible curiosity about seeing the nature of the things and capturing it on the page and to his persistent efforts at encountering a way of measuring the line and developing it into a certain metrical unit which is genuinely available in American idiom.

Relentless in his pursuit of the American way of writing a poem, nevertheless, as implied by such titles as “On First Opening the Lyrical Year” (1913) and “La Belle Dame de Tous Les Jours” (1936), Williams’s initial master was John Keats. Contrary to the commonly presupposed image of Williams as a born free-verser, some of his early poems observe conventions of rhyme, punctuation and capitalization of the first letter of each line, which he was soon to overthrow. Gradually Keats was replaced as his master by Walt Whitman, under whose guidance Williams was led to embark on a lifelong voyage of poetic discovery. But Whitman was no more than a guide, and Williams had to set sail for an unknown island on his domestic Rutherfordian boat while the ambitious ocean-going vessels of his compatriots, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, reached their European destinations with triumphant speed.

This transatlantic traffic went in both directions: among British poets immigrating to America, W. H. Auden stands out. Williams showed hostility toward Auden’s Englishness, which he feared would affect the course of American poetry. Despite this, there was a reciprocal influence between the two poets, though at a rather superficial or unconscious level. Auden, a “stylistic chameleon” as John G. Blair names him (125), would eventually praise Williams’s “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower,” written in so-called triadic stanzas, with a variable foot, and would use this peculiar stanza form in his own “Encomium Balnei” (1962). He could compare the advantages and disadvantages of being a poet from England and of being a poet from a relatively younger country. In the reassessment of Williams’s formal and metrical endeavors, Auden is found to be such a resourceful critic that he plays an advisory role in this thesis.

Chapter One of the thesis begins with an overview of the free-verse trend among the French poets, through an analysis of their manifesto poems, such as Victor Hugo’s “Quelques mots à un autre” (1856) and Paul Verlaine’s “Art poétique” (1884), in order to show how from Keatsian beginnings Williams embarked on experimental poems in the wake of the free verse that had originated in France. What Verlaine is to Hugo

resembles what Williams is to traditional English prosody. Like Verlaine, who succeeded in departing from the Alexandrine to create a new rhythm, Williams struggled to break the spell of English poetic tradition in order to find a discipline for American poetry of his age.

Although it may be a noble path to discuss Williams in the filiation of Whitman, the first chapter thus aims to feature the correlation between the breaks with tradition tingling in certain precocious formal manifestos of French poets, notably the Symbolists, and in the pursuit of an American measure by Williams, who sought a path diverged from the so-called father of free verse. Whitman, for Williams, effected an unintentional separation from English prosody; he felt “[t]he rigid impositions imposed on us by the regularly measured foot” but “did not properly know what to do with” (*SL* 334) the freedom he gained.

In Chapter Two, the painterly face of Williams will be revealed through an analysis of the sequence, “Pictures from Brueghel” (1962), which attempts to “fuse the poetry and painting to make it the same thing” (Wagner 53). This remark of his, reminiscent of *ut pictura poesis*, seems to be a touchstone for understanding his passionate relationship with painting. To elucidate the meaning of his attempt, I shall show how his Brueghel poems differ from Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” (1940) and resemble Allen Ginsberg’s “Cézanne’s ports” (1961). Whereas Auden’s interpretation of Brueghel’s *Icarus* can be said to be moralistic and iconographic in its handling of the auxiliary verbs prone to ambiguous connotations and in its association of the work with the two biblical paintings by Brueghel, Williams’s presentation of Brueghel’s *Icarus*, with its shorter lines quickening the movement of the downward zigzagging gaze upon the page, straightforwardly sets the design of the unchecked downfall and its marginalization in a telling typographic image.

In their depiction, both Williams and Ginsberg seem to fight against the linearity of poetry. By juxtaposing the initial and final version of the latter four stanzas of “The Parable of the Blind” (1962), it will be perceived that Williams, with his designed

lineation, adjusts our optic sensor in the course of reading. In Ginsberg's poem likewise, the eyes horizontally cast over a poem are liberated by the poet's pointers to experiencing on a page almost exactly the same sensation that a canvas elicits. In contemplating a work of art, one's appreciation should not be reduced to conformity, which is to say, being told what to look at first. Poetry, however, has difficulty in preventing this happening because of its lineation and order of utterance.

The revision process examined in the first two chapters reveals that Williams makes emendations in his lines without adding punctuation or alternating vocabulary. The typographical rearrangement is at the service of the visual impact, which stimulates the reader's actual sensory vision. This is a fundamental feature of his compositional technique. But if his poems aimed only to surprise and please the eye, could they be called poems at all? The latter two chapters will therefore explore the realm of the variable foot.

In Chapter Three, I shall move on from the visual aspect to discuss Williams's rhythmic measurement of the line and attempt to overcome the bifurcation in studies of Williams's poetics, which tend to focus almost exclusively either on the visual or on the rhythmical aspect. This chapter mainly discusses the rhythmical characteristics of Williams's poems, namely the variable foot, in relation to the American idiom and to the other metrical techniques employed by his predecessors.

The sprung rhythm of Gerald Manley Hopkins presumably strengthened Williams's motivation to advance the idea of a foot and a line. It is the rediscovery of the sophistication of the accentual-syllabic rhythm innate in English poetry. Williams thus rediscovered Hopkins's sprung rhythm, continued to ponder over what the line is and finally concluded that the fixed notion of a foot, that is, what has been taken as a fundamental and immutable element of the constitution of poetry should be altered in the making of a poem by the eye and the ear of a twentieth-century American poet.

If, as Williams perceives, Hopkins's sprung rhythm is "a kind of mid-point between f.v. [free verse] and tradition" (*Encyclopedia 2*, 289), his variable foot can be

said to be one of the higher stages in the ascent to the summit of a new post-traditional form. As my analyses of “The Catholic Bells” (1935) and “The Dance” (1944) exemplify, Williams composes “by criteria of effectiveness and expressiveness” (*Encyclopedia 2*, 289), hence of performance. By keeping in mind the notion of syllable counting, now regarded as outdated, Williams attempted to develop a new style of freedom in prosodic patterns.

As for the scansion of the two poems stated above, I attempted to conduct it based as faithfully as possible on Williams’s actual recitation available at PennSound, the digital archive of poetry and poetics stored at the University of Pennsylvania. The challenging process of transcribing Williams’s spoken words not only led my comparative analysis of “The Dance” with Skeltonics, named after the Tudor poet John Skelton, but also yielded the unprecedented discovery of Williams’s following expression: “I began to write to copy myself and to write a certain line with a variable foot. It amounted to a line, which frequently became anapestic, not even dactylic, but not the conventional iamb, the iambic pentameter” (Swigg 1992). This recording is from his 1955 readings at the University of California, where Williams hesitantly but emphatically revealed—in a voice that was almost inaudible, probably due to his stroke—the curious phenomenon: the American idiom has a tendency to create anapestic rhythms.

Chapter Four is dedicated to an evaluative and comparative analysis of Williams’s longest triadic-line poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower.” “Asphodel” can be judged the finest of Williams’s poems using the variable foot in that it solves the dilemma of form and formlessness. Auden, against Williams’s will, is said to have applauded “Asphodel” and may have been inspired to adopt Williams’s more colloquial technique to his “Encomium Balnei.” This last chapter will feature Williams’s reconciliation with tradition in his monumental variable-foot poem “Asphodel,” which epitomizes, in comparison to Auden’s imitative poem, the American poet’s conquest of ‘free’ verse.

On first reading “Asphodel,” one may find its rhythm somewhat eerie. The first two triadic stanzas are disguised in what Williams once called “the straitjacket of iambic pentameter” (Swigg 1992), evidence of continuity with tradition. Tradition is also present in the references to Greek mythological figures, summoned to the America of the twentieth century. “Asphodel” abounds in beautiful alternations of old and new. This opposing mixture gives Williams’s variable foot dignity and power in its rhythm. Early in his life he emphasized breaks and rebellion; later, especially in the 1950s after his stroke and memory loss, he cherished continuities and deep memory, even while being endlessly inventive and forward-looking in his poetic forms.

In the interview with Stanley Koehler in April 1962, Williams confessed that Rutherford was not a perfect environment for his poetic life and he would have liked to live in another place, another country. With a slight tinge of bitterness, he even said that he stayed in America to his sorrow. Yet this is not an outburst of regret, for Williams was happy to resist an age in which “the trend has always been toward denial of origins,” by opposing to it a strong “assertion of origins” which “is the more fertile basis for thought—and technique” (*SL* 303). If Williams had left America, there would have been no twentieth-century American poet able to insist with the same intensity on the importance of the American idiom and to invent a measure “cogent to its day” (*SL* 280).

Whereas John Malcolm Brinnin declares that “[a]mong the poets of his own illustrious generation, William Carlos Williams has been the man on the margin, the incorrigible maverick, the embattled messiah” (5), I would prefer to draw on the floral metaphor in one of Williams’s favorite poems, “A Sort of a Song” (1944): “Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks” (*CP2* 55). Saxifrage, etymologically ‘stone-breaker,’ is a plant prized for its small and bright flowers. Like saxifrage, small but strong, blooming incognito in the rockeries of the meter, Williams stands out in relief among the other American poets.