Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English

Band: 2 (1985)

Artikel: Expression in color : the theory of Wassily Kandinsky and the poetry of William Carlos Williams

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99840

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Expression in Color: The Theory of Wassily Kandinsky and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams

Peter Halter

"Let us now have a beginning of composition. We have had enough of your improvisations," says a protesting voice in Williams' *The Great American Novel*, in the midst of a passage in which the poet (or the dominant narrative voice) gives full rein to his associative train of thoughts.[1] It is one of those casual remarks surfacing here and there in which Williams openly acknowledges Kandinsky's lasting influence on his poetics. On the one hand, this is not surprising – it is well known that the inspiration coming from the visual arts was of the utmost importance for Williams. On the other hand, it is somewhat unexpected that Kandinsky, whose spiritualism had caused him to turn to total abstraction by 1911, should have been an important figure for Williams, the poet who, like no one else before him, relied on the power of the sheer direct naming of simple ordinary objects, situations and moods. But, broadening our viewpoint a little, we discover deeper allegiances between the two artists that reveal some essential aspects of Williams' poetry and touch on some of the more fundamental aspects of modernism.

The passage from *The Great American Novel* quoted above with its protest against unending improvisations is a reference to Kandinsky's three basic artistic modes, as he set them down in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. This book, published in 1912, turned Kandinsky immediately into one of the leading avant-garde theorists of the time. Williams must have read the excerpts published in *Camera Work* in 1912 and in *Blast* in 1914. A few years later, he was in all probability

[1] William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 197. Henceforth abbreviated I. (Books and essays frequently quoted will be identified in my text by their initials in parentheses, followed by page numbers.)

intimately familiar with Kandinsky's theories through his friend Marsden Hartley, the painter who was closely associated with the Blaue Reiter group during his stays in Germany between 1913 and 1915.

Here are Kandinsky's three basic modes or "sources of inspiration," as he calls them:

1. A direct impression of nature, expressed in purely pictorial form. This I call an "Impression."
2. A largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, non-material in nature. This I call an "Improvisation."
3. An expression of slowly formed inner feeling, tested and worked over repeatedly and almost pedantically. This I call "Composition." Reason, consciousness, purpose, play an overwhelming part. But of calculation nothing appears: only feeling.[2]

Mike Weaver was the first to link Williams' pastorals and portraits, written mainly between 1915 and 1917, to Kandinsky's "Impressions."[3] Williams seems to have found an inspiration or a justification here for his own version of the Imagistic poem, which, built around a narrative nucleus, tries to remain absolutely faithful to what Kandinsky calls "a direct impression of nature, expressed in purely pictorial form." Williams, in other words, stayed away from Pound's composite Image (with a capital I); it was too near the standard metaphor for him, because it was basically the result of two superimposed images – one present, directly perceived, and the other absent, imagined, conjured up by the first. Pound's Image, seen in Kandinsky's terms, would be a "Composition" in a nut-shell.

Kora in Hell, on the other hand, is Williams' purest version of a kind of *écriture automatique* and thus, as its subtitle "Improvisations" with a

[2] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art,* ed. Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, 1947), p. 77. Henceforth abbreviated CSA.

[3] Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 39. For studies in book form about the relations between Williams' poetry and the visual arts see Bram Dijkstra, *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton, N. J.,: Princeton University Press, 1969); Dickran Tashjian, *Skyscraper Primitives: Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910–1925* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1975); Dickran Tashjian, *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1979); William Marling, *William Carlos Williams and the Painters, 1909–1923* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1982). On Kandinsky's influence in particular see Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Literary Avant-garde," *Criticism,* 21 (1979), 347–61.

nod in Kandinsky's direction indicates, a prime example of the painter's second category. Those of his poems in turn that Williams would have classified as "Compositions" are the poems or books, mainly written after 1920, that resulted from his endeavor to get away from "free verse" – a contradiction in itself, as Williams soon realized – to a form that was neither too rigid nor so free as to become nearly amorphous. The gradual emergence of a poetic form in the early twenties which was *orally and visually* patterned testifies to this struggle. It may well have been his painter's bias that led him to his dissatisfaction with the form of the "Impressions" and to his search for what he called later "some formal arrangement of the lines, perhaps a stanzaic form." "I have always had something to say, and the sheer sense of what is spoken seemd to me all-important, yet I knew the poem must have shape. From this time on [i. e. the publication of *Al Que Quiere!* in 1917] you can see the struggle to get a form without deforming the language."[4]

If Williams compared his early "Impressions" with the "Improvisations" of *Kora in Hell*, then the latter, viewed in terms of radical modernism, must have struck him as a gigantic step forward, going, as they did, far beyond the comparatively tame pastorals and doing away almost completely with mimetic "copying" or, as Pound would have said, with "matching" poem and object world. But the "Improvisations" were, as Williams knew, only one of many possibilities, with their own rewards *and* their own dangers. The "excellence" of *Kora in Hell* was, as he later wrote, "the disjointing process," but its fault, at the same time, "the dislocation of sense, often complete" (I, 285, 117). After *Kora*, therefore, Williams modified his theory of the poem: if it was vital to transcend mere mimetic "copying," it was equally important to make full use of the referential power of words.

Now it seems that here, with regard to this tension between the abstract and the concrete, the designed and the denoted, Kandinsky's theories were once again a rich source, highly stimulating and at the very least a help to the poet in clarifying and confirming his own ideas. According to Kandinsky, a form appears in a painting in two basic functions, and has accordingly two basic aims, two meanings, two impacts:

[4] William Carlos Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1978), pp. 22–23. Henceforth IWW.

1) Either a form aims at delimiting a concrete object two-dimensionally
2) Or a form remains ... a purely abstract entity. Such abstract entities, which have life in themselves, are a square, a circle, a rhombus, a trapezoid, etc., many of them so complicated as to have no mathematical formula. [...]
Between these two boundaries lie the innumerable forms in which both elements exist, with a preponderance of either the abstract or the concrete (CSA, 48).

For Kandinsky, abstract art is a means to reveal the inner resonance, or the "inner sound," which each abstract form possesses on its own. The more abstract the form, the "more clear and direct" is its appeal to the spirit. Horizontal lines are inherently quiet or peaceful, while vertical lines elicit in the viewer a sense of action or agitation. "In a painting," says Kandinsky, "when a line is freed from delineating a thing and functions as a thing in itself, its inner sound is no longer weakened by minor functions, and it receives its full inner power."[5]

Yet words in literature cannot be wholly abstract, since their power to denote is part of their essence. But words, too, says Kandinsky, are objects that have their own inner sound, a sound that "springs partly (perhaps principally) from the objects denoted." But constant repetition of a word, for example, leads to the point at which the object it refers to is forgotten and the "pure" sound of the word itself is revealed. This is what Kandinsky admired in Maeterlinck (CSA, 34), and it is exactly the same effect that Williams praised in Laurence Sterne and Gertrude Stein: "The feeling is of words themselves, a curious immediate quality quite apart from their meaning, much as in music different notes are dropped, so to speak, into repeated chords at a time, one after the other – for themselves alone."[6]

According to Kandinsky, all "organic forms" in art – objects depicted by words in literature, for example, or concrete things delineated in paintings – invariably possess an internal "double sound." In this double sound or "spiritual accord of naturalism with the abstract" the two sounds or reverberations may either enhance or weaken each other,

[5] Wassily Kandinsky, "On the Question of Form," in *The Blaue Reiter Almanach*, ed. Klaus Lankheit (New York and London, 1974), p. 168. Henceforth QF.

[6] William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969), p. 114.

and they may do so (in both ways) "either by concord or counterpoint" (CSA, 49).

That is why, Kandinsky concluded, it is by no means necessary for everybody to turn to complete abstraction. In his important essay "On the Question of Form," he tried to outline the formal properties of an art that would, within the realm of the concrete, ideally correspond to abstract art. This "great realism," as he called it, was a nascent art form characterized by, first of all, an attempt to discard the "superficially artful" and to embody the essence in "a simple ('inartistic') representation of the simple solid object." To discard "conventional and obtrusive beauty" and to concentrate on a straight presentation of things in their essential form was the surest way of revealing their pure internal resonance (QF, 161).

Of equal importance, in Kandinsky's view, was to render all objects in such a way as to remove them out of the realm of the pragmatic and utilitarian ("das Pragmatisch-Zweckmäßige"). Henri Rousseau was the great master here; equally revealing, he wrote, were the drawings of children. Both the great naive painter and the child are not yet prepossessed by the pragmatic and utilitarian view of the world, for they "see everything with fresh eyes" and still have "the natural ability to absorb the thing as such" (QF, 161). Such an experience is at the furthest possible remove from a conceptual approach which sees all objects as determined by their function in a world in which everything is logically and causally connected.

Now, each of the two constitutive traits of Kandinsky's "great realism" is also a fundamental tenet for Williams. Kandinsky's call for an art that should discard the traditional notions of the beautiful has its correspondence in Williams' lifelong attacks on too limited a concept of "Beauty," which he sees as linked to equally narrow notions of literature itself, or the meaning of such terms as tradition, novelty, innovation. This issue, too, is taken up in *The Gerat American Novel*, in one of the dialogues or inward debates between the narrator and an opponent who defends the conservative viewpoint. "What then," asks the latter, "would you say of the usual interpretation of the world 'literature'?" "Permanence," the narrator retorts. "A great army with its tail in antiquity. Cliché of the soul: beauty." "But," the other protests, "can you have literature without beauty?" "It all depends," the narrator says, "on what you mean by beauty. There is beauty in the bellow of the BLAST, etc. from all previous significance. – To me beauty is purity. To me it is discovery, a race on the ground" (I, 170–71).

A new beauty based on discovery, however, can only be achieved by words that are free, that is, not bound to past literary forms (which in turn are tied to past worlds and values). Such poets as Marianne Moore are, in Williams' view, truly creative because they are using words that they freed completely from past associations, by "wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or [by] taking them bodily from greased contexts" (I, 315–16).

It was equally important for Williams to recognize that a new beauty based on discovery would necessarily assume different forms in different environments. If Kandinsky's discoveries were appropriate for Europe, Duchamp's ready-mades were important in America:

> Expressionism is to express skilfully the seething reactions of the contemporary European consciousness. Cornucopia. In at the small end and – blui! Kandinsky.
> But it's a fine thing. It is THE thing for the moment – in Europe. The same sort of thing, reversed, in America has a water attachment to be released with a button. That IS art (I, 173).

The reference here is of course to Duchamp's ready-made "Fountain," the urinal he had handed in at the 1917 Exhibition of the Independents. Not unlike naive or primitive art, Duchamp's ready-mades, taken out of their original realm of the utilitarian, truly forced you to see "with fresh eyes," to absorb the "thing as such." At the same time they were important for Williams because they confronted the Americans with their own technological culture, for what it was worth.

In order to create an art that was based on this new conception of beauty, it was essential for both Williams and Kandinsky to transcend the traditional outlook that lay behind the accepted modes of expression. Hence Kandinsky's admiration for such "primitives" as Rousseau, and hence Williams' praise of Gertrude Stein who had freed words "from the dead weight of logical burdens" and who had carried to the extreme the necessary "general attack on the scholastic viewpoint, that medieval remnant with whose effects from generation to generation literature has been infested to its lasting detriment" (I, 346–47).

Thus Williams and Kandinsky belong to the foremost exponents of those modernists who came to the conviction that the modern artist had to transcend the limits of perception inherent in Cartesian or post-Renaissance rationalism. Both artists are in this respect part of a multifaceted movement that goes back at least to the second half of the

nineteenth century, a counter-tradition in search of a more immanent or empathetic experience of the object-world. This alternative outlook is to be found, for instance, among the early "physiognomists," the artists and critics in the wake of Cézanne (who was often praised as a "primitive") as well as the Gestalt psychologists in the early twentieth century.

In all of these movements, theories of expression figure prominently, although the awareness of the expressive dimension as such is of course much older than that. "There is no theory of art, old or new, which ignores this element altogether," writes E. H. Gombrich. "The ancient theory of music, for instance, elaborated the 'expressive' character of modes and keys, orators discussed the physiognomy of words, rhythms, and sounds, and architects had something to say about the physiognomy of the various 'orders' in architecutre. Even in the visual arts, the expressive possibilities of shapes and forms as such were by no means neglected by the writers of the academic tradition." But Gombrich, too, stresses that in this century the attention paid to the expressive dimension reaches a new climax, although he somewhat narrowly regards this change as an outcome of Expressionist theories.[7]

In addition to the increased emphasis on the importance of expression, one finds also various attempts to view the vastly differing attention paid to it in different times and cultures within a larger historical perspective. Thus Kandinsky is not alone when he relates a high awareness of the expressive properties to a more primordial experience of reality. "Within the larger dimension of the development of mankind," writes the art historian Hans Sedlmayr,

> as well as in the smaller one of the development of each human being, the ability to grasp the expressive character of things (their physiognomic dimension) is an older and more original way of perceiving the world than is the ability to perceive forms and colors from a purely formal point of view. The child perceives the expressive properties of things (that is, whether they

[7] E. H. Gombrich, "On Physiognomic Perception," in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1963), pp. 48–49. For further reading on the theory of expression cf. Gombrich's "Expression and Communication" in the same volume, pp. 57–69, as well as his chapter "From Representation to Expression" in *Toward a Psychology of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 51–73 and 192–212; Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 444–461 and passim.

> appear friendly or angry, serene or sad) before it notices colors and forms ... In the later phases of the development of mankind there are two different modes of perception: a primary, physiognomic one – in which things, colors, forms, in fact virtually everything, can be experienced as severe or serene, powerful or tired, relaxed or full of tension (to name only a few of the many physiognomic qualities) – and a later, secondary perception of things from a conceptual-formal-technical point of view. A red with so and so much blue or gray or white added would be an example of a color perceived purely with regard to its specific hue, seen as an aspect of the object bearing it. Experienced 'physiognomically,' on the other hand, 'red' is not an optical-spectral entity but something completely different, characterized by its living, 'burning,' energetic, powerful expression.[8]

Kandinsky devoted an important chapter in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to the expressive quality of colors – the warmth of yellow and the coolness of blue, for example, with their inherent movement – "the warm colors approaching the spectator, the cool ones retreating from him" (p. 57). Equally important are the excentric or concentric movements which are also characteristic of warm and cold colors:

> If two circles are drawn and painted respectively yellow and blue, a brief contemplating will reveal in the yellow a spreading movement out from the center, and a noticeable approach to the spectator. The blue, on the other hand, moves into itself, like a snail retreating into its shell, and draws away from the spectator. The eye feels stung by the first circle while it is absorbed into the second (CSA, 57).

In Kandinsky's view the artist has above all to be susceptible to this expressive dimension of colors and forms; he has to revert back to that primary sensitivity to the impact of all things which children and the so-called primitives alone seem to possess, in an age severely limited and impoverished by its rational-technological outlook.

[8] Hans Sedlmayr, *Kunst und Wahrheit* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1956), p. 107; my translation. Cf. also Sedlmayr's essay "Ursprung und Anfänge der Kunst", in *Epochen und Werke I* (Wien und München, 1959), pp. 7–17. Sedlmayr (as well as Rudolf Arnheim in his brilliant essays on the theory of expression) points out that expression or the physiognomic dimension should not be confused with anthropomorphism: "It is erroneous to believe that the physiognomic qualities experienced in non-human things are human expressions transferred into objects. The physiognomic experience of human faces is merely a remnant of a primary perception of all things." With regard to the experience of colors this means that one "can very well experience the 'sadness' of a color without feeling sad" (*Kunst und Wahrheit*, p. 107, 108; my translation).

Again, it is precisely this sensitivity to the expressive dimension of all things which is one of Williams' great qualities, a sensitivity which results in that rare immediacy he advocated in such a dictum as "No ideas but in things" or in his manifestoes praising "Contact" in art. Due to this immediacy, we find in Williams' poems, according to Kenneth Burke, "man without the syllogism, without the parode, without Spinoza's Ethics, man with nothing but the thing and the feeling of that thing." "Seen from this angle," he added, Contact in these poems "might be said to resolve into the counterpart of Culture, and Williams thereby becomes one of our most distinguished Neanderthal men."[9] Burke's statement is of special interest in the context of Kandinsky's praise of an art that explores the realm beyond the pragmatic-utilitarian view of things, specifically in the light of the theories of expression juxtaposing a primary awareness of the expressive dimension in all things to a later perception dominated by the spirit of rationalism and utilitarianism. In so far as these latter ways of perception lie at the heart of modern civilization, Contact with its attempt at closing the gap between self and other in an "interpenetration, both ways"[10] is indeed the counterpart of modern culture, and Williams' art is therefore indeed related to that of the so-called primitives.[11]

[9] Kenneth Burke, "William Carlos Williams: Two Judgments," in *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 49.

[10] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 3. Henceforth P.

[11] It is interesting that in the preface to *Kora in Hell* Williams links three art forms which, each in its own way, point out the expressive properties of things: Duchamp's ready-mades, the painting of the *naifs*, and pre-historic rock-painting. All three art forms are characterized for Williams by some elements that make them "truly new, truly a fresh creation," and thus "good art": Duchamp achieves it by taking his objects out of their environment so that, deprived of their function, they appear in a new light; or else he makes use of chance and accident to discover things that are "of far greater interest than works of art conventionally composed *in situ*." Naive painters, on the other hand, can, "without master or method," produce works like that painting Williams owns which "in its unearthly gaiety of flowers and sobriety of design possesses exactly that strange freshness a spring day approaches . . ." Such paintings in turn are related for Williams to pre-historic rock painting: to "galloping bisons and stags, the hind feet of which have been caught by the artist in such a position that from that time until the invention of the camera obscura, a matter of six thousand years or more, no one on earth had again depicted that most delicate and expressive posture of running" (I, 8–9).

In these poems, where we have "man with nothing but the thing and the feeling of that thing," colors, for instance, are forces that spread and recede, rouse or calm, fill, together with all other things, a space that is never empty, sometimes floating in it and enveloping everything as part of the light they create:

> Yellow, yellow, yellow, yellow!
> It is not a color.
> It is summer!
> It is the wind on a willow,
> the lap of waves, the shadow
> under a bush, a bird, a bluebird,
> three herons, a dead hawk
> rotting on a pole –
> Clear yellow!
> It is piece of blue paper
> in the grass or a threecluster of
> green walnuts swaying, children
> playing croquet or one boy
> fishing, a man
> swinging his pink fists
> as he walks[12]

Diverging, spreading yellow becomes the "radiant gist" of a beautiful summer day, and the dazzling outgoing activity of nature that the color contains is embodied in the incantatory fourfold repetition of the word "yellow" itself – in its explosive sound pattern the word-body is, ideally, "transfused by the same forces which transfuse the earth – at least some small part of them" (I, 121). This fourfold repetition is echoed in the anaphoric "It is . . ," of the following lines, and in the cumulative effect of the rhapsodic Whitmanesque accretion of details throughout the poem. The all-pervading yellow becomes identical with everything which the eye, moving insatiably from one thing to another, encounters – in a series of equations that culminate in the paradoxical identity of yellow with "a bluebird," a "piece of blue paper," "green walnuts swaying," "a man / swinging his pink fists / as he walks," "tufts of purple grass." Yellow in this color field of action (which one might compare to a Kandinskean palette with its characteristic yellow, blue, green, red, pink and purple) permeates everything to the point where it reigns supreme and forces, as it were, the other colors to submit or resign.

[12] "Primrose," *Collected Earlier Poems,* (New York: New Directions, 1951), p. 209. Henceforth CEP.

Thus, for example, yellow is "a disinclination to be/five red petals or a rose" and the green sepals under the "four open yellow petals [curl] backward into reverse spikes." In Williams' spring poems – poems devoted to the crucial moment of birth and renewal in a universe experienced as a never-ending process of creation and destruction, growth and decay – the drama of spring is invariably also a drama of colors. Thus in "Portrait of the Author" (CEP, 228) the bright green of the budding trees is full of a disturbing, maddening energy, an energy, however, that is uncannily contained and enclosed in the slow, silent, "cold" unfolding of the leaves:

> The birches are mad with green points
> the wood's edge is burning with their green,
> burning seething – No, no, no.
> The birches are opening their leaves one
> by one. Their delicate leaves unfold cold
> and separate, one by one.

The impact of this "burning" bright green can only be understood if we realize that it approaches yellow, as the title of another spring poem, "The Yellow Season," indicates. Now, the basic movement of yellow, says Kandinsky, "that of straining towards the spectator ... and the second movement, that of overrunning the boundaries, [have] a material parallel in that human energy which attacks every obstacle blindly and goes forth aimlessly in all directions. [...] If we were to compare [yellow] with human states of mind, it might be said to represent not the depressive, but the manic aspect of madness" (CSA, 58).

The poet in "Portrait of the Author" is possessed by precisely this manic, upsetting, non-directed energy, due to his empathetic identification with the "burning, seething" yellowish green of the budding trees. This feeling leads to an overwhelming desire to break through silence, isolation and inertia and bridge the intolerable distance that separates him from all other human beings:

> O my brother, you redfaced, living man
> ignorant, stupid whose feet are upon
> this same dirt that I touch – and eat.
> We are alone in this terror, alone,
> face to face on this road, you and I,
> wrapped by this flame!
> Let the polished plows stay idle,
> their gloss already on the black soil

> But that face of yours–!
> Answer me. I will clutch you. I
> will hug you, grip you. I will poke my face
> into your face and force you to see me.

But the frantic desire does not lead to action – the poet's immobility reflects the contending forces in nature, with the almost unbearable tension between the trees burning with their bright green and the leaves unfolding intolerably slowly and coldly:

> And coldly the birch leaves are opening one by one.
> Coldly I observe them and wait for the end.
> And it ends.

Thus the contending forces in the poet, by virtue of his "approximate co-extension with the universe" (I, 105), reflect the forces of nature, and an essential part of these forces are the contending forces of the interacting colors themselves. Green, according to Kandinsky, is the result of blending warm yellow and cool blue and thus generates itself, at least to some extent, the fundamental tension experienced by the poet in "Portrait of the Author:"

> An attempt to make yellow colder produces a greenish tint and checks both the horizontal and eccentric movement. The color becomes sickly and unreal, like an energetic man who has been checked in the use of his energy by external circumstances. The blue by its contrary movement acts as a brake on the yellow and is hindered in its own movement, and, if more blue is added, the contrary movements cancel each other out and complete immobility ensues. The result is *green* (CSA, 57).

Lifted to the more general level of a basic underlying principle Williams expressed the same perception in *Kora in Hell:*

> Between two contending forces there may at all times arrive that moment when the stress is equal on both sides so that with a great pushing a great stability results giving a picture of perfect rest (I, 32–33).

The bright green of springtime is of course far away from this "great stability"; each of the two conflicting elements is felt separately, and the total impact can only be expressed as a paradox: the leaves are burning while they coldly and slowly unfold, and the poet is ecstatic and terrified at one and the same time, "wrapped by this flame" and "peering out/ into this cold world" at one and the same moment, crying out and waiting silently for the end.

In this as well as in other spring poems, black and white, "the second great antithesis" (CSA, 57), is also part of the perturbations of spring. The white blossoms which virtually seem to explode out of the black of the branches are "flares of small fire" joining forces with the burning green. And white, too, similar to the bright green, is a deeply disturbing color, hot and cold at the same time. In another spring poem, "The Widow's Lament in Spring Time" (CEP, 223), in which the confrontation with awakening life is extremely painful because it throws the woman back on her own deprivation, this confrontation culminates in the experience of the overwhelming white of the blossoming trees:

> Today my son told me
> that in the meadows,
> at the edge of the heavy woods
> in the distance, he saw
> trees of white flowers.
> I feel that I would like
> to go there
> and fall into those flowers
> and sink into the marsh near them.

Such a white that rouses the desire to merge with it and get lost in it is experienced as an extreme: oppositions fuse, ecstasy leads to oblivion and annihilation, the color of joy turns (as in China) into the color of mourning. In Williams' poems, writes James Breslin, "'[c]rowds are white', the sea is dark: immersion in either gives relief, a union with One, but halts the cyclic process of renewal."[13] And Kandinsky in turn writes: "White is a symbol of a world from which all colors as material attributes have disappeared. The world is too far above us for its structure to touch our souls. There comes a great silence which materially represented is like a cold, indestructible wall going on into the infinite. White, therefore, acts upon our psyche as a great, absolute silence, like the pauses in music that temporarily break the melody. ... White has the appeal of nothingness that is before birth ..." (CSA, 59–60).

Of course the meaning or impact of a color cannot be defined once and for all. Within different contexts and different juxtapositions it can elicit different, even diametrically opposed reactions. Thus in "The Wildflower" (CEP, 287) white is opposed to Dionysian abandonment and sensuous immersion into the darkness of the

[13] James Breslin, *William Carlos Williams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 75.

Black eyed susan
rich orange
round the purple core

In this poem white recalls things that belong to an unassuming, ordinary and restrained domesticity, such as the common "white daisy," or "farmers/who live poorly." White is related to the bleaker aspects of the present or to one's everyday life, while the orange, purple and black colors of the wildflower are as sensuous as the remote or past worlds whose reality cannot be separated from dreams and phantasies:

But you
are rich
in savagery–

Arab
Indian
Dark woman.

In "Queen Anne's Lace" (CEP, 210), a *paysage de femme* which fuses the white of a woman's body with a field of white flowers, a basic tension is expressed through the different impact of the two shades and textures of white embodied in the anemone on the one hand and the wild carrot on the other:

Her body is not so white as
anemone petals nor so smooth – nor
so remote a thing. It is a field
of the wild carrot taking
the field by force; the grass
does not rise above it.

The smooth, delicate and pure white of the anemone petals seems passive, fragile, almost incorporeal and related to the virginal when compared to the *wild* carrot, which is not "so remote a thing" but active to the point of "taking/the field by force" – a paradox which recalls the androgynic nature of flowers.[14] With the wild carrot there is "no question of whiteness,/white as white can be"; the added purple mole at the center of each flower makes it approachable: it is turned into a flower-woman that is desired by the sun-poet *and* desiring him, caressed *and*

[14] Jerome Mazzaro, *Wiliam Carlos Williams: The Later Poems* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 123.

caressing: "Each part/is a blossom under his touch/to which the fibres of her being/stem one by one."

Whiteness here, where there is desire, love, warmth and fertility, does not reign supreme; it is not the spotless purity of the dematerialized absolute. Although it still contains the "pious wish to whiteness," it is "a pious wish to whiteness gone over–". Gone over where to? Whiteness of Apollonian clarity and restraint gone over to whiteness of Dionysian ecstasy, gone over to the climactic moment in which the field of encounter is "empty" of everything but a "white desire" – to collapse into the "nothing" at the very end of the poem, when the imaginative ecstatic union of the male sun-poet and the female field of flowers has reached its orgasmic height and the poet is thrown back on himself, on his own separate consciousness:

Wherever
his hand has lain there is
a tiny purple blemish. Each part
is a blossom under his touch
to which the fibres of her being
stem one by one, each to its end,
until the whole field is a
white desire, empty, a single stem,
a cluster, flower by flower,
a pious wish to whiteness gone over –
or nothing.

Such an empathetic identification of the poet with the sun in his pan-erotic encounter with the field of flowers is only possible in a poem whose aesthetics of energy transcend the fixed categories of the rationalist-technological outlook and make no fundamental difference between human and non-human realms. The poem becomes a field of action into which the poet's consciousness enters, in the double movement of appropriating it and being exposed to it that Williams calls "an interpenetration, both ways." And the colors in this field of action are an essential part of the basic forces interacting with each other.

The specific process that gives direction to these interacting forces is often that of *form being born* out of the formless ground.[15] In this

[15] Cf. J. Hillis Miller, *Poets of Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 328: "There is ... much drama in Williams' work, [which] lies in a dimension appropriate to the realm of immanence which he has entered. Three elements are always present in that realm, and these must be brought into

context "Queen Anne's Lace" is of particular interest because it paradigmatically enacts this process on the level of colors: it begins and ends with color being born, so to speak, through the subtlest distinctions of white. The white of the wild carrot is *not* "white as can be," which, as an end point on a scale, turns into its own negation – into an absence of color which is absence of life, the "nothingness that is before birth" (CSA, 60). Hence the sense of purity conveyed by total whiteness can only be a purity beyond fruition. Approached from this angle, the "nothing" of the last line acquires a second meaning, which becomes clearer when we realize that syntactically it stands in opposition to the previous eight lines: "Each part/is a blossom under his touch ... until the whole field is ... a pious wish to whiteness gone over–/or nothing." Life begins where the sterility and non-form of absolute whiteness "[goes] over" into something else – life begins where color begins, and a color can only be perceived in its difference from another color.

Thus the interaction of colors enacts in a paradigmatic way what happens also on all other levels (that is, the level of the sounds and forms of the words making up the poem as well as the level of the things denoted). "Interaction" in this process, it is important to realize, has to be taken literally, since to bring out the expressive dimension in colors, forms and objects means to bring out what is "adverbial, not adjectival," as Rudolf Arnheim writes. Expression applies "to the behaviour of things, not to the things themselves." In this sense viable art indeed contains the universal in the particular, since it embodies something of the *natura naturans* underlying the myriad forms of the *natura naturata*. "In a broader sense," writes Arnheim,

> it is the direct expressiveness of all perceptual qualities that allows the artist to convey the effects of the most universal and abstract psycho-physical forces through the presentation of individual, concrete objects and happenings. While painting a pine tree, he can rely on the expression of towering and spreading this tree conveys to the human eye, and thus can span in his work the whole range of existence, from its most general principles to the tangible manifestations of these principles in individual objects.[16]

the proper relation or life will fall back to some form of inauthenticity. Yet they are mutually incompatible. ... The three elements are the formless ground, origin of all things; the formed thing, defined and limited; a nameless presence, the 'beautiful thing' (P, 119), there in every form but hidden by it."

On this aspect, see also Charles Doyle, "Kora and Venus: Process and Object in William Carlos Williams," *Perspective*, 17:3 (Winter 1974), 189–97.

[16] *Toward a Psychology of Art*, pp. 208, 69–70.

In poetic form Williams said more or less the same in "Still Lifes,"[17] written in the last years of his life. It is a poem by an artist who not only kept in fruitful touch with what happened in the visual arts throughout his life but who also never stopped pondering the mysterious way in which a particular poem or painting is "transfused by the same forces which transfuse the earth – at least some small part of them" (I, 121):

> All poems can be represented by
> still lifes not to say
> water-colors, the violence of
> the Iliad lends itself to an arrangement
> of narcissi in a jar,
> The slaughter of Hector by Achilles
> can well be shown by them
> casually assembled yellow upon white
> radiantly making a circle
> sword strokes violently given
> in more or less haphazard disarray.

[17] *The Hudson Review,* 16:4 (Winter 1963–64), p. 516.