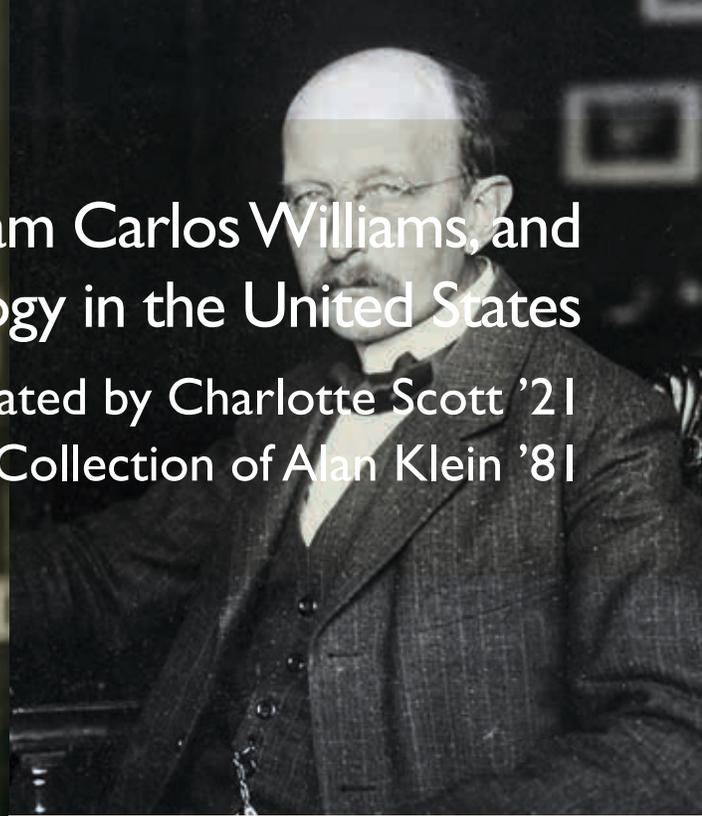


Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and  
Science and Technology in the United States

An Exhibition Curated by Charlotte Scott '21  
From the Collection of Alan Klein '81



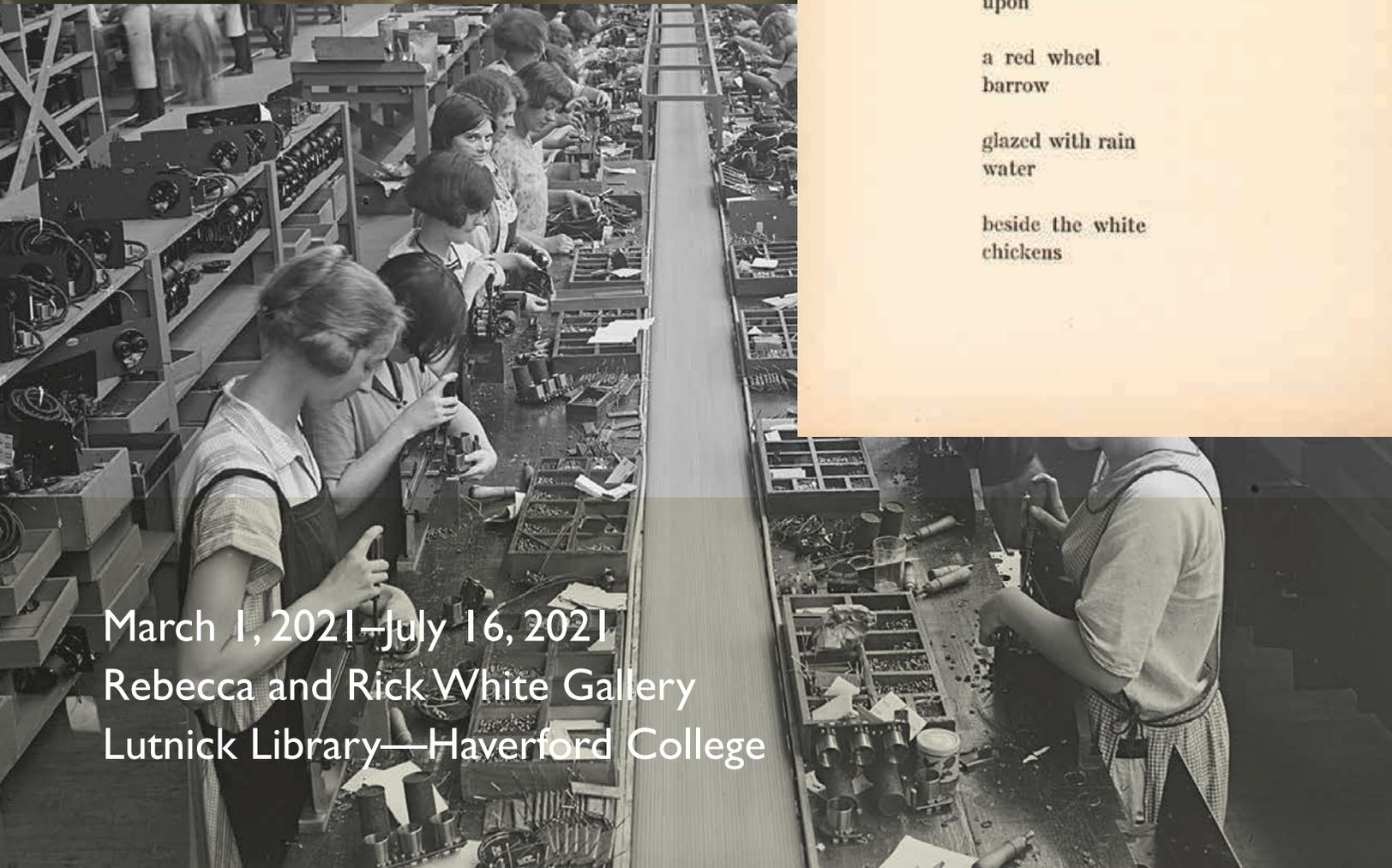
XXII

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

A black and white photograph of a factory floor. Several workers, mostly women, are seated at long workbenches, focused on their tasks. The benches are cluttered with various tools, parts, and materials. The perspective is from an elevated position, looking down the length of the factory.

March 1, 2021–July 16, 2021  
Rebecca and Rick White Gallery  
Lutnick Library—Haverford College

# Writing the Modern World: Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Science and Technology in the United States

An Exhibition Curated by Charlotte Scott '21, from the Collection of Alan Klein '81

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) and William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) were two American poets writing in a moment of extreme upheaval and change. At the turn of the 20th century, American poetry was in a state of crisis.<sup>1</sup> During the 19th century, poetry had been dominated by the so-called “fireside poets,” a group that included men such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier. The fireside poets were still read, but by the 1890s there was a sense that their work didn’t speak to modern society—secular, industrialized, urban—in a meaningful way. Without compelling new poets to replace the old, there was no clear path forward for

American poetry.<sup>2</sup> Between 1890 and 1910, newspapers frequently published articles on the state of American poetry, with titles such as “The Poet in an Age of Science” and “Will Poetry Disappear?”<sup>3</sup>

The modernist movement helped to solve the crisis in American poetry and reinvigorate the arts as a whole. Modernity forced artists and other creators to confront complex new questions, and pushed them to innovate with new styles and forms. The famous 1913 International Exhibition of Modern art in New York (popularly known as the Armory show) introduced Americans to works by Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, and many more.<sup>4</sup> If there could no longer be fireside poets to provide the ideal American poetry, a completely new form of poetry would have to replace it. A vital figure in this endeavor was Harriet Monroe, a poet herself. In October 1912 she launched her influential magazine, *Poetry*, which published a very broad range of works.

The huge shifts in American society wrought by science, technology, and industry presented new opportunities for artists as well as new pitfalls. In an industrialized society confronted with the Great Depression and two world wars, the very purpose of poetry was up for debate. Both Williams and Stevens were deeply invested in finding a way to make poetry respond to the times. What makes their stories so fascinating is the specifics of their respective strategies. Williams maintained an interest in concrete objects and capturing single moments. He defined his subject matter as the local, and used his interactions with people in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey to fuel his writing. Throughout his career Williams attempted to mirror the speech of the American people in his poetry, typically using everyday language and short lines. Stevens’ writing is generally more abstract and philosophical, with a broader temporal and spatial scope than Williams’. He enjoyed complex vocabulary and word-play, and was particularly concerned with the relationship between reality and imagination. Despite these distinctions in the form and style of their work, both Williams and Stevens shared a common interest in creating a new poetry for a truly modern, and truly American, reality.



“Dr. Williams’ Double Life,” in *Medical Economics* (June 1950)



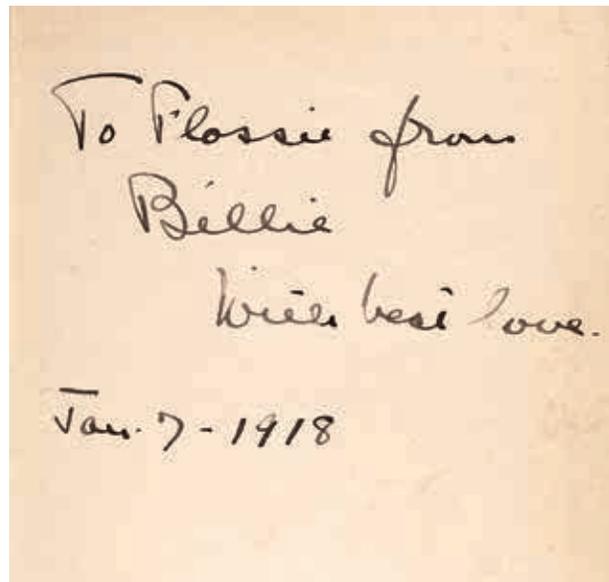
Wallace Stevens dustwrapper portrait from  
*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954)

Williams was born in the same town where he died—Rutherford, New Jersey—and came from a multicultural family. His mother was Puerto Rican with mixed European and Jewish ancestry, and his father was English. After graduating from high school Williams followed his parents' wishes and went directly to the University of Pennsylvania for medical school, while harboring a passion for both John Keats and Walt Whitman.<sup>5</sup> As a student he met Ezra Pound, who introduced Williams to other young artists and writers, changing his life and his poetry in the process. As Williams himself later said, “before meeting Pound is like B.C. and A.D.”<sup>6</sup> Williams married Florence “Flossie” Herman in 1912, despite admitting he wasn't in love with her—he had been turned down by her sister. His job as the town doctor, back in Rutherford, took up a huge amount of his energy and time, and Williams was very dedicated to his patients.<sup>7</sup> Despite the time commitment, Williams continued as a full-time doctor while writing his poetry and prose, and the financial stability allowed him to fund publication of some of his early works.<sup>8</sup>

Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, to Presbyterian parents with deep roots in the region.<sup>9</sup> His

mother was particularly religious, and Stevens attended parochial school before receiving a classical education in high school.<sup>10</sup> He attended Harvard for three years, where he was a success on the college literary scene. After leaving Harvard he went to New York City to try working as a journalist. The job didn't last long, and in 1916 he got a law degree and began doing legal work for various companies in the city. While visiting Reading in 1904, Stevens met Elsie Moll Kachel, whom he married in 1909. In 1916, Stevens took a job involving large construction contracts at the Hartford Indemnity Insurance Company, where he would work for the rest of his life, and the couple moved to Connecticut.<sup>11</sup>

Williams and Stevens met two years after the Armory show, in 1915, at an exhibition of artworks held by Walter Arensberg.<sup>12</sup> They would remain in contact for the next forty years, until Steven's death. Stevens and Williams were both unusual in the community of modernist poets for a number of reasons. Both men had full-time, long term, “respectable” jobs in addition to their pursuit of poetry. Both men chose to stay in the United States and engage directly with the issue of American identity, asking questions that many of their contemporaries avoided by moving abroad to Europe. Each made an argument, again and again, in favor of poetry, defending the importance of the art form even



*Al Que Quiere!* (1917)  
Flyleaf inscription from William Carlos Williams to his wife “Flossie”



North and Southampton Reformed Church from “Epitaphiana” (1943), a collection of photographs taken by Sylvia Salmi documenting Wallace Stevens’ ancestral Bucks County home

in a modern society. In spite of their stylistic differences, they were each committed to creating truly American poetry that could stand up to the challenges and transformations of modern society.

#### TECHNOLOGY AND THE MODERN WORLD

Technological innovation shaped the lives of all Americans in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Significant developments in technology in this period saw the rise of a distinctive “machine culture” in America. Assembly lines facilitated mass production and standardization, and a push for efficiency gave rise to Frederick Winslow Taylor’s *Scientific Management*.<sup>13</sup> These changes defined the context in which Stevens and Williams were writing, informing the new reality that they sought to portray and interrogate.

By the time Williams and Stevens were writing, the world had changed immensely from their childhoods. Looking back on his youth, Williams writes: “Imagine! No sewers, no water supply, no gas, even. Certainly no electricity, no telephone, not even a trolley car... The rooms were lit by kerosene oil lamps—am I *that* old?”<sup>14</sup> Stevens lived through a very similar series of changes. With the turn of the century came an emphasis on speed and efficiency; trains, automobiles, telegraphs,<sup>15</sup> and even cameras were all functioning faster and faster, taking American society along with them.<sup>16</sup> Advertisements from the 1910s and 1920s for everything from shaving brushes to calculators reflect

the association between speed and modernity.<sup>17</sup> In this environment, speed and efficiency became essential aspects of American identity itself.

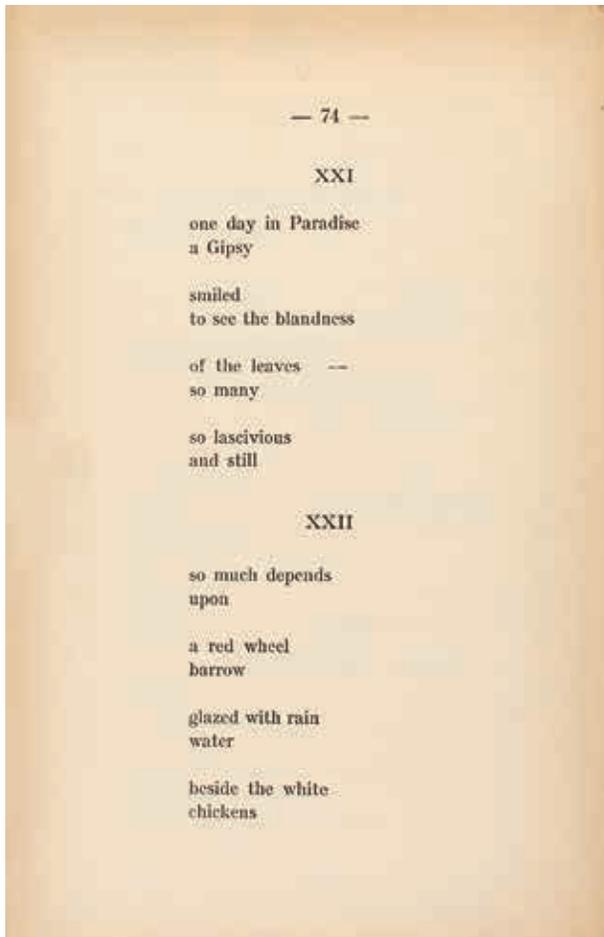
While some public figures such as Henry Ford, creator of the Model T, encouraged the rapid new way of life,<sup>18</sup> others worried about its effect on American society.<sup>19</sup> In fact, new practices in the areas of industry and commerce changed the way that the average American related to the rest of society. Taylorism was one particularly notable development. Taylor experimented with factory workers’ tasks to identify and remove all excess motion, thus increasing the workers’ productivity.<sup>20</sup> In 1911, he published *The Principles of Scientific Management*, in which he recommended strictly dividing labor between management and workers, breaking down a task into extremely small parts, and giving each worker one small job to complete again and again.<sup>21</sup> Although his methods were controversial, there are still many markers of Taylorism in American industry today.<sup>22</sup>

Modernist artists and writers responded critically to these developments by creating a so-called “machine aesthetic.” This incorporated imagery, characteristics, and styles inspired by machinery and a mechanized world in order to reflect and respond to the experience of living in modernity.

#### WILLIAMS AND MACHINE CULTURE: “A MACHINE MADE OF WORDS”

In the introduction to his 1944 book of poetry, *The Wedge*, Williams famously declares that “A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there’s nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant.” This conception of poem-as-machine emphasizes the utility of a poem, or at least its utility in achieving a certain purpose. Rather than describing sentimentality as an excess of emotion, Williams characterizes it by redundancy—wastefulness, inefficiency. In a machine society, this comparison feels particularly apt, perhaps even a justification for poetry’s continued presence and relevance.

Although Williams could appreciate the aesthetic of an accelerated, machine-driven society, he was also aware of its potential pitfalls. Williams explores the relationship between technology and modern society in many of his works, including *Spring and All* (1923), a mix of poetry and prose written relatively early in



William Carlos Williams. *Spring and All*  
Contact Publishing (1923)

his career. Several of the poems in *Spring and All* are now considered classics. In one of the prose passages, Williams describes day-to-day life in America: “Thoughtless of evil we crush out the marrow of those about us with our heavy cars as we go happily from place to place... Children laughingly fling themselves under the wheels of the street cars, airplanes crash gaily to earth. Someone has written a poem.”<sup>23</sup>

The mix of violence and joy in Williams’ language underscores the strangeness of a society in which speed is valued above all else. The scenes he describes are rife with hyperbole, and they communicate both the comedy and the tragedy of the United States running itself happily into the ground. And yet among all the other hectic occurrences, someone—not specifically Williams—has written a poem. As critics have noted, Williams does not envision a separate, calmer space for

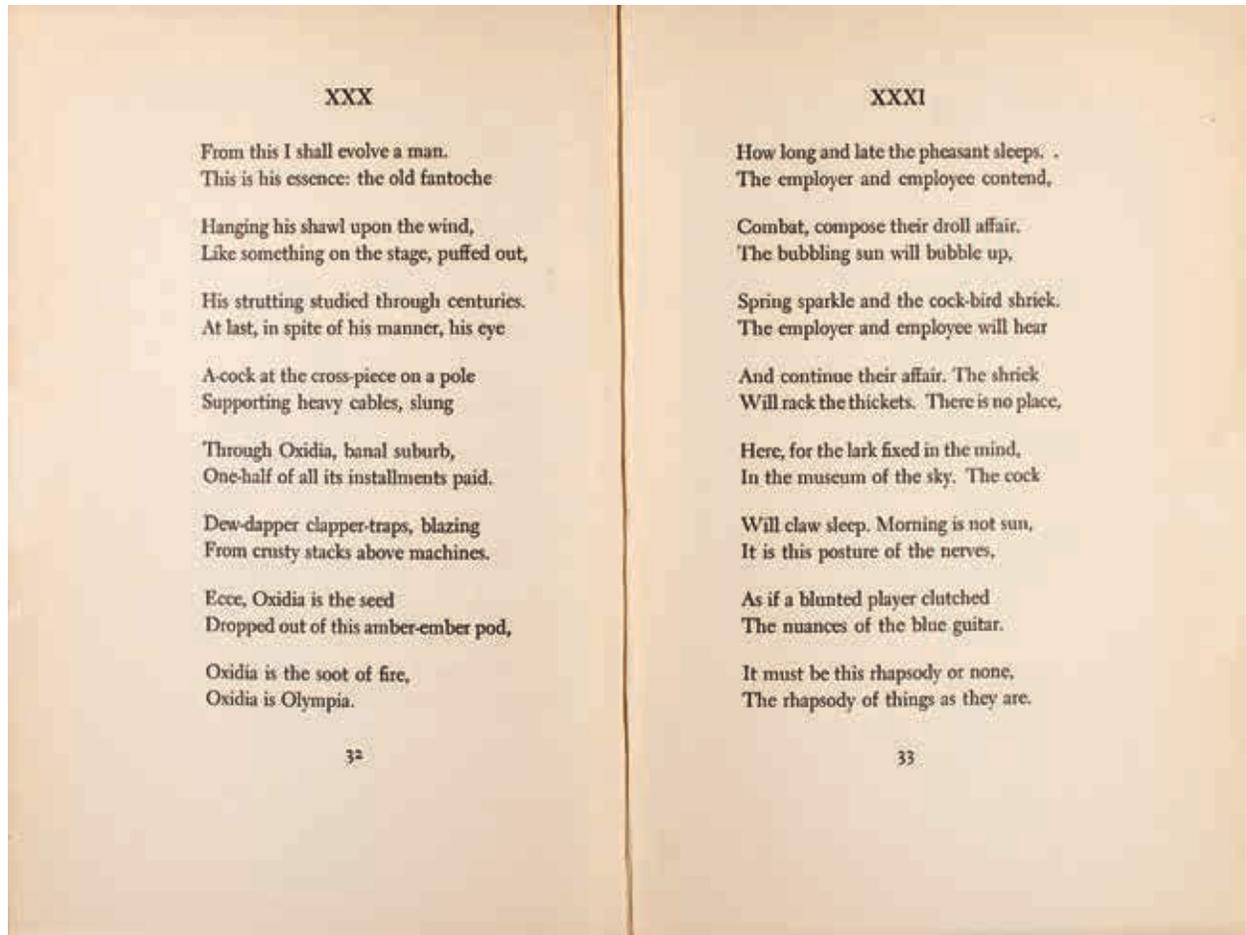
the contemporary American poet.<sup>24</sup> There is no poet in his description, only the action of writing a poem. The American poet has to be part of American society and all of its rapid transformations.

### STEVENS AND THE “PRESSURE OF REALITY”

In contrast to Williams’ conception of the poem as an efficient machine, Stevens was comfortable with a sense of playful “excess” in his works.<sup>25</sup> Many of his poems use significant wordplay and puns that give them a sense of levity, even when they are not overtly humorous. Compared to many of his modernist contemporaries, Stevens wrote less about modernity and its implications in his poetry, focusing instead on the natural world and philosophical and aesthetic questions. In a rapidly modernizing society, Stevens’ choice to explore imagination and the natural world was itself a particularly significant way of responding to modernity.

Stevens’ ambivalent feelings towards modernity and his interest in the natural world are present in his journal entries even before 1900.<sup>26</sup> Over forty years later, he was still considering the modern world and what place it held for the poet in his essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” (1941).<sup>27</sup> In the midst of World War II, and immediately following the Great Depression, Stevens describes something he calls the “pressure of reality.” This pressure stemmed from the terrifying events of the period, coupled with the proliferation of news media and an accelerated pace of life. The pressure of reality, Stevens argues, is a threat to poets’ creativity and to the act of contemplation itself.<sup>28</sup> In such a society, Stevens defines the poet by their ability to resist the pressure of reality,<sup>29</sup> and declares that their purpose is to “help people live their lives” through their imaginative abilities.<sup>30</sup>

Although Stevens frequently omitted modern technology from his poetry, and found the natural world a source of significant imaginative power, there were certainly exceptions to this rule. In the mid-1930s, an era of significant economic and social upheaval, Stevens’ work drew criticism for its apparent distance from the reality of everyday experience.<sup>31</sup> Stevens’ response to this criticism shaped *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937), in which he attempts to reconcile modern suburban life—its telephone poles and pensioners—with the internal, imaginative world of his poetry. The titular poem of the collection examines the relationship between reality—“things as they are”—and imagination. Although it begins with



Wallace Stevens. *The Man With The Blue Guitar*  
(1937)

natural imagery of hawks and the sea, the poem culminates with a “droll affair” between an employer and employee in the “banal suburb” of Oxidia. A contemporary review by Delmore Schwartz notes that Stevens “justifies poetry, he defines its place, its rôle, its priceless value,” while also citing the strengths and weaknesses inherent to Stevens’ writing.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, the poetry captures a process of exploration and internal debate unique to Stevens.

### SCIENCE AND REALITY

The poetic upheaval associated with the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was accompanied by revelations in physics and chemistry that had enormous implications. Not only did these changes produce entirely new fields of scientific study, but they presented novel worldviews to the lay public. Discoveries in theoretical physics by Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and many others changed the course of

science and the understanding of reality itself.<sup>33</sup> Marie and Pierre Curie’s official discovery of radium in 1902 and their subsequent work had huge impacts on chemistry, physics, and medicine.<sup>34</sup>

In 1905, Einstein published his paper on special relativity, which resolved long-standing conflicts in physics by proposing the idea that both time and space are relative. In simple terms, time passes more slowly for a moving object relative to a stationary one,<sup>35</sup> and the length of an object contracts along the direction of its movement.<sup>36</sup> While the experience of time and space is still predictable, it is observer dependent—certainly not fixed or universal, as previously believed. Einstein’s general theory of relativity subsumed Newton’s imperfect explanation of gravity and reconciled it with special relativity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Einstein argued that the concepts of space and time exist solely through measurement. The

versions of time and space in our minds, divorced from a clock or a ruler, are simply abstractions.<sup>38</sup> Einstein's theories received significant media attention and had a profound impact on modern science and culture. In the United States, he became a sort of folk hero.

The field of quantum mechanics, which deals with particles like protons and electrons, was also at its inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Work by the physicist Max Planck, along with Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and Niels Bohr, produced findings with staggering implications.<sup>39</sup> Subatomic experiments show that the experimenter plays an active role in the outcome: measurement and observation can seemingly change the path of a particle.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, physicist Erwin Schrödinger argued that there is no real distinction between the mind and external reality, since what we perceive is always mentally constructed.<sup>41</sup> While Einstein's relativity offered a revolutionary view of the universe, quantum mechanics transformed scientific thinking at the atomic level.

Radioactivity had its own share of startling implications. It ushered in a new understanding of matter itself: radioactive elements could release energy that passed through solid matter, spontaneously glowed in the dark, and would decay into different elements entirely.<sup>42</sup>

Americans, including Williams and Stevens, were exposed to the implications of these discoveries through popular media. Einstein's theory of relativity was appropriated by many members of the public, especially artists and writers; the media at the time freely encouraged metaphorical interpretations of relativity.<sup>43</sup> As a doctor, Williams was aware of radioactivity and its many medical applications, such as cancer treatment.<sup>44</sup> Williams and Stevens appropriated scientific concepts and language, and used the metaphorical capacities of poetry as a response to the radical scientific discoveries of their day.

### “THE PHRASEOLOGY OF SCIENCE”

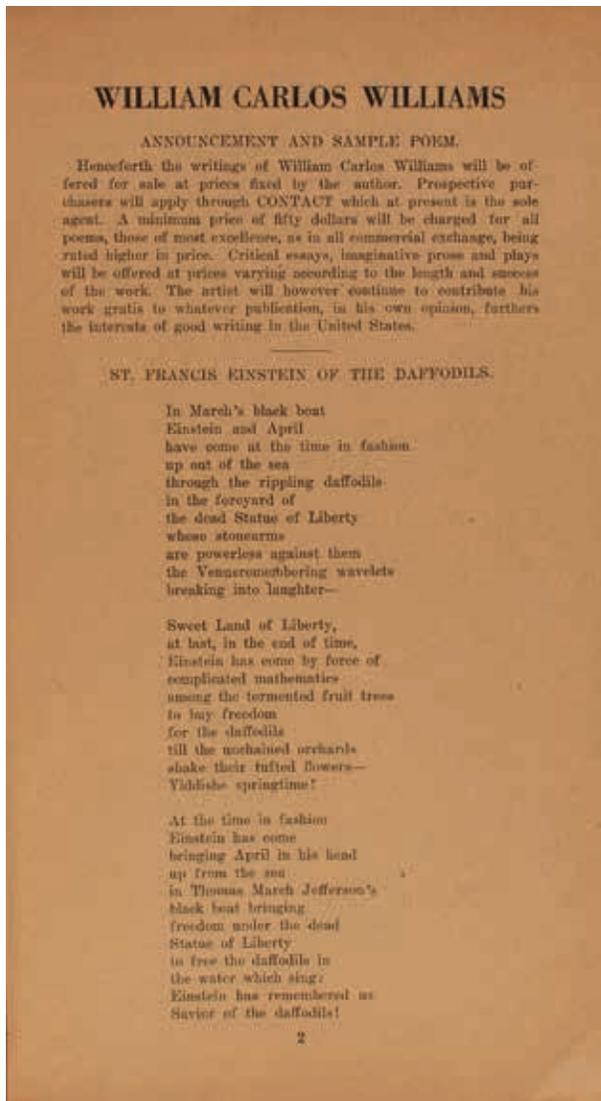
Williams was more than happy to adopt scientific language and concepts for his own poetic purposes. As he claims in *Spring and All* (1923), “the imagination uses the phraseology of science. It attacks, stirs, animates, is radio-active.”<sup>45</sup> This willingness to engage with science and adopt its vocabulary is apparent throughout his poetry and prose. Williams' comfort engaging with science makes sense given his background in medical school, and to be a competent doctor he would have stayed up to date on



Albert Einstein. *Die Grundlage der Allgemeinen Relativitätstheorie* (1916)

recent advances in the medical field. In addition to that knowledge, Williams was incredibly interested in Albert Einstein's work on relativity. His understanding certainly had its limits, however, and like many other artists he tended to equate a relativistic universe with a non-deterministic, human-centered one.

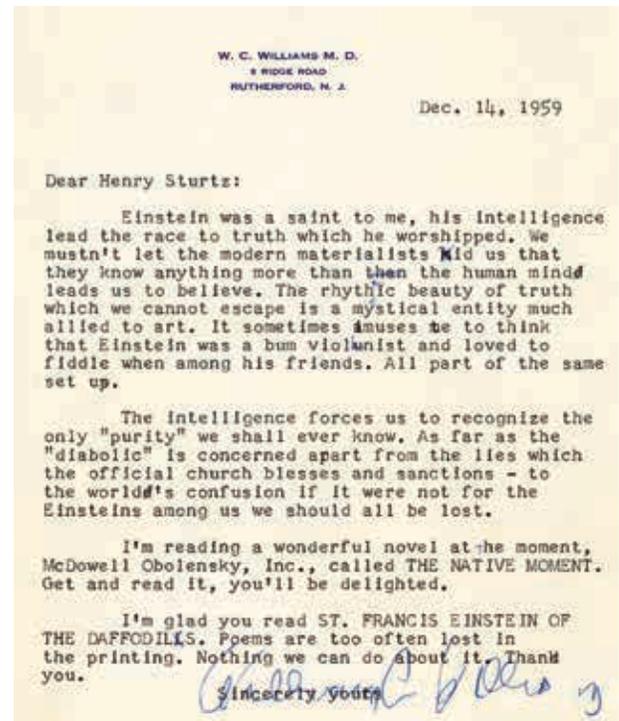
In 1921 Williams published “St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils,” a poem written in honor of Einstein's visit to the United States. The poem was likely written with information gleaned from popular news accounts of Einstein's theory.<sup>46</sup> Albert Einstein is linked in the poem with St. Francis of Assisi, a historical figure from the 12th century and the Christian patron saint of animals and the environment.<sup>47</sup> Over the course of the poem, Einstein is described as bringing spring and freedom to the United States, particularly to its flowers and trees:



Williams' "St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils" (1921)

Einstein has come  
bringing April in his head  
up from the sea  
in Thomas March Jefferson's  
black boat bringing  
freedom under the dead  
Statue of Liberty  
to free the daffodils<sup>48</sup>

While the Statue of Liberty is "dead," Einstein brings spring and freedom—likely intellectual freedom—to the United States. Williams elsewhere refers to



William Carlos Williams typed letter to Henry Sturtz, (1959) about "St. Francis Einstein of the Daffodils"

a "springtime of the mind," suggesting that Einstein's arrival heralds a period of intellectual rebirth after a long winter. He even alludes to the consequences of special relativity, declaring that Einstein is both "tall as a violet" and "tall as a blossomy peartree!"<sup>49</sup> As Carol Donley has noted, these two botanical comparisons illustrate that Einstein's height is relative<sup>50</sup>—like space, it changes based on the observer. Almost 40 years after writing the poem, Williams enthusiastically responded to a reader's letter about "St Francis Einstein," reiterating that Einstein was a modern saint and leader in the "race to truth."

In his speech titled, "The Poem as a Field of Action," Williams asks his audience, "How can we accept Einstein's theory of relativity... without incorporating its essential fact—the relativity of measurements— into our own category of activity: the poem."<sup>51</sup> In alignment with this statement, Williams saw his invention of the "variable foot" as directly reflective of and inspired by relativity.<sup>52</sup> The "variable foot" is a unit of poetical meter that served as the basis for the triadic-line structure Williams used in poems in his collections *The Desert Music* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955).<sup>53</sup> For example:

The petty fury  
that disrupts my life --  
at the striking of a wrong key

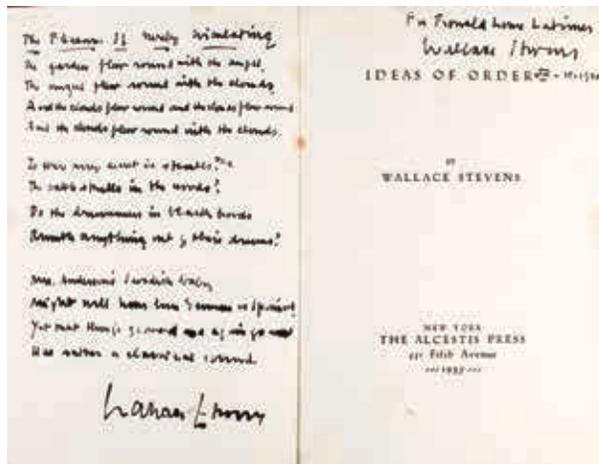
(from "The Drunk and the Sailor")

The ultimate meaning of the variable foot has long been a source of debate among scholars. Insights from linguistics have recently provided the intriguing possibility that Williams' variable foot was based on patterns of intonation—the rise and fall of vocal pitch—in American English.<sup>54</sup> Thus Williams' excitement about the concept of the variable foot was rooted in the fact that it represented the very real culmination of his efforts to capture the idiosyncrasies of American speech.

In books Three and Four of *Paterson*, his magnum opus, Williams incorporates the discovery of radioactivity. He explores the implications of radioactive elements and includes Marie and Pierre Curie as characters.<sup>55</sup> Carol Donley explains how Williams makes connections between Marie Curie's discovery of radium and the poet's creative process, ultimately suggesting that the radioactive material extracted by Curie is like "the poet's search for the beautiful thing—for meaningful language."<sup>56</sup> Rather than viewing poetry and chemistry as separate disciplines, Williams found similarities in the processes of artistic and scientific discovery.

### WALLACE STEVENS' "EXPERIMENT IN LANGUAGE"

The presence of science in Stevens' poetry is often subtle, but the analytical quality of many of his poems reveals an inherently scientific perspective. Furthermore, Stevens' explorations of imagination and reality have strong connections to quantum theory. The scientific qualities in Stevens' poetry often manifest through the process of supposition—the act of supposing something, of presenting a scenario that is not immediately true but could be.<sup>57</sup> Many of Stevens' poems include an imperative such as "say," a request for the reader to imagine a specific scenario which Stevens then builds on and explores in the rest of the poem.<sup>58</sup> Jeffrey Blevins has argued that this suppositional perspective resembles the practice of the thought experiment,<sup>59</sup> a technique used by Einstein in his work on relativity and quantum mechanics.<sup>60</sup> Stevens himself declared that "Poetry is nothing if not experiment in language,"<sup>61</sup>



*Ideas of Order*, Alcestis Press (1935)  
with poem handwritten by Stevens

and the experimental approach of supposition allowed him to explore complex, abstract ideas.

Stevens came to understand the particulars of quantum theory late in his career,<sup>62</sup> but even his early poetry parallels scientific concepts. "The Idea of Order at Key West," for example, was published in 1935, and centers on a singer who shapes reality through her act of creativity:

She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker.<sup>63</sup>

The creative power attributed to the singer is significant enough to actually shape reality—to make the sea into the "self" in her song. In the world she creates, the singer is the "artificer," and Stevens returns again and again to the connections among the ocean, the song, and the woman. Dana Wilde has argued that the singer's imagination is an "ordering force, like the experimenter who chooses the configuration of the experiment, and the sea is like the unknown, or yet unordered, quantum reality."<sup>64</sup> The sea, like a subatomic particle in an experiment, is already in existence; the singer does not create it. But through her creative observation—her song—the woman shapes reality, causing the sea itself to respond.

In many of Stevens' poems, observers shape the world around them in a similar way; their perception

directly influences reality. Likewise, physicist Erwin Schrödinger was quite clear in stating that reality was a construct of the mind. Stevens' "Description Without Place," written a decade later, centers on the links between seeming and being. The poem describes a queen whose "green mind made the world around her green."<sup>65</sup> Once again, an individual's actions and perceptions shape the very fabric of reality, and Stevens emphasizes this connection throughout his work.<sup>66</sup>

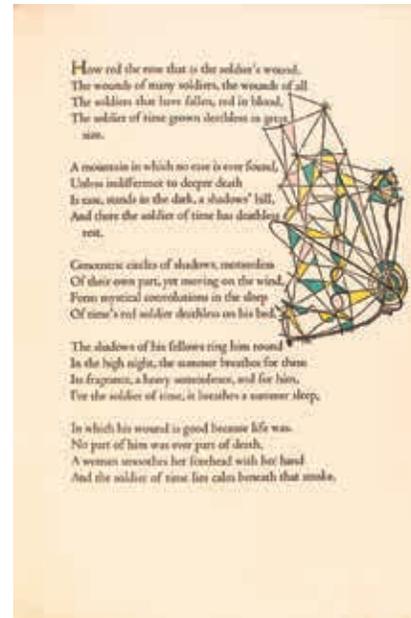
Late in his career, Stevens discussed science more directly, with a focus on figures who shaped the new physics. He had a particular respect for the physicist Max Planck, whom he wrote about in "A Collect of Philosophy" (1951). Stevens admired Planck's hesitation to accept the implications of quantum mechanics, a field which he had helped create. He ends "A Collect of Philosophy" with Planck to emphasize the unsolved, the questions that cannot be easily answered—both subjects that Stevens explored and ones essential to his poetry. The new physics, as critics have argued, helped Stevens validate and develop his own longstanding, complex view of reality.

#### THE CHANGING WORLD OF PRINT AND PUBLISHING

The state of print and publishing in Williams and Stevens' day was also changing. By the 1880s, the last steps in the printing process—typesetting and image production—were mechanized, heralding an important shift in the history of printing.<sup>67</sup> Improvements in papermaking and the use of wood pulp paper meant that paper was much less expensive than before. All of these developments encouraged faster and cheaper production of printed material and introduced new possibilities for design and typography.<sup>68</sup>

These changes ushered in shifts in publishing, with increased output from publishers accompanied by a move towards commercialization.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, however, there was pushback against the kind of mass-produced books that were now so convenient to print. In 1890, William Morris helped launch the so-called "private press" movement in Britain, which then spread to the United States. The movement attempted to emulate the artistic and hand-made qualities of printed books from earlier centuries and inspired numerous small-scale publishers.<sup>70</sup>

Several small presses in the U.S., most notably Cummington Press and Alcestis Press, produced limited editions of Williams' and Stevens' work. Producing a



Stevens' *Esthétique du Mal*, Cummington Press (1945)

book in a limited edition, often signed and with hand-made or high-quality paper, was in direct contrast to the larger-scale mechanized publishing trends of the early 20th century. In strong opposition to the push for efficiency emphasized by Taylorism,<sup>71</sup> small presses were intentionally inefficient, which, to their supporters, lent them an artistic merit not present elsewhere.

Williams and Stevens both published a number of works with small presses. Such presses were quite important to Williams' career, since it was not until 1937 that he found a consistent publisher in James Laughlin at New Directions.<sup>72</sup> Stevens was also appreciative of small presses; he often supported them by waiving the royalties on his own limited edition books.<sup>73</sup> During the Great Depression, when many larger publishers were struggling to publish books of any kind,<sup>74</sup> J. Ronald Lane Latimer founded and ran the small Alcestis Press. Alcestis printed limited editions of both Stevens' and Williams' new work, as well as a poetry magazine.

The new state of print technology also enabled the spread of so-called "little magazines" that were fundamental to the Modernist poetry movement as a whole. Increased literacy and better transportation allowed little magazines and other print periodicals to reach Americans far and wide and helped transform print culture.<sup>75</sup> Harriet Monroe founded the pioneering *Poetry* in October 1912 in Chicago, publishing Williams, Stevens, Marianne Moore,

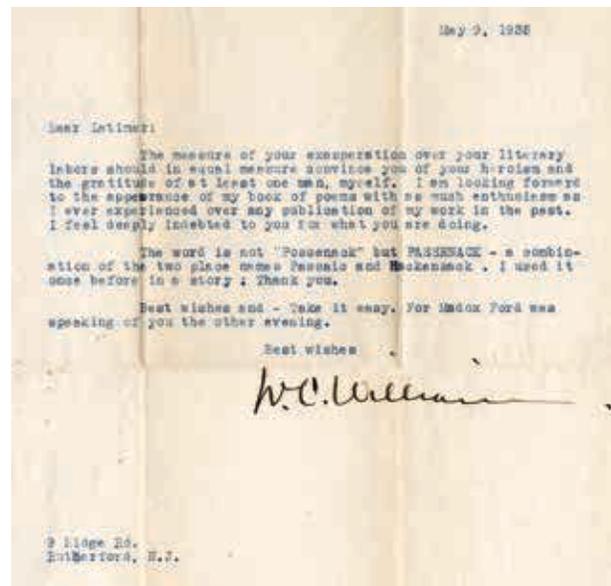
Mina Loy, Carl Sandburg, and many others. Monroe's famous "open door" policy, coupled with her refusal to publish only "traditional" poetry, meant that a single issue included many different forms, styles, and subjects.<sup>76</sup>

Another groundbreaking little magazine was Alfred Kreyborg's *Others: A Magazine of New Verse*, which was founded in 1915, partly as a response to the perceived failings of *Poetry*.<sup>77</sup> The magazine was dedicated to free verse and radical, avant-garde poets.<sup>78</sup> Williams was very involved in the community of poets and artists behind *Others*, making frequent visits to the artist colony Kreybourg founded in Ridgefield, New Jersey.<sup>79</sup> This sort of community building, as well as conversations across publications in the literary field, were made possible by the technological and cultural developments of the time.

## CONCLUSION

It has been more than a century since William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens began their poetic careers, but their work remains extremely relevant. The questions their poetry explores are the same ones we struggle with in this moment. What Stevens called the "pressure of reality" feels particularly powerful, as each day we are exposed to vast quantities of information, news, and ideas, and face a profoundly uncertain future. Yet it is still possible, as Stevens wrote, to resist this pressure, which is a primary task of the poet.<sup>80</sup> One of the many powers of poetry, then, is to help teach us this same skill: how to think critically, create, and take action in the face of difficult external circumstances. Without the capacity to resist this pressure, we risk falling into apathy. Successful poetry is born of a deep engagement with the world, and yet it can also offer solace when the world outside our doors becomes overwhelming.

Williams and Stevens do not leave us with easy answers, but their work can guide us as we navigate our own modernity. In his poetry, Williams encourages us to observe carefully and fully, to seek out connections between artist and scientist, poem and machine. His work celebrates innovation and progress without discounting their impact, and he never loses sight of everyday human experience. Stevens' poetry offers a place to step back from modernity and reflect, to seek solace in the natural world and the power of our own imagination. Whether exploring quantum mechanics or the nature of beauty, Stevens embraces the subjective and the unknown. The world has changed enormously since Williams and Stevens wrote their final poems, but



William Carlos Williams typed letter to J. Ronald Lane Latimer (1935)

the innovation and complexity of their work still endures in American poetry today.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Writing the Modern World* came together under extraordinary circumstances, and I was guided by an extraordinary team of people, all of whom deserve my thanks. This exhibit would not be possible without the Joseph E. O'Donnell Research Fellowship, for which I am extremely grateful. I am truly thankful for Sarah Horowitz and Semyon Khoklov, who supervised this project and supported me throughout the process. Their enthusiasm, insight, and encouragement helped me stay on track while working entirely from home. The opportunity to combine poetry, science, and technology in one project was a dream come true. Thank you also to Terry Snyder and Bruce Bumbarger, who offered invaluable advice and feedback as the exhibit took shape. I must confess that I have never taken a physics course at Haverford, but feedback from Professor Dan Grin helped me write about relativity and quantum mechanics, and for that I am very grateful. Finally, I must thank Alan Klein '81, who generously shared his collection so I could create this exhibit. Alan's genuine love for Williams and Stevens, along with his impressive knowledge of their work and lives, made this experience truly special.

## Two American Poets and A Collection

Alan M. Klein '81

I am truly delighted to be sharing the items in this exhibit with the Haverford College community. Over the last twenty years I have developed an extensive collection of signed and inscribed first editions, periodical appearances, letters, and manuscripts of the American poets Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, as well as a wide range of material relating to their lives. In early 2019, a large portion of this collection was exhibited at The Grolier Club, the country's oldest and largest bibliophile club, in an exhibit entitled "Two American Poets: Wallace Stevens & William Carlos Williams," and an accompanying 250-page catalogue was published. After Terry Snyder, the Librarian of the College, was kind enough to come to New York City and view the exhibit, she suggested that an exhibit of some of the material take place in the new Lutnick Library, which had not yet opened.

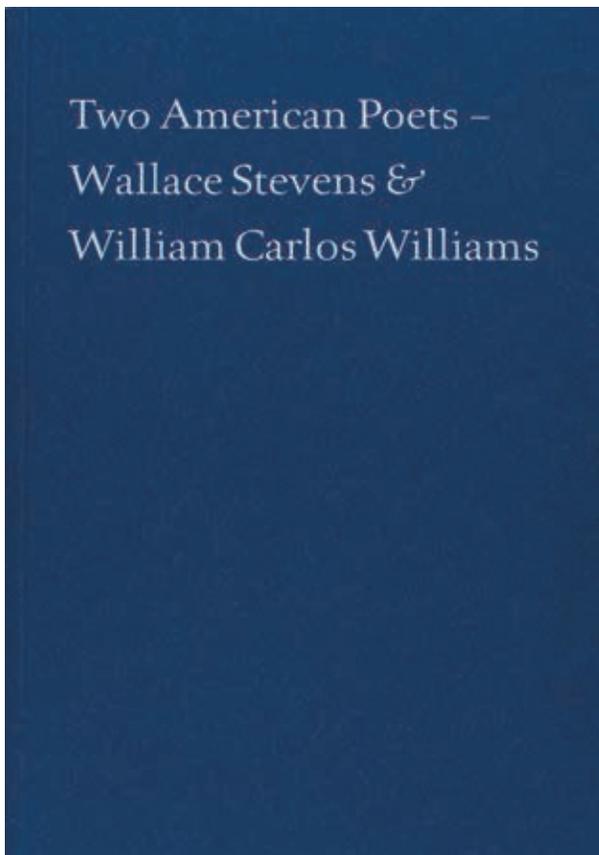


Exhibit catalog, Grolier Club

When I met with Terry and Sarah Horowitz, the College's Head of Quaker & Special Collections, to discuss the exhibit, they had a very Haverfordian proposal: to have a student curator craft an exhibit using selected items from my collection. I immediately and enthusiastically agreed. They proposed that applications for the curatorship would be solicited, and once selected, the student would regularly meet over several months starting in the spring of 2020 with Terry, Sarah, Research and Instructional Librarian Seymon Khokhlov, and Library Conservator Bruce Bumbarger, and that I would join when possible as well. Charlotte Scott '21 was ultimately chosen from among many talented applicants to take on the curator role. I was fortunate to be able to participate, virtually of course, in many of the sessions that took place among them. I am immensely grateful to have been able to see the incredibly stimulating intellectual exploration which they undertook.

The process of seeing Terry, Sarah, Seymon, and Bruce working with Charlotte represented to me the best of what Haverford offers. It was collaborative, it was interdisciplinary, it involved a student working with original material, and it featured a student working directly with faculty. There can be no better example of what a liberal arts college can provide to both students and faculty, and in this instance, an alumnus. I was fascinated to learn what others working with the material I had collected drew from it. There were different perspectives, conclusions, and emphases than those I had brought to thinking about the two poets and the items in my collection. Charlotte's research and her resulting insights were revelatory. The results of the months of work this past spring and summer can be seen in Charlotte's essay in this catalogue and the selection of books, journals, and letters from my collection chosen to be included in this exhibit.

Of course, when the prospect of this exhibit was first discussed, there was no inkling that a pandemic would wreak havoc on every aspect of our lives from March of 2020 onward. All credit goes to Charlotte and the Haverford Libraries for forging ahead, uninterrupted, with the work that took place to put the exhibit and catalogue together. In addition, adjustments have been made in order to make the exhibit

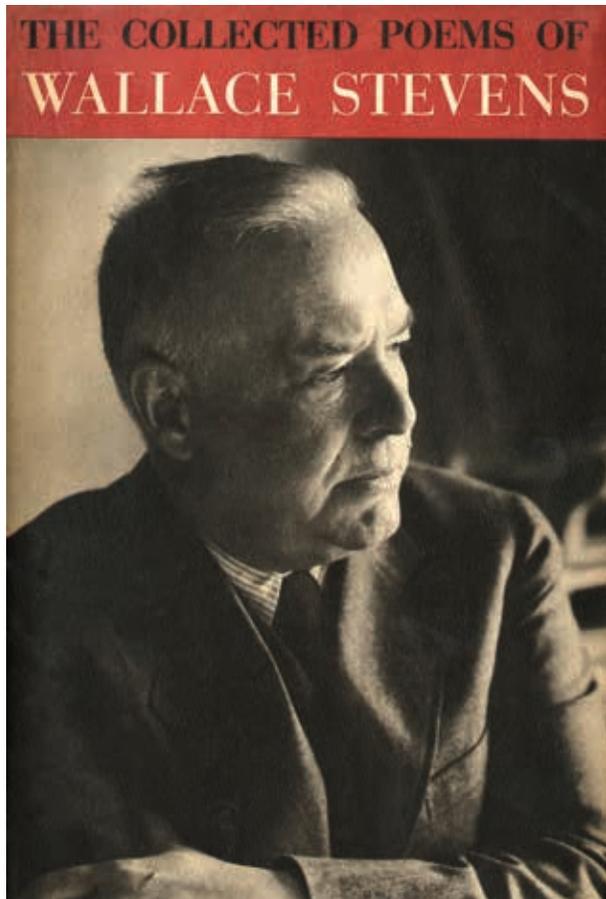
and accompanying programming accessible online. If there is anything positive that can be said to come out of the pandemic, it will be that so many exhibits and events have become available to people who would otherwise never have been able to be physically present to see them.

I am regularly asked how I came to collect books and collect the works of these two poets. I am a corporate lawyer specializing in mergers and acquisitions. No obvious connection exists between my professional life and my book collecting. There is no question that the breadth of the education that Haverford provided and the ethos of intellectual exploration that Haverford instilled in me is a prime reason I have developed my interest in collecting books. I was not an English major in college, although I took a number of English courses and have always loved books. Haverford professors always encouraged students with a range of backgrounds to take their classes. That spirit of intellectual experimentation across disciplines has always guided me and so many other Haverford graduates.

So, when I walked out of a musty old bookstore in London near the Stock Exchange in the City of London on a dreary, rainy day almost 25 years ago, I was not aware that I had become a book collector. But spending a few hundred British pounds on a small handful of early books by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, somehow led, item by item, to inexorably amassing an extensive collection of not only inscribed first editions of his works, his letters, and ephemera, but also those of the Irish poet W.B. Yeats and the American poets Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams. I am continuing to expand the range of my collecting with the addition of Stevens' and Williams' friend and peer Marianne Moore.

My interest in Heaney had arisen after meeting him while I was in law school, shortly after graduating from Haverford in 1981. Since Heaney was often described as "the modern Yeats" it seemed natural, once I realized I had in fact started collecting his signed first editions, to start buying similar works of Yeats. Not too long into this process, I thought to myself that I really ought to collect some American poets. Then serendipity took hold, along with the benefit of a certain amount of ignorance.

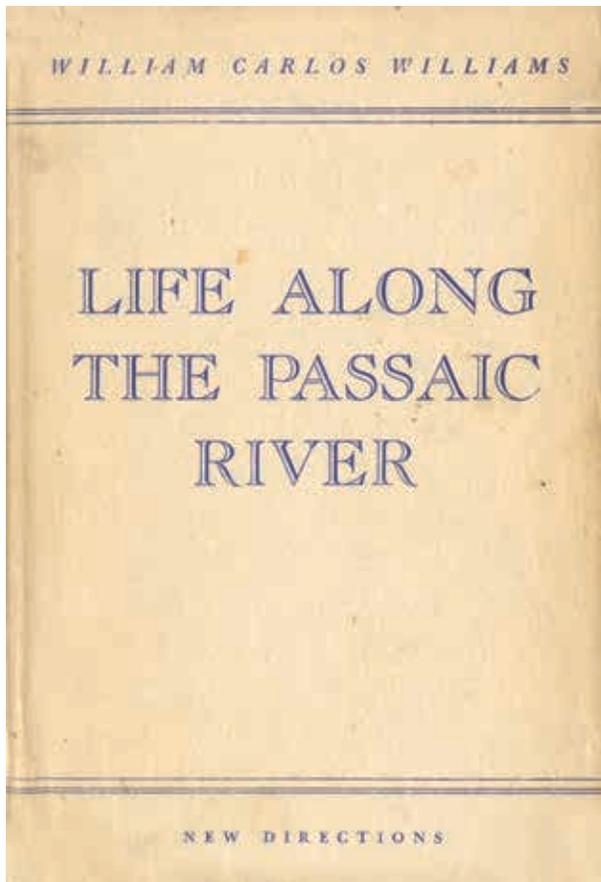
Two American poets that I liked were Wallace



*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (1954)*

Stevens and William Carlos Williams, two of the foremost American modernists. I knew I liked Stevens' work and Williams' work, although their styles are extremely different. I also knew that they each had professional careers aside from their poetry, Stevens as a lawyer and Williams as a physician. Their ability to somehow balance successful professional careers along with groundbreaking poetic careers was very appealing. I was also drawn to the two of them because a driving motivation for both was to develop a poetry which was recognizably and demonstrably an American poetry, not a literature that was simply derivative of its European antecedents. I started acquiring some first editions of their work, which led to a deepening interest in their work and their lives and, as years went by, resulted in my current collection.

The serendipity of my starting to focus on Stevens and Williams was in discovering that Stevens (1879–1955) and Williams (1883–1963) were not only contemporaries and modernists beginning in the period around World



William Carlos Williams  
*Life Along the Passaic River* (1938)

War I, but also friends who supported one another's careers for the over forty years of their friendship. Each was the peer that the other would measure themselves against, even as stylistically their work took very different directions. Although recognized by their respective biographers as an important relationship in one another's life, particularly early in their publishing careers, it was only as my collections of them grew that the true scope of their continuing interaction and overlapping publishing became more and more clear.

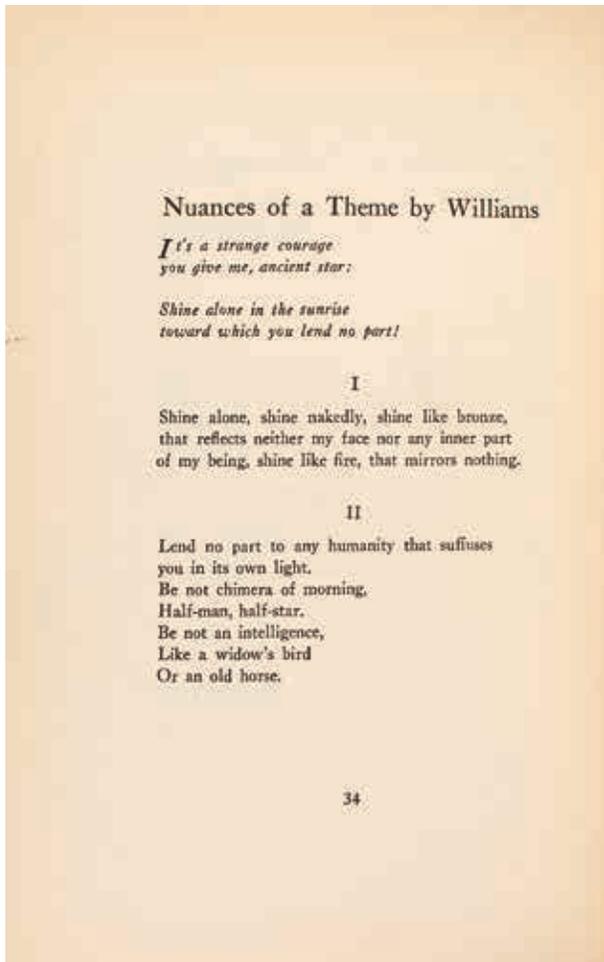
The benefit of ignorance was in not knowing that I was not supposed to like the works of both of them. Stevens' work is abstract and interior, while Williams' language is down to earth, writing very directly about the world around him. The differences in their styles, and the extremely different forms of verse that they use, tends to mean that aficionados and academics appreciate one or the other, often quite ardently, but

rarely appreciate both of them or think of the two of them together.

Developing collections relating to Stevens and Williams meant that their lives and works could be seen in light of one another. Any collection of the sort I have built becomes like a prism. As different facets are viewed, new images emerge. Fascinating new patterns and interactions can be seen that were not previously apparent with respect to all aspects of their careers. Looking together at the lives and works of these two contemporaries and friends has brought much to light that was previously either not fully perceived or understood. For instance, they addressed each other in print. Until you look at the two of them at the same time over the long course of their careers, the extent of their ongoing conversation does not become clear. Williams' 1920 book *Kora in Hell* opens with an introduction in which he reprints a letter from Stevens in which Stevens explains why he thinks Williams publishes too many books, which Williams then responds to in the introduction with an explanation of his philosophy of writing. When Stevens published his first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, in 1923, one of the poems he included is titled "Nuances on a Theme of Williams" in which he reprints Williams' short poem "El Hombre" and then proceeds to elaborate on it in his own style. In turn, when Williams' *Collected Poems, 1921-1931* was published in 1934, which includes the first appearance of his iconic poem "This is Just to Say," it was Stevens whom Williams asked to write the introduction. This ongoing conversation in print only concluded with Williams' poignant appreciation of Stevens' life and career following Stevens' death in 1955.

Examining Stevens' and Williams' careers and lives through my collection also led to beginning to understand the context in which they wrote. My time as a Haverford history major, examining original letters and documents in Magill Library and researching objects for the "Seminar on Historical Evidence," then the junior year centerpiece of the History major, greatly influenced how I began to think of the material I had amassed and to relate that material to the world in which Stevens and Williams were born, came of age, and began to revolutionize the writing of American poetry.

Stevens and Williams were born in a world of horses and buggies and lived and wrote through a time of tremendous innovation and turmoil. They lived through



Stevens' "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" from  
*Harmonium* (1923)

two devastating world wars, and saw the development of nuclear weapons, the era of television, the flight of the jet plane, and, in the case of Williams, the beginning of the space age. Through the material in my collection I began to understand their lives and their work through the lens of the changes through which they lived. Stevens and Williams were born into homes without electricity or modern plumbing. There were no radios, movies, home telephones, recorded music, automobiles, or airplanes when they were born. And yet, by the time Stevens and Williams met when they were in their early thirties, all of these advances in technology, communication, and transportation had come into existence. The pace of change in their lives must have been almost incomprehensible to them. A current observer can scarcely imagine it. Just as they met, World War I began, adding an apocalyptic

aspect to the rapid changes which had engulfed their lives, as many of these inventions were turned into weapons of war.

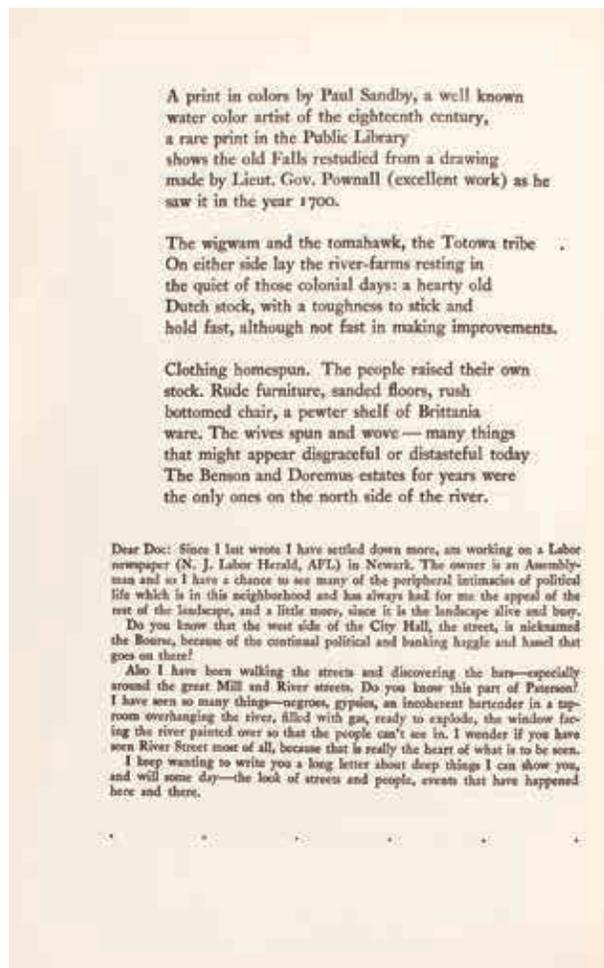
To understand the world in which Stevens and Williams lived and the literary works they created in response to that world, it is also helpful to understand the generation of which they were a part. I was startled to realize that born the same year as Stevens, in 1879, was Albert Einstein, whose life span matched that of Stevens exactly, dying the same year as Stevens in 1955. Pablo Picasso was born in 1881, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Igor Stravinsky were born in 1882, and Franz Kafka was born the same year as Williams, in 1883. This was a generation that both helped reshape how the world was understood and how music, art, and literature responded to that world.

Einstein's dramatic publication of four groundbreaking papers in 1905 began a radical transformation of how the physical world was understood and viewed. Within ten years, Einstein's work was reaching the general public. If the details eluded the grasp of even accomplished physicists and mathematicians, what was understood was that the basic truths of Newtonian physics had been overturned. The universe and the world around us could no longer be seen as straightforward. Two different people in different places observing the same phenomenon would see something taking place differently and they would both be correct. There was, perhaps, no fixed reality. Today, we take this view of the world for granted, but this realization was transformational for the artists and writers coming of age in this period. The seismic changes in the world opened up not only new subjects to be addressed by the creative arts but also gave license for creators to experiment with new techniques with which to express themselves. World War I further heightened the sensation of a world given over to chaos and the need for new emotions to express and new ways to express them.

In early 1913 the legendary Armory Show took place in New York, bringing together contemporary Europe and American artists and exposing Americans to the new forms of modern art then starting to appear in Europe, such as Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase." Stravinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps" premiered in Paris in May of 1913 and became a sensation. Kafka began writing *The Metamorphosis* in 1912 and it was published in 1915. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was serialized in London in 1914 and 1915 and published as a book in the U.S. in 1916. Picasso's seminal

painting “Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,” although painted in 1907, was first publicly exhibited in 1916.

Clearly, when Stevens and Williams met in New York City at a salon of writers and artists in the mid-nineteen teens it was a time of incredible intellectual ferment. Stevens and Williams were each early in their professional careers, Stevens finding his way as an insurance company lawyer and eventually moving to Hartford, Connecticut and Williams finishing his medical residency and subsequently opening his medical practice in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey. Stevens and Williams each spent the rest of his lives in these respective places, although New York remained the center of their literary lives, much as it became the center for American writers and artists throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.



Williams' *Paterson* (Book Four) (1951) with letter from Allen Ginsberg

The collection that I have had the opportunity to put together shows the progression of both Stevens' and Williams' writing careers and the relationships they had with other noted writers and artists of their day. Stevens actively corresponded with poets ranging from contemporaries such as Conrad Aiken and Witter Bynner to younger poets such as Allen Tate, Delmore Schwartz, and Richard Eberhart, among his correspondence in my collection. Williams was an early advocate for the work of several generations of younger poets such as Louis Zukofsky, Charles Henri Ford, Theodore Roethke, Denise Levertov, and Allen Ginsberg, and Williams' relationship with each of them is represented in my collection. Ginsberg grew up in Paterson, New Jersey and wrote fan letters to Williams as a high school student. Williams used some of those letters in Books Three and Four of his five volume epic poem *Paterson* and some years later he wrote the introduction to the initial publication of Ginsberg's groundbreaking poem "Howl." My copy of "Howl" belonged to Denise Levertov.

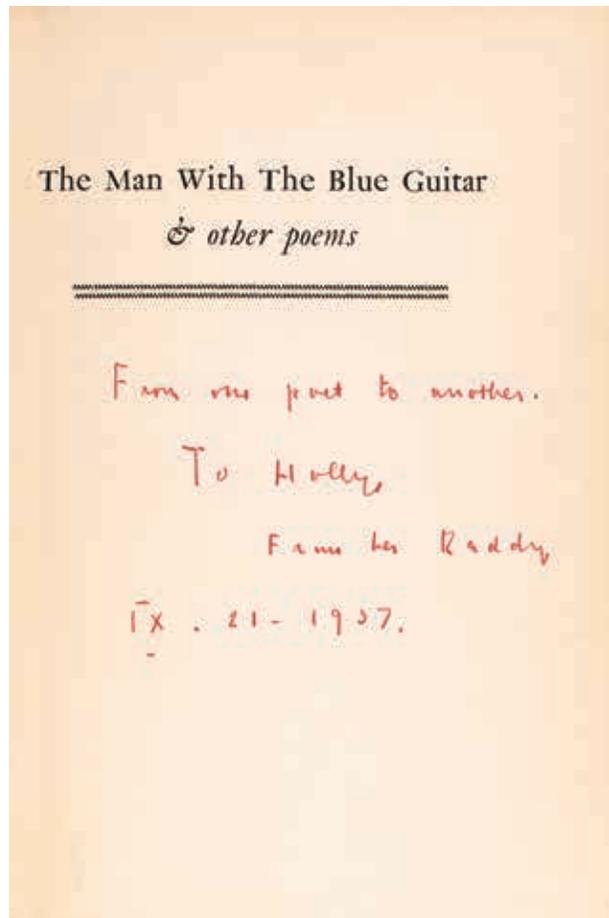
Another element of my collection is that it highlights the deep engagement that Stevens and Williams each had with the art world. Stevens wrote introductions to gallery catalogues such as exhibits of the works of Marcel Gromaire and Raoul Dufy and lectured at the Museum of Modern Art on "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting." Williams worked with and inscribed books in my collection to the photographers Man Ray and Alfred Stieglitz, the artist Charles Sheeler, and the choreographer Martha Graham. His 1920 poem "The Great Figure" directly inspired his friend Charles Demuth's painting "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold," now hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I have also been fortunate to acquire material from the families of both Stevens and Williams and from the descendants of Ezra Pound, all of which has greatly illuminated the relationship each poet had with his family and the almost sibling-like relationship that Williams had with Pound over a sixty-year period. Collecting items ranging from Stevens' marriage certificate and studio photographs of his parents in the 1880s to Kodak snapshots taken of him in front of his house showing off his garden and, poignantly, in the hospital only days before he died, help greatly to humanize an often remote figure. One of the most surprising items in my collection is a copy of the first edition of Stevens' 1937

book *The Man with The Blue Guitar and Other Poems* tenderly inscribed by Stevens to his then fourteen-year-old daughter, "From one poet to another/To Holly from her Daddy." Seeing that kind of sentimental inscription casts Stevens in a different light from the austere figure as which he is typically viewed.

Similarly, holding some of Williams' school books or the anthologies given to him by his mother that are in my collection gives a sense of the roots of the man and the poet. The many books inscribed by him to Ezra Pound and the posthumous collections of Williams which Pound obtained and annotated which have made their way into my collection highlight the pivotal role that Pound played in Williams' life. They met as students at the University of Pennsylvania, and remained in one another's lives for the next sixty years.

The many facets of my collection of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams have illuminated for me their poetry, their lives, and the times in which they lived. The process of collecting both poets has opened up for me the opportunity to draw connections between the two of them and between each of them and the broader intellectual community of which they were a part. Stevens and Williams were born into a world lit by kerosene and lived to see the atomic bomb. As students they learned sonnets by the Romantic poets and lived to read the Beat Generation. Their own work helped create the modernist movement and put them in the forefront of American poetry in the twentieth century. Haverford College, with its spirit of intellectual inquiry which has persisted for almost a hundred and ninety years, with a new library for the twenty-first century, seems like the perfect setting for this exhibit.



Stevens' *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937) with inscription to his daughter Holly

## NOTES

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- REAR COVER**
- Others: A Magazine of the New Verse* (August 1915)

# OTHERS

A MAGAZINE *of the* NEW VERSE

AUGUST 1915

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