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## Completing the Picture: Williams, Berryman, and "Spatial Form"

by DAVID M. WYATT

IN SPEAKING OF the native range and power of the American eye, Richard Poirier discovers it typically focusing, in its fictional excursions, with intensity rather than extensiveness. "Why is it," he asks, "that often we remember vividly a particular scene that upon inspection turns out to have lasted only a few pages in a book of several hundred? From the answer to such a question we can discover that a writer could only give to moments of greatest illumination in his book, moments at which he seems to expend his genius most authentically, a small proportion of time and space as against what he felt required to give to 'the rest of life'."<sup>1</sup> Genius here expends itself through two dimensions: "time and space." At its most intense the work asks the reader to mediate temporal "moments" and spatial "scenes." Except for these "few" intensities the reading experience persists through unredeemed duration and unilluminated void. Space and time are conjoined in Poirier's argument as if each were simultaneously the ground of literary experience. Yet while his language indicts the recalcitrance of both dimensions, it is the essential temporality of literature which creates the problem he laments. As language diachronically unfolds it shapes the rhythm of expectation out of which the various "scenes" imaged by the work emerge. Impatience with the continuum of pages or lines sending up these intensities resolves into impatience with the temporal nature of the medium by which reading and writing proceed.

Poirier does not propose as antidote to literary ongoingness the concept of "spatial form." Yet the alternative to oscillation between authenticity's "small proportion" and " 'the rest of life' " is one note endlessly held, one scene continually visible. Poirier's vocabulary consequently depends, in its moments of greatest illumination, upon terms appropriate to the plastic arts. Looking is valorized over reading. The latter activity consists of continually falling away from the moment into time, of the alternation of presence and absence. Looking, or reading "spatial form," occurs in a continuous present where nothing is lost since nothing need be left behind. Yet even when *poesis* attempts merely to render *pictura*, has it altered the dimension through which it typically proceeds? Nowhere does the natural ongoingness of literary language appear more willing to

1. Richard Poirier, *A World Elsewhere: The Place of Style in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 14.

curtail, if not forego itself than in its actual transcriptions of paintings. While reading such works the urgency of the temporal quest seems suspended as the eye focuses upon a scene already fully humanized. Such attention meets both of Poirier's implicit criteria: that the fully satisfying work resolves itself into a scene at once continuous and intense. In their poems on Bruegel's *The Hunters in the Snow* (see fig.), William Carlos Williams and John Berryman have attempted to notate the impact of such a scene.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as our experience of these poems meets or resists Poirier's demands, we can measure the willingness of each poet, working in a temporal medium, to see its limits transgressed or affirmed.

The argument for transgression asserts that facing a painting, Williams is free to assume as his visual axis the painter's, to see through another's eyes. He is thereby freed from an earlier objective and its difficulties, where "his object" had been "not so much to impose a new form on the world as to adopt a new stance in which the world takes on new shapes. His difficulty is that his method works too well: the shapes proliferate endlessly, and, having deprived himself of an external standpoint, he has no means of controlling them." This is Charles Feidelson describing Whitman and the dilemma he passes on to Williams.<sup>3</sup> A painting grants the poet caught up in proliferation with the necessary "external standpoint." By simply attending to the arresting vividness of the painting, a sustained vividness is seemingly guaranteed for the poem. The poet's axis of vision need only merge with an earlier artist's in an apprehension of his "spatial form." Sight can now fix itself by means of a still point instead of continually mediating a flux of images. Adopting such a vision promises much relief; does Williams seek it?

Yes, according to Bram Dijkstra. While looking at a painting Williams "records the details of the image presented by the painting in the order of their visual importance—in the same order, in other words, in which, on seeing the painting, his awareness would register them."<sup>4</sup> This would seem to give all freedom to the poet, while actually granting all power to the painter. For it is the painter who determines this "order" of "visual importance." The observing poet simply finds his "awareness" registering it. Active imaginative choice would give way here to the passive, if pleasurable, ordering of one's experience by an external landscape. Given such dependence, the poet need not worry over conveying an arrangement in space through the ordering of poem time. The eye becomes a camera,

2. Bruegel completed the painting in 1565 as a part of an unfinished calendar cycle. It represents either the months of December, January, or February. The broken sign hangs before the Inn of the Stag. The motto "Dit is In den Hert" lies below the painted legend of St. Hubert or St. Eustace. Now in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum, the Panel measures 46 x 63¾ inches. Williams' poem was first published in *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (Norfolk, Conn: J. Laughlin, 1962; rpt. New York, New Directions, 1967). Subsequent references to this volume will be identified by the letters *PB*. Berryman's poem was first published in *The Dispossessed* (New York: Sloane, 1948), rpt. in *Short Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967).

3. *Symbolism and American Literature* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 27.

4. *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Stieglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 62.



Bruegel, *The Hunters in the Snow*; Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum

the poem a photograph, and the reading experience a passive retracing of a visual event passively undergone.

Yet if the poet "records the details of the image presented by the painting in the order of their visual importance," and if the painting contains more than one detail, this process must take time. The realization of this "order" depends, in fact, upon the power of one detail to attract the eye *before* (sooner than) another. Thus a spatial order can only be known through a temporal one as the details are registered in sequence upon the consciousness of an observer. Completion depends upon completing. If paintings have such an "order," the definition of their status becomes problematic. Ontologically speaking, "A painting represents a moment of perception. It consists of a field of experience made instantaneously perceptible. It is a moment in time, suspended and lifted outside the sequence of time, rescued as it were for eternity."<sup>5</sup> Dijkstra's ideal definition of a painting has little to do with the way in which we actually experience one. His enthusiasm for a medium which might rescue perception from time never finds a specific outlet. Instead, his experience of poems of paintings leads him to rediscover the painting itself as bound by temporality. In speaking of Williams's verbal recording of a painting in "March," Dijkstra admits that "the poetic unit which results is a part of the temporal process only insofar as reading is, but in these terms a painting is too—for it takes time to scrutinize a painting in detail. In all other respects the unit is outside the sequence of time in literature (narrative continuity), because, just as in a painting, the details can be examined in any order desired."<sup>6</sup> Even if it were true that the "details" of a painting can be examined in any order desired—what about Dijkstra's "order of visual importance?"—the order thereby realized still "takes time" to construct. More importantly, reading *is*—is everything. We can only possess a poem by "reading" it; "insofar" as reading is the only mode of possession open to us, a poem is entirely part of "the temporal process." And if we wish to possess paintings as fully as poems—"in detail"—nothing less than the same kind of attention will do. The "other respects" Dijkstra posits never come into being except in the idea of a painting. It may be possible to think of a painting or a poem as "instantaneously perceptible," but to scrutinizing men living in time, such notions remain notions, not realities. Life "takes time"; Dijkstra, even while attempting to diminish the role reading plays in the realization of works of art, reveals it as the activity by which we must examine and order them.

Contradictions between Dijkstra's theoretical view of poems and his practical experience of them registers a confusion dating (at least) from the Imagist and Vorticist manifestoes. Their challenge to an enervated literary culture, in finding support from the plastic arts, has been inter-

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

preted as a willful adoption of the methods and effects of those arts. In turning to them as exemplary of the direct treatment of the thing, poetry was to free itself from faded abstraction, tired rhythms, and muzzy sentimentality. Best of all, it was to acquire a new immediacy, to present, in Pound's famous formula, "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." Although it is possible to interpret this exhortation as calling for a penetration of time, it has been commonly understood as urging a spatialization of the poem. Cezanne, cave painting, and Stieglitz have all been charged as responsible for inspiring this turn toward the visually static from the verbally ongoing. It has been endlessly argued whether literature succeeded in embodying these new qualities, whether such an attempt is desirable. The most intelligent of these arguments first discover the differentia of the plastic and the verbal arts—spatialization versus temporality—and then proceed to argue for one dimension as preferable to the other while assuming their transferability. Hugh Kenner argues in *The Pound Era*, for instance, that a poem can *be like* a painting. Debunking Pater's theorizing in this regard, he asserts that "The art toward which it leads is a passionate attention to transient effects, and an attention which, rescuing them from the flux of time, will render them static, hence pictorial."<sup>7</sup> In dismissing this as a "recipe for being an artist," Kenner intends the definition of painting as "static" to become an epithet for bad poetry. In order to rescue Pound from the net such a definition casts, Kenner later argues that true Imagism is metamorphic: "Misrepresented as a poetic of stasis, it had been a poetic of darting change; for a whole page, in the Canto [Canto 2], perception succeeds perception like frames of film."<sup>8</sup> He further maintains that only minor poets seriously attempt to capture in poems merely pictorial effects. While continuing to discuss such modes as transferable, he judges them to be, at least for the authentic modern artist, antithetical. The notion of the visual arts as static, free from the effects of time, and authentic verbal art as primarily ongoing, flowing on in the tide of time, remains a central assumption of his book.

I have argued that the primary dimension through which any artistic work is experienced, authentic or not, is time. Space, according to Bergson, can only be perceived in time. Even the "timeless" concept of space can have only a temporary hold upon us: "The conception of an empty homogeneous medium [space] is something far more extraordinary, being a kind of reaction against that heterogeneity [time] which is the very ground of our experience."<sup>9</sup> While it may be possible to argue that a painting is, in some experiential vacuum, a spatial artifact, it remains to define it by way of the human observer, whose "states of

7. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 182.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 367.

9. Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F. L. Pogson, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1910), p. 97.

consciousness, even when successive, permeate one another.”<sup>10</sup> According to such a version of consciousness, we experience space through a continuity which denies it stability. Once we admit with Dijkstra that a space (a painting) admits to being read, we have admitted that experiencing even the most homogeneous medium “takes time.” By applying procedures traditionally reserved for reading verbal works to plastic arts we can better understand the dimension through which both have always emerged for the human audience. The problematic relationship between poetry and painting will be further illuminated insofar as both are treated, however different their materials, as affecting us through ongoingness.

While reading Williams's poems of paintings we become not passive recorders of a spatial field, but active performers of a temporal sequence. That these poems are of and full of images, descriptions of scenes, parts of scenes and empty spaces should not distract us from the task they assign us: negotiating in the order of its presentation the poet's experience of the painting. Everything on the page notates an ongoing interpretative activity; nothing is there merely to be seen. Through their lack of traditional typography these poems demand renewed attention to the course of reading time. The end spaces which assume the burden of punctuation bring arrest into the poem only to reveal it as dependent for its full effect upon a context of ongoingness. The ability of Williams's new measure to capture as great a sense of sequentiality as conveyed by standard verse forms, despite his claim that the “moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested,” reveals his continuing awareness that “time is a storm in which we are all lost.”<sup>11</sup>

WILLIAMS attempts to calm this storm in “The Hunters in the Snow.” His success at bringing time into line depends upon his willingness to measure out without denying the force he would control. As a powerfully modulated transformation of a “spatial” form into a temporal one, Williams's poem can be compared to John Berryman's verbal transcript of the same painting. In “Winter Landscape” Berryman attempts, through traditional means, to account for the experience of looking at—and thinking about. The kind of time his poem asks us to keep completes a far different kind of painting by way of a far different kind of poem—one drawn by the temptation to fulfill itself in a single moment.

Williams says the painting this way:

*The Hunters in the Snow*

The over-all picture is winter  
icy mountains  
in the background the return

10. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

11. *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 89; *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), p. xvi.

from the hunt it is toward evening  
 from the left  
 sturdy hunters lead in  
  
 their pack the inn-sign  
 hanging from a  
 broken hinge is a stag a crucifix  
  
 between his antlers the cold  
 inn yard is  
 deserted but for a huge bonfire  
  
 that flares wind-driven tended by  
 women who cluster  
 about it to the right beyond  
  
 the hill is a pattern of skaters  
 Brueghel the painter  
 concerned with it all has chosen  
  
 a winter-struck bush for his  
 foreground to  
 complete the picture . . .

Reading persists here in what might be called Williams's "lengthened present." Except for a mild intervention of the past perfect ("has chosen") and the timeless infinitive ("to complete"), our line-by-line movement through the poem occurs wholly in the present tense. Sequentiality punctuates immediacy. In other words, discrete line-breaking portions out what the poem's verbal force attempts to fuse. We discover the clarity resulting from the temporal structuring of a poem as complementary with the impulse to reveal instantaneously the poem's (and its subject, the painting's) "over-all" force.

Given this kind of poem, the reader must shuffle minute particulars with inclusive perspectives. We begin with the latter:

The over-all picture is winter

This seems to promise a painting as an achieved entirety, "a moment of perception." Yet the very inclusiveness of this gesture, having completed itself in the poem's first line, exhausts the option it has chosen to pursue. To equate the painting with a season satisfies a desire for comprehensive description while leaving the work, to the reader's eye, merely an abstraction. By conjuring up the sum of all color (Melville's "colorless, all-color of atheism"), "winter" denies us any grasp of specific detail. In "The Polar Bear" (*PB*, 16) Williams invokes the "snow/which attacks and kills" as an enemy of the very words by which his work proceeds,

silently as it falls muffling  
 the world  
 to sleep that  
 the interrupted quiet return



A white world becomes emblem of an empty page; poems most successfully interrupt the quiet of a colorless plane. In "The Descent" (*PB*, 73) Williams again confronts the nostalgia for whiteness—

and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory  
of whiteness .

—while going on to descend further into the continuing defeat of purity a poem spells. Silent oneness can only be purchased by the loss of the saving parts and sounds of which words and poems are made. By granting us at the beginning of his poem a view all-too comprehensive, Williams chastens the impulse toward a total perspective. In the remainder of the poem he humanizes, as does Bruegel, a landscape tending to icy sameness. Our task becomes a filling-in of the "over-all picture."

Synecdoche provides the way forward. "Icy mountains," given a separate line, acts as a concretizing appositive to the chilling time of year and restores the presence of a part within the context of the whole. Yet even as the line-break after "mountains" helps to isolate the line with its predecessor, the line's incomplete syntax lures us forward. The inconclusiveness of line 2 is quickly undercut as we move on to line 3:

in the background the return

Here the mountains, distanced into the background, fade from view, but not without having turned our course aside from a perspective that might have frozen us in our steps. "In the background," sandwiched between the mountains and "the return," now becomes foreground. Does the phrase in fact refer only to the location of the return? Common sense links it with the position of the mountains, while lineation connects it with this now visible activity. We must think backward in order to read forward. Barely within this poem of a painting, we have established no vanishing points by which to fix our sights. "The field," as Emerson says, "cannot be well seen from within the field."<sup>12</sup>

By crossing over to a new stanza we turn further into "the return"

from the hunt it is toward evening

"From the hunt" renders the abstract more concrete. A measure of time—or is it space?—then intervenes. "Toward" brings evening close, as if it were measured by our distance from a place. In the face of this painting, Williams is drawn to express duration in terms of extension. Not in the words of the poem, but in the rhythm their arrangement along the quiet of the page asks us to spell, will time be consistently measured out. So we return to "the return," after learning the time of day within the time of year, as if seeing it for the first time:

from the left  
sturdy hunters lead in

12. Emerson, "Circles."

This can barely be called repetition. Given the return specifically located with respect to the frame of the painting, it affects the reader as a new departure. How is he to know that these hunters from the left are not a party different from "the hunt" first descried. Did not "the return" first emerge from the background? It is as if we see the same group of men twice: first as a distant emblem of homecoming, second as hunters simply coming from left-ward into view. Abstraction gives way to description. By seeing the hunting group in two different ways and stanzas Williams presents a lingering over one part of the painting as though it were a movement through the whole. His way of seeing becomes our own without our being aware that such a decidedly personal vision controls our progress. It is difficult to find in this strategy any passive recording of "the details of the image presented by the painting in the order of their visual importance." The opposite strategy is pursued while preserving the appearance of mere transcription.

Stanza three begins with the (syntactic) end of stanza two: "their pack." By jamming this detail up against

the inn-sign  
hanging from a  
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix

the poet recreates in the reader a sense of the jumpy movement of the seeing eye. Such an eye discovers a sequence, not a continuity. When it comes to "detail," "one/follows the others" (*PB*, 11) without necessarily registering itself smoothly. By virtue of the poet's eye we now see a minor detail—the sign—arresting movement toward more striking aspects of the painting. (Jerome Mazzaro, opposing Dijkstra, argues that emphasis upon this detail reveals the choiceness of the poet's imaginative will, not the dependence of his seeing eye.)<sup>13</sup> It is something broken. So are the lines describing it. The weakest line-break in the poem leaves us "hanging from a" *a*. Instead of empowering the line-ending with a suspense where we hang listening, Williams lets it trail off into empty space, one we quickly ignore in our search for the object of the indefinite article. This merely pivotal line leads us into one packed with concrete nouns. The eye moves from seeing too little to seeing too much. We get lost in trying to single out the respective positions of these details. Is "a crucifix" appositive to "a stag," and are both on, or the shape of, the sign? Only after moving to stanza four will it become somewhat clear that just as stanza three begins with the end of one stanza, so it ends with the beginning of another. The separate units of perception each stanza would normally provide overlap, just as the movement of the eye through a painting can continually dissolve, even confuse, one detail with another.

Thus

between his antlers

13. *The Later Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 165–166.

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reaches back to envelop “a crucifix” and separate it from any parallel relationship with “a stag.” At the center of this poem of a painting lies a framed thing. The one detail literally central to centuries (including Bruegel’s century) of painting leaps into prominence for the poet’s eye, despite its obscurity on the part of the painter. The antlers demarcate significance, as a frame creates out of emptiness a field. Williams’s pre-occupation with the means for setting something off, for making of space a place, discovers in Bruegel’s painting an emblem of his quest. Seeking always for the lightest tethers on his formal designs (*PB*, 40), he chooses to imply the possibility of framing while giving us an equivocal experience of it. For one detail leads on to another, and just as we have glimpsed the crucifix “between” the antlers, the line in which they are rooted draws us toward

the cold  
inn yard is  
deserted but for a huge bonfire  
that flares wind-driven tended by  
women who cluster  
about it

By draping one compound sentence over these six lines Williams asks us to assimilate a cluster of detail as a series. Seen at first “between the antlers,” the scene continues to emerge as though unframed. What the eye takes in at a glance the ear must hear in stages. These line-breaks create no ambiguities as each one either obviously cuts into or confirms a unit of sense. Their only function can be to slow the reader down. When they admit of no other purpose, line-breaks continue to portion out our descent through the poem, making of our life with it a probing, not a plunge.

Having moved to one edge of the painting, the eye next nudges us away

to the right beyond  
the hill is a pattern of skaters

“Beyond” reaches toward stanza six to create the most expectant moment in the poem. As a term by which we might locate ourselves, “beyond” only succeeds in confusing us as to where—or what—things are. Do we look to the hill or beyond it? Are we meant to see that “beyond” the cluster of women “the hill is a pattern of skaters?” Or is “a pattern of skaters” “*beyond*/the hill?” A glance at the painting confirms this latter perspective, but we are reading this poem. Williams asks us to take our own stand on this preposition, to create whatever continuity we can out of the hints the poem haltingly provides. Continually forced to retreat in order to advance, the process of looking becomes dependent upon the energy with which we stitch the lines together. The painting we finally compose may be far different from Bruegel’s, but the effort to see it all resembles his own.

Thus the poem's conclusion has for us the force of an experience already lived:

Brueghel the painter  
concerned with it all has chosen  
  
a winter-struck bush for his  
foreground to  
complete the picture . . .

As each line has demanded a choice from the reader, he can now appreciate each stroke the "concerned" painter "has chosen." Yet "choosing" (one reading over another) has proceeded in a medium so unpredictable, so resistant to closure, as to reveal our capacity for abandon, not the strength of our will. During these closing lines the intervention of past time frees us from the urgencies of the present tense and the willful movement forward it enjoins. We are freed to think about the process of composition, not to enact it. A detail which only Williams would notice—the "winter-struck bush"—thus becomes admissible as a token of mastery. It becomes an issue of technique, a means the painter found "to/complete the picture," just as "all" has come to have a far different referent (the entire poem) at the poem's end than at its beginning (where it evokes only our expectations for the poem). But completion remains a project, not an achievement. The infinitive registers a sense of possibility, not finality. The poem does not end. It germinates two "still seeds"<sup>14</sup> which can flower into further details of the painting. As we trail out of the poem across them we are enjoined to read it again, to keep circling through its words and spaces between which, as we catch glimpses of the painting, we catch glimpses of ourselves.

This is a poetry only marginally aware of its own past. Its reader follows out a sinuous line of advance; he does not proceed through a fully articulated structure of repetition. "Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward."<sup>15</sup> The poem is not only an "emblem of intellectual power," it confers such power upon the reader. He foregoes aspirations to spatial harmony for temporal rhythms:

the melody line is  
everything  
in this composition (PB, 18)

The waywardness of this melody line encourages a wakefulness to the possibilities of missed or emerging perspectives. The activity of reading such a poem, of looking at such a painting, is never complete. Both create

14. Cary Nelson, *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1973), p. 201.

15. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 14.

experiences of going through. Yet the desire to still such creations forever tempts. John Berryman says this painting as if it were an occasion for eternal recurrence:

*Winter Landscape*

The three men coming down the winter hill  
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds  
At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,  
Past the five figures at the burning straw,  
Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink  
Lively with children, to the older men,  
The long companions they can never reach,  
The blue light, men with ladders, by the church  
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time  
To come, the evil waste of history  
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow  
Of that same hill: when all their company  
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown,  
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say  
By their configuration with the trees,  
The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,  
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds  
At heel and the tall poles upon their shoulders,  
Thence to return as now we see them and  
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill  
Descend, while three birds watch and the fourth flies.

As a poem of the end of time, "Winter Landscape" imitates in its structure the ultimate arrest it would envisage. Not only by halting our progress in interpretative stays, but through a patterned repetition which installs us in a continuous present. The poem's apparent melody line—it is one continuous sentence—repeatedly intersects itself to create a structure of static harmony. We are asked to go through this very moving poem only to discover that we remain in one place. We occupy an instant; we do not live out a duration.

But if this poem measures out our career through a continuous rhythm and syntax, does it not create the experience of an orderly, ongoing descent from beginning to end? While such devices can act as the ground for sequential development, they can also suspend their typical forwardness through effects of repetition. The poem calls attention to this timelessness in no uncertain terms—through thrice repeating the very words descriptive of repetition itself. "Returning," "Returning," "return": upon these three words progress through the poem turns, and halts. In Williams's poem "the return" happens twice, while seeming to happen only

once. "Returning" for his reader is more powerfully a mode of reading, an ongoing discovery and creation of the way a line can turn, and return, to a new or unexpected departure. (Williams keeps us live-ly. Even his longest poem, *Paterson*, is "a searching for the redeeming language by which a man's premature death . . . might have been prevented.")<sup>16</sup> For Berryman, "Returning" constitutes the re-viewing of one aspect of the painting, the persistent recourse of thought to the same significant "configuration." As his views and thoughts become our own, we discover a new way of appreciating a painting—through the meaning of the "over-all picture" rather than the sequential ordering of the parts.

In our beginning is our end:

The three men coming down the winter hill  
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of hounds  
At heel, through the arrangement of the trees,  
Past the five figures at the burning straw,  
Returning cold and silent to their town

The strongest impression these lines make is of a verse returning with an upbeat to the margin of departure. A pattern of reassurance stays the reach toward discovery. The enjambement of the first and second lines does not violate this pattern. Although extensions such as "In brown" come quickly on the heels of the preceding, their imminence has been hinted at by the lack of final punctuation. Even were the reader unprepared for such additions, they merely add to, without revaluing, his sense of the foregoing. Each line completes or repeats another without altering, and thereby forcing us to back up through, the preceding ones. Thus we see the painting through an "arrangement" of lines more or less parallel in function, harmonious in their total effect.

Berryman's desire to write a poem of strict accord continues to reveal itself:

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink  
Lively with children, to the older men,  
The long companions they can never reach,  
The blue light, men with ladders, by the church  
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street

Here "Returning" becomes the essence of the painting, as it is our experience of the poem. An abstraction which names a pictured activity, the word sacrifices the concrete steps of the return to its significance. Things remain at a distance from things as these participles suspend us in time. Their verbal force might normally set us in motion, but their repetition creates a sense of being still there. Participating gives way to witnessing a state. No prepositions ask us to connect and move from one part of the painting to another. Instead, "children," "men," the "blue light," "ladders" and so on are listed as the unlocateable points which can never

16. Quoted in Sherman Paul, *The Music of Survival* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1968), p. 36.

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be gained. The stanza's central line acts as commentary on the static experience surrounding it. It states a fact true of any painting—by definition its separate but companionable forms can, except in the eye of the beholder, “never reach”—as if to lament it. Yet the poem, itself capable of letting us reach and stitch such parts together in reading time, denies itself this option.<sup>17</sup> While lamenting the absence of a saving time in a spatial art, the poet attempts to “spatialize” a temporal one.

The will to still the poem climaxes in the third stanza:

Are not aware that in the sandy time  
To come, the evil waste of history  
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the brow  
Of that same hill:

Here the one action granted to the hunters in the present—they “Are not aware”—intrudes after such a lengthy elaboration of their state as to lose all force. By attributing to men *in* the painting a capacity usually reserved for viewers of it, Berryman grants us access to the scene in a way Williams does not venture. Apparently there are ideas in these things—these men—which take precedence over their appearance. A painting should not be, but mean (or think). As we think about it, we lose hold on the painting present to us and imagine the “time/To come.” The painting has become an occasion for thought, the poem a meditation on time. As we read past “the evil waste of history” into empty space, attention is stretched out into the void the poem refuses to traverse. History is not a dimension experienced through the poem but an apprehension beyond it. Engaged in such apprehension, we come upon the verb descriptive of the activity we have forsaken. The men “will be seen,” presumably by a viewer, one in the future. This is the future and we are it, but we are thinking about the painting, not seeing it. Viewing time literally becomes a “waste” for us as we fail, or are not allowed, to use it. As the poem winds down into a colon, having brought us to the end of time, the present in which we are reading, it can only discover a mode of proceeding by repeating itself. Like an hourglass, having funneled its contents through the nick of time, it can now be turned upon its head to run again through the same “sandy” time. It recommences at the point where it stopped, at the “when” of the present, to widen out toward the time of the painting, the saving sense of eternal recurrence it provides:

: when all their company  
Will have been irrecoverably lost,  
  
These men, this particular three in brown  
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and say  
By their configuration with the trees,

17. Arthur and Catherine Evans, in “Pieter Bruegel and John Berryman: Two Winter Landscapes,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, V, (Winter 1963), p. 314, assume that the formal features of the painting and the poem are, and should be, isomorphic, that the poem “preserves the same order of presentation and the same grouping of elements as the Bruegel composition.”

The small bridge, the red houses and the fire,  
What place, what time, what morning occasion

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds  
At heel and the tall poles upon their shoulders,  
Thence to return . . .

These lines re-"say" the poem. For the poet the painting continues to "say" rather than to appear. The act of looking can therefore issue in questions—"What place, what time, what morning occasion/Sent them into the wood?"—no mere sight of the painting could answer. The entire painting is again gone over, not gone through. It matters not in what order the scene is kept to the poet who values it as a self-sufficient "configuration." The fact that these figures are *with* other figures and continually *there* counts for more than the process by which we see them. The painting finally depends upon no human observer. This is the triumph of the "Ekphrastic Principle," the achievement of an impression of "formal and linguistic self-sufficiency." The poem, "through all sorts of repetitions, echoes, complexes of internal relations . . . converts its chronological progression into simultaneity, its temporally unrepeatable flow into eternal recurrence."<sup>18</sup> When all human "company" will be irrecoverably lost, the men in the painting will still "keep the scene." Their power to preserve this configuration, despite the lack of a future viewer, gets conveyed through the repetition of phrases—"in brown," "a pack of hounds/At heel," "down the winter hill"—from the first half of the poem. Moreover, the men continue "to return." The infinitive confirms the sense of timelessness already established by the repeated participles. Verbs have been converted into the service of the very motionless they seek to activate, as readers have been stilled into stasis.

But just as the poem threatens forever to arrest us, we become implicated in sustaining its recurring action:

as we see them and  
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill  
Descend . . .

In these closing lines the reader steps into the painting by way of the strategies of the poem. Berryman acknowledges us, admits that we are still alive. If we agree to "see" the hunters return, the logic of parallel grammar also asks us to "Descend." This verb, floating unattached to any clear antecedent, catches the reader up in its field of action. The choice of how to read the poem first becomes problematic. Each of its ambiguities admits of solution but this one. Reading becomes constructive, necessary to "keep" the poem alive (as opposed to its function in the face of a work of art somehow able "to keep" itself alive). The verbal ambiguity provides a latitude for choice. We can continue to be observers, choosing to link

18. Murray Krieger, *The Play and the Place of Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 105.



"Descend" with the self-sustaining activity of the hunters. Or descent can become an activity we "now" realize. Thus the last phrase

... while three birds watch and the fourth flies

serves not only as description of the painting but as a parable of our newly achieved status with the poem. As the three hunters watch, the reader can step on, descend the hill, walk down into the distance, and, as the poem ends, off of the page.

Having attempted throughout to create the impression of stillness, Berryman ends by setting us in motion. We walk off through and into time. Such an option comes too late to save our experience of the painting from enduring in much more than a frozen moment. But the sense of final doubleness, of the chance to observe *and* act, remains: "A poem, a sentence, causes us to see ourselves. I be & see my being, at the same time."<sup>19</sup> The experience Emerson here recommends Williams encourages more consistently than Berryman. But at the end, Berryman, who has done most of the work of composition and interpretation for us, who has asked us to detachedly "see," also asks us to actively "be." He is tempted into the duration he would deny; tempted out of, as Kenner has it, a "static" world into one also of "darting change." The poem ends with an image of movement, a verbal flight, and a reader finally stepping on. In this conclusion we are asked, after having been denied such engagement throughout, "to/complete the picture."

Yet the essential differences between reading both poems remain. In each a way of looking reveals a mode of thinking. For Berryman, and his reader, there are ideas which vivify things (paintings). Ideas which fuse and arrest replace things resisting fusion and arrest. The swiftness of thought resists the workings of time. While attempting to comprehend meaning at a glance, in an instant, "Winter Landscape" denies the ongoingness during which things in a painting, in all of their intransigence, might emerge and be seen. For Williams, and his reader, there are no ideas but in things. The poet asks us to experience the simultaneous coming into being of words and ideas, not the priority of ideas to the words which cast them. His refusal to generate in his poem Berryman's apocalyptic sense of an ending (a teleology) is balanced by a corresponding "refusal to believe that one can trace a present thing or occurrence back to some remote, distant origin"<sup>20</sup> (an archaeology). "So much depends" upon portioning out the experience of a reader for whom you wish the intermediate world of a painting, rather than prior ideas about it, to come clear. Williams comes to depend on time passing, to capture its workings in his verse, in a way of which Berryman appears only impatient. The paintings we see through both poems become, therefore, very different.

19. Emerson, *Journals*, ed. Merton M. Sealts, Jr. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965), V, 278.

20. Joseph Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 12.

One emerges as a pattern completed by a continuously reawakening eye. The other fuses things and times together into a comprehensiveness which sacrifices movement to momentousness. In Berryman's poem we stand as if at the center of a world of concentric circles, all visible at a glance. In Williams's we live out a world circling, one through which we spiral with the poet along the melodious, broken lines his poem endlessly creates.

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