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Roots, Blossoms, and Additions to Nature: Reading *Spring and All* Against Shelley's "Defence of Poetry"

In the "Author's Introduction" to *The Wedge*, William Carlos Williams writes:

> A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words … When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them – without distortion which would mar their exact significances – into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such an intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity...There is no poetry of distinction without formal innovation, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning … [1]

In these lines one finds an incredible tension between Romantic and Modernist thought; a poem is both "an intense expression of … [a man's] perceptions and ardors" and a "machine made of words … [that] lives with an intrinsic movement of its own." This tension underlies the relationship between Williams' *Spring and All* and Percy Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," as the former work performatively weds Williams' insistence that "formal innovation" is essential to poetry to Shelley's claims for poetry's value. In so doing, *Spring and All* reveals itself to be in many ways an imaginative reworking of Shelley's "Defence," containing a defense of poetry that can only be fully grasped through placing it in dialogue with Shelley's essay.

Williams' work does not mount a linear argument, offering instead a dizzying array of incomplete sentences, jarring leaps between ideas, and a smattering of poems interspersed throughout the text. It's engagement with Shelley's text is consistent, but not straightforward. The indirect nature of its discourse with the text from which it grew, however, is one of the commonalities between the two works. Shelley's "Defence" is subtitled: "Or Remarks Suggested

1 William Carlos Williams, *The Wedge*, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. II 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions Books, 1988), 54-55.

By An Essay Entitled 'The Four Ages of Poetry,'"[2] yet towards the end of his work he notes that "I have thought it most favourable to the cause of truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind by a consideration of the subject itself, instead of following that of the treatise that excited me to make them public...[They are] thus devoid of the formality of a polemical reply..."[3] Although Williams' work does not function as a direct "refutation"[4] of Shelley's, these lines serve also to describe the nonlinear fashion in which *Spring And All* approaches the "Defence."

It is worthwhile to begin with a consideration of Williams' defense of poetry on its own terms, before placing it into further dialogue with Shelley. Williams' defense rests on his understanding of human experience. He gives a picture of a world without inherent meaning, which exists in a state of essential independence from the individual subject. This is captured in his assertion that for man, "life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it, life exists … the only means he has to give value to life is to recognize it with the imagination and name it."[5] Williams thus establishes a clear divide between the objective world and subjective experience, a divide which is traversed by interpretation from perception into language. The faculty that enables this interpretation, and therefore contextualizes man in the world, is the imagination. Experience, absent this process of interpretation, is isolate, mechanical, and meaningless.

It is from this metaphysical position that the value of poetry arises. Prior to composition "must come the transposition of the faculties to the only world of reality men know: the world of

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2 Percy Bysshe Shelley. "A Defence of Poetry," in *The Critical Tradition: Classical Texts and Contemporary Trends (Third Edition)*, ed. David Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 346.
3 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 362.
4 Ibid.
5 William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol. I 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions Books, 1986), 202.

the imagination, wholly our own."[6] In Williams' understanding, man does not have access to the world in itself, but can only know it as it is mediated by his imagination. If poetry is to be understood as a communicative act, it must therefore communicate not the world of objects, but the experience of a subjectivity interpreting this world.

Williams is adamant that his elevation of the imagination is in no way an avoidance of life. Rather, he insists that to those who "believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination."[7] Art grounded in the imagination "gives the feeling of completion by revealing the oneness of experience; it rouses rather than stupefies the intelligence by demonstrating the importance of personality, by showing the individual … that his life is valuable."[8] But how does this process occur?

Williams claims that "the inevitable flux of the seeing eye toward measuring itself by the universe can only result in crushing humiliation unless the individual raise to some approximate co-extension with the universe. This is possible by aid of the imagination."[9] The imagination, then, enables man to identify himself as existing in a metaphysical position comparable to that of the external world. This self-understanding both underlies, and is enabled by, poetic creation. Williams writes: "In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality – Taught by the imagination to feel every form which he sees moving within himself, he must prove the truth of this by expression."[10] This passage inverts the usual understandings of perception and expression, in which man "fixes" the universality of the existent world with his particular eye; instead,

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6 Williams, *Spring and All*, 215.
7 Williams, *Spring and All*, 178.
8 Williams, *Spring and All*, 194.
9 Williams, *Spring and All*, 192.
10 Williams, *Spring and All*, 193.

Williams renders personality as the only constant in experience, and frames objects as particulars which inform the construction of the internal experience of human life. Because man can only approach the external world through the process of relating it to himself, the forms of nature appear to him as analogues to his internal being; it is only through creative expression, or the creation of new objects from out of this internal being, that he can affirm his position of "co-extension" with the world.

The imagination is the faculty through which man translates from the objective to the subjective world and back, through the medium of language. Williams declares that "the value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence."[11] The imagination is thus not only the force through which man meets the objective world, but also that which enables him to exert an effect thereon.

Williams concludes by claiming that "the word is not liberated, and therefore able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it until it is accurately tuned to the fact which, giving it reality, by its own reality establishes its freedom from the necessity of a word, thus freeing and dynamizing it at the same time."[12] This fact must be understood as the force of the imagination, which frees man from the shackles of passive experience by revealing both the fact that his experience of reality is interpretive, and also his ability to act on reality through the creation of words from the materials of his mind. The nature of this operation is described by Williams at the very end of his book, as he argues that "poetry does not tamper with the world, but moves it – It affirms reality most powerfully, and therefore, since reality needs no personal support but exists free from human action … it creates a new object. As birds' wings beat the solid air without which none could fly so words freed by the imagination affirm reality by their

11 Williams, *Spring and All*, 207.
12 Ibid.

flight."[13] Poetry both affirms reality as the predicate for human experience, and also demonstrates the independence of that experience from the determinism of nature; man's unique relationship to reality, as exemplified by his ability to create objects as additions thereto, serves "to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads."[14] The creation of poetry, then, both reveals and enables a definition of man as a creative, and therefore free, agent.

This is but one level of Williams' defense of poetry, however. To apprehend the remainder of his defense, and the precise relation the ideas already discussed ideas bear to poetry, one must examine *Spring and All* in light of Percy Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," which shares a tremendous amount with Williams' work. Indeed, Williams' assertion that "poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it" is a powerful echo of Shelley's concluding assertion that "Poets are … the influence which is moved not, but moves..."[15] Throughout *Spring and All*, Williams performs a complex dialogue with Shelley, which both reveals the Romantic roots of his own defense, and mounts an argument that his Modernist insistence on formal innovation is the necessary extension of Shelley's understanding of poetry into Williams' historical moment.

Spring and All begins with Williams ventriloquizing an imaginary chorus of critics as they attack him and his work. At the heart of their extensive complaint is an indictment on account of Williams' divergence from established poetic practice: "Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why there is none in your work whatever. Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry … You moderns! It is the death of poetry that you are accomplishing."[16] Williams responds by redefining poetry, and arrives at a definition that bears a striking resemblance to that which lies at the heart of Shelley's "Defence." He writes: "[P]rose

13 Williams, *Spring and All*, 235.
14 Ibid.
15 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 363.
16 Williams, *Spring and All*, 177.

has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form. This is the force of the imagination … poetry: new form dealt with as reality in itself … the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words."[17] In both its positive claim, and the reliance of this claim on the imagination, Williams' definition contains an unmistakable echo of Shelley, whose defense is predicated on the idea that "[p]oetry, in a general sense, may be defined as 'the expression of the Imagination'..."[18] Williams and Shelley are thus in accord when it comes to the fundamental definition of poetry, but to this understanding Williams adds the belief that poetry is a categorization on the basis of form. While both expand the category of poetry to contain works which would not traditionally be classified therein, the logic underlying this expansion is at least somewhat different; this difference, however, can best be understood in light of the extensive commonalities existing between the two defenses. One can begin by recognizing that, in addition to his other arguments, Williams recapitulates Shelley's grandest claims for the value of poetry.

Shelley argues that, without poetry "the human mind … could never have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences … which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself."[19] Poetry, then, is the origin of other modes of thought, and therefore the essential function of the intelligence. Williams echoes this understanding twice, first as he notes that "in great works of the imagination A CREATIVE FORCE IS SHOWN AT WORK MAKING OBJECTS WHICH ALONE COMPLETE SCIENCE AND ALLOW INTELLIGENCE TO SURVIVE,"[20] and again at the end of his work, as he directly asserts the superiority of poetry to other modes of approaching the world. He writes: "It

17 Williams, *Spring and All*, 219.
18 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 347.
19 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 359.
20 Williams, *Spring and All*, 199.

is the imagination on which reality rides … It is a cleavage through everything by a force that does not exist in the mass and therefore can never be discovered by its atomization. It is for this reason that I have always placed art first and esteemed it over science … Art is the pure effect of the force upon which science depends for its reality – Poetry."[21] Williams thus establishes a relationship between "poetry" and "science" which predicates the existence of the latter on the operation of the former, repeating one of Shelley's most powerful arguments for poetry's value.

Shelley also claims that poetry is the source of morality, writing that "[the] great secret of morals is love; or a going out of own nature...A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively...The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting on the cause."[22] Shelley's claim is that the empathetic projection which is necessary for moral action depends on a metaphor, as one perceives a likeness between himself and other subjects. Williams takes up this point in one of the poems dispersed throughout *Spring and All*. He begins by observing that "The decay of cathedrals / is efflorescent / through the phenomenal / growth of movie houses," but suggests that "...schism which seems / adamant is diverted / from the perpendicular / by simply rotating the object // cleaving away the root of / disaster which it seemed to foster. Thus / the movies are a moral force // Nightly the crowds / with the closeness and / universality of sand / witness the selfspittle / which used to be drowned / in incense and intoned … "[23] Although the connection to Shelley is not immediately evident, Williams' understanding of the "moral force" exerted by the movies rests in the fact that they carry over the "closeness and / universality" of the crowd which was previously found in the cathedrals; the moral operation of both thus depends on the individual's experience in a crowd, or a mass of common humanity. Thus Williams shares with Shelley both

21 Williams, *Spring and All*, 225.
22 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 351.
23 Williams, *Spring and All*, 214.

the belief that morality is predicated on the perception of one's likeness in other human beings, and his understanding that works of art can encourage this perception.

As noted previously, Shelley's “Defence” is constructed as a rebuttal to Thomas Love Peacock's essay “The Four Ages of Poetry.” Peacock's work culminates in the claim that the apex of poetry's value was found in its role as “the mental rattle that awakened the attention of intellect in the infancy of civil society,”[24] after which point it was overtaken by philosophy and the sciences. Shelley argues, in contrast, that the language of poets is “vitally metaphorical,”[25] because

> it marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become through time signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.[26]

This means, in effect, that far from being the “mental rattle” of intellect, poetry is the intellect's beating heart. The function which Peacock admits for poetry is not performed only once, at the beginning of civilization's development, but must be repeated so long as language is to survive. Williams also echoes this assertion, claiming that

> so long as the sky is recognized as an association [] is recognized in its function of accessory to vague words whose meaning it is impossible to rediscover [] its value can be nothing but mathematical...The man of imagination who turns to art for release and fulfillment...contends with the sky through layers of demoded words...because meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence which have let words empty … What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations...[27]

Williams thus locates the value in his work as its revitalization of language; a tremendous portion of Shelley's argument for the primacy of poetry rests on the fact that poetry preserves the vitality of language, without which all other modes of thought would be impossible.

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24 Thomas Love Peacock, "The Four Ages of Poetry,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classical Texts and Contemporary Trends (Third Edition)*, ed. David Richter (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007), 343.
25 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry,” 347.
26 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry,” 347-48.
27 Williams, *Spring and All*, 187-8.

For all of these commonalities, absent a shared understanding of the imagination Williams' echoes of Shelley's claims for the value of poetry are at best mere appropriations from Shelley's powerful defense. When one seeks to locate such a common understanding, however, one is initially frustrated, as Williams appears to deviate significantly from Shelley's use of the term. Eventually, however, this apparent divergence is revealed to be deceptive.

Crucial to Shelley's definition of imagination is his understanding of it as the source of metaphor, or the metaphorical faculty in intelligence. He writes that "reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things."[28] Williams, however, writes that one way of recognizing when "work is empty" is that "it is typified by use of the work 'like.'"[29] He identifies the task of art as being "to replace not the forms but the reality of experience with its own – up to now shapes and meanings but always the illusion relying on composition to give likeness to 'nature' [] now works of art cannot be left in this category of France's 'lie'... it is not a matter of 'representation,' but of separate existence."[30] The work of art is not to be a metaphor for reality; rather, "when in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writing have reality … to perfect the ability to record at the moment when the consciousness is enlarged by the sympathies and the unity of understanding which the imagination gives, to practice skill in recording the force moving..."[31] Art must be mimetic, not of the external world, but of the operation of the imagination. This belief is shared by Williams and Shelley, but also provides the justification for Williams' insistence that poetry must dynamize emotion into new forms.

Early in his essay, Shelley asserts that "to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful, in a word the good which exists in the relation, subsisting, first between existence and

28 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 347.
29 Williams, *Spring and All*, 188.
30 Williams, *Spring and All*, 204.
31 Williams, *Spring and All*, 206.

perception, and secondly between perception and expression."[32] He thus establishes a three-part model of composition, in which two translations occur: First, the poet perceives the realm of the existent; following this, he composes these perceptions into an expression, returning them from his mind into the world of objects. This same triple model subtends Williams' understanding of the imagination.

This overlap can be seen through a comparison between two metaphors, one from each work. Shelley offers an image of man's relationship to the world, offering a complex comparison between man and an Aeolian harp:

> Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Æolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody. But there is a principle within the human being, and perhaps within all sentient beings, which acts otherwise than in the lyre, and produces not melody alone, but harmony, by an internal adjustment of the sounds or motions thus excited to the impressions which excite them.[33]

This image expands on the triple model of composition, offering a further sense of the passage from reality to expression as an interpretive process. Man differs from the lyre insofar as his response to stimuli is not wholly mechanical; while the relationship between the lyre and the wind that plays it is a direct casual link between impression and melody, man acts on the "external and internal impressions" which occur prior to composition, and through this "internal adjustment" creates "not melody alone, but harmony." Williams' work offers a strong echo of this passage. Early in *Spring and All*, he implores the reader to "imagine the New World...in all its prismatic colorings, its counterpart in our souls – our souls that are great pianos whose strings, of honey and steel, the divisions of the rainbow set twanging, loosing on the air great novels of adventure."[34] The similarity between the two passages is evident, as both render the natural world acting on man, who turns them into art.

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32 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 348.
33 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 347.
34 Williams, *Spring and All*, 178.

The differences are more subtle, but are essential to understanding the relationship between Williams' work and Shelley's. A piano, unlike an Aeolian harp, cannot produce music without the influence of a player, who exerts a conscious agency on his instrument; while Shelley's "lyre" produces a simple melody, and differs from man in that man supplements this melody with a pleasing and related "harmony," Williams' "piano" does not make music at all. Instead, its strings are harshly "set twanging, loosing on the air great novels of adventure." Williams thus renders the translation, or translations, which occur between impression and expression as far more drastic alterations than those presented by Shelley. Specifically, he places greater emphasis on the initial translation between existence and perception.

For Williams, the imagination is the force which translates experience across the subject/object divide, performing "the jump between fact and imaginative reality"[35] which is analogous to "the jump from prose to the process of imagination."[36] This understanding of imagination both separates man from the world, but also frees him; Williams declares that "The writer of imagination" inhabits "A world detached from the necessity of recording it, sufficient to itself, removed from him (as it most certainly is), with which he has bitter and delicious relations and from which he is independent … and the unique proof of this is the work of imagination is not "like" anything but transfused with the same forces which transfuse the earth."[37] Williams thus posits the imagination as the creative principle which constructs man's internal world, translating the facts of existence into the facts of experience.

This internal world is a "reality" unto itself, parallel to that of the world of objects. Williams applies his understanding of the inward life of man to the relationship between nature and poetic creation, concluding that "Nature is the hint to composition not because it is familiar

35 Williams, *Spring and All*, 221.
36 Williams, *Spring and All*, 219.
37 Williams, *Spring and All*, 207.

to us … but because it possesses the quality of independent existence, of reality which we feel in ourselves. It is not opposed to art but apposed to it."[38] The artist does not copy nature, but reveals himself as a creative force comparable to it. Williams makes this point clearly, indicting Shakespeare's "familiar aphorism about holding the mirror up to nature" for perpetuating the erroneous belief "that the reflection of nature is nature," but notes that Shakespeare himself avoids this error, and "holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own."[39] Williams believes that the artist does not, and cannot, mimic the world, but rather produces objects which are mimetic of his process of creatively interpreting the world.

Nonetheless, Williams' definition of the imagination is revealed to be essentially in accord with Shelley's. Although Williams places greater weight on the relation between existence and perception, in his understanding the translation from one to the other remains a process of the creation of metaphor, which is the essence of Shelley's understanding of the imagination. This identity can be witnessed through another allusion in *Spring and All* to Shelley's work.

Early in *Spring and All*, Williams implores the reader to imagine a scenario in which mankind devolves into an orgy of violence, and declares that following "the annihilation of every human creature on the face of the earth...at last will the world be made anew."[40] Soon, however, "a miraculous miracle" occurs: "Through the orderly sequences of unmentionable time EVOLUTION HAS REPEATED ITSELF FROM THE BEGINNING … A perfect plagiarism results. Everything is and is new...the imagination, drunk with prohibitions, has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was."[41] These lines contain clear

38 Williams, *Spring and All*, 207-8.
39 Williams, *Spring and All*, 208.
40 Williams, *Spring and All*, 179.
41 Williams, *Spring and All*, 181.

rhetorical echoes of Shelley's claim that "poetry...creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impression blunted by reiteration. It justifies that bold and true word of Tasso – *Non merita nome de creatori, se non Iddio ed il Poeta.*"[42] The subjective reality which Williams identifies as the province of the imagination can thus be identified as thoroughly of a piece with Shelley's understanding of the term. Nonetheless, this still leaves unresolved the apparent divergence between the two defenses on the basis of Williams' insistence on the necessity of formal innovation in poetry.

Throughout *Spring and All*, Williams is adamant that a poem, as expression of imagination, can only be identified on the basis of formal innovation. His definition of poetry is surrounded by insistences that poetry is "the dynamization of emotion into a separate form,"[43] that "there is work to be done in the creation of new forms, new names for experience,"[44] and that "[t]he only realism of art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation. Invention of new forms to embody this reality of art, the one thing that art is, must occupy all serious minds concerned."[45] Indeed, in considering how to determine a work's status as poetry, he notes that "meter has nothing to do with the question whatever … to write or to comprehend poetry the words must be recognized to be moving in a direction separate from the jostling or lack of it which occurs in the piece."[46] This "jostling" is nothing less than the product of the "dynamization … into a separate form" which is the hallmark of poetry, as the kinetics of the piece reveal the movements of the imagination in words.

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42 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 361. A footnote added by Richter translates Tasso: "Nobody merits the title of Creator save God and the Poet."
43 Williams, *Spring and All*, 219.
44 Williams, *Spring and All*, 203.
45 Williams, *Spring and All*, 198.
46 Williams, *Spring and All*, 229-31.

Although Shelley does not make as large a point of this insistence, it is nonetheless deeply embedded in the logic of his work. He allows for his definition of "poetry, in the general sense" to extend to encompass "not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance and architecture and statuary and painting...the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society and the inventors of the arts of life and the teachers,"[47] because they may be called poetry by that figure of speech which considers the effect as a synonime of the cause."[48] Each of these classes is identified as poetic on the basis of the new forms through which they expressed the operation of the imagination into the world.

Shelley's consideration of poetry as it is found in language can also be seen as containing the germ of Williams' insistence on formal innovation. Shelley agrees with Williams that "the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissable,"[49] and also discards meter as integral to a work's claim to poetic status, noting that

> ...the language of poets has ever affected a certain uniform and harmonious recurrence of sound, without which it were not poetry … an observation of the regular mode of the recurrence of this harmony in the language of poetical minds … produced metre, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony of language. Yet it is by no means essential that a poet should accommodate his language to this traditional form, so that the harmony which is its spirit, be observed … [E]very great poet must inevitably innovate upon the example of his predecessors in the exact structure of his peculiar versification.[50]

If this is not an identical argument to that made by Williams, it is nonetheless comparable in meaningful ways. Shelley understands poetry not as a matter of outward appearance, but as determined by the "spirit" animating an expression. What is essential to Shelley is not the presence of formal meter in a work, but that, as an expression, it evinces on the level of sound, an organizing principle. It can be extrapolated on the basis of the repeated word that the "harmonious recurrence of sound" in a work should bear a relation to the "harmony" that arises

47 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 348.
48 Ibid.
49 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 349.
50 Ibid.

in the passage from impression to expression that constitutes the poetic activity; in Williams' terminology, it is only necessary that poetry reveal the movement of the imagination in words.

One can argue, then, that Williams' insistence on formal innovation is nothing more than an extension of Shelley's understanding of poetry as the expression of the imagination, adjusted to accommodate the different metaphysical assumptions underlying Williams' worldview. This can be seen in the difference between the two poets' understandings of the relationship between imagination and value. Shelley opposes “reason... the enumeration of quantities already known” to “imagination...the perception of the value of those quantities”;[51] in this understanding, reason allows one to see what is, while imagination allows one to perceive what things mean. Williams, on the other hand, argues that “life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it, life exists...the only means … [man] has to give value to life is to recognize it with the imagination and name it...a work of art...places a value upon experience.”[52] For Williams, the imagination enables not the “perception” but the assignation of value to the external world. Shelley believes that poetry contains “eternal truth,”[53] and that “a Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one,”[54] while Williams believes that poetry does not reveal pre-existing value, but rather places man in a position in relation to the world he inhabits that such that “a value [can] be affixed”[55] to life. While Williams maintains that man can only know the world as it is mediated by the interpretive operation of his imaginative subjectivity, Shelley claims that “a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth … the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the

51 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry,” 346-7.
52 Williams, *Spring and All*, 202-215.
53 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry,” 350.
54 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry,” 348.
55 Williams, *Spring and All*, 193.

mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds."[56] Shelley's language of transcendental value and eternal truth is tethered to his belief in "unchangeable forms of human nature"; Williams' rejection of transcendental truth, or value external to man and his perception, comparably informs his insistence that the creation of new forms is essential to the task of poetry.

This divergence rests on the different weights that the two poets give to the relation between existence and perception in the process of composition. While Williams' understanding of imagination as subjective reality is an extension of Shelley's use of the term, this extended understanding requires a concomitant extension in the translation from perception to expression. In Williams' poetics, poetry is the product of a creative act, as the imagination reconfigures experience into a "separate form." Moreover, this "separate form" reveals, or expresses, the operation of the force which generated it. For Williams, a poem is a linguistic object which reflects not reality, but the operation of the mind. This understanding is shared by Shelley, who opens his defense by positing "one mode of regarding those two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination,"[57] in which "the former may be considered as mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another … and the latter, as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts..." Shelley thus renders the imagination as a generative or creative force. The distinction between reason and imagination is fundamentally that between "mind contemplating" and "mind acting"; in the former instance, no new force is asserted, while a force originating in the individual mind is integral to the operation of the latter.

Yet Williams sees the mind as recreating the objective world within the individual

56 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 349.
57 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 346.

subjectivity; as such, the object which it produces must reflect this process back into the objective world. He thus offers his clearest expression of the relationship between the imagination, poetry, and form, arguing that "poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination – the perfection of new forms as additions to nature."[58] If value must be assigned to life, rather than discovered, man's creative faculty must be equivalent to nature's; for meaning to be constructed, rather than apprehended, the poem, the objective "crystallization" of the operation of the imagination, must take not merely reflect nature, but prove by its very being man's ability to reshape nature in his mind.

Williams thus offers a definition of beauty which differs from that given by Shelley. Shelley claims that "In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects," and that "there is a certain order … belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation … Every man in the infancy of art observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which the highest delight results";[59] he defines "the beautiful" as "the relation between … [the] highest pleasure and its cause."[60] Williams, in contrast, insists that art has previously maintained "the illusion relying on composition to give likeness to 'nature' [] now works of art … must be real, not 'realism' but reality itself." As a result, he arrives at a definition of beauty which reflects his extended sense of the distance between existence and perception, and resultant emphasis on the creation of new forms; for Williams, "'beauty' is related not to 'loveliness' but to a state in which reality plays a part.'"[61] Art that is mimetic of the external world can only be "plagiarism after nature"; the entirety of man's creative faculty resides in his ability to produce objects which bear the form of his experience of reality.

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58 Williams, *Spring and All*, 226.
59 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 347.
60 Ibid.
61 Williams, *Spring and All*, 204.

Williams is concerned with his particular moment, both in itself and as a synecdoche for the human condition. He begins his work by identifying a crisis, noting the existence of a "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world," and claiming that the reader "never knows and never dares to know what he is at the exact moment that he is. And this moment is the only thing in which I am at all interested."[62] He declares that most of what has been called "art" has been complicit in this separation of the reader from the world and his own nature, having been "especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment. It has always been a search for 'the beautiful illusion.'" Williams offers, in opposition to this pursuit, what he identifies as "the modern trend" in art, the

> attempt to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience … at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination … [creating] a picture of sea and mountains … which the onlooker is not permitted for a moment to witness as an 'illusion.' … the mountain and sea are obviously not 'the mountain and sea,' but a picture of the mountain and the sea.[63]

Williams here gives his reader the opportunity to define by analogy "the imagination," as well as the "'beautiful illusion'" to which it stands opposed. To "witness as an 'illusion'" the picture he describes is to perceive what it portrays as "'the mountain and the sea,'" rather than as "a picture of the mountain and the sea"; the imagination *contra* illusion is thus perception understood as an interpretive or picturing faculty, rather than as a passive reception of sensory information from the world of objects. The artist does not represent the world, but the world as he sees it; the distinction between art pursuing "'illusion'" and art rooted in imagination is that the former attempts to represent objective reality, while the latter seeks to produce a picture of an individual mind's process of perceiving the world.

Williams continues, making this point with yet greater strength. He notes that the work's

62 Williams, *Spring and All*, 177-78.
63 Williams, *Spring and All*, 194-97.

self-conscious refusal to be apprehended as illusion is the product of a change in the subject matter of art, claiming that such an insistence "was not necessary where the subject of art was not 'reality' but related to the 'gods' … There was no need of the 'illusion' in such a case since there was none possible where a picture or work represented simply the imaginative reality which existed in the mind of the onlooker. No special effort was necessary to cleave where the cleavage already existed."[64] When it portrayed the gods, art could only be understood as expressing the operation of the individual mind, because what it represented could not be observed anywhere in the external, objective world. Because "the subject of art" is now "'reality,'" however, the nature of art has been obscured, and art must now struggle to prove what has always been true; namely, that art can only ever represent "the imaginative reality which existed in the mind" of the artist. Despite the change in subject from "the 'gods'" to "'reality,'" the fact that art offers not a picture of reality, but a picture of an individual's experience of reality, remains unchanged. The only difference is that, in the transition, it has become "necessary to cleave" the work from reality to reveal its actual subject. For all this, Williams' understanding of the subject of art, and of poetry, is essentially the same as it is in Shelley's defense: it is the operation of the imagination. His emphasis on the creation of new forms is simply what he views as necessary to cleave a work from false representation to imaginative reality.

Thus, *Spring And All* can ultimately also be read as Williams' attempt to re-imagine Shelley's defense for his own "moment," and to justify his poetics as an extension of Shelley's full-throated defense of poetry. One recalls that Williams begins his work by imagining that its status as poetry will be challenged, on the basis of its lack of meter. The remainder of the book is a response, which consists largely of Williams showing that the only way that the abrasiveness of Williams' own poetics is the result of his attempt to carry forward Shelley's claims for the value

64 Williams, *Spring and All*, 198.

of poetry; to express the imagination, over a hundred years after Shelley wrote, requires something different than previous practice.

The essential tension permeating *Spring and All* as it unites Shelley's Romantic defense of poetry, predicated on an understanding of perception and the operation of the mind, with Williams' relentless Modernist insistence on formal innovation, is contained in the very title of the work, which has two sources. It is an echo of some of Shelley's most breathless rhetoric, as he claims that "[P]oetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the center and circumference of all knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and blossom of all other systems of thought: it is *that from which all spring …*"[65] These lines show Shelley at his most impassioned, making his broadest claims for the value of poetry in the world. At the same time, the work's title refers it to Williams' vision of the destruction of the world, which he repeatedly punctuates with declarations that "It is approaching the beginning … SPRING is approaching … THE WORLD IS NEW."[66] Here, one sees Williams' Modernist emphasis on new forms, including in the realm of typography.

Even in the actual text of this section, Williams gestures towards the relationship between his work and Shelley's. He writes that "for the moment everything is fresh, perfect, recreated. In fact now, for the first time, everything IS new … The terms 'veracity' 'actuality' 'real' 'natural' 'sincere' are being discussed at length, every word in the discussion being evolved from an identical discussion which took place the day before yesterday."[67] This identical discussion, of course, is both that which occurs both within the text, and that which occurs between Williams' text and Shelley's. The remaking of the world is thus also both the revision described by the text, and the revision of Shelley's "Defence" that it performs.

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65 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 360 (italics added for emphasis).
66 Williams, *Spring and All*, 182.
67 Williams, *Spring and All*, 181.

This gesture points to a final point of commonality between the two defenses, which leads in turn to the clearest possible understanding of their relationship. Towards the end of his essay, Shelley decides to "confess" that he does not think highly of the poets of his time, admitting that he is "unwilling to be stunned by the Theseids of the coarse Codri of the day. Bavius and Maevius undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable persons. But it belongs to a philosophical critic to distinguish rather than confound."[68] Shelley notes that he has confounded poetry into a unity, but that this is not unduly problematic because the drawing of distinction, rather than the perception of similarity, is the province of "a philosophical critic." This assertion is not to be taken too literally, but rather shows Shelley placing himself, and by extension his defense of poetry, firmly on the side of the imagination, the essential operation of which is the perception of "the similitudes of things." Although his defense rejects as false the opposition of poetry to philosophy, these lines can nonetheless be seen as suggesting that Shelley's essay is of a piece with that which it defends.

Moreover, these lines occur in the very same passage in which Shelley describes the nonlinear relationship between his essay and the work which inspired it, Peacock's "The Four Ages of Poetry." Having examined both the "Defence" and *Spring and All* more closely, one can find new meaning in Shelley's deceptively slight admission that he "thought it more favourable to the cause of truth to set down these remarks according to the order in which they were suggested to my mind by a consideration of the subject itself, instead of following that of the treatise that inspired me to make them public," and in Williams' decision to take a parallel approach to Shelley's defense. This structural principle accords with both mens' understanding of poetry as the expression of the imagination, an objective product of the operation of the individual mind. The form of the two works, in relation to their antecedents, thus suggests that

68 Shelley, "Defence of Poetry," 362.

they are works of poetry.

Given the understanding of poetry and its value contained in both defenses, this self-reflexive claim to poetic status is perhaps inevitable. Both Williams and Shelley view poetry as the creation of new forms to communicate and embody the movements of the imaginative faculty of the individual mind. They both locate poetry as integral or originary to other modes of thinking, and suggest that the imagination plays an unacknowledged but essential role in human experience. The strength of their claims, and their understanding of language as fundamentally a metaphorical construct, and metaphor, in one sense or another, as the essence of poetry, lead one to wonder if either man could write about poetry without writing what he would himself consider to be poetry.

And indeed, Williams' defense of poetry also qualifies, under his definition of the term, as a work of poetry itself. It takes an object from the world of existence, processes it imaginatively through Williams' perception, and returns it to the world in a new form which reveals the motions of Williams' imagination. Williams himself acknowledges this fact with a wink, asking his reader "Is what I have written prose? The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated – If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence – that is the end of the sentence – Or if a new phase enters at that point it is only stupidity to go on."[69] On their own terms, and according to the broader terms given throughout the work, these lines indicate that Williams' work is as much a work of poetry as it is anything else. As such, *Spring and All*, in its relation to Shelley's "Defence," actually embodies its own argument. Not only does it echo Shelley's claims about the nature and value of poetry, while insisting that poetry requires the creation of new forms, but it also performs this operation on Shelley's text, re-imagining it in a wildly different form. In so doing, it also reveals in action

69 Williams, *Spring and All*, 226.

Shelley's argument that poetry revitalizes the language. Shelley's “Defence of Poetry” is thus both the root and blossom of *Spring and All*, and both works can lay claim to the title of poetry which they so passionately and imaginatively defend.