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Ecocriticism and the Modern Artist's Notice of Nature

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ABSTRACT | By assessing the relationship between William Carlos Williams scholarship and the visual arts my article focuses on how Williams's aesthetics, influenced by Cubism's fusion of object with surrounding space, challenged human-centered perspectives. I compare traditions of appropriative art such as Dada that reconditioned, re-used, and redeemed "found" material that had been regarded as waste to perspectives on art, nature, and subjectivity that can be defined as post-human or at least not human-centered. Building on Clement Greenberg's focus on the materiality of representation—pigments, language itself—I argue that modernists such as Williams drew their medium closer to physical environments and thus away from structuring the picture plane according to Renaissance/Humanist one-point perspective. My article reflects on the ecocritical implications of such work as Williams's *Paterson*, and his loyalty to a city characterized historically by abandonment and pollution. A bond, I argue, that was forged partly by Williams's Dadaist openness to conventionally unaesthetic and "irredeemable" subjects and objects, things that the industrial world used up, transformed into plate glass and automobile, or discarded as slag heap. The poem's empathy with the Passaic's "down-at-the-heel," neglected, spurned, and ordinary beings also extends beyond humans.

KEYWORDS | William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, Cubism, Dada, Clement Greenberg, ecocriticism

Since the emergence in the early 1980s of ecocriticism, scholars have been evaluating literary and other texts for their implicit or explicit environmental arguments. They have also been extending and in many instances challenging some of the claims first made under this rapidly expanding

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area of literary theory and criticism. Characterized by two of its founders, Michael Branch and Scott Slovic, as the study of "the environmental implications of literary texts (or other forms of artistic expression)" (Branch xiv), ecocriticism first took shape when scholars still could rely on, and still were relying on, distinctions between natural or ecogenic environments and human-made or anthropogenic environments. Today, over a quarter of a century later, scholars are finding it increasingly difficult, tenuous, and even anachronistic to label the many things and beings in the world and the environments that humans construct, imagine, and retreat to, as either anthropogenic or ecogenic, unnatural or natural, human-made or nonhuman-made. Most of the planet's environments today cannot be defined according to only one of the two terms in such binaries as culture/nature, human/nonhuman, and natural/unnatural. They oscillate materially and conceptually somewhere in between. Mark Long, one of the first ecocritics to address the poetry and prose of William Carlos Williams in post-industrial material terms and post-structural conceptual terms, did so in a piece entitled "William Carlos Williams, Ecocriticism, and Contemporary American Nature Poetry" (2002). Enlisting poststructuralist theory, namely Derrida's notion that (human) language extends and supplements the world, he challenges a common agreement among Williams scholars that the poet's famous statement "no ideas but in things" (P 6, 9) was a call for art and language to "reestablish a more immediate contact with the world" (Long 60). As Long interprets Williams's statement, it stands for an anti-Romantic belief in language, as something that has never been divorced from the world, as well as for an anti-Realist argument. It is "precisely *against*" the belief that language can faithfully reproduce reality or "disclose phenomenological presence" (Long 60, 69). Language cannot establish an unmediated or "less-mediated" relation with the world because it is already part of the furniture of the world. What it can do instead is act as a "structural invention" that opens humans to the "possibilities of the phenomenal world where [humans] have been living all along" (64–65).

Long's arguments are inspired by what poststructuralist theory offers to ecocriticism rather than by what poststructuralist theory disavows when it undercuts assertions about what is real. A more conservative but nonetheless important position is articulated by Leonard Scigaj in *Sustainable Poetry: Four American Ecopoets* (1999). In this work, inspired by the phenomenological theory of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Merleau-Ponty's unfinished book *The Visible and the Invisible*, Scigaj characterizes

phenomenology as "the most promising philosophical response [. . .] to both poststructuralism and philosophical dualism," and he illustrates the theory in his analysis of four twentieth-century "ecological poets," "ecopoets," and "sustainable poets" (65): A. R. Ammons, Wendell Berry, W. S. Merwin, and Gary Snyder. In their writings, as Scigaj argues, there is always an emphasis on the belief that human language depends on something prior to it and human language is limited insofar as it separates humans from the "irreducible natural world" (67). There is also always an emphasis on "embodied" (66) consciousness, the authenticity of "prior" or "preverbal" speech" (26–29), and the "extralinguistic" (38) and "referential origin" of all language.[1]

Long's and Scigaj's arguments were written long after Williams's death and long after the disappearance of the specific environments that Williams records in his writings. However, these arguments relate to Williams's interest in and defense of the environments that industrialization and urbanization were usurping in his time, and can be grounded in the specific context of Williams's response to the visual arts. Recapitulating Long's and Scigaj's two very different but not entirely incompatible ecocritical beliefs about language, these are as follows: Long is receptive to the poststructuralist and posthumanist claim that language is always and already natural or "radically ahuman" (Wolfe 119); Scigaj is pronouncedly anti-poststructuralist when he uses phenomenological theory to argue that humans show hubris when they strive to replicate, replace, or outrun nature with their language, art, and technology. These two different valorizations of language and art are useful for understanding the arguments that scholars have made about the influence on Williams of modern art.[2] I focus mostly on two studies: Peter Schmidt's *William Carlos Williams, The Arts, and Literary Tradition* (1988) and Peter Halter's *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1994). I also look quite closely at the writings of a near contemporary of Williams, Clement Greenberg (1909–1994), one of the most influential art critics of the twentieth century. Greenberg's formalist account of modern art in the period between the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, more so than that of any other art critic, provokes ecocritical questions about what Williams and his fellow modernists were seeking through their verbal and painterly representations of the natural world. Schmidt's and Halter's studies also generate ecocritical questions about Williams's poetry and prose and about the painting of Williams's contemporaries.

Charles Altieri states that "[n]o American poet needed the supplementary context that painting provided" more than Williams (224). Williams himself states that "had it not been easier to transport a manuscript than a wet canvas, the balance might have been tilted the other way" (Preface, SE xiv). The poet references many painters and painting including the following: the American abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock and his "blobs of paint squeezed out / with design! / pure from the tube," which seemed to say that "Nothing else / is real" (P 211); Ben Shahn and his stark socio-political portraits of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, Japanese fishermen exposed to American nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands in the 1950s, and the anarchists Ferdinando Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti; Toulouse Lautrec, the painter to whom Williams dedicated Book V of *Paterson*; Pieter Bruegel, founder of the landscape genre proper and one of the subjects of inspiration for the late collection of poetry *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962); and Giotto di Bondone and Fra Angelico, the first painters to introduce natural detail—earth, sky, flora, and fauna—into Renaissance painting.

Another seminal figure for Williams is Paul Cézanne, a key figure in the early twentieth-century painterly movement of Cubism and a major influence on the slightly earlier movements of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Schmidt and Halter comment extensively on the influence of Cézanne and several European and American artists who followed in the steps of Cézanne, namely Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Marsden Hartley. Schmidt argues that the movements that these artists associated with, European Cubism and American Cubist-Realism, also known as Precisionism or American Scene painting, led Williams both backward to traditional literary forms—to the pastoral, ode, and epic—and forward to avant-garde writing practices—to automatic writing (the "improvisation"), concrete poetry, and the "collage." Halter argues that these movements critically inspired Williams in his search for a language paradoxically both "nonmimetic" and faithful to "empirical reality" (60). Williams may also have been drawn to these painters because of their implicit and explicit defenses of the natural world, for in Cubist painting there is a questioning of conservative anthropocentric purchases on reality in its decentering of classic Renaissance linear perspective. Williams was also drawn to Cubism because this mode of painting elevated the status of the genres of the still life and the landscape, genres that occupied the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of painting, sitting under history painting,

portrait painting, and family or "genre" scene painting. With regard to American Scene painting, an attraction for Williams may have been its ironic statements about the industrial transformation of the natural world, while his interest in Dada might have extended beyond the appeal of its anti-art, anti-establishment, and anti-war rhetoric, to the implicit ecologic message to reclaim, redeem, or reuse subjects and objects trashed by the industrial imagination.

Greenberg narrowly defines Cubism as the analytic and synthetic experiments with paint, canvas, and other media by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso after 1907, the year Picasso's proto-Cubist, confrontational *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* showed in Paris (Greenberg [1952] 117). More broadly, the movement of Cubism refers to efforts under painterly modernist projects to "retain and renew" Western painting's "tryst with reality" (McCaughey 20), no matter how tenuous this engagement was at times. According to the latter definition, Cubism as a movement sums up the many avant-garde directions in painting under the aegis of Cézanne between approximately 1860 and 1930. One of these directions or developments is the inversion of the traditional hierarchy of genres. While this inversion was not a conscious effort to give due recognition to nonhuman subjects and objects, the elevation of the two main genres under which those subjects and objects were given prominence—the genres of the landscape and still life sitting on the bottom of the painterly hierarchy—prompted such recognition.

A second hallmark of Cubism that carries ecocritical weight is its two distinct "pictorial plots or strategies" (McCaughey 20). In the modern painting that begins with Cézanne, the first plot or strategy refers to the reconstruction of the object or figure on the canvas to incorporate multiple view points of the same image, and the second refers to the fusion of this object or figure with the surrounding space, a technique known as *passage* (20). Although these techniques may not have been employed in order to call attention to the interests or claims of the natural world, they prompt an ecocritical reading because they undercut the notion of a single *human* vantage point. Also, they collapse the boundaries between human and nonhuman figures, making it difficult to discern a clear dividing line between human figures and nonhuman figures in the painting.

The self-conscious address of the medium, or the material support, a third hallmark of painterly modernism, also prompts ecocritical conjecture. Such address implicitly acknowledges the natural ingredients of language (pigment and canvas), or it refuses to uphold older conventions of representing

nature (the illusion of spatial depth and recession). Did Williams and his contemporaries read modern painting's inversion of the painterly hierarchy, its avant-garde pictorial strategies, and its self-conscious address of the material medium as environmental statements as well as formal aesthetic statements?[3] Even if they did not, their art seems to question and critique the twentieth-century phenomena of urbanization and the industrialization of the environment by aligning with nature rather than against it. Here, nature refers to environments that are relatively unaffected or negligibly affected by the presence of the human, environments that have dwindled in the last fifty years as almost the entire planet now registers the human footprint in one way or another. However, in Williams's time it was still possible or not unreasonable to distinguish between more or less natural, or nonhuman, or ecogenic environments and more or less human-made, or "built," or anthropogenic environments.

One of Williams's and his contemporaries' first exposures to the painting of Cézanne and his contemporaries (artists who were working on either side of the Atlantic), was the New York Armory Show of February 1913. It was the event that introduced to the general American public, "for the first time, side by side with [. . .] progressive American Art" (Halter 8) the avant-garde movements in visual art in Europe. In his recounting of this event in the manuscript version of his autobiography, Williams compares himself to dry wood—"tinder"—set aflame by the light of Cézanne's paintings: "I had long been deep in love with the painted canvas through Charles Demuth but that was just the beginning[. . . .] Then the Armory Show burst upon us, the whole Parisian galaxy, Cézanne at the head, and we were exalted by it" (cited in Halter 8–9). He states that the new "French painting" was a painting that faced itself and nothing else, as "pigment on a surface" (EK 21); and that the artist who wished to "copy" nature was merely reflecting something "already there, inertly," whereas the artist who endeavored to "imitate" nature was willing not only to "become nature" or "discover in [herself or himself] nature's active part" but also to add to nature (A 240–41). In *Spring and All* (1923), Williams's first important collection of poetry (and prose), the speaker declares: "Cézanne—The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation" (CP1 198).

Williams's words reverberate with those of the art critic Clement Greenberg, a slightly later figure in this time period who in other respects is a near contemporary of Williams. In one of his most famous statements

on "flatness" and painterly modernism, "The Role of Nature in Modern Painting," Greenberg states that "the French painters" between Courbet and Cézanne seemed to depart "further and further from illusionism" but actually were being "driven" by a "conscious desire" to give an account of nature that would be "more accurate or faithful [. . .] than any before" (272). They were doing so not by way of older painterly techniques of representing nature but "vis-à-vis the medium itself" (272). If they were propelling painting in a direction that would permit the claims of the medium "to override those of nature," they were not doing so with this in mind (272). Cézanne's self-conscious emphasis on the flat picture plane combined with an "extremely literal exactness" of vision, the latter technique of which he learned from the Impressionists (Greenberg [1951] 85), suggested that he was "never able to dispense with the object in nature as a starting point," no matter "how far" he was able "to go at times toward the abstract" (Greenberg, [949] 274). "In spite of himself," he was "trying to give the picture surface its due as a physical entity" (Greenberg [1951] 86). For Cézanne and the generation of painters who followed him, as Greenberg argues and as the art historian John Rewald argues, nature still "came first" (Greenberg [1951] 85; Rewald 296).[4]

Similar to Greenberg's reading of the modern painting that begins with Cézanne, Halter's reading of the influence of modern painting on Williams carries a nascent ecocritical argument. Halter notes that Williams consciously worked against the "illusion of an 'objective' rendering of reality" and "appreciation of art as a copying of nature" (Halter 66).[5] He argues that Williams treats nature as something worthy of being "imitated" (66) rather than as something that can be copied let alone abandoned or outwitted. In emphasizing how much Williams admired Georges Braque, the painter whom Williams and his contemporaries lauded for taking unfinished canvases "outdoors, on occasion, to see if their invention ranked beside that of nature worthily enough for him to approve of it" (A 240–41), Halter suggests that Williams understood human language as a peer to natural language or a companion design to natural design rather than as something superior to or able to traduce nature. It must assert its independence but in a way that does not commit the offense of dismissing or replacing nature and must choose to remain "a part" of nature—"cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized" (CP1 189).[6]

Halter, Schmidt, and other scholars who write about Williams's interest in Juan Gris, a contemporary of Georges Braque as well as the painter

whom Williams most admired among the Cubists, include references to Gris's contribution to synthetic Cubist painting. As Schmidt points out, both analytic and synthetic Cubist painting dissect the object or figure from many angles to "radically critique" (146) mimesis, but in the synthetic Cubist work—typically a combination of flat canvas and extraneous objects (cards, newspaper, oilcloth, calling cards, magazine advertisements, wallpaper, pieces of cane or bamboo, scraps of wool, and so forth)—the critique of mimesis is pushed further. Here, "the language of art" is juxtaposed with that of actual material objects. In *Spring and All*, Williams's speaker alludes to this licentious use of collage when he offers positive comments on art that otherwise functions as a "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" (CP1 177) and on art that "stand[s] between man and nature as saints once stood between man and the sky" (CP1 199). He also asserts that this art of anti-mimesis rejects a thinking that relegates nature to mere *back* ground: "So long as the sky is recognized as an association" or mere "accessory," the "value" of it is "nothing but mathematical certain limits of gravity and density of air" (CP1 187). As he continues, in this same modern art, nature seems to function as only "the hint to composition" (CP1 207). However, this is not because nature is "familiar to us" and therefore "the terms we apply to it have a least common denominator quality which gives them currency"; rather, this is because nature "possesses the quality of reality of independent existence" (CP1 207–8). Nature "*is not opposed to art but apposed to it*" (CP1 208; my emphasis).

More than thirty years after Williams ebulliently praised Cézanne in *Spring and All*, the modern French painter "still seemed a God" (A 322) to Williams. Among the late poems that acknowledge the poet's debt to Cézanne, the most famous is "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." In the less well-known poem "Cézanne," Williams advises the aspiring artist to follow the "French painters" by having on the one hand "No pretense" and on the other, "a pileup / of passion to match the stars" (CP2 377). Marsden Hartley, a painter who was deeply influenced by Cézanne, was another important critical influence on Williams. In *Spring and All*, Williams alludes to Hartley's debt to Cézanne and emphasizes that the artist must be conscious of the existence of nature alongside his or her work—of "the common thing which is anonymously about us" (CP1 189). He also writes, "Nothing is put down in the present book—except through weakness of the imagination—which is not intended as of a piece with the 'nature' [. . .] and which Hartley speaks of so completely in his 'Adventures'" (CP1 189). "Adventures" refers

to Hartley's collection of essays, *Adventures in the Arts*, published in 1921 just two years before *Spring and All* was published. Of the paintings by Hartley that Williams saw, he most liked the flower studies; of the landscapes, he was most fond of *New England Sea View-Fish House* (1934) (see RI 152). He could not afford to purchase this painting; however, he did acquire a painting that pointed to the influence of Cézanne: the pastel work *Mountains in New Mexico* (1919) (see MacGowan 196, 501; Tashjian 50). It depicts the Taos mountains between the United States and Mexico in terms of strangeness and remoteness and also in terms of physical closeness and contact between the subject-object of the mountains and the subject-object of the human-artist-observer. The opposing claims in it are similar but more pronounced in work that Hartley produced after 1928, when he took a trip to Aix-en-Provence, France: a series of canvases modeled on Cézanne's paintings of Mont Sainte-Victoire (see Tashjian 50).

In Cézanne's famous paintings of the mountain Sainte-Victoire, including *La montagne Sainte-Victoire* (c. 1886–88), his techniques bring the mountain figure in the background strangely forward in the space of the painting, as if he is wanting to make fully present or "to realize" the mountain such that it becomes the composition itself, or the subject or figure that controls the space of the painting (rather than the subject-observer Cézanne). The mountain is figured *in* the painting, but it also seems to remain outside of or not corralled by any would-be perspective, as if Cézanne is baulking against submitting the subject the figure stands for to a perspective that is not the mountain's own. The particular technique of *passage* that Cézanne used to achieve this was the outlining of figures in blue paint. This "re-excavated" (Greenberg [1951] 84) pictorial depth, something that the Impressionists abandoned, but it did not reenact spatial depth, the hallmark of Renaissance painting. The figures in the composition seem to evade the painting's attempt to control, contain, or possess them, or commission them into a fixed perspective not their own:

> The little overlapping rectangles of paint, laid on with no attempt to fuse their dividing edges, [draw] the depicted forms toward the surface while, at the same time, the modeling and contouring of these forms, as achieved by the paint dabs, [pulls] them back again into illusionist depth[. . . .] The result [is] a never-ending vibration from front to back and back to front. (Greenberg [1951] 86)[7]

Hartley sought a language similar to that of Cézanne, although according to Greenberg he never fully succeeded in achieving this in the landscapes that he produced. Greenberg faults them for their lack of "three-dimensional quality," their reduction of "salient incidents of surface as well as form," and their denial of space by "decorating it" ([1944] 247). *New England Sea View—Fish House* (1934) and another painting, *The Old Bars, Dogtown* (1936), do achieve what Greenberg finds missing in Hartley's earlier landscapes. In both paintings, combinations of the genres of the landscape and the still life, the *matter* of the paint, or medium, and the *represented* subject-objects are equally present or make an equally strong statement; neither one cancels out or "gets in front" of the other. This effect is what Hartley had called for years earlier in an essay entitled "Dissertation on Modern Painting" (1921), published in *The Nation* in the same year as *Adventures in the Arts* appeared in print. In it, he stated that the artist must seek "to realize the pure sensation derived from nature [. . .] to bring nature [. . .] clearly to the surface in terms of itself, without cast or shade of the application of extraneous ideas" (235).

Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler also are very important painters for Williams. Both identify with the early twentieth-century "local" American painterly movement of Precisionism, and. Williams's responses to their work can be examined through an ecocritical lens. As the geographer and anthropologist David Harvey characterizes Modernism, a movement spanning the last two thirds of the nineteenth century and first third of the twentieth century, it was largely an "urban phenomenon" (25), coincident with unprecedented urbanization and industrialization of the natural world. Demuth's and Sheeler's American Scene paintings are a direct response to this urbanization and industrialization and, as Williams scholars point out, both Demuth and Sheeler as well as Williams read the new American landscape in highly ambiguous ways. Two poems by Williams, ekphrastic responses to two paintings by Demuth and Sheeler, especially suggest this.

"The End of the Parade" (1941) is a direct allusion to an American Scene painting by Demuth that Williams owned, *End of the Parade—Coatesville, Pa.* (1920), a painting of the Lukens steel plant in Coatesville, Pennsylvania.[8] Williams's poem ekphrastically captures the ominously imposing and looming industrial power depicted in Demuth's tempura-on-board painting: "what was once / cadenced melody / full of sweet breath" (CP2 20) has been replaced by the clamorous "percussion strokes" of machinery and

greenhouse gas emissions. The oppressive language of the new industrial order is not indubitably more durable than the language of an older small town agrarian order: its "sentence undulates / raising no song [. . .] the / words of it are falling apart." In his discussion of Demuth, Halter observes that Demuth's American Scene paintings and other urban landscape paintings include very few references to nature, or only to its "remnants" (103). Where nature is seen, it is "dwarfed and incapable of effectively opposing the geometrization of space." He also notes that nature is not completely defeated. It exhibits a "stubborn refusal to be integrated." Demuth reminds the viewer "of the price paid" for ecocide by rendering "the new urban space slightly equivocal." Schmidt, noting that the title of Demuth's painting carries an allusion to the traditional Fourth of July parade that in the past "ended at the factory gates" of the Lukens steel plant in Coatesville, tells us that the painting's palette of blacks and grays implies "that any festival in a company town ends in—and is dominated by—assembly-line regimentation" (Schmidt 144). Williams, describing the painting's greenhouse emissions billowing outwards and upwards from the steel plant as a hard, flat, lifeless "arrangement of cylinders and planes" (RI 148) implies that an environment that is more-or-less entirely industrialized is an unimpressively limited and finite one.[9]

Williams's environmental responses to the work of Charles Sheeler are similar to his environmental readings of Demuth's paintings. They are found in the prose as well as the poetry, including in two essays published in 1939 and 1954 (both collected in *A Recognizable Image*) and in the 1937 poem "Classic Scene." Observing that Sheeler was mainly interested in the genres of the still life and the landscape, Williams reads Sheeler's American Scene paintings as he reads Demuth's, as criticism of America's anthropogenic industrial world order. He notes that many of the paintings bear "little direct reference to humanity" (RI 144). They are, he states, "the realization on the part of the artist of man's pitiful weakness and at the same time his fate in the world," since "when man becomes insignificant in his attributes and swollen to fill the horizon the representation of the human face is not enlightening" (148). His most well known ekphrastic tribute to Sheeler, "Classic Scene," inspired by Sheeler's painting *Classic Landscape* (1931), refers to the "urban pastoral" (Schmidt 16) American Scene painting commissioned by the Ford Motor Company. Sheeler's portrait of Ford's River Rouge plant in the town of Dearborn in the northeastern state of Michigan is both a "highly nationalistic" (19) evocation of the New World

"Arcadia" of modern industrial America and an ironic comment on this New World. The latter is represented as timeless and aristocratic, but there is something too perfect, serene, detached, and impervious about it. It is hubristically and oppressively anthropogenic. Williams's poem captures the surreptitious anti-industrial rhetoric of Sheeler's painting. The image of the Ford automobile plant, "A power-house" and "a red brick chair / 90 feet high" (CP1 444), suggests an imperial figure seated on a high throne. The images of two smaller "metal / stacks—aluminum" suggest court followers. One is "passive" (445) but only for "today" (the last word of the poem); the other emits "buff smoke." All three figures command "an area / of squalid shacks," a place where the natural world and its human members survive as marginalized beings.

Gary Snyder, one of the most prominent ecopoets of the twentieth century, wrote that Williams was "the largest single influence" (Snyder 15) on his generation of poets. This generation includes the first poets in American literature to be formally recognized as ecopoets, namely, in addition to Snyder, Ammons, Berry, and Merwin, the poets whom Scigaj singles out in his study. The environmental imagination of Williams, recognized by Snyder and a post-1950s generation of ecopoets, also was recognized by Williams's own contemporaries. In a review of Williams's *The Desert Music,* Kenneth Rexroth, a leading figure in the San Francisco Renaissance poetry movement, compares Williams to Saint Francis of Assisi (see Rexroth 276). Founder of the thirteenth-century monastic order, St. Francis was and continues today to be "especially loved by partisans of leftist causes" (Acocella 72) and by animal rights and environmental rights activists in particular.[10] In a review of the first book of *Paterson*, Robert Lowell comments that a "defect perhaps" of the book is that "human beings exist almost entirely in the prose passages" (cited in Mariani [1975] 80). Lowell accidentally but felicitously points out the ecocentricity of the poems in *Paterson*, which contrast with the androcentricity of the prose sections. In the introduction to the first edition of *Selected Poems of William Carlos Williams* (1949), Randall Jarrell writes that the poems in it are "full of 'Nature'" and reflect Williams's close "knowledge of plants and animals, our brothers and sisters in the world" (Jarrell xii). Sister M. Bernetta Quinn, another important early critic, comments that Williams is devoted to "letting man's earthly garden shine forth" (cited in Mariani, [1975] 103). As Williams's biographer Paul Mariani characterizes much of Williams's poetry as fundamentally "nature" (121) poetry.

After the First World War, the critical aversion to poetry that celebrated the natural world was compounded by a conservative backlash against poetry that was sympathetic to socialist and communist political agendas. Both sets of antipathies were responsible for the slow critical response to Williams for at least a decade after the poet's death. Williams's proletarian portraits of America's "great unwashed and unfed" (cited in Wixson 82) working poor, wogs and wops sent to the "red as poor-man's flesh" (P 37) brick convent of St. Ann's to give birth to children conceived out of wedlock, and women farmed out to the suburbs to work as domestic servants, are closely tied to Williams's representations of nonhuman ecogenic communities exploited by aggressive groups of humans.[11] Flora and fauna that most often appear in Williams's poems are "simple, ordinary [. . .] unassuming" (Halter 180). They are undistinguished or unwanted: goats, sparrows, grasshoppers, abandoned dogs, and weeds. They survive by roadsides, and in gutters, "factory vents" (P 37), sewers, back lots, and the industrial dumping sites of swamps.

Kenneth Burke characterized Williams's poems as "the counterpart of Culture" ([1966] 49) and the "triumph of anti-Culture" (50),[12] remarks that help introduce the notion that Dada also was provocative for Williams in an environmental sense in that, perhaps in unforeseen ways, it called for the artist to re-use, re-cycle, and redeem conventional waste, namely the discarded objects of the industrial imagination.

Marcel Duchamp, one of Dada's most prominent and celebrated figures, led artists to abandon the constructed or made object, the *object d'art,* and turn to the ready-made or found object, the *object trouvé*. By no short stretch of an argument could Duchamp be called an environmental artist, let alone environmental activist, but many of the things that Duchamp "redeems" are taken from industrial and commercial sites including the urinal for *Fountain* (1917), the cast iron stove gas burner for *La Vénus du gaz* (1945), and the bicycle wheel for *Bicycle Wheel* (1913, 1951), which Duchamp exhibited *as* art. Williams scholars have not addressed Duchamp's nascent environmental imperative; nonetheless, they note the tremendous impact that Duchamp and many other Dada artists had on Williams because of the rejection by both of rigid hierarchies. Stephen Burt, in a review of Herbert Leibowitz's *"Something Urgent I Have to Say to You": The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams* (2012), comments that Williams was producing "magnificently disorganized, Dadaist-influenced prose" as well as, in "fitful" bursts, poetry that was wholly new and pronouncedly "demotic" (10)

between the time of publication of his second book of poetry, *The Tempers* (1913) and *Collected Poems, 1921–1931* (1934). Schmidt tells us that Williams's *Paterson*: also was deeply inspired by American and European Dada artists.

As Schmidt argues, the principal target of *Paterson* is the eighteenth-century industrialist and "Founding Father" (91) Alexander Hamilton. In *Paterson*, the speaker tells us that in the 1790s, Hamilton envisioned the city and surrounding Passaic region of Paterson, New Jersey, as "a great manufacturing centre, a great Federal City, to supply the needs of the country" (P 70). As Schmidt further argues, *Paterson* is the Dada artist's expression of "despair and disgust" (91) toward the "decadent modern culture" of economic monopolization. "[U]under the guise of rebelling against Britain's political and economic monopolies," its chief figure, the "American Antichrist" Hamilton, sought to set up new monopolies in America "to take their place" (197). Founded in 1792 by Hamilton, Paterson was the first industrial city in the United States and operated the country's first silk and cotton textile mills. By the nineteenth century it was among the largest producers of textiles as well as guns, paper, and locomotives. A century and a half later, in 1940, it was economically and environmentally stagnant. Many of the city's working class populations could not find work, the rivers and tributaries were heavily polluted, and the once fecund swamps had become "the villest swillholes in chistendom" (IG 195).[13] In his own summary of the poem, Williams writes that the section titled "Sunday in the Park" "brought out" the "whole theme" of *Paterson* in "the contrast" that it makes between "the mythic beauty" of the Passaic falls and mountain (Mt. Garrett) and "the industrial hideousness" (cited in Sankey 71) of the city. Yet, in Dada-like fashion, Williams also reclaims this beautiful-thing world in his poetry, both the ecogenic nonhuman subject-object "thing" of nature and the anthropogenic nonhuman subject-object "thing" that is thrown out, spurned, or wasted by the industrial imagination.

In *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), the second book in his trilogy devoted to the literary environmental imagination, Lawrence Buell describes *Paterson* as both "an experiment in 'urban poetics'" (117) and "a literature of reinhabitation" (119). He points out that Williams was "perpetually disconsonant with his grimy, down-at-the-heel city" but nonetheless "fiercely loyal" to it. That loyalty, I suggest, was partly shaped by Williams's Dadaist openness to conventionally unaesthetic and "irredeemable" subjects and objects, things that the industrial world used up, transformed into plate glass and automobile, or discarded as slag heap. In *Paterson*, a

poem inspired by the city not far from Rutherford where Williams lived for most of his life, the poet confronts industrial orgy in the specific context of the environmental degradation of the Passaic between 1790 and 1940. The poem's empathy with the Passaic's "down-at-the-heel," neglected, spurned, and ordinary beings extends beyond human beings, subjects whom Williams scholars have tended to focus upon more or less exclusively. Williams himself was one of the latter kinds of subjects and "underdog" figures in the sense that Kirsch claims he was plagued by "inferiority" and "self doubt" (24) throughout his poetic career, and never achieved the literary status in his lifetime of such figures as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Today, in a century when the issue of the environment has become a very serious and pressing concern, readers will find in Williams's poetry and prose expressions of an extraordinary and stubborn refusal to shun or disdain the natural world. This poetry and prose was written in a century when everything but the natural world seemed glamorous. Williams was interested in Dada and Cubism because he saw these as a challenge to anthropocentric purchases on reality, set in motion by Renaissance humanism and accelerated in a later period of modernity under industrialism. Demuth's and Sheeler's American Scene paintings ambiguously extol the American industrial power that was steadily and inexorably encroaching upon the North American continent and anthropogenically transfiguring it. Dada too was extraordinarily ahead of its time in its nascent environmental message of recycling and re-using industrial and commercial waste, while Cézanne and his followers again drew attention to the natural world and to subject-objects other than the human subject-object.

NOTES

1. Scigaj follows Merleau-Ponty's notion of the world as something that is not within full material or physical grasp of the human. He does not postulate "either a theological foundationalism or initial divorce between human subjectivity and the world that humans inhabit," but he does argue that phenomenology attempts to "restore" to the referential world its "transcendence" (Scigaj 65). In this sense, he is quite critical of "establishment" postmodern poets (Jorie Graham and Robert Hass) as well as poststructuralist critics (Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff). Also, in contrast with Long, who points out the critical influence of Williams on a later generation of ecopoets, Scigaj argues that Robinson Jeffers is the "mentor and spiritual father" (42) of this generation.

2. The works by Breslin, MacGowan and Marling are also key statements on Williams and the influence of the visual arts.

3. Sayre argues that Williams was acutely aware of the visual features of poetry—namely, the printer's type, the space of the page, and the visual look of the typeset on the paper—and this awareness influenced his compositions. As Sayre also points out, this awareness of the material medium was analogous to modern painters' self-conscious attention to the painterly medium.

4. Halter cites one of the most famous accounts of Renaissance linear perspective, by the art historian Erwin Panofsky from the latter's *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1927): "the history of linear perspective can be regarded with equal justification as *the triumph of a distancing and objectifying sense of realty as well as the triumph of the human drive for power negating and suspending the distance*" (cited in Halter 215 ([emphasis in original]). As Halter writes, this objectification of the subject, or "heightened respect for empirical reality," strengthened humankind's sense of superiority over all that was encountered. All is now invariably related to the viewer [. . .] the new, scientific space, related to Cartesian rationalism and subsequent models of rational, scientific knowing, places the perceiving [. . .] self at the center as never before [. . .] Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting [. . .] promotes what Heidegger, appropriating Nietzsche, calls Western man's will to power over existence (215).

5. For further discussion of the terms *imitation* and *copy* as these concern Williams's environmental imagination, see Rozelle, 110, and Felstiner 145.

6. In the words of art historian Wendy Steiner, "most essentially," Cubist art as a whole represented the search for a language which could be "both a sign of the thing-world and a part of the thing-world" (183).

7. Ecocritic Timothy Morton's term and concept "mesh" is analogous to what art critics observe about Cézanne's landscapes: "since everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground" (Morton 28).

8. Demuth also responded to Williams's writings. His poster print *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928) was directly inspired by Williams's "The Great Figure."

9. In addition to the urban and industrial American Scene paintings by Demuth and Sheeler, Williams also admired Demuth's still-life studies of flowers, which contrast markedly with the "coolly derisive" (Schmidt 158) language of the former. Williams's many paeans to flowers, numbering over two hundred, are not sentimental or trite. His love of flowers came close only to his love of trees. Long before he thought of becoming a physician or a poet, he wanted to be a "forester" (Mariani, [1981] 22). Kirsch notes that plants are the principal subjects of some of Williams's best poems (25). It is possible that this feature of Williams's writings made his poetry unappetizing for many readers who saw or asked modern poetry to be the arbiter of culture not the keeper of nature, and contributed to the late acceptance of Williams into the Modernist canon.

10. Ecocritics distinguish Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis" as an early important writing on the subject of St. Francis and the environmental imagination. The most important work for Williams scholars on the subject of St. Francis is Diggory.

11. See Conroy 203–6. Conroy and Lewis were heavily involved in socialist and communist movements in the 1920s and 1930s. Conroy contributed to *American Mercury*, Lewis to *New Masses*. For an account of Lewis's proletarian sympathies and Williams's support of Lewis, see Wixson. For a different account of Williams, one that holds that Williams's was essentially conservative in his politics, see Billitteri.

12. The statements of Williams's long time friend Kenneth Burke have been appraised relatively recently according to ecocritical scholarly investigations. See, for example, Laurence Coupe's note about Kenneth Burke's essay, "Hyper-Technologism, Pollution and Satire" (Burke).

13. Much of the older part of the city and the city's falls, which once supplied the power for the city's textiles and other mills, now are designated as a national park. Leonard A. Zax, former real-estate lawyer and city planner in Washington, DC, drafted the bill to turn the historic district into a national park. The bill was passed by the House of Representatives in 2007 and signed by President Obama in 2009.

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