

# The Verse Line in Williams

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## 1.

IN THE 1957 INTERVIEWS WITH EDITH HEAL, William Carlos Williams talks of his Complete Collected Poems in 1938 as providing him with “the whole picture,” a chance to appraise all he “had gone through technically to learn about the making of a poem.” Then he recounts learning to organize a poem into lines:

The greatest problem was that I didn’t know how to divide a poem into what perhaps my lyrical sense wanted. Free verse was not the answer. From the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom—this was a better word than language, less academic, more identified with speech. (I Wanted 64–65)

This kind of statement draws skeptical comments from critics (for example, Cushman 81–83, 99, and Perloff 160). In point of fact, Williams spoke to the problem of lineation in a letter to James Laughlin in 1939. When Laughlin related how his professors at Harvard had told the young editor not to “mix auditory and visual standards in poetry,” Williams was contemptuous. “What they, the formulators of that particular question

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do not know," Williams snapped, "is that an auditory quality, a NEW auditory quality, underlies and determines the visual quality which they object to" (Williams and Laughlin 47). Williams had argued for this new auditory quality throughout the 1930s and proposed to formalize it—what he refers to above as "the pattern"—in a new verse line. "The new verse is a new time," he insisted in 1931, a time manifest in and measured by this line. Not a forced, metric time but something invented, "a new time that catches thought as it lags and swings up into the attention" (*Selected Letters* 136). That verse line, the basis of a new poetic form, was to be discovered in—invented from—the American vernacular.<sup>1</sup>

Williams's attempts at "measuring" the vernacular line have largely been dismissed; the sound and shape of his poems remain a topic of contention.<sup>2</sup> No doubt visual and aural elements are both at play, and any discussion of Williams's verse line needs to consider their interlinking complexities. The issue here is twofold. First, if what guides Williams is *primarily* an "auditory quality" found in American speech, then exactly in what way are his lines modeled on speech? Second, and more difficult to establish, if Williams's prosody is speech-based, how might those lines express, as he insisted, *musical* time and so be the basis of what he notoriously called a "new measure"? In the following I'll argue that Williams's verse line functions as a prosodic device, indicative of several aural factors,

1 I apologize for appropriating the term American for what is more accurately United States of America. I simply follow Williams here.

2 Henry Sayre and Stephen Cushman, for instance, do not believe Williams's line breaks are motivated by aural properties. Sayre finds Williams's "sense of the poem as an auditory arrangement" to be a self-perpetuated fiction and his form "arbitrary, imposed upon his subject matter" (2–3): "Williams' work ... originates in sight, not sound, in a visual pattern against which the aural dimension must assert itself" (4). Cushman finds Williams's prosodic statements contradictory and argues for a theory of line breaks based on enjambment and typographic patterning (14). Motivating Williams's enjambment, for Cushman, are varying levels of syntactical resistance that he reads as contributing to the poem's representational meaning (31–50). The line, he believes, measures a course of "stylistic-mental events" (44). The poem thus becomes a "pictogram" (48). Michael Golston extends Cushman's work, arguing that Williams's theory of measure "bears a component of allegory" resulting when he dissociates "the idea of measure from the *phenomenon* of rhythm" (252). Marjorie Perloff writes that typography provides Williams with a "visual prosody," that he uses the page as a poetic unit (178). While Perloff speaks of his lines as "a phenomenon of the eye rather than the ear" (167), "to be seen rather than heard" (168), she also evaluates lines on the basis of phonetic structure, for example, sound values and stress, making it obvious that she takes both into account. But all four reject Williams's claim for a new "auditory quality" determining the visual appearance of the poem.

chiefly intonation, pace, and rhythm, and that it is fashioned with regard to its impact on the total poem—that is, subordinate to the poem as a whole—rather than functioning simply as a visual or rhythmic unit (such as an iambic pentameter line).<sup>3</sup> Further, I'll demonstrate in what ways Williams's prosody is in fact speech-based and show, by listening to Williams, how line breaks give clear evidence of his prosodic practice—breaks best explained by use of syntax, intonation, and pace.

## 2.

In December 1931, Williams composed a letter to Kay Boyle, intended as the opening declaration for a new incarnation of *Contact* (Mariani 328–29). His premise was, bluntly, “There is no workable poetic form extant among us today” (*Selected Letters* 129). He writes of listening to “speech in my own environment” for a prosodic model which he'd develop into a form. “The form of poetry,” he insists, “is that of language.”<sup>4</sup> Because the *form* of poetry is to be found in characteristics of the spoken language, Williams will consequently search the vernacular for formal characteristics and

3 Counting stresses or syllables was not part of Williams's practice and is therefore not an adequate way to assess his claims. He sometimes confuses the issue by using the older, metric terminology, but that doesn't negate his dismissal of that practice. Further, the issue of Williams's lineation isn't one of his *representing* American speech but one of using organizational principles found in speech. Perloff and Berry both note that the greater body of Williams's work is clearly not composed of speech, that his syntactical constructions are writerly (Perloff 160; Berry 1984, 109–11). And to be sure, Williams is highly selective in what he represents as vernacular. That said, anyone who listens to Williams read recognizes, from pace and tone, the conversational basis from which he works; there's little rhetorical distance or heightening, especially when compared with the way contemporaries Pound, Stevens, Eliot, Cummings, or Millay, for example, read. This point was not lost on young Allen Ginsberg in 1949 (quoted in Sayre 1; Mariani 605), nor on Robert Creeley in the 1950s (Creeley 30–33). As Williams said, he sought a “pattern or form *from* the spoken language” (emphasis added; *Something to Say* 166). That speech-based prosody became the basis of the New American Poetry of the 1960s.

4 Form is understood as an expression of cadence, and cadence is understood as intrinsic to a particular language, inasmuch as cadences are made possible by properties of a language. Once form has been achieved, Williams writes in 1941, it “becomes itself a ‘word,’ the most significant of all, that dominates every other word in the poem” (“Studiously Unprepared” 25). Williams refers to this “word” as an ideogram in a letter to Zukofsky that same year (Williams and Zukofsky 280). There is, then, a parts-to-whole argument being made about the relation between line and form. Williams makes parts-to-whole arguments throughout his career. In 1934, he applied that argument to his image of the poem as a machine: “A poem must be definitely tuned to what it wishes to say as the parts of a machine are tuned to make it an effective whole” (“Four Unpublished Letters” 72). Collectively, the lines compose “form in the full sense.”

argue that Greek prosody emerges from the Greek language and English prosody from English. It follows that, because American is distinct from British speech—shaped by a relationship to place, an argument central to *In the American Grain* (1925)<sup>5</sup>—American poetry should be distinguished by its development from vernacular, hence his later insistence on “intrinsic form” (*Collected II*, 54). By 1933, Williams will find support for this argument in Mencken’s *The American Language*.

Williams then discusses, in his letter to Boyle, the *line* as the rhythmic core of the poem and so the key to form. The line in the sonnet is dead, he explains, because “unsuited to the language,” then states flatly: “Poetry is the creation of new form” (*Selected Letters* 134). The source of that form must be a line developed from the vernacular:

A minimum of present new knowledge seems to be this: there can no longer be serious work in poetry written in “poetic” diction. It is a contortion of speech to conform to a rigidity of line. It is in the newness of a live speech that the new line exists undiscovered. To go back is to deny the first opportunity for invention which exists. Speech is the fountain of the line into which the pollutions of a poetic manner and inverted phrasing should never again be permitted to drain. (*Selected Letters* 134)

“Rigidity of line” refers to an imposed metrical pattern; going back to European forms contorts American speech into poetic diction. Williams then aligns speech with thought: “The line must be pliable with speech, for speech, for thought, for the intricacies of new thought,” because a truly modern line should “exclude no possibility of intelligent resource” and will “include the age as the Homeric line included Greece” (134).

Louis Zukofsky first called Williams’s attention to the line as a formal unit in two discussions of Williams’s work in 1930, “Beginning Again with Williams” in the *Hound & Horn* and “American Poetry 1920–30” in *Symposium*. In the latter essay, Zukofsky talks of how Williams uses typography to guide the voice and eye: “His line sense is not only a music heard, but seen, printed as bars, printed (or cut as it were) for the reading” (150).<sup>6</sup> Zukofsky notices, importantly, that Williams’s line contributes to

5 For a full discussion, see Holsapple, “Imagining America: Williams’s *In the American Grain*.”

6 Use of the word “music” here suggests the tonal properties of speech, referred to as “speech melody.” Associating poetic lines with musical bars is central to both poets; a common subtext would be Ezra Pound’s dictum, “As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase” rather than “in sequence of a metronome” (Pound 3).

the overall movement of the poem, a point I'll build from. "One does not think of line-ends in him," Zukofsky remarks, "but of essential rhythm, each cadence emphasized, the rhythm breaking and beginning again, an action, each action deserving a line." Zukofsky felt Williams's use of the line successfully transferred the rhythmic principle behind syllable count and regulated stress to the use of cadence. Williams's use of cadence, Zukofsky writes, emerges from "a decided awareness of the printed as well as quantitative looseness of verse libre" (138). The poet shows a "salutatory gift" for *quantity* in use of the printed line.

Williams responded with a letter, saying that Zukofsky had "expressed precisely" what Williams desired to achieve. Further, he writes, "you have contributed heavily toward the next step in bringing to my attention the word 'quantity.'" That shift is decisive.

You're quite right, that's where much if not all of the release lies. I have in my duller hours (and weeks—and years) worried over accent. But I have not thought much of quantity. Lucky for me it didn't come more to my attention earlier when it might have interfered with my practice of it! (Williams and Zukofsky 78)

Precisely what "quantity" means to these writers isn't clear, but regulating lines by long and short vowels is not likely what either intends. What Zukofsky draws Williams's attention to with "cadence," however, is the rhythmic flow of his lines, a flow associated with intonation, the inflection of tone. That is, the poetic line is being linked to speech melody, the pitch contours of the poem, hence their use of "quantity." The letter marks the genesis of Williams's consideration of a time-based measure, the basis of his "variable foot."<sup>7</sup>

7 As has been noted by others, Williams adopted the term "variable foot" from Poe's "The Rationale of Verse." His most complete statements on the variable foot can be found in "On Measure—Statement for Cid Corman" (*Something to Say* 202–08), Letter to John Thirwall (*Selected Letters* 330–32) and "Measure—a loosely assembled essay on poetic measure" in *Spectrum* (1959). Williams uses "quantity," I suspect, to indicate duration of sounds, as they relate to the line, rather than long and short syllable lengths, as classical prosody dictates. As early as 1934, in a letter to Morse, Williams uses the term "structure" as a component of form and distinguishes structure from content as well as introducing other new terms, for example, that poems are made of "words and the movements of words implied in 'meter.' Measure." He then uses the term "quantitative": "I write always trying to discover the implications of a spoken American language, trying to find in it a quantitative foot, some means of measuring newly what must be the firmer, better built but intrinsically identical *thing*, that I am doing imperfectly" ("Four Unpublished Letters" 73). Discovering a "quantitative foot" would enable him to give the verse more structure.

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### 3.

In 1935, A. M. Sullivan interviewed Williams on radio and recounts (from the transcript) Williams's response to questions on American poetry and American language idioms. Note below his emphasis on music and pace but, equally important, that Williams is not talking about using speech rhythms in verse but, rather, of developing "rhythmic character" from the vernacular:

Poetry is largely music. If we persistently ignore the native music of our speech we shall end by being ignoramuses. We are not English in anything we do though we use many words of English origin in our daily vocabulary. But we do not use them either in pace, inflection or sometimes even in meaning as any others but ourselves do. When language is packed, when its pace is quickened, when it is sharpened and driven in, it takes a rhythmic character. (Sullivan 44)

The music of our speech is the basis of poetic form, but the issue isn't one of using speech in poetry, rather it's one of seeking properties inherent in one's speech by which to raise the vernacular to the level of art, words "rhythmically organized," "charged with emotion" (*Interviews* 73). From a language's sonic characteristics—a "physical more than a literary character," as he says in *The Wedge* (*Collected II*, 54)—certain elements or "rhythmic particles" (Weaver 82) are selected out. Williams talks about pace and rhythm in a lecture for the Brooklyn Institute in 1936 also, stating that each language has a particular pace, and "when intensity is reached the language tends to become rhythmic—as with all rapid motion." Further, "it is the understanding of this pace and rhythm that makes for the poetic form natural and suitable to any language" ("Brooklyn Lecture," C33 in Baldwin and Myers, 168; Mariani 395–96). The musical patterns and organized rhythmic character of a language constitute the basis of poetic form. The basic unit of that form is the line.

In 1936, Williams reviewed the fourth edition of Mencken's *The American Language*, singling out the chapter on "The Pronunciation of English" as the most important for him.<sup>8</sup> That chapter documents specific phono-

<sup>8</sup> Williams also reviewed the first edition of Mencken's *The American Language* in 1933, where he spoke of "the inner spirit" of the American language and its difference from English as not simply one of vocabulary but "above all a difference in pronunciation, in intonation, in conjugation, in metaphor and idiom, in the whole fashion of using words" (quoted in Weaver 80). Of special note, he speaks

logical changes occurring to English speech when transplanted in the New World and provides some evidence for Williams's belief in the interrelation between word and locale. Mencken spends several pages on sound shifts, for instance, the transformation of "English broad *a*" to "American flat *a*" in words like "ask" and "path." He as well discusses changes in word stress. Of course, stress is fundamental to rhythmic structure. In fact, his discussion of stress supports Williams's contention that American rhythms differ from English rhythms. For instance, Mencken writes:

Accent had been found to be a far more complicated phenomenon than the old-time lexicographers ever suspected, and stress itself is by no means an isolated phenomenon, measurable wholly in terms of intensity. Stress also drags out the duration of a syllable, raises its pitch and augments its tonal range. And as with syllables, so with words. (Mencken 421)

Williams's argument on the need for a new verse line, then, is informed by the fact that the duration, pitch, and tone of American speech were measurably different from English, hence his continued interest in quantity and time.

In "To Write American Poetry," published in *Fantasy* in 1935, Williams argues that spoken languages "of any geographic group" have specific characteristics and that American differs from English "in word use and inflection." This difference has ramifications, for "one of the requirements of the prosody in each of these groupings is to recognize the minute tendencies of the language and to build accordingly. The pace of American is entirely different from the pace of English" (13). Williams also uses the term "measure" in this essay, suggesting that speech is spontaneously measured by speakers, a measure that is "intrinsic," although one also notes that he tries to reconcile his new views with a traditional prosodic account:

The smallest unit in prosody is the foot. Here (I think) the technical work must be done. Pace gives the key. I'm not going into that. But when the metrical characteristics of a language are spoken of, it means that there is a natural sense of measure in any language, not precise, not easily set down for study, but there nevertheless. This metrical but evasive foundation of a

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of "a basic pace change" between the two dialects, for Williams's notion of pace figures prominently in his discussions of prosody and notions of measure. This change in pace would be evidence of the impact of place on the language.



language is its deepest truth, as it is also the foundation of its prosody. (“To Write American Poetry” 13)

By the 1940s, Williams will talk of this “natural sense of measure”—that he (correctly) hears in speech—in terms of its “modulated character” (“The Basis of Poetic Form” 27). But the metrical foundation, as linguists would attest, is indeed evasive. “The poet’s business is to find that basis,” Williams writes, “to discover it in the speech around him and to build it into his compositions.” The foot on the other hand has been inherited from English prosody and that unit—while at the basis of meter—needs reconsideration.<sup>9</sup> “Pace gives the key,” he writes, and in fact pace is a key to Williams’s new verse line.

Williams’s focus on rhythm, pace, and music underscores comments on musical time in his undated essay “Speech Rhythm”—an essay revised

9 Williams had broached the subject of metrical feet with Boyle in 1931: “It seems to be that the ‘foot’ being at the bottom of all prosody,” he wrote, “the time has come when that must be recognized to have changed in nature. And it must have changed in its rhythmical power of inclusion” (*Selected Letters* 136). In notes for a lecture at Dartmouth College in 1940, Williams talks of a “great technical shift” in the historical transition from quantitative to accentual verse and speculates that a similar change may now be underway, a “structural change” in the foot. Here’s his problem:

What I must have is a new MEASURE which I have already achieved instinctively but which I have not yet found. It will not be a visual division of the parts of the poem into units but must have its basis in a fuller conception of the poetic foot—in the SOUND, that is, of the poem. (“Studiously Unprepared” 13)

Williams set himself a formidable task. *Not* a visual division, but one which has a conception of the foot. He reiterates the point at Harvard in 1941; this was an escape “from the purely syllabic measure to an equivalent in musical time” (“The Basis of Poetic Form” 28). Notice, however, that he frames the problem as one of “metric pattern” and “poetic foot,” even one of scanning, as when he writes: “How to scan my verse or to give any excuse what ever for my divisions into what must seem arbitrary lines and stanzas? The basis for completing what I do is often lacking” (“Studiously Unprepared” 12). I think Kenner is correct that Williams would have done better to drop the older terminology (37). Such terms led Williams into confusing situations such as occurred in the interview with Gerber and Wallace in 1950, when he spoke of “This Is Just To Say” as being “metrically absolutely regular.” That poem is not regulated by syllables or by stress but probably by intonation and tempo (*Interviews* 16–17). The same kind of confusion occurs in his interview with Sutton in 1960. When Williams was asked if he uses “foot” as it’s conventionally used in verse, Williams said yes, but not in terms of stresses: “No, not as stresses, but in spaces in between the various spaces of the verse. I would say the confusion comes from my calling them feet” (*Interviews* 38–39). Williams may be suggesting his sense of musical time with reference to “spaces.”



perhaps in the late 1920s or later<sup>10</sup>—as when he talks of counting syllables as a makeshift, “only possible because we were not capable of music and because none has yet been able to count the time without it,” because “the true necessity,” Williams continues, “is that the time, not the syllables *must* be counted” (quoted in Weaver 83). He then posits an account of timing that matches a linguistic description of isochrony—the theory that English is spoken with roughly equal durations of time between heavy stresses (though intervals vary in the number of syllables they contain): “The same rhythm, swift may be of three syllables or if two are elided, of one: whereas, slow, it may consist of four or seven or any number that the sense agrees to. This is the flexibility that the modern requires” (Weaver 83).

Emphasis on musical time moreover appears in most of Williams’s comments on rhythm. Consider his review of Vazakas’s *Transfigured Night* (1946), where he singles out Vazakas’s use of the line.

[I]t has a very definite regularity resembling, however vaguely, a musical bar. A bar, definitely, since it is not related to grammar, but to *time*, as Vazakas uses it. The clause, the sentence and the paragraph are ignored and the progression goes over into the next bar as much as the musical necessity requires ... a sequence of musical bars on the page, and capable of infinite modulation. (*Something to Say* 159)

Vazakas has invented a measure based on music, rather than grammar, Williams insists, and by returning to music “whence all poetry came,” he abandons the eye for “pure ear” (*Something to Say* 160).

Williams’s focus on the musical phrase and elapsed time—on speech melody—had at least one major consequence, as Eleanor Berry demonstrates, for when he discovered the triadic line in *Paterson* in the mid-1940s, he was consistently dividing lines on the basis of the intonational phrase (Berry 1989). The intonational phrase does in fact involve shifts in accent and duration, as Williams speculated, hence his sense of culmination and breakthrough. But Berry also demonstrates this mode of

10 Both Weaver and Mariani assign 1913 as a date for this essay, when a handwritten version was submitted to Harriet Monroe at *Poetry*. The only surviving manuscript, however, was found uncatalogued in the Viola Baxter Jordan papers and is typed. Because Williams corresponded with Jordan at least to 1946, there’s an important possibility that the surviving copy is revised from an earlier version. Given Williams’s references there to the imagination, to “English speech rhythms” (rather than American speech), and to phrases like “partaking in the essential nature of the whole,” I would argue the essay was revised between 1927 and 1930.

“[M]aybe I want  
to discover  
singable  
patterns.”

organization applies only to the meditative lyrics from 1945 to 1955. As Williams worked with this form in the 1950s, he learned its limitations; intonation is not the only way we measure speech, and it is not the only way Williams measures his lines.

Baldwin relates that Williams assembled a large manuscript in 1938 entitled *The (lang)Wedge*—understood as “A New Summary”—one that became, with Zukofsky’s help, *The Wedge* (134–35). *The Wedge* stands as a test case in Williams’s prosodic practice. He wrote to Mary Bernard at the time saying he wished to write even more colloquially thenceforth, “more after the pattern of speech, maybe I want to discover singable patterns” (quoted in Mariani 416). Singable patterns are evident in the rhymes that begin to structure poems (for example, *Collected* II, 6–7, 12, 15–27). Notice that Williams signals his shifts in intonation and pace by line break and spacing:

She turns her head  
to breathe the morning air  
bright April on her  
    pale face  
and yellow hair

Hey look! they turn  
from their horseplay  
Look! reminiscent of the  
    night

striking by day (*Collected* I, 451)

Mariani speaks of this period as one of renewed struggle with *Paterson* and cites several poems from “Detail and Parody for the Poem *Paterson*,” such as the following study, perhaps written in 1939. Here Williams uses syntactical units to divide lines:

Doc, I bin lookin’ for you  
I owe you two bucks  
How you doin’?  
Fine!  
When I get it  
I’ll bring it up to you.

On his typescript, Williams notes: “This is the sort of thing in its essential poetic nature, its rhythmic make up (analyzed) that the poetry I want to write is made. The reason I haven’t gone on with *Paterson* is that I am not

able to—as yet, if ever I shall be. It must be made up of such *speech* (analyzed)” (*Collected II*, 449; Mariani 419–20; see also *Collected II*, 20–21). Without doubt, then, Williams understood his project to involve specific aural properties found in speech, and he studied to apply those to the verse line.

#### 4.

As a literary device, the line utilizes reading practices and conventions, and one conventional use is organizational. Williams’s worksheets make obvious the effort he put into organizing lines. But *what* lines organize depends on the use to which they are put, because the line is an organizational unit by default. Since rhythm is a distinguishing feature of poetry, lines tend toward rhythmic organization, as measures of stress patterns, for instance. But from available evidence, Williams’s line breaks are not used simply to “score” rhythmic units. That is, while Williams uses the line break to impart rhythmic information, the line is not consistently used as a rhythmic unit but, more generally, as a prosodic device.<sup>11</sup>

One of the perplexing facts about Williams’s use of line breaks is their apparent inconsistency, for lines extend to varying lengths and break on all parts of speech, violating both intonational and syntactic phrases, along with any simple notion of why he broke lines as he did. Obviously, the corpus of Williams’s breaks doesn’t result from a single principle. But speech rhythms are componential, offering Williams several options in a particular poem, according to the purpose served, especially so if one thinks in terms of their total prosodic impact, and I think this latter factor—the point which Zukofsky made in 1930—is crucial, as is Williams’s repeated use of “pace,” that is, how each line contributes to that impact. My argument, again, is that line breaks (at this time) are best explained as speech-based, utilizing syntax, intonation, and pace.

Linguistic rhythm is a complex, dimensional phenomenon. Most accounts begin with word stress, the alternation of strong and weak syllables, but periodicity in speech consists of several co-ordinated factors. Stress can be produced by pitch, loudness, and duration, and, in English, syllables organize into rhythmic groups. In any rhythmic group there are degrees of stress prominence; stress is relative, a fact that causes much

11 See also Gates (especially 512–13) where she discusses Williams’s lineation as allowing for control of “placement of prominence” in a phonological phrase, for instance, in “the promotion of the words occurring before line breaks to primary prominence” over “competing claims for focus within the syntactic unit” (513), hence the tension at times between rhythm and syntax.

theoretical complexity, for while alternating patterns of relatively weak and strong syllables form the metrical basis of a rhythmic phrase, the pattern is organized in stress hierarchies, and those groups are in turn constituents of both syntactical and intonational phrases. That is, stress is aligned with syntactical and intonational prominence. Commonly, nouns take primary stress, and function words like prepositions are unstressed. But again, stress is relative; an adjective may take relatively less stress than a noun but nevertheless receive stress. But so can an article. For stress prominence is also distributed according to usage. The intonational phrase is routinely aligned with major syntactical units, but not necessarily so, and involves word stress by way of pitch changes. The contour of pitch changes in the intonational phrase is organized by a nuclear tone or pitch accent. In a series of clauses, intonational contours also exhibit periodicity, hence Williams's talk of the "undulant" movement of a poem (*Collected II*, 54).

Speech rhythms are composed, then, from at least three interlocking modes, alternating but relative degrees of stress, the intonational phrase or melodic contour, and the hierarchy of syntactical divisions (Bolinger 139–79; Giegerich 249–90; Levelt 372–98; Selkirk 36–71; for a review, see Cutler, Dahan, and Donselaar; for a tutorial, see Shattuck-Hufnagel and Turk). Verse line breaks can be made on the basis of any one of these. And there are yet other, important factors involved, two of which were critical to Williams, the pace or tempo of speech, a factor that clearly helped him to determine line breaks, and the pauses, hesitations, and silences between words that he sometimes spoke of, indicating those by extended colons, spaced periods, commas, and white space (see for instance *Interviews* 38–39).<sup>12</sup> Nor is rhythm restricted to simple clauses but, rather, is a phenomenon of discourse "paragraphing." These levels of organization make discussions of rhythm complex, and that complexity explains why Williams can be difficult to follow, especially as his terms shift over time.<sup>13</sup>

When the verse line is not regulated by stress or syllable count (or phonetic features like alliteration), it's often organized by syntactical phrase in stress groups that function as rhythmic units, with line breaks

12 It's of note that, in the literature on rhythm, there are areas referred to as silent stresses or silent beats, just as Williams indicates on the page (for instance, in Selkirk 20, 298–313, and Couper-Kuhlen 34).

13 Further, American English is a stress-timed language and primary stresses occur at approximately regular intervals; this is the principal of isochrony, spoken of above (Couper-Kuhlen 53; Giegerich 181, 258–60; Levelt 392–98; Selkirk 39). The consequence of this feature is that if speakers organize an utterance by levels of stress—degrees of prominence—then apparently there is a prosodic level between the syllable and the phrase by which we organize stresses. This

occurring at major syntactical boundaries. In fact, there is a measurable pause at that boundary. One way Williams organizes lines is by major syntactical phrases. Below are five lines, just over a stanza, from Williams's "The Semblables" (published in 1943). Four lines are each composed of a major syntactical unit, the fifth line of two units, but note that all lines are approximately the same length, that is, they are measured:

peaked by the bronze belfry  
peaked in turn by the cross,  
verdigris—faces all silent  
that miracle that has burst sexless

from between the carrot rows. (*Collected II*, 85)

When Williams reads this poem (at the Library of Congress, 1947; CD track 14), he pauses slightly at the end of each line.<sup>14</sup> The pauses suggest the lines function as rhythmic units, but linear organization varies throughout the poem (see below).

As said, intonation is typically aligned with syntax; there is a pause at the end of an intonational contour, often coinciding with a syntactical unit, though they are not always aligned. When Williams developed his three-tiered line, he organized those lines by intonational phrases, a point evident in his recordings. This is the second principle way he determines a verse line. Below is an illustration of Williams's "new measure," one famously used as an illustration in a letter to Richard Eberhart in 1954:

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level is designated in the literature as a metric foot (Giegerich 179–207; Hogg and McCully 78–80). While theories behind metrical phonology are complex, my point is simple. If Williams listened to speech for rhythmic principles, this jagged rhythmic pattern composed of feet roughly equivalent in duration but of a varying numbers of syllables—grouped in turn by syntax and intonation—is at least in part what he would hear. He may be referring to this organization when he talks of the modulated character of our speech (for instance, "The Basis of Poetic Form" 27), and of course this description fits what Williams called "the variable foot."

14 It seems worth remarking that Williams reads the lines in these increments: 1.941 seconds, 1.756 seconds, 3.248 seconds (including the dash, or 2.154 seconds without the dash), 2.711 seconds, and 1.771 seconds. Three lines of five, then, are read in almost precisely the same amount of time. However, I recognize this proves little.

The smell of the heat is boxwood  
 when rousing us  
                   a movement of the air  
 stirs our thoughts  
                   that had no life in them  
                   to a life, a life in which (*Collected II*, 246)

In that letter, Williams explains he doesn't count syllables; he's returning to a musical model, measuring by beat.<sup>15</sup> A reader needs "to keep in mind the tunes which the lines (not necessarily the words) make in our ears" (*Selected Letters* 326). Williams could hardly have been more explicit; and note his use of the word "pace": "By measure I mean musical pace," he writes, then states that each line (above) should be counted as a single beat (325–26), that he counts under his breath when he writes. "Beat" obviously means duration in time.<sup>16</sup> When Williams reads these lines—he recorded this poem, "To Daphne and Virginia," five times in 1954–55—he treats each line as an intonational unit, pausing at the end of each. (Listen for instance to the reading at UCLA Berkeley on 19 May 1955; these specific lines are on CD track 16). This way of breaking lines was the result of his interest in speech melody. As Berry shows, the technique of breaking lines at intonational boundaries applies largely to the meditative lyrics (from 1945 to 1955), but Williams uses intonation as a basis for line breaks throughout his career.<sup>17</sup>

15 With the term "beat," Williams may be indicating the nuclear tone of an intonational phrase, but he could just as well be referring, as he said, to musical time. Floss Williams spoke of the family listening to Williams tap his foot as he composed in their attic overhead (*I Wanted* 105–06). Incidentally, in Williams's Berkeley reading in 1955, these lines range from 1.01 to 2.01 seconds in duration.

16 Cushman addresses this letter to argue—correctly—that the following lines, from "The Descent," could not possibly occupy equal amounts of time (82–83): "Memory is a kind / of accomplishment, / a sort of renewal / even / an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places / inhabited by hordes / heretofore unrealized, of new kinds—" (*Collected II*, 245). I don't have space to address his argument, but when Williams reads this poem the lines clearly indicate pace and intonation, and four of the six lines do occupy, roughly, equal durations.

17 The following from *Adam & Eve & the City* (1936) was once considered part of *Paterson*. Line breaks are made on the basis of syntax and intonation:

I bought a new  
 bathing suit

Just pants  
 and a brassiere—

Williams is  
conspicuously  
attentive to  
punctuation.

The third principle way Williams organizes lines is to indicate pace, and I've pointed out his repeated use of that term. Pace is conveyed several ways, for instance, by line lengths—the shorter the line, the quicker the pace—and, during this critical period (1938–45), line lengths in any particular poem tend to be regularized (as above).<sup>18</sup> A second way pace is indicated is by punctuation. As punctuated pauses are introduced, the pace slows. When there is no punctuation used, pace quickens. Williams is conspicuously attentive to punctuation. A third, crucial way Williams indicates pace is by line breaks, breaks that work either for or against major syntactical and intonational boundaries.<sup>19</sup> Below is a second example of how Williams regulates pace in “The Semblables.” Notice, then, how one is *impelled forward* by some line breaks—exactly the point Zukofsky makes—and that his lines work both for and against syntax and intonation:

---

I haven't shown  
it  
  
to my mother  
yet (*Collected I*, 418)

18 As a quick example, below are the last eleven lines of “The Forgotten City” (composed 1938–39). Williams did not count syllables, but it's nonetheless relevant that while lines vary from eight to thirteen syllables they have a mean of twelve syllables and an average of eleven syllables per line. Clearly, line length was measured:

I had no idea where I was and promised myself  
I would some day go back to study this  
curious and industrious people who lived  
in these apartments, at these sharp  
corners and turns of intersecting avenues  
with so little apparent communication  
with an outside world. How did they get  
cut off this way from representation in our  
newspapers and other means of publicity  
when so near the metropolis, so closely  
surrounded by the familiar and the famous? (*Collected II* 87)

19 Kenner writes that, with Williams, “The event is not the line, the event is the line-break” (39), and I think that's astute. Those line breaks function on several levels—my argument isn't exclusive—and visual factors are certainly important. Perloff makes a point similar to the one I make, but for her this kind of line break indicates that it is “a phenomenon for the eye rather than the ear” (167).



The red brick monastery in  
the suburbs over against the dust-  
hung acreage of the unfinished  
and all but subterranean  
munitions plant:

When Williams reads this poem (CD track 15), pauses occur at all major syntactical and intonational boundaries—a measurable event—so if he were using lines as simple rhythmic units, this is roughly where line breaks might occur—for here is where he pauses:

The red brick monastery  
in the suburbs  
over against  
the dust-hung acreage  
of the unfinished  
and all but subterranean  
munitions plant

The critical event, then, is that Williams doesn't pause at the end of his lines, unless lines form complete syntactical or intonational units. That is, Williams *reads through* his line breaks without pause (for example, "in / the suburbs"), indeed without any indication that there is a line break, and he does that consistently in recordings because the line is not used to indicate rhythmic units. (That doesn't mean that lineation is visual or ideational, however, for remember that linear organization in this poem varies.) I take this act of reading through line breaks as illustrating three points: first, that Williams is not signaling for us to pause at line breaks, since he doesn't do so, with the above corollary that the line is not used as a simple rhythmic unit; second, that line breaks are not meant to disrupt but rather to contribute to cadence and propel one forward; and, third, that such breaks as occur within major syntactical groups signal *continuity and pace* and are meant to propel the reader beyond the line—causing what some call a suspension effect—evident, for instance, when he separates the preposition "in" from its noun phrase or the hyphenated adjective "dust" from the adjective phrase modifying acreage: "The red brick monastery in / the suburbs over against the dust- / hung acreage."

Kenner writes that Americans "tend to hit prepositions with a rising inflection; and Williams tends to break lines on prepositions" (38), suggesting that lines tend to end on a rising inflection, hence the suspension effect, but that's not fully the case. Lines end on all parts of speech, even articles. When Williams breaks lines on a preposition ("in / the suburbs"),

several effects ensue, according to context. As Cushman notes, breaking a line after a preposition “abandons us at the moment when the fact of relatedness is established” (37). In that instance (using the above example), a slight pause occurs after “monastery” before the preposition “in”; and one brakes slightly against the push of syntax, for when we hit the preposition we lift slightly, in anticipation of the following noun phrase, as Kenner says; the noun then takes stress prominence.<sup>20</sup> But further, pace can alter components of a syntactical group. When spoken rapidly, as Williams’s poems often are, a preposition can loosen from its noun phrase and group itself within the prior verb phrase (Shattuck-Hufnagel and Turk 201–03).<sup>21</sup> Williams was no doubt attentive to this prosodic fact.

Another feature in Williams’s regulation of pace by verse lines occurs when he alternates between full phrasal boundaries and disrupted phrases, varying between suspension and resolve (akin to Cureton’s concepts of departure and arrival [*Rhythmic Phrasing* 124]); that effect in turn contributes to total rhythmic impact. Williams also uses visual features to support prosodic elements, such as where line breaks reinforce intonational contours (for example, “and all but subterranean // munitions plant”).<sup>22</sup> Ending a line at a syntactic or intonational boundary reinforces the line end; breaking before a normal pause has the effect of propelling one to the resolve, for reading is predictive; we parse and construct as we read. Consequently, we go back and forth, establishing a larger rhythmic pattern. Williams also establishes patterns of disruptive line breaks on the same parts of speech. This creates yet another kind of regularity indicative of pace. Notice below how the lines break once at a hyphen and twice after articles:

20 If I read him correctly, Hartman refers to these effects as “counterpoint” (61–69) when he writes, for instance, of the “shifting relations between syntax and linear isochrony”: “The counterpoint makes us aware of subtle shifts in tone of voice, implies possible as well as actual developments in thought that diverge as we watch, slants words in particular ways” (69). As well, Cureton (1992, 146–53) speaks of “prolongation”—suggesting a consideration of timing—which seems applicable here.

21 This is the principle of enclisis (Giegerich 268–72). As a quick example, notice that the preposition “to” can be grouped—prosodically—with either the prior verb or the following noun phrase according to the pace at which the phrase is pronounced: “Joe went to college.”

22 Perloff argues (177) that the page is a prosodic device for Williams, and this point supports her argument. Berry (1981) makes a related argument that Williams’s stanzas are visual.

“YEEEE-  
AAAAASSSSS”

is primarily  
visual.

These are men! the gaunt, unfore-  
sold, the vocal,  
blatant, Stand up, stand up! the  
slap of a bass-string.  
Pick, ping! The horn, the  
hollow horn  
long drawn out, a hound deep  
tone— (*Collected II*, 149)

These breaks are clearly signals of pace, and Williams reads this poem in rapid fire (in “The Interview with John Gerber”), pausing only at points indicated by punctuation. Intonation drops with the word “tone” (CD track 17).

A final comment as regards the issue of visual versus prosodic organization might be illustrated with another poem (from “Detail and Parody for the Poem Paterson”):

Hey!  
Can I have some more  
milk?

YEEEEAAAAASSSSS!  
—always the gentle  
mother! (*Collected II*, 19)

My argument is that Williams’s linear arrangement provides key prosodic information, not simply stress groupings, hence his phrase “*speech* (analyzed)” above. Note, for instance, parallel line breaks at “more / milk” and “gentle / mother!,” breaks reflecting both pace and shifts in intonation. One function of intonation is to provide sentence focus, giving salience to important information. This effect is achieved visually by isolating words, as in “always the gentle / mother!” or even “Hey!” There are visual conventions involved, and one might argue that the effect of the capitalized “YEEEEAAAAASSSSS” is primarily visual; that is, it functions as a visual icon of loudness and duration. But we need to bear in mind that we subvocalize as we read or, more narrowly, recode a text from graphic symbols into the speech code (Adams 188; Just and Carpenter 93–100; Underwood and Batt 12–15, 20–21). Although specific prosodic interpretations may vary, reader to reader, that line is read with reference to the speech code.

To conclude, then: when Williams spoke of a new auditory quality informing the appearance of his poetry in 1939, he had in fact been

developing that look, line by line, throughout the decade. A new form was requisite, for he believed poetry was at basis “the creation of new form” (*Selected Letters* 134). But it was prerequisite to invent a new verse line as the basis of that form; part of what stalled *Paterson* was developing that line. Williams proposed measuring the line, a singular challenge, by what he called musical time, and the argument here has been that this sense of time is correlated with cadence, speech melody, a combination of stress prominences, syntax, pace, silence, and intonation. Listening to Williams read makes it evident lines are not used as independent rhythmic units but, rather, offer other kinds of prosodic information as well, each line contributing to the impact of the whole. Tracing Williams through the 1930s demonstrates, then, not only that his prosody is speech-based, as he said, but also that use of the line—his new measure—is developed from prosodic factors like syntax, intonation, and pace.

## Works Cited

Audio tracks cited in this article are available on the compact disc accompanying the print version of this special issue. Some of the audio tracks cited in this article may also be available at [www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc](http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/~esc) under the “Extras” tab.

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