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**IN SHAPE AND STRUCTURE,  
IN WARP AND WEFT:  
W. C. WILLIAMS'S "A FORMAL DESIGN"**

*Cristina Giorcelli*

To Maria Irene, whom I succeeded as Vice-President on the EAAS Board: two female *Vices* in that honorable all-male caucus!

**Resumo:** Este artigo propõe uma análise do poema de William Carlos Williams, "A Formal Design", incluído em *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962). Uma vez que a composição se refere à última das obras de tapeçaria com o título genérico de *A Caça ao Unicórnio*, existente na coleção do Cloisters Museum (New York), investiga-se a analogia aí presente entre a configuração visual (tipográfica) e a dimensão auditiva (prosódica) do poema e a técnica de manufatura, bem como as características da textura dessa tapeçaria.

**Palavras-chave:** William Carlos Williams; O Unicórnio em Cativoiro.

**Abstract:** This essay proposes a close reading of William Carlos Williams’s poem “A Formal Design” from *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962). As the composition refers to the last one of the seven *Hunt of the Unicorn* tapestries in the collection of the Cloisters Museum (New York), the analogy between Williams’s visual (through typography) configuration as well as auditory (through prosody) dimension and tapestries’ manufacturing techniques as well as texture characteristics is also attempted.

**Keywords:** William Carlos Williams; The Unicorn in Captivity.



The Unicorn in Captivity (the last of the seven woven hangings popularly known as The Hunt of the Unicorn), end of the 15th century, Flemish or French, wool, silk, silver, and gilt (The Cloisters, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

William Carlos Williams’s knowledge of works of visual art and his ability to “read” them are well known: we need only think of the many beautiful ekphrases he composed during his long poetic

career. Revealingly, Kenneth Burke once defined him “the master of the glimpse” (Burke 197) and when Williams was asked what was his most salient characteristic, he answered, “My sight” (Williams 1929: 87). In a letter to Louis Zukofsky he went so far as to maintain that “Eyes have always stood first in the poet’s equipment”<sup>1</sup> and in a review he wrote, “Only where the eye hits does sight occur” (Williams qtd. in Dijkstra 144). Thus, the works of Botticelli, Dürer, and Brueghel, together with those of such contemporary photographers and/or painters as Sheeler, Demuth, Hartley, Cezanne, Gris, and Picasso – to name but a few – were often precious sources of inspiration. Additionally, as Bram Dijkstra observes, “Williams believed that in matters of technique, of design, and emotional intention, the artistic goals of painters and poets were the same” (4).

In many instances, Williams attempted to give his poems a *typographic* configuration that would also render them *visually* significant. Even if he affirmed that “the poem, like every other *form* of art, is an object, an object that in itself *formally* presents its case and its meaning by the very *form* it assumes” (Williams 1951: 264, emphases mine), in his ekphrases his strategy was not to evoke their contents through their arrangement on the page, but to endow his compositions with a specific spatial – although not mimetic – organization. His aim was a linguistic *and* visual rendition<sup>2</sup> that would make his readers realize and *see* how semantics, syntax, grammar, enjambments, lineation, prosody, dashes and empty spaces may allude to – without being equivalent to – the complex relations that, in his opinion, were entailed in the structure of a particular work of art and in the dynamic tensions that hold it together. In

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<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Selected Letters*, 102 (July 1928) (John C. Thirlwall, ed. New York: McDowell Obolensky, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Perloff calls the way Williams’s poems appear on the page their “look” (*The Dance of the Intellect. Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 89).

other words, Williams created iconic diagrams, as John Haiman defines them: systematic arrangements “of signs, none of which necessarily resembles its referent, but whose relationships to each other mirror the relationships of their referents” (Haiman 515).

When in 1952 Williams began to conceive *Paterson V*, he started pondering not only paintings and/or photographs, but also another type of visual art: the tapestries on display at the Cloisters in New York and, in particular, the set of seven<sup>3</sup> hangings whose theme is the hunt and capture of the unicorn. Designed and woven by Flemish or French artists and tapestry makers in the fifteenth century, “[i]n design, in beauty of coloring, and in intensity of pictorial realism,” they “form the most superb ensemble of late medieval tapestries in existence” (Rorimer 162). According to legend (in India, where it originated, but also in the Near East and in Europe, where its fame spread), the fabulous unicorn, single-horned and generally milk-white, could only be tamed by a young virgin. From the Middle Ages, it was allegorically interpreted as Jesus Christ, whereas the beautiful maiden that captured it was seen as the Virgin Mary, and its overall story read as that of the Incarnation. The unicorn thus stood for both secular and divine love. Despite the fact that the Asian origins and sophisticated European fortune of the legend ran counter to Williams’s complete dedication to the American scene and cultural patrimony (no matter how vulgar or degraded they might be), in recapitulating “the local and the mythical,” the brutal and the beautiful, the vicious and the sublime, the theme of these tapestries succeeds in uniting the earlier four Books of *Paterson*, becoming its “organizing symbol” (Martz 12 and 13). In addition, since for Williams, “The Unicorn/has no match/ . . . the artist/ has no peer,”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The fifth one consists of two fragments.

<sup>4</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*, 209 (Christopher MacGowan, ed. New York: New Directions, 1992). Book V of *Paterson* came out in 1958.

the unicorn stands for “the immortal presence of art” (Martz 14). As Mariani has concisely and precisely put it, in Williams the unicorn “becomes the artist’s imagination in pursuit of the Woman,” or rather, it becomes the “pursuit of the poem in search of the virgin language, which must of necessity be whored, mauled, and finally possessed” (Mariani 701). In fact, in *Paterson V* we read: “The whore and the virgin, an identity:/through its disguises” (208). Thus, in this last Book, the theme of the language, of the American idiom to be redeemed by poetry (just as the unicorn must be tamed by the maiden), summarizes the gist of Williams’s epic and of his poetics. Furthermore, given that *Paterson V* was composed by Williams, but, due to the many insertions of letters and other people’s words, it may also be said to have been “written in part by his friends, his patients, and all the milling populace of Paterson, past and present,” this Book can be considered “a kind of *tapestry*, woven out of memories and observations” (Martz 16, emphasis mine). As has been maintained, “At a structural level, literary interlace has a counterpart in tapestries where positional patterning of threads establishes the shape and design of the fabric, whether the medium is thread in textile or words in a text” (Leyerle 5).<sup>5</sup>

In a poem from his last collection, *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), Williams returns to the unicorn:

A Formal Design  
This fleur-de-lis  
at a fence rail  
where a unicorn is

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<sup>5</sup> I have dealt at length on weaving techniques as metaphors with reference to the structure of a Willa Cather novel in “Writing and/as Weaving: *Shadows on the Rock* and *La dame à la licorne*” *Cather Studies* 8 (2010): 262-281.

confined it is a tapestry  
deftly woven  
a millefleurs 6

design the fleur-de-lis  
with its yellow  
petal edges

a fruiting tree formally  
enough in  
this climate 12

a pomegranate to which  
a princely  
collar round his

arching neck the beast  
is lightly  
tethered 18

The tapestry to which Williams refers is the final one of the set: here, after having been killed, the resurrected unicorn is loosely chained to a pomegranate tree and is seated happily serene within a circular fence. According to the Christian reading, it symbolizes the risen Christ, while the enclosure in which it is portrayed is the *hortus conclusus*, that is, the Virgin Mary. But since “the unicorn is leashed with a golden chain, symbol of marriage, to a tree bearing pomegranates, symbols of fertility, this tapestry is also to be interpreted as the consummation of marriage” (Rorimer 170). These tapestries, in effect, may have been woven to solemnize Anne of Brittany’s marriage in 1499 to Louis XII of the House of Valois-Orléans (in whose coat of arms figured the heraldic golden lily).

This poem – an “objective”<sup>6</sup> presentation of the tapestry that eschews both a speaking subject and the use of metaphors or similes<sup>7</sup> – deploys the triplet.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Cushman claims that since the triplet recalls Dante’s *terza rima*, its rhythm is well suited to conveying meditative contents.<sup>9</sup> While the short lines in this poem direct our attention both to particular words and to the relationships between them, there is no punctuation (not even at the very end) and no capital letters (except, conventionally enough, in the title and the very first word). For this reason enjambments and pauses – which, signified by the empty spaces, lend a visual tempo to the lines – acquire momentous importance. We also notice how alliterations (especially *t, d, th, f*, plus the digraph *gb*) link the words.

The poem consists of a single sentence with embedded prepositional, paratactic and appositional phrases; its apparently regular form – all the lines are left-aligned, but, as in other cases, the words “push and jostle” (Perloff 89) against it – hides complexities that are also inherent in tapestry making. I would suggest that in one case the poet uses enjambment having, possibly, (also) in mind the basic weaving technique of dovetailing.<sup>10</sup> Whereas almost five of the six triplets dwell on flowers and on the pomegranate tree, the unicorn makes its appearance, briefly, in the first triplets (lines 3-4) and, at greater length, in the final ones (lines 14-18). The various

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<sup>6</sup> Williams was included in the 1931 issue of *Poetry* in which Zukofsky presented the so-called Objectivist movement. See Cristina Giorcelli and Luigi Magno, eds. *New Objectivists, Nouveaux Objectivistes, Nuovi Oggettivisti*. Napoli: Loffredo, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Except that, as we have just seen, the unicorn itself bespeaks a metaphor.

<sup>8</sup> Williams here uses the triplet, but not, as with two other compositions in this collection, the staggered triadic stanza that characterizes his earlier *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954) and *Journey to Love* (1955).

<sup>9</sup> “The poems of the middle fifties constitute an elegiac meditation on death, time, and change.” Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meaning of Measure*. New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1985, 92.

<sup>10</sup> This technique, together with interlocking, is used to avoid slits that weaken the fabric. Both techniques are illustrated in Margaret B. Freeman, *The Unicorn Tapestries*. New York: Dutton, 1976, 207-210.



enjambments (a device widely used by Williams), with lineation working in counterpoint to syntax, create suspension, hesitation, emphasizing the necessity to think over the poem's words.

Let us examine the poem closely, starting from the title. The adjective "formal" may refer to both the *form/shape of* the poem and the *forms/shapes* (flowers, tree, beast) *in* the poem and *in* the tapestry, that is, to the outward appearance of such *forms/shapes*. Regarding its many meanings, however, the substantive from which this adjective derives is also used to indicate "the mode in which a thing exists," the "structure," the "nature" of what it designates: thus "formal" may stand not only for what is external, but also for what is internal, for what is "essential." In addition, "formal" here may also hint at the elegance and "ceremonial" function of this work of art.<sup>11</sup> The second word of the title, "design," may again refer to the shape/s, pattern/s to be found in both the poem and the tapestry and, given the word's many meanings, it may also refer to its "purpose," its "intention" and even its symbolic significance. Therefore, since both adjective and substantive possess analogous meanings, the title makes use of tautology to reinforce its message: the outward and the inward are one and the same (like the front and the back of a tapestry).<sup>12</sup> Because the two words somewhat mirror each other, they can be considered to sum up what Williams, speaking of both his poetry and his love of painting, declared late in life: "as I've grown older, I've attempted to fuse the poetry and painting to make it the same thing . . . to give a *design*. A *design* in the poem and a *design* in the picture should make them more or less the same thing" (Sutton 321-322, emphases mine).

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<sup>11</sup> Tapestries were portable decorations used in the castles and mansions of kings and noble families. In churches, they were displayed on special occasions. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, rich tapestries woven with emblems, mottoes, or coats of arms were hung behind and over thrones as symbols of authority.

<sup>12</sup> Albeit in reverse.

The deictic “this” opens the poem and refers to the flower that, in the center foreground, stands out from all the others: the lily, the royal flower. Indeed, it is the only one that rises beyond the top of the fencing. Williams – a lover and a singer of flowers and vegetation (and a passionate gardener), who always presented them with precision and tenderness<sup>13</sup> – not only starts his poem with it, but, after mentioning the other flowers that provide the background to the tapestry (“a millefleurs/design,” lines 6-7),<sup>14</sup> he returns to it (line 7). And, to underline the importance of its shape, in line 7 he puts the “fleur-de-lis” immediately after “design.” The syntax of the first four lines, with its two subjects for the one verb,<sup>15</sup> emphasizes what, in his mind, besides the unicorn, makes or rather “is” this “tapestry”: “this fleur-de-lis.”

In effect, Williams insists on the lily by both defining its color (line 8) and imbuing the word “edges” (line 9) with a potential dual function (substantive and verb). As a potential substantive, “edges” pertains to what precedes it, while, as a (transitive) verb, it governs what follows. Grammatically tied to both lines, it may metaphorically remind readers of the dovetailing technique of weaving that occurs when two wefts from adjacent areas are wrapped alternatively around the same warp. And linguistically, with its position at the end of the line, on the brink of a demarcation, of a turn, “edges” iconically *embodies* and *shows* its very meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> In *Paterson V*, Williams indirectly wrote of himself, “Flowers have always been his friends,/even in paintings and tapestries” (Williams, *Paterson*, 228).

<sup>14</sup> In these tapestries the individual figures, birds, and animals are naturalistically rendered and the millefleurs background is made up of over a hundred distinct types of flowers, of which over eighty have been identified by botanists.

<sup>15</sup> In a brief analysis of this poem, Caws underlines how, in its *incipit*, there is a visual and poetic echo from “This” to “lis” to “is,” together with a decrescendo in the length of the words, as well as a crescendo in their semantic importance. Mary Ann Caws, “A Double Reading by Design: Brueghel, Auden, and Williams.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41.3 (Spring 1983): 324.

There is a glitch, however: if the lily “edges” the railing in the tapestry – mitigating, through embellishment, its role of fencing something in – it does not “edge” the “fruiting tree.” The poem would thus be imprecise with regard to the tapestry were it not for the fact that, as the hanging is described from bottom to top following the central vertical axis – from the fleur-de-lis to the pomegranate tree – it is as if the lily were pointing *toward* the pomegranate tree that rises along this same axis. Furthermore, not only do pomegranate flowers resemble lilies, but there is also a sort of continuity of origin as both yellow lilies and pomegranate trees come from Asia (as does the unicorn legend). It is worth noting that before calling it by its name, the poet specifies that it is a tree that bears fruit, thus referring directly to the idea of fertility which underpins the making of this tapestries’ series.<sup>16</sup>

Two thirds of the way through the poem, the presentation turns back midway along the vertical axis and, given that tapestries eschew perspective, it figuratively makes a sort of loop (similar to the leash that ties the unicorn) between the lily and the pomegranate tree by pausing at the unicorn’s “collar” (line 15). Being similarly round and horizontal, the “collar” reconnects with the aforementioned “fence rail” (line 2). “Collar” and “fence” (and even the unnamed leash, evoked by the figurative loop) form the perfect ouroboros<sup>17</sup>: like a wedding ring (and, in the Christian tradition, like the Virgin as “*filia tui filii*”). In addition, since in this tapestry the unicorn’s neck is straight,<sup>18</sup> by using the word “arching” Williams may have wished

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<sup>16</sup> Pomegranate flowers may be self-pollinating. Williams may have found an affinity with them, since, as an artist, he sang of himself as “being/half man and half/woman.” In “For Eleanor and Bill Monahan” (*The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. II, 252-255).

<sup>17</sup> In *Paterson V*, Williams mentions twice the serpent with “its tail in its mouth.” Williams, *Paterson*, 229 and 230.

<sup>18</sup> In *Paterson V*, Williams singles out the beast’s neck and collar on three occasions: “its [of the unicorn] neck/circled by a crown!,” “he bears a collar round

to hint indirectly at the curls in the beast's beard and tail and at the curves in both the fence and the beast's collar. Finally, the last word, "tethered" (line 18) – a verb that collocates with animals – takes up more strongly the meaning of the earlier "confined" (line 4). While referring to the curved elements in the tapestry, at the end the poem makes another (this time, structural) loop by returning on the unicorn from which it started (line 3), thus reaffirming the prevailing idea of a bond (a link, a chain, a ring) willingly accepted/cherished.

There are no fewer than three adverbs of manner in the poem and one adjective that may be used, albeit rarely, as an adverb. "Deftly" (line 5) pinpoints the humble,<sup>19</sup> skillful, and quick<sup>20</sup> way in which accomplished weavers would work on tapestries, and also condenses three of the composition's most used consonants; "formally" (line 10), besides referring to one of the two words in the title, conveys that "under normal circumstances"<sup>21</sup> pomegranates do not bear fruit in "this climate" (line 12), that is, where "[t]his fleur-de-lis" (line 1) is displayed: in New York<sup>22</sup> (symmetrically, the two demonstratives echo each other and appear at the start of their respective lines, 1 and 12); "lightly" (line 17) stresses the gentle way in which the unicorn is kept captive as, with a good grace ("cheerfully" is one of the adverb's meanings),<sup>23</sup> it accepts its imprisonment. The way the unicorn is tied and its general bearing are of such importance that this adverb is given almost a whole line to itself. The fact

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his neck," "his regal neck/fast in a jeweled collar." Williams, *Paterson*, 209, 210, and 232.

<sup>19</sup> This is the first meaning of "deft" in the *OD*. Individual makers of tapestries are generally anonymous.

<sup>20</sup> Relatively speaking, since each tapestry would probably have taken several years to complete. "Nimbly" is one of the meanings of "deftly."

<sup>21</sup> This is the fourth meaning of "formally" in the *OD*.

<sup>22</sup> In the U.S.A., pomegranates prosper in California.

<sup>23</sup> This is the third meaning of "lightly" in the *OD*.

that the adjective “princely” (line 14) looks and sounds like an adverb evinces the importance that Williams places in *viewing* and *bearing* the words of his poems before assigning them their proper grammatical function. The meaning of “princely,” emphasized by its taking up almost an entire line, is well-suited to the unicorn’s sumptuous collar.

This poem, inspired by a tapestry woven in honor of a union, is thus an indirect meditation on, and, once more, a celebration of marriage to which a few years earlier (1955) Williams had dedicated the long autobiographical lyric “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower.”

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