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William Carlos Williams,
"Author's Introduction"
to *The Wedge*, 1944

Wesleyan,
2004.

Author's Introduction to *The Wedge*

The war is the first and only thing
The arts generally are not, nor is
relief, a turning away. It is the war of
the field.

Critics of rather better than ever
that after socialism has been achieved
use for poetry, that it will disappear
a faulty definition of poetry—and to
say that mathematics is likely to be
why poetry?

It is an error attributable to the fact
arts are a resort from frustration,
many minds.

They speak as though action itself
with frustration. All action the same
at least one of the finest lyrics of
Who isn't frustrated and does not
say so? But through art the psychologist
distinguished man of his age. Take

The making of poetry is no more
work of Henry Kaiser or of Timoshin
of desire to a complex end. And
mathematics and the arts will turn
sary for their reward and let's all be

A man isn't a block that remains
treat him so—and most take an insult
He varies; Hamlet today, Caesar tomorrow
he is to retain his sanity, and why not

The arts have a *complex* relation
nomenon, no more is his work. *The*
diagnosis, a plan for procedure, a re-
during form. There need be nothing
may be a throw-off from the most
parallel to it, a saga. It may be the
memory, something to be set aside
of emotional significances for later

As early as 1918, Williams was distancing himself from the Anglo-American modernism of Pound and Eliot in the prologue of his experimental prose piece *Kora in Hell*, calling them "men content with the connotations of their masters." Although greatly influenced by imagism, and Pound, whom he first met when they were undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as the Dada and surrealist visual artists and poets who gathered around Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery in Manhattan, Williams wanted to create something new, something that drew on the contemporaneity of America and the speech rhythms of the American idiom. "Nothing is good," he writes, "save the new."

In his early book, *Spring and All* (1923) Williams combines prose with some of the most well-known of his poems, such as "The Red Wheelbarrow," poems that aim at direct statement and the commonplace fused with the energy of the imagination, what he defines as "seeing the thing itself without forethought or afterthought but with great intensity of perception." This essay, which served as an introduction to his 1944 collection of poems, *The Wedge*, is emblematic of this objectivist stance, as well as for his claims for a new prosody. His belief, like Pound's, was that in order to say something new, one must be able to say it in a new way. The poem as a machine. Art as a made thing. "Compose," he wrote in his poem, "A Sort of a Song," written the same year as this essay:

Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!

Williams, more than anyone, has changed our idea of the suitable subject matter of a poem. A poem can be made out of anything because (as Mallarmé, a very different sort of poet, said to Degas) it is made out of words.



Author's Introduction to *The Wedge*

The war is the first and only thing in the world today.

The arts generally are not, nor is this writing a diversion from that for relief, a turning away. It is the war or part of it, merely a different sector of the field.

Critics of rather better than average standing have said in recent years that after socialism has been achieved it's likely there will be no further use for poetry, that it will disappear. This comes from nothing else than a faulty definition of poetry—and the arts generally. I don't hear anyone say that mathematics is likely to be outmoded, to disappear shortly. Then why poetry?

It is an error attributable to the Freudian concept of the thing, that the arts are a resort from frustration, a misconception still entertained in many minds.

They speak as though action itself in all its phases were not compatible with frustration. All action the same. But Richard Coeur de Lion wrote at least one of the finest lyrics of his day. Take Don Juan for instance. Who isn't frustrated and does not prove it by his actions—if you want to say so? But through art the psychologically maimed may become the most distinguished man of his age. Take Freud for instance.

The making of poetry is no more an evidence of frustration than is the work of Henry Kaiser or of Timoshenko. It's the war, the driving forward of desire to a complex end. And when that shall have been achieved, mathematics and the arts will turn elsewhere—beyond the atom if necessary for their reward and let's all be frustrated together.

A man isn't a block that remains stationary though the psychologists treat him so—and most take an insane pride in believing it. Consistency! He varies; Hamlet today, Caesar tomorrow; here, there, somewhere—if he is to retain his sanity, and why not?

The arts have a *complex* relation to society. The poet isn't a fixed phenomenon, no more is his work. *That* might be a note on current affairs, a diagnosis, a plan for procedure, a retrospect—all in its own peculiarly enduring form. There need be nothing limited or frustrated about that. It may be a throw-off from the most violent and successful action or run parallel to it, a saga. It may be the picking out of an essential detail for memory, something to be set aside for further study, a sort of shorthand of emotional significances for later reference.

Let the metaphysical take care of itself, the arts have nothing to do with it. They will concern themselves with it if they please, among other things. To make two bald statements: There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: 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.

Prose may carry a load of ill-defined matter like a ship. But poetry is the machine which drives it, pruned to a perfect economy. As in all machines its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character. In a poem this movement is distinguished in each case by the character of the speech from which it arises.

Therefore, each speech having its own character, the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form. The effect is beauty, what in a single object resolves our complex feelings of propriety. One doesn't seek beauty. All that an artist or a Sperry can do is to drive toward his purpose, in the nature of his materials; not to take gold where Babbit metal is called for; to make: make clear the complexity of his perceptions in the medium given to him by inheritance, chance, accident or whatever it may be to work with according to his talents and the will that drives them. Don't talk about frustration fathering the arts. The bastardization of words is too widespread for that today.

My own interest in the arts has been extracurricular. Up from the gutter, so to speak. Of necessity. Each age and place to its own. But in the U. S. the necessity for recognizing this intrinsic character has been largely ignored by the various English Departments of the academies.

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn't what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it's what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity. Your attention is called now and then to some beautiful line or sonnet-sequence because of what is said there. So be it. To me all sonnets say the same thing of no importance. What does it matter what the line "says"?

There is no poetry of distinction without formal invention, for it is in the intimate form that works of art achieve their exact meaning, in which

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they most resemble the machine, to give language its highest dignity, its
illumination in the environment to which it is native. Such war, as the
arts live and breathe by, is continuous.

It may be that my interests as expressed here are pre-art. If so I look for
a development along these lines and will be satisfied with nothing else.