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for my mother and father

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ABSTRACT

In "Naïve Modernism," I argue that the simplicity, freedom, and imaginative world-making often associated with childhood are central to the work of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Lorine Niedecker. Each of these poets has more than once been dismissed as childish—simplistic, nonsensical, or slight—and each has also been redeemed in the name of sophisticated or more "adult" aesthetic and intellectual seriousness. Here I take these writers seriously while also attending to the ways in which their writing is truly childlike or childish. Indeed, "Naïve Modernism" proposes that these writers need not adhere to the codes of grown-ups to be taken seriously.

In characterizing these writers as "naïve," I take up Friedrich Schiller's well-known account of artless, simple immediacy in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. Schiller is helpful in describing the childlikeness of Williams, Stein, and Niedecker, but their work also in turn expands and complicates Schiller by adding the elliptical, erratic, and crafty possibilities of child-mind to his picture of noble innocence. Furthermore, this modernist naïveté is not entirely artless or natural. Williams, Stein, and Niedecker each in their own ways seek immediacy, but they are all also careful, knowing artificers. In their poems we see how the naïve mode can itself be a culturally mediated performance of childlike or "folk" qualities—a sentimental sort of naïveté. To articulate a new concept of the naïve that accommodates these modernist versions of childlikeness, I supplement Schiller especially with Walter Benjamin's and D.W. Winnicott's ideas about childhood and play.

The dissertation also locates Williams, Stein, and Niedecker in an international network of modernists that includes such figures as Eliot, Pound, H.D., Stevens, Breton, and Duchamp. Within the seriousness and authority of sophisticated "high" modernism, "Naïve Modernism" seeks out provisional zones of playful non-compliance. My aims are not only to understand three particular poets more fully and to reveal new literary-historical aspects of modernism, but also to learn from modernist poems some new ways of imagining our own adulthood.

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INTRODUCTION

In "Naïve Modernism," I write about poetry that to many readers has seemed simple or slight, undisciplined or arbitrary. The chapters that follow attend to these childlike and sometimes childish qualities in the work of William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, and Lorine Niedecker. While all three poets are now taken seriously as important modernists, they were in their own time often derided (in the cases of Williams and Stein) or altogether marginalized (in the case of Niedecker) as nonsensical, unsophisticated, or otherwise aesthetically immature. In the last fifty years their positions in literary history have been secured mainly by critics who argue that they only *seem* nonsensical or simple, and that they are in fact highly sophisticated, very adult literary artists. Reassessing both the dismissals and the celebrations, "Naïve Modernism" argues that Williams, Stein, and Niedecker each in their own ways truly do aspire to such qualities as nonsense and minorness, and that we ought to take seriously their wishes to write with the freedom, absorption, and simplicity they attribute to childhood. I want not to refute the seriousness with which Williams, Stein, and Niedecker are now taken but to propose that these poets need not adhere to the codes of grown-ups to be taken seriously. By becoming receptive to their paradoxically artful naïveté, we might not only tell a new story about literary modernism but also discover new ways of reading their strange or strangely simple poems—and thus new ways of conceiving what we take to be our own adulthood.

In describing these poets as "naïve," I take up the term as Friedrich Schiller famously used it in his 1800 treatise *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*: "Naïveté is a *childlikeness, where it is no longer expected*, and precisely for that reason it cannot be attributed to actual childhood in the strictest sense."[1] Schiller distinguishes naïve poetry, which he describes as artless and simple, from sentimental poetry, which is complexly wrought and intellectually sophisticated. While the naïve poet is intuitively attuned to the natural world and his cultural milieu, the sentimental poet's relation to his environment and social world is mediated by complex self-consciousness; naïve poetry thus tends toward mimetic representations of particular and concrete reality, sentimental poetry toward abstraction and reflection. Homer and the Classical Greeks are Schiller's exemplary naïve poets, Klopstock and Kleist his exemplary sentimental poets, though the distinctions do not fall neatly along historical lines: he counts Shakespeare, for instance, as a naïve poet. His categories are useful in describing the work of Williams, Stein, and Niedecker, but these modernists' work in turn can help expand and revise those categories and the familiar senses of childlikeness they entail. Schiller's idea of childhood is defined by intellectual innocence and a simple directness of expression. The poets I discuss, however, are sometimes innocent and plainspoken, but they can also be erratic, incoherent, cryptic, self-absorbed, boring, and prone to tantrums, so we must adapt Schiller by imagining a modernist naïveté that accommodates both the nobility and the naughtiness of childhood. Furthermore, the poetry of Williams, Stein, and Niedecker is not as natural and artless as the archaic naïveté Schiller describes. While these poets do in different ways seek immediate contact with the world, they are all also careful, knowing artificers. In their poems we see how the naïve mode can itself be a culturally mediated performance of childlike or "folk" qualities—a sentimental sort of naïveté. This dialectic of artlessness and artifice is a key dynamic of naïve modernism.

[1] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 184. Italics in the original.

Likewise, the idealism of Schiller's essay provides a useful point of departure for thinking about Williams, Stein, and Niedecker, but I wish ultimately to pull the idea of naïve poetry away from its idealist origins. In Schiller's scheme, the naïve poet's unity with nature is the lost ideal back toward which the sentimental poet is always looking; now fallen from that original integration, he can only mark his distance from the ideal in elegiac, idyllic, and satiric modes. As Schiller puts it early in the essay, the ancients "felt naturally, while we feel the natural."[2] The sentimental poet encounters nature only through the mediating concept of "the natural," which would be entirely foreign to the naïve poet. Yet rather than imagine a return to some sort of unselfconscious naïve unity, which for Schiller is both impossible and undesirable, he proposes that the sentimental poet might eventually achieve a third stage in which adult reason and reflection have recuperated lost nature in a new and improved form. In this truly ideal stage of culture, the poet might be said not only to *feel* nature but also to *know* nature. The trajectory is one of cultural maturation; Schiller sees something admirable in childhood but does not wish simply to return to it.

We can recognize a similar narrative of progress in the way he values "play," another concept that is useful for thinking about the poetry of Williams, Stein, and Niedecker. In the fifteenth of the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Schiller asserts that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and *he is only fully a human being when he plays*"; we find exemplary early human playfulness, he avers, "in the art and in the feeling of the Greeks."[3] In Schiller's quasi-Kantian framework, "Man" is defined by duality: he lives in the finite world of sensuous experience and time, but rationality affords him access to the infinite, timeless realm of pure form. Thus he is practically governed by necessity while being intellectually or imaginatively free. In making and experiencing artworks, a person exercises what Schiller calls the "play drive" by

[2] Ibid., 195.

[3] Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in *Essays*, 131. Italics in the original.

giving sensuous shape to otherwise purely abstract forms, thus reconciling the material and ideal halves of his existence.[4] He describes the art object as a "*living form*"—sensuous matter animated by human consciousness, an object vitalized by subjective agency.[5] When "Man" plays, he is neither "exclusively matter"—a brute at the mercy of appetite and impulse—nor "exclusively mind"—a disembodied intellectual wraith.[6] Schiller scales this mediation of matter and spirit up to the level of western civilization and calls it "culture," assigning aesthetic education a crucial role in moral and societal well-being.[7] In the *Aesthetic Education*, play is rescued from the childish realm of "*mere* play" and ennobled as an essential step toward ideal human maturity.[8]

The nobility of childhood and the edifying effects of play are by now familiar tropes, found not only in German Romanticism but also in Anglophone Romanticism, American Pragmatism, and various twentieth-century theories of child development. In "My Heart Leaps Up," for instance, Wordsworth famously proclaims "The Child is father of the Man," and in the sixth section of "Song of Myself," Whitman has a child ask him the essential question: "What is the grass?" John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, one the Pragmatist educator's central texts, is essentially Schillerian in its celebration of the aesthetic play as the fundamental mode of human self-realization and thus as a foundational element of liberal society, but he replaces Schiller's Kantian idealism with a Darwinian naturalism. What Schiller calls "Man," Dewey describes as "the live animal" seeking "harmony" or "equilibrium" with his environment.[9] All creatures, Dewey contends, strive to achieve stability by overcoming the various "disturbances" posed by the world; in his account, auditory dissonance or spatial disarray are simply less urgent forms of disturbance than lack of food or threatening weather.

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[4] Ibid., 126.
[5] Ibid., 128. Italics in the original.
[6] Ibid., 129.
[7] Ibid., 122.
[8] Ibid., 130.
[9] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 14-17.

Aesthetic play, a capacity exercised first in childhood, is thus one of a creature's basic ways of negotiating the discrepancy between itself and the world in which it must survive—of ordering the elements of its environment in a way that reflects human need and desire. For all of these thinkers, childhood provides a foundational image of ideal human potential. In this broadly Romantic view of culture, play is crucial to the orderly, healthy development of human society because it allows both children and adults to experience and renew that potential.

In "Naïve Modernism," I follow Schiller, Dewey, and others in linking childhood, play, and aesthetic experience, but I want also to resist the assimilation of childhood and play into a teleological narrative of progress. As Brian Sutton-Smith has written in *The Ambiguity of Play*, there is a tendency common among play theorists to value play only insofar as it contributes to the healthy development of children, adults, and society. We can see this tendency in theories of child development that emphasize play as a necessary step in cognitive growth or as a necessary part of maturation into a well-adjusted adult individual. We can also see it in the Romantic emphasis, found for instance in Schiller and Wordsworth, on the vitality of the Child's imagination as an ideal for a more noble society.[10] The Romantic idealist Schiller celebrates rational, ordered play—edifying play—over "uncultivated taste" for the "new and startling…colorful, fantastic and bizarre, the violent and the savage."[11] As Sutton-Smith points out, Schiller has little else to say about the more chaotic, darker sorts of play that might engage both children and adults.[12] Games of chance and imaginative "phantasmagoria," for instance, in different ways court irrational, erratic, wasteful, and destructive forces that do not clearly lead to healthy maturity and might even thwart progress toward a well-adjusted adulthood. Sutton-Smith contends that these more fanciful and sometimes disorderly

[10] See Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, especially Chapter 1, "Play and Ambiguity"; Chapter 3, "Rhetorics of Child Play"; Chapter 8, "Rhetorics of the Imaginary"; and Chapter 10, "Rhetorics of the Self."
[11] Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, in *Essays*, 174.
[12] Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 131-32.

imaginary worlds might be understood as assertions of autonomy from the orderly adult world, not as aspirations to join it—as "fabricat[ions] of another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life," not mere "replications" of the given world.[13] In reading Williams, Stein, and Niedecker, I seek to linger in this other world of childhood while holding at bay the disciplinary work of critical adulthood. Play is not necessarily sensible and good for you, and neither are poems, but they might hold open possibilities other than health and correctness. "Naïve Modernism" asks what happens if we resist maturity, even if only for as long as it takes to read a poem.

To supplement Schiller's (and Dewey's) ideas about childlikeness and play, I draw upon two very different twentieth-century thinkers, D.W. Winnicott and Walter Benjamin, who had their doubts about adulthood. The conjunction of the British psychoanalyst and the German cultural critic will seem perhaps unlikely, but both wrote about the imaginative lives of children with vivid perceptiveness, and their surprisingly compatible ideas about childhood and play are useful in filling out the conceptual framework of "Naïve Modernism." First Winnicott: his well-known emphasis on play would seem to place him in the lineage of Schiller and Dewey. Like the earlier thinkers, he sees human life as a split existence and play as a way to reconcile the cleft halves of experience. While other psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein, regard the content of a child's play primarily as something to be interpreted by the therapist, Winnicott is more interested in playing itself as a mode or attitude that allows a person to interact flexibly with the outside world, to engage successfully in what he calls the ongoing "task of reality-acceptance," and to withstand "the strain of relating inner and outer reality."[14] For Winnicott, the foundational reality that each individual must learn to accept is the discrepancy between oneself and the external world, a discrepancy first experienced in infancy

[13] Ibid., 166, 158.
[14] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 18.

as the baby learns that its mother's breast is not simply continuous with the desire for nourishment—that subjective desire and its material fulfillment are not identical. In playing, first with a "transitional object" and later in other forms of imaginative and physical activity, a person figures out how to live in this discrepancy. While he locates the origins of play in the transitional phase during which the baby negotiates its independence, Winnicott, like Schiller, scales up: play becomes the creative capacity for healthy self-realization, an activity that makes a person most fully himself or herself in the world. Furthermore, he frames art, religion, and other cultural activities as forms of play, or collective transitional phenomena mediating human agency and the non-human world. In this regard, Winnicott seems to offer yet another narrative of maturation in which play provides crucial habituation for a well-adjusted adult life.

What I want to emphasize, however, is the zone of a natal creative disorder surviving within Winnicott's picture of an orderly adulthood. In his developmental theory, the earliest stage of a child's life is characterized by what he calls "primary unintegration" during which the child is only a loosely bound array of feelings and physical sensations, undefined by any ego: "There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is many bits or one whole being, or whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something."[15] As a child grows, he "comes together" more often and more definitively, gradually becoming a mostly integrated and independent self. It's crucial, however, that he be permitted ample time to linger idly alone in primary unintegration, which Winnicott also identifies with the "potential space" of play.[16] If the child is rushed too quickly out of play, either by material circumstances or adults' expectations that he act like one of them, he is apt to become what Winnicott calls a "compliant false self."[17] The compliant ego is *too* integrated,

[15] Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*, 150.
[16] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 55.
[17] Ibid., 137.

too well-formed by the demands of the external world. This person loses his capacity to return to and dwell in primary unintegration, which is an original resting place, the primordial experience out of which creativity and the "true" or "spontaneous" self emerges. In Winnicott's view, seemingly healthy, well-adjusted adults are all too often compliant false selves, their feet too firmly planted on the ground:

> It is sometimes assumed that in health the individual is always integrated, as well as living in his own body, and able to feel that the world is real. There is, however, much sanity that has a symptomatic quality, being charged with fear or denial of madness, fear or denial of the innate capacity of every human being to become unintegrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal. Sufficient lack of sleep produces these conditions in anyone.[18]

In a well-known footnote to this passage, Winnicott urges us toward creative non-compliance, proposing aesthetic experience as the antidote to this illness of sanity: "Through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane."[19] An unintegrated sense of self, Winnicott implies, might endure as a potentially disordering or reordering unreality within adult reality, and the art that helps us remember our naïve selves might allow us to make an alternative world within this one.

Like Winnicott, Benjamin values imaginative world-making, and he understands play to be a primal—and crucial—human capacity.[20] While he is not usually counted as a theorist of play, Benjamin was fascinated by toys and children's books, and in the 1920s, he wrote several brief essays about these topics, all of which evince a powerful respect for the semi-autonomy of children. In

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[18] Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*, 150.

[19] Ibid., 150n.

[20] One especially uncanny anticipation of Winnicott comes in the essay "Toys and Play," where Benjamin speculates about the most basic human games and playthings: "In all probability the situation is this: before we transcend ourselves in love and enter into the life and the often alien rhythm of another human being, we experiment early on with basic rhythms that proclaim themselves in their simplest forms in these sorts of games with inanimate objects. Or rather, these are the rhythms in which we first gain possession of ourselves." "Toys and Play" in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, 120.

these essays, he disdains toys that are manufactured to fulfill adult expectations of what a child should enjoy, and he celebrates the ingenious ways that children at play rearrange and make strange the familiar pieces of the adult world. "[P]lay has been thought about altogether too exclusively from the point of view of adults," Benjamin declares in "Toys and Play," "and has been regarded too much as the imitation of adults."[21] Children, it seems, can make a toy of anything: "no one is more chaste in the use of materials than children: a bit of wood, a pinecone, a small stone—however unified and unambiguous the material is, the more it seems to embrace the possibility of a multitude of figures of the most varied sort."[22] In "Old Forgotten Children's Books," Benjamin critiques the pervasive Enlightenment view that children must be supplied with specialized toys that encourage their development in suitable ways, writing that children

> are irresistibly drawn by the detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry. In waste products they recognize the face that the world of things turns directly and solely to them. In using these things, they do no so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one.[23]

So while children do not require toys designed particularly with their healthy maturation in mind, they do see the adult world with their own unique vision—one that perceives an entirely other aspect of common things. For Benjamin, that aspect seems primarily to be color, which in the early fragment "A Child's View of Color," he describes as "fluid, the medium of all changes, and not a symptom."[24] While adults see color as a secondary attribute of things, children perceive it as primary, a sort of visible essence of the things around them—a sensuous quality that is nevertheless "something spiritual." For children, Benjamin proposes, color appears as a "single" yet "infinite" mixing and shifting of "nuances" across all objects, not a fixed quality "superimposed" on isolated

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[21] Ibid., 119.
[22] Benjamin, "The Cultural History of Toys," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, 115.
[23] Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 408.
[24] Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 50.

objects.[25] By following the logic of color, children "create the interrelated totality of the world of the imagination," linking those "widely differing kinds" of things that to the adult eye might seem unrelated.[26] Of the vivid colors in children's books, Benjamin writes,

> In this play of colors, the imagination runs riot. After all, the role of children's books is not to induct their readers directly into the world of objects, animals, and people—in other words, into so-called life. Very gradually their meaning is discovered in the outside world, but only in proportion as they are found to correspond to what children already possess within themselves. The inward nature of this way of seeing is located in the color, and this is where the dreamy life that objects lead in the minds of children is acted out. They learn from the bright coloring. For nowhere is sensuous, nostalgia-free contemplation as much at home as in color.[27]

The images Benjamin describes here do not aim to educate children in the ways of the adult world; rather, they are keyed to children's distinct ways of perceiving, which they aim to encourage, not to correct. What children learn from children's books is not how to participate appropriately in "so-called life," but how to exercise their imaginations in "the outside world" beyond the pages of their books—to "produce their own small world of things within the greater one."[28]

There is something unabashedly romantic in Benjamin's characterization of childhood vision as a kind of enchantment, but his child is not father to the man. While the adult task is "to provide a world order," as he writes in "A Child's View of Color," the child is concerned with "pure receptivity."[29] This receptivity, Benjamin writes, "contains an implicit instruction to a life of the spirit which is no more dependent on accidental circumstances for its creativity than color, for all its

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 51.

[27] Benjamin, "Old Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 410.

[28] For a complementary reading of this aspect of Benjamin's thought, also see Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature*, especially Chapter 2, "Sources of Ecstasis in Childhood Experience." I follow her in finding Benjamin's perspective on children to be a helpful supplement or corrective to the general subordination of childhood play to adult-oriented progress. See also Carlo Salzani, "Experience and Play: Walter Benjamin and the Prelapsarian Child," in Benjamin and Rice, *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*, 175-200.

[29] Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 51.

receptivity, is capable of communicating about the existence of dead, causal reality."[30] An "instruction to the life of the spirit" and freedom from "accidental circumstance" do ring of Schiller, but the suggestion here is that childhood imagination and the "dead," disenchanted logic of adult reality might finally be incompatible. To learn the lessons of childhood is to learn vivid disorder, not to instate a righteous world order. If there is a pedagogical quality of naïve modernism, it's likely more akin to Benjamin's dilation of child mind than to Schiller's noble play: not a moral-aesthetic education of "Man" but a surprising recess permitting adults to perceive again as children might. This would be a pedagogy of turning aside from maturity, of throwing off the authority of adulthood. "To understand poetry," writes Benjamin's contemporary Johan Huizinga, "we must be capable of donning the child's soul like a magic cloak and of forsaking man's wisdom for the child's."[31] In his seminal study *Homo Ludens*, the Dutch historian describes poetry as a "play-function," and like Benjamin, he understands play as world-making—the imaginative construction of "a second poetic world alongside the world of nature."[32] In language strikingly similar to Benjamin's, Huizinga notes that in this second world, "things have a very different physiognomy from the one they wear in 'ordinary life,' and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality."[33] Williams, Stein, and Niedecker each in their own ways don the child's soul and rearrange the things of "ordinary life" according to logics other than the laws of adulthood. The project of "Naïve Modernism" is to trace and articulate these poets' alternative logics in the hope that their poems might in turn encourage us to make our own rearrangements—fleeting, intimate spaces that permit contemplation of the otherwise within the given.

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 113.
[32] Ibid., 4.
[33] Ibid., 113.

Recent scholarship has tended to present literary modernism itself as an adulthood that cannot quite tolerate the childishness of its own beginnings. The history of literature between 1900 and 1945 is often understood in terms of various "crises" and the responses of certain writers to these crises. A good recent example of what me might call "crisis modernism" comes at the beginning of Pericles Lewis's 2007 primer, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*: "My working definition of modernism will be: the literature that acknowledged and attempted to respond to a crisis of representation beginning in the mid-nineteenth century."[34] Lewis understands the primary crisis to be an aesthetic one: how does literature represent (or not represent) reality? But he also identifies a closely related political crisis, which he calls "the crisis of liberalism": how do broadly Enlightenment-derived public spheres and forms of government represent (or not represent) individual persons, collective identities, and the very categories of "the individual" and "identity"? Modernist writers, in breaking with realist or naturalist modes of representation (for example), cracked open received ways of understanding human subjectivity and social relations. We find a similar structure of crises and response in Charles Altieri's 2006 book, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Altieri's account also begins with a crisis of inheritance, what he calls "two basic modernist refusals of basic values in the culture they inherited."[35] The first of these refusals was "epistemological": modernist poets turned "from ideals of sensitive description and symbolic representation" to "presentational realism" that emphasized the processes and intensities of perception itself.[36] The second refusal was "psychological": "the young modernists acutely felt the pressure of entrenched values and worse, of entrenched personality types that the culture established to preserve those values."[37] To resist or subvert these values and personality types, modernist poets eschewed the "ideal of sincerity" and the

[34] Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, xviii.
[35] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 3.
[36] Ibid., 4.
[37] Ibid.

rhetorical forms of identification and personal mastery that supported it, developing a new "anti-rhetorical expressionism."[38] According to Altieri, both the "new realism" and this "anti-rhetorical expressionism" shifted poetry away from mimesis (of the physical world and of received cultural forms) toward the constructive powers of the imagination performed and registered in language. Like Lewis, Altieri understands modernist aesthetic innovations as attempts to reimagine what it means to be a person living within the tumultuous culture of the early twentieth century.

As Altieri goes on to demonstrate, the new realism and the resistance to conventional rhetoric rely, especially in modernism's early stages, on strong assertions of individual imagination and the originality of the writer's own perceptions. Like Altieri, Christopher Butler argues that the refusal of "the assumptions of the previous generation" is modernism's first imperative, and in that refusal, modernists "relied upon the idea that creativity (and art) had to be subjective, intuitive, and expressionist in character."[39] The elevation of individual vision, which Butler places in the intellectual historical context of Bergson's intuitionism and Nietzsche's will-to-power, is accompanied by what Butler calls "the withdrawal from consensual languages": the development of difficult, idiosyncratic artistic styles that break with ordinary norms of communication and representation.[40] Michael Levenson meticulously traces this subjectivist turn in his landmark study *A Genealogy of Modernism*, and Peter Nicholls likewise makes the assertion of individual style the essential modernist gesture in his *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*. For Nicholls, idiosyncratic style and a self-distancing irony are the distinguishing signs of modernist writers. Both are efforts at mastery. By developing the artifice of style, the writer marks his difference from his bourgeois milieu and asserts his own constructive agency against "natural" conceptions of identity and collectivity. Irony allows him to take a knowing, "superior" stance toward both his milieu and any "sincere" or "Romantic"

[38] Ibid., 5.
[39] Butler, *Early Modernism*, 3.
[40] Ibid., 4.

formulations of selfhood.[41] In such accounts as these, the modernist writer emerges as a man without illusions, and one who meticulously protects his disillusionment.

But there is a further turn in the narrative of crises: once modernist writers broke with conventional modes of representation and withdrew from the social life supported by those conventions, they faced a crisis of authority within their various modernisms. Without the sponsorship of tradition or the persuasiveness of rhetoric, how could modernist writing offer something beyond mere novelty or sheer negation? As Altieri writes, modernism's early anti-authoritarianism and emphasis on individual vision "left it with almost no means to take up the traditional roles of delighting and instructing."[42] Perhaps it seems strange to think of modernists wanting to delight and instruct, but what else were early 20th-century avant-gardes if not efforts at cultural renovation? The radical artifices of modernist poetry, however, proved to be troublingly anti-social. So certain modernist poets went about reestablishing poetry's social authority, turning back to some of the old ways but with a difference. As Altieri writes, poets such as Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens redeployed the conventional resources of rhetoric in the interest not of re-inscribing old values but of inducing certain modes of imaginative intensity.[43] Other poets performed a kind of artistic self-maximization, continuing to foreground personal style while marshaling the resources of a longer cultural history. Witness the dazzling, all-encompassing didacticism of Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and the masterful consolidation of the western literary history in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and his later poetry and essays—work in which Nicholls identifies a modernist "call to order" and the "preoccupation with forms of authority."[44] These modernists

[41] Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 3-4, 18-20.
[42] Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 7.
[43] See Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, 87-96 and 128-46.
[44] Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide*, 167, 192.

projected themselves as the new priests of culture, simultaneously offering a social vision and maintaining their own distance from the masses.

"Naïve Modernism" tells a different story about individuality and authority, one that does not refute the story summarized above but exists within it, or just to the side of it. The story of crisis modernism is one of rebellion and maturation, with modernist *enfants terrible* first resisting their parents, enduring a turbulent adolescence, and then settling into their own authoritative adulthood. Williams, Stein, and Niedecker do not follow this trajectory of maturation, nor do they deploy encyclopedic citations or the self-protective ironies of the modernist masters. In different ways, they linger in childhood, playfully unmastered and unmastering. In this, they have more in common with the Continental avant-garde than they do with many of their Anglo-American peers. It was the Dadaist Hugo Ball who described "Childhood as a new world, and everything childlike and phantastic, everything childlike and direct, everything childlike and symbolical in opposition to the senilities of the world of grown-ups…To surpass oneself in naïveté and childishness—that is still the best antidote," and the Surrealist André Breton who wrote that "It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's 'real life.'"[45] As we will see, the European avant-garde provides important context for the American naïve modernists I discuss here, and throughout the dissertation, I propose networks of affiliation that cross not only national and linguistic boundaries, but also boundaries between artistic media and modes of thought. Whatever their nationalities, naïve modernists craft within the adult society of "high" modernism their own provisional, homemade worlds where "real life" might be lived. They show us ways to be modern without growing up.

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[45] Ball, "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism," in Rainey, *Modernism*, 478; Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in Rainey, *Modernism*, 737.

The first half of "Naïve Modernism" considers forms of naïve excess. Chapter One examines Williams's 1920 book *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*, an erratic and often obscure prose text in which the poet announces his aspiration to match his young son's wild imaginative reveries. Like the boy's phantasmagoria, Williams's improvisations are mercurial and flighty, transforming and recombining elements of daily life in ways that can be as bewildering as they are exciting. Because this imaginative dynamism seems inevitably to produce a degree of unintelligibility—or unintegration, as Winnicott might describe it—the improvisations tend not to reward modes of reading that prioritize hermeneutic understanding. Instead they encourage, or even require, alternative modes of playful or improvisational reading, and throughout the chapter, I both attempt to perform some of these alternatives and comment upon their possibilities and difficulties. Once reading is understood as a form of play, literary study begins to look more like recess than it does a classroom; the question becomes how much disorder can criticism accommodate. Entering into what Williams calls the "dance" of writer and reader, we find ourselves both intimate with and estranged from the poet—drawn in and partially guided by his text but ultimately turned out to improvise on our own. Drawing upon Roland Barthes's understanding of a "Text" and Winnicott's ideas of the "non-communicating self" and the "capacity to be alone," I describe how *Kora in Hell* permits Williams and his readers to be alone in one another's company, and triangulating Williams with Breton and Wordsworth, I find that Williams reconfigures avant-garde and Romantic tropes to propose childhood as both a rejuvenating possibility and a discomfiting challenge.

Chapter Two focuses on Stein's *Tender Buttons*, her 1908 collection of prose poems. For more than a century critics have been comparing Stein to a child, usually to dismiss and occasionally to praise her writing. This chapter tracks concepts of childlikeness, childishness, and the primitive across early newspaper reviews of Stein and significant essays about her work by Wyndham Lewis and Laura Riding, seeking both to understand how these concepts have functioned for Stein's critics

and to repurpose them for reading Stein and understanding her significance today. Reading *Tender Buttons* in light of Stein's essay "Poetry and Grammar," I argue that her prose poems are naïve exercises in naming things—efforts to restore the "thrill" of naming she believes is experienced by children but lost to adults—and that she paradoxically seeks childlike immediacy and directness by cultivating a sophisticated, often indirect, verbal medium. I conclude by considering Stein's career and the persistent difficulty of her work more broadly, using the concept of naïveté to reengage and reframe influential recent work on Stein by Marjorie Perloff, Jennifer Ashton, Bob Perelman, and Sianne Ngai. If we can think of Stein as a naïve modernist, we might come to better terms with her writing's intense self-absorption, recognizing the ways her work both invites us in and turns away from us, leaving us to our own devices.

The second half of "Naïve Modernism" turns from naïve excess to naïve minimalism. Chapter Three returns to Williams, this time considering well-known poems from the 1920's and 30's—seemingly simple, toy-like poems such as "The Red Wheelbarrow," "This Is Just to Say," and "A Chinese Toy"—poems Williams's friend and rival Wallace Stevens derided in a 1953 letter as mere "mobile-like arrangements of lines," forms impoverished of ideas and so formally slight they seem almost to drift off the page.[46] This chapter seeks to turn derision into insight, applying the figure of the mobile—both a type of modernist sculpture and a toy common to children's cribs and bedrooms—to Williams's work in ways that counter the characterization of him as an unintellectual poet. Indeed, the image of lightly jointed parts in motion captures something true about the formal qualities of a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow," an "arrangement" of words that might be said to mobilize seemingly fixed elements of the world. Drawing on Baudelaire's essay "A Philosophy of Toys" as well as comments by Pound and Duchamp, I locate Williams's minimalist works between the imagist lyric and the Dadaist readymade, and I consider the many playful imitations Williams's

[46] Stevens, *Letters*, 801.

work has inspired, some of them by actual children. While Yvor Winters, like Stevens, influentially described such works as well-crafted but intellectually empty, I argue that Williams's constructions enable a kind of mobile, attentive thinking that critics like Winters could not abide. Such adult authorities, it seems, can only perceive such naïve world-making as a threat.

Chapter Four takes up the work of Lorine Niedecker. For decades neglected or patronized as a minor or regional poet, Niedecker has in recent years been rightfully elevated to the status of a "major" modernist poet, writing from rural Wisconsin but belonging, with her peers Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivist poets, among the international avant-garde. This reevaluation has been crucial, but in the final chapter of "Naïve Modernism," I make the case for thinking again of Niedecker as a "minor" poet—not one of lesser talent or importance, but one who resists growing up, whose poetry dwells in the imaginative spaces of childhood and among the culturally "minor" voices of rural working-class people. In both her early work—what she called her "folk" poems, published in the 1946 book *New Goose*—and in later autobiographical poems such as "Paean to Place," Niedecker presents herself often as a child and grandchild imaginatively "floating" among the marshes of Blackhawk Island and the various human voices gathered into the poems, provided for and protected by her elders but also constrained by the realities of her family and the rural economy. Plainspoken and remarkably receptive to the natural world and vernacular speech around her, she is in some ways a quintessential naïve poet in Schiller's original sense, but her intricate poetic craft and shrewd, ambivalent class-consciousness also mark her as sentimental one. Indeed, Niedecker's work asks that we think carefully about the relationship between poetic naïveté and economic necessity, and finally proposes, in concert with Winnicott, that the receptivity and resourcefulness of our most primitive selves offer ways not of escaping but of living within the world as given.

"Naïve Modernism" is at bottom motivated by a pedagogical inquiry: what can readers do with bafflingly nonsensical or strangely simple poems? Why read them or teach them to our

students? Whether by ludic excess or folksy slightness, Williams, Stein, and Niedecker ask us to reconsider how and why we value the experience of reading. Their naïveté makes plain some of poetry's basic qualities: the playfulness of making, the imaginative reconfiguration of the given world, and the possibility of at least temporary experiences of freedom. One conviction of this dissertation is that engaging with poetry can provide children and adults alike with the time and space to play—a sort of recess within everyday life. Like recess, naïve modernism is not an escape from the world but a brief reprieve, a fleeting gap, a temporary rearrangement of the rules. Play typically comes to end; poems are put aside; we return to the sanity of the "real world." But what lessons might we take from recess back into that more orderly realm? What might we learn from becoming naïve, even if only for a moment? Whether or not we play our way into an ideally ordered society, Schiller was right that play is powerful. The small worlds we create in play make the real world more bearable, and why not hope that by imagining multiple worlds we might disorder this one enough to make it different?

CHAPTER ONE

THE HUGE PHANTASMAGORIA OF WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

No one, including Williams Carlos Williams himself, has ever known quite what to do with *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*. The book remained out of print and largely unavailable between 1920, when it was first printed, and 1957, when City Lights reissued it as part of its Pocket Poets series; it was subsequently gathered with some of Williams's other early works in the 1970 New Directions omnibus *Imaginations*, but then it was excluded from the 1986 *Collected Poems*. The book puzzles commentators as well as editors: compared to *Spring and All*, *Paterson*, and his numerous widely-read shorter poems, the improvisations have received scant critical attention. Many critics simply leave *Kora in Hell* out of their accounts of Williams; some treat it as a one-off novelty, errant juvenilia to be mentioned in passing but nothing to linger over. There are, however, some important exceptions to this general pattern of neglect. A few critics have read *Kora in Hell* as a necessary step in the development of Williams's poetics; others have examined it as an example of a distinctively American variety of Dada or of prose poetry; a few have celebrated it as one of the poet's most daring achievements.[1] While Williams himself maintained that the book was always a favorite of his—"It reveals myself to me and perhaps that is why I have kept it to myself," he told Edith Heal in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*—he tended to speak of it as a sort of private document, a crucial step

[1] See Bruns, "Da Improvisatore"; Fredman, *Poet's Prose*; Loewinsohn, "'Fools Have Big Wombs'"; Miki, *The Prepoetics of Williams Carlos Williams* Perloff, "Lines Converging and Crossing: The 'French' Decade of William Carlos Williams," in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 109-54; Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition*; and Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*.

along the way but still of only minor interest to a wider audience.[2] In 1923, just a few years after *Kora in Hell* was published, Williams wrote in *Spring and All* that "The virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values—their fault is their dislocation of sense, often complete."[3] He was already moving on, it seems; he had found it necessary to go to an extreme, but the mature work would have to regain "sense" while retaining the "new values" found through improvisation.[4]

Yet perhaps we need not decide that *Kora in Hell* is either juvenilia or a great achievement in its own right. The improvisations, I think, are juvenile in a much deeper sense than either Williams's critics or perhaps even he himself was inclined to acknowledge. In *Kora in Hell*, the poet wants to write the way a child plays—to cultivate a naïve modernism. He announces this aspiration in the italicized commentary that follows improvisation XXII.2:

> *My little son's improvisations exceed mine: a round stone to him's a loaf of bread or "this hen could lay a dozen golden eggs." Birds fly about his bedstead; giants lean over him with hungry jaws; bears roam the farm by summer and are killed and quartered at a thought. There are interminable stories at eating time full of bizarre imagery, true grotesques, pigs that change to dogs in the telling, cows that sing, roosters that become mountains and oceans that fill a soup plate. There are groans and growls, dun clouds and sunshine mixed in a huge phantasmagoria that never rests, never ceases to unfold into—the day's poor little happenings. Not that alone. He has music which I have not. His tunes follow no scale, no rhythm—alone the mood in odd ramblings up and down, over and over with a rigor of imagination that rises beyond the power to follow except in some more obvious flight. Never have I heard so crushing a critique as those desolate inventions, involved half-hymns, after his first visit to a Christian Sunday school.* (74)

Many of the improvisations are followed by such italicized paragraphs, which Williams claims to have appended to the original improvisations for explanatory purposes, even though many of them are as erratic and obscure as the paragraphs that precede them. This interpretation is fairly lucid, however, and it coaches us on how we might read the book as a whole. The little boy's imagination

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[2] Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 26.

[3] Williams, *Imaginations*, 117. Further citations of *Kora in Hell* and other works gathered in *Imaginations* given parenthetically in the text.

[4] Williams did, however, continue to write similarly improvisatory, "dislocated" prose into the early 1930's; see for instance *The Great American Novel* (1923) and *A Novelette* (1932), both collected in *Imaginations*, and *Rome,* written in 1924 but unpublished until 1978.

turns stone to bread, brings birds into his bedroom, perceives the threat of giants, invents and slays bears with a single gesture. His improvisations mingle fact and invention; he riffs off the given, transforming it into an endlessly shifting "phantasmagoria." *My five-year old could have done that*: many of us have heard someone express their skepticism of sloppy or seemingly arbitrary works of art this way—a Pollock or a Twombly, or perhaps one of Williams's improvisations—and the assertion implies a further claim about what counts as art: it must be skilled, it must be schooled, and it must be in control of itself. If an adult's production looks childish and is exhibited or published as art, something fraudulent or at best pretentious is happening. Here Williams sees this criticism and raises it to praise: *if only I could do what my five-year old does!* The boy does not intend to make poems; he's simply inhabiting his world, exercising his imagination within "*the day's poor little happenings*." The vitality of his imagination has to do, it seems, with its freedom from logical convention: he can turn anything into anything else simply by willing it. Logic becomes "a butterfly," as Williams puts it later in improvisation XXVII.1 (81). The boy's flights "*rise above the power to follow*," but Williams casts this unintelligibility as a virtue: that the boy's family members cannot often understand him is taken as proof of his imaginative "rigor." For his father, it's something to aspire to. And if Williams aspires to his little son's imaginative vitality, the suggestion is that we should try to read his improvisations as we might receive the "odd ramblings" of a five-year old.

But how might literary criticism accommodate such childishness? Keeping company with a five-year old is usually less about interpretation, historicization, or critique of his play than it is about playing along or bearing with him—if not mutual understanding, then perhaps mutual participation in an imaginative exchange *(*or at least forbearance). To participate in a child's play asks that we ourselves become more like children. Williams's improvisations ask us to improvise in kind, and I suspect that if we are willing to accept the invitation (or is it a challenge?), our own improvisatory readings will be as varied and particular as Williams's peculiar paragraphs and perhaps as private as

his son's imaginative flights. Readerly improvisation might resist the generalization typical of literary criticism. To illustrate both these difficulties and the possibilities of the playful reading *Kora in Hell* prompts, I want to venture my own improvised exchange with Williams's improvisation XXII.2, which immediately precedes the italicized paragraph above:

> Security, solidity—we laugh at them in our clique. It is tobacco to us, this side of her leg. We put it in our samovar and make tea of it. You see the stuff has possibilities. You think you are opposing the rich but the truth is you're turning toward authority yourself, to say nothing of religion. No, I do not say it means nothing. Why everything is nicely adjusted to our moods. But I would rather describe to you what I saw in the kitchen last night—overlook the girl a moment: there over the sink (1) this saucepan holds all, (2) this colander holds most, (3) this wire sieve lets most go and (4) this funnel holds nothing. You appreciate the progression. What need then to be always laughing? Quit phrase making—that is, not of course—but you will understand me or if not—why—come to breakfast sometime around evening on the fourth of January any year you please; always be punctual where eating is concerned. (73)

The improvisation begins in the voice of a moralist, speaking in the first-person plural of "our" disposition toward certain abstract values. But "clique" already adjusts moralism to the more gossipy insider critique of a coterie. Who exactly are "we"? Why do we give up security and solidity? What do we gain—or lose—by doing so? The next "it" would seem to refer to "Security, solidity"—and so we would be making good on our laughter's scorn by casually smoking or steeping these bourgeois values. Does it matter that "it" and "them" don't match? And what about the leg? Whose is it, and what are we or the tobacco in relation to it? "You see the stuff has possibilities": security and solidity are turning into smoke and liquid, and the "stuff" of these first sentences is suggesting possibilities without clearly making good on any of them. The "you" in "You see" could be anyone, an impersonal marker of emphasis, but the second one turns very personal: *you* are a hypocrite. Is this a monologue or one-half of a dialogue? Am I the silent interlocutor? "No, I do not say it means nothing" seems to respond to a missing sentence, perhaps my unwritten rebuttal to the accusation of hypocrisy. But what did I say? *What* might mean nothing?

The almost-established dramatic scene begins to wobble with "Why everything is nicely adjusted to our moods." This might be an oblique comment on "our" arbitrariness (i.e., our principled positions are actually mere adjustments determined by our moods), but again, the sentence does not clearly follow from what precedes it. The next sentence turns abruptly away, according merely to the improviser's whim: "But I would rather." The elliptical or parodic social critique of the first seven sentences swerves into an antic discourse on the relative holding capacities of kitchen vessels. The "progression" proceeds with perfect logic and economy, from the containment of a pan to the porousness of a colander. "What need then to be always laughing?" Was I laughing? Why? Am I embarrassed and bewildered at the sudden swerves, unsure of how else to respond? Amused at the cleverness and aptness of Williams's progression? "Quit phrase making—" Was I saying something? Were mine the phrases of canned response or of fussy versification? What's the difference? At this point phrases seem only to be unmade; sense runs out of the paragraph like water through a sieve. The improvisation disintegrates into a series of conversational qualifiers ("that is, not of course" and "or if not—why") and the assertion—is it ironic or hopeful?—that something has been communicated ("but you will understand me"). If understanding fails, I might at least accept an invitation to breakfast, even if it is in the evening.

We can see how the poet's transformation of security and solidity into tobacco and tea, his swerve from samovar to colander, his sudden invitation to breakfast—all "adjusted to our moods"—are comparable to his son's rapidly shifting phantasmagoria. My reading of improvisation XXII.2 is admittedly not as phantasmagoric—not as disjunctive, not as fanciful. I adopt a certain analytic bearing; I make meta-interpretative comments and dramatize the way my initial attempt at interpretation devolves into a series of questions. But what I hope it illustrates is the way one might, when reading *Kora in Hell*, find that a flutter of speculative, bewildered questions replaces logical understanding as the primary activity of reading, and furthermore, that one's own "I" is somehow

invited to participate—or implicated—in the text. When hermeneutic gaps open, I must patch them with myself. In the case of XXII.2, this invitation/implication happens explicitly in the play of personal pronouns, which is common in *Kora in Hell*, but even when the improvisations do not so explicitly hail the reader, their "odd rambling" induces this peculiar personal involvement. I'm asked to participate but then just as quickly left alone with my questions, left to improvise in my own way, to do my own thing.

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Before continuing with my own improvisation, it might be helpful to do the more responsible adult work of placing Williams's book in its early modernist context. An essential quality of *Kora in Hell* is that, at least according to Williams, the original improvisations stand unrevised. He recounts the composition of the book in his *Autobiography*:

> I decided that I would write something every day, without missing one day, for a year. I'd write nothing planned but take up a pencil, put the paper before me, and write anything that came into my head…I did just that, day after day, without missing one day for a year. Not a word was to be changed. I didn't change any, but I did tear up some of the stuff. Later, having picked up an old book which gave certain brief paragraphs upon a theme and then, with a line under them, gave a brief moralistic statement explaining the text, I did somewhat the same. I read over the improvised bit and, without thought, or too much of it, I interpreted, with what grew below the line, all that was above. It made an attractive novelty. With a preface which I then wrote, it was printed.[5]

Williams describes a two-phase process of writing. In the first, he improvised, jotting down whatever he fancied, seemingly unconcerned about its intelligibility. In the second, he prepared these jottings—what he calls in the prologue to the 1957 edition his "scribbling in the dark"—for the light of a potential public readership (29). But his self-editorial preparations intentionally preserved and even multiplied the improvisations' obscurity: he made no clarifying or unifying revisions, and his "interpretations" are as arbitrary and unthinking as his improvisations—"often more dense than the

[5] Williams, *Autobiography*, 158.

first writing," as he puts it in the 1957 prologue (29). So the poet simultaneously courts an audience and turns away from it in a performance of willful amateurism. Describing his writing of the late teens and twenties to Edith Heal in 1958, Williams comments, "I didn't originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it."[6] In light of this comment, the impertinent, deliberate messiness of the improvisations seems indeed to broadcast Williams's sympathy with Dada, which he had come to know in its New York manifestation though his association with Walter Arensberg, Marcel Duchamp, and Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery.[7]

The most obvious of Williams's Dadaist sympathies is his commitment to creative negativity, a will to destroy tired and restrictive aesthetic conventions in preparation for an eruptive rebirth of art.[8] *Spring and All*, for instance, begins by imagining "the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth" in anticipation of "the new world" (91, 95). But *Kora in Hell*'s celebration of childhood imagination resonates with international Dada even more than Williams could have known in 1918, when he was completing the improvisations. In a 1916 journal entry, not to be published in English until 1936, Hugo Ball, one of the founding Zurich Dadaists, writes: "Childhood as a new world, and everything childlike and phantastic, everything childlike and direct, everything childlike and symbolical in opposition to the senilities of the world of grown-ups…To surpass oneself in naïveté and childishness—that is still the best antidote…"[9] And Ball's collaborator Richard Huelsenbeck writes in 1920: "The Dadaist is naïve. The thing he is after is obvious,

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[6] Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, 48.

[7] Indeed, *Kora in Hell* has often been considered Williams's most Dadaist text. See Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, and Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition* for the most comprehensive accounts of Williams's relation to Dada. Also see Perloff, "Lines Converging and Crossing,'" in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*,

[8] Miki and Tashjian are articulate on this Dadaist element in Williams; see especially Miki, *The Prepoetics of William Carlos Williams*, 33-41 and Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, 12-13.

[9] Ball published his journals of 1916-17 in 1927 as *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*; Eugene Jolas translated passages of the book for *transition* 27 (Fall 1936); here I quote Jolas's translation, as reprinted in Rainey, *Modernism*, 478. *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* was also translated in its entirety into English by John Elderfield and published as *Flight Out of Time* in 1996.

undifferentiated, unintellectual life."[10] Williams, Ball, and Huelsenbeck are united in their pursuit of "directness," a sort of non- or pre-rational, unmediated immersion in experience—a primitivism that here makes the child its hero. Williams's unique variation is to link Dada with his fervent quest for decisively "American" literature and art. In the space of three pages in 1923's *The Great American Novel*, an extended improvisatory prose work that bears many similarities to *Kora in Hell*, Williams skitters from litotic praise of Dada ("Maybe Dadaism is not so weak as one might imagine.") into a confession of American ignorance of "European consciousness" ("You damned jackass. What do you know about Europe?"), and then from confession to a rejection of European culture worthy of Zurich Dada: "Europe is nothing to us. Simply nothing. Their music is death to us" (172-74). In what will become characteristic Williamsian gestures, he characterizes Americanness as both inadequacy and possibility: "America is a mass of pulp, a jelly, a sensitive plate ready to take whatever print you want to put on it—We have no art, no manners, no intellect—we have nothing. We water at the eyes at our own stupidity," and then, "I am a beginner. I am an American. A United Stateser" (175). Peter Schmidt puts a fine point on this identification of Dada and American culture when he writes that, for Williams, "America *is* Dada."[11]

Williams concludes this profession of American amateurism with an explicit disavowal of revision—"Here's a man who wants me to revise, to put in order. My God what I am doing means just the opposite from that. There is no revision, there can be no revision"—which returns us to the anti-method of *Kora in Hell* while also calling to mind André Breton, another writer with an early affinity for Dada naïveté (176). Breton and Philippe Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques*, their first experiment with automatic writing, appeared in 1920, the same year that *Kora in Hell* was published. Although briefly allied with Tristan Tzara, who had arrived in Paris in 1920, Breton was in fact

[10] "En Avant Dada: A History of Dadaism" was not translated into English until 1951, by Ralph Manheim for Motherwell's *Dada Painters and Poets*. Quoted here from Rainey, *Modernism*, 474.
[11] Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition*, 163.

already moving on from Dada into his own Surrealism; in 1922, he would announce Dada's obsolescence in the brief statement "After Dada," and in 1924, he would publish his seminal "Manifesto of Surrealism," which elaborates the methods of automatic writing he first explored with Soupault. Despite Breton's public break with Dada, "Manifesto of Surrealism" strongly echoes Ball's, Huelsenbeck's, and Williams's celebration of child-mind. Breton begins the essay by imagining a man who, settled into the routines of bourgeois adulthood, "turn[s] back toward his childhood" with what remains of his imagination. "There, the absence of any known restrictions allows him the perspective of several lives lived at once; this illusion becomes firmly rooted within him; now he is only interested in the fleeting, the extreme facility of everything. Children set off each day without a worry in the world. Everything is near at hand, the worst material conditions are fine. The woods are white or black, one will never sleep."[12] Breton's characterization of childhood is remarkably similar to Williams's depiction of his son's flights of fancy: both writers emphasize the unconventional or unregulated mobility of a child's imagination, its rapidity and shifting lightness, its ability to virtually transfigure the material world at will. Breton closes his essay by announcing Surrealism as a second childhood:

> From childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sentiment of being unintegrated, and then later of *having gone astray*, which I hold to be the most fertile that exists. It is perhaps childhood that comes closest to one's "real life"; childhood beyond which a man has at his disposal, aside from his laissez-passer, only a few complimentary tickets; childhood where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself. Thanks to Surrealism, is seems that opportunity knocks a second time.[13]

Here again we see childhood linked with the immediate experience of a pre-rational "real life" that is typically lost to adults. In Breton's inversion, real self-possession entails a return to this "unintegrated" state of mind, not the achievement of a tidily integrated, consolidated adult

[12] Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," translated by R. Seaver and H.R. Lane, in Rainey, *Modernism*, 718.
[13] Ibid., 737.

subjectivity, and this second childhood is achieved through automatism, which opens the mind to the "dictation" of the unconscious. As Williams does in *Kora in Hell* and *The Great American Novel*, Breton rejects revision:

> If such and such a sentence of mine turns out to be somewhat disappointing, at least momentarily, I place my trust in the following sentence to redeem its sins: I carefully refrain from starting over again or polishing it. The only thing that might prove fatal to me would be slightest loss of impetus. Words, groups of words *which follow one another*, manifest among themselves the greatest solidarity. It is not up to me to favor one group over the other. It is up to a miraculous equivalent to intervene—and intervene it does.[14]

To keep up the momentum at all costs, to avoid imposing order, to let the words take care of itself—these are Williams's imperatives too.

Yet despite the two writers' clear affinities, Williams's improvisations and Breton's automatic texts are not likely to be mistaken for one another. While Breton's writing eschews logical progression and cultivates semantic incoherence, his sentences and paragraphs are typically continuous, their semantic parataxis smoothed by grammatical and rhetorical hypotaxis. Paragraphs from his and Soupault's *Les Champs magnétiques* or his and Paul Eluard's *L'Immaculée Conception* are often governed by consistent personal pronouns, their sentences and phrases joined with conventional connectives such as "before," "after," and "then," which contributes to a sense of narrative coherence and progress even when other elements within the paragraphs seem discontinuous. As we have already begun to see, the sentences and paragraphs of Williams's improvisations are markedly more paratactic, riddled with dashes, ellipsis, and exclamations; their pronouns and modes of address are erratic; disparate phrases and clauses jostle freely against one another. While one improvisation might seem perfectly hypotactic and logically lucid, the next might be utterly fragmented and opaque. Where Breton tends toward a cool evenness, Williams is brashly inconsistent. Breton pursued automatism according to a careful method, in lengthy sittings under

[14] Ibid., 733.

controlled circumstances; Williams dashed off his improvisations in whatever moments his frenetic medical practice allowed him, catching whatever way and whatever material was nearest. And while Breton believed Surrealism to be a sort of magic by which the writer becomes a medium to channel a "monologue" speaking from an occulted unconscious, Williams places no such faith in "miraculous" intervention.[15] As Peter Schmidt observes, "If Breton and Soupault in *Les Champs magnétiques* look solely inward seeking purity, Williams in *Kora in Hell*…looks outward as well as inward and finds the utmost heterogeneity."[16]

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D.W. Winnicott, was, like Williams, a pediatrician and writer especially attuned to the relation between a person's inner life and the external world, and like both Williams and Breton, he saw childhood as a time of special access to one's "real life." His description of infancy is remarkably similar to the "sentiment of unintegration" Breton attributes to memories of childhood. Recall Winnicott's characterization of the earliest stage of a child's life as the period of "primary unintegration," during which the child is just a loosely bound array of feelings and physical sensations, undefined by any ego: "There are long stretches of time in a normal infant's life in which a baby does not mind whether he is many bits or one whole being, or whether he lives in his mother's face or in his own body, provided that from time to time he comes together and feels something."[17] This language clearly echoes Breton, but the image of a person's permeability and heterogeneity—the child's way of living both in and outside its own body—fits Williams's sense of childhood even more aptly. All too often growing up means losing or suppressing one's ability to linger in this unintegrated state, and like the poets, Winnicott finds that "healthy" adulthood frequently means ennui and inflexibility: "It is sometimes assumed that in health the individual is

[15] Ibid., 227, 233.
[16] Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition*, 106.
[17] Winnicott, *Through Paediatrics to Psycho-Analysis*, 150.

always integrated, as well as living in his own body, and able to feel that the world is real. There is, however, much sanity that has a symptomatic quality, being charged with fear or denial of madness, fear or denial of the innate capacity of every human being to become unintegrated, depersonalized, and to feel that the world is unreal."[18] Furthermore, like the poets, Winnicott proposes literature and the other arts as ways to reawaken and sustain the "unintegrated" imaginative vitality of early childhood: "Through artistic expression we can hope to keep in touch with our primitive selves whence the most intense feelings and even fearfully acute sensations derive, and we are poor indeed if we are only sane."[19] For all three writers, childhood is an antidote to adulthood.

Winnicott understood, however, that our unintegrated, most vital "primitive selves" are not easily expressed to others, and this insight is particularly helpful in reading *Kora in Hell*. Indeed, he might have recognized the frequent obscurity and incoherence—the extravagant privacy—of Williams's improvisations as the mode of expression proper to what Winnicott calls the "core" self, which a person wants simultaneously to make known and to protect as a sort of essential secret. While Winnicott is constantly concerned with the ways that people relate to one another, he is equally committed to an essential privacy; the possibility of being alone together is a deep motivation in his work. A crucial step in his picture of human development is the time when a child is able to feel alone in her mother's presence, entirely absorbed in her own imagination, playing for no one but herself.[20] In the essay "On Communicating and Not Communicating leading to a Study of Certain Opposites," Winnicott writes that "each individual is an isolate, permanently non-communicating, permanently unknown, in fact unfound," and this private self is only available to a person when she feels herself to be securely alone.[21] The artist, he writes, is thus located in "an inherent dilemma,

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[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 150n.
[20] See Winnicott, "The Capacity to be Alone," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 29-35.
[21] Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 187.

which belongs to the co-existence of two trends, the urgent need to communicate and the still more urgent need not to be found."[22] In the spirit of Winnicott, then, we might understand the improvisations as Williams's way of both communicating and not communicating, and the strange experience of reading *Kora in Hell*—in which we seem simultaneously to encounter the poet's deep self and to be deflected out on our own—as one way of being alone together with Williams.

With Winnicott in mind, let's return to Williams's odd rambling in improvisation XV.3:

> Here's a new sort of April clouds: whiffs of dry snow on the polished roadway that, curled by the wind, lie in feathery figures. Oh but April's not to be hedged that simply. She was a Scotch lady and made her own butter and they grew their own rye. It was the finest bread I ever tasted. And how we used to jump in the hay! When he lost his money she kept a boarding house…But this is nothing to the story that should have been written could he have time to jot it all down: of how Bertha's lips are turned and her calf also and how she weighs 118 pounds. Do I think that is much? Hagh! And her other perfections. Ruin the girl? Oh there are fifty niceties that—being virtuous, oh glacially virtuous—one might consider, i.e. whose touch is the less venomous and by virtue of what sanction? Love, my good friends, has never held sway in more than a heart or two here and there since—? All beauty stands upon the edge of the deflowering. I confess I wish my wife were younger. This is the lewdest thought possible: it makes mockery of the spirit, say you? Solitary poet who speaks his mind and has not one fellow in a virtuous world! I wish for youth! I wish for love—! I see well what passes in the street and much that passes in the mind. You'll say this has nothing in it of chastity. Ah well, chastity is a lily of the valley that only a fool would mock. There is no whiter nor no sweeter flower—but once past, the rankest stink comes from the soothest petals. Heigh-ya! A crib from our medieval friend Shakespeare. (58-59)

In this deliberately erratic book, a truly exemplary improvisation is hard to find, but this one serves well enough. It is neither the most obscure nor the most lucid of the improvisations; like the book as a whole, it quickly veers from lucidity to obscurity and back again. At the level of the sentence, it is not as unintelligible as Williams's other comments about the book might lead us to believe. Words and phrases tend to cluster into fairly clear images, events, propositions, and confessions, e.g. drifting snow, jumping in the hay, the precariousness of beauty, and someone's wish for his wife's youth. There's not a problem of reference, at least locally. We can even identify something like a

[22] Ibid., 185.

theme, or at least a prevailing concern, having to do with desire and disgust, female "virtue" and its corruption, youth and aging. Indeed, here Williams might be all too clear: while it seems reductive to attribute all of the sentences to a single personal voice, if we do take this as a diary entry, we might find ourselves embarrassed or even disgusted by the disclosure of such Hamletesque attitudes toward women.[23] We might wish that Williams had not published this part of himself.

But even as we begin to feel that Williams is communicating too much, he seems also to dissolve into a rhetorical hodgepodge. Just whose voice is this? How many voices are there? What's the situation and mode of address here? How do these sentences follow one another? Here we can clearly distinguish Williams from Breton, whose automatic writing delivers disorienting imagery in elegantly coherent rhetoric, or Gertrude Stein, whose verbal portraits and still lives proceed with disorienting yet methodical repetitions and grammatical shifts, as we will see in Chapter Two. Williams's improvisation is neither smoothly homogenous nor consistently disjunctive. How are we to pass from the assertion "April's not to be hedged that simply" (which is not in itself simple to gloss) to the "Scotch lady" who "made her own butter"? There's no antecedent for the pronoun "she"; I thought I was reading a delicate meditation on novel weather effects of early spring, but now I find myself in the middle of a fond recollection. And then the recollection turns quickly into something else: I can surmise that the first "he" is the Scotch lady's husband, and perhaps that his destitution brought an end to the happy home in which "we used to jump in the hay," but what to

[23] *Kora in Hell*, like much of Williams's work, involves a troubling and complex mythology of gender; like Hamlet, to whom he knowingly alludes here, Williams is fascinated by "the feminine" and the qualities he associates with it, veering erratically between desire and disgust. On Williams's engagement with the Kore/Persephone myth in particular, see Harvey Feinberg, "The American Kora: Myth in the Art of Williams Carlos Williams." For an incisive critique of Williams's essentialist gender mythology, see John Palattella, "'In the Midst of Living Hell': The Great War, Masculinity, and Maternity in Williams' *Kora in Hell* and 'Three Professional Studies'." For a comprehensive account of Williams's relation with his own mother and the role of "maternity" in his work, see Kerry Driscoll, *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse*. On Williams's ambivalent conceptions of gender, his relationship with Mina Loy, and his influence on his later "poetic daughters," see Linda Kinnahan, *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. For a poet's own take on the difficulties of being a "granddaughter" of Williams, see Alice Notley, *Doctor Williams' Heiresses*.

make of the ellipsis and the sentence that follows it? How much of a rupture does the ellipsis signal? Who's this second "he," and who's Bertha? Who is the "I" that comes soon after that, and what does "I" have to do with these other people? What do *I* have to do with any of it? A series of divergent rhetorical gestures follows in rapid succession: unanswered (and probably unanswerable) questions; the interjection "Hagh"; an address to "my good friends"; the sudden turn toward whom—me?—of "say you?"; and the *mea culpa* "I wish my wife were younger." And what about the exclamatory phrase, "Solitary poet who speaks his mind and has not one fellow in a virtuous world"? Is it the writer's self-identification or his address to someone else, say *me*? Does the difference matter? Both writer and reader seem equally without fellow here, if fellowship implies some mutual understanding. Is the trouble that the poet's self-expression is unvirtuous or that it is too confusing even to count as expression?[24]

The interpretation that follows improvisation XV.3 does not offer direct commentary or clarification of the dislocated paragraph that precedes it, but it does provide more general insight into the heterogeneity of Williams's improvisations and how we might orient ourselves toward them:

> *That which is heard from the lips of those to whom we are talking in our day's-affairs mingles with what we see in the streets and everywhere about us as it mingles also with our imaginations. By this chemistry is fabricated a language of the day which shifts and reveals its meaning as clouds shift and turn in the sky and sometimes send down rain of snow or hail. This is the language to which few ears are tuned so that it is said by poets that few men are ever in their full senses since they have no way to use their imaginations. Thus to say that a man has no imagination is to say nearly that he is blind or deaf. But of old poets would translate this hidden language into a kind of replica of the speech of the world with certain distinctions of rhyme and meter to show that it was not really that speech. Nowadays the elements of language are set down as heard and the imagination of the listener and of the poet are left free to mingle in the dance.* (59)

[24] Numerous critics have discussed the possible influence of Wassily Kandinksy's conception of "improvisation" on Williams's choice of generic designation for *Kora in Hell.* In his 1911 book, *Concerning the Spiritual in* Art, 57. Kandinksy associates improvisation with "a largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character" For more on Williams's exposure to Kandinsky's ideas, see Dijkstra, *Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, 37-9; Weaver, *The American Background*, 37-9; Schmidt, *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition*, 100-3; and Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion*, 99-100.

Here Williams describes an anti-aesthetic poem. Not only does he eschew rhyme and meter, two of the prosodic elements that traditionally distinguish poetic language from ordinary speech, but he also wants to remove any boundary at all between the poetic text and "*our day's affairs*." Instead of a "*replica*"—a well-wrought speech-object distinct from ordinary language—Williams proposes a "*dance*"—a collaborative activity through which the poet and his "*listener*" construct, or "*fabricate*," a text that he calls "*a language of the day*" (a heterogeneous language, in contrast to Breton's more unitary, nocturnal language). This text is notably porous (perhaps even sieve-like), open to ordinary speech, sights around town, and the subjective imaginations of both poet and listener; in this account, an improvisation seems to be a sort of collage, the work of fabrication as receptive as it is creative. The poem Williams proposes has an almost documentary quality: "*the elements of language are set down as heard*." Imagination, it seems, is not a special poetic talent but a fundamental capacity for attentiveness potentially shared by poet and non-poets. On the one hand, he's diminishing the imagination's status as an aesthetic value by letting it "*mingle*" with the quotidian, but on the other he's maximizing its non-aesthetic importance: without it, a man is "*blind or deaf*," insensible not only to poems but also to the world around him.

Equally provocative, and somewhat puzzling, is the suggestion that this dance lets the imaginations of the poet and his listeners come into proximity, allowing them to "*mingle*" with one another. If the situation of improvisation were in fact oral—if the poet were fabricating his poem before a live audience of listeners—we might be able to imagine some kind of dialogic collaboration in which everyone present mingled their observations and imaginations in a collective performance. But these improvisations have readers, not listeners. Williams seems alert to the textuality of his improvisation, despite referring to the "listener," when he describes the process of fabrication as "*set[ting] down*" the language he hears around him. What kind of contact or collaboration can the poet and a reader achieve, displaced as they are from one another in place and time, especially when the

poet seems to be carrying on without much interest in any fellowship with his reader? In reading XV.3, I felt as though I couldn't understand the text, or whatever *he* meant by it. But perhaps "dancing" with the poet is something other than knowing what he means by his words. If "*meaning*" comes down like "*rain or snow or hail*," its primary significance might be not what it says but what it does to us. If we re-conceive of the improvisation not as the incoherent rhetoric of a single speaker but as "*a language of the day*"—a rhapsodic, phantasmagoric text fabricated by the single poet from his own observations and imaginations but still somehow open to the reader's involvement and elaboration—some of the questions I generated in reading XV.3 might appear not as symptoms of its failure but as movements natural to the dance it obliquely choreographs.

Described this way, an improvisation begins to look something like what Roland Barthes calls a "Text," which calls for a reader's collaboration, as distinguished from a "work," which permits or encourages passive consumption: "The Text (if only by its frequent 'unreadability') decants the work (if it permits it at all) from its consumption and recuperates it as play, task, production, practice. This means that the Text requires an attempt to abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, not by intensifying the reader's projection onto the work, but linking the two together into one and the same signifying practice."[25] The text Williams seeks would "decant" itself out of aesthetic objecthood and into "*our day's affairs*," which thus becomes a zone of encounter where writer and reader mingle. But it's important here to emphasize Barthes's qualification of this "linking": it's premised not upon "projection" or identification but upon what he calls "unreadability." Which is to say that I collaborate most with Williams in precisely those places where I struggle to follow him. The gaps and swerves in improvisations XXII.2 and XV.3 are the openings for my imagination, the places where I must join in the dance to keep it going—the places where I must perform my own improvisations, where I must *play*, to pick up a term of

[25] Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *The Rustle of Language*, 62.

Barthes's that returns us to the activities of childhood. In replacing "reading" with "playing," Barthes insists on

> the polysemy of the term: the text itself "plays" (like a door that plays back and forth on its hinges; like a fishing rod in which there is some "play"); and the reader plays twice over: he *plays at* the Text (ludic meaning), he seeks a practice which reproduces it; but, so that this practice is not reduced to a passive, interior *mimesis* (the Text being precisely what resists this reduction), he *plays* the Text; we must not forget that *play* is also a musical term; the history of music (as practice, not as "art"") is, moreover, quite parallel to that of the Text; there was a time when, active amateurs being numerous (at least within a certain class), "to play" and "to listen" constituted a virtually undifferentiated activity.[26]

Looseness, ludic activity, performance—I quote Barthes's riff at length because it articulates so vividly how the various concerns of this chapter overlap in the single word *play*.

Barthes's comparison of writing and reading to musical performance summons a sense of improvisation that is simultaneously helpful and misleading in thinking about *Kora in Hell*. It is tempting to liken William's improvisations to jazz, the art form with which improvisation is perhaps most commonly associated and one with which Williams was fairly familiar (see, for instance, poem XVII in *Spring and All*), and indeed, jazz improvisation does offer a helpful way of thinking about the simultaneous convergence and divergence of writer and reader in or upon the text of *Kora in Hell*. In collaborative musical improvisation, the players are both autonomous and involved with one another, each doing his or her own thing, but doing them together. While discussing the experience of playing in Thelonious Monk's band, the saxophonist Steve Lacy succinctly describes this aspect of jazz improvisation: "when we were playing together sometimes he would play something on the piano and I would pick that up and play that on my horn. I thought I was being slick, you know? And he stopped me, and he said, 'Don't do that…I'm the piano player, you play your part. I'm accompanying you. Don't pick up on my things.'"[27] Monk is both guarding his own territory and

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[26] Ibid., 62-63.

[27] Quoted in William Day, "Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," 100. Original interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, WHYY-FM, November 20, 1997. Day's article makes a compelling case for thinking

provoking Lacy to strike out in his own direction, to explore new territory. They're held in proximity to one another by the contours of the song they're playing, but the charts leave spacious gaps for the players to fill. The vitality of collective improvisation comes from this loose coordination of heterogeneous energies. Barthes would say that, together, they "produce the Text, play it, release it, *make it go*."[28] We might think, then, of Williams as Monk and ourselves as Lacy, simultaneously listening (or reading) and spinning out our own riffs.

But while the Lacy-Monk exchange nicely articulates the divergent collaboration apt to reading *Kora in Hell*, the analogy is complicated by the extremity of Williams's improvisational practice. Most jazz improvisation is structured by conventions such as standard tunes, shared harmonic vocabularies, and familiar riffs. Improvisers vary, diverge from, and return to these conventional structures; the persistence of convention underwrites the coherence and intelligibility of their performance.[29] Williams's improvisations, however, seem to eschew convention altogether. There are no charts for *Kora in Hell*. Gerald Bruns vividly captures just this unconventional quality of Williams's written improvisation: "The unpredictability of improvisational discourse means exactly that the improvisator is hard or impossible to follow: we cannot get a line on him, because his lines do not proceed or follow from one another in linear or generic fashion: we cannot see where he is going, cannot anticipate his turns, and are literally left standing there, unreading, as he disappears

about jazz improvisation as akin to the moral perfectionism Stanley Cavell articulates by way of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Day focuses on Emerson's texts seek to inspire originality instead of imitation in his readers by turning them out to realize their own "genius." Cavell calls this gesture "aversive thinking"; see "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche." My account of Williams here is indebted to both Cavell and Day.

[28] Barthes, "From Work to Text," in *The Rustle of Language*, 63.

[29] There is an extensive body of literature on the role conventionality and communication in jazz performance. Musicologist Ingrid Monson's *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* is the definitive study; see especially Chapter Three, "Music, Language, and Cultural Styles: Improvisation as Conversation." The philosopher Philip Alperson has written several valuable articles on the relationship between spontaneity and conventional constraints; see "On Musical Improvisation" and "A Topography of Improvisation." While he does not apply it to jazz music in particular, Gilbert Ryle's definition of improvisation as a "union of Ad Hockery and know-how remains influential in improvisation theory; see his essay "Improvisation."

into the page."[30] As Bruns goes on to explain, Williams's paragraphs "avert" familiar generic or formal conventions, constantly seeming to turn away toward something—anything—else.[31] Like his son's tunes, Williams's paragraphs "*follow no scale, no rhythm—alone the mood in odd ramblings up and down, over and over with a rigor of imagination that rises beyond the power to follow except in some more obvious flight.*" I want to suggest, however, that it's precisely in these moments of aversion, these passages where we seem confounded in our reading, that Williams *appears* most insistently.

In listening or watching conventional improvisation, what impresses us is the player's performance of technique—her skill with her instrument, her surprising and resourceful ways of manipulating familiar melodies, progression, or riffs. We encounter her mastery. But with *Kora in Hell*, in the absence of convention or anything like a disciplined technique, all that's left for us to encounter is performer's sheer presence, his raw capacity for imaginative transformations, even if they remain unintelligible to us. In the improvisations, we encounter Williams's unmastered, childish performance of himself, which is by turns exhilarating, tedious, delightful, and repellant. Improvisational performance often brings both players and audience members to the brink of embarrassment (or over it) because failure seems so possible, and in failure the performing self becomes too visible, too present. Williams's improvising son, however, is unabashedly unintelligible; he's so absorbed that he's not performing, or doesn't know that he's performing. He's alone among others, simultaneously communicating and not communicating. He doesn't care if his family likes the show. He's just doing his thing, "putting himself out there," take him or leave him. The frequent embarrassment of reading *Kora in Hell*—the feeling that we're getting "too much" Williams—seems inevitable if the poet aspires to this childish mode. We can take it or leave it. We can play along with

[30] Bruns, "Da Improvisatore," 68.

[31] While such later free jazz players such as Ornette Coleman or Albert Ayler might perform this kind of radical improvisation, for Monk and certainly for the early jazz musicians Williams would have heard, intelligible and successful improvisation always maintained some relation—however stretched or skewed—to familiar generic markers, melodies, and chord progressions. The "standard" tune persisted as the basis of improvisation.

him, or away from him, just at those moments when he becomes unreadable, or we might just as soon close the book and go about our own business, play at something else. *Kora in Hell* thus proposes a mode of engagement that's more heterogeneous even than Monk's improvisations. The activity of reading becomes a sort of minimum coordination, something like a schoolyard in which a diversity of children play in varying degrees of proximity to one another.

The challenge of coordinating an array of particulars without negating the differences between them animates Williams's imagination throughout his career, from the barely contained heterogeneity of the improvisations to the multifarious collage of *Paterson*. In *Kora in Hell*, this is a question not only of the particular persons of the writer and his readers, but also of particular things, words, and images within the text itself. In both cases, Williams figures this challenging coordination as a "dance," a word that repeats again and again in the improvisations and reappears prominently in later poems such "The Dance" and in the final lines of *Paterson* V: "We know nothing and can know nothing / but / the dance, to dance to a measure / contrapuntally, / Satyrically, the tragic foot."[32] Early and late, Williams proposes the dance as an alternative to rational intellection as our primary mode of engagement with both the text and the world around us. By replacing "knowing" with "dancing," he emphasizes mobility and physicality over certainty and conceptual abstraction, and this shift asks that the reader adjust his or her approach to the text. In the prologue to the 1920 edition, Williams writes:

> The instability of these improvisations would seem such that they must inevitably crumble under the attention and become particles of a wind that falters. It would appear to the unready that the fiber of the thing is a thin jelly. It would be these same fools who would deny tough cords to the wind because they cannot split a storm endwise and wrap it upon spools. The virtue of strength lies not in the grossness of the fiber but in the fiber itself. Thus a poem is tough by no quality it borrows from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being. (16-7)

[32] Williams, *Paterson*, 236.

Here Williams simultaneously admits a fault and recasts faultiness as fullness. He acknowledges that the improvisations will not stand up to careful interpretation—they "crumble under the attention"—but while his writing might seem incoherent or insubstantial to the "unready" because it does not satisfy familiar hermeneutic expectations, truly imaginative readers will be willing to dance, not to decode, to move energetically among disparate elements made contiguous but not assimilated by the poem. In implicitly distinguishing the uninitiated from the initiated, Williams participates in the characteristically modernist valorization of difficulty, but in a peculiar way: rather than require extensive learning or hermeneutic persistence, he is effectively saying, "Just roll with it." Stephen Fredman usefully distinguishes the difficulty of *Kora in Hell* from that of other modernist classics: "The clarification of allusion and intentions beneath the surface has materially aided our reading of *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, and *Ulysses*, but *Kora in Hell* asks for a reading that pays particular attention to its transitory surface, to the ways words and things appear and are linked in the moment of its writing."[33] The challenge, then, is not to gain mastery but to give up seeking it. Williams is trying to imagine the poem as a whole—"a full being"—that does not reduce its "broken" parts to a unity. Most interpretative practices aspire to unity of one sort or another, which is achieved by subordinating all details of a poem to overarching formal, thematic, historical, or theoretical patterns. The challenge of *Kora in Hell* is to participate in the "being" of the poem while foregoing interpretative subordination—to let the mess of a poem be a mess. Of course, as this chapter itself demonstrates, it is difficult if not impossible not to interpret at all, so perhaps what we're after is incomplete interpretation—or a more playful indulgence in the fact that interpretation is always incomplete. The obliqueness of Williams's own interpretations of his improvisations might be

[33] Fredman, *Poet's Prose*, 17.

exemplary in this regard: they make glancing contact with the improvisations but then shoot off in multiple directions of their own.[34]

Two pages later Williams elaborates the figure of the dance, explaining that he prefers juxtaposition to "the coining of similes": "this loose linking of one thing with another has effects of a destructive power little to be guessed at: all manner of things are thrown out of key so that it approaches the impossible to arrive at an understanding of anything. All is confusion, yet it comes from a hidden desire to dance, a lust of the imagination, a will to accord two instruments in a duet" (19). Like Monk and Lacy, musicians playing a duet are "loosely linked": while they play together, each plays his own part. Williams links disparate things and rhetorical gestures loosely enough that they can do their own thing within the minimum "accord" provided by the ongoingness of improvisation and the book's formal arrangement of numbered paragraphs. With the image of the duet, the compositional logic of the text—"loose linking"—merges with the logic of the writer-reader relation: he does his thing, and I do mine—proximate to but divergent from him. John Dewey's seminal *Art as Experience*, which anticipates Barthes in "decanting" the artwork from its objecthood into activity, is helpful in articulating this displaced collaboration: "For to perceive, a beholder must *create* his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent. They are not the same in any literal sense."[35] Comparable but not the same—writing and reading remain private activities, but Williams and I can imagine performing them together. As reading shifts from interpretation to mutual improvisation of

[34] John Beck considers this coordination of multiple "broken things" within a "full being" in an insightful discussion of what he frames as Williams's embrace of a "mongrel plurality." Beck sees this aspect of Williams's poetics in the context of a broader philosophical and practical problem for American liberalism in the early 20th century, one also taken up by John Dewey: how can diverse individuals be joined in the single society without muting the differences among them? See Beck's *Writing the Radical Center: Williams Carlos Williams, John Dewey, and American Cultural Politics*, especially pages 27-34.

[35] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 56.

"the dance," understanding is refigured not as rational exchange but as a quasi-physical movement in which imaginations come into contact but retain their particularity.[36]

It has been tempting for critics to seek lucidity in the seeming darkness of *Kora in Hell* by imposing hermeneutic coherence upon it, as if to secure its place in the modernist canon by showing that it meets certain New Critical criteria.[37] Williams's earliest readers, however, were more willing to indulge his incoherence, perhaps even to dance with him. Ezra Pound, in the letter Williams quotes in his prologue, pays his friend an ambiguous compliment: "The thing that saves your work is opacity, and don't you forget it" (11). In her *Poetry* review, Helen Birch-Bartlett writes, "Just why these 'Improvisations' are likeable is difficult to say…William Carlos Williams leads us gently, not always gently, to nowhere in particular…Even after but half a reading it has been possible to go on about this book rather eagerly, and that in itself is almost an introduction to its strong personality.[38] (Another, less patient reader might find the personality to be altogether *too* strong, too much on

[36] R. Keith Sawyer also links Dewey's emphasis on the collaborative production of artistic experience with improvisational performance in his article "Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity." See especially page 156.

[37] Indeed some critics have tried to demonstrate the improvisations do not in fact "crumble under the attention," and that they are governed by a total structure that produces shareable meanings. Ron Loewinsohn, for instance, maintains that the "improvisations only *seem* anarchic. Almost all of them yield to analysis…The notion that the artist can discover an order in what appear to be a broken mess makes the Improvisations possible, and that notion is in turn based on a faith that when you let go of all the orderly landmarks that compose your world into categories like 'art' or 'hardware,' when you lose your bearings, a discoverable order remains" ("'Fools Have Big Wombs,'" 223-24). More recently, Mitchum Huehls identifies *Kora in Hell* as a philosophically-grounded program that succeeds in renovating our relations to language and things of the world: "Williams' way of seeing implies a unique phenomenological and ontological conception of the object being perceived and further necessitates a unique form of language that allows for the sufficient articulation of the thing being perceived" ("Reconceiving Perceiving," 57-58). Both Loewinsohn and Huehls seek to authorize *Kora in Hell* by showing that, if one looks hard enough, the improvisations yield to essentially New Critical conventions of literary interpretation, and their articles show just how possible it is to perform such interpretive work. For them, the book has "a point"; it replaces the given order of things with another, more authentic order. I would suggest that Marjorie Perloff's treatment of *Kora* and Williams's other early-20s writings undertakes a similar project of validation, even though she understands her valorization of "indeterminacy" as a corrective to New Critical norms; Perloff uses essentially New Critical tools to make the case that Williams pursues a "defamiliarizing" formal design. See "'Lines Converging and Crossing,'" in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, especially pages 115-22. What Loewinsohn and Huehls cannot account for is the way the improvisations continually subvert and exceed orderly interpretation; what Perloff does not account for is the book's more "determinate" passages seem not to fit into a reliably defamiliarizing "design." All three remind us how interpretation often requires omission and suppression of certain details. I would argue that the improvisations *are* anarchic, and deliberately left so.

[38] Birch-Bartlett, "On Williams' 'Colossally Nice Simplicity,'" 330-32.

display.) And Williams's friend Robert McAlmon, in his April 1921 letter to *Poetry*, praises the book precisely in terms of its incoherence: "It is incoherent and unintelligible to those people with lethargy of their sensing organs. They look for the order and neatness of precise, developed thought. It is not there. *Kora in Hell* is accepted as a portrait of Williams' consciousness—a sort of retouched photograph."[39] What's striking in both Birch-Bartlett's and McAlmon's comments is their linking of the text's aimlessness and incoherence with "its strong personality," the "consciousness" of its author so strongly impressed upon its pages. The text's disorder, they seem to suggest, serves as Williams's signature, the mark of his presence; while not exactly autobiographical, *Kora in Hell* is at least autographic. It's a discontinuous signature, riddled with those gaps that invite us into its gestures. A strong personality, perhaps, but also a porous one.[40]

McAlmon's comment about the "lethargy" of certain readers' "sensing organs" echoes Williams's assertion that to the "unready" the improvisations will seem bound only by "a thin jelly," distinguishing them from those whose imaginations are vigorous enough to dance. McAlmon goes on to elaborate what *Kora in Hell* offers to these readier readers:

> For those who wish poetry to create some sublime beauty, which to others grows irksome since it is necessary to turn from its sublimity to the reality of existence, William Carlos Williams' *Kora in Hell* will mean little. To those however who rather like to have the record of somebody else's conscious states by which to check their own, with which to respond and commune, it will mean a great deal. The writer, not caring for literature as literature, not knowing what function it performs in life other than that of a mental decoration if it does not get into, reveal, and sensitize people to, new experience; believes, however, that no book previously produced in this country has been so keenly, vividly aware of age conceptions, qualities, colors, noises, and philosophies as *Kora in Hell*. It is a break-away from poetry written by poets who set out to be poets. It is an adventurous exploration.[41]

[39] McAlmon, "Concerning 'Kora in Hell,'" 57-58.

[40] For a longer discussion of personality in *Kora in Hell* and a comparison of Williams's and Eliot's ideas about poetic impersonality, see my essay "Private Avowal, Public Front: Reading Williams's *Kora in Hell*."

[41] Ibid., 59.

McAlmon re-imagines reading with an odd trio of verbs: *check*, *respond*, and *commune*. Taken together they suggest that reading the improvisations induces an ambivalent sort of intimacy. I've already performed and reflected upon some ways I or we might respond to Williams's "conscious states" as we find them recorded in *Kora in Hell*. But what would it mean to both *commune* with Williams and to *check* ourselves against him? Again we're given an image of proximity and difference: that we might *commune* suggests direct, unmediated contact between my consciousness and Williams's, but that I *check* my consciousness against his suggests that I also restrain myself, that I pull up short of identification.[42] That my conscious states and his are comparable, but not the same. According to McAlmon, this encounter with Williams's incoherence—his fundamental difference from me—is quickening for those who can accept it. The comparison will "sensitize" my imagination anew to the heterogeneous array of "conceptions, qualities, colors, noises, and philosophies" out in "the reality of existence" beyond the text, as though by checking myself, by bumping up against Williams, I am deflected back out into my own day's affairs.

Another comment of McAlmon's brings us back around to Winnicott and the idea of a "primitive" or "core" self. He writes that "[Williams] is not distinctly located to himself—it's a 'Should I, or shouldn't I, and what if I don't?' It's a conscientious sensitive mind, or life organism; trained in childhood to staid and tried acceptances and moralities, trying to be open, and to think, sense, or leap to a footing which more acceptably justifies the life-process than any of the traditional footings seem to."[43] McAlmon suggests that the improvisations are an attempt to return to the most primitive stage of mental life, the experience of childhood before the child has been fully inducted into the social life of family and school, before he has assumed the habits of compliance sociality entails. The poet seeks a radical reduction to the most basic organismic receptivity, which is

[42] Thanks to Sam Rowe for pointing out this sense of "check" to me.
[43] Ibid., 58.

characterized as a sort of open quandariness—"Should I, or shouldn't I…"—before the contours of personal identity have become distinct. Here McAlmon's account of *Kora in Hell* seems deeply attuned to the aspiration Williams expresses by comparing himself to his little son, and to the ideas of "potential space" and play that Winnicott elaborates several decades later. While the poet's boy is already of school age, his father depicts him as still able to dwell in this open, in-between space. He mingles the creations of his own imagination with "the day's poor little happenings," seemingly without a strong sense of his distinctness from his environment or any particular concern from the "tried acceptances" of adult communication that would allow him to be easily understood by his family. As McAlmon describes it, the improvisations seem to be less a book of poems or poetic prose than a graph of therapeutic practice—not, as he puts it "literature as literature," but something that might "get into, reveal, and sensitize people to, new experience." Taken together, his comments imply that *new* experience might in fact be the *old* experience of childhood openness and flexibility so often lost in the process of growing up. An adult who can dance or play—for instance in art or sport—returns regularly the state of primary unintegration, that healthy insanity in which self and world mingle and differentiate in varying rhythms and proportions. The dance into which Williams invites his readers thus appears to be an example of what Winnicott would call the "creative apperception… that makes the individual feel that life is worth living."[44] In asking us to join him in improvisation, Williams is inviting us to become again our most primitive selves.

•

In calling us back to the basic, naturalized aesthetic experiences of childhood, Williams might look more like a Romantic poet than a vanguard modernist. Yet the child he imagines is less a father to the man than an unruly challenge to the man's sense of right order. Rather than examples of Schillerian noble play that might habituate one for a well-adjusted adult life, Williams's

[44] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 87.

phantasmagoria are better understood as impetuous assertions of imaginative autonomy from the adult world. The receptive unintegration and privacy they induce might actually disturb rather than inspire a well-ordered aesthetic republic. Here it's helpful to put Williams in dialogue with Walter Benjamin, another modernist who is particularly alert to the semi-autonomous region of children's play. Both find children's imaginative arrangements to be decidedly foreign to the adult world. Recall Benjamin's description of the way children scavenge and reconfigure the "detritus" of everyday adult life: "In using these things, they do not so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship. Children thus produce their own small world of things within the greater one."[45] Benjamin's account of children's play brings out its essentially improvised quality—not only its spontaneity but also its willingness to take up whatever is ready to hand. Like the children Benjamin describes, Williams is distinctively interested in the "detritus" of everyday life—whether the pots and pans of XXII.2 or the glass shards glimpsed in the later short poem "Between Walls." Children will entertain themselves with what's available, and as Williams writes in improvisation XX.3, "*A poem can be made of anything*" (70). Like Benjamin's "artifact produced in play," the improvised texts of *Kora in Hell* present a heterogeneous array of observed things, bits of speech, sudden soliloquies, and tiny narratives, joined, as Williams writes, "by no quality [they] borrow from a logical recital of events nor from the events themselves but solely from that attenuated power which draws perhaps many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being." Both Benjamin and Williams depict play is a sort of intuitive enchantment that momentarily reconfigures the ordinary things it seizes upon, imaginatively making a miniature world within the given world. Insofar as they are composed according to non-adult logics, these provisional miniature worlds threaten (however gently) the coherence of grown-up norms. The adult's task, Benjamin writes, is "to provide a world order," but

[45] Benjamin, "Old, Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 408.

children are concerned with "pure receptivity"—and in their receptivity, children won't hesitate to make a mess of the adult world.[46]

In contrasting modernist and Romantic modes of childlikeness, however, I want to be careful not to fall into a reductive binary. While it's fair to say that there's a Romantic tendency to hold up the Child as a figure of spiritual innocence and imaginative purity unsullied by worldly experience, we can also find within classic Romantic poems a nascent modernist child making trouble for grown-ups and their logic. This childish negativity is nowhere more evident than in Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," where a friendly encounter between a curious adult and a resolutely "simple" child becomes a protracted conflict between radically different worldviews. In turning to this well-known, oft-studied poem, I want to emphasize its tediousness and the embarrassment it can induce. It's precisely in these qualities, which are varieties of badness, that Wordsworth's poem most vividly discloses the disordering capacity of a child's view. The poem begins innocuously enough:

> A simple child, dear brother Jim,
> That lightly draws its breath,
> And feels its life in every limb,
> What should it know of death?
>
> I met a little cottage girl,
> She was eight years old, she said;
> Her hair was thick with many a curl
> That cluster'd round her head.
>
> She had a rustic, woodland air,
> And she was wildly clad;
> Her eyes were fair, and very fair;

[46] Benjamin, "A Child's View of Color," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*., 51. I call these imaginative worlds "semi-autonomous" because rather than transcend the adult world, they exist within it. The improvisations, like children's play, rely upon their materials and remain somehow attached to them. They don't lift the poet or the reader clear of the given world, but they make its parts newly mobile and open to manipulation. Toward the end of *Kora in Hell*, in improvisation XXVII.2, Williams writes that "There is no thing that with the twist of the imagination cannot be something else," and it's worth entertaining the possibility that imaginative transformations sometimes do make actual transformations newly possible (81).

—Her beauty made me glad.[47]

In these opening stanzas we can recognize an ideal child—simple, light, rustic, fair, beautiful, perfectly and easily alive in her body. She lightens the passing adult's heart. The child's innocence is implied by a slightly ominous question—"What should it know of death?"—which at first seems to be a rhetorical one. The implicit answer: "Why, the little one should know nothing of death." As the poem progresses, however, the child's seeming ignorance of death becomes more troubling for the adult:

"Sisters and brothers, little maid,
How many may you be?"
"How many? Seven in all," she said,
And wondering looked at me.

"And where are they, I pray you tell."
She answered, "Seven are we;
And two of us at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea.

"Two of us in the church-yard lie,
My sister and my brother;
And in the church-yard cottage, I
Dwell near them with my mother."

"You say that two at Conway dwell,
And two are gone to sea,
Yet ye are seven; I pray you tell,
Sweet Maid, how this may be?"

Then did the little Maid reply,
"Seven boys and girls are we;
Two of us in the church-yard lie,
Beneath the church-yard tree."

"You run about, my little maid,
Your limbs they are alive;
If two are in the church-yard laid,
Then ye are only five."[48]

[47] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 100.
[48] Ibid., 100-1.

The trouble begins with the adult's simple question: how many brothers and sisters do you have? The child's answer makes it clear that she really does know nothing of death, not, at least, according to the terms of the adult's question. While she is keenly observant of geographic or spatial configurations of bodies, the basic categorical distinction between the quick and dead seems simply not to register for her. She arranges her family by a logic of literal proximity; her dead sister and brother in the church-yard seem even closer to her and her mother than the two who have gone to sea. Likewise, her logic of proximity simply does not register for the adult, who takes for granted the distinction between living and dead bodies, and for whom only the living count. He can only reiterate his question in exactly the same terms, even after the girl elaborates her world:

> "Their graves are green, they may be seen,"
> The little Maid replied,
> "Twelve steps or more from my mother's door,
> And they are side by side.
>
> "My stockings there I often knit,
> My 'kerchief there I hem;
> And there upon the ground I sit—
> I sit and sing to them.
>
> And often after sunset, Sir,
> When it is light and fair,
> I take my little porringer,
> And eat my supper there.
>
> The first that died was sister Jane;
> In bed she moaning lay,
> Till God released her of her pain,
> And then she went away.
>
> So in the church-yard she was laid,
> And, when the grass was dry,
> Together round her grave we played,
> My brother John and I.
>
> And when the ground was white with snow,
> And I could run and slide,
> My brother John was forced to go,
> And he lies by her side."

"How many are you, then," said I,
"If they two are in Heaven?"
Quick was the little Maid's reply,
"O Master! we are seven."

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"[49]

By this point the poem has extravagantly devolved into a performance of mutual stupidity. All the child can do is reiterate her logic of proximity, counting out the distance between her doorstep and her siblings' graves and describing how they are still physically present in her daily routine. What counts for her is their visibility: their graves "may be seen." (She does express some understanding of death when she describes her sister's and brother's "going away," but this is not the decisive fact for her.) The child's childlikeness—her absorption in her own world, her imperviousness to adult conventions—is disclosed in her lengthy insistence. In response to the adult's obtuse questioning, she is unabashedly herself. Like a child, she goes on a little too long. And the adult, more embarrassingly, is locked inside his own adult mind, but his tediousness serves Wordsworth's disclosure of childhood: as he insists on his mature logic, the child becomes more resolutely a child. The poem ends at an impasse: "'Twas throwing words away."

While its mode and style are decidedly not modernist, Wordsworth's poem is as attuned as Williams's improvisations are to the disruptive potential of a child's imaginative logic. Like Williams's paragraph about his son's phantasmagoria, "We Are Seven" offers a sort of meta-commentary on the challenging encounter between adults and imaginative children. While Williams indulges his son's nonsense, Wordsworth's adult tries and fails to make the child conform to his logic. But Williams's relation to his son is agonistic in another way: he turns it into a competition,

[49] Ibid., 101-2.

with *Kora in Hell* as an attempt to match or outdo his son's improvisations. Instead of correcting the boy, the father wants to assume the child's logic as his own poetic logic. While Williams eventually abandons the extravagant, Dadaist childishness of the improvisations, he never stops paying attention to children and their play, and decades later, as an old man writing in a seemingly different style, he again adopts a naïve mode. "*My little son's improvisations exceed mine*," he wrote in 1919, and in 1955, he enters into an imaginative contest with his grandson in much the same spirit. Consider "The Turtle," dedicated to his grandson, one of the last poems in Williams's last volume, *Pictures from Brueghel*:

> Not because of his eyes,
> the eyes of a bird,
> but because he is beaked,
> birdlike, to do an injury,
> has the turtle attracted you.
> He is your only pet.
> When we are together
> you talk of nothing else
> ascribing all sorts
> of murderous motives
> to his least action.
> You ask me
> to write a poem,
> should I have poems to write,
> about a turtle.[50]

The boy's imagination may be naïve, but it is not innocent. Seizing upon a single feature of his pet's anatomy while disregarding any other, he projects a counterfactual life for the turtle, one of aggression and violence. The boy's fascination, not with the turtle itself but with his fiction of turtle-life, dominates conversation with his grandfather. This imaginative single-mindedness and egoism recalls Williams's son's constant and unselfconscious reveries—behavior recognizable to anyone who has spent enough time with young children. As his son's improvisations did thirty-five years

[50] Williams, *The Collected Poems, Vol. 2*, 432.

earlier, his grandson's speculative riffs spur the poet's own, only this time the child makes an explicit request that the adult take up his imaginative mode.

Williams fulfills the request, not only writing about a turtle but also imagining it just the way his grandson will appreciate, as a violent conqueror. We might wonder if the boy would even recognize a peaceful turtle as a turtle at all. The poem first asks that we, and by implication the boy, pay attention to the turtle's actual eyes, but it quickly becomes a phantasmagoria:

> The turtle lives in the mud,
> but is not mud-like,
> you can tell it by his eyes
> which are clear.
> When he shall escape
> his present confinement
> he will stride about the world
> destroying all
> with his sharp beak.
> Whatever opposes him
> in the streets of the city
> shall go down.
> Cars will be overturned.
> And upon his back
> shall ride,
> to his conquests,
> my Lord,
> you![51]

This grandfather contrasts brightly with the obtusely sane adult of Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," who was so unable or unwilling to enter the child's world. Williams seems almost to be showing off his capacity for play, extravagantly transforming the turtle into just the sort of Godzilla his grandson hopes for, a monster subject only to the boy's own mastery. But with a suddenness worthy of *Kora in Hell*, the scene of turtle-induced chaos rapidly shifts, and the conqueror becomes "an altogether different animal," as Mark Payne puts it in his generative reading of the poem.[52]

> You shall be master!
> In the beginning

[51] Ibid.
[52] Payne, *The Animal Part*, 55.

there was a great tortoise
who supported the world.
Upon him
all ultimately
rests.
Without him
nothing will stand.
He is all wise
and can outrun the hare.
In the night
his eyes carry him
to unknown places.
He is your friend.[53]

There is no turtle that with the twist of the imagination cannot be something else. This new animal is, as Payne writes, "a composite figure," a collection of seemingly incompatible attributes: a Turtle Island present at Genesis, solid as rock yet quicker than the hare.[54] This mercurial creature can exist only in the imagination. Perhaps hoping the boy was hooked by the turtle's violent entrance and now might be willing to follow him in another direction, Williams offers the turtle not as a conquering destroyer but as a wise and reassuring companion. His vision is exemplary for poet and child alike: "In the night / his eyes carry him / to unknown places." In this late poem, Williams escapes the impasse of adulthood by following his grandson's lead, just as he escaped winter and emerged into spring by following his son's lead in 1918. While he eventually abandoned the early wild childishness of the improvisations, preferring in the end the lucidity of "The Turtle" to *Kora in Hell*'s more experimental "dislocation of sense," he remained juvenile to the last. Early and late, Williams's writing extends an invitation to play. In doing so, he risks embarrassing himself and embarrassing us. *Kora in Hell* "reveals myself to me," he wrote, "and perhaps that is why I have kept it to myself." But he never really did keep it to himself; children tend to be less inhibited than adults. He challenges us to reveal our non-communicating selves, to do our own things. Can we be, in our

[53] Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 2*., 433.
[54] Ibid., 56.

reading, become as uninhibited as Williams is in writing? Do we want to? Perhaps we are too bored, disgusted, or confused by *Kora in Hell* to join in. Will we try to wring sense out of Williams, or will we play along? Or will we simply close the book? It might be impossible for us *not* to reveal ourselves, whichever way we respond.

CHAPTER TWO

GERTRUDE STEIN'S SECOND CHILDHOOD

Consider Gertrude Stein's "A Sound," found toward the end of "Objects," the first section of her 1914 book *Tender Buttons*:

> Elephant beaten with candy and little pops and chews all bolts and reckless reckless rats, this is this.[1]

What can we make of this sentence-like collection of words, which according to Stein's categories is a poem? Its elephant and reckless rats could belong to a fable or a nursery rhyme; the silliness of an elephant beaten with candy could spring from the funny pages or a child's antic imagination. We might notice that "pops," "chews," and "bolts" all could be either nouns or verbs, and that this particular configuration makes its hard to determine their parts of speech and their relation to one another, an ambiguity that simultaneously conjures frenetic motion and arrests it in thing-like solidity. We might notice that the one clear verb, "is," also holds still in tautology. We might notice the words' sonic liveliness, their interplay of popping bilabial and dental stops (*t*, *p*, *b*) and hissing fricatives (all those *s*'s). We might take these effects to be mere coincidence, or we might take them to be a carefully wrought demonstration of "A Sound." We might call all this nonsense; we might call it playful. Will we accept "A Sound" as poetry, and how long will we indulge this sort of writing? We might dismiss it as childish, or we might enjoy it as childlike.

[1] Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 28. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *TB*.

Indeed, it has been a critical commonplace to compare Gertrude Stein to a child for over a century. As recently as 2011, the headline of a review of Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts* calls the opera "silly" and "naïve," and the review itself begins: "'Four Saints in Three Acts,' the cloying little theatrical concoction by composer Virgil Thomson and librettist Gertrude Stein, is the grade-school pageant of the operatic repertoire. You don't so much attend to it—at least not if you're an adult—as pat it on the head, coo indulgently and wait for it to be over already. The production…was as cute and chuckle-headed as anyone could ask."[2] As early as 1914, one review compares *Tender Buttons* to a series of games and other decidedly non-literary activities: "Do you remember the game (if your memory goes that far back) when everybody sat around in a circle, and each one wrote down a word, and when all the words were read in a sequence, the results were often screamingly funny? That was when you were young."[3] Written a century apart, these reviews share a tone of slightly amused, condescending indulgence. Gertrude Stein, they suggest, is not to be taken seriously. Whether one finds her work boring or entertaining, such nonsense surely does not reward serious, adult attention. At best, one might forebear or play along knowingly. These reviews, which represent a prevalent critical attitude toward Stein, cast her as a child who has somehow found her way to the grown-up table, or perhaps a grown-up pretending to be a child.

In both reviews the comparison of Stein to a child suggests that she is slightly stupid, or "chuckle-headed," a view that jibes with Leo Stein's well-known estimation of his younger sister: "Gertrude and I are just the contrary. She's basically stupid and I'm basically intelligent."[4] It would seem that her whimsical language is devoid of ideas. "The way to make a word-salad," writes the anonymous reviewer of *Tender Buttons*, "is to sit in a dark room, preferably between the silent and mystic hours of midnight and dawn, and let the moving fingers write whatever comes. The idea is

[2] Kosman, review of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, *SFGate*, August 23, 2011.
[3] Unsigned review of *Tender Buttons*, *New York City Call*, June 17, 1914, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 16.
[4] Leo Stein, *Journey into the Self*, 149.

not to think. Thinking would be ruinous. So this is how Miss Stein works, and we have some results in *Tender Buttons*."[5] This projection of Stein at work is ambivalent in the way that so many critical assessments of her are: it emphasizes the seeming vacuity of her language while also implying that there's a certain discipline to it. Stein has made a method of her childishness, this review suggests, in the way surrealists later would make a method of automatism. As we will see, some critics think that Stein's cultivation of childishness (or stupidity) is an act of fraud while others think it is the work of genius. Already in 1926, an anonymous review of *The Making of Americans* begins: "She has been a conundrum to the literary world for a quarter of a century. Are her novels childish babble or works of genius? The answers are conflicting."[6] As the 2011 review of *Four Saints* shows, the opinion that Stein's writing is mere babble persists today, especially in the popular imagination (to the extent that Stein remains part of that imagination), but the last several decades of academic literary criticism, during which Stein has been elevated to the status of modernist master, seem meanwhile to have answered "genius."[7]

The basic claim of this chapter is that it remains useful to think of Gertrude Stein's work in relation to childhood—not, however, in order to dismiss or belittle her writing. The critics who characterize her writing as childish are picking up on an essential quality of the work, but for the most part they misdirect that initial recognition, sometimes out of meanness, sometimes out of honest bewilderment. In considering early criticism of Stein in relation to Schiller's concept of naïve poetry, I hope to take the recognition of her writing's childishness in a more constructive direction. Schiller can help us entertain the possibility that Stein's "nonsense" discloses some of poetry's most

[5] Unsigned review of *Tender Buttons*, *New York City Call*, June 17, 1914, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 15.
[6] Unsigned review of *The Making of Americans*, *The Literary Digest*, February 6, 1926, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 32.
[7] For representative celebrations of Stein's radical achievement, see especially Perloff, "Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein" in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 67-108; DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing*; and Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*. For a more ambivalent take on what it means for Stein to be considered a genius, see Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky*.

basic qualities even while its self-absorption can seem to exclude us. In the chapter's second section, I demonstrate how Stein's *Tender Buttons* can be usefully understood as a naïve exercise in naming things—an effort to restore the "thrill" of naming experienced by children but lost to adults.[8] In the third and final section, I propose that thinking of Stein as a naïve modernist also helps us think about Stein's work and career more broadly, allowing us to reframe familiar critical accounts of her "unreadability," "indeterminacy," or "autonomy." If we can think of Stein as a child at play or even an idiot—emphasizing not the latter's connotation of imbecility but its root in *ἰδιώτης,* i.e., a "private person" or "person without professional knowledge"—we might begin to understand the considerable obscurities and inconsistencies of her writing as manifestations of a basically self-absorbed focus and intensity.[9] Her pursuit of publication notwithstanding, Stein wrote first for herself. Rather than simply dismissing her work as nonsense or valorizing it as an open call for readerly collaboration, a faithful account of it will describe the ways her writing both invites us in and turns away from us, leaving us to our own devices. It is only natural, I propose, that Stein's naïve modernism thrill us at one moment and leave us bewildered or bored the next.

Before turning to Stein's own writing, I want to investigate further the "conflict" among Stein's early critics, which not only provides a useful sense of her milieu but also brings into focus certain tensions within literary modernism about the relationship between artistic innovation and "ordinary people." For an innovative modernist writer, Stein received considerable attention in the popular press of her day. The tone of that attention ranges from cruel vituperation to breathless praise, but it's helpful to begin by considering two reviews that stake out somewhat more measured positions. The poet and editor Alfred Kreymborg reviewed *Tender Buttons* for *The New York Morning Telegraph* in 1915. As a member of the circle of writers and artists around Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery

[8] Stein, "Poetry and Grammar," in *Writings 1932-1946*, 331. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *PG*.
[9] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd Ed., s.v. "idiot."

291, Kreymborg would have had "insider" knowledge of Stein's work; Stieglitz's *Camera Work* was one of the first periodicals to publish it. For this broadsheet review, however, he adopts a commonsensical everyman persona, opening with an amusing imaginary scenario: a man's wife returns home from a shopping trip wearing an extravagant hat and proceeds to answer her husband's inquiries about her purchases and their dinner by quoting passages from *Tender Buttons*. Hijinks and some frustration ensue. The domestic scene soon settles back down, but with a lovely difference:

> Your connubial relationship has been strengthened by this new excursion into aesthetic adventure-land. Eating is no longer mere eating…There is a new light in what used to be your water glass. There is a light even in the eyes of the stolid cook who brings on the veal, vegetables and dessert—lo, the rhubarb itself shining with unwonted brilliance. And who has done this thing? No less an entity than Gertrude Stein.[10]

Later critics will focus more of the ways Stein's queer or anti-patriarchal imagination of domestic space upsets rather than renews hetero connubial bliss, but Kreymborg's scenario anticipates a basic idea common to much later Stein criticism: her writing defamiliarizes ordinary words and things in order to sharpen and enliven our relationship with them. Kreymborg's tone is hard to pin down, but despite his jokiness there's reason to believe that he's sincere in his characteristic early modernist appreciation of Stein's novelty (and in his pessimism about ordinary life in 1914). "She has given you a new sensation," he writes near the end of the review. "And sensations are so rare, particularly in these days of warfare that you don't want to deny yourself of one. You can always go back to sleep again."[11]

Yet Kreymborg remains agnostic about whether *Tender Buttons* should be considered serious literature. He adopts a cheeky irony in describing Stein's salon and her contacts with Picasso, Matisse, and Mabel Dodge. With similar skepticism—but without real dismay—he wonders aloud

[10] Kreymborg, review of *Tender Buttons*, *New York Morning Telegraph*, March 7, 1915, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 167.
[11] Ibid., 170.

whether or not Stein is having a gas at her readers' expense: "May not the fond lady be playing a joke on the world? Mystification is one of the most delightful, one of the most secretly joyous of pastimes…And why not a new form of hoax as well as a new form of poem, play, novel or painting?"[12] Kreymborg's most trenchant line of questioning comes in response to the idea that Stein's writing approaches the condition of music, which he attributes to her early advocate Carl Van Vechten: "Is music literature?…Where is the subject, where the predicate and where the object? Or has the sentence no object—beyond music?…Is the sentence more than sound? Our six-year-old daughter, Ethera, loves to bang on our piano. Ask her what she is doing and she will invariably say: 'I am making music.' But is it music because she thinks so?"[13] With this comparison to a child, Kreymborg suggests that, if Stein's writing is not a hoax, it might nevertheless not count as literature because it is somehow too self-absorbed, in the manner of a child at play. The con artist would have a fine-tuned awareness of herself and her milieu, but the sincere child simply occupies only her own world. Like Ethera, Stein might lack an accurate understanding of how her "literature" comes across to those around her, and such oblivious language might indeed grow maddening—or just boring. In Kreymborg's view, a possible problem with Stein's writing is that it's too private.

While Kreymborg is content to let his doubt remain an open question, Henry Seidel Canby, in his 1934 review of *Portraits and Prayers*, comes down more decisively. His review begins by asserting his good faith: "I have always tried to read Gertrude Stein since her earliest publications and I have always failed."[14] While her linguistic surfaces—her "smooth rhythms" and "sonorous variants"—afford pleasure, the trouble for Canby is that he can get no semantic purchase on her sentences: "Something childish in me likes the play with words; the adult in me protests against the

[12] Ibid., 169.
[13] Ibid., 169.
[14] Canby, review of *Portraits and Prayers*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, November 17, 1934, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 79.

writing back of language to the primitive or non-human."[15] After lengthy consideration of Stein's possible virtues—not only her unusually "good ear" but also the expressiveness and relative lucidity of some of her earlier writings—Canby can only conclude: "No, this book is not by any definition literature. It is music of a primitive and rather fascinating kind, vitiated by the drag of meaning…This is the art of the mockingbird, sound that means so little as not to matter…This is an insult to the civilization that with incredible labor united, however imperfectly, sound and sense."[16] While Canby is more willing than Kreymborg to grant Stein's prose the status of music, in the end he is far less game for whatever playful novelty it might produce. For him, Stein's regressive childishness must be resisted despite its pleasures: the dignity of civilization depends upon it. Indeed, in Canby's figurative language, Stein's "art" is so primitive that it becomes animal—"the art of the mockingbird"—which implies that it's not properly art at all. In Canby's view, the problem with Stein's writing is that it's too primitive.

Whatever their final judgments, Kreymborg and Canby are at least willing to entertain the possibility that Stein writes in earnest and that her work possesses certain virtues, but many other contemporary critics are unequivocally scornful. These critics tend to equate childishness with idiocy. "She has written a book or so of inconceivably idiotic drivel," writes Richard Burton in a review of *Tender Buttons*, "compared with which the babble of a three-year old child is Hegelian. Her specialty seems to be the throwing together of language absolute meaningless and insulting alike to one's sense of taste and decency."[17] Now Stein's language is even more primitive than a child's, and its presentation as literature verges on obscenity. In Burton's view, Stein is a consummate poseur, and his invective is aimed as much at "pseudo-intellectual" literati and publishers who pay attention to Stein's "silly, stupid maundering" as it is at Stein herself: "really, we have fallen on evil days when

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 81.
[17] Burton, review of *Tender Buttons*, *Minneapolis Bellman*, October 17, 1914, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 163.

she is possible!"[18] Burton sees Stein's success as the symptom of more widespread societal decay. The well-known communist Mike Gold, writing about Stein for *The New Masses* in 1934, likewise interprets Stein as a bellwether of doom. In an article bluntly titled "Gertrude Stein: Literary Idiot," Gold condemns Stein's work as

> an example of the most extreme subjectivism of the contemporary bourgeois artist, and a reflection of the ideological anarchy into which the whole of bourgeois literature has fallen…Gertrude Stein appears to have convinced America that she is a genius. But Marxists refuse to be impressed with her own opinion of herself…The literary idiocy of Gertrude Stein only reflects the madness of the whole system of capitalist values. It is part of the signs of doom that are written largely everywhere on the walls of bourgeois society.[19]

Whereas Burton criticizes Stein for being stupidly primitive (and a poseur to boot), Gold takes her to task for being too private: her work is locked into a selfish bourgeois subjectivism that privileges individual over collective values. Whether or not Gold was aware of the deep etymology of the word "idiot," his critique brings out the now buried Greek sense of an idiot as an inward-facing person, one who is concerned only with his or her own private pursuits, not with collective, or political, life. While Burton takes the position of an upstanding bourgeois citizen who refuses to be taken in by pretentious, even pernicious, bohemian babble, Gold assails the very bourgeois values of which he sees Stein to be the most extreme expression. In their convergence on "idiot" as a term of censure, however, we can begin to see how privacy and primitivism are overlapping problems in Stein's work.[20]

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[18] Ibid., 165.

[19] Gold, "Gertrude Stein: Literary Idiot," *New Masses*, 1934, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 209-11.

[20] Stein was censured from both left and right. Soon after Gold's review appeared in *The New Masses*, John Gould Fletcher reviewed Stein's *Lectures in America* for the culturally and politically reactionary *American Review*. Fletcher recalls Burton when he writes that Stein's lectures have "nothing whatever to do with…anything beyond literature for the nursery…she is clear as to what she like and dislikes and why she likes or dislikes it. But it is clarity achieved by ignoring the necessary relationship between writer and audience, one which emerges not out of skepticism and hesitation, but out of plain blunt straightforward naïve stupidity, a stupidity which may perhaps account for popularity at this moment with many other stupid people in the United States" (Fletcher, review of *Lectures in America*, *American Review*, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 86-7). Fletcher does not accuse Stein of fraudulence or pretense; in his characterization, she seems to be perfectly sincere yet perfectly stupid, and her childish stupidity allies her with the general reading public, of whom Fletcher writes with open contempt. Like Burton, he fears the degenerate effects of any attention paid to Stein, but

Stein, however, was not without her champions in the popular press. Reviewing *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* for *The New York Herald-Tribune* in 1933, the best-selling novelist (and later well-known conservationist) Louis Bromfield praises Stein precisely in terms of her childlike primitivism, which he casts as the mark of visionary subjectivity. Bromfield writes: "Gertrude Stein has an extraordinary power of personality and it is my impression that she has the clearest intelligence I have ever encountered. It is an intelligence which has remained fresh and vigorous since the day of her birth, never having fallen into the weakness and narrowness and limitations of the intellectual."[21] Where other critics finds fault, Bromfield finds virtue. In the context of his review, childhood is a privileged source of intellectual vitality; far from stupidity, her seeming imperviousness to adult intellectualism is her unique genius: "Miss Stein has that peculiar variety of naïveté which is the gift of the gods. It is an innocence which is quite beyond the knowledge of those who are known as sophisticated, but most of them are rather like the very clever children who make better designs in yarn than the other children of the kindergarten class."[22] By comparing contemporary intellectuals to the self-satisfied, clever "little adults" we might remember from school, Bromfield makes a distinction between intellectualism and true intelligence. The intellectualism of those who would reject Stein is too refined, too artificial, too driven by the approval of the relevant authorities (their schoolmasters?). True intelligence, meanwhile, is naïve and natural, characterized by childlike directness. "For thirty years or more, Gertrude Stein has been laboring with words…to create a sense of actuality; that is to say, a sense of absolute reality as of

whereas Burton writes as though public opinion will confirm his judgment as good sense, Fletcher writes as a member of an embattled, enlightened intellectual minority, fending off the barbarians. This shift in tone might correspond with the dramatic rise of Stein's cultural capital in the two decades that separate the two reviews. In 1914, Stein was a bohemian curiosity getting a bit of attention in the papers, but by 1935, after the success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, she was a full-blown celebrity. Civilization may already have been lost. Fletcher and Gold would agree that such popular "idiocy" signals the collapse of contemporary society though their attitudes toward that collapse would likely differ.

[21] Bromfield, review of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *New York Herald Tribune*, September 3, 1933, in Curnett, *Critical Response*, 63.

[22] Ibid., 63-64.

suspension in time. These things, with many others having to with writing, have concerned her since she was child."[23] The persistence of Stein's childhood concerns is clearly a good thing in his view. He depicts her as an essentially Romantic heroine: in touch with the genius and wonder of childhood, untouched by society's more "adult" affectations. This Stein is an inspired amateur, her relations to her world and her language undistorted by literary professionalism.

The popular press was not the only place where these different versions of Stein—the (possibly fraudulent) idiot-child and the naïve genius—came into conflict. She was also a point of controversy in the more rarefied air of modernist writers themselves. Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot were dismissive; William Carlos Williams and Mina Loy were staunch advocates. But it is in the dueling essays of Wyndham Lewis and Laura Riding that the significance of Stein's naïveté comes into clearest focus. In his lengthy treatise *Time and Western Man*, Lewis takes up the idiot-child motif and develops it with characteristic wickedness. In criticizing what he sees as Stein's inability or unwillingness to explain her ideas clearly in "Composition as Explanation," Lewis writes, "she is not so simple at all, although she writes usually so like a child—like a confused, stammering, rather 'soft' (bloated, acromegalic, squinting and spectacled, one can figure it as) child, simple, at least, in spite of maturity. But that is not so; though, strangely enough, she would like to be thought that it is so."[24] Lewis, of course, prefers hard edges, and he could not have foreseen the blindness that would leave him "squinting and spectacled" later in life. Elsewhere he refers to "the spurious child-language of Ms. Stein, cadenced and said twice over in the form of the Hebrew recitative" and calls her "a colossus among the practitioners of infancy; a huge, lowering, dogmatic Child."[25] In just a few pages, Lewis manages to poke fun at Stein's body and to ridicule Jews, bespectacled children, and sufferers of acromegaly, all the while accusing Stein of the utmost fraudulence. According to Lewis, what

[23] Ibid., 65.
[24] Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, 47.
[25] Ibid., 45, 61.

proves her fraudulence is that all her writing—whether fiction, prose, or explanatory lecture—proceeds in the same idiosyncratic style: "that 'explanation' and 'composition' are both done in the same stuttering dialect, you have proof that you are in the presence of a *faux-naif*, not the real article."[26] Lewis's logic seems to be that since Stein is by many other accounts an intelligent adult capable of maintaining standard English syntax, her refusal to step out of character is mere coyness.

Worse still than Stein's simple fraudulence is what Lewis calls her "false 'revolutionary' propagandist *plainmanism*," which he illustrates by comparing passages of Stein's prose to passages from Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, contending that both employ repetition and simple diction to imitate the illiteracy and childish cuteness Lewis seems to think appeal to "primitive mass life."[27] Loos, at least, writes this way to sell books, but he attributes to Stein the more pretentious—and disgusting—desire to be "a *child of the people*."[28] She seems actually to want to identify with "the simplicity, the illiterateness, of the mass-average" of characters such as Melanctha.[29] Lewis will abide no valorization of the weak, the common, or the oppressed. Furthermore, Stein's indulgence in "personal rhythm" and her concern for the subjective experience of "Time" (under the spell of Bergson, according to Lewis), fatally marks her as "romantic," which is Lewis's general pejorative term for "soft" or "excessive" writers.[30] While his politics couldn't be farther from Mike Gold's communism, Lewis, too, charges Stein with a degenerate subjectivism. Lewis's invective, then, draws together two tendencies of a certain (primarily English) wing of modernism: contempt for ordinary people and an insistence on an austere, impersonal aesthetic.

Laura Riding takes modernist poets to task for just this snobbishness and professed classicism in her 1928 essay "T.E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein." Hulme is the

[26] Ibid., 49.
[27] Ibid., 60.
[28] Ibid., 56.
[29] Ibid., 60.
[30] Ibid., 61.

primary name she names, but he serves as a representative for a group of writers that includes Pound, Eliot, and Lewis. Riding begins her essay by discussing the "difficulty" of contemporary poetry and its distance from ordinary contemporary readers. Contemporary poetry, she contends, suffers from excessive professionalization:

> Poetry has been the victim of increasing pressure and isolation. It has been obliged to specialize and over-specialize in itself. It has been narrowed down by the specialization of human time-activities to a point where it seems only another human time-activity, where it becomes, in other words, an art in the most formal interpretation of the word. The poet therefore has forced upon himself the whole burden of criticism of poetry. He has forced upon him a historical consciousness far more acute that that, say, of the travelling bard of the *Beowulf* period or of the professional poet of an imperially or religiously phrased society. Such poets merely met certain demands laid upon them by an environment in which they were generously included. The modernist poet has no such easy social adjustment to make: it is doubtful whether he is included at all in the complicated social pattern. As a result he is more at the service of the public situation of poetry, which is a perilous one, than of his private poetic endowments.[31]

This account of poetry's marginalization, initiated by broad sociocultural shifts and exacerbated by poets' reactive specialization, is by now a familiar one; we regularly find versions of it in criticism of the confluence of aesthetic avant-gardism and academic professionalization in our own period. Riding's critique brings out with particular force the way that historical self-consciousness becomes the poet-critic's burdensome armor. Indeed, Riding finds that poets have grown more concerned with criticism and its policing function than with the writing of poetry: "He must have a scale of good and bad or true and false or lasting and ephemeral; a theory of a tradition of poetry in which successive period-poetries are subjected to historical judgment either favourably or unfavourably, and in which his own poetry-period is carefully adjusted to satisfy the values which the tradition is believed to have evolved."[32] Here Riding's implicit primary targets would seem to be Eliot and Pound, with their insistence on tradition, but her emphasis on judgment and regulation of

[31] Riding, "T.E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein," in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, 52.
[32] Ibid., 53.

contemporary poetry equally describes the novelist-critic Lewis's approach to contemporary writing. These literary professionals, Riding avers, have become entirely public in their orientation, neglecting the "private poetic endowments" with which amateurs and idiots content themselves, and in this outwardness, they have become policemen rather than poets.

Via her reading of Hulme—who wrote considerably more about what poetry ought to be than he wrote poems—Riding depicts a contemporary guild of poet-critics who champion "the absolute," "purity," and "originality" but are embarrassed by ordinary life, ordinary people, and the expressions of "personality" they associate with romanticism. Against the alleged excesses of romanticism, they call for an impersonal, "geometric" and "mathematical" classicism; for Riding, Imagism and Vorticism are perfect examples of this aesthetic.[33] Yet for all these writers' professed disgust with romantic extravagance, Riding finds in their valorization of purity and originality of vision an essential romanticism—a romanticism of which they are ashamed. For her, this shame is at the heart of "classicist" modernism. On one hand, the cohort Riding associates with Hulme wants what she calls a "new barbarism": a language purified of its ordinary usages, stripped of historical and personal baggage, somehow reduced to its "original" material.[34] On the other hand, this cohort is too inhibited by historical self-consciousness and by its attachment to its own rarefied professional superiority to pursue that barbarism far enough to achieve the purity it seeks.[35] These modernists want both to transcend history and to insist on a literary-historical trajectory of which they are the culmination, and according to Riding, they can't have it both ways, at least if they want to be included at all in the contemporary "social pattern"—if they want their work to matter to people.

In Riding's view, the true barbarian—the one who pursues modernist purification to its necessary extreme—is Gertrude Stein. "The barbaric tendency expresses itself in mass," Riding

[33] Ibid., 73-75.
[34] Ibid., 59-65.
[35] Ibid., 66, 78-80.

writes, "the civilized tendency in specialization."[36] Stein makes a method of the very ordinariness—the plain language of the masses—that other modernists reject, but through ordinariness she achieves the aesthetic purity they seek. Riding lauds the very "plainmanism" that Lewis derides. The reigning poet-critics cannot abide her work because it beats them at their own game: "Gertrude Stein's use of words may be looked on as such a purification. Her language is primitive and abstract. It is so primitive, indeed, that criticism has felt obliged to repudiate her work as vulgar romantic barbarism, an expression of the personal crudeness of the mechanical age rather than a refined historical effort to restore a lost absolute."[37] Later in the essay, Riding puts it even more strongly:

> Gertrude Stein, lacking the sophistication of [Eliot and Joyce], refused to be baffled by criticism's haughty coyness…taking everything around her very literally and many things for granted which other have not been naïve enough to take so, she has done what every one else has been ashamed to do. No one but Miss Stein has been willing to be as ordinary, as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric as successful barbarism demands.[38]

Here Riding assimilates the insults leveled at Stein by the likes of Burton, Gold, Fletcher, and Lewis, and turns them into praise. She echoes Bromfield's claim that Stein's naïveté surpasses sophistication, but she adds a corresponding—and damning—critique of the modernist poetry establishment. "The ideal barbaric artist," she writes, "is superior in ordinariness rather than originality."[39] Because Stein seemingly doesn't worry about originality, eschewing as she does the poet-critic's historical self-consciousness, she is able to write what Riding considers to be true poetry, which typically eludes the professionals, who only "in a few rare cases, by a sort of historical

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[36] Ibid., 57.

[37] Ibid., 66. Williams Carlos Williams also praises Stein's pursuit of purity in his essay "The Work of Gertrude Stein": "She has placed writing on a plane where it may deal unhampered with its own affairs, unburdened with scientific and philosophic lumber" (*Imaginations*, 439). And in her poem "Gertrude Stein," Mina Loy credits Stein with isolating a pure element of language, paying tribute to the poet who "crushed / the tonnage / of consciousness / congealed to phrases / to extract / the radium of the word" (*Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 94).

[38] Ibid., 78.

[39] Riding, "T.E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein," in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, 80.

absent-mindedness, happen to write by pure nature, without historical or professional effort."[40] The true poet of any age, Riding implies, is a naïve amateur, like "the traveling bard" of *Beowulf*.

Here in the midst of modernism, then, Laura Riding reprises the categories famously articulated by Schiller in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*. For Schiller, naïve poetry is artless and simple, sentimental poetry artificial and intellectually sophisticated. While the naïve poet is intuitively attuned to his environment and the social pattern of which he is a part, the sentimental poet's relation to his milieu and things of his world is mediated by complex self-consciousness. The sentimental poet writes with a sense of discrepancy between the ideal he can imagine and the actual world he experiences, and between himself and his world. Naïve poetry thus stands in a more direct, imitative relation to particular and concrete reality while sentimental poetry tends toward conceptual abstraction and reflection.[41] As Riding characterizes them, Stein's "barbaric," amateur engagements would align roughly with Schiller's naïve mode, the "civilized," professional poetry of Eliot and his cohort with the sentimental mode. Riding's essay, however, is much more polemical than Schiller's treatise. For Schiller, the naïve and sentimental modes are distinct yet complementary, deriving in earlier periods from historical circumstance and in Schiller's own period from a poet's given temperament and sensibility. Both bring into view an ideal "nature," one by witnessing it directly, the other by bearing witness to our distance from it. Each mode entails its own risks and rewards. According to Schiller, "Every true genius must be naïve or he is no genius," but in his own sentimental age, he finds equal, or perhaps slightly greater, virtue in the sentimental mode, with which he identifies his own work.[42] For Riding, however, naïve or truly barbaric poetry is clearly

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[40] Ibid., 52. In light of Stein's later *Lectures in America* and "What Are Masterpieces and Why Are There So Few of Them," in which Stein repeatedly places herself in a literary-historical context, Riding's characterization would require some revision. My concern here is less the accuracy of these various accounts of Stein and more the motif of naïveté that occurs across them, so I will not undertake that revision, though I can imagine an argument that would turn Fletcher's criticism of Stein's reductive literary history in her *Lectures* into praise, reframing Stein as a naïve historian.

[41] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 204-5.

[42] Ibid., 189.

superior to civilized poetry. While Schiller's sentimental poets always bear witness, either elegiacally or satirically, to the nature they cannot access directly, Riding's professional poets have grown so sentimental that they turn away from nature in embarrassment and shame. If they are to be true poets, she contends, modernists must become naïve again, and Gertrude Stein will lead the way back to that second childhood.

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None of these early commentators looks very closely at particular passages of Stein's texts. In the case of the negative reviewers, this isn't surprising; their charges of childishness imply precisely that her writing is not worth reading closely. But if we do read closely, we find that, despite these critics' negativity, their characterizations of Stein's childishness, barbarism, and naïveté are truer to her writing than they themselves probably understood. Riding comes closest to appreciating the seriousness of Stein's barbarism, but even she does not locate the most interestingly naïve moments in Stein's texts. In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein relates the activity of writing poetry directly to childhood experience of language (though this connection has gone unremarked in most of the many critical considerations of this essay). In one the essay's most quoted lines, she asserts: "So as I say poetry is essentially the discovery, the love, the passion for the name of anything" (*PG*, 329). Here Stein echoes Emerson's remark that "the poet is the *sayer*, the *namer*, and represents *beauty*" to define poetry as an essentially Adamic vocation.[43] But naming is difficult these days, according to Stein, and it has been for some time: "Naturally, and one may say that is what made Walt Whitman naturally that made the change in the form of poetry, that we who had known the names so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them. We that is any human being living has inevitably to feel the thing anything being existing, but the name of that thing of that anything is no longer anything to thrill any one except children" (*PG*, 331). For us adults, the thrill is gone, but for children who are

[43] Emerson, "The Poet," in *Essays*, 219. Italics in the original.

just learning the names of things and trying them out for the first time, the relation between word and world is still lively and passionate. For children, the fundamentals of poetry are still a thrill. Stein might agree with Schiller's claim that encounters with children and "primitive peoples," in all their undiminished "sensitivity to nature," remind us of what we have lost in growing up and which we might aspire to regain.[44]

Like Schiller, Stein sees the relation of contemporary poetry to earlier poetry as homologous to the relation of adults to children. "Think of all that early poetry," she writes, "think of Homer, think of Chaucer, think of the Bible and you will see what I mean you will really realize that they were drunk with nouns, to name to know how to name earth sea and sky and all that was in them was enough to make them live and love in names, and that is what poetry is it is a state of knowing and feeling a name" (*PG*, 328). At first it would seem that Stein is describing an intoxication with the medium of language, but a few paragraphs later, Stein equates names with things themselves: "to discover the names of things, that is not discover the names but discover the things the things to see the things to look at" (*PG*, 329). Taken together, these passages describe a more or less immediate relationship between words and the world. Homer or Chaucer could "live" in names because their language puts them in direct contact with the things they lived among. In this basically Edenic view of language, to name something is to touch it—to know it and to feel it. One imagines that such vital, amorous contact with the elements would indeed be intoxicating. In Schiller's account of naïve poetry, in which Homer also serves as a primary exemplar, sign and signified stand in similarly direct relation. While a sophisticated "scholastic understanding, always in fear of error, hammers its words like its concepts on to the cross of grammar and logic," the "language of genius [which for Schiller is always naïve] springs from thought as by an inner necessity…This manner of expression, where the sign completely disappears in what is signified, and where the language, as it were, leaves naked the

[44] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 182.

thought it expresses…this above all is what people call ingeniousness and esprit in the style of writing."[45] In this case, Schiller is discussing not the relation between concrete things and their names, but the relation between ideas and their names, yet for him the same basic logic defines both cases (Stein: "Of course you all do know that when I speak of naming anything, I include emotions as well as things" (*PG*, 331)). For the naïve poet as for children, there is no boundary between nouns and what they name. Names are thrilling because things are thrilling.

For Stein, then, the "problem of poetry" is the recovery of a lost thrill—or, perhaps more accurately, the discovery of a new thrill. Rather than attempting simply to return to a naively immediate language or to write the way a young child speaks, Stein sees sophisticated formal innovation as a way to revitalize the poet's vocation, which is the naming of things. Once the poet has lost the thrill of direct contact with nature—once she has fallen into sentimentality—she can never return to that original innocence. Her more adult knowledge will not permit it. She can only cultivate a second naïveté—a sentimental naïveté, a modernist naïveté. William Gass captures this paradox in his description of Stein's project: "So we must rid ourselves of the old titles and properties, recover a tutored innocence, and then, fresh as a new-scrubbed Adam, reword the world."[46] Ridding ourselves of the old and scrubbing our language clean—these are familiar modernist goals, and Stein's own description of her Adamic aspirations likewise invokes a modernist rhetoric of rupture: "So as everybody has to be a poet, what was there to do. This that I have just described, the creating it without naming it, was what broke the rigid form of the noun the simple noun poetry which now was broken" (*PG*, 331). To achieve a new naïveté, "simple" poetry must be upset by something presumably less simple. Somewhat less characteristically modernist—and here's where Riding's comments on Stein's ordinary barbarism are especially perceptive—is Stein's almost

[45] Ibid., 190-91.
[46] Gass, *The World Within the Word*, 80.

off-handed claim that "everybody has to be a poet." Instead of casting herself as an avant-gardist or a priestess of high modernism, Stein suggests that, since everybody has the need (and the power) to name things, she's just doing what anybody who feels less than thrilled with their language would do.

This suggestion is perhaps too coy. Stein's comments about poetry and the lost thrill of naming are all part of her discussion of *Tender Buttons*, the book she describes as her effort to discover things through their names "and in so doing…to name them not to give them new names but to see that [she] could find out how to know that they were there by their names or by replacing their names" (*PG*, 329). It's hard to believe that just anyone would or could write such a book. In breaking "the rigid form of the noun," she produced a text that most everyone in 1914 (and in 2017) seemed to find fairly confounding. And even putting this difficult strangeness aside, Stein's claim that she did indeed achieve such breakage is not as straightforward as she makes it sound. Anyone can see that nouns are by far the most common part of speech in the text of *Tender Buttons*, despite Stein's claim early in "Poetry and Grammar" that "I like to write with prepositions and conjunctions and articles and verbs and adverbs but not with nouns and adjectives. If you read my writing you will you do see what I mean" (*PG*, 316).

Indeed, Stein seems insistently, deliberately ambivalent about nouns throughout her essay. She claims a strong preference for verbs, which she finds more "interesting" than nouns because verbs "can be so mistaken" (*PG*, 314). While nouns are locked down and worn out by familiarity and routine use, verbs are mobile and somehow more pleasingly errant. Yet as we have seen, Stein also understands nouns to be essential to poetry. In one of the essay's central paragraphs, she seems to want to fold this ambivalence itself into her conception of poetry—to generate an ambivalent, wobbly sort of writing: "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that, doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and

betraying and caressing nouns" (*PG*, 327). Imagined this way, poetry amounts to a passionate fort-da game with nouns. In the wobble between avoidance and adoration, we can begin to understand the way Stein wants to regain the direct relation of nouns to things by means of verbal indirection. For her, substitution—saying something another way—is part of love's logic, and love is the modality of intimate, immediate contact with things: "As I say a noun is a name of a thing, and therefore slowly if you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known. Everybody knows that by the way they do when they are in love and writer should always have that intensity of emotion about whatever is the object about which he writes. And therefore I say it again more and more one does not use nouns" (*PG*, 314). In *Tender Buttons* Stein does continue to use nouns, but they are nouns made to behave in ways that nouns are not known to behave. Like a person in love, Stein goes about "calling" things in another way. Namely, she makes nouns behave like verbs. To break the rigid form of the noun, she has to reintroduce the possibility of errancy, to keep her nouns but loosen them up a bit. The problem is not nouns themselves but the rigidity of standard usage. So when we read Stein's claim that in writing *Tender Buttons*, she "knew nouns must go in poetry as they had gone in prose," we might understand her to be saying not that nouns must be removed but that they must move (*PG*, 334).[47]

[47] My account of Stein's mobilization of nouns owes something to Harriett Scott Chessman's readings of "Poetry and Grammar" and *Tender Buttons*. Chessman reads Stein as an Emersonian Romantic, but one who revises Emerson by replacing the single, "true" name sought by his poet with the linguistic movement of multiple names, and by making feminine touch rather than masculine vision the poet's primary sense. Chessman argues that while Emerson ultimately despairs that the poet cannot achieve the Adamic immediacy he seeks, Stein embraces the "sacral qualities" of linguistic mediation itself. See Chessman, *The Public Is Invited to Dance*, 80-87. Jayne Walker makes a similar case for Stein's paradoxically mediated immediacy; she finds that Stein's disorderly play with language "demonstrates that the inherent order of language is equally alien to the concrete heterogeneity of the external physical world and to the chaotic richness of immediate perceptual experience" while nevertheless bringing us into more intimate contact with that perceptual experience (*The Making of a Modernist*, 136). Like many Steinians, Chessman and Walker take a broadly poststructuralist approach to Stein, but Jennifer Ashton directly challenges this tendency, arguing that Stein's writing involves a strongly determinate view of language. Ashton finds, via a consideration of Frege and Russell on sense and reference, that Stein attempts to solve her noun problem by making nouns behave not like verbs (as I argue) but like pronouns that refer indisputably to their objects. Ashton's argument is forceful and complex, but strangely she applies Stein's comments about poetry and naming to *Four in America* (which is not a work of poetry) rather than to *Tender Buttons*, the text Stein makes the primary example of her poetry. *Four in America* serves Ashton's argument about the philosophy of language well, but by avoiding *Tender Buttons*, Ashton neglects what would seem to be the central text for understanding Stein's

In fact, the primary way Stein makes nouns go is not by removing them but by adding more and more of them. Consider the first poem in *Tender Buttons*:

> A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.
>
> A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (*TB*, 11)

With its striking, almost awkward use of "that is," the poem's title announces a logic of substitution that then ripples through its first sentence.[48] Of its twenty-four words, nine are nouns, three are adjectives modifying nouns, six are articles introducing nouns, three are conjunctions joining nouns, and three are prepositions relating one noun to another noun. There are no verbs. In the first phrase, "A kind in glass and a cousin," we move swiftly across three different sorts of nouns, from the abstract "kind" to the concrete, inhuman "glass" by way of a preposition, and then on to "a cousin," which can be both concrete and human (the child of one's aunt or uncle) or figurative and more abstract (a "kind" of thing or concept that bears some relation to another thing or concept). There are two different but related textures at work here, then, one having to do with literal kinship, the other with more abstract systems of classification. What we seem to be classifying—or perhaps indirectly naming—are objects made of glass. The preposition "in" is slightly strange here: we might have expected "of," as if to say a carafe is a kind of glass object; "in" shifts the emphasis to the physical kinship of a carafe, the somewhat mysterious "blind glass," and the "spectacle" of the next phrase: they are all of "a kind" in being made of glass. As "cousins," they are also anthropomorphs, objects subtly recast as potentially animated beings.

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conception of poetry—and one that would complicate Ashton's account of Stein's strong determinacy. See Chapter 2, "Making the rose red: Stein, proper names, and the critique of indeterminacy," in Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 67-94.

[48] Of the three sentence-like units in this poem, only the third can properly be called a sentence, if we take a sentence to be an independent clause. However, in this discussion of Stein, I will use "sentence" to refer to any group of words that terminates with a period, whether it is a clause or not.

Despite their slight strangeness, the poem's title and its first phrase share a basically parallel structure: four nouns (carafe, glass, kind, cousin) introduced by indefinite articles renaming each other in a series. This structure is present in the next phrase as well, but before the sentence ends, its parallelism has gone askew. The first two terms of the second phrase—"a spectacle and nothing strange"—maintain but attenuate the grammatical parallelism: we have two things joined by a conjunction, but the first is a noun while the second is an indefinite pronoun (albeit one that sometimes, as in the work of Wallace Stevens, serves as a definite noun). There does seem to be a subtle non sequitur here, the presence of the "spectacle" grammatically negated by a pronoun indicating absence, and one meaning of "spectacle" (an extraordinary sight or event) semantically negated by the colloquial sense of "nothing strange." And now we see how this non sequitur is actually preceded by another one: "spectacle" itself functions as a semantic double joint, meaning both eyewear ("a kind in glass" that is decidedly not "blind") and something that grabs the attention. After these shifts, the parallelism really comes loose, "nothing strange" sliding into "a single hurt color" without punctuation or conjunction. With this slip from one noun phrase to another, there's also a more pronounced transformation in kind: neither a concrete something nor nothing, "a single hurt color" is a sort of abstract property, yet one that's curiously well-defined ("single") and embodied ("hurt"). The sentence seems almost to recover its parallel structure with "and an," but the noun phrase introduced by the conjunction and article, "arrangement in a system to pointing," is perhaps the most dramatic non sequitur so far. This ungainly accretion of prepositional phrases seems to exceed the space allotted each of the preceding phrases, and its abstract, quasi-mathematical sound clashes with the almost fleshly affect of "a single hurt color."

Yet even as Stein's diction shifts jarringly, there's a sonic consistency passing fluently across the sentence, as its pattern of variations of *s*, *i*, and *t* sounds culminates in "system to pointing." Across differences of semantic kind, we can recognize a family resemblance among the words'

sounds. While the sentence lacks a verb, its series of grammatical, semantic, and sonic transformations creates a strong sense of movement—surprising yet fluid—even as it tends toward the stasis of a name, with its final word turning a verb into a noun, the participle "pointing." "All this," as the next sentence begins, refers back to these all these noun phrases, held by parallelism and a period yet wobbling in place, "not unordered" yet "not ordinary." The poem's only true verb comes in the final sentence—"The difference is spreading"—but it's a copula, perhaps the least mobile of verbs; we can take "is spreading" as a progressive verb, but with the copula, "spreading," too, is on the verge of becoming a predicate adjective, or even a predicate noun that renames difference as a form of mobility.

While *Tender Buttons*' nouns tend to move, its verbs tend to become thing-like. "To be" is the verb that appears most frequently in the book, and it typically links a grammatical subject with a predicate nominative or adjective, thus emphasizing not motion but equivalence or identity. Even when a different verb appears, Stein's grammatical structures can seem to subordinate it to the nouns around it. Here's the first of two poems called "A Box":

> Out of kindness comes redness and out of rudeness comes rapid same question, out of an eye comes research, out of selection comes painful cattle. So then the order is that a white way of being round is something suggesting a pin and is it disappointing, it is not, it is so rudimentary to be analysed and see a fine substance strangely, it is so earnest to have a green point not to red but to point again. (*TB*, 13)

In this poem's first sentence we find another example of Stein's skewed parallelism, with the prepositional phrase "out of" repeating four times, each time with a different object. "Kindness" and "rudeness"—both qualities of persons or actions—are similar in kind, but the physical "eye" and "selection," which can name either the process of choosing or the thing chosen, knock the series off kilter. The other parallel element is the inverted verb-subject combo, "comes [noun]." Stein gives us a verb other than "to be," but here "come" functions mainly to connect and emphasize the nouns on either side of it. With one noun "coming" out of another, Stein's clauses

ask us to think about the way one noun follows from or grows out of another, even while her diction seems to thwart obvious logical connections. It is not too difficult to imagine a link between the near-rhymes "kindness" and "redness," a color that suggests both human warmth and the bloodlines that link kin (and could also be one shade of "a single hurt color"). And while they are not joined by the verb, "rudeness" does seem sonically to come out of "redness"; "rapid" at first extends this consonantal logic, but "same question" startles us off in another direction. The pairing with "eye" brings out the ocular element of "research," and perhaps we might think of "research" as driven by a persistent "same question," though the connection is tenuous. And maybe we can think of "research" as involving "selection" of sources or data, but "painful cattle" comes with slapstick suddenness, an interjection of goofy nonsense that upsets whatever game we were playing. Certainly it's the nouns that are "mistaken" here while the verbs provide grammatical stability, functioning less as movers than as nails in the construction of a box formed by the four clauses of the first sentence. The poem's long second sentence likewise inverts nouns and verbs: its multiple iterations of "is" serve as pins holding together numerous nouns, adjectives, and verbals (verbs turned into nouns and adjectives). All the poem's action is the nouns. There is a certain rigidity in the form of "A Box," but with the sonic play and semantic surprises of Stein's nouns, there's plenty of weirdness wriggling around within it.

This simultaneity of stasis and animation is a defining quality of *Tender Buttons*—one hinted at in the book's title, which grants fleshy sensitivity and malleability to typically rigid inanimate objects. Having observed the ways that "A Carafe" and "A Box" endow nouns with mobility—and with the possibility of being "mistaken"—while making verbs thing-like, we might begin to hear Stein's claim that *Tender Buttons* is "what broke the rigid form of the noun" a bit differently, letting the emphasis fall not on *noun* but on *rigid*. In this book, naming a thing is not something that happens once and for all, but a steady ripple and shake of multiple nouns, a constant shuffling and

reshuffling of possible substitutes. In perpetual motion, names might become thrilling once again. We can take "A Table" as a comment on Stein's method of naming:

> A table means does it not my dear it means a whole steadiness. It is likely that a change.
>
> A table means more than glass even a looking glass is tall. A table means necessary places and a revision a revision of a little thing it means it does mean that here has been a stand, a stand where it did shake. (*TB*, 28)

With its multiple repetitions in close proximity to one another, this poem more closely resembles some of Stein's other famous works—such as *Three Lives*, with what Lewis ridicules as its "stammering"—than do the other poems from *Tender Buttons* I've quoted here. One effect of this more concentrated repetition is to make us aware that while it typically occurs at longer intervals, repetition is a crucial element of this book, too, with words such as "kind," "glass," and "pointing" reappearing throughout the poems of *Tender Buttons* in new settings and combinations. The effect is one of "a whole steadiness" that plays upon both resemblance and difference to continuously recall and revise the names of the ordinary things Stein writes about. So when she writes of "a table," I take her to refer not only to a piece of furniture on which the objects of her still lives are placed or around which friends might take their "places," but also to a chart or ledger in which things are assigned their "necessary places" among an array of other things to which they are related. As "an arrangement in a system to pointing," this table "means" by way of display, relation, and substitution. Places are both necessary and open to "change," so the objects standing upon the table or recorded within it are stable yet shaking with the naïve thrill of naming.

The familiar yet "not ordinary" domestic world of *Tender Buttons*, animated and re-enchanted by Stein's modernist naïveté, recalls the "small world of things within the greater one" that Benjamin credits children with creating: As I discussed in relation to Williams's *Kora in Hell*, Benjamin writes that children reconfigure the "detritus" of the ordinary adult world according to their own naïve logic: "In using these things, they do no so much imitate the works of adults as bring together, in the

artifact produced in play, materials of widely differing kinds in a new, intuitive relationship."[49] Like Williams's improvisations, Stein's "arrangements" are such artifacts of seeing the world otherwise. Where Benjamin proposes an alternative composition of things organized according to their colors, Stein proposes "a small world" organized by an idiosyncratic grammar, a series of linguistic permutations rippling and wobbling across the surfaces of the things she names. With a "change in the form of poetry" Stein makes it possible, even if only briefly, "to feel the thing anything being existing," and even to make "the name of that thing of that anything" a thrill even for adults.

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But what if you don't find Stein's writing thrilling, or not always thrilling? In her vast oeuvre, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pages of repetitions and permutations which for most readers are the opposite of thrilling. For every passage that interests or excites, there are many more that leave one bored, bewildered, entirely indifferent, or in the case of some readers, outraged by their boredom and bewilderment. I find this to be true even in so short and often thrilling a text as *Tender Buttons*: certain sections fascinate and delight while others simply leave me cold, with little to think or say. My eyes simply pass over them. (On any given reading, however, a seemingly dead passage might suddenly come to life, which is why I bother returning to the book, or writing about it.) *Tender Buttons* is light and easy compared to the nine-hundred pages of *The Making of Americans*, but it gives us a taste of how wearying Stein's writing can be, especially in its unbroken last section, "Rooms." In reading Stein, it is as important to come to terms with this weariness as it is to indulge in the thrills her linguistic play can provide, and a few critics have tried to account for this difficulty without damning or dismissing Stein. Sianne Ngai, for instance, has recently coined the term "stuplimity" to name the peculiar experience of simultaneous "astonishment" and "fatigue" generated by trying to

[49] Benjamin, "Old, Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 408.

read Stein's seemingly endless repetitions, permutations, and taxonomies.[50] Ngai develops "stuplimity" in a positive direction, proposing that it might become "a condition of utter receptivity in which difference is perceived (and perhaps even 'felt') prior to its qualification or conceptualization."[51] Bob Perelman, by contrast, describes a more negative mixture of "perplexity, discomfort, and shame" most readers feel when trying to read modernist "geniuses" such as Pound, Joyce, and Stein:

> The blankness that they proffer the neophyte needs to be considered as an integral part of their meaning, and not simply to be blamed on inadequate readers, schools, or societies. This is in the spirit of Benjamin's 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism,' but I would like to eliminate the pejorative connotations in Benjamin's vocabulary. In the case of difficult modernism there is no document of refined criticism that is not at the same time a chasm of anxious boredom for many readers.[52]

Whichever way we judge Stein's "plainmanism" or "new barbarism," and however much faith we place in the transformative powers of linguistic innovation, Perelman asks us to confront the fact that most plain men or ordinary barbarians probably won't make much of much of Stein. Many of us will feel excluded by her writing, as though it wasn't really written for us.

Marjorie Perloff, in the influential treatment of Stein in her landmark 1981 book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, acknowledges the challenges of reading Stein but blames readers for their own frustrations: "To read a text like *Tender Buttons* can be exasperating and boring if one expects to find actual descriptions of the objects denoted by the titles—a carafe, a cloak, eyeglasses, a cutlet, cranberries."[53] If you are frustrated by Stein, it's because you bring the wrong expectations—namely of discursive clarity and representational directness—to her writing. In Perloff's view, these expectations are exactly what Stein aims to challenge. Stein's disruptive "verbal configurations are set

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[50] Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 253.
[51] Ibid., 261.
[52] Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius*, 11-12.
[53] Perloff, "Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein" in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 108.

up precisely to manifest the arbitrariness of discourse, the impossibility of arriving at 'the meaning' even as countless possible meanings present themselves to our attention."[54] Perloff makes a broadly poststructuralist argument that by upsetting the discursive norms that enable our everyday communication in language, Stein's strangeness calls our attention to the ways that readers are always constructing—rather than simply receiving—the meanings of the texts they encounter. While we might feel excluded when we have no clear idea of what Stein's talking about, or when it seems she could be talking about any number of things at the same time, Perloff contends that we ought instead to feel ourselves empowered as collaborative producers of the text. Discussing the pronoun "it," which is ubiquitous in *Tender Buttons*, Perloff characterizes ambiguous reference, which is typically seen as bad for communication, as an opportunity to participate. Quoting a 1957 review of *Stanzas in Meditation*, she writes that Stein's "fluidity of reference creates what John Ashbery, whose pronouns are similarly indeterminate, has called 'An all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to his or her own set of particulars.' The poet wants us to be able to fill the gaps in whatever way suits us."[55] For Perloff, reading Stein in this way seems to be a wholly positive experience. She feels herself welcomed into Stein's world: "the author offers us certain threads that take us into her verbal labyrinth, threads that never quite lead us out on the other side but that recreate what Ashbery calls 'a way of happening.'"[56] Being stranded in a labyrinth isn't everyone's idea of fun, but in a certain mood, one might find something empowering, interesting, and even delightful about being left "to fill the gaps in whatever way suits us." In another mood, though, we might feel that we've been invited to dinner and then left sitting alone at the table, expected to take care of ourselves.[57]

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[54] Ibid., 76.

[55] Ibid., 105-6.

[56] Ibid., 108.

[57] Two other books that make compelling cases for Stein's participatory aesthetics are Chessman's *The Public Is Invited to Dance* and Juliana Spahr's *Everybody's Autonomy*. Chessman's account of Stein's is somewhat subtler and more extensive than Perloff's; while she celebrates Stein's work as an ongoing invitation into warm literary "intimacy," she also thinks at length about the role that divergence and discrepancy play in that encounter: "After all, to come together is not always

Curiously, the sense that Stein is unconcerned with her readers also emerges in Jennifer Ashton's 2005 book *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, which directly attacks Perloff and the Language poets, whom Ashton sees as in cahoots in a deleterious campaign to "postmodernize" Stein with their misguided ideas about indeterminacy and the materiality of the language. Ashton invokes Michael Fried's concept of "literalism" to describe the way that "postmodernists" emphasize the beholder's role in creating a work of art or literature. According to Fried and Ashton, what a literalist calls an artwork is merely raw material—an object—waiting for someone other than the artist or writer to make something of it. Ashton sees Stein as offering the opposite:

> But resisting the autonomy of the text by making the text dependent on the reader's experience of it becomes problematic when language proponents like Perloff or Hejinian turn to Stein as their mascot. For if literalism refuses the autonomy of the work of art by calling upon the beholder (or reader) to participate in its situation—indeed to *create* its situation—Stein, by contrast, insists on the autonomy of the work of art precisely by refusing any relation whatsoever between the work and anyone who might experience it, including herself.[58]

Ashton counters the "postmodernization" of Stein by making her the avatar of a radically idealist, formalist modernism that strives under a "fundamental ontological imperative of all art, its quality of final or absolute 'existence.'"[59] This version of Stein seems even more standoffish than the host who

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possible or necessary. Stein creates a playful dialogic space between the acts of reading and writing, within which difference may occur" (2). Bob Perelman, however, critiques Chessman's "dialogic" model, arguing that her analogy between the Stein-Tolkas relation and the Stein-reader relation cannot encompass the diversity and difficulty of Stein's writing (*The Trouble with Genius*, 139-40). Spahr makes Stein's work exemplary of the disruptively democratizing pedagogical poetics her book celebrates: "Often the criticism of these works of reader autonomy misreads them as individualistic. Again and again, for instance, Stein's work has been called nonsense, or private, or encoded, or presymbolic. Instead, I like to think of her work as using reading to encourage a sort of anarchy, not the sort the Sex Pistols called for where all the rules are abandoned in the name of chaos, but rather one where the work allows readers self-governance and autonomy, where the reading act is given as much authority as the authoring act" (13-4). While I agree with Spahr that readers have more potential for creativity and constructive anarchy than critics often give them credit for and that accounts of Stein's unreadability tend to flatten her work, I also think that Stein is more self-absorbed than Spahr gives her credit for. Stein seems to me decidedly more interested in her own authorship than in enabling the powers of others, and if her indeterminacy does turn readers into authors, it does so more by neglect—leaving them to fend for themselves—than by deliberate empowerment. Spahr also critiques Perelman's reading of Stein, arguing that his claims of her elitism miss powerful ironies in her work and that his study as a whole "seems eerily indicative of a crisis in contemporary visions of reading" (34).

[58] Ashton, *From Modernism to Postmodernism*, 7-8.

[59] Ibid., 62. Where Perloff sees pronouns as primary vectors of Stein's indeterminacy, Ashton sees Stein's deployment of pronouns as proof that she is "absolutely devoted to the name and the determinacy it entails" (68). See footnote 6.

abandons us at the table or in the middle of the labyrinth she has constructed. How exactly are we to think of a work of art that refuses any relation to any person? By making such a strong argument against any readerly experience of the text at all (even though she herself does offer interesting readings of Stein's texts as articulating a set of abstract formulas), Ashton asks us to think of a book without readers (and possibly even without a writer). This extreme formalism, with its refusal of actual persons, seems to posit a profoundly antisocial work of art. All we can do is stand in some proximity to its sheer autonomous "existence."

Despite their very different intellectual commitments, both Perloff and Ashton depict Stein as strategically antisocial. They cast her difficulty, which many readers will find to be exclusionary, as the constitutive virtue of the work. I think it would be more accurate to think of Stein's exclusionary or antisocial tendencies not as strategic but as almost inevitable consequences of a naïvely self-involved writing practice. It's not that Stein sets out to disrupt, confuse, or bore us; it's that, in the process of pursuing her own projects—such as "breaking the rigid form of the noun"—she just might happen to do so. Perelman is helpful in articulating this self-involvement. While he appreciates Stein as a "sophisticated innovator" and "accomplished writer," he also writes that, "Her imperturbable commitment to her daily practice of writing rather than to the quality of any particular bit of the product is the primary fact. There is a literalism and self-assertion to her work that is not easy to assimilate to aesthetic or literary-historical categories of judgment."[60] Here the Greek conception of idiocy comes into play again. Stein writes primarily for herself and foregoes the professional writer's task of editing and selecting the "best" of her texts for other readers, so her writing retains a basic quality of privacy. It may or may not interest other people; interesting others isn't really the point. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein herself claims a powerful blend of confidence in herself and disregard for readers: "In those days she never asked anyone what they

[60] Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius*, 130.

thought of her work, but they were interested enough to read it. Now she says if they can bring themselves to read it they will be interested," noting also that she never threw anything away.[61] Stein, it seems, could take or leave a readership: easy come, easy go. In her view, it just so happens that people are interested; in might also happen that they are not, though she doesn't take up that possibility. *She* seems plenty interested, and that's reason enough to keep writing.

In light of these comments, Stein's pursuit of publication is puzzling. With her published texts, she presents herself to us—the fact of the writing as proof of her practice, asserted as interesting because it's hers—but she doesn't care to address us. She holds up the writing for us to see, but it wasn't written with us in mind. Reading the red notebooks in which Stein originally wrote *Tender Buttons*, one sees how little she edited the work before publication; while publisher Donald Evans reordered the sections and elicited a title from Stein, the published text of *Tender Buttons*, save the numerous infelicities of the 1914 Marie Claire edition, presents her sentences and paragraphs more or less as she first wrote them—an ongoing practice within her "own small world of things," written for herself and possibly for Toklas, but not for us. It's a document of private activity displayed in plain view.[62] By revealing her writing process in full, Stein paradoxically turns her idiocy outward, making amateurism into a profession. An anecdote from William Carlos William's *Autobiography* helps us understand this professional amateurism. Describing a visit to Stein and

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[61] Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, in *Writings 1932-1946*, 712.

[62] Joshua Schuster traces the strangeness of *Tender Buttons* back to this indirect indiscretion: "The structural factor of illegibility is also due to the fact that Stein's writing may not really be for us. The illegible faithfully leaves a minimal margin of otherness intact" ("The Making of Tender Buttons," *Jacket 2*, April 21, 2011, http://jacket2.org/article/making-tender-buttons). The definitive study of Stein's notebooks and working papers is Ulla Dydo's *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises*. Dydo contends that reading Stein's notebooks and thus to become immersed in her writing process is the truest way to read Stein. Dydo fruitfully reads Stein's notes, lists, and doodles as an essential part of her writing practice. See especially that chapter "Reading the Handwriting," in which Dydo traces Stein's practice of keeping notes in small *carnets* and then writing out full texts in the larger *cahiers* that became the basis for her typescripts. At least during the period of Stein's career that concerns Dydo, 1923-34, there does seem to have been a process of selection and consolidation that took place between *carnets* and *cahiers*, though the *cahier* writing seems—as with the *Tender Buttons* notebooks—mostly to have been published with little editing of the original handwritten texts. So while it would be it overstatement to characterize Stein's entire published oeuvre as unedited, I think it is fair to say that her published texts document her writing process with uncommon immediacy. Even if they don't retain every note or doodle, they must be "processual" enough to suggest that reading for "process" would be an appropriate way to read Stein in the first place.

Toklas's home in Paris, Williams writes that after tea, "Miss Stein went to the small cabinet, opened it and began to take out manuscripts, one at a time, telling us the titles and saying that she hoped one day to see them printed." When Stein asks Williams what he would do with so many unpublished manuscripts, he answers: "If they were mine, having so many, I should probably select what I though were the best and throw the rest into the fire." After a moment of "shocked silence," Stein replies: "No doubt. But then writing is not, of course, your *métier*."[63] Williams succinctly brings out Stein's peculiar (but perhaps not uncommon) blend of obliviousness of and desire for readers' attention. A writer's profession, her response to Williams implies, is simply to write and, if possible, to publish everything—not to evaluate, select, or edit her texts in anticipation of readers' interest or lack thereof. Thus copiousness and opacity become Stein's professional calling cards.

Feeling excluded some or much of the time, then, is just part of reading Stein—the professional amateur, the naïve modernist. I suspect that all those early charges of "childishness" and "idiocy," which function basically as assertions of her unreadability, are motivated at least in part by the feelings of "anxious boredom" Perelman describes. Likening her writing to child's play is one way of outflanking or mastering something that engenders feelings of "perplexity, discomfort, and shame."[64] If the language is mere nonsense, the burden of understanding is no longer on the reader or the critic. But Stein's naïve modernism is more deeply exclusionary than her critics themselves see, even as they accuse her of childishness. In her book *On Not Being Able to Paint*, psychoanalyst Marion Milner brings out the troubling way in which encounters with "difficult" art can put a person

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[63] Williams, *Autobiography*, 254.

[64] I take the difficult of absorbing particular passages of Stein's writing into literary criticism to be another symptom of Stein's naïveté. It seems that for many critics her writing is either so nonsensical that it's not worth talking about or so plain that it does not require and perhaps could not support any further commentary. Since the 1980's, this resistance to interpretation has frequently been celebrated as Stein's defining virtue, but critics who wish to champion Stein's radical disruptiveness also find themselves in a difficult position: if they are able to read the texts *too* closely, they undercut their own argument for Stein's innovation. Perelman might have this elusiveness in mind when he writes that *Tender Buttons* remains "non-descript (i.e., interestingly unknown)" ("Unlikening Tender Buttons," *Jacket2*, March 10, 2015, http://jacket2.org/reviews/unlikening-tender-buttons). Neither interpretative mastery nor abandonment to indeterminacy seems to do the text justice. Schuster: "No one has settled how this book should be read."

in touch with childishness—his own and the artist's. In discussing the "fierce animosity of those who feel themselves shut out" by the work of innovative artists who refuse the conventions that might allow their work to communicate to more than "a small coterie," Milner writes that "those who do not understand the artist's creations are liable to indulge in the righteous indignation of the child who feels he himself has been good and given up earlier enjoyments, but sees another child who has been less docile and obedient and yet is getting away with it."[65] This captures the feeling communicated when someone looks at a Pollock hanging in a museum and in consternation exclaims, "My five-year-old could have done that!" Like Winnicott, Milner sees creative activity as a manifestation of a primal, "non-communicating" self from which one is liable to become estranged in the process of growing up and learning to conform. Indeed, there is something resolutely "non-communicating" about *Tender Buttons* (as there is about Williams's *Kora in Hell*), and Stein's intensely focused self-absorption and her lack of regard for an audience (coupled with the desire for attention) are permissions usually granted only to children. In Milner's light, critics' charges of childishness begin to appear as expressions of their envy for Stein's naïve freedom: she has retained or regained the childishness they long for. Schiller, too, comments upon the critical opprobrium naïve poets typically receive in sentimental times, appearing as "strange individuals" and "uncultivated nature boys" detested for transgressing the boundaries critics ("the real border patrol of taste") are at pains to preserve.[66] For both Milner and Schiller, critics are frustrated, melancholy adults whose antipathy toward seemingly nonsensical or simplistic art flows from their own unacknowledged identification with a lost naïveté. While Schiller would probably not accept it as such—preferring to focus on the more virtuous aspects of the naïve—Stein's confident, exclusionary self-absorption is perhaps her most resiliently naïve quality.

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[65] Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*, 135.

[66] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 199-200.

Guy Davenport seems to understand Stein's modernist naïveté when he writes, in a 1993 review of Ulla Dydo's *A Stein Reader*, that Stein's work "is the very literate equivalent of children playing in a sandbox. They are happy, busy, purposeful in their own way, but only angels know what they think they're doing."[67] This characterization sounds at first condescending, but it comes at the end of an exceedingly generous review. Davenport admires Stein's work even as he recognizes that much of it remains obscure to us. What his image of Stein as a child at play brings out is not arbitrariness or nonsense but the deliberateness and focus with which children conduct their imaginative world-making. The frequent obscurity of a child's play is neither her fault nor ours, but a result of the difference between our two worlds. Kids (usually) play for themselves, not for an audience, and so their logic may seem beyond us—amusing, boring, incorrect, or some combination thereof. One of Stein's achievements—or errors, depending on your view, or perhaps your mood on any given day—is to have so resolutely played her own game for so long, to have continued building her own world in plain view of the adult world. Schiller writes that naïve poetry is "a lucky throw, needing no improvement if it succeeds, but also incapable of any if it misses the mark."[68] Sometimes we might find ourselves able and inclined to participate in Stein's world; sometimes we might grow impatient or even furious with the way she obliviously carries on; sometimes we might simply lose track of her; sometimes we might stand in awe of something so focused yet so opaque. A single passage might seem dead on one reading yet thrill us the next time. This inconsistency probably owes as much to the work as to the changing dispositions we bring to it. If we can permit Stein her prerogatives, perhaps we can permit ourselves our own.

[67] Davenport, review of *A Stein Reader*, *New Criterion*, November 1993, 73.
[68] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 235.

CHAPTER THREE

"THE RED WHEELBARROW" AND OTHER TOYS

The first half of this dissertation considered forms of naïve modernism distinguished by ludic excess. In their almost unchecked copiousness and persistence, Williams's *Kora in Hell* and Stein's *Tender Buttons* can seem to verge on incoherence or stupidity, and as we have seen, both books have at times been dismissed as nonsense. The excess and opacity of Williams's and Stein's texts can make interpretation or understanding seem out of the question, yet I have tried to develop methods of reading that render them intelligible as vital formalizations of fundamental poetic capacities—play and naming. In characterizing these texts as *naïve*, I have hoped to use Schiller's concept to articulate the ways Williams and Stein can seem alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) childlike or childish, invitingly open or frustratingly odd. By now it should be clear that theirs is not the naïveté of unsophisticated innocence but of artful (even artificial) and sometimes difficult basicness.

In the second half of this dissertation, I turn from excess to paucity, to poems by Williams (in this chapter) and Lorine Niedecker (in the next) that trouble us not by offering too much but by seeming not to offer much of anything at all. Such writing can strike us as stupid in its very plainness, its determined slightness. Some of Williams's best-known poems, such as "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "This Is Just to Say," at first seem so bare that there's no question of understanding them. They appear to obviate interpretation, leaving us with little to say. I do in fact have something to say about those two poems, but by way of beginning let's consider a lesser-

known poem by Williams. Published first in 1935, "A Chinese Toy" is an excellent example of the dominant style of William's middle period—finely crafted, precisely observed, and strikingly brief:

> Six whittled chickens
> on a wooden bat
>
> that peck within a
> circle pulled
>
> by strings fast to
> a hanging weight
>
> when shuttled by the
> playful hand[1]

The poem is a single descriptive gesture of a simple toy, elaborating an initial noun phrase ("Six whittled chickens") with a prepositional phrase and then a relative clause that stretches across the last six lines in a series of prepositional, participial, and adverbial phrases. Because it never resolves into an independent clause, as it would had Williams omitted the relative pronoun "that," the poem seems almost to be a protracted, multifaceted noun, hovering in suspended animation. Indeed, syntactical suspension—or suspense—is the poem's defining formal quality. After the first two lines, which are relatively self-contained, a series of enjambments breaks the syntax of the relative clause such that each line depends upon the ones around it to complete its sense and grammatical structure. In the second and fourth couplets, line breaks split articles from their nouns, and the third couplet severs the preposition "to" from its object. Between the second and third couplets, the participle "pulled" pulls apart from the prepositional phrase identifying its agent. So while the absence of a complete predicate creates a sort of grammatical stasis, the play of syntax against line and stanza breaks creates a strong sense of mobility. Each piece of the poem seems to pull and be pulled gently by each other piece, balanced in motion, and this formal interdependency of the poem's pieces clearly imitates the structural logic of the thing it describes. All the pieces of the toy—

[1] Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 1*, 407.

whittled chickens, wooden bat, and hanging weight—are threaded through with a single string such that the movement of one piece sets each of the others into motion. The elements of the simple play machine are so thoroughly integrated that it can be difficult to discern just how each is joined to the others, just as in "A Chinese Toy," it is difficult to decide whether "pulled" modifies "circle," "bat," or "chickens." By omitting punctuation and by breaking phrases across lines and stanzas, Williams cultivates a grammatical ambiguity that aids representational precision. Both poem and toy conduct a single, fluid current of playful motion.

The toy only moves, though, "when shuttled by the / playful hand." This last stanza reminds us that its motion depends upon human agency. For the weight to swing and the chickens to peck, someone must pick up the toy and play with it, and Williams suggests by way of the toy-to-poem analogy that a similar logic might pertain to a poem: for "A Chinese Toy" to get going, someone must pick it up and *make* it go. How does one make a poem go? What's analogous to "the playful hand" in our relationship to a poem? The shuttling touch of hand to toy is a fairly minimal mode of agency—just a slight, simple movement does the trick, and once the motion begins, it helps sustain itself. It's a minimal agency, but it's not an entirely easy one. The gesture and force applied must be appropriate to the toy; swatting the Chinese toy up and down as if it were a paddleball would not achieve the desired effect and indeed would indicate a misunderstanding of the device in hand. The player must recognize the form of the toy and produce the motion proper to that form. (The poem must also invite the reader's mobilizing attention just as the toy entices a child to pick it up and follow its formal suggestions. The final stanza of "A Chinese Toy" is the poem's crucial, inviting specification—a detail that makes a simple object an occasion for imaginative agency.) Williams's suggestion, then, is that a reader must find the modes of attention proper to an individual poem and then apply them with the appropriate amount of pressure. In the case of "A Chinese Toy," the proper mode seems to be attention to grammar and enjambment. Reading the poem for rhetorical

power, musical lushness, or philosophical ambition would miss or mangle its potential pleasures, but if we read for grammar and enjambment—and accept Williams's wager that straightforward description is adequate for a poem—"A Chinese Toy" yields not only pleasure but also a simple yet compelling idea about the similar ways a toy and a poem might channel human activity.

In this chapter, I hope to demonstrate the usefulness of thinking about Williams's short poems in relation to toys, if we understand toys simply to be small (or sometimes large) machines made for the purpose of engaging human activity and attention without necessarily producing anything more than that activity or attention itself. Short, plainspoken, descriptive poems such as "A Chinese Toy," "The Red Wheelbarrow," and "This Is Just to Say" do not represent the breadth and variety of Williams's poetry, but they nevertheless define his body of work for many high school students (at least those fortunate enough to be shown poems at all) and for many professional literary scholars. It is fair to say that for most people who recognize his name, "The Red Wheelbarrow" *is* Williams Carlos Williams, and rather than insist on how incompletely such a poem represents the poet, I want to consider anew how the well-known poem and a few others allow us to understand some defining qualities of Williams's poetry, and furthermore, to articulate a second mode of naïve modernism. This second mode is one of radical simplicity, and rather than redeem it by claiming, as some critics have done, that Williams's simplicity belies great intellectual complexity, I hope to do justice to the virtues and problems of simplicity as such. Williams was endlessly condescended to and more than once judged stupid or foolish; my premise is not that we ought to love his simplemindedness but rather that we ought not confuse simplicity and stupidity and that simplicity (formal, conceptual, or both) is an achievement not a fault. Here is another opportunity to distinguish modernist naïveté from its Romantic predecessors. While Wordsworth, for instance, surely wrote with technical finesse and achieved a studied simplicity in poems such as "My heart leaps up," his poems also seek to cloak their technique in a sort of naturalism. Williams, too, is

interested in common language, but he almost always foregrounds his poetic techniques, calling attention to his poems as linguistic constructions built with careful art. He prefers to show the mechanism at work. As often happens with children's toys, the device itself becomes the source of pleasure and interest, focusing our attention with almost unaccountable power.

We can find some precedent for a poetics of the simple toy in the work of another nineteenth-century writer, Charles Baudelaire.[2] In his brief essay "A Philosophy of Toys," the French poet celebrates the toy as "the child's earliest initiation to art, or rather for him the first concrete example of art, and when mature age comes, the perfected examples will not give his mind the same feelings of warmth, nor the same enthusiasms, nor the same sense of conviction."[3] Baudelaire attributes the strange power of toys to what he calls their "simplicity of production."[4] In his reckoning, it's the poorest toys that produce the most immersive imaginative worlds. He describes the way children make toys of ordinary furniture and scraps—chairs for horse and carriage, corks and dominoes for tiny soldiers—in ways that "put to shame the impotent imagination of the blasé public which in the theatre demands a physical and mechanical perfection, and cannot conceive that the plays of Shakespeare can remain beautiful with an apparatus of barbaric simplicity."[5] Indeed, Baudelaire writes with thorough contempt for fanciness and the trappings of

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[2] Baudelaire's essay initiates a lineage of the poetic-theoretical thinking about toys that also includes Walter Benjamin's writings about children's books and toys, Roland Barthes's brief meditation on toys in *Mythologies*, and, most recently and extensively, Daniel Tiffany's book *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*. Like Baudelaire, Benjamin emphasizes the way children "produce their own small world of things within the greater world" by imaginatively transforming the "detritus" of ordinary adult life (Benjamin, "Old, Forgotten Children's Books," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 1*, 408), and Barthes criticizes "bourgeois" French toys that aid the reproduction of adulthood and are "meant to produce children who are users, not creators" ("Toys," in *Mythologies*, 54). Tiffany's book pursues at length the parallels between poetic speculation and modern scientific thinking by considering the role of toys (especially automata) and imaginative images in modeling imperceptible physical forces. Tiffany describes the toy as "an image possessing only the most tenuous physical presence" that engages a child's speculative imagination by giving body to otherwise invisible motions (73). "[T]he discourse of lyric," he concludes, "suspended between empiricism and speculation, between representation and rhetoric, offers the most authentic model for materialist criticism in the humanities" (294). While I am not especially committed to materialist criticism and remain agnostic about which varieties of it might be most authentic, I think his terms might be helpful in thinking about Williams's "tenuous" and "suspended" poems.

[3] Baudelaire, "A Philosophy of Toys," in *The Painter of Modern Life*, 199.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

adult sophistication, disparaging "splendid dolls" and the ways that some children "play at grown-ups."[6] His objects of fascination are toys like Williams's whittled chickens on a wooden bat:

> the barbaric toy, the primitive toy, in which the maker's problem consisted in constructing an image as approximative as possible with elements as simple and as cheap as possible: for example, the cardboard punchinello, actuated by a single thread; the blacksmiths hammering at their anvil; the horse and its rider in three pieces, four wooden pins for legs, the horse's tail forming a whistle, and sometime the rider wearing a little feather in his cap, which is a great luxury:—these are toys for a penny, a halfpenny, a farthing.—But do you think that these simple images create a lesser reality in the child's mind than those New Year's Day marvels which are a tribute paid by parasitic servility to the wealth of the parents rather than a gift to the poetry of childhood?[7]

In Baudelaire's description of "barbaric" penny toys we can recognize the salient qualities of Williams's Chinese toy and his poem about it. Both toy and poem are made of simple and cheap materials: some bits of wood and string, twenty-six basic words and a few line breaks. Both seek maximum mimesis with minimum means. The toymaker wants to show us chickens; the poet wants to show us the toy that shows us the chickens.

It's striking that Baudelaire's examples and Williams's toy all have moving parts, as if "constructing an image as approximative as possible" were a matter not of belabored visual reproduction but of quick mechanical analogy. The form of the blacksmith or the chickens may be crudely rendered so long as the toys' mechanisms conjure their essential gestures. As we will see, the suggestion that a simple image might serve less as a static emblem and more as a conduit of motion is particularly helpful in reading, or playing with, Williams's short poems, which are often read as examples of the imagism developed first by Williams's old friends Ezra Pound and H.D. There is indeed a direct line from Pound's imagist tenet "direct treatment of the 'thing'" to Williams's dictum "No ideas but in things," but in focusing on Williams's iconic thinginess, his readers have typically paid less attention to how much his things *move*. While Williams surely conceived of his poetic craft

[6] Ibid., 198, 200.
[7] Ibid., 199-200.

in relation to imagism, he also understood his poems as small machines with "movement [that] is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary quality."[8] Baudelaire's description of toys as simple image-machines, then, can help us not only to understand the attraction and mobility of Williams's toys, but also to rethink his relation to the imagism that exerted such influence over English-language poetry in the twentieth century.

"A Philosophy of Toys" also suggests new ways to think about the Dada strain in Williams's writing. In the essay's most memorable passage, Baudelaire extends his thinking about "the plaything of the poor" with a haunting vignette about a rich child who casts aside his own "rich and glittering" doll once he beholds the "living toy" of the poor "urchin" on the other side of a fence: a live caged rat. "To save money," Baudelaire writes, "his parents had taken the toy from life itself."[9] He offers little comment on this brief tale, but with it he moves beyond penny toys and imaginatively repurposed furniture to something more puzzling and perhaps unsettling. Described as "a rare, unknown object," the rat is something other than a pet. Neither an image nor a transfigured ordinary object, it is a piece of "life itself" captured and caged as a toy. Here toy-making is not a matter of mimetic craft but of simple reframing: "Now this rat is a toy." The suggestion is that rather than a representation, a toy might be a readymade, just as Duchamp's *Fountain* would assert in 1917: "Now this urinal is an artwork." This tale of Baudelaire's, in which "life itself" replaces representation in a sort of radical realism, thus provides another lens through which to view Williams's poems, which have more than once been compared to Duchamp's readymades. If imagism was one formative context for Williams, another was New York Dada. Duchamp was an acquaintance of his, and Stieglitz, who showed Duchamp's work, was a friend. While Williams might never have produced poems that could properly be called "readymade," the radical realism of the

[8] Williams, Introduction to *The Wedge*, in *Collected Poems, Vol. 2*, 54.
[9] Baudelaire, "A Philosophy of Toys," 200.

poor boy's rat or Duchamp's urinal—the dream that a poem might somehow actually present (rather than represent) a thing from "life itself"—stands at the extreme pole of Williams's poetic practice. So Baudelaire's essay gives us a progression of toy poetics, from ordinary objects imaginatively transformed to simple mimetic image-machines to appropriative readymades. Having already considered the role of imaginative transformation in *Kora in Hell*'s playful phantasmagoria, here I will consider how these last two possibilities manifest in Williams's poetry. If his improvisations risk incoherence and obscurity, his toy-like poems risk "*being too matter-of-fact*," which Schiller identified as the characteristic liability of naïve poetry.[10] Indeed, as Williams practices them, imagism and Dada are both ways of playing with the matter of facts—of composing ordinary things such that we might do something new with them. The trick of reading the poems in this chapter is figuring how to handle them as one figures out how to handle a simple toy. How can we make these poems go?

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No critic articulated the idea that Williams is a simpleminded, minor poet more forcefully or influentially than Yvor Winters, who reviewed *The Complete Collected Poems 1906-1938* in *The Kenyon Review*. In Winters's view, Williams is a decent and occasionally excellent craftsman of verse but a fundamentally stupid person:

> Dr. Williams distrusts all ideas and seeks value as far as may be in the concrete…And he distrusts the entire range of feeling which is immediately motivated by ideas, for he is in no position to distinguish good ideas from bad, and hence, in this realm, sound feelings from false…His poetry therefore concentrates on the concrete; the only ideas which it occasionally expresses are those which I have outlined [having to do with feeling and instinct as the ways to wisdom and art], and since the ideas are bad, the poetry is best when Dr. Williams follows his favorite formula and eschews ideas altogether.[11]

Curiously Winters has little specific to say about Williams's verse technique, even when claiming that in his best poems, such as "By the road to the contagious hospital" and "The crowd at the

[10] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 240. Italics in the original.
[11] Winters, "The Poetry of Feeling," in Miller, *Williams Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 67.

ballgame" from *Spring and All*, "no other poet using free verse is even comparable to him."[12] What Winters mostly seems to appreciate in these poems is that Williams hasn't strayed beyond his intellectual depth: his resources as a poet allow him to handle only "elemental forces and instincts," and since he tries to do no more than that in these poems, they are good poems. When he tries actually to express "intellectual values," the work becomes "sentimental and essentially unsatisfactory."[13] In Winters's 1965 postscript to the original 1939 review, he disavows his earlier praise of "The crowd at the ballgame," which he now finds too sentimental. In fact, Williams's work, which Winters had originally predicted might be "as nearly as indestructible as Herrick" (another poet whom the critic finds slight yet "fine"), barely survives twenty-five years in Winters's own judgment. In the postscript he whittles down the list of Williams's good poems to five: "all minor poems, most of them very minor indeed, but they come close to perfection in execution…To say that Williams was anti-intellectual would be almost an exaggeration: he did not know what the intellect was. He was a foolish and ignorant man, but at moments a fine stylist."[14] With this mean praise, Winters casts Williams as a sort of naïf, but in an almost entirely pejorative sense. He was occasionally equal to certain "elemental forces" and happened to have unstudied knack for free verse technique, but higher mental functioning was beyond him. That a poet's thinking might manifest in ways other than "explicit judgment" and direct propositions of "intellectual values" seems not have been a possibility for Winters.

Like Winters, Williams's friend Wallace Stevens thinks of Williams as a better stylist than thinker, but his scattered comments about Williams are both more ambiguous and more sensitive. Over the course of their decades-long friendship (or perhaps cordial acquaintanceship), Stevens's judgment of Williams oscillates between qualified praise and a sort of confounded condescension. In

[12] Ibid., 68.
[13] Ibid., 67.
[14] Ibid., 69.

the preface to the 1934 *Collected Poems* published by the Objectivist Press, which he agreed to write with some hesitation, Stevens's strongest praise is restrained: "In respect to manner he is a virtuoso. He writes of flowers exquisitely."[15] Despite his regard for Williams's technique, however, Stevens looks past most of the individual poems, which he characterizes as "specimens of abortive rhythms, words on several levels, ideas without logic, and similar minor matters…merely the diversion of the prophet between morning and evening song."[16] It is strange to treat so many of an "exquisite" craftsman's products as mere diversions from his true vocation. Rather than point out particular instances of his handiwork, Stevens devotes most of the preface to discussing the sensibility of the "prophet," which emerges as dialectic of two opposing forces: "…generally speaking one might run through these pages and point out how often the essential poetry is result of the conjunction of the unreal and the real, the sentimental and the anti-poetic, the constant interaction of two opposites. This seems to define Williams and his poetry."[17] Like Winters, Stevens describes Williams as a "romantic" poet of strong "sentiment," but according to Stevens, an equally strong realism tempers this romanticism: by the "anti-poetic," Stevens seems to mean the particulars of the poet's material reality and historical moment. With characteristic aloofness, Stevens writes of Williams's dialectical sensibility as though merely recognizing the poet for what he is. He praises the craft but simply describes the sensibility. Given how extravagantly Stevens avoids or embellishes the "anti-poetic" his own poems, however, we might hear his insistence on Williams's commitment to the "anti-poetic" as rather faint praise.[18]

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[15] Stevens, "Williams Carlos Williams," in Miller, *Williams Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 64.
[16] Ibid., 63.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Charles Doyle notes in *William Carlos Williams: The Critical Heritage* that Stevens's remarks did indeed rankle Williams: "Williams was annoyed at Steven's [sic] reference, in the Preface, to 'the anti-poetic' and on a number of occasions he repudiated it. In 1948, for example, he wrote to Horace Gregory, 'Frankly I'm sick of the constant aping of the Stevens' dictum that I resort to the antipoetic as a heightening device.'" (124). See also Williams, *Selected Letters*, 265.

In a 1946 note on Williams entitled "Rubbings of Reality," Stevens characterizes Williams's "anti-poetic" tendencies more admiringly:

> What does a man do when he delineates the images of reality? Obviously, the need is a general need and the activity a general activity. It is of our nature that we proceed from the chromatic to the clear, from the unknown to the known. Accordingly the writer who practices in order to make perfect is really practicing to get at his subject and, in that exercise, is participating in a universal activity. He is obeying his nature. Imagism (as one of Williams' many involvements, however long ago) is not something superficial. It obeys an instinct. Moreover, imagism is an ancient phase of poetry. It is something permanent. Williams is a writer to whom writing is the grinding of a glass, the polishing of a lens by means of which he hopes to be able to see clearly. His delineations are trials. They are rubbings of reality…[19]

This passage is entirely of a piece with Schiller's characterization of the naïve poet as one who "merely follows simple nature and feeling, limiting himself solely to imitation of reality."[20] Here Stevens dignifies Williams's realism with a sort of moral diligence, and moreover, his metaphor of the poet as lens grinder links clear vision to the workmanlike dedication to physical craft. In the careful construction of his verses, Williams cultivates his fidelity to "reality," and Stevens seems to admire his commitment. Yet we might detect some ambivalence in the way Stevens describes the "delineations" as "trials," suggesting that although the pursuit of clarity is admirable, Williams's poems themselves remain somehow unrealized or provisional, however carefully "polished" they may be. Stevens's estimation of imagism is similarly ambivalent. He seems to value the imagist impulse to see and represent the world clearly when he calls it "permanent" and "ancient" (or perhaps, in Schiller's terms, *naïve*, part of "our nature"). Yet in calling this impulse an "instinct" and dissolving the poetry into "a universal activity," he depicts Williams's work as less an imaginative endeavor than a simple attempt to find one's bearings, less art than reflex. Coming from some critics, this characterization would constitute unequivocal praise, but coming from Stevens, it's really

[19] Stevens, "Williams Carlos Williams," in Miller, *Williams Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 64-65.
[20] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 204.

not clear whether these are terms of positive value, at least as they apply to poetry. "Rubbings of reality" do seem a long way from his own "supreme fictions."

In his letters to friends and literary associates, Stevens's assessment of Williams is more frank. Several times he comments on Williams's fine craft, but mostly as a way of disparaging him. In a 1935 letter to the editor T.C. Wilson of the *Westminster Magazine*, who had asked him to review a book by Marianne Moore (probably her 1935 *Collected Poems*), Stevens writes, "I think that what [Moore] does is really a good deal more important than what Williams does. I cannot help feeling that Williams represents a somewhat exhausted phase of the romantic, and that his great attractiveness is due to the purity of his form."[21] A decade later, he writes to his friend José Rodriguez Feo, the editor of the Cuban magazine *Origenes*, that he has "the greatest respect for [Williams], although there is the constant difficulty that he is more interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say. The fact remains that we are always fundamentally interested in what a writer has to say. When we are sure of that, we pay attention to the way in which he says it, not often before."[22] Here Stevens seems basically to agree with Winters that Williams is a simpleminded craftsman. In light of these comments, his characterization of Williams's "rubbings of reality" seems like a backhanded compliment indeed: since the man has nothing much to say, he concerns himself with simple reproductions of what he finds around him—an ancient phase of poetic activity that more sophisticated modern poets have grown out of.

In another ten years, once Williams wins the National Book Award in 1950 and the Bollingen Prize in 1953, Stevens's cool, self-assured judgment of Williams becomes grouchier. The

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[21] Stevens, *Letters*, 278-79.

[22] Ibid., 544. Compare this comment to Williams's claim in "The New Poetical Economy," a 1934 essay about George Oppen's book *Discrete Series*: "importance cannot be in what the poem says, since in that case the fact that it is a poem would be a redundancy. This importance lies in what the poem *is*. Its existence as a poem is of first importance, a technical matter, as with all facts, compelling the recognition of a mechanical structure. A poem which does not arouse respect for the technical requirements of its own mechanics may have anything you please painted all over it or on it in the way of meaning but it will for all that be as empty as a man made of wax or straw" (221).

doctor's formalism, once his only clear virtue, becomes itself a source of annoyance. In a 1953 letter to Richard Eberhart, he writes with clear impatience of "the universal acceptance of Bill Williams…who rejects the idea that meaning has the slightest value and describes a poem as a structure of little blocks."[23] Now Williams is a child playing with his blocks, and Stevens is an old man decrying the boy's literalism. In another letter from the same period, this one to his friend Barbara Church, he again belittles his old friend: "if the present generation likes the mobile-like arrangement of lines to be found in the work of William Carlos Williams or the verbal conglomerates of e.e. cummings, what is the next generation to like? Pretty much the bare page, for that alone would be new…"[24] In describing Williams's poems as "mobile-like," Stevens characterizes Williams as a lightweight, a maker of childish toys. His poems are flimsy, insubstantial—forms impoverished of ideas and even so formally slight they seem almost to drift off the page.[25]

I linger over Stevens's occasional remarks because even while his judgments strike me as wrongheaded, his observations about the work seem richly suggestive for further thinking about Williams. Hugh Kenner calls Stevens's assessment of Williams—especially his sense that the poems are somehow empty—"one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in literary history."[26] Winter's misunderstanding of Williams is more ordinary; the doctor's work is simply lost on him. But some of Stevens's descriptions of Williams's work are extraordinarily accurate. His claim that Williams is committed to an almost documentary representation of material reality is undeniable, as is his claim that Williams understands poetic composition as a sort of material arrangement.

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[23] Ibid., 801.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Stevens pursued his own sort of austerity toward the end of his career in poems with such Williamsian titles as "The Plain Sense of Things" and "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself," but even at its plainest, Stevens's late style seems fulsome and elaborately abstract in its propositions, especially compared to "A Chinese Toy" or "The Red Wheelbarrow." Interestingly enough, during this same period in the early 1950s, Williams's own style was growing more richly meditative, even somewhat Stevensian, in such poems as "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." This late-career crossing of the two poets might be a worthwhile topic for another essay.

[26] Kenner, *Homemade World*, 55.

Ultimately Williams is lost on Stevens, too, but Stevens has some sense of what he losing, or what he cannot accept, so the misunderstanding brings into relief significant differences between their poetic values. For Stevens, poetry is metaphysical invention (what Kenner calls "creation of concepts"[27]); for Williams, poetry is the realization of what's already there. This is not as simple as saying that the former is imaginative or inventive while the latter is realistic or reportorial. As we saw in Chapter 1, Williams is as avid a champion of the imagination as Stevens, but they have very different ideas about what the imagination itself is and does.

Here it's important to understand that for Stevens, the imaginative "fiction" of poetry is not simply an aesthetic evasion of reality. In the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he describes the imagination as the capacity that people, especially poets, assert against the "pressure" of material reality, "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without."[28] The poet's job is "to help people to live their lives," not by offering simple wisdom or narcotic pleasures, but by generating alternative imaginative concepts or frameworks (e.g., a jar in Tennessee) that give new vividness or order to an otherwise hostile, untamed reality.[29] As Stevens characterizes it, poetry's relation to what we might call "real life" is basically paradoxical, depending upon reality while offering an alternative to it. "The poetic process is psychologically an escapist process," he acknowledges, but then he distinguishes bad escapism from poetry's good escapism: "The pejorative sense [of escapism] applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental."[30] So poetry creates another world that sticks to this world, or remains within it. It is the turn away that transfigures reality, the fiction

[27] Ibid., 53.
[28] Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," in *The Necessary Angel*, 36
[29] Ibid., 30.
[30] Ibid., 30.

that quickens the given. At its most powerful, it takes dominion everywhere, and indeed, for Stevens, the poetic imagination is an ordering power wielded against the world's disorder.

For Williams, too, poetic imagination is a form of human agency, but rather than an assertive power pushing back against an encroaching material reality, the imagination as he describes it in *Spring and All* is a receptive capacity:

> Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore, since reality need no personal support but exists free from human action, as proven by science in the indestructibility of matter and of force, it creates a new object, a play, a dance which is not a mirror up to nature but—
>
> As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their flight.[31]

Rather than escape, reorder, or refute the given world, Williams wants to adjust himself to it in such a way that he might be lifted by "reality" in the same way a bird adjusts itself to the drafts of air that hold it aloft. This is neither entirely active nor entirely passive. As we saw in the first chapter, Williams's recurring metaphors of "play" and "dance" suggest an imaginative mode in which the poet both responds to reality and lightly "moves" it, sometimes following and sometimes leading. This poet is participating in the given world instead of taming it, turning into it rather than away from it. As Stevens understood when he described the "rubbings of reality," part of Williams's project is alert receptivity to the world as he finds it.

But clear vision is itself a kind of invention for Williams, a new arrangement of material particulars such that poet and reader can freshly apprehend them and the connections among them. "A Sort of a Song," the first poem in Williams's 1945 collection *The Wedge*, succinctly articulates the complex relationship between composition, invention, and the "things" of reality:

> Let the snake wait under
> his weed
> and the writing

[31] Williams, *Imaginations*, 149-50.

be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

—through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.
Compose. (No ideas
but in things!) Invent!
Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.[32]

This *ars poetica* ending with saxifrage—the rock splitter—revivifies the etymologies of familiar words to make its own claim about how poetry helps people to live their lives. By apposition, the second stanza links "reconcile" (to bring back together elements that have been split apart), "compose" (to place things in relation to one another), and "invent" (both to create anew and, according to the OED, to "discover" or "come upon"[33]) as the verbs proper to poetic writing. To "reconcile / the people and the stones": the poet seeks to bring mind and matter back into sympathy, and his instrument is "metaphor," or "carrying over" one thing over to another by way of comparison or equation. Indeed, metaphor is crucial to this this poem. By simply *com-posing* them in parallelism, Williams compares "snake" and "writing" in the first stanza, thus creating (or discovering) the striking physicality of the poetry he proposes. Rather than a form of conceptual reasoning or speculation, writing might be a wakeful, animal responsiveness to one's environment. (What are we to make, though, of the poet's additional identification with saxifrage, an agent of unmaking, as "his" flower and thus a figure for poetic making itself? Perhaps the proposal is that the decomposition of solid rock is what makes it available for poetic composition in the first place. Only in pieces can reality be rearranged.) "No ideas but in things": language itself becomes thing-like here, something almost to be handled, as Williams insists that "the writing / be of words," and that those words be composed, as they are in these sinuous lines, according to their slowness or quickness as

[32] Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 2*, 55.
[33] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd Ed., s.v. "invent."

much as by the ideas they carry. He never mentions Stevens, yet the poem reads almost as a rejoinder to his critique of Williams's poems.

For Williams, then, composition—the literal arrangement of words within the poem, the virtual arrangement of what the words name—is a kind of thinking through or with things, a mode quite different from the well-reasoned "judgments" Winters seeks or the full-bodied "fictions" Stevens elaborates. In comparison to Stevens, most of Williams's poems seem simple and spindly indeed, but spindliness is not the same as meaninglessness or stupidity. Stevens's belief that "what a writer has to say" (his ideas) and "his way of saying things" (his compositional techniques) are separable leads—and permits—him to read Williams as empty, but for Williams, it's precisely composition that generates meaning. With this distinction in mind, we might begin to read Stevens's description of Williams's "mobile-like arrangement of lines" against the grain of his own criticism, finding in the figure of the mobile (both a type of modernist sculpture and a toy common to children's cribs at midcentury) a useful model for understanding Williams's short poems.[34] The image of lightly jointed parts in motion recalls both "The Chinese Toy" and Baudelaire's account of "barbaric" toys made of paper and string. It also captures something about the formal qualities of a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow," one of Williams's spindliest and most famous works. To Stevens, such a slight poem might seem meaningless, but we can use his own terms to ask what mobile-like meanings the poem might spin out for us.

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[34] Williams's near-contemporary, Alexander Calder, is the artist most closely associated with mobiles, though it was Duchamp who first used the term "mobile" to describe his own bicycle-wheel sculpture and in turn suggested it as a name for Calder's kinetic sculptures. See Joan Marter, *Calder*, 123-25. Like Williams, Calder has also been characterized as a child, for better or worse. For more commentary on this aspect of Calder's work and reception, see Marter, 132 and 250-51. Marter herself celebrates Calder's childlikeness: "He continues to be universally admired for joining childhood play with art, and for setting new parameters of the definition of sculpture" (231). See also James Johnson Sweeney, *Alexander Calder* and "Alexander Calder: Work and Play," *Art in America* 51, 1963, 93-96.

The poem we usually call "The Red Wheelbarrow" first appeared as section XXII in *Spring and All.* Untitled and placed among longer poems and chunks of digressive prose about the powers of the imagination, the poem seems even more diminutive in its original context, more a passing note than a minimalist icon of modernism. Yet it is the only poem quoted by Marion Strobel, who calls it "no more than a pretty and harmless statement," in the only review the book received, published in *Poetry*, which perhaps testifies to the strange power the poem exerts even over those who disparage it.[35] It sticks in the mind. Strobel seems to be the first to call it "The Red Wheelbarrow," the title the poem carries when it appears on its page in *Collected Poems 1921-1931* and in most subsequent selections of Williams's work. Here it is:

> so much depends
> upon
>
> the red wheel
> barrow
>
> glazed with rain
> water
>
> beside the white
> chickens[36]

That the poem has come to be called "The Red Wheelbarrow," highlighting the object at its center, rather than by its first line, "so much depends," points up the degree to which the poem is read as a still image of a thing or, like a readymade, a thing itself. Bram Dijkstra, for instance, compares it to photographs by Stieglitz and his cohort: "it is a moment, caught at the point of its highest visual significance, in perfectly straightforward, 'realistic,' but highly selective detail; each word has its intrinsic evocative function, focusing the object and its essential structural relations to its immediate surroundings in concrete terms."[37] Dickran Tashjian likens it to a readymade: "Aside from the

[35] Strobel, "Middle-Aged Adolescence," 104.
[36] Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 1*, 224.
[37] Dijkstra, *Hieroglyphics of a New Speech*, 168.

opening declaration, which serves to underscore the significance of the wheelbarrow (much as Duchamp in choosing his object determined his readymade), Williams presents the wheelbarrow itself, the readymade transposed into language through accurate, concise description and subtle phrasing."[38] While the terms used by both critics are questionable (How do we determine a moment's "highest visual significance"? What is a word's "intrinsic evocative function"? Can a visual readymade be so readily "transposed into language"?), what's most interesting are the ways Dijkstra and Tashjian disregard the poem's first stanza, the former by writing as though it's simply not there and the latter by setting it aside with a dubious comparison to Duchamp's method. It's really only possible to see the poem as a snapshot of a moment or the "presentation" of an object once that opening rhetorical wager has been cropped out. The words "so much depends / upon" establish the poem as a decidedly linguistic gesture (an independent clause), and moreover as an assertion of extra-visual value. Without the verb "depends," the red wheelbarrow might indeed seem visually arrested as a single object in a single moment, but that would be a different poem.

Another striking thing about these readings of "The Red Wheelbarrow" is how clearly their language recalls the terms in which Ezra Pound propounded his three principles of imagism:

> 1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
> 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
> 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.[39]

In Dijkstra's description of the poem as "straightforward, 'realistic,'" and in Tashjian's claim that Williams "presents the wheelbarrow itself," we can hear the strong echo of Pound's insistence on direct treatment, and both critics rehearse Pound's emphasis on careful economy, writing of the poem's "highly selective detail" and "accurate, concise description." Furthermore, in his emphasis on the poem's "concrete terms," Dijkstra seems to have taken to heart Pound's additional warning

[38] Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives*, 108.
[39] Pound, "A Retrospect," in *Literary Essays*, 3.

to "Go in fear of abstractions."[40] So while these critics are trying to compare Williams's little poem to photographs and readymade sculptures, they might more effectively be describing it as an imagist lyric. Given the degree to which Williams himself seems to have taken on Pound's poetics, it is almost inevitable that his poem would be read this way. "No ideas but in things" is Williams's homegrown compound of "Direct treatment of the 'thing'" and "Go in fear of abstractions," and his assertion in the introduction to *The Wedge* that "Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is a machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy" would be right at home among Pound's exhortations and prohibitions.[41] In his less assertive moments, however, Williams's identification with imagism is a way for him to describe himself as an unambitious naïf. Writing in 1928 to Louis Zukofsky about Zukofsky's sometimes troublesome tendency toward "abstract, philosophic-jargonish language," Williams self-deprecatingly acknowledges his debt to Pound while also expressing some doubt about his own version of imagism: "Perhaps by my own picayune imagistic mannerisms I hold together superficially what should by all means fall apart."[42] Here Williams seems to anticipate Stevens's later criticism, representing himself as wary of abstract concepts, constructing poems so slight they seem about to disintegrate.

Williams's Jersey imagism can indeed seem "picayune" and precariously toy-like by comparison to H.D. and Pound's more sophisticated continental manners. It's worth considering both how Williams's short poems compare to those by his two college friends and how well (or poorly) Pound's principles match the poems H.D. and Pound himself wrote during their imagist phases. Consider H.D.'s "Oread," often cited as a quintessential imagist poem:

> Whirl up, sea—
> whirl your pointed pines,
> splash your great pines
> on our rocks,

[40] Ibid., 5.
[41] Williams, Introduction *to The Wedge*, in *Collected Poems, Vol. 2*, 54.
[42] Williams, *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky*, 13.

hurl your green over us,
cover us with your pools of fir.[43]

Aside from brevity, this poem has little in common with "The Red Wheelbarrow." With its mythological title and apostrophe to the sea, "Oread" immediately contextualizes itself within a classical literary tradition and strives for dramatic rhetorical effect. Anaphora, epistrophe, and the invocation of the collective "us" amplify this effect over several lines. The formal structure of the poem's free verse is determined by its rhetorical elements, and its thematic logic is essentially metaphorical, overlaying two images—the sea and fir trees—such that water and land fuse in a single complex. Neither the sea nor the trees are strongly particularized; especially given the mythical invocation and elevated rhetoric, the natural details seem fairly generic. While "Oread" is consistent with Pound's imagist program in being concise and visually vivid, it is less a "direct treatment" or a "presentation" of a thing than a stylization of two familiar landscape "types" that blurs them into one another. In fact, seeing one thing in terms of another is common to many "classic" imagist poems, despite Pound's emphasis on "direct treatment." Consider his own "Fan-Piece, for Her Imperial Lord":

O fan of white silk,
    clear as frost on the grass-blade,
You also are laid aside.[44]

Pound adopts a Chinese manner rather than H.D.'s Greek one, but like "Oread," this poem contextualizes itself within a long literary tradition, immediately elevates its register with an apostrophe, and turns upon the comparison of one thing to another. Yet despite its initial "O," there's a matter-of-fact flatness to a "Fan-Piece" that brings it somewhat closer to "The Red Wheelbarrow," and like Williams's poem, it focuses on a particular, constructed object viewed at close range rather than an elemental panorama, although the elegant "fan of white silk" certainly

[43] H.D., *Collected Poems*, 55.
[44] Pound, *New Selected Poems and Translations*, 43.

makes a wheelbarrow seem homely. The final line—"You also are laid aside"—is almost comparable to "so much depends / upon" as a sort of framing device, but by ending with this line, Pound diverges from Williams and seems to offend against his own principles by shifting our attention away from the thing itself to someplace "offstage," or a moment just before or after this glimpsed still life. Suddenly the tiny haiku-like poem evokes and suspends an entire narrative, leaving us to wonder about absent characters.

Perhaps the closest imagist cousin to "The Red Wheelbarrow" is Pound's iconic "In a Station of the Metro":

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
> Petals on a wet, black bough .[45]

Pound's poem is iconic in two senses: it's the textbook example of an imagist poem, and it functions as a static image. Especially with its original spacing restored, the poem resolutely emphasizes its things, isolating each of its two principal nouns ("apparition" and "Petals") at the head of each line. Typographic isolation also breaks off each of the first two prepositional phrases from the nouns they modify, encouraging us to focus on their own objects ("faces" and "crowd"), and in the third prepositional phrase, even the object of the preposition is set on its own, almost letting the adjective "black" become a noun itself. So the poem holds out its nouns at every opportunity, and furthermore, since it's constructed simply of two noun phrases placed adjacent to each other on two lines without a single verb, the whole construction itself tends toward noun-like stillness. The only movement in the poem is our own imaginative shuttling between the faces and the petals; here Pound pares the metaphoric structure of "Oread" or "Fan-Piece" down to its barest essentials. There is no rhetorical drama or implied narrative. In each of those other poems, we sense that what we see actually bears some significance beyond the visual aspect—either a nymphish spiritual

[45] Ibid., 39.

immersion in the elements or the narrative suspended somewhere outside the poem. "In a Station of the Metro" is a severely reduced poem, one that consists primarily, if not exclusively, of an act of visual apprehension. In that regard, it might fit Dijkstra's and Tashjian's description of "The Red Wheelbarrow" better than "The Red Wheelbarrow" does.

Williams's poem is both more and less reduced than Pound's. It's more reduced than any of the three poems above in that it directly treats or presents only one thing, involving no comparison between two different images. And clearly Williams's diction and tone are plainer and "lower" (more Jersey?) than either H.D.'s or Pound's. Even "In a Station of the Metro" features the rich word "apparition," which isn't so likely to appear in ordinary conversation, while the fanciest word Williams uses is "glazed," which appears frequently enough in daily speech. But "The Red Wheelbarrow" is less reduced than "In a Station of the Metro" in that it's an independent clause, and furthermore, one that begins with an expansive claim: "so much depends / upon." So we return to the first stanza, which was problematic for Dijkstra and Tashjian and which makes trouble for any attempt to describe the poem as a photograph, a readymade, or an imagist poem. Even while most of the poem seems to treat the thing more directly than any of the archetypal imagist poems above, as a broad assertion of value, these first lines are more abstract than any of H.D.'s high-flown rhetorical flourishes or Pound's narrative implications. Gesturing well beyond the thing itself and the confines of the poem with his capacious "so much," Williams seems clearly to have violated the rule "Go in fear of abstraction."

Or has he? We can also think of "The Red Wheelbarrow" as putting "No ideas but in things" into practice, but in a different way than the poem is usually read as doing. Indeed, critics such as Dijkstra and Tashjian focus only on the "thing" side of William's dictum, but let's not forget about the "ideas" side of things. As we learned in reading "A Sort of a Song," Williams understands composition to be a mode of thinking through or with things, a paradoxically concrete sort of

abstraction. "The Red Wheelbarrow" begins as if the poem is going to offer a more conceptual assertion, one that might continue at a relatively high level of abstraction: "So much depends upon the appropriate integration of agricultural technology, seasonal weather patterns, and sensible animal husbandry." Much of the little poem's curious power and memorability, however, comes from the diminution of the expectation established by the first stanza. With the second stanza, the largeness of the rhetorical gambit suddenly narrows to "the red wheel / barrow." The poem's mode abruptly shifts from reasoning to seeing, with that line break minutely adjusting our focus from the tightly ground-level "wheel" to the slightly larger complete "wheel / barrow." Where we might have expected the continuation of an idea, we get things, and with this substitution, the word "depends" becomes newly significant.[46] Rather than express abstract causality or subordination, the verb regains the physical sense encoded in its etymology, the sense of one thing "hanging down" from another—a simple interrelation of real objects in space. This is intellectual activity, but not of the sort that Winters or Stevens would recognize as meaningful.

"The Red Wheelbarrow" also concretizes, or literalizes, the idea of dependency in the "dependent" movement created by the interaction of enjambment and grammatical syntax. The poem's formal structure is organized not according to rhetorical patterns (like "Oread") or natural syntactical breaks (like "Fan-Piece") but according to word count. This more abstract pattern visually and (if we read aloud with attention to line breaks) sonically interrupts or suspends the

[46] In *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*, Charles Altieri also focuses on the meaning of "depends" in "The Red Wheelbarrow," framing the entire poem as a "treatment of dependency as a poetic site" (233). As I do, Altieri considers the ways each of the poem's stanzas depend upon one another and upon the opening assertion, but he borrows the technical language of phenomenology to cast his reading in philosophical terms: "Rather than presenting an icon that we take as a perceptual reality, Williams makes the iconic force of art testimony for the most abstract, yet most intimate of psychological energies: those that define the very form of intentionality" (234). Here I must also acknowledge my debt to Hugh Kenner's reading of the poem in *Homemade World*, which first suggests its mobile-like qualities: "The lines, the words, dangle in equidependency, attracting the attention, isolating it, so that the sentence in which they are arrayed comes to seem like a suspension system" (59). This, I think, it one of the most perceptive sentences written about Williams's poetry, and the reading I offer here ought to be understood as an elaboration of Kenner's passing remark.

poem's syntax across line breaks and between stanzas such that we become more concretely aware of the poem's grammatical and rhythmic movements.[47] In this regard its enjambments and spaces between stanzas function similarly to the gaps in the lines of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," but Williams's interruptions are more radical, and the poem's vertical arrangement contributes to a stronger sense of dependency among the parts. Pound's breaks atomize the poem, and its more horizontal orientation allows the isolated words to rest in greater autonomy from one another, while each of Williams's lines and stanzas briefly holds its own and then tips or turns into the next, much as they did in "A Chinese Toy." "Depends" depends upon "upon" in the second lines since that verb always takes a preposition; the preposition "upon" depends upon the next stanza for its object; and the third line's "wheel" depends upon the fourth line for its completion with "barrow." The enjambments are slightly gentler in the second half of the poem—the third stanza is a complete participial phrase, the fourth a complete prepositional phrase—yet "rain" still tips into "water," and "white" turns over to resolve with "chickens."

The repetition of the three-word / one-word pattern creates a steady yet off-kilter sense of return in the poem, and each rotation moves the mind's eye through the virtual visual field, outward from wheel to wheelbarrow, zooming in on the wet surface, then zooming out to the chickens in the space around the wheelbarrow. Rather than a static icon, this poem is a little moving image machine, a simple toy barnyard, a mobile-like arrangement conducting a "movement [that] is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary quality," as Williams would put it. Far from a negligible frame that sets apart a photograph or a readymade, then, the first stanza's rhetorical gesture is more like a "playful hand" that sets this mobile into motion. With the words "so much depends / upon," the poet gives the still image of the red wheelbarrow a gentle grammatical push to make it go,

[47] In his study *Williams Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure*, Stephen Cushman writes that, "A short-line poem is in a state of constant enjambment" (22). For his excellent, comprehensive account of Williams's "counterpointing" of line and syntax, see Chapter 2, "Why Have I Divided My Lines as I Have."

inviting us to follow its turns and dependencies. With sixteen basic words and some line breaks, Williams turns an idea into a thing—a spindly toy—to think with, a little machine that focuses the attention, our most basic imaginative agency. It truly isn't much, but we might follow Baudelaire in asking whether such a simple image "create[s] a lesser reality" in our minds than "those New Year's Day marvels which are a tribute paid by parasitic servility to the wealth of the parents rather than a gift to the poetry of childhood."

What good is the poetry of childhood, though, to responsible, busy adults? What does such a simple contraption as "The Red Wheelbarrow" offer us? Of course, it's difficult to convince someone that a particular activity is fun if he isn't already enjoying himself, but I would encourage even the most sophisticated adult reader to indulge in the serious pleasure of a little poem. "When the urge to play overcomes an adult," writes Benjamin in his essay "Old Toys," "this is not simply a regression to childhood. To be sure, play is always liberating. Surrounded by a world of giants, children use play to create a world appropriate to their size. But the adult, who finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form."[48] Described this way, playing with a simple toy—and Benjamin, like Baudelaire, marvels at how children make the most of the humblest materials and mechanisms—is a sort of homeopathic remedy to adult experience. In manipulating scaled-down images of familiar reality, we might imagine new ways of moving through the larger world and ways of manipulating its parts such that the "sting" becomes less acute. It's not that a poem like "The Red Wheelbarrow" makes light of the world but that it makes the material of the world seem perhaps a little lighter, its otherwise static forms newly mobile and open to rearrangement. In this regard, Williams's slight and lucid little verses bear some similarity to Stein's busy and nonsensical prose blocks. Both find ways to

[48] Benjamin, "Old Toys," in *Selected Writings, Vol. 2*, 100.

reanimate the rigid world of adulthood, and as Winnicott understood well, it's just when we're in the grips of sanity that we're most in need of primitive pleasures.

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If "The Red Wheelbarrow" works like a "barbaric" penny toy, other poems by Williams are somewhat more like Baudelaire's caged rat—objects appropriated from "life itself" and simply reframed as toys. The analogy of a poem to a readymade sculpture is imperfect, but Duchamp remains a helpful point of comparison for reading Williams's short poems, not only poems that treat "anti-poetic" objects, such as "The Red Wheelbarrow," but also—and especially—another of the poet's anthology pieces, "This Is Just to Say." What critics have often focused on in comparing Williams to his artist friends Duchamp, Stieglitz, Demuth, and Sheeler is these artists' embrace of ordinary scenes and artifacts of contemporary American life—city streets, skyscrapers, advertisements, fire engines, mill buildings, barns, wheelbarrows, urinals, and other industrial design products. Stieglitz's cityscapes and Sheeler's earnest, Precisionist barns can seem quite distant from Duchamp's ironic urinal and shovel, yet all these artists seek to open the frame of high art to homelier stuff.[49] Indeed, techniques of reframing are crucial to all these artists, as they are to Williams. With their readymades, however, Duchamp and Williams play with framing in more radical ways than photographs, paintings, and imagist poems do. Like *Fountain*, "This Is Just to Say" doesn't just frame and compose an image within that boundary, it emphasizes and dismantles the boundary between art and life itself.

The poem first appeared in Williams's 1934 *Collected Poems*:

> I have eaten
> the plums
> that were in
> the icebox

[49] In addition to Dijkstra and Tashjian, see also Peter Schmidt's *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition*, especially Chapter 4, "The Aggregate is Untamed: Williams' Dadaist Poetry," and Henry Sayre, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, especially Chapter 2, "Shaping America."

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold[50]

"The Red Wheelbarrow" may be the poem numerous critics regard as Williams's readymade poem, but this is clearly the poem that's more like Duchamp's *Fountain* and Baudelaire's poor boy's rat. Williams seems simply to have lifted a kitchen note from life itself and, by versifying and titling it, reframed it as a poem.[51] Discussing *Fountain* in 1917, Duchamp wrote that he chose "an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view—created a new thought for that object."[52] Here the artist exercises his agency in simple acts of selection and re-contextualization. Whereas Stieglitz or Sheeler reframes a piece of life itself by representing it in a new medium, Duchamp simply reframes the original object by applying new terms to it. It was a urinal; now it's a fountain. It wasn't a work of art; now it is. If this is representation, it's of a very literal variety: the artist presents something to us again, only by another name. What's crucial here is that the urinal was a physical object before it became a sculpture; the artistic transformation didn't change the kind of thing it is. That's why "This Is Just to Say" is more readymade than "The Red Wheelbarrow" is. It's only partially true that, as Henry Sayre writes, with "The Red Wheelbarrow" Williams "places his material in an equally strange [compared to an art gallery] environment—the poem—and new wheelbarrow's accidental but very material presence in

[50] Williams, *Collected Poems, Vol. 1*, 372.

[51] For a perceptive take on Williams's reframing, see Robert von Hallberg, "The Politics of Description." Von Hallberg writes of this gesture: "There are no apparent complexities or contradictions to interpret, and that it just the point. The only thing that invites interpretation is the label of "poem" implied by the unjustified margin on the right. The poem short-circuits conventional expectations of 'meaningfulness' in poetry" (143).

[52] Duchamp, "The Richard Mutt Case," 5.

this new context invests it with a new dignity."[53] Putting a red wheelbarrow into words transforms an actual physical object into a virtual one, and in this basic sense, the wheelbarrow cannot be a "very material presence" in the poem. A readymade poem, if such a thing can be said to exist, must appropriate a piece of language itself, not a piece of the physical object world, and that's what "This Is Just to Say" does. Duchamp turns a urinal into an artwork by giving it a title, reorienting it so that it rests on its back, and placing it on a pedestal in a gallery. Williams turns the text of a note into a poem by giving it a title, reorienting its sentences by breaking them into lines, and printing it in a book.

So what's "the new thought" that Williams creates for his object by reframing it as a poem? This poem's first thought is its straightforward, seemingly artless expression of slightly guilty pleasure in the succulence of plums, and beyond that, of the pleasure of not really apologizing. But this is really the object's old thought—the same one it expressed when it was just a kitchen note. The old thought doesn't disappear as the new one emerges; it is preserved, re-contextualized, and played upon. The new thought is about the difference between a kitchen note and a poem, and to think this thought, we must recognize the way "This Is Just to Say" doubles back on itself in meta-pragmatic knowingness, its title ironically emphasizing the poem's status as a linguistic act. Once we start paying attention to this performativity, we might notice that "this" purports, however playfully, to perform not only the act of informing—of "saying"—but also of apologizing, with the request "Forgive me." And this performative utterance seeks another in response: the words "I forgive you," which would perform the requested apology. So "this"—a kitchen note—is not *just* to say, it's also to *do*. But then we must acknowledge that "this" is also no longer really even a kitchen note, if it ever was: cut up into verse and published in a periodical or book, it's a poem. All the while we know we're not really being issued an apology or asked for forgiveness. The trick is that "this"—a poem—

[53] Sayre, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, 66.

is *not* just to say, or to do, at all. It has been lifted out of the kitchen, out of the context in which it served its original purpose, and turned into a toy note, a bit of language for us to play with.

One way to play with the poem is to imitate it, and over the years "This Is Just to Say" has seemed uniquely available to imitation. A 2008 episode of the National Public Radio program *This American Life*, organized around the theme of non-apologetic apologies, features a segment all about Williams's poem and its imitations, including a few written just for the program by such NPR personalities as Sarah Vowell and David Rakoff. One of the most interesting things about the imitations is how far they stray from Williams's poem. Vowell's is the closest: "I carved your name, not mine, into the arm of dad's chair. Sorry you were punished. But the wood was so gummy, and my knife was so sharp."[54] Since line breaks don't easily translate on the radio, we don't know if Vowell wrote her imitation in verse (and there are no line breaks in the transcript of the episode), but Vowell did preserve Williams's count of twenty-eight words, and her concluding intensified adjectives, "so gummy" and "so sharp," clearly echo "This Is Just to Say." The offense for which Vowell apologizes, however, is more calculated and less epicurean than Williams's snack, and the tone of her imitation thus seems more deadpan. Rakoff's imitation, meanwhile, bears little resemblance at all to the original poem: "At our wedding, I disappeared briefly to have sex with your sister up against the back of the Portosans. What can I say? The chardonnay was so fresh and cold and I, so full of love and a sense of family. And I said, I'm sure one day we'll laugh about this. Well, by one day, I meant that day. And by we, I meant me. And by laugh, I meant laugh."[55] There's an echo of Williams in "so fresh and cold," but Rakoff has written a fairly cruel miniature psychological narrative instead of a casual household note. The only thing it has in common in with "This Is Just

[54] "Mistakes Were Made," *This American Life*, April 18, 2009.
[55] Ibid.

to Say" are the gestures of confession and apology, but the apology is even more attenuated in Rakoff's imitation, where "Forgive me" becomes "What can I say?"

The program also refers to Kenneth Koch's "Variations on a Theme by Williams," perhaps the most well-known imitation of "This Is Just to Say" (and the title of which seems also to nod at Stevens's early "Nuances of a Theme by Williams"):

> 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.
>
> 2.
> We laughed at the hollyhocks together
> and then I sprayed them with lye.
> Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing.
>
> 3.
> I gave away the money that you had been saving to live on for the next ten years.
> The man who asked for it was shabby
> and the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold.
>
> 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![56]

Each of Koch's variations pins itself to Williams's original in one or more of three different ways: a simple opening announcement of a misdeed, a gesture of apology (either "I am sorry" or "Forgive me"), and/or concluding intensified adjectives ("so inviting," "so juicy and cold"). Yet Koch's offences are absurdly egregious, and the variations' humor comes in large part from their flat delivery of such absurdity. (The fourth variation works somewhat differently, with a final exclamation that tonally recalls Williams while also perhaps making a joke about the poet-doctor's promiscuity.) And more significantly, even though they are in verse, Koch's variations bear no resemblance to William's three tightly-enjambed four-line stanzas. Indeed, Koch adopts the basic

[56] Koch, *Collected Poems*, 135.

gestures of Williams's poem—confessing and apologizing—but preserves his own characteristic style of long, prosey lines.

There's a similar indifference to the form of "This Is Just to Say" in the many imitations of the poem written by grade-school students and published in Koch's anthology *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?: Teaching Great Poetry to Children*. Here are three of the remarkable poems Koch includes:

Sorry But It Was Beautiful

Sorry I took your money and burned it but it looked like the world falling apart when
it crackled and burned.
So I think it was worth it after all you can't see the world fall apart every day.
by Andrew Vecchione[57]

Dear Cat

Please
for
give
me
for
watching
your
eyes
gleam
in
the
night.
by Lorraine Fedison[58]

Dear Bird

I am sorry
To kill you
But when you're cooked
You taste too good
With gravy.
Author unknown[59]

[57] Koch, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, 134.
[58] Ibid., 135.
[59] Ibid., 136.

All of these poems bear a clear relation to Williams's original, but each recalls "This Is Just to Say" in different ways. "Sorry But It Was Beautiful" apologizes for using up something that the addressee had saved, as Williams's addressee had probably been saving the plums, but Vecchione's long lines and vivid, extravagant simile are quite unlike Williams's poem. "Dear Cat" takes up Williams's plain diction and straightforward syntax, but Fedison adds a layer of complexity and mystery by apologizing not to a human being but to an animal for an act of voyeurism the cat might not even have minded; this poem's one-word lines recall the form of "The Locust Tree in Flower," another poem Koch taught these children, but they are unlike the lines and stanzas of "This Is Just to Say." In its gustatory emphasis on an ordinary sort of meal, "Dear Bird" is perhaps the most direct imitation of the original, but here again the poem addresses an animal (as do several other of the children's poems), and though its lines are roughly the same length as Williams's, the poem's form and rhetoric are not especially similar to his.

The variety and freedom of all these imitations—by poets, radio personalities, and schoolchildren—is a testament to the generative permissiveness of Williams's original poem. While certain bits of its diction and rhetoric resurface in some of the imitations, its particular verse form finally seems relatively dispensable. All that seems to matter is that there is some sort of verse lineation that sets the poem apart from the language of ordinary apology, framing it as the sort of literary construction we call a poem (with the exception of Rakoff's imitation, which seems completely untethered to any idea of form). The formal design may be fairly weak, as it is in Koch's and Vecchione's long lines, but the outlandish deeds and extravagant imagery of these poems help distinguish them as "poetic" even if their form does less of this work. The other element that survives in all of these imitations is the gesture of apology or subverted apology, and it's the possibility that a poem might consist of something so simple that most seems to delight and fascinate both the children and the adults who imitate Williams. This is the power of his readymade:

by simply reframing something as familiar as a note of apology, Williams un-frames the realm of poetry. Everyone feels invited to try it out; everyone is granted permission to turn the materials of their own lives into poems, however trivial or exciting they may be. "*A poem can be made of anything,*" Williams write in *Kora in Hell*, and with "This Is Just to Say," he effectively says, "I can make one, and so can you."[60]

"The Red Wheelbarrow," too, seems to call out for imitation, but interestingly enough, many writing exercises and imitations based upon that poem hew more closely to the syntax and verse form of the original. A quick Internet search for such exercises turns up several that follow not only Williams's focus on a single ordinary object but also his word count, grammatical syntax, enjambments, and stanza pattern. That "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "This Is Just to Say" summon these different modes of imitation—one primarily formal, the other primarily performative—points toward the differences in the ways these two poems work. Like Baudelaire's penny toys, "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a lightweight, articulate device that "construct[s] an image as approximative as possible" with a minimum of material. What fascinates us is the movement of its parts—the precise interaction of syntax, line, and stanza—so successful imitation of the device requires the careful construction of a similar mechanism. The fascination of "This Is Just to Say," meanwhile, is in the way it seems to deformalize both the poem and the category of poetry itself. While the poem is clearly the product of carefully measured versification, its lines and stanzas break syntax in ways that are less pronounced and thus seem less significant. To its imitators, its particular form is less important than the simple fact that has any form; verse becomes a minimal framing device in the same way a pedestal is a mere platform that transforms Duchamp's urinal into an artwork, or a cage is the enclosure than turns a rat into a toy.

[60] Williams, *Imaginations*, 70.

What the two types of toys have in common is the simplicity—even the poverty—of their means. The challenge of Williams's seemingly easy poetry, then, is to accept it on its own barbaric terms. For the children in Koch's classroom, it seems hardly to be a challenge at all: "Once they knew what a poem was about, they wanted to write. The hour was busy but it didn't seem rushed. The very fact that they wrote so many poems (some children wrote six or seven) in one hour seemed to add to their feeling of inspiration and freedom and to put them in a fairly wild and receptive creative mood."[61] While it might seem stupid to certain authorities, Williams's naïve modernism again and again proves itself inspirational, and even fun, to what Stevens calls "the present generation." His poems are less about intellectual ambition, artistic dominion, or allusive literary sophistication than about simple self-assertion in play and attention. Poems such as "A Chinese Toy," "The Red Wheelbarrow," and "This is Just to Say" let the present generation, among whom we may count ourselves, live in the world a little. In reading them and perhaps in writing our own, we might aspire to freedoms Koch's students allow themselves: "they enjoyed…asserting the importance of their secret pleasure against the world of adult regulations. They apologized, and were pleased about, breaking things, taking things, forgetting and neglecting things, eating things, hitting people, and looking at things."[62]

[61] Koch, *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*, 130.
[62] Ibid., 130-31.

CHAPTER FOUR

LORINE NIEDECKER'S FLOATING LIFE

It is tempting to view Lorine Niedecker as a prototypical naïve poet, and indeed she was for many years read this way, if she was read at all. Certain particulars of her biography—residence in rural Wisconsin, intermittent employment that at one point involved cleaning hospital floors, and scant publication during her lifetime—can create an aura of naïve preciosity around both the person and her work. Her poems, like many by William Carlos Williams, tend to be short and plain-spoken, concerned with the natural world and the quotidian particulars of Fort Atkinson, her hometown. Louis Zukofsky, Niedecker's longtime friend and one personal link to the broader culture of literary modernism, influentially included her work in his pedagogical manual *A Test of Poetry* as an example of "folk poetry," a label Niedecker herself applied to the work, especially the poems gathered in her first book, *New Goose*. Zukofsky himself remained a fairly marginal figure for most of his career despite connections to Pound and Williams and a more advantageous location in New York City, but his advocacy for Niedecker and his classification of her work were influential among the small cohort of poets who were paying attention. For decades she would be known, where she was known at all, as Zukofsky's countrified apprentice out in the boonies—a talented, slightly wry yet innocent little sister to her modernist brothers.

Niedecker's work went mostly unpublished between the appearance of *New Goose* in 1946 and the final decade of her life, when several enterprising British and American young men took up the cause, bringing four collections into print between 1960 and 1970, the year of Niedecker's

death.[1] For these self-styled outsider poets and small-press publishers, who were undoubtedly crucial to the survival of Niedecker's poetry for future readers, the romance of the hermit-like folk poetess was part of the work's appeal. Consider Jonathan Williams's jacket copy for *T&G*: "Lorine Niedecker is the most absolute poetess since Emily Dickinson. She shuns the public world, lives, reads, and writes, very quietly, near the town of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, by the Rock River on its way to Lake Koshkonong. Her importance to—and remove from—the urbane literary establishment is of the rank of Miss Dickinson." Elsewhere Williams praises her "plain, rustic line—the old farmhand potato."[2] While his advocacy is exuberant, it can also seem to diminish Niedecker—and to make the value of her work depend upon its diminutiveness. Her poetry is important, Williams avers, because of its quietude (feminized as Dickinsonian) and its distance from the power centers of the literary establishment. He depicts the work as a kind of rural miracle, sprung like a tuber from native ground. Niedecker, who could indeed play the part of the bumpkin and shied away from self-promotion, bears some responsibility for the persistence of her rustic mystique, but it is an exaggeration to say that she "shun[ned] the public world."[3] She was as hungry for publication and readership as any writer and frustrated to be considered merely a "Wisconsin poet." When *T&G* was shelved among "regional materials" in the University of Wisconsin library, she wrote pointedly to Cid Corman: "I should ask: Which region—London, Wisconsin, New York?"[4] Exacting modesty and the textures of rural life are unmistakable qualities of Niedecker's poetry, but to reduce the work to those qualities alone unfairly circumscribes its reception. As

[1] Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press published Niedecker's second collection, *My Friend Tree*, in Scotland in 1961; Stuart Montgomery's Fulcrum Press published *North Central* in England in 1968 and *My Life by Water* in 1970; Jonathan Williams's Jargon Society published *T&G* in North Carolina in 1969. Throughout the 60s, Cid Corman published her poems regularly in *Origin* and eventually became her literary executor.
[2] Jonathan Williams, *A Palpable Elysium*, 62.
[3] On Niedecker's "self-effacement," see Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 5; Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 4.
[4] Niedecker, *Between Your House and Mine*, 208.

Gilbert Sorrentino summed it up in 1996, "Niedecker is in peril of being trivialized by her admirers," cast inescapably as a "bumpkin-savant."[5]

Today, however, Niedecker is no longer in such peril. Over the last twenty years, she has been gradually, rightfully elevated to the status of a "major" modernist poet, writing from rural Wisconsin but belonging among the international avant-garde. Her *Collected Works*, edited by Jenny Penberthy, was published by the University of California Press in 2002, making the entirety of her writing more widely available than ever before. Furthermore, in two important volumes published by university presses, *Lorine Niedecker: Woman and Poet*, edited by Penberthy, and *Radical Vernacular: Lorine Niedecker and the Poetics of Place*, edited by Elizabeth Willis, a range of prominent critics and poets have carefully reconsidered of the roles of class, gender, and geography in her work and its reception. While Niedecker is still not as central to the canon of modernist poetry as H.D. or Marianne Moore, she is no longer in jeopardy of being forgotten. She is hardly a household name, even in literary households, but many poets and scholars of poetry now understand her work in the broad context of innovative Anglophone modernism, not within the narrower confines of folk or local-color writing. Lorine Niedecker, it seems, has permanently escaped the "regional materials" section of the library. She is a bumpkin no more.

At this late date, with the value of Niedecker's work finally secured in the academy and among poets beyond the coterie of Zukofsky's inheritors, it might seem retrograde to propose that we still ought to read her as a naïve poet, but that is what I will do in this chapter. Schiller characterizes the naïve poet as one who displays "*childlikeness, where it is no longer expected*," and childlikeness is essential to Niedecker's poetry.[6] Indeed, she repeatedly presents herself as a *minor* poet—not one of lesser talent or value, but one who carefully cultivates simplicity and resists

[5] Sorrentino, "Misconstruing Lorine Niedecker," in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 287, 289.
[6] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 184; italics in the original.

growing up. Her poetry dwells in the imaginative spaces of childhood, and even late in life she casts herself as a minor, ever the child of the two parents who haunted her imagination. Discussing Niedecker's use of nursery rhymes, ballad stanzas, and quasi-haiku, Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes that "She may seem to seek a minority, a littleness, a miniature scale almost unthinkable, especially for a female writer who can be culturally coded as minor no matter what genre she chooses, but especially if she chooses tiny-looking and folk forms."[7] We might add to the smallness of her craft her identifications with children, small animals ("I'm just a sandpiper in a marshy region," she wrote to Edward Dahlberg in 1955[8]), and the culturally minor voices of her neighbors and coworkers in Fort Atkinson, whom she called "the people." Here we can recall that Schiller also describes the naïve poet to be, like Homer, immediately in touch with both the natural world that surrounds him and the culture of which he is part.[9] Yet while there is a sense in which Niedecker fits nicely into Schiller's account of naïve poetry, we also know that, even alone in central Wisconsin, she was hardly ignorant of what he might call the more "sentimental" artifices of modernist literature. She read widely and was well-acquainted not only with Zukofsky's Objectivist poetics but also with European surrealism, and she understood her own writing in relation to these sophisticated developments.[10] Like the naïveté of Williams and Stein, then, Niedecker's is a paradoxically sentimental, or modernist, naïveté—which is to say that her "farmhand potatoes" are not simply dug

[7] Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous: Gender, Glass, Genre, and Resistances," in *Blue Studios*, 143. In thinking about the ways Niedecker deliberately deploys elements formerly chalked up to her "naïveté," I'm following not only Blau DuPlessis but also Michael Davidson ("Life by Water: Lorine Niedecker and Critical Regionalism," in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 3-20), and Peter Middleton ("Lorine Niedecker's 'Folk Base' and Her Challenge to American Avant-Garde," in Blau DuPlessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 160-88.). All three critics argue that Niedecker deploys the very qualities that make her work seem slight—her gender, class position, regional focus, and folksiness—as strategies of resistance to hegemonic forces within metropolitan modernism.

[8] Quoted in Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 4.

[9] See Schiller, *Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 195-95.

[10] For more on Niedecker's engagement with surrealism, see Nicholls, "Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal," in Penberthy, Woman and Poet, 193-218; Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paean to Place' and Its Reflective Fusions" in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 151-79; and Jennison, "Waking into Ideology: Lorine Niedecker's Experiments in the Syntax of Consciousness," in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 131-50.

up out of the ground but are cultivated with careful art. And insofar as she casts herself not only as a poet-child but also as a poet-dependent, both provided for and constrained by her parents, we might also call her modernist naïveté a modernist *minority*: Niedecker imagines dependency as a zone of aesthetic potential, and she crafts an artifice of childhood in an effort to retain the conditional freedom it offers.

Niedecker was fascinated with childhood throughout her career. Her self-described "folk poems," written in the 1930s and 1940s, often assume the voice of a child, as if children were uniquely receptive listeners, and the retrospective poems written toward the end of her life return frequently to the scenes and sensations of her childhood on Blackhawk Island near Fort Atkinson—the world she describes in "Paean to Place" as "green / slide and slant / of shore and shade / Child-time—wade / thru weeds."[11] At once a particular period of her life and a more enduring mode of imagination, "Child-time" is both a source and an aspiration of Niedecker's poetry. Even as an adult, Niedecker often writes from the position of child within a family structure, as she does in this untitled poem from *New Goose*:

> Well, spring overflows the land,
> floods floor, pump, wash machine
> of the woman moored to this low shore by deafness.
>
> Good-bye to lilacs by the door
> and all I planted for the eye.
> If I could hear—too much talk in the world,
> too much wind washing, washing
> good black dirt away.
>
> Her hair is high.
> Big blind ears.
>
> I've wasted my whole life in water.
> My man's got nothing but leaky boats.
> My daughter, writer, sits and floats.
> (264)

[11] Niedecker, *Collected Works*, 264. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

Daughterhood is this poem's organizing principle. While the framing voice establishes a degree of impersonal distance by referring to the second voice as "the woman" instead of "my mother," the details of deafness, her "man's…leaky boats," and her "daughter, writer" clearly identify this speaker as Lorine's mother, Theresa "Daisy" Niedecker, née Kunz. During Lorine's birth in 1903, Daisy lost much of her hearing and over the course of daughter's childhood grew depressed and increasingly isolated.[12] Lorine's father, Henry Niedecker, made much of his living by carp-seining on Lake Koshkonong; a loving father to Lorine but an adulterer and a poor money-manager, he "had nothing but leaky boats" for his wife. The triangular relationship between Lorine, Daisy, and Henry forms the basic matrix of Niedecker's poetics.

Indeed, she often focalizes two of her poetry's other naïve elements— the sounds of "folk" speech and the textures of her natural environment—through the perspective of a child within a family. In just the first two words of "Well, spring overflows the land," we can identify both Niedecker's slant relation to vernacular language and her fascination with water, the element that defines her landscape and thus comes to define her poetry. The poem is an arrangement of two speaking voices, the difference between them indicated formally by the shifting left margin, but it is not a conversation. Instead, one voice frames the other. The first word, "Well," marks the text as an imitation of conversational speech, and the diction throughout is plain, but "Well, spring" also gives us a wink: this speech might be plain, but it's also artfully organized. Puns are one of Niedecker's favorite devices for making ordinary speech say more than it might at first seem to say. In this case, the pun makes seasonal flooding—a basic fact of the Niedecker family's life—more than just a threat or an annoyance. As a "wellspring," flooding is also an abundant source of the medium upon which Lorine, the "daughter, writer," floats.

[12] See Penberthy, introduction to *Collected Works*, 1-2; ; Peters, 9-10.

"Well, spring overflows the land" articulates the complexity of this mother-daughter relationship in its fine calibration of register. Without exception the poem's words are simple and concrete, referring to basic facts of a domestic interior and the landscape just beyond its door, and this consistency of diction across two voices establishes a sense of the family's common milieu. Within this shared world, however, subtle elevations of register distinguish Niedecker's framing voice from her mother's framed voice. The metaphorical logic of the third line's "woman moored to this low shore by deafness," which figures Daisy's disability as a rope preventing her from floating out onto the open waters of a broader world, rearranges the familiar elements of Blackhawk Island just strangely enough to move beyond ordinary speech into something more literary. When the daughter's voice returns in the third stanza, it does so with decidedly modernist concision. "Her hair is high. / Big blind ears" is a vivid bit of imagism, swiftly conjuring this frustrated woman's hair drawn tightly up to expose her unhearing ears, which are synesthetically figured as "blind." (Niedecker, in a curious inversion of her mother's disability, had extremely weak eyes, and as we will see, acoustic alertness becomes a mode of vision in her poetry; a bird lover, her way of watching birds was by necessity to listen to their songs.[13]) A secondary effect of the image is to suggest that Daisy is somehow bat-like, hiding in the eaves of the flooded house. Her daughter's poetic idiom is compact, sophisticated, and multivalent. It would not be surprising to learn that she has been reading the little magazines *Poetry* and *transition*.[14]

The voice Niedecker imagines for her withdrawn mother is not that of a modernist poet. Daisy speaks with a sort of homespun resignation, weary of both domestic labor and the weather's relentless erosion of their property, always "washing, washing." She is fundamentally pessimistic,

[13] On Niedecker's listening to birds, see Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 66; on listening and acoustics in her poetry, see Robertson, "In Phonographic Deep Song: Sounding Niedecker," in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 83-90.

[14] On Niedecker's reading of little magazines, see Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 34-38, and Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofksky*, 17-25.

feeling that her life is already "wasted," and that even if she weren't deaf, she wouldn't be interested in what she might hear. Yet this voice is not without its own poetry, most obviously in the rhyme that snaps shut the poem's last two lines. In contrast to her daughter's literary metaphors and telegraphic, elliptical phrasing, Daisy's poetry is folksy and almost comic, more kitchen complaint than imagist lyric. It resonates not because it makes the familiar compellingly strange but because it pithily encapsulates an all-too-familiar predicament: my husband's no good and my daughter's no help. The important distinction here is not between poetry and ordinary speech, then, but between two registers of poetry: the literary register of modernism and the folk register of the mother and the family's neighbors on Blackhawk Island. Niedecker's writing, especially the work gathered in *New Goose*, lives in the margin where these two registers of poetry overlap and pull away from one another. "My mother was a kind of Mother Goose, straight out the people," wrote the poet to Ronald Ellis in 1966, explaining how she incorporated Daisy's spoken language into her own written verses.[15] Niedecker understood her mother, it seems, to be an outlet of the common poetry of "the people"—an authorless poetry from which an uncommon modernist poet might paradoxically draw her own authority. To become a "new" Mother Goose, she combined oral tradition with modernist literary tactics.

If folk language is one wellspring of Niedecker's poetry, the other is the actually watery natural environment of her upbringing. While she associates the language of "the people" with her mother, she links the marshes of Blackhawk Island with her father, even though Daisy is the parent who actually grew up there. In this untitled tribute, written around 1950, Niedecker depicts her relation to her environment as something inherited from Henry:

> He lived—childhood summers
> thru bare feet
> then years of money's lack
> and heat

[15] Quoted in Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 56.

beside the river—out of flood
    came his wood, dog,
woman, lost her, daughter—
    prologue

to planting trees. He buried carp
    beneath the rose
where grass-still
    the marsh rail goes.

To bankers on high land
    he opened his wine tank.
He wished his only daughter
    to work in the bank

but he'd given her a source
    to sustain her—
a weedy speech,
    a marshy retainer.
(169-70)

Throughout Niedecker's poetry, her father appears as the optimistic if beleaguered foil to her bitter mother. Out of the water that submerges Daisy's world, Henry fishes up his family and his livelihood. Despite the challenges it presents, the river is his natural element. The quasi-ballad of Henry Niedecker is a song of seemingly cheerful persistence in the face of financial hardships. Despite all he suffered, "He lived—," rather than feeling that he had wasted his life, and the poem suggests that something of his "childhood summers" survived with him into old age. While Daisy withdrew, Henry socialized—perhaps too much—with the Milwaukee and Chicago businessmen who stayed at the inn he ran on Blackhawk Island; in his good-natured accommodation of these moneyed guests, he frequently allowed their bills to go unpaid for extended periods.[16] And whereas Niedecker depicts her mother as demanding and frustrated by her daughter ("Wash the floors, Lorine!— / wash clothes! Weed!" urges Daisy in one poem), Henry hopes his precious daughter will have a life free from manual work (149). Another poem from this period describes him as the "Old

[16] See Niedecker's comments about her father in a June 1, 1958 letter to Zukofsky. in Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*, 246.

man who seined / to educate his daughter," and Niedecker did attend Beloit College for a year before she was called home to care for Daisy (174).

More sustaining, however, than any formal education Henry provided Lorine is the "source" he gifted her in childhood days spent outdoors exploring and fishing with him: "a weedy speech, / a marshy retainer." With characteristic concision, Niedecker merges landscape and language, as though her environment itself permeates the verbal texture of her poems. Untended yet fertile, found at the margins and in the cracks of cultivated property, "weedy speech" is a bit like folk language—endemic, persistent, and less than desirable to those of refined taste. Both folky and weedy, Niedecker's poetry opens itself to the encroachments of native species. With characteristic playfulness, she casts her uncultivated language as "a marshy retainer"—both a wall that holds back erosion and a steady source of income. The joke is that weedy speech is neither of these things. Water and weeds disperse rather than retain Niedecker's property, and her poetry hardly provides a living. Her permeable, island language is no compensation for not working at the bank, so whatever sustenance it offers must be of another, immaterial order. Here again, Niedecker presents herself as a floating daughter, an idler withdrawn from the actual economy into imaginative activity, provided for by her parents' labor. Water is where and why her parents work: Henry fishes for carp, Daisy cleans up after the floods. For "the woman moored to this low shore by deafness," rising waters only make more chores—the wash machine out of commission, floors to be mopped, rugs to be hung out. Lorine, however, "sits and floats" on the same element that so frustrates her mother. To be a writer, it seems, is be free from the labor that exhausts her parents.[17]

Under their care, Niedecker can be a minor poet attuned to the minor frequencies of weeds, water, and folk—humble alternatives to the cultivated, cosmopolitan authority of major

[17] My readings of "Well, spring overflows the land" and "He lived—childhood summers" are indebted to Blau DuPlessis's observations in "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous," in *Blue Studios*, 159-60.

modernism.[18] Safe in her creative "Child-time," the poet lets the water and words of others lap in and out of her own verses in a way that loosens any sense of ownership over them. In the world of these poems, the boundaries of a self are rather like the boundaries of property on Blackhawk Island: permeable and constantly shifting. Niedecker's "Child-time" thus recalls Winnicott's idea of the "potential space" of childhood, a zone of experience that is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective.[19] This space, in which the child feels safe to play alone and to idle in "desultory formless functioning" and "unintegrated personality," is for Winnicott the birthplace of creativity.[20] In early childhood, parents provide this space by managing the exigencies of the external world so that the child is only gradually disillusioned of her omnipotent harmony with her environment. In this

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[18] Niedecker's weedy, folky poetry might be said to offer her what Deleuze and Guattari call a "line of flight," especially if we keep in mind that the French *fuite* also suggests, as Brian Massumi points out, "flowing" and "leaking" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, xvii). Indeed, the terms in which I've been discussing her work also recall the concept of "minor literature" they elaborate in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. I want to be careful not to overburden Niedecker's poetry with an elaborate theoretical vocabulary, but insofar as it links cultural marginality, collective forms of language, animality, and childlikeness, the idea of minor literature is useful to keep in mind. Deleuze and Guattari define minor literature as "that which a minority constructs within a major language…in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization." In other words, it is the literature of a linguistic underclass within a dominant language, such as the vernacular German of Kafka's Prague Jews or perhaps the vernacular English of Niedecker's Wisconsin "people," distinguished by idiosyncratic elements of sound and expression that seem to exceed or escape the "territorializing" hegemony of the dominant language (16). For Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is always political and always communal—a linguistic force that might be channeled through a single author's writing but is nevertheless a "collective assemblage of enunciation" surging up from the margins with its deterritorializing potential (17-18). Another way of saying this might be that minor literature is folk literature.

In reading Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari are especially drawn to moments of "becoming-animal," when the author's otherwise human assemblage is permeated by the vibrations of animal life, and words "in their own way climb about, bark and roam around" (22). In these passages, language ceases to be an "instrument of Sense" (which Deleuze and Guattari associate with majority) and becomes "a ladder or a circuit for intensities one can make race around in one sense or another, from high to low, or from low to high" (21-22). In Niedecker's case, we might describe the poet's "becoming-weeds," "becoming-water," or "becoming-sandpiper" and consider the ways in which her poetry grows, flows, or pipes its own way within economic or filial territory. While Deleuze and Guattari do not explicitly link minor literature with the legal minority of childhood, they do identify certain other circuits within Kakfa's writing as "childhood blocks" or passages of "becoming-child"—moments at which otherwise adult writing seems to be in touch with the deterritorializing intensities of childhood desire and play (78-79). My aim here is not to encapsulate Niedecker as a Deleuzian poet but to notice that Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature is surprisingly reminiscent of Schiller's concept of naïve poetry, and that Niedecker's work brings out this connection with particular clarity. Both concepts emphasize the writer's attunement to collective life, her animal-like receptiveness to non-human nature, and the childlikeness of her imagination and language. Yet where Schiller understands naïveté as a primal, antique form of poetic authority, Deleuze and Guattari understand minority as a disordering of authority—an evolving, unpredictable potential. In proposing that we read Niedecker as both a naïve poet and a minor poet, then, I am proposing that we recognize in her work the dual (and something dueling) forces of tradition and innovation, authority and play, dependence and autonomy.

[19] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 55.

[20] Ibid., 86.

picture of development, it is crucial that a child be permitted ample time and space "just to lie back and float."[21] For both Winnicott and Niedecker, "floating" is a condition of unusual, unguarded receptiveness. As the child grows into adulthood, she will ideally internalize parental permission and find for herself the space in which to float and play. Winnicott calls adult play *culture*: "The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment…The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play."[22] Paraphrasing Winnicott in Niedecker's terms, we might say that poetry begins in floating.

Like Williams and Stein, Niedecker is a poet who seeks experiences of freedom in the imaginative spaces of childhood. This freedom is conditional and fleeting—less transcendence than mobility, or room to play. In their efforts to retain or regain their childhood, all three challenge the standards of aesthetic sophistication and maturity that define high modernism. Their naïve poetics create small worlds of their own within the world governed by adults, whether the adults are parents, the policemen-critics of modernism, or the standard bearers of the bourgeoisie. Yet Niedecker's work also evinces a keen awareness that aesthetic freedom is sometimes unavoidably clipped by material reality—the conditions of property and poverty, for instance, or one's familial obligations. While her mother and father provided her with certain poetic sources and freedoms, her poetry is also candid about their shortcomings and the financial burdens she inherited from them. As Alan Marshall writes, "For Niedecker, economics is part of the concrete of reality. It is not poetry's business to transcend economics but to apprehend it, to apprehend this life of which economics is a part."[23] And apprehend it she does, with a hard-bitten resilience she seems also to have learned from

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[21] Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*, 28.

[22] Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 135.

[23] Marshall, *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought*, 136. In this connection, we might also consider Zukofsky's comments on folk poetry in *A Test of Poetry*: "Poetry is one of the arts—sometimes individual, sometimes collective in origin—and reflects economic and social status of peoples; their language habits arising out of everyday

her family. A coming-of-age poem titled "Coming out of Sleep," written during the *New Goose* period but unpublished during Niedecker's lifetime, pointedly transforms a familiar lullaby into a class-conscious wake-up call:

> O rock my baby on the tree tops
> and blow me a little tin horn.
> They've got us sucking the hind tit
> and that's the way I was born.
>
> O let me rise to the door-knob
> and let me buy my way.
> I know that owner of the store
> and that's the way I was raised.
> (116-17)

Thus her poetry not only invites us to float with her, momentarily free from worldly care, but also to acknowledge that sometimes we must return to shore. Even poets must at certain moments act their age. As we will see, Niedecker's poetry is as much a cultivation of naïveté as it as a negotiation of her own disillusionment.

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Niedecker began writing the poems that would eventually become *New Goose* in 1935, inspired by the work she encountered several years earlier in Zukofsky's Objectivist issue of *Poetry*.[24] While what she called her "folk poems" share some qualities with writing called "Objectivist"—formal precision, careful attention to "particulars," and a certain modesty of presentation—Niedecker's source material and her poems' off-kilter playfulness distinguish them from what such serious city poets as Zukofsky and Oppen were writing at the time. In 1936, she submitted some of these poems to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*, calling them her "Mother Geese" and explaining that the poems drew

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matter of fact; the constructions which the intelligence and the emotions make over and apart from the everyday after is has been understood and generally experienced" (99). For Zukofksy, folk poetry is closer to the collective language and the facts of everyday life, but insofar as all poems are human "constructions," we might infer that even the folk poet's individual "intelligence and emotions" still create a margin of freedom even in the small gap between "the everyday" and the composition of the poem.

[24] See Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 53-59.

upon the language of her mother, grandfather, and neighbors on Blackhawk Island. This early reference to Mother Goose is revealing: even as Niedecker sought to place the poems in a periodical central to literary modernism, she understood them in relation to a folk tradition of poems for children. She kept at the project for almost a decade. From 1938 to 1941, she was employed by the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project in Madison, researching and writing for the book *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*, which was published in 1941 as part of the American Guide Series; her poems of this period are steeped both in Kunz-Niedecker family language and in the history of Wisconsin.[25] An early set of sixteen folk poems appeared in *New Directions* 1 in 1936, and a collection of forty-one finally appeared as the book *New Goose* in 1946. Drawing from the *New Directions* set, the published *New Goose* manuscript, and poems from another, unpublished manuscript called also called "New Goose," the *Collected Works* gathers a total of eighty-eight folk poems.

The poet of *New Goose* presents herself as a child-folklorist, as if a child were uniquely positioned to receive the words of "the people." The book's collection of multiple voices, various proper names, and shifting pronouns at length creates a sort of choral effect, the collective sound of virtual small town. In this, *New Goose* could be considered among classics of American regionalism such as Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology*, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. As a child might channel and mimic the adults around her, the poet seems to float among personages, some of whom might be Niedecker herself, some of whom are clearly personae. The poet seems sometimes to be speaking and at other times to be listening, and this speaker-listener often assumes the position of a child. Consider the book's opening poem:

> Don't shoot the rail!
> Let your grandfather rest!
> Tho he sees your wild eyes
> he's falling asleep,

[25] Ibid., 60-69.

his long-billed pipe
on his red-brown vest.
(92)

These lines seem to be addressed to an energetic or mischievous child within a multigenerational family. The world of the poem is down-home in the way Jonathan Williams appreciated: here is a twentieth-century poet writing not about urban alienation, the power of machines, or the disintegration of European civilization but about a sleepy grandpa and the Virginia Rail—a long-billed, rufous-breasted marsh bird that breeds across the northern United States and southern Canada. Yet despite the folksiness of the diction and the subject matter, we can also recognize hallmarks of modernist style. The poem (and the book) begins in the middle of an unspecified situation, presenting two fragments of speech without any introduction of a speaker or auditor. The commands, perhaps issuing from a parent, are stacked in parataxis, as if to collapse two distinct moments of potential transgression—one out in the marshes with gun in hand, the other in the house or on the porch where grandfather rests. Thus the poem quickly maps the porous, indoor-outdoor terrain of "Child-time" on Blackhawk Island, and then it enacts a strange metamorphosis. The scolding parental voice suddenly turns poetic, merging grandfather and rail with an imagist elegance worthy of Pound or H.D.: grandfather's pipe and vest become the bird's long, thin bill and rufous breast, joined in rhyme as an image of a man-bird falling asleep. Mother Goose and Grandpa Rail—this is a world of both familial and human-animal kinships. Distinct realms permeate one another as they might between waking and sleeping, and the poem leaves us in this potential space bounded by adult oversight, where the child listens, receptive yet wild-eyed.

Other poems in *New Goose* treat childhood less directly, yet "Child-time" never seems too far off. In "Well, spring overflows the land," for instance, Niedecker imagines her mother from the perspective of a daughter floating somewhere between childhood and adulthood. One of the book's

more well-known poems approaches childhood, not necessarily Niedecker's own, in clear retrospect, yet it makes the past almost present:

> Remember my little granite pail?
> The handle of it was blue.
> Think what's got away in my life—
> Was enough to carry me thru.
> (96)

This single ballad stanza is both naïve and knowing. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes, "It speaks from an adult voice, but the first two lines emerge as if from a child."[26] The opening question is literal and direct; the singularity of the pail's blue handle evokes a child's affectionate focus upon one of its favorite objects. The granite pail (not a pail made of granite but a tin pail enameled with a speckled "graniteware" pattern) is another sort of down-home object. To cosmopolitan modernist eyes, it might seem to be an artifact of naïve life. Rather than the urban machinery and high-art objects that fill other modernist texts, Niedecker's poem asks us to recall a simple piece of vernacular equipment—a bucket used for hauling water and other chores. There is sort of innocent satisfaction in remembering the plainly decorated, functional tool. With its third and fourth lines, however, the poem articulates a decidedly adult sense of loss. Such disillusionment—the knowledge of "what's got away" over a lifetime—is only really available to self-consciously aging adults, and the poem's quiet, weary reserve is likewise an adult mode of communication. It makes the magnitude of loss felt without revealing any particular losses. The initial imperative to "Remember" seems to communicate with a second person, but with "Think," the poem turns inward and away, toward these private losses recalled in the hiatus at the end of the third line. Here the straightforward opening question and statement give way to more fractured syntax, leaving ambiguous what exactly "was enough to carry [her] thru." By poem's end, a sophisticated metaphor has replaced the childlike

[26] Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker, the Anonymous," in *Blue Studios*, 139. My reading of this poem owes much to hers.

literalism of the first lines. The pail itself is lost, and with it a childhood sense of adequacy and simple fullness. The memory of one lost object summons up all the others.

Yet perhaps this recollection of loss achieves an adequacy of its own. Thinking of what's got away, the poem suggests, might be just enough to carry one through. It's significant that the poem retains the form of a nursery rhyme even as it treats a decidedly adult theme. In their *Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, Iona and Peter Opie note that "the overwhelming majority of nursery rhymes were not in the first place composed for children; in fact, many are survivals of an adult code of joviality, and in their original wording were, by present standards, strikingly unsuitable for those of tender years."[27] While the Opies are referring to the roots of children's rhymes in bawdy pub balladry, we might rethink their observation for Niedecker's poem, which partakes less of joviality than of weariness. Niedecker is a "new" Mother Goose, and while traditional nursery rhymes might be adapted from adult songs, her modernist poems reverse the procedure to reclaim childhood rhymes for adult purposes, preserving some of the fullness and intensity of an otherwise lost "Child-time." The contents once received and held in the pail still permeate the poem, and we might yet hear the child's voice within an adult's weariness. Thus Niedecker's little, carefully minor poem is itself a sort of granite pail: well-made and functional, it "carr[ies] thru" some of what she, or whoever voices this anonymous poem, must remember of her life.

Another poem later in *New Goose* recalls both "Don't shoot the rail!" and "Remember my little granite pail?" as it comments upon Niedecker's simultaneously sentimental and naïve poetic practice:

> The museum man!
> I wish he'd taken Pa's spitbox!
> I'm going to take that spitbox out
> and bury it in the ground
> and put a stone on top.
> Because without that stone on top

[27] Opie, *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, 3.

it would come back.

(101)

Again we hear the voice of a parent as if from the position of a listening child, and again we're presented with a humble everyday object. At one level, the poem seems to be a frustrated wife and mother's fanciful complaint about her husband's disgusting habits. At another, it's a meditation on the curatorial acquisition of folk artifacts, as Peter Middleton suggests in his perceptive reading of what he calls Niedecker's "folk base."[28] In the world of this poem, the folk are becoming conscious of their own folksiness: the museum man has been lurking around, and they know what he's looking for. The speaker of this poem understands that the artifacts of her life might be interesting to a sophisticated collector come out from the city, but she comically wishes to convert that interest into a solution for her domestic annoyance. She'd be getting the better end of the deal: the museum man would be left holding a box full of saliva and tobacco juice, and she'd be rid of the wretched thing.

Like "Don't shoot the rail!", this poem begins with two plainspoken exclamations and then performs a surprising metamorphosis of an ordinary figure or object into something unstable and otherworldly. The verse folds the flatly inelegant repetitions of "take," "spitbox," and "stone on top"—which we can hear as characteristic of frustrated, emphatic speech—into a spell-like incantation. A backyard burial might be the fastest way to get the spitbox out of the house, with a stone placed over it to prevent Pa from digging it up too easily, but the ritual also transforms the box into a complexly resonant metonymy. Like the granite pail, it stands in both for rural folk culture and for the travails of an individual life. The owner of the granite pail wishes to retain some of the fullness lost with the beloved vessel; here Ma wants to bury the frustrations held in a vessel

[28] Middleton interprets the poem as a critique of modernism's own appropriative practices, arguing that the spitbox remains embedded in its own particular network of associations that are inaccessible to the reader beyond its domestic, folk context; thus Niedecker's "folk base" resists the aesthetic commodification Middleton associates with more urbane modernists. In this connection he also contrasts Williams's treatment of the red wheelbarrow with Niedecker's granite pail. See "Lorine Niedecker's 'Folk Base' and Her Challenge to American Avant-Garde," in Blau Duplessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, especially 176-78 and 181-84.

she can't get rid of. The stone is both a weight to hold down her persistent woe and a headstone to mark the grave of the folk culture the box would exemplify for the museum man, but the image suggests that both domestic frustration and folk-life itself might return as irrepressible revenants. Thus the poem hovers between naïveté and sentimentality. We can read its words as an artless kitchen complaint, but Niedecker's verse betrays the agency of a knowing poet. Is Ma conscious of her words' figurative resonance, or do this poem's strange transformations happen in the potential space of the poet-child who records them? Which is naïve and which sentimental: the weary mother or the modernist daughter?

These three poems give us a sense of the way *New Goose* constructs a complex naïveté. Niedecker seems at once young and old, at once one of the folk and a modernist poet. She anonymously channels the language of her family's and neighbors' everyday life, but her shrewd formal arrangements and multivalent images at same time mark the distance between her and her culture. The element of style would seem to disqualify Niedecker as a true folk poet, at least according to folklorist and literary scholar T.M. Pearce, an exact contemporary of Niedecker's. In his 1953 article "What Is a Folk Poet?", Pearce presents a poet who almost dissolves into the community of and to which he speaks.[29] Describing the performances and the handwritten collection of verses by the New Mexican singer and poet Prospero S. Baca, whom Pearce visited in Bernalillo, near Albuquerque, in 1943, Pearce writes:

> These verses are filled with the sense of solidarity belonging to a homogeneous group dwelling in one community neighborhood, of one religious faith, united in a common activity, speaking the same language about it, in both literal and figurative senses. The poet is one of them: his words are their words and their thoughts his. His is their voice, a community laureate, speaking in a self-effacing, almost anonymous way yet at the end of the poem, he announces:
>
> Próspero S. Baca se llama,
> El que hiso esta poesia

[29] Middleton also cites Pearce's essay in connection to Niedecker; see "Lorine Niedecker's 'Folk Base' and Her Challenge to American Avant-Garde," in Blau DuPlessis and Quartermain, *The Objectivist Nexus*, 178-79.

"The one who made this poem is named Prospero S. Baca."[30]

The poet almost dissolves, but not quite. Baca is seamlessly integrated into his social milieu—what Laura Riding would call "an environment in which [primitive poets] were generously included"—yet he also retains his individual identity at the maker of the verses.[31] "His identity as an author is not suppressed," Pearce writes, "but his individuality as a poet is submerged in the stream of group or community feeling which animates all his compositions."[32] For Pearce, the measure of whether or not a poem counts as a "folk form" or a "literary form" is the "amount of introspection and self-conscious literary intention" it manifests.[33] Baca was active as a poet during the same period Eliot wrote *Four Quartets* and Pound wrote *The Pisan Cantos* (both of whom spoke of their poetry in relation to "the tribe") but Pearce would distinguish Baca from these contemporaries because "[h]is own prestige is secondary to the common welfare."[34] Their modernist poems are marked by a high degree of introspection and self-conscious literary intention, while Baca's folk poems—occasioned by births, weddings, and deaths—are decidedly extroverted and occasional. We might place Niedecker somewhere between Eliot and Baca. A careful listener but no community laureate, she writes from within her milieu while seeming also to stand outside or aslant from it.

As attentive as her poems are to the language of "the people," Niedecker knew that she was not exactly one of them. An untitled poem from 1950 revisits the question of the poet and the people by describing the poet's employment as a stenographer and proofreader in the office of *Hoard's Dairyman*, a national trade magazine published in Fort Atkinson: "I worked the print shop / right down among em / the folk from whom all poetry flows / and dreadfully much else" (142).

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[30] Pearce, "What Is a Folk Poet?", 245-46.
[31] Riding, "T.E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein," in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, 56. See my longer discussion of Riding's essay in Chapter 2.
[32] Pearce, "What Is a Folk Poet?", 248.
[33] Ibid., 248.
[34] Ibid.

Whereas the poet of *New Goose* maintained her anonymity, in her later work Niedecker begins to appear more explicitly as herself. Here she is in fact one of the people—a worker just like everyone else—but she maintains her difference from them simply in her description of "em" as the source of "all poetry," a distinction they surely would not award themselves, and in her snobbish shudder at the presumably vulgar "dreadfully much else" that "flows" from them. Her ambivalence grows more complex in the poem's final stanzas:

> I heard their rehashed radio barbs—
> more barbarous among hirelings
> as higher-ups grow more corrupt.
> But what vitality! The women hold jobs—
> clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
> and go to church.
>
> What would they say if they knew
> I sit for two months on six lines
> of poetry?
>
> (143)

Here again the poet expresses solidarity and difference. She critiques management's corruption while judging the workers barbaric. Her awe at her women coworkers' busy lives seems both sincere and slightly superior; there is also perhaps a note of regret in the list of responsibilities and pastimes Niedecker had not accumulated by middle age. The difference between the poet and the folk, then, has not only to do with intellectual and cultural sophistication but also with the types of labor they perform. Is the poet's extremely inefficient, self-indulgent labor—sitting two months on six lines—much less or much more valuable than the labor of these women who are simultaneously wives, mothers, and office workers? Hatching only poems, Niedecker withholds part of herself from the economy with an ascetic's resolve, but lacking the ascetic's performative confidence, she also withholds her poetry as if it were an embarrassing secret. "Down among" the people, she claims an aesthetic freedom for herself that she cannot or will not share with "em."

We might describe this dialectic of solidarity and self-consciousness in Schiller's terms: Niedecker's ambivalent relation to her own cultural milieu finds literary form in the interaction of the naïve and the sentimental aspects of her poetry. In the poet's moment of self-conscious distance from the people among whom she works and writes, the sentimental appears synchronically within the naïve, not as a more advanced poetic mode that follows it diachronically. In fact, Niedecker can help us see more clearly that even in Schiller's account, which emphasizes an historical trajectory from naïve immediacy to sentimental reflection, one sometimes surprisingly emerges within the other. Schiller, for instance, cites Glaucus and Diomedes' exchange of armor in Book Six of the *Iliad* as a primary example of naïve poetry: Homer reports the two warriors' recognition of their families' shared history and their decision to avoid one another in battle with matter-of-fact directness, as though the poet "himself had no heart in his breast."[35] The modern, sentimental poet, according to Schiller, would step back "to testify to his delight at his action" just as modern readers "also pause in our hearts while reading and eagerly distance ourselves from the subject matter to look at ourselves."[36] While the naïve poet seems transparent, offering an unmediated report of the subject matter, the sentimental poet makes himself apparent as a membrane of sensibility between us and the subject. Yet Schiller's example complicates this argument in a way he seems not quite to notice. To emphasize Homer's naïveté—his "dry, matter-of-fact way"—Schiller quotes the end of armor exchange: "Still, Zeus so excited Glaucus, that he, unthinkingly, / Traded his gold armor for the bronze armor of Diomedes, / Armor worth a hundred young steers for armor worth nine."[37] This voice is indeed fairly dry, but here the poet in fact steps away and judges the action according to a logic that's external to the scene. In this moment of knowingness, we glimpse Homer himself reflecting on an economic reality of which his characters are at least momentarily innocent—a flicker

[35] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 199.
[36] Ibid.
[37] *Iliad*, Book 6, lines 224-36, quoted in Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 199.

of sentimentality within a naïve poem. Interestingly enough, it's economic disparity that brings out Homer's sentimentality, too. Homer notes the difference in the worth of gold and bronze, and Niedecker notes the difference in the worth of profitable labor and poetic labor.

In Niedecker's poem, the dialectic again turns back on itself: even while her economically sophisticated reflection distances her from the naïve folk she writes about, her preoccupation with poetry betrays another sort of naïveté. Among responsible wives and mothers, the adult Niedecker emerges again as a floating child. The relationship between childhood, poetry, and the labor market is at the heart of her 1962 poem "Poet's Work":

> Grandfather
> advised me:
> Learn a trade
>
> I learned
> to sit at desk
> and condense
>
> No layoffs
> from this
> condensery
>
> (194)

Here again Niedeckcr locates the origin of her poetic vocation in the familial space of "Child-time." If her mother gave her a language "straight out of the people" and her father gave her "a marshy retainer," her grandfather here gives her the decisive professional advice. Yet Lorine short-circuits his folk transmission of practical wisdom with her own decidedly literary trickiness. Her creative misunderstanding of his advice crystalizes in a set of puns: rather than seek gainful employment in the dairy industry (perhaps the Whitewater Condensery not far from Fort Atkinson, which Hoard's Creamery acquired in 1939[38]), she employs herself in the condensery of modernist poetry (Pound:

[38] Cartwright, "The Whitewater Condenery," Whitewater Historical Society, http://www.whitewaterhistoricalsociety.org /index.php/whitewater-press-articles/127-the-whitewater-condensery.

"Dichten=condensare").[39] She won't lay herself off, and the work of poetry is so demanding that she can't lay off it anyway. Thus poet has excellent job security, but she also earns no pay. In learning the poet's trade, Niedecker exchanges participation in the labor market for artistic self-sufficiency: her trade negates profitable trade itself. She wins her small freedom at the expense of an actual livelihood. A child might float safely enough in the potential space afforded her by her parents, but for an adult of employment age, the wages of poetry are poverty. (Not perhaps for Gertrude Stein with her inheritance, but certainly for Niedecker, whose family left her in debt.) On this count the modernist certainly seems naïve, but she is also wise enough to know it. Her wordplay positions her like Homer, just outside her subject, asking, "Am I Diomedes or am I Glaucus?"

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While Niedecker's childhood was comfortable, she was for most of her adulthood a relatively poor person. She worked a series of insecure, low-wage jobs and was burdened by debts and costs related to the property she inherited with the deaths of her parents in the 1950s. Only in 1963, with her marriage to Milwaukee house-painter Al Millen, was she able to retire and enjoy a degree of security. Financial worry—her own and those of the people around her—is woven into the texture of her writing. As Alan Marshall points out, her poetry seeks to "apprehend" rather than "transcend" a "life of which economics is a part." Yet as we have seen, Niedecker's apprehension of the economic part of life is such that she wants to withdraw from it, or even to assert the other part of her life—poetry—against it. In an oft-quoted passage from "Paean to Place," Niedecker meets poverty with renunciation:

> O my floating life
> Do not save love
> for things
> Throw *things*
> to the flood

[39] Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 36.

ruined
by the flood
    Leave the new unbought—
        all one in the end—
water

I possessed
the high word:
    The boy my friend
        played his violin
in the great hall
(268-69)

If in *New Goose* "floating" is the daughter's privileged idleness, here it is also her precarity. With its apostrophe, the line "O my floating life" hovers somewhere between lament and praise, as though a life of poverty might be redeemed by one's willing election of ruin. Rather than wait for rising waters to claim her property, Niedecker will throw her "things" to the flood.

The poem's imperatives and its language of saving, expenditure, love, and property recall the Sermon on the Mount's opposition of faith and materialism, yet Niedecker's renunciation of property anticipates not treasure in heaven but a final, terrestrial equalizer: "all one in the end— / water." The equanimous acceptance of inevitable elemental negation without the wish for transcendence is perhaps more Stoic than it is Christian, and indeed Niedecker counted Marcus Aurelius among her favorite writers. She wrote to Cid Corman in 1962 that she kept a copy of *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius* in her "immortal cupboard" of essential texts, and two passages she marked in Book 9 of Meric Casaubon's translation seem especially to inform this section of "Paean to Place."[40] The first passage, paragraph XVIII, begins, "Within a while the earth shall cover us all, and then she herself shall have her change," and concludes, "The cause of the universe is as it were a strong torrent, it carrieth all away." The second passage, paragraph XXX, reads, "Many of those

[40] See Niedecker's February 18, 1962 letter to Corman in *Between Your House and Mine*, 33. Niedecker's copy of the *Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius* is now held at the Dwight Foster Public Library in Fort Atkinson, and her annotations are summarized at http://www.lorineniedecker.org/resources_display.cfm?rid=148.

things that trouble and straiten thee, it is thy power to cut off, as wholly depending from mere conceit and opinion; and then thou shalt have room enough."[41] Here and throughout his *Meditations*, Marcus encourages renunciation of extraneous things, both material and immaterial, in order that one might live as freely and happily as possible within in the constraints of the world as given. Niedecker, following the stoic emperor, wants to spend her love and attention only on essentials. In "Paean to Place," these are memory and poetry, and in the poem's drift they merge with Blackhawk Island itself. She loves the place, "And the place / was water," according to the poem's epigraph. Land and water, past and present, human language and non-human sound—these elements become "all one in the end" of this marshy poem, too, each flowing through the others in a series of minimally punctuated stanzas that seem to float in merest syntactical relation to one another.

Once material things are thrown or washed away, what sort of sustenance might poetry actually provide? What's the value of Niedecker's "marshy retainer"? Rather than seek the security of high ground, she asserts the power of "the high word"—a musical performance by the young violin prodigy Paul Zukofsky, Louis and Celia Zukofsky's son, who played at Carnegie Hall in 1956.[42] What she "possesses," then, is not property but simply an idea or memory of a child's music, and she wields it stoically against an economic order that insists on consumption and materialism. Her wager is that a boy's song, even unheard, is enough to carry her through material poverty. The logic, or illogic, of Niedecker's faith in art is quixotic, but the sudden reference to Paul is perhaps even more startling. Depending on how much one knows about the poet's life, the appearance of "the boy my friend" might come across as either incongruously opaque (Who is this unnamed boy, and

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[41] *The Golden Book of Marcus Aurelius*, 111-13. Gregory Hays's recent translation resonates even more strongly with Niedecker's poem: "The design of the world is like a flood, sweeping all before it…You can discard most of the junk that clutters your mind—things that exist only there—and clear out space for yourself." See *Meditations*, 124-25.

[42] The history of Niedecker's relationship with Paul and his parents is complex and somewhat troubling. For accounts of this relationship, see Peters, *A Poet's Life*, and Penberthy, *Niedecker and the Correspondence with Zukofsky*. For a sustained reading of *For Paul*, Niedecker's unpublished manuscript of poems from the 1950s, in its biographical context, see Perloff, "'L. Before P.': Writing 'For Paul' for Louis," in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 175-70. See also Upton, *Defensive Measures*, especially 49-52.

why are we hearing about him only now, late in a poem where he, his violin, and any "great hall" seem out of place?) or unsettlingly personal (What are we to make of an elderly woman's intense attachment to a boy she barely knows, and who is the son of a man whose child she carried and aborted three decades earlier?). Interpretation cannot account for the depth of personal resonance in Niedecker's words. Yet for all this stanza's strangeness, it can also help us understand her complex thinking about language and music. In just a few lines, Niedecker effectively converts language—"the high word"—to musical performance, or to put it another way, she asserts the force of music *in place* of verbal argument. In a poem with a title that invokes poetry's roots in music—a "paean" is a genre of song—this conversion signals her commitment to poetry as a sonic art, even if its sound is heard only in the writer's or reader's inner ear.[43] Note, for instance, how the first stanza quoted above holds open its initial "O" across five lines and a series of modulations shaped by "l" and "th" sounds, or how each line of the second stanza locks its assonance shut with "t" and "d" sounds only to be washed open again with wide vowels and final liquid consonant of "water." Thus Niedecker articulates her assertion that the musical "high word" alone can sustain a life in verses crafted to maximize their sonic sustain.

"Paean to Place" is acutely attuned to the past and present sounds of Blackhawk Island, and we can hear the poem's prosody as Niedecker's effort to register her acoustic environment in the verbal texture of her lines and syllables. An earlier passage in the poem sounds out the music of the poet's own childhood. Here is the complete "Child-time" section:

> I grew in green
> slide and slant
> of shore and shade
> Child-time—wade
> through weeds
>
> Maples to swing from
> Pewee-glissando

[43] On Niedecker's reluctance to perform her poetry aloud, see Peters, *A Poet's Life*, 214.

sublime
slime-
song

Grew riding the river
Books
at home-pier
Shelley could steer
as he read
(264-65)

The entire long poem consists of five-line stanzas such as these, an idiosyncratic form that Niedecker derived from her extensive readings of Japanese and Chinese poetry in translation. She used it as a sort of standard compositional module through the 1950s and 60s, sometimes setting down a single stanza as an independent poem, sometimes stacking or stitching multiple stanzas together, as she does here. With their stepwise structure and delicately balanced patterns of assonance and consonance, these sliding and slanted stanzas bear out Kenneth Cox's observation that "[a]t length her versification came to consist of nothing but syllables placed one under another at different angles and different distances."[44] While loose or absent syntactical connections leave individual lines simply floating in proximity to one another, internal echoes and occasional end-rhymes (more pronounced here than in this previous quotation) conduct a steady current through the stanzas. This dual effect permits Niedecker's paratactic quickness of association (e.g., the aspirational likening of herself to Shelley, another poet-boater, with the rhyme of "pier" and "steer"), and it also creates a recurrent sonic lapping that mimics the movement of water. Indeed, the poem becomes explicitly onomatopoetic with "Pewee-glissando / sublime / slime- / song," lines that mimic the glissando they describe while merging birdsong with the murmur and splash of

[44] Peter Nicholls describes something similar when he writes of "poems floating on the page but held in a kind of cross-tension by Niedecker's now characteristic way of playing sound and rhythm against syntax" ("Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal," in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 213). For another sensitive reading of the poem's sonic construction in the context of Niedecker's effort to reconcile Objectivism and the more "reflective" poetics she derived from Surrealism, see Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paean to Place' and Its Reflective Fusions," in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 151-79.

muddy water in a single linguistic stroke. In this "weedy speech," we can also recognize a characteristic Niedecker gesture: the elevation of small, almost negligible things—the wood pewee and marsh muck—to the power of sublimity.

Daisy and Henry are the ghosts who preside over this watery landscape, and throughout "Paean to Place," Niedecker pays her parents loving if ambivalent tribute. Her father appears again as the resilient man who "kept us afloat," but in this poem, it's her mother with whom she identifies more strongly—and by whom she seems more haunted. In the poem's second stanza, Lorine and Daisy seem almost to live the same life, bound as they are by a shared landscape: "My mother and I / born / in swale and swamp and sworn / to water" (261). In a movingly complex passage a few pages later, she ponders her mother's alienation from the acoustic environment of Blackhawk Island and onomatopoetically opens a sublime depth of memory:

> I mourn her not hearing canvasbacks
> their blast-off rise
> from the water
> Not hearing sora
> rail's sweet
>
> spoon-tapped waterglass-
> descending scale-
> tear-drop-tittle
> Did she giggle
> as a girl?
> (263)

Here a daughter's declaration of grief for her mother's loss quickly flies into an exuberantly playful celebration of own her words' sonic properties. Niedecker's imitation of the sora rail's characteristic whinny again collapses outdoor and domestic spaces by describing animal life in terms of tableware, while "tear-drop-tittle" at once laughingly evokes the bird's call and conjures a mournful image of tears. As "tittle" rhymes with "giggle," we descend before we know it into a depth of memory beyond the scope of Niedecker's own life, about which she can only wonder. It is another startling moment, this one brought about by a subtle manipulation of time aptly described by Peter Nicholls:

"The disciplined movement holds us in this net of sounds so that the tense of the final question hardly breaks our sense of an evolving present—but it is a present which, while referring to an 'actual' past, is displaced completely into its own figurative occasion, existing primarily as an 'event' of writing."[45] Thus the present-tense unfolding of Niedecker's onomatopoetic "giggle" seems almost simultaneous with the distant past of her mother's childhood. The poem associates "Child-time" so strongly with the sounds and sensations of the marshy environment where both Daisy and Lorine grew up that within "Did she giggle / as a girl?" we might hear a deeper question: "Was my mother ever a child?" Did Daisy ever experience the potential space her daughter wishes never to leave? Did she know this imaginative zone in which inner and outer spaces permeate each other as land, water, language, and sound lap through one another in this poem?

Nowhere is Niedecker's vision of childhood as a time of special permeability clearer than in her memorable identification with the plover, which immediately follows the "Pewee-glissando":

> I was the solitary plover
> a pencil
> for a wing-bone
> From the secret notes
> I must tilt
>
> upon the pressure
> execute and adjust
> In us sea-air rhythm
> "We live by the urgent wave
> of the verse"
>
> (265)

The vulnerable image of "a pencil / for a wing-bone" blurs the boundary between human art and animal behavior as the young poet's tool merges with the bird's means of flight. Now an endangered species of shorebird native to the Atlantic coast and Upper Midwest, the plover is itself a creature that tends to blur into its surroundings, its small stature and sandy-colored plumage making the bird

[45] Nicholls, "Lorine Niedecker: Rural Surreal," in Penberthy, *Woman and Poet*, 213.

difficult to see on the beaches and among the grasses where it lives and breeds. Here Niedecker's poetic vocation seems to be a naïve one indeed, learned by listening to "the secret notes" of the elusive plover. She depicts a childhood apprenticeship spent not among master poets but among the animals and elements of rural Wisconsin; what she appreciates about Shelley is not primarily his poetry but the fact that he could steer a boat as he read. "I must tilt // upon the pressure / execute and adjust": these lines at once imagine what it might be like to fly as a plover and describe the way one steers a small craft by leaning on its tiller. Both flying and boating are forms of floating, and both require alert, but not necessarily conscious, responsiveness to environmental pressures and signals. Niedecker resolves this hybrid image into an explicit comment on poetry by adapting a line from Robert Duncan's essay "Towards an Open Universe": "In us sea-air rhythm / 'We live by the urgent wave / of the verse.'" What was for Duncan a metaphor for the cosmic vibrations channeled in poetry here becomes vividly literal: the poem as Niedecker imagines it is a conduit for the movements of actual air and water.[46] To write in this way is "to lie back and float," as Winnicott might say—to welcome the environment's infiltration of an artfully "unintegrated personality."

Like the poems of *New Goose*, "Paean to Place" is highly receptive, but as we have seen, its "weedy speech" is attuned to the sounds of nature rather than the language of "the people." It is indeed a notably non-social poem, unpopulated except for the three members of the Niedecker family. Whereas *New Goose* engages with various contemporary social dynamics and difficulties—poverty, domestic frustration, war, local gossip—the later poem self-consciously withdraws into quietude, as if Niedecker seeks to preserve the solitude Winnicott values as the refuge where a person might find her sense of creativity and aliveness.[47] A latter-day Stoic, she finds sufficiency in

[46] For further consideration of Niedecker's borrowing from Duncan, see Blau DuPlessis, "Lorine Niedecker's 'Paean to Place,'" in Willis, *Radical Vernacular*, 170.

[47] See Winnicott's essay "The Capacity to Be Alone," in *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment*, 29-36.

her own ways of seeing and imagining. The poem's final section acknowledges that this retreat involves aesthetic flight from certain species of reality:

> On this stream
> my moonlight memory
> washed of hardships
> maneuvers barges
> thru the mouth
>
> of the river
> They fished in beauty
> It was not always so
> In Fishes
> red Mars
>
> rising
> rides the sloughs and sluices
> of my mind
> with the persons
> on the edge
> (269)

Niedecker knows that her poem—"this stream"—makes her early life seem lovelier than it really was, yet she does not disavow the poem's flattering moonlight. Rather she indulges in it, letting the remembered waters of the Rock River wash thoroughly through her mind. The final ambiguous lines hinge on two senses of "edge," at once expressing solidarity with her economically, culturally, and geographically marginal family members and neighbors and holding those same "persons" at bay, as if at the edge of her mind. Again Niedecker converts precarity into privilege so that she might float a little longer. Persons are only one species of life, after all, and there are many others to hear out, their sounds no less real than human hardships.

•

I have been describing Niedecker as a "sentimental naïve" poet, and some might ask why I insist on her naïveté. If she's sophisticated enough to count as a modernist, isn't she just playing the part of a naïve poet? And isn't an artificial naïveté only a symptom of sentimentality? A similar objection could be raised about my treatments of Williams and Stein. In the cases of the latter two poets, I

have argued that their linguistic artifices can be rightfully described as naïve, despite their sophistication, because they are not elegiac representations of a lost childlike immediacy but active attempts to regain it. Early in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, Schiller describes naïve poets in contradistinction to "us," the sentimental, culturally adult moderns among whom he counts himself: "They *are* what we *were*; they are what we *should become* once more. We were nature like them, and our culture should lead us along the path of reason and freedom back to nature. Thus they depict at once our lost childhood, something that remains ever dearest to us, and for this reason they fill us with a certain melancholy."[48] Writing in the gap between the actual and the ideal, Schiller's sentimental poets are always either satirical or elegiac; their lost "nature" is only ever an ideal, something to which they aspire but never achieve. Williams and Stein, however, truly sought immediacy in the mediations of modernist style. Neither can accurately be described as a satirical or elegiac writer. They believed that certain ways of writing might actually induce experiences of childish or childlike absorption and mobility, and I have tried to find ways of reading and talking about their texts that are responsive to their serious naïveté.

If Williams and Stein wrote from modern sentimentality back into naïveté, Niedecker seems never to have fully lost contact with "nature" such that it would need to be regained. Her poetry presents us with the possibility that Schiller's clear distinction between "us" and "them" does not always apply (and as we have seen, this is true even within Schiller's own text). A poet might craft complexly "modern" poems that are attuned all along to what Schiller calls "nature in plants, minerals, animals, and landscapes, as well as to human nature in children, in the customs of country folk and the primitive world."[49] Instead of sentimentality superseding naïveté, in Niedecker's poems the two modes coexist in shifting proportion. Her work sustains an ongoing dialectic of innocence

[48] Schiller, *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, in *Essays*, 180-81; italics in the original.
[49] Ibid., 179.

and experience that ramifies in the interactions of multiple not-so-opposites: folk culture and avant-garde modernism, animal behavior and human craft, environmental sound and human language, etc. As we have seen, her poems often not only muddy (sometimes quite literally) the distinctions between these opposites but also invert them such that what from one angle seems naïve looks from another to be sophisticated, and vice versa. A few lines of folk talk transcribed by the poet might reveal surprisingly self-conscious wisdom, and to her mother and the "folks" in the print shop, the modernist poet's unproductive and unprofitable preoccupation might look like a childish indulgence. A product of both Fort Atkinson and international avant-garde, Niedecker is an expert code-switcher, routinely crossing the signals of naïve and sentimental poetries.

For all of her "floating," Niedecker is one of our most class-conscious poets, and her writing raises the question of naïve and sentimental poetry in economic terms that are present but mostly only implicit in Schiller. She teaches us that there's poetic naïveté, and then there's economic naïveté, and the two are not simply aligned. The privileged daughter-poet of *New Goose* knows full well the conditions of her imaginative freedom, and no matter how far out she floats, she still receives the voices of people who struggle. Even Niedecker's most quietisitic poem, "Paean to Place," keeps material realities in view. While certain midcentury theorists of modernism conceptualized timeless aesthetic autonomy in philosophical terms, Niedecker practiced her freedom in fleeting moments, stealing time for poetry within the workday, asserting acts of naïve attention against economic law. An untitled poem from 1955 brings this dialectic of innocence and experience into sharp focus:

> The death of my poor father
> leaves debts
> and two small houses.
>
> To settle this estate
> a thousand fees arise—
> I enrich the law.

Before my own death is certified,
recorded, final judgement
judged

taxes taxed
I shall own a book
of old Chinese poems

and binoculars
to probe the river
trees.

(157-58)

With the death of the parent who kept her afloat, Niedecker must face the economic exigencies he held at bay. There's a weary joke in "estate," which plays Henry's small, dilapidated properties off an image of landed affluence. Wealth here is held by lenders and "the law" itself, and Niedecker wryly acknowledges the way her own status as a property owner, however tenuous, helps sustain that distribution. The alternative to involvement in the economy, however, is not transcendence. As she does in "Paean to Place," Niedecker plays here upon the language of the Gospels: "final judgement" takes place in the office of municipal records, and the tax collectors win in the end. Yet the bureaucratic capture of the poet is not total; some part of her life exceeds the law's judgement. We might call it the naïve part of life—the part that persists in the oldest poetry and in the birds perched above the Rock River. She turns ownership against itself, stoically paring down her property to only two objects, both of which almost undo their own objecthood by becoming see-through. A book of Chinese poems and a pair of binoculars—these are things that mediate but ultimately sharpen the attention: through one language to another, through words to landscape, through a lens to birds and trees. Even once her parents have left her on her own, the adult daughter reasserts her Child-time in art and focused attention to the natural world. Niedecker inherited her father's debts, but she also inherited a marshy retainer. It won't release her from those debts, but it might make them bearable. A floating life is not a life other than this one, but another sort of life within the one that's given.

CODA

I did not entirely intend to write this dissertation. I thought I was going to write a study of Williams Carlos Williams but let myself be distracted and led astray by the possibility of play. Clearly, though, Williams remains a figure central to my thinking, and I can see now that I've stayed true to my original inclinations in ways that were sometimes obscure to me as the actual dissertation took shape. What I had wanted to do was write about Williams in a way that did justice to his strangeness—both the extravagant wildness of texts like *Kora in Hell* and the austere simplicity of poems like "The Red Wheelbarrow"—without assimilating his writing to models of literary criticism that prioritize sophistication and complexity. In other words, I wanted to see if it was possible to claim that *Kora in Hell* is valuable because it truly is wild and often obscure, not because its seeming incoherence actually encodes complexly coherent messages or because it carries out an avant-garde program. I wanted to see if it was possible to claim that "A Chinese Toy" and "The Red Wheelbarrow" are valuable because they truly are simple devices, not because they can support surprisingly elaborate hermeneutic readings. There is perhaps something childishly contrarian about these lines of argument, but I'd like to think they might eventually also produce some critical wisdom. While literary scholars and critics have proven ourselves adept at identifying difficulty and revealing complexity, we less often concern ourselves with true wildness or simplicity. In writing about Williams, I wanted to see if the idiom of scholarly criticism could reckon meaningfully with these sorts of texts, too.

It was in thinking about *Kora in Hell*, particularly the passage where Williams announces that "My little son's improvisations exceed mine," that the child first emerged as a figure of interest. Initially the ideas of childhood and play seemed useful mainly as ways of framing what Williams was doing with the improvisations, but it quickly became clear that they could be useful in organizing further thoughts about Williams—a poet who has more than once been called childish and whose most famous poems are enduringly accessible to actual children. From there it was hardly a leap to Gertrude Stein, who is perhaps the most legendary of modernist child-writers and, more importantly, whose *Tender Buttons* seemed a natural analogue to *Kora in Hell*. Lorine Niedecker is perhaps a less obvious connection, but Objectivist poetics link her to Williams, and I'd long wanted to write about her work in relation to simplicity and folk culture. When I turned to Niedecker's work with childhood in mind, her own fascination with "Child-time" became undeniable. Literary-historical logic aside, what seemed most promising to me about this grouping of writers is that, despite the real differences among and even within their three bodies of work—*Kora in Hell* is as like "The Red Wheelbarrow" as *Tender Buttons* is like "Remember my little granite pail?"—Williams, Stein, and Niedecker have all at times produced in me the strange feeling of being unaccountably compelled by something that seems almost negligible—too nonsensical or slight to be as powerful as it is. This is the feeling I wanted to begin accounting for on its own terms, and I realized that doing so would require stepping aside or aslant from the norms of a scholarly discourse that has thoroughly absorbed modernism's desire for difficulty and complexity. Indeed, the trio of Williams, Stein, and Niedecker suggests an alternative, miniature modernism dwelling within monumental modernism—a provisional zone where some other ways of thinking about poetry might be possible.

To talk about childlikeness and childishness as poetic modes, I needed to develop a conceptual vocabulary, and Schiller proved to be a fruitful source. It's difficult, in fact, to imagine writing about this topic without drawing upon *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*, which offers the first

and most influential theorization of the relationship between childlikeness and poetry. While certain aspects of Schiller's treatise might now seem naïve in a pejorative sense—simplistically Idealist or too beholden to the pictures of Romantic Philhellenism—his basic categories of the naïve and the sentimental still hold great descriptive and analytic potential. His rubrics are familiar, but, as I hope the preceding chapters prove, they are not exhausted. For my purposes, the most powerful element of Schiller's thought is the seriousness with which he takes childlikeness and poetic simplicity, and, obviously, his terminology provides my title: "Naïve Modernism." Furthermore, there is something appealing in this title's implicit argument, which is that a quintessentially Romantic notion might be borne out in modernist writing, and equally that modernist writing might in turn expand and revise that Romantic notion.

While Schiller's concept of the naïve seemed generative, it required some twentieth-century edge if it was going to accommodate Williams, Stein, and Niedecker. I needed a version of Schiller that was a little less noble and a little more willing to misbehave, and that's where Benjamin and Winnicott came in. Benjamin's own Romanticism—his belief in magic and in the unique powers of imaginative play—is nowhere clearer than in his writings about toys and children's literature, but he writes with a twentieth-century sense of damage and disorder, and with a modernist scavenger's sense of the way art fashions its own small worlds from the detritus of the "real" world. Winnicott is a sort of Romantic, too, with his belief in the power and necessity of play, but he writes about actual children, not ideal childhood, and thus he helps us understand the powerful strangeness of our individual imaginations—the tendency of our psyches to become unintegrated, the deep parts of ourselves that wish not to communicate, and our need sometimes to be alone, even in the company of others. Taken together, Benjamin and Winnicott helped me devise a concept of the naïve that retained Schiller's sense of simplicity and even purity but could also be responsive to the wildness, privacy, and resistance we sometimes find in Williams, Stein, and Niedecker. If for Schiller

childhood and play provide the original blueprints for an ideal adult society (however far off it may be), for my naïve modernists, what childhood and play provide are an imaginative zone and mode of ad hoc world-making within an adult society that is oppressively regulated and tediously sane, as Winnicott might put it. Naïve modernism is less about edification and more about making-do, less about raising a major cultural monument and more about arranging a minor aesthetic refuge, a zone of playful non-compliance.

The possibility that Williams, Stein, and Niedecker are merely "minor" poets not to be included in the canon major modernists runs throughout "Naïve Modernism." It's present in the critical dismissals of Williams and Stein I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, and in Chapter 4, I take up the idea of minority more explicitly, playing upon the word's linkage of naïveté, childhood, and inferiority. This dissertation could be described as an effort to rearticulate the "major" significance of certain poets while also doing justice to the qualities of minority—e.g., playfulness, flightiness, simplicity, and folksiness—that make their work signify as it does. As I have emphasized throughout, Williams, Stein, and Niedecker were not actually culturally naïve; all three knew about and participated in international literary modernism. One challenge of writing this dissertation has been to maintain the tension between these poets' real sophistication and the naïve or minor qualities of their writing, which I have argued are equally real even though they are knowingly cultivated. I have tried throughout to suggest that there's not necessarily anything "mere" about poetic minority and that there's nothing inherently inferior about mere-ness itself. My hope is that by reimagining what it can mean for poetry to be naïve, I have offered new ways of understanding Williams, Stein, and Niedecker, and that in proposing that it might sometimes be childish or childlike, I have opened up new ways of thinking about literary modernism more broadly.

Oddly enough, it seems to me now that T.S. Eliot—who in many ways embodies the sentimental, major modernism against which I've defined naïve, minor modernism—offers a useful

way of concluding this dissertation and imagining what might come next. In his 1944 essay "What Is Minor Poetry?", Eliot considers the use of literary anthologies and takes stock of the various qualities that might be said to distinguish minor poetry from major poetry. After discarding certain familiar criteria, for instance that major poets write long poems while minor poets write short ones, he concludes that "[t]he important difference is whether a knowledge of the whole, or at least of a very large part, of a poet's work, makes one enjoy more, because it makes one understood better, any one of his poems. That implies a significant unity in his whole work."[1] Rather than quarrel with the value Eliot places on "unity," or beyond that, with the premise that there's an essential difference between major and minor poets, both of which would seem to reveal his affection for authority and rule-making, I'm more interested in noticing how much affection he expresses for the poetry he identifies as minor. One value of an anthology, he proposes, is that it

> helps us to find out whether there are not some lesser poets of whose work we should like to know more—poets who do not figure so conspicuously in any history of literature, who may not have influenced the course of literature, poets whose work is not necessary for any scheme of literary education, but who may have a strong *personal* appeal to certain readers. Indeed, I should be inclined to doubt the genuineness of the love of poetry of any reader who did not have one or more of these personal affections for the work of some poet of no great historical importance: I should suspect that the person who only liked the poets whom the history books agree to be the most important, was probably no more than a conscientious student, bringing very little of himself to his appreciations. This poet may not be very important, you should say defiantly, but his work is good for *me*.[2]

I don't mean to imply here that Williams, Stein, and Niedecker are not historically important; I believe they are, and it seems that most scholars and anthologists now agree, especially in the cases of Williams and Stein. But the historical importance and cultural authority of their work is not finally what matters in the readings and arguments I've offered in the preceding chapters. What matters more is the potential for personal or private significance—the genuine usefulness—that I've tried to

[1] Eliot, "What Is Minor Poetry?", in *On Poetry and Poets*, 47.
[2] Ibid., 37-38. Italics in the original.

perform and account for. I'm not sure that Eliot would assent to this set of priorities, but it's pleasing to discover this naïve possibility at the heart of his sophisticated modernism.

To make of poetry not a set of lessons but a space of permission; to write about, teach, and practice poetry without becoming schoolmasters; to bring ourselves to our appreciations and grant others the permission to do the same—these are the aspirations of "Naïve Modernism." Perhaps in today's critical climate they can only be willfully naïve aspirations, and perhaps they leave us where criticism comes to an end and some other sort of practice can begin. What might it mean to bring ourselves to poetry? What might it mean to be genuine? Although they come to us through distinct etymologies, "genuine" and "naïve" both entail being true to something "native"—to various capacities primitive within us well before we grow up to become conscientious students.[3] It probably isn't helpful, or even possible, to identify or analyze what's genuine, or "proper, or peculiar to a person or thing," but perhaps in reading poems, whether together or alone, we might experience its presence, each time a little differently, and find ourselves momentarily naïve.

[3] *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd Ed., s.vv. "genuine" and "naïve."

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