CHAPTER III

"The multiple seed, / packed tight with detail, soured, / is lost in the flux"

Postmodern Aesthetics: The Role of Williams. Section I

Critics variously date the beginnings of Postmodernism from the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. If the term modernism derived from the poets in the 1910's, in its current sense Postmodernism was invented by critics in the 1950's and 60's.¹ Poets like Charles Olson, Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan referred to contemporary poetry as "postmodern." Randall Jarrell first used the term postmodern in regard to American poetry in his famous review of Robert Lowell's Lord Weary's Castle (1946) to characterize the movement of which Lowell's verse was a part. By using the term postmodern Olson and others meant that they and their fellow poets of the 50's and 60's were basing their work on the styles of 1910's and 1920's. Olson also meant by this term a new human consciousness that developed after the second world war. In this sense post modernism has been treated as a radical break with the past in human sensibility, imagination and morality. Another viewpoint is that of referring only to a style in arts as in poetry to denote a contemporary period as a whole, or some tendencies within it. Some maintain that postmodernism is a more radical modernism and others that postmodernism is altogether a different style that flourishes along with modernism.

Different cultural realms spawn and sustain movements according to their historically determined needs and opportunities and these differences combine to assure that modernism or postmodernism will mean different things in each. In painting, France witnessed the dramatic appearance of Fauves led by Henri Matisse. Later there
emerged Cubism and Futurism. Baudelaire and Apollinaire imbibed these trends into poetry and the Anglo-American modernism led by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot amalgamated these to the full, to fit them into the cultural realms of Great Britain and America. In France the nouveau roman had helped to provide a bridge between modernism and post modernism. This created a degree of mutuality between creative writers and progressive thinkers which fed into the post structuralism of Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault and later Roland Barthes, enabling Lyotard and Baudillard to deconstruct the Marxian narratives. Prominent postmodern British writers of the present are Angela Carter, D. M. Thomas, and Salman Rushdie, whereas The North and South American writers include Kurt Vonnegut, Jorge Louis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Thomas Pyncheon and John Hawkes. It seems sensible to attend to the configuration achieved by literary trends in single national literatures before venturing on more expansive characterization of modernism and postmodernism.

This study focuses more on the American literary realm, especially poetry, to demarcate the modernist, postmodernist trends. The aesthetic practices of the postmodernist era seemed related to those of the modernist, and also to have moved beyond them. Charles Olson's Heideggerian visualization of a new kind of poetry that treats man as a being in the world, as radically situated as any other object is a post modernist expansion of Williams' concept, "no ideas but in things." We find this tendency in the French New Novel and its theorization in the writings of Allain-Robbe-Grillet and in Susan Sontag. In his Preface to American Poetry Jerome Mazzaro differentiates between modernism and postmodernism:

Without the technical language of the of the Structuralists, the
essential difference between 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' becomes: in conceiving of language as a fall from unity, modernism seeks to restore the original state often by proposing silence or the destruction of language; postmodernism accepts the division and uses language and self-definition — much as Descartes interpreted thinking — as the basis of identity. Modernism tends, as a consequence, to be more mystical in the traditional senses of that word whereas postmodernism, for all its seeming mysticism, is irrevocably worldly and social. (VIII)

Post structuralism provided a justification for post modernism's emphasis on the free play of language, of the text as generating meaning by demonstrating that all meaning and knowledge could be exposed as resting on a naively representational theory of language. Like postmodern theory, postmodern art tends to mediate a sense of multiplicity, fragmentation, instability of meaning and a rejection of all hegemonies and orthodoxies. Its aesthetic forms are parody, irony, self-reflexivity and playfulness.

The realistic perspective that gives shape and point to works of tragic comic post modernism, permitting them to present distortion as distortion, gives way to a celebration of energy — the vitalism of a world that cannot be understood or controlled. We find this celebration of energy in the poetry of Beats, the Projective Poets, and other poetic continuers of Whitman, Williams and Pound, in the short lived vogue of the living theatre happenings and Pop art, and in a variety of artistic and musical experiments with randomness and dissonance. It goes hand in hand with the post structuralist notions of a work of art as "an irreducibly plural, endless play of signifiers which can
never be finally fixed on to a single center, essence, or meaning." The text is thus "less a structure than an open ended process of structuration". In the ‘schizophrenic’ present of postmodernism there is a realistic attempt to make language reflect the world. The world and word coalesce in to each other, and just as the text is the world, so too is the world becoming the text.

Critics take polemical stance on the origin of postmodernism and its separation from modernism. Frederic Jameson in Post Modernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism argues that the economic pre conditions for postmodernism or late Capitalism arose in the 1950's, with the cultural manifestation of what he thinks of as postmodernism occurring with the psychological and social transformation of 1960's. He treats Postmodernism as a period concept and believes that Postmodernism has become a cultural dominant for the entire social order; accordingly its force has to be found as much in the economy, the cinema, philosophy, architecture and literature itself. Ihab Hassan in The Postmodern Turn: Essays on Postmodern Theory and Culture demarcates the varied characteristics of Postmodernism like indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonymization, selflessness, depthlessness, the unrepresentable, unrepresentable, irony, hybridization, carnivalesque, performance, participation, immanence and the like, without venturing on a clear cut definition.

Postmodern writing and art, by participating in the indeterminacies of contemporary culture, transgresses boundaries and mixes up genres and discourses. By indulging in the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, we come across discontinuities and opened up spaces in between. Works like Paterson foreground the literary artifice through nonlinear narration and insertion of multiple genres in the form of
journals, letters, narrative of sermons and mixed forms of economic and social documents.

Postmodernism is, nevertheless, most descriptive of writing that evinces the ontological and epistemological effects of postmodernity's historical difference from modernity. The postmodernist writing embodies a perception of reality that gets meaning only by becoming a transparent medium, a process of creation involving the writer and reader. In it there is the foregrounding of literary artifice, the presentation of the work as metafiction or fabulation, and above all the writer's self-conscious awareness of the fictionality of literature and its status as a construction of language. In various cultural expressions of late modernity, including William Carlos Williams' Paterson there is a tension mounting up between a desire to find some kind of order, coherence and universality and the new sense of contingency and provisionality that the present offers. What appears to hold ground is the stance that postmodernity was the inevitable continuation of modernity. There are arguments from critics like C. Barry Chabot ("The Problem of the Postmodern," in Zeitgeist in Babel: The Postmodernist Controversy) who subscribe to the view that "what some are calling postmodernism is actually a late development or mutation within modernism itself," and that "there is considerable satisfaction in believing that one inhabits a cusp between eras, not the least of which the belief that one is replicating the heroic phase of modernism." Alan Wilde (Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination) describes postmodernism as emerging out of the modernist disjunctive or absolute irony into suspensive or generative irony that constitutes a new or postmodern sensibility. Alan Wilde's concept of disjunctive or absolute irony in modernism is, "the
conception of equal and opposed possibilities held in a state of poise or more briefly still, the shape of an indestructible, un-resolvable paradox." The modern ironist attempts to impose a shape or order. Wilde's concept of postmodern suspensive or generative irony involves the perception of "experience as random," rather than the modernist view of simply fragmented. Instead of pressing for or disposing an order, according to him, the contingent world is simply accepted.6

Patricia Waugh in Practising POSTMODERNISM: Reading MODERNISM substantiates that the roots of postmodernism would seem to be in modernism itself and not in anything which comes after. She argues that tradition is conceived of as an ongoing fusion of the horizons of the past and present in a continuous living reconstruction of the past. Meaning in the world is always a function of situatedness in a common tradition, though what is common is constantly being modified through our present immersion in that tradition. She is of the view that Gadamer's concern with situatedness is virtually indistinguishable from Eliot's concept of tradition and this consideration of Eliot through hermeneutic theory reveals again a continuous development from modernism to postmodernism.7 Hans-George Gadamer goes on to elaborate in Truth and Method that all interpretation of a past work consists in a dialogue between past and present. Gadamer argues that tradition has a justification that is outside the arguments of reason.6 Thus, Eliot the modernist, highlights tradition as the backbone of creation, the postmodern hermeneutic stance is to treat history as a living dialogue between past, present and future and to patiently remove the obstacles to this endless mutual communication.

To dichotomise twentieth century in to two static periods, modern and postmodern
is to arrest the dynamic flow and process of history. It is tantamount to limiting the protean nature of art and life into periodic closures and breakups. Contemporary writing is far too diverse and open ended to be labeled as merely postmodern. The flux of contemporaneity is a kind of circle that dissolves all along its circumference. With reference to the transient nature of flux, Aristotle used to refer to the story of Cratylus, who amended the famous Heraclitean statement on flux, "No man gets into the same river twice" into "no man can do it once." The act of taking up a new reality involves a re-evaluation of the terms in which it is involved. Every writer or artist has to address himself to this unavoidable crisis. Ultimately the Williamsian visualisation of the present prevails:

For the beginning is assuredly
the end – since we know nothing, pure
and simple, beyond
our own complexities. (P 12)

Over the years critics have value-charged the terms modernism and postmodernism in their polemical arguments and attacks. "In What is Modernism?" Harry Levin calls moderns "the children of humanism and enlightenment" and characterizes the postmodern as the anti intellectual undercurrent. Herbert N. Schneidau's "The Age of Interpretation and the Moment of Immediacy: Contemporary Art vs. History," describes contemporary art as something that seeks to be apocalyptic and not avant-garde. He argues that while modernists were accused of "formlessness" in their day, "it now appears that they really wanted fixity and flux bound together in a paradoxical relationship," a new form and that contemporary art's affirmation of a
"kinetic Dionysian flux" leads to abolish all hierarchic distinctions, all separation between art and life and even the act of interpretation. Leslie Fiedler, on the other hand, similarly concludes that the current is apocalyptic and the new movement has freed itself of all "vestiges of elitism and cultural religion in modernism" and has in fact succeeded in repudiating "humanism itself, both in its bourgeois and Marxist forms," along with the cult of reason. In his "Enlarging the Temple," Charles Altieri derives both twentieth century periods from their common ancestor in romanticism; for him modernism remains committed to a "creative form giving imagination while post modernism emphasizes more "the discovery and disclosure of numinous relationships within nature," than "the creation of containing the structuring forms." Ihab Hassan in his "Post modernism: A Para critical Bibliography" concludes that "whereas Modernism created its own forms of authority, precisely because the centre no longer held, postmodernism has tended towards anarchy, in deeper complicity with things falling apart." These varied perspectives highlight the indefinable aspect of contemporaneity as a shifting ground or ongoing process.

There is valid ground in James E. B. Breslin's argument in From Modern to Contemporary American Poetry (60) that in many ways "the notion of the post modern poetry that affirms 'chance operations' and the releasing of controls' is a fashionable idea whose time has already gone." Breslin problematises the critical myth associated with post modernism as the end of interpretation, end of form, symbol, myth, the end of logocentricity, of the book and of literature itself, and refers to the ongoing process of contemporaneity that treats all these as infinitely deferred. Breslin agrees that the new poets deal with the contingent and aleatory, but their end is not "to surrender to the
flux," but "to find new ways of binding form and flux so that temporality will not seem to have been violated." It is thus as Denis Levertov puts it, "not a breaking down, but a breaking open." 14

If the modernist preoccupation is to shape out form from flux, the post modern concern is to revel in the flux that provides an existential enmeshed reality. The deviation from the aesthetic cannons energises contemporary writers to locate themselves in the literal reality of the physical, existential moment. Contemporary poems remain thus open to contingency and their venue is the literal reality of the present that resists monolithic, unitary and determinate metaphorisation or any exclusive, programmed artistic ordering. As Charles Olson puts it, avoiding the "too strong grasping of it," these poets wanted to keep the world alive in a poetry of ongoing process. 15 As a result form is apprehended as an unfolding process of discovery as Williams sounds it in Paterson:

[... write carelessly, so that nothing that is not green will survive. 

(P 155)

Robert Creeley quotes the painter Franz Kline: "If I paint what I know, I bore myself; if I paint what you know, I bore you; so I paint what I do not know." Robert Duncan also acknowledged: "As I write the writing talks to me." Andrienne Rich also refers to the revelatory aspect of the process of writing:

I find that I can no longer go to write a poem with a neat handful of materials and express those materials according to a prior plan [...]. The new poem itself engenders new sensations, a new awareness in me as it progresses. [...]. Instead of poems about experiences I am
now getting poems that are experiences,"

In quoting them Breslin establishes that this stress as a poetic of discovery explains “why so many of the poets write open ended poetic sequences, like Olson’s *Maximus Poems*, Creeley’s *Pieces* and Duncan’s *Passages*.” (60). William Carlos Williams was far ahead of their times to embark on this poetics of discovery through *Paterson*, a bold experiment in a long poem that inhabits a ‘cusp’ between the modern and post modern era.

The basic premises of Williams’ poetics anticipates this exposure to the ongoing aspect of life. For him poetry, like life itself, must always make a fresh beginning subverting the moment before and it is “always new, irregular.” (SL, 23). Writing is an act of living and a poem as it proceeds must at every point be changing and spontaneous, since whatever is otherwise is dead. The process of a poem is ‘transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth and a poem like life itself has no goal except in the vividness of each moment and therefore is unselective without closure (imagination121). “Nothing is good save the new,” he declared (SE 21) and Pound demanded that writers should “make it new” (Guide To Kulchur 51). Each moment is born in absolute newness and freedom. To keep pace with it man must match the ever renewed freedom of time with an equal freedom on his own part. Williams believed with Pound and Eliot that a poetic form can be fully developed and perfected only through experiment. Live poetry will necessarily be unfinished. Since the present at the very moment is going on, by the time a form has been perfected, it will express a sensibility that is past. Any form that has been in touch with the new moment will be defective and ineffectual. The new can not be correct. It has no time. Hence a really first rate modern
movement must bear 'gross imperfection.' Williams opted for a new measure because 'whatever brilliantly finished must be pass'e. An artist or a poet indulges in an endless act of 'renewal' working on the fringes (SE 336)

Different ways of addressing the new reality of the present, engender a new immediacy. J. Hillis Miller gives a clear picture:

The pathos of the disappearance of God is the pathos of infinite space.

.. the mind, objects and the ground of both mind and things are present in a single realm of proximity. [..] Examples of this new immediacy may be found in widely divergent areas of contemporary thought and art [..] 16

Miller traces this in the flatness of the paintings of Mark Rothko and Franz Kline, in the superficiality of the novels of Ivy Crompton Burnett or Alain Robbe-Grillet, in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger or the German or French phenomenologists, in the British Common Language Philosophers, in the poetry of George Guillen, Rene Char or Charles Olson and in the literary criticism of Gaston Bachelard, Jean Pierre Richard or Marcel Raymond. Miller honours Williams as a powerful poet of this 'new immediacy.'

To attain unmediated access to the 'immediate' is an agonizing struggle for the contemporary writer who finds his self coalescing into the very process of binding form and flux. "I must take pains not to intend anything but the work itself, to let the work take shape as it comes," Frank O'Hara wrote in a journal imbibing to the full this preoccupation with the present.17 But the poetics of this immediacy is problematic in many ways than one. The present is a fusion of horizons, of the past and future. As Alfred North White Head puts it, "What we perceive as present is the vivid fringe of memory
tinged with anticipation." The poet's view of the present is that of a viewer on a saddle back for whom past merges into a three fold vision of future and present. Another problem arises. How can he enter the temporal flux without being swallowed up by it or without claiming for himself an ego or centre outside time? That Williams was well aware of this dilemma is clear in these lines.

a mass of detail
to inter relate on a new ground, difficulty
an assonance, a homologue triple piled
pulling disparate together
to clarify and compress. (P 30)

In *Spring And All*, Williams claimed unmediated access to the moment and many of his small poems like "The Red wheel barrow", "The Young Sycamore", and "The Great Figure" are brilliant accomplishments. In 'The Great Figure,' movement is stilled within time. The visual impact is very powerful.

The Great Figure

Among the rain
and lights
I saw figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

The poet becomes an unmediating medium and the purely mundane, utilitarian fire truck exists on a plane outside time. It's rumbling echoes in the mind of the reader as a felt reality. The different units of perception are coded in an order to produce bareness and spontaneity. No wonder this masterpiece of a poem inspired the painterly masterpiece by Charles Demuth.

In the long poem *Paterson*, such unmediated access becomes a burden although the boundaries between life and art are broken and the collage pattern dominates. Again and again, the present folds back into history, into temporal sequence, and the poet cannot but slip back into historical narrations, legends and personal obsessions. This bears semblance to postmodern writing which by participating in the indeterminacies of postmodern culture, transgresses boundaries and mixes up genres and discourses. By indulging in the dissolution of traditional generic boundaries, we come across discontinuities and opened up spaces in between. Works like *Paterson* foreground the literary artifice through non-linear narration and insertion of multiple genres in the form of journals, letters, narrative of sermons and mixed forms of economic and social documents.
In *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Paterson*, metonomy, a figure of speech which substitutes the part for the whole, solidifies the variegated human experience and only a supreme power of imagination can reconstitute the fragments into a meaningful whole. Yet, Eliot strives for a universal order; the Fisher King in *The Waste Land* is out to set his land in order and Tiresius heaps the fragments against ruins. Tiresius is the trope of modernism itself which returns to the origins only to flee real beginnings, which relates itself to the past only to deny and transgress it. This blind seer can amalgamate blindness with insight. What is sought is a meaningful relation between the contingent layers of the quotidian and the latent surfaces of truth. But Williams negotiates the 'moment' which offers no escape and *Paterson* grows out of the poet's hands as a commitment to dissonance to merge into the vivid and varied contours of life.

Even a contemporary poet like John Ashbery cannot escape this predicament. In his poem "As You Came From Holy Land," it is apparent:

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[.................................]

it can never come about
not here not yesterday in the past
Only in the gap of today filling itself
an emptiness is distributed
in the idea of what time it is
when the time is already past!
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Here the problem that the present offers is a very clear. 'It' refers to a present moment and 'it' can never come about. When we ask what time it is, that time is already past. Today is only a 'gap' filling itself with emptiness.
The elusive present preoccupies much of Williams' attention, although he is very conscious of its challenging nature. It comes out clearly in his ideas on poetic creation (Imagination 88,89):

There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world.... The reader knows himself as he was twenty years ago and he has also in mind a version of what he would be, some day. Oh, some day! But the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested.

When consciousness responds to the flying penumbra of random ungraspable reality, writing turns discontinuous, fragmentary and heterogeneous. The writer has to present the facets of experience brokenly without completing or closing them. Thus post, postmodern writing points to the inevitability of open-endedness that gives a wide berth to the word, the world, the writer and the reader. In "Projective Verse," one of the seminal documents for the new poetry, Charles Olson offers a stance towards reality that is at once distanced and projecting (the lyrical interference of the individual as ego). His is an effort to reground reality in the 'kinetics of the thing' and for him the poem is a 'high energy construct.' His apotheosis of the type writer has stimulated all the talk in contemporary poetry about getting the poem off the page with a stress on poetic voice and the oral reading of poetry. In the late sixties Allen Ginsberg experimented on composing on a tape recorder (which he could play at poetry readings). Jerome Rothenberg's performance poetry, and David Antin's talk poetry are all efforts to make the listener's experience of the poem simultaneous with its creation and so a true
moment of poetic presence. Contemporary poetic creation thus turns technetronic to invite the reader and the writer into the same fold to evoke a unified presence of creation.

To deal more with the surface than the depth, with the process of writing, shifting the dramatic centre from a lyric speaker to the reading experience itself, is strong in contemporary writing. As Wolfgang Iser says:

The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized, and furthermore the realization is by no means independent of the individual disposition of the reader [. . .] The convergence of the text and the reader brings the literary work into existence.20

Williams and his contemporaries anticipated these tendencies in their work by translating the tensions of visual art into the realm of poetry. The Armory show of 1913, where such artists as Cezanne, Gaugin, Renoir, Picasso, Picabia, Duchamp and Gleizes were seen publicly in New York, inspired poets like Williams and Wallace Stevens into new awareness of transparence in art. They were introduced to Cubism, Futurism and the indeterminate of styles associated with post-impressionism. It was a period when new ideas were surfacing in New York art and literary world. Williams recalls this impact:

In Paris Painters from Cezanne to Pisarro had been painting their revolutionary canvases for fifty or more years but it was not until I clapped my eyes on Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* that I burst out laughing from the relief it brought me! I felt as if an
enormous weight had been lifted from my spirit for which I was infinitely
grateful.²¹

The little Galleries of the Photo –Secession, more conveniently called ‘291’ after
their address on the Fifth Avenue, had originally been opened in 1905 by Alfred
Steiglitz, the famous photographer. William Marling disagrees with Bram Dijkstra in
dating the acquaintance of Williams with Steiglitz before 1919, although Williams may
have read Steiglitz’s magazines and transected his orbit earlier²² He gives importance
to Demuth’s return from Paris in 1913 for Williams’ involvement in the New York art
scene.

Steiglitz introduced Gertrude Stein through a special issue of Camera Work, a
Little magazine. Her work was used as an example of literary Cubism. She was hailed
for doing with words what Picasso was doing with paint. The avant garde movement
developed three centers: the first remained always 291, centering on Stieglitz and his
American painters; a second became a group around Walter Conrad Arensberg,
including Mina Loy and the painters Marcel Duchamp and Albert Gleizes, as well as
Wallace Stevens; the third developed in Grantwood, where Kreymborg began to
publish Others with the help of William Carlos Williams.

Imagism was fast dwindling and futurism was rising up. Bram Dijkstra writes:

It would seem clear that the intensity of the avantgarde activity and
theorizing in New York beginning with the Armory Show left imagism a
rather unexciting and even redundant bone to chew on for poets like
Williams[...].²³
The futuristic aesthetic which concerned itself with representing the speed and
dynamism of modern life in art already dominated the work of painters in the Arensberg
circle. Arensberg had developed ideas about novel poetic techniques, experimented on
typology and was attentive to the mechanics of reader interest. The following poem of
his is a kind of exercise for the reader:

On a sheet of paper
dropped with the intention of demolishing
space
by the simple substraction of a necessary plane
draw a line that leaves the present
in addition
carrying forward to the uncounted columns
of the spatial ruin
now considered as complete
the remainder of the past.
the act of disappearing
Which in the three dimensional
is the fate of the convergent
vista
is thus
under the form of the immediate
arrested in perfect parallel
of being
The extension of the mind beyond the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the general ground whatever it may be, and the decision not to be confined, to capture the perceived in all its intensity, and the enlargement of the spirit at all times were the common goals of poets as well as painters of that period. There was a surge of heated controversy between the two sets of painters, the futurists and the expressionists. Through focusing on the appearance of things Futurism lent itself to a formulaic approach whereas Expressionism insisted on absolute freedom. American expressionists proclaimed, “Anywhere is everywhere.” In “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” Wallace Stevens wrote: “Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers.”

Marjorie Perloff in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, explains that from the early days of Cubism in 1910 through Vorticism and Futurism, Dada and Surrealism, down to the Abstract Expressionism of the fifties and the conceptual art, Super realism, assemblages, and performance art of the present, visual artists have consistently resisted the Symbolist model in favour of a creation of a world in which forms can exist as an oscillation between representational reference and compositional game. The various facet planes offer the disjunct surface invites the reader in and the reader is forced to experience the work from the inside itself. As life gathers meaning in the way it is lived, the meaning of a work of art depends fundamentally on the reader’s ability to negotiate with it.
David Walker in *The Transparent Lyric* traces 'the double vision' of the transparent lyric in Williams' poems. A transparent lyric allows the reader to experience the work from inside and outside at once. We seem to enter the poem directly and immediately, at the same time being continually reminded that this world is the poet's fictional composition. Walker quotes Williams' comments in *Spring And All* to substantiate this (*Imagination* 89):

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

Williams' text is a post modern text which is a constant negotiation between the writer and the reader. There the space between the creator, critic and reader coalesce into one in an endless search for meaning.

"The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know.": The Experiment and Experience of the 'new measure.': Section 2.

The pentameter line in English prosody usually breaks when spoken into halves. This ideally conforms to the Western perception and thought, based upon balance, comparison, proportion, contrast, cause and effect, and the viewing of things dually. This does not keep pace with the rampant pluralism, imbalance and relativism that pre-dominate the contemporary world. Williams realized that, to avoid falling into Absolutism, he would have to permit this structure and the sense of futurity – not prophecy, but the setting up of fixed relationship of the light to the relative moving universe that Einstein had outlined. In appropriating Einstein's notion of relativity,
Williams strives hard to encode the varying relative perceptions of reality with an effort to bring out a kind of order out of the chaos of perception. He devised a new measure—controlled by a triadic line, which by insisting on two caesuras, enormously enlarges the flexibility of the single caesura line. And by utilizing a variable foot, the poem could achieve all the relativism of free verse plus order.

Emerging out of the straitjackets of imagism and objectivism, Williams hit upon ‘the variable foot’ that widened the margins of experience and expression. He substituted the conventional measure with the assured music of rhyme and metrics. In his essay, “A New Measure” he writes:

I was early in life sick to my very pit with order that cuts off the crab’s feelers to make it fit into the box. The measure should be returned to music. By music shall the best of modern verse be known and the resources of music.  

Rather than the crab trying to accommodate itself to the box, the box should be made to the specifications of the crab. The musical analogy argues for the adequation of form and content.

The flexibility allotted to the measure attunes itself to the contemporary situation where erosion of meaning and uncertainty about the dangling subject and flickering object confront the poet. In a world of dancing signifiers the postmodern poet indulges in a language game. To secure a vantage point outside and above the game appears problematic. Williams’ way of countering this problematic was through the ‘variable foot.’ That Williams was conscious of this ‘erosion of meaning’ comes out clearly in Spring And All where he writes that ‘a man of imagination’ has to contend with words
that have become ‘demoded’ or lacking in ‘vitality’ because meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence (CP1 188). He sought ‘measure’ as the sole means of escape from the barred world of language. He writes:

The first thing you learn when you begin to learn anything about this earth is that you are eternally barred save for the report of your senses from knowing anything about it. Measure serves for us as the key: we can measure between objects: therefore, we know that they exist (SL 331)

Measure thus serves as ‘the key,’ and dissolves the boundary between the external and the internal world. The existence of the external depends on the inventive measurement of the internal.

In “Free Verse,” Williams describes the variable foot as “a term and a concept already accepted widely as a means of bringing the warring elements of freedom and discipline together.” This freedom and discipline tantamount to the absorbing credos of the modernist order and the postmodernist disorder. They thus necessarily constitute the inevitable binaries, one embedded within the other, and thus pose interpretative problems in equal measure. As T. S. Eliot puts it in the “Music of Poetry” in “Reflections On Verse Libre,” there is no escape from metre or attainment of absolute freedom. Eliot writes:

We may therefore formulate as follows: the ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the “freest” verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. Or freedom is only true freedom when it appears against the background of an artificial limitation.
Thus Williams’ variable foot shuttles between the alluring worlds of order and disorder, freedom and restraint. The ghost of the iambic pentameter haunts the variable foot in *Paterson*, *The Desert Music* and *Asphodel* (as in ‘The province of the poem is the world’ or ‘What end but love, that stares death in the eye?’ p 130). Although Williams uses enjambment, asymmetric typography, prose and conversational idiom and different narrative strands to exorcize its invading impact, iambic regularity occurs in between as significant variations. The dimensions of disorder can be discerned only against the background of an artificial limitation. The new is incomprehensible without the old and as in postmodernist aesthetics the new is the old turned upside down, an inverted mirror image of the old.

The books of *Paterson* became proving ground for Williams’ prosodic experiments. The various books of the epic show the progression of the metric technique and chronicle the stylistic changes of the period. Book I and II teems with verse paragraphs. The long lines are broken by a caesura.

And there against him, stretches the low mountain

The Park’s her head, carved, above the falls by the quiet river; coloured crystals the secret of those rocks: (p 17)

But as the narrative proceeds, stanza forms break up into occasional quatrains, tercets, isolated lines or short phrases within the strophe. Vertical space rather than punctuation is made use of as in

Divorce is

the sign of knowledge in our times

divorce! divorce. (p 28)
Phrasal units run from line to line and these individual lines constitute a long stanza:

Moveless
he envies the men that ran
and could run off
toward the peripheries —
to other centers, direct —
for clarity (if
they found it) \( (P 48) \)

In his letter to Kenneth Burke (St. Phatric’s, 1947), Williams wrote: “I am trying in Paterson to work out the problems of a new prosody” \( (SL 257) \).

The line arrangement as a reflection of content has been facilitated by paced arrangement of word groups that form a line. The word groups can be terse, compact concretization of thought in a tercet or couplet, or long ones that move in a measure of its own.

The scene’s the park
upon the rock
female to the city
--- upon whose body Paterson instructs his thoughts \( (concretely) \) \( (P 57) \)

The enjambing lineation cuts a word off from its immediate context and holds it up for inspection, highlighting it among its neighbours. Here the word ‘upon,’ has been has been kept dangling twice to highlight the weighing impact of experience on expression.

This long verse is a lyrical outburst of the sense of urgency of the new measure:
Without invention nothing is well spaced
unless the mind change, unless
[...............................]
[......................] unless there is
a new mind there cannot be a new
line, the old will go on
repeating itself with recurring
deadliness: [. ..................]
[............] without invention the line
will never again take on its ancient
divisions when the word, a supple word
lived in it, crumbled now to chalk. (P 65)

This verse paragraph has twenty lines, each line containing nine, eight or seven
syllables enforcing the content through the emphatic repetition of the head unit 'without'.
Though the first line is the old line structure of iambic pentameter (without invention
'nothing 'is well 'spaced) the lines that follow vary in pace and stress at times halting
when attention is rivetted on self descriptive enjambments like "new line" and "ancient /
divisions." The enjambment "a new / line" initiates a new line whereas "ancient
divisions" enacts a line division. Throughout Paterson, the poet's thoughts tend to move
either in long measures or in short sequences connected by structure into phrases – the
interruptions of fact.

Williams attributed the imagined origins of poetry in 'ancient divisions' or
measures:
Poetry began with the measure, it began with dance, whose divisions we have all but forgotten but are still known as measures. Measures they were and we still speak of their minuter elements as feet (SL 331).

The poet allows variety into speech by allowing freedom to the different persona to speak in different speech rhythms. The sermon of the itinerant preacher Klaus Ehrens has an oratorical pulsing rhythm seldom broken by pauses:

- the spirit of the Lord that gives
  the words of even such a plain, ignorant fellow
  as I a touch of His own Blessed dignity and
  strength among you

(P 83)

The following lines show how the very verse structure undergo the change to suit the voice:

I love the locust tree
the sweet white locust
How much?
How much?
How much does it cost
to love the locust tree
in bloom?(P 117)

In his continued search for a single form which would embody both freedom and order, Williams came to realize that it was not stanza or line that was the key to structure but measure. He concluded that the foot is not a unit of accents, but one of time and that its
regularity need be only relative. "Time is the real matter of measure and not stress. Elapsed time is the whole story. Speech for poetry is nothing but time – I mean time in a musical sense," Williams wrote in a letter to Kay Boyle in 1932 (SL 136). The feet in "The Descent" give the impression of being regular because the lines move steadily at a rather slow pace.

The descent beckons

as the ascent beckoned

Memory is a kind

of accomplishment,

a sort of renewal

even

an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places

inhabited by hordes

heretofore unrealized . . . (P 96)

Here one foot consists of a single word 'even' (disyllabic), and another is comprised of ten words, seventeen syllables. On the single word 'even,' the pivotal movement, of the oscillation between the past and the present occurs. It refers back to descent and looks forward to ascent, a swing from renewal to memory and the initiation to new place. The movement is slow through the long line that follows it, but the continuity of the pace and content is carried on smoothly to the 'uninhabited,' 'unrealised.' (For detailed analysis refer to page 142, Chapter IV). What Williams claimed, "Count a single beat to each numeral" (SL 327), and that three stepped down lines comprise a triadic line, appears an absurd notion especially here in this part where lines which vary from two to fifteen
syllables occur defying equal spoken duration. What we get is a kind of visual regularity of the three part stanza which accentuates the meditative tone, or mood of rational reflection which of course breaks up at an unexpected point, in a projecting one or two short words to bring in variation.

In his handwritten essay entitled "English Speech rhythms" which Williams submitted to Poetry (Chicago) his ideas on measure are explicit:

[. . ] the one thing essential to rhythm is not sound but motion, of the two kinds: forward and up and down, rapidity of motion and quality of motion.

[. . ] The motion must be given by either a greater or lesser number of sounds in the same unit. 31

On these lines Williams argued that the rhythm must be put to music and what must be counted is not the syllable but time. He writes, "The same rhythm, swift, may be of three syllables or if two are elided, of one: whereas, slow, it may consist of four or seven or any number that the sense agrees to. This is the flexibility that the modern requires. . . " (Quoted in Weaver 83).

He was concerned not with stresses but with the spaces in between various stresses of the verse, spaces which are of necessity 'variable.' Thus measure is considered as a matter of duration. In Paterson Book III, we find the poet dividing his lines into metric units visibly because he knows the duration of time is difficult to measure.

Death lies in wait,

a kindly brother –

full of missing words
the words that never get said –
a kindly brother to the poor (P 133)

Here the enjambment serves as the expansion of the idea of death, a breaking of limits, of transcendence into that unknown world that extends the brotherly, kind invitation to the poor hapless victim. Williams special use of the run-on-line or enjambment is to traverse from the finite into the infinite.

In *Paterson* Book IV, Williams was more resolved to make clear his poetic technique. He wrote to Marianne Moore on June 23, 1951 (SL 305): "I say even that the language [. . .] more fits the line in the last book than in the first." He divides the line most frequently and makes bold use of parenthesis, dash and dot, and exclamation to accentuate the speech rhythm and force of appeal.

I warn you, the sea is not our home
the sea is not our home

The sea is our home whither all rivers
(wither) run

the nostalgic sea
sopped with our cries

Thalassa! Thalassa!
calling us home

I say to you, Put wax rather in your ears against the hungry sea

it is not our home!
draws us in to drown, of losses
Here the punctuation is of great significance. The space between the period and the line that follows vibrates with the tension and tussle of opposite urges (The urge to withstand — to succumb, to the call). The call of the sea comes as an irresistible call inspite of all the warning given to keep away from it. The single line, where the two words occur, the parenthetic ‘wither’ and ‘run,’ end on a distant period, the distance of which suggests the infinitude where all rivers are bound to run and meet. The balancing measures contain breath units that restrain us only to stretch ourselves out all the more with eagerness towards the sea which draws us in, to drown, the sea of losses and regrets. The broken segments of measure (breath unit) in between, “Thalassa ! Thalassa !” resonate with the inviting roar of the sea that sucks us in.

Stephen Cushman in “Visual Prosody and Typographic Inscription” (William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure), explains that Williams continued to use asymmetric typography before returning to symmetric formats in the last decade of his career. He considers Williams’ “Della Primavera Transportata al Morale” (1934), “The Pink Church”(1946), “The Desert Music”(1951), and parts of Paterson (1946-58) as examples of Williams’ more remarkable exploration into the possibilities of asymmetric typography. Asymmetric typography keeps the poem moving across the page, never letting it settle. Just when a pattern seems to be emerging, it is torn apart. In fact this keeps pace with the undulating, surfing waves of contemporaneity which mix and merge into different shapes and forms. In Paterson Book IV, section 2, in the famous Williamsian expostulation on credit, money, uranium and gist, Williams uses absolute freedom “to cut diagonally across the page” as he described it in his essay on “E. E.
Cummings’s Paintings and Poems” (1954). The net result is no emergent clear cut notion of social reform, but a vague mixing up of boundaries as all notions on social evolution inevitably turn out to be. It only shows how the very plan of it is getting defeated in the process.

Williams was very conscious of the role of typography in measuring verse. In his essay on “Measure,” he writes, “What else is verse made of but ‘words, words, words’? Quite literally, the spaces between the words, in our modern understanding, which takes with them an equal part in the measure.” This is a late statement by Williams, drafted in the fall and winter of 1958-59. What Williams meant and aimed by ‘the spaces between words” has been a rich object of speculation and study by various critics. Through these notions of spacing of words into lines and lines into triads Williams formulated the ‘variable foot.’

The late experiments in prosody led Williams directly to the triadic line or versos suelto structure of the mid fifties, a structure which provided much freedom of movement within a basic regularity. In it measure appears regular, with each line divided into three units or feet. With the discovery of the variable foot Williams turned to symmetric inscription, a triadic stanza with its first line left-justified, second indented, third indented further. Because of the spatial arrangement, each foot has a consistent time value regardless of its actual length. Williams advised his readers to count a single beat for each segment of line:

In old age

the mind

casts off
rebelliously

an eagle

from its crag

We get it in the other parts of Paterson V.

-- the virgin and the whore

an identity,

both for sale

to the highest bidder! (P 276)

The triadic line allows much freedom of construction and in no way restricts the individual sentence. In Book V, Williams experiments on the triadic line with variations.

When variable the foot and the line are most effective:

There is a woman in our town

walks rapidly, flat belled

in worn slacks upon the street

where I saw her.

neither short

nor tall, nor old nor young

her

face would attract no

adolescent (P 255)
Often by isolating a single word like 'her,' a pause is worked out to conform to the awkward halting nature of American idiom. In Paterson V we get the pulsating rhythms of American speech. James Demuth in “William Carlos Williams’s ‘Paterson’: A Search For Language, a Recovery of Words” characterizes the measure of Book V as “talking poetry,” because the pattern of syllabic accents here is based on the ordinary rhythm of phrase and rhetorical stresses. He argues that in Book V Williams sets aside the futile quest of earlier books and accepts 'the American idiom' as an authentic cultural expression and probes its structure.

The triadic line when it comes out as an individual utterance, or interior monologue is quite forceful, but in a poem like Paterson which is a composite mixture of different persona and discourse, Williams had to resort to the variable foot all the more to suggest contrast and heterogeneity. Williams’ great interest during these years was in the fifteenth-century Flemish tapestry which helped him to fabricate variance within individual segments. Thus using the flexible orderly variable foot, Williams recreated the pulsating natural rhythms of American speech. He enunciated a measure that would remain variable, relative to each speaker or poet, to his local and individual experience. This innovative approach to prosody inspired a coming generation of poets and embodied that open-ended approach to art, the trend of the postmodern.

By breaking up the existing composite units, whether it is conventional prosody or contemporary reality, Paterson, the long poem becomes an interesting study on the definition of art. It invites the attention of the writer as well as the reader towards the artistic and non-artistic elements of the poem. The mighty chunks of material coming into the poem from outside reinforce an immediate sense of locale. In Book IV, there
are excerpts of violent murder and massacre from history, letters addressed to the poet from poets like Allen Ginsberg and fragments of a Dutch lullaby to accentuate the notion of language as something intricate and discontinuous. There are also long lyrical outbursts in the form of verse paragraphs like the following:

I remember going down to the old cotton mill one morning when the thermometer was down to thirteen degrees below on the old bell post. In those days there were few steam whistles. Most of the mills had a bell post and bell, to ring out the news, "come to work!"

Stepping out of bed into a snow drift that had sifted in through the roof: then after a porridge breakfast, walk five miles to work. (P 230)

On the other side, there is the breaking down of formal sentence, in keeping with the abandonment of conventional metre, in favour of the variable feet.

She used to call me her country bumpkin

now she is gone I think of her in heaven

She made me believe in It a little while
Where else could she go? (P 222)

The syntactic loose ends or the ambiguous pronoun reference mark a variation of movement causing uncertainty. Meaning oscillates between these, dwelling neither in one or the other. If the conventional long poem deals with characters and passions and moral struggle that calls a man's whole person into play, here is a long poem that is an endless play of meanings in different voices, tones and textures. Mutlu Konuk Blasing, in her Art of Life: Studies in American Autobiographical Literature, characterizes the movement of Paterson as "dissipation of energy"37 She explains that, the splitting of the atom to release energy from matter, embryonic fission leading to birth, the breaking up of poetic foot to energise the field of the page, and the splintering of the epic narrator's voice for the dramatic energy of interacting voices, are all processes analogous to the growth of the poem through dissipation of energy.

In a letter to Richard Eberhart, Williams reveals that "by measure I mean musical pace," and that he counts one for each of three feet in a stanza (SL 326). The practice, it appears, is rather easily understood and much less radical than the theory would lead us to expect. The uniform intervals of lapsed time (musical pace) establish a regularity in the poem: but the syllable count, ranging from one to thirteen in 'Ashphodel that Greeny Flower,' is variable, with pauses used to fill out the intervals in the shorter lines. The line divisions slow down movement of verse, momentarily isolate syntactic units, and the interval foregrounds its impact. Attention is riveted on each fragment so that meaning filters in as a sediment. The pregnant pauses prolong expectation.

Charles Doyle in "The Odourless Flower," William Carlos Williams and The American Poem, argues that there is little difference between 'the variable foot' and
Charles Olson's conception of a breath unit or cadence unit. In each case, the measure has two characteristics: it is a unit of natural speech and the unit as such is dependent on the individual at least as much as the requirement of making communicable sense. The music in the poem is the continuing relation between the poet and the world about him. Syntactical groupings apart, Williams' other requirement for measure is 'vividness,' direct unfalsifying contact with each object in the world. Doyle is of the view that true measure depends on it.38

In the poems of his last book, Pictures From Brueghel, Williams uses three-tiered line, but departs from it at will. He treats the variable foot, variously, even including the demonstration of some humour. In these poems the concept goes beyond the relatively simple idea of a breath unit towards emphasis (sense). The concerns of The Pictures From Brueghel are very much that of Williams' whole career -- beauty, process, and the poem. The Desert Music (1954) which include poems like "The Host," "Journey to Love," show a reaffirmation of Williams' creative powers grounded on self reliance in the quest for a new measure. In Ashphodel That Greeny Flower (1963), Williams spiritualises the concept of measure with a meaning that extends beyond mere poetic form, at the same time humanising it on a plea for love and forgiveness.

David Perkins in A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After, makes significant comments on Williams' variable foot. He argues that since the 'variable foot' is a paradox, a self contradiction, Williams never got the concept clear, though he revolved it perpetually thenceforth:

But if we ask how this measure is to be interpreted, Williams offers little help, for his many remarks are maddeningly general, inapplicable or
inconsistent. He has a “triadic” or three part unit. Each part may be considered a foot, a single “beat,” but evidently the “measure” does not lie in any regularity based on quantity, stress, number of syllables, or duration. Neither do the parts of the “triad” necessarily coincide with the units of natural breathing or of syntax, though they tend toward this. If we accepted Williams’ idea of prosody, consonant with Einstein’s theory of relativity, we might say that the “measure” is constantly changing, each foot determining a new measure. But in prosody, I remain stuck at Copernicus, a variable or relative measure seems none at all. Three parts in each unit is the only regularity in this prosody, and since this would never be heard, it is a regularity only for the eye.39

To expect from Williams a clear cut definition and implementation of the ‘variable foot’ is far too ambitious, since a poet of his dimensions leaves a wide margin, since poetry to him is as much what is said as what is not said, since what is said is not necessarily true, and since what is said can always be said in another way.
Notes

1 Jerome Mazarro, "Preface," Post Modern American Poetry (London: Illinois UP, 1980) VII. In his powerful critique of postmodern American poetry, the author highlights how American poets placed much value on the long poem by considering it necessary to the "great poet." It was to be either in the form of a sustained narrative, a lyrical sequence, or a "poem" at all. They include Roethke, Ignatow, Berryman, Jarrell, Plath and Bishop.


3 Jameson Frederic, "Post Modernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 146 (1984): 53-54. Jameson treats modernism as a period concept and believes that postmodernism has become the cultural dominant for the entire social order: accordingly, its force is to be found as much in the economy, the cinema, philosophy and architecture as in literature itself.


7 Patricia Waugh, Practising POSTMODERNISM: Reading MODERNISM (New York: Chapman and Hall Inc, 1992) 80-81. The book examines postmodernism as a "period term" for a cultural epoch, as an aesthetic strategy and as a philosophical
critique. A close reading of three postmodernist and four modernist texts is made to understand postmodernism as a theoretical 'mood,' an extension of aestheticist assumptions reaching up to areas other than the strictly aesthetic.


13Ihab Hassan,"Postmodernism: A Paracriritical Bibliography." *Paracriritisms* (Urbana, University of Illionis Press,1975) 59. Hassan argues that there is a distinctive new style developing after existentialism during the 1950's with the nouveau roman, the nouvelle vague in cinema, the new music and the new painting.


23 Dijkstra, *Cubism* 25. This study of the influence of visual art on poetry convincingly proves that the relations between various creative media need to be looked at as carefully as the patterns of influence which exist within each separate branch of art.


26 Marjorie Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981) 33-34. This book is primarily historical and textual rather than theoretical. The author exposes the ‘French connection’ – the line that goes from Rimbaud to Stein, Pound and Williams by way of Cubist, Dada and Surrealist Art, a line that also includes the great French / English compositions of Beckett.

27 David Walker, The Transparent Lyric (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1984) 23. According to him the transparent lyric may be defined as a poem whose rhetoric establishes its own incompleteness, replacing the poet with the reader as the centre of dramatic attention. It thus becomes a transparent medium, a process of poetic activity rather than its product.


31 Quoted by Mike Weaver, William Carlos Williams: The American Background (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971) 83.
32 Cushman 62.


38 Charles Doyle, William Carlos Williams and The American Poem (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1982) 149. Doyle argues that Williams’ emphasis on the immediately ‘present’ place and time ranges from subscribing to the Poundian
"direct treatment of the thing," to a whole host of attitudes shared with Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and later writers such as Gertrude Stein.

38David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987) 270. This book is a brilliant study of literary history of one hundred and sixty poets of Great Britain and United States exposing the cross currents of impact on each other, and a lucid juxtaposition of the breadth of perspectives reaching up to the contemporary aesthetic. The principal theme of the volume is the continuing efforts of poets since the 1920's to modify or break away from the high modernist style.