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Old Masters and Modern Intrigue: Reception of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Late Poetry of William Carlos Williams

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Old Masters and Modern Intrigue: Reception of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in the Late
Poetry of William Carlos Williams

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Literary and Cultural Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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INTRODUCTION

“In Williams, as in Wallace Stevens to a lesser extent, we have the ultimate development of form that seeks to arrest or still the image. This is not to say that motion and action are dispensed with in this method, but that, even when the subject matter is of a very violent nature, as is often the case with Williams, the extreme surface of the poem remains or attempts to remain at a dead calm. It is a poetry as closely allied to painting as any I know.”

-KARL SHAPIRO

On May 17th, 1921 an article was published in the New York Times with the headline: “Painting By Bruegel The Elder, On View: ‘The Harvesters,’ in Art Museum, May Have Been Owned by Archduke William in 1659.” The article explains that the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired the painting during the “early days of the war,” but not much else about the acquisition was known at the time. Manhattan residents were enthusiastic about this new treasure in the Metropolitan’s collection, and the article expressed the air of excitement surrounding the new picture in its opening line: “Of great charm and interest is a painting, ‘The Harvesters,’ by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, which visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art will see today for the first time in Gallery 27, the Flemish Room, in the northwest corner of the Museum.” By 1921, Bruegel had already become a source of inspiration for the Flemish avant-garde, including such artists as Van de Woestyne, Smits, Laermans, and De Saedeleer, who reinvented the style of the old master. From then to the mid twentieth-century, Bruegel’s popularity increased among the modernists, who (as opposed to 19th century critics) celebrated his “candid portrayal of ordinary life” (Koerner 224). Art historian David Anfam argues that even the modernist artist Willem de Kooning was linked to the old masters Bosch and Bruegel through fundamental themes in their work (Anfam 705). While de Kooning was painting  

his Judgment Day (which Anfam speculates has imagery that resembles the “fantastic creatures that Bruegel had portrayed” in his paintings), William Carlos Williams was composing Pictures from Brueghel, a sequence of poems based on the paintings of the old master, first published in The Hudson Review and later in a bound volume along with the collections Desert Music and A Journey to Love (in 1962). The Metropolitan Museum of Art included several reproductions of Bruegel’s prints in its June 1943 Bulletin, which de Kooning and Williams were both likely to have seen, as both men were avid readers of the Bulletin and actively engaged with the New York art scene in the 1940s. Though there is no historical evidence that shows Williams visited the Metropolitan to see The Harvesters when it first arrived at the Metropolitan, he had acquired a book of reproductions after paintings by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, read Fritz Grossmann’s writing on him, and decided to make him the subject of one of his final works, for which he posthumously received the Pulitzer Prize in 1963.

Many art historians of the time noticed the expanded interest in Bruegel the Elder during this period, as more of his works surfaced, more in-depth research was completed on recent acquisitions, and invaluable research in German and Dutch was translated to English. Fritz Grossmann, in “New Light on Bruegel,” noted this trend in the early 1950s:

It clearly indicates a constantly growing interest in the art of Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and its inexhaustible challenge to the ingenuity of the modern interpreter, that the number of publications devoted to the artist is continually on the increase. In 1951 and 1952 two standard works, the

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2 All references to the text of Pictures from Brueghel come from The Collected Poems of Williams Carlos Williams, Vol. 2, Ed. Christopher J. MacGowan, pp. 383-393
catalogue of the drawings, by Dr. Charles de Tolnay, carefully revised and greatly expanded, appeared in new German editions as well as, for the first time, in English translations, and since then there has been an unending stream of books and articles in which more or less successful attempts have been made to throw some new light on various aspects of Bruegel’s art and personality (Grossmann 341).

Like modern painters and art critics, modernist poets took a strong interest in Bruegel. His humanism and “matter-of-fact character” appealed to the modernists and his “commitment to everyday” subjects made him a special object of interest for Williams (Koerner 224). The *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence brilliantly portrays the themes that connected this sixteenth-century Flemish painter to twentieth-century American poets. Though, out of all of the modernist poets who considered the work of Pieter Bruegel the Elder in their writing, I contend that Williams’s comes closest to capturing the formal qualities and historical essence of his work in words.

I will begin my analysis of the poems and paintings alluded to in *Pictures from Brueghel* by examining each individually and by comparing them in the way they work thematically, formally, and aesthetically. Major themes that appear in *Pictures from Brueghel* illustrate the “basic rhythms of man’s life and the rhythms of art by which this life can be illuminated,” including marriage, religion, labor, violence, and death, as Joel Connaroe remarks in his essay, “The Measured Dance: Williams’s ‘Pictures from Brueghel’” (Connaroe “The Measured Dance” 569). As a work composed later in Williams’s literary career (its first publication date was in 1960), *Pictures from Brueghel* is a comment on the idea of the artist as a faithful recorder of the environment.
surrounding him. In this Williams found Bruegel to be a kindred spirit, as an artist and craftsman who, like Williams, appreciated the potential in the quotidian.

Numerous poets have composed lines in association with the Bruegel paintings from this collection, the most notable examples being W.H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” on *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and John Berryman’s “Winter Landscape” on *The Hunters in the Snow*. Through these various interpretations of a single painting, one can examine how different writers have confronted the paintings in particular, yet distinct styles, in congruence with the expectations they bring to the work. Conventional notions of vision and representation are contested while looking at Bruegel’s paintings and subsequently when reading through the poems as modern ‘reactions’ to these visual works. As opposed to his contemporaries (namely, Auden and Berryman), Williams wrote about the paintings in his collection of poems through his characteristically Imagist technique, in which he confronts the object without any preconceptions (“direct treatment of the thing”). He used the blank page as his canvas, and spread about the words like paint, guiding us through the image without imposing his point of view too oppressively (though that does not mean that he remains on the level of superficiality; part of the “William Carlos Williams paradox”). He does not allegorize, like Berryman and Auden, but gives us the paintings as they are. The experience of reading his poems, then, is refreshing and unique, both simple and dense—but dense with visual intensity, not heavy metaphorical implication.

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3 My own definition of what I think of as the “William Carlos Williams paradox” (although it’s certainly been mentioned by other authors, including Peter Halter in *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*): There is a paradox in Williams’s poetry of the perfectly constructed, concise, straight-to-the-point, economically devised, form and then an opening out, fluidity, and ease—but intensity, feeling very close to the actual thing or experience when in fact we are held at a strict distance from it.
Absent from *Pictures from Brueghel* are many of Williams’s earlier themes, including a focus on contemporary subject matter and language. He turns, instead, to a “religion of art,” to celebrate the creation of art as the only kind of meaning or immortality available to man. This idea of humans’ relationship to art is encapsulated in an interview John W. Gerber conducted with Williams in 1950 (when Williams was nearing age seventy), during which he remarked:

> When you’re through with sex, with ambition, what can an old man create? Art, of course, a piece of art that will go beyond him into the lives of young people, the people who haven’t had time to create. The old man meets the young people and lives on (Wagner-Martin 62).

Perhaps this is why he also looks back to Bruegel and the old masters in his later works, and to the theme of immortality and permanence in art, in contrast to his early poems on passing, ephemeral moments, like the iconic poem “The Great Figure,” on which Charles Demuth’s poster portrait, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, is based. Williams does, however, retain this Imagist technique in his later poems, as opposed to writers like Ezra Pound, who helped to initiate the Imagist movement but then left it with the rise of international modernism in the 1920s.

Bruegel was likely an influence on Williams for his “capacity to objectively scrutinize” his surroundings, as we see in his vast and complexly detailed landscape paintings (Connaroe “The Measured Dance” 567). Williams, too, found a certain satisfaction in pointing out things in the environment that would likely go unnoticed by others (hence the attractions of writing about a painting like *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* with the lines “…unsignificantly / off the coast / there was // a splash quite
unnoticed / this was / Icarus drowning"). Although in his early career, Williams took up a great interest in modernist painters, primarily of the Stieglitz group (including Charles Demuth, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Charles Sheeler), he increasingly turned to the old masters in his later poems as a source for Imagist inspiration. Among these were Leonardo da Vinci, Dürer, Botticelli, Bosch, Daumier, El Greco, Gauguin, and, of course, Bruegel. Bonnie Costello, in her review on Bram Dijkstra’s edition of *A Recognizable Image*, makes an apt point about the poet’s interest in Bruegel’s paintings:

> It isn’t difficult to see why Williams was attracted to Bruegel. Not only the painter’s choice of low-life subjects but also his detached, comprehensive view of them, recalls the poet's work. On a more formal level, the emphasis on activity, the rich variety of color and shape, and the distinctness of design in these canvases would certainly have appealed to Williams. (Costello, par. 15)

Bruegel’s paintings display subjects that are engaged in daily work or activities, much like past subjects of Williams’s poems (for example, in “The Young Housewife” or “Autumn”). As an Imagist poet, Williams was drawn to color, activity, and energy—he once remarked, “poetry and image were linked in my mind” (Costello, par. 9). Still, however, Williams was committed to a formal design in which his imaginative, pictorial expressions could be constructed. His later poems, including *Pictures from Brueghel*, are composed in the “triad” form, or three-line stanzas. David Perkins notes in *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After* that: “Williams was no longer composing vers

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4 This is from the article, “William Carlos Williams in a World of Painters,” published in the June/July 1979 issue of the *Boston Review*. Costello is reviewing two works in her article: *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* by Bram Dijkstra and *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene, 1920-1940* by Dickran Tashjian.
libre [free verse] as this had ordinarily been conceived in the 1920s” by this point (Perkins 271). In the *Pictures from Brueghel* series, Williams repeatedly references the basic elements of design, composition, and pattern in Bruegel’s painting, but this may also refer to his own poems simultaneously, in their conscious formal construction. However, the poems do not produce the initial effect of careful construction. Instead, they feel spontaneous. The eye moves fluidly across Williams’s lines and an image, true and exact to the painting, is created in the mind. Williams’s skill lies in his ability to make us think that we, too, have spotted the best parts of the picture, though he is carefully directing our line of vision.

The modernist focus on the artist and maker is another central thematic piece to these poems. Without Bruegel, Williams hints, we would not have this window into the lives of sixteenth-century Flemish peasants. Williams, too, actively reawakens these scenes of history for us in a new way. “By turning the past into a creation of individual imagination, into an extension of the American ‘moment’ and the artist’s ‘local consciousness,’ he [Williams] tried to make even history ‘new’” (Dijkstra 24). He introduces to us an original, active way of seeing—one that is critical and comprehensive, though not sentimental, reflective or imposing. Williams gives us a sense of what it is like to view the pictures as an individual viewer, and he tries to give us the same effect that the paintings do in the words of his poems, through formal strategies like rhythm, diction, and imagery.

My goal throughout this essay is to address the ways in which Williams actively “reawakens” history for us in his poems, through the framework of reception aesthetics. Bruegel’s paintings received a renewed interest in the modernist period, because there
was something about that moment that aligned it with these works. As Hans Robert Jauss notes in his 1982 work, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*: “That which was does not interest us because it was, but because in a certain sense it still is” (Jauss 59). Bruegel’s paintings still resonated very much with modernist artists and poets because there was a truth in them that was realized in this moment. Additionally, as Wolfgang Iser states, works can have cultural significance outside of their historical contexts, and I think we see a new light shed on Bruegel’s work in the twentieth-century in this way:

> A text born under the conditions of a specific historical period can outlast that situation and maintain its freshness and its impact in different historical circumstances (Iser qtd. in Holly 449).

That does not mean that Bruegel’s works did not have a certain significance in their own time, but as one sees in examining the *Pictures from Brueghel* poems side-by-side with the Bruegel paintings, their impact has undoubtedly shifted with the time that has passed. For example, William Carlos Williams or John Berryman viewed the paintings with a much different set of expectations than Bruegel’s sixteenth-century Flemish contemporaries would have. I find Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence especially interesting because it enters into a dialogue with Bruegel’s work in a way that traditional art historical texts do not. Williams’s poems give us a unique vision of the total experience of viewing the paintings. In addition, I think his Imagist technique contributes to the visual quality of his poems, which aids in their communication (to us) of what is happening in the paintings. Williams, too, changes our “horizon of expectations” for a reception of Bruegel’s paintings in the future. Here it is helpful to look to the poems themselves for Williams’s distinctive mode of visual representation in
Pictures from Brueghel and to examine the links between this modernist poet and the old master painter.

“Self-Portrait” is an curious poem to begin with, in terms of what it represents and what it does not, and—beyond that—how Williams considers the figure of Bruegel in the poem. Williams wrote this poem on what was considered in his time to be Bruegel’s painting of the same name, but it has been confirmed by numerous art historians since that the painting is neither a self-portrait nor a painting by Bruegel. The painting, originally referred to by Williams in an early subtitle as “The Old Shepherd,” is now attributed by most scholars to the fifteenth-century French painter, Jean Fouquet. Fouquet’s title for the painting is *Portrait of the Ferrara Court Jester Gonella*, therefore making this a portrait of a jester, not an artist.

However, Williams was not aware of the attribution at the time he wrote “Self-Portrait,” and the poem depicts the disheveled appearance of an artist in his “red winter hat” with “blue / eyes smiling.” But the fact that a shepherd or a jester would be viewed in the same light as an artist creates a fascinating insight to the introductory poem of the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence. It is clear in the language of the poem that Williams admires the “artist” in this painting for his heartiness, his “red-rimmed” eyes and his “unshaved” blonde beard that suggest a man too preoccupied with his work to attend to his personal appearance every day (“no time for any- / thing but his painting”). Williams initially draws the viewer’s attention to the large features of the man pictured: “head and shoulders / crowded on the canvas” (as if his upper half has been crammed into the confined space of the canvas), “one / big ear the right showing,” “broad buttons,” “a bulbous nose.” Though as he continues, Williams directs the viewer to the man’s “delicate wrists” which “show him to have been a / man unused to / manual labor.” It is a
notable remark, considering that the painting was thought to have depicted a shepherd, and is now confirmed as a jester. They, too, like the artist, engage in daily work; their work also does not include heavy manual labor, as the shepherd looks after herds of sheep, while the jester creates spectacles for courtly audiences.

Williams certainly celebrates the work of the artist, but it is difficult to say whether he viewed the artist as “a kind of laborer—a workman—a maker in a very plain sense—nothing vague or transcendental about it: that is the artist—at base” in the way that Terrence Diggory puts it in *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting* (Diggory 43). For, early on in his career, Williams gave the artist a more elevated social status than what Diggory allows in his description. He viewed the artist (and himself, by association) as “see-er” or as “a revolutionary that leads society to a recognition of truth” (Dijkstra 17). Though his views were subdued somewhat from these early exclamations when he published *Pictures from Brueghel*, Williams seems to align himself and Bruegel less with the work of the day laborer and more with the work of the chronicler, or the shepherd—who both engage in slow, steady, guiding work. This is emphasized not only by the fact that Williams’s first subtitle for this poem was “The Old Shepherd” but also in the way that the man in the poem is characterized.

When looking at the painting that Williams references, one notices that the characterization is an accurate one, true to the original composition. The man is squeezed into the frame, but shows kind eyes, an unshaven beard, and large, rough features (ear, nose, broad arms) that are set in contrast with his small and smooth, almost feminine hands. The color contrast of this painting is heightened, too, with a red so vivid that it is not hard to see why it was mistaken for so many years as Bruegel’s own work. Williams
directs our focus to the colors of the painting in his first line: “In a red winter hat blue /
eyes smiling” (emphasis added). He notes the abundance of red (which often represents
energy and vitality) in this poem just as he notes the absence of it in a poem later on in
the sequence titled “The Parable of the Blind,” which, by contrast, is a poem about
destruction and descent.

Perhaps Williams also felt a certain kinship with what he thought to be a self-
portrait of the painter Bruegel, a man completely devoted to his artistic work and to the
people of his time. It is said that Bruegel gained the nickname “Peasant Bruegel” for
donning the clothes of a peasant to mingle among them at seasonal celebrations, such as
the harvest, and at weddings (Sellink 151). He witnessed the lives of the ordinary people
around him in a way that Williams connected with—as man and artist who remained
rooted in Rutherford, New Jersey throughout his life and wrote poems on the city, the
people, and the environment of his day-to-day surroundings. As Joseph Leo Koerner
states in his essay “Unmasking the World: Bruegel’s Ethnography,” “Modernist poets,
who celebrated his candid portrayal of ordinary life … recognized a humanism kindred to
their own. By their account, Bruegel’s importance lay in how he humanized art”
(Koerner 224). Despite the referential confusions that are part of this poem, it is an
appropriate beginning to a sequence on the paintings of an artist whom Williams deeply
admired and understood. It is significant, too, because it sets up Bruegel, the artist, as
model and maker for the rest of the poems in the sequence.

Williams considers some of the same themes from “Self-Portrait” in the fourth
poem of the Pictures from Brueghel sequence, “The Adoration of the Kings,” which
illustrates the well-known adoration scene of the Christian tradition. However, as
Williams’s poem communicates, the painting appears to place the work of art above the religious subject (in an ironic, “dispassionate” approach), and Williams comments on the work of art as being a “worship” in itself, an awe-inspiring event (“as a work of art / for profound worship”). Here we receive a second model of the artist passed from Bruegel to Williams.

To begin with, the bucolic nature of Bruegel’s adoration is held in sharp contrast with the scenes painted by the “Italian masters.” Williams notes this difference, in the lines “make a scene copied we’ll say // from the Italian masters / but with a *difference*” (emphasis added). This not only shows Bruegel’s style and method, but also reveals Williams’s own take on Bruegel, who began with a religious scene and transformed it into an adoration that appears as if it could be set in a Flemish, sixteenth-century town. Bruegel makes the scene familiar to his locale and time, an act that Williams would appreciate. Additionally, the subjects of his painting lack the “idealized beauty typical of the Italian manner and of Bruegel’s contemporary Netherlandish Romanists” (Connaroe “The Measured Dance” 574). Williams sees Bruegel as removed from the artistic traditions of his time (though not from the people or things of his time), just as he felt a similar anachronistic experience with the emergence of the New Critical poets years before.

Terence Diggory makes an insightful point about Bruegel’s *Adoration* and the Williams poem that follows it in his book, *William Carlos Williams and the Ethics of Painting*. Not only is Bruegel’s *Adoration* different from those painted by the Italian masters, but Williams’s poem differs from the Bruegel painting in its emphasis on two focal points (both the Virgin Mary and Joseph)—whereas “the painting’s focus” is “on a
single center” (just the Virgin Mary) (Diggory 70). Here one begins to see how Williams has altered the perspective to fit his own horizon of expectations (or Erwartungshorizont, according to Hans Robert Jauss). The effect is one that Diggory notably calls a “double exposure”:

While thus respecting Brueghel’s composition, however, Williams overlays it with a new composition of his own, producing the curious effect of double exposure (Diggory 70).

The term is extremely useful for the way it reflects the work being done over time with Bruegel, Williams, and the receptive audience. Bruegel creates an adoration painting that is, in itself, a reflection of the Italian masters, which is in turn taken into the perspective of Williams and thus “doubly” copied—though “with a difference” as well. Finally, this work is triangulated by the addition of the audience, or viewing public, who will inevitably be affected by the artistic choices that have occurred over time through successive acts of reception.

There is a strong emphasis on the relationships between religion, art, and the artist’s mind in the poem. The internal structure of the poem also changes, for the central focus of the poem shifts away from the religious subject and concentrates on the “resourceful” and “alert” mind of the artist. One could speculate about what Williams’s intended meaning is in lines 14-21:

and the mind the resourceful mind
that governed the whole

the alert mind dissatisfied with
what it is asked to
and cannot do

accepted the story and painted
it in the brilliant
colors of the chronicler

Though, it is clear that Bruegel is the “resourceful mind” that is referenced and that the
work completed by this mind and the artist’s hand is, in itself, worthy of “profound
worship.” Williams also points to the fact that this mind “govern[s] the whole,”
suggesting the role of the artist for Williams to be one who occupies an elevated position
and is also open and receptive to the totality of experience. The artist is in the position to
capture the atmosphere of a period and convey it in his/her work.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this poem, however, is its conclusion, in
which Williams comments on the “downcast eyes of the Virgin / as a work of art / for
profound worship.” Williams incorporates the religious overtones of the painting with
his view of Bruegel as a model for the role that the artist should take up. The resulting
compilation expresses both the religious subject as something that can be worshipped, but
more importantly, the work of art itself (and the artist who brought it to completion) that
is both worthy of worship and praise. Thus, Williams takes on a more secular view of the
adoration scene and shows that it can indeed be read outside of its original, religious
context.

The elevated status of the artist comes across most clearly in the eighth poem of
the Pictures from Brueghel sequence, “The Wedding Dance in the Open Air.” From the
first line, Williams notes that the figures in the picture have been “Disciplined by the
artist / to go round / & round // in holiday gear.” A very exuberant poem, “The Wedding
Dance in the Open Air” conveys the common desire that Bruegel and Williams had to
celebrate the vitality of the human spirit and physical engagement with the outside world.
Bruegel in his painting shows a motley group of peasants, engaging in numerous
activities, including dancing, drinking, and making music. Williams captures the action of the painting in his poem’s language and imagery, through descriptions of the peasants in their “riotously gay rabble” with “mouths agape … kicking up their heels” in dance.

Bruegel was a model to a modern writer like Williams for the way in which he conveyed how a commonplace subject could be depicted in realistic form with richness and lively expression. Williams’s poem, in turn (and perhaps as an homage to Bruegel), emphasizes the role of the artist, who has captured this moment and preserved it in time. The fact that the artist is alluded to in the opening line of the poem is a statement in itself about the artist’s status and his control over the final image portrayed. Bruegel, in Williams’s description, appears to be aligned with the puppeteer, a figure who makes his puppets “go round / & round” in a manner similar to what (Williams thinks) Bruegel is doing with the peasants depicted. Though Williams delves into an Imagist treatment of the peasant’s activities in the middle of the poem, he again reminds us of the fact that the picture has been captured and designed by the artist, by repeating again the lines “round and around” at line sixteen of the poem.

Thus, through the poems “Self-Portrait,” “Adoration of the Kings,” and “The Wedding Dance in the Open Air,” one can observe that Bruegel is deployed as a model for the modern artist. Williams alludes to him as the maker of these works, emphasizing how strongly he feels that Bruegel serves as a model for modern writers, including himself. Though Williams had certainly mastered an objective and direct treatment of the subject in his earlier poems, Bruegel became for him, in this sequence, the epitome of the detached observer. Bruegel’s depiction of the everyday work and festivities of the peasants in the Netherlandish countryside strongly appealed to modernist poets like
Williams because of their energy, action, and spontaneity—the foundation of Imagist technique. Bruegel’s paintings delineate the way in which a modern artist could successfully portray daily subjects with a perspicacious eye and balanced composition. These elements Williams extracts from the paintings represented in “Self-Portrait,” “Adoration of the Kings,” and “The Wedding Dance in the Open Air.”
II. Peasant Bruegel, Doctor Williams: “Peasant Wedding”

In the preceding section, I discussed the ways in which Bruegel served as a model for modern writers like Williams Carlos Williams. However, Bruegel and Williams had more in common than their subject matter or style, for they both lead lives of dual existence. Williams was both a doctor and a poet, which perhaps contributed to the way that he objectively detailed physical objects in the environment, detached from emotional sentiment (like a doctor necessarily must be when viewing his patients). Bruegel, too, worked as a painter but he also mingled with the Flemish peasant class, and it’s rumored that he often dressed as one to seamlessly fit into the crowd. Accordingly, his paintings reflect the boisterous and vivacious nature of peasant gatherings. Both Bruegel and Williams viewed their works with a detached point of view but the detail of their subjects reveals a shared concern with local settings, the complexity of human interactions, work, leisure, and seasonal influences. These shared sympathies set up Williams as an appropriate interpreter of Bruegel’s work. The overall effect of this doubled relation is one of looking at something from a distance, but understanding and noting the very minute particulars of that action or event (being both in it and separate from it). In this section, then, I want to discuss how this double consciousness ties into the duality of past/present in Williams’s reading of Bruegel’s paintings, transporting them out of the sixteenth-century and making them meaningful in the modernist moment.

“Peasant Wedding” is the fifth poem of Pictures from Brueghel, situated at the center of the sequence, if one counts “Children’s Games” (X) as one poem with three distinct parts. The painting by Bruegel has been interpreted (especially in light of Flemish proverbs from Bruegel’s own time) as a study on the evils of gluttony, as Walter
S. Gibson notes in his essay on “Festive Peasants Before Bruegel.” Gibson notes, according to a fifteenth-century Swiss poem entitled *Wittenwiler’s Ring*, that there were “two types of peasants” in this time: “the one who ‘wisely support[ed] himself by honest work’ and the other who ‘live[d] wrongly and act[ed] foolishly’” (Gibson 292). Gibson debates the representation of peasants in Bruegel’s work, considering first the “bad peasant” at work. In the passage below, he gives a description of the ill-mannered peasant:

> He is the stupid, boisterous, quarrelsome *boer*, whose drunken kermises and rowdy weddings, often ending in a bloody brawl, epitomize the very opposite of what the burgher and the courtier considered to be proper behavior (Gibson 293).

One can imagine how *Peasant Wedding* could be looked at in this light. The floor is strewn with empty liquor jugs in the left hand corner of the picture, food and drink are consumed with gusto around the table, and a jostling crowd is seen, far in the background, at the entrance of the room (suggesting that the crowd will soon enlarge and the reception may get a bit rowdy). However, as Gibson appears to conclude in his essay, and as I see it, neither Bruegel nor Williams were viewing these peasants in a negative way. Bruegel’s audience may have looked at the painting and perceived it as a proverb warning of the revels of the “bad peasant” but this interpretation seems foreign to Williams.

Williams, instead, in his “Peasant Wedding” poem, focuses on some details that would have been recognized in a sixteenth-century reading, but many of the ones he extracts from the picture might feel arbitrary or insignificant to Bruegel’s contemporary
audience. These would include the “hound” (which is barely discernable under the table on the right), the “spoon” in the “hatband” of the server, or the “starched” white “headgear” that the peasant women wear (which, if anything, implies a sense of order and structure rather than rowdiness and dishevelment). What makes Williams’s reading most different from a sixteenth-century one, though, is likely his focus on the bride and her role in this scene, for a reading that focused on the negative nature of peasant revelry would be more focused on figures of movement and action. As Williams points out in his poem, the bride is the most silent, solitary figure in this scene. All of the other wedding guests are chatting, eating, and drinking, but “the bride / hands folded in her / lap is awkwardly silent simple” according to Williams. Although her hair is compared to a golden head of ripe wheat at first (a bright, fertile image), throughout the course of the poem we realize that the bride is separated from the loud and merry action that surrounds her. She sits “enthroned” by a dark tapestry behind her, dressed in a dark green gown, with her hands folded and eyes closed. The bride in “Peasant Wedding” recalls that idea of being both in an event and being separate or detached from it simultaneously.

Williams also takes on a modern interpretation of the painting by pointing to her as the focal point (textual clues that point to this interpretation: the bride is mentioned twice in his poem, whereas the bridegroom is briefly given the direction “pour the wine” at the top of the poem).

Williams’s use of language in “Peasant Wedding” is especially interesting as well for its mixture of past and present elements that reflect that rich history—proverbially and traditionally—through the various readings the painting has undergone. The aural effect of words like “clabber” and “gabbing” is very strong. They sound like old words
and they are old words. Clabber, for instance, has its etymology in the Irish and Gaelic “clabar” and means “milk naturally curdled.” It was first used by playwright John Ford in 1634 in the *Chronicle of Perkin Warbeck: A Strange Truth*, and so came into use only a few decades after Bruegel’s death in 1569 (Oxford English Dictionary). Similarly, the word “trestle” used in line 18 is another word from Middle English that came into use in the 1400s and would have been in regular use by Bruegel’s time. The significance of Williams’s use of these words is that he is both referring to an older time and he is also recreating the lively noise that Bruegel probably would have heard at a wedding like this through their onomatopoeic effect. As Michael Ann Holly states in “Reciprocity and Reception Theory”: “Far from getting lost to the word, powerful images get inside words and help to determine their choice, as well as what they have to say” (Holly 453). For Williams, the visual effects determine his verbal expression, and as we see in this poem, the result is very effective.

In the following section, I will discuss the role of “the insignificant” in modern poetry, and how two Bruegel paintings, *The Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* and *The Hunters in the Snow*, became iconic sources of inspiration for modernist poets who dealt with this theme. Williams’s poems from the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence will be the main focus, but I will also look at poems by W.H. Auden, John Berryman, Walter de la Mare, and Joseph Langland in response to the Bruegel paintings. All of the poems show evidence of a modern interest in Bruegel and represent a thematic continuity between several different horizons. Bruegel’s technique in these works is described in the following way:
Each of these paintings also involves the technique employed by many Mannerist painters, of hiding the main character so deeply into the painting that he or she is difficult or impossible to find. The purpose of this technique is to compel the viewer to look at the painting actively so as to engage it (Bonn 31).

Thus, these works are also about engaging in a dialogue with the work of art, and different poets of course do this in different ways.
III. Recognizing the “Insignificant”: “Hunters in the Snow” and “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”

“Hunters in the Snow”
Different poems written on Brueghel’s painting, *Hunters in the Snow*, c. 1565:

**Winter Landscape**

John Berryman

The three men coming down the winter hill
In brown, with tall poles and a pack of
heels, through the arrangement of the trees,
Past the five figures at the burning straw,
Returning cold and silent to their town,

Returning to the drifted snow, the rink
Lively with children, to the older men,
The long companions they can never reach,
The blue light, men with ladders, by the
church
The sledge and shadow in the twilit street,

Are not aware that in the sandy time
To come, the evil waste of history
Outstretched, they will be seen upon the
brow
Of that same hill: when all their company
Will have been irrecoverably lost,

These men, this particular three in brown
Witnessed by birds will keep the scene and
say
By their configuration with the trees,
The small bridge, the red houses and the
fire,
What place, what time, what morning
occasion

**Hunters in the Snow: Brueghel**

Joseph Langland

Quail and rabbit hunters with tawny
hounds,
Shadowless, out of late afternoon
Trudge toward the neutral evening of
indeterminate form

Sent them into the wood, a pack of hounds
At heel and the tall poles upon their
shoulders,
Thence to return as now we see them and
Ankle-deep in snow down the winter hill
Descend, while three birds watch and the
fourth
flies.

**Brueghel’s Winter**

Walter de la Mare

Jagg'd mountain peaks and skies ice-green
Wall in the wild, cold scene below.
Churches, farms, bare copse, the sea
In freezing quiet of winter show;
Where ink-black shapes on fields in flood
Curling, skating, and sliding go.
To left, a gabled tavern; a blaze;
Peasants; a watching child; and lo,
Muffled, mute--beneath naked trees
In sharp perspective set a-row--
Trudge huntsmen, sinister spears aslant,
Dogs snuffling behind them in the snow;
And arrowlike, lean, athwart the air
Swoops into space a crow.

But flame, nor ice, nor piercing rock,
Nor silence, as of a frozen sea,
Nor that slant inward infinite line
Of signboard, bird, and hill, and tree,
Give more than subtle hint of him
Who squandered here life's mystery.
Done with their blood-announced day
Public dogs and all the passionless
mongrels
Through deep snow
Trail their deliberate masters
Descending from the upper village home in
lovering light.
Sooty lamps
Glow in the stone-carved kitchens.
This is the fabulous hour of shape and form
  When Flemish children are gray-black-olive
And green-dark-brown
Scattered and skating informal figures
On the mill ice pond.
Moving in stillness
A hunched dame struggles with her bundled sticks,
  Letting her evening's comfort cudgel her
While she, like jug or wheel, like a wagon
cart
Walked by lazy oxen along the old
snowlanes,
  Creeps and crunches down the old
dusty street.
High in the fire-red dooryard
Half unhitched the sign of the Inn
Hangs in wind
Tipped to the pitch of the roof.
Near it anonymous parents and peasant girl,
Living like proverbs carved in the alehouse
walls,
  Gather the country evening into their arms
And lean to the glowing flames.

Now in the dimming distance fades
The other village; across the valley
  Imperturbable Flemish cliffs and crags
Vaguely advance, close in, loom
Lost in nearness. Now
The night-black raven perched in branching
boughs
Opens its early wing and slipping out
Above the gray-green valley
Weaves a net of slumber over the snow-capped homes.

  And now the church, and then the walls
and
roofs
Of all the little houses are become
Close kin to shadow with small lantern
eyes.
And now the bird of evening
  With shadows streaming down from its
gliding wings
  Circles the neighboring hills
Of Hertogenbosch, Brabant.

Darkness stalks the hunters,
Slowly sliding down,
Falling in beating rings and soft diagonals.
Lodged in the vague vast valley the village
sleeps.

The Hunters in the Snow

William Carlos Williams

The over-all picture is winter
icy mountains
in the background the return
from the hunt it is toward evening
from the left
sturdy hunters lead in
their pack the inn-sign
hanging from a
broken hinge is a stag a crucifix
between his antlers the cold
inn yard is
deserted but for a huge bonfire
that flares wind-driven tended by
women who cluster
about it to the right beyond
the hill is a pattern of skaters
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen
a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture
In “The Hunters in the Snow,” one sees Williams’s distinct mode of vision and representation come through, especially when his writing is held in contrast to different representations of this Bruegel painting in poetry. Williams’s poem marks the division between the main event of the painting (the hunters returning) and the act of the artist designing his work, choosing what is to be included and what is to be discarded from the picture. He, therefore, points out the modernist role of the artist and gives a reading of the painting that conveys its mood without remarking on the inner psychology of the hunters or the peasants of this Flemish village. His reading is, necessarily, tailored to his artistic environment, as a modern imagist poet.

Bruegel is often admired for the composition in his paintings. *Hunters in the Snow* is no exception, composed of sharp diagonals that emphasize the movement of the hunters as they descend toward the village, in addition to highlighting (through strong lines and edges of the crisp snow and the dark, bare trees) the sharp, stinging chill of a winter day in the Netherlands. Williams nods to the strong composition of the painting through the composition of his own poem, which is brief, but concise and full of striking imagery. Williams begins with a totalizing sense of vision (“the over-all picture is winter”), breaks down this unified focus to scattered details of the action that occur in the painting, and then concludes with the statement that:

```
Brueghel the painter
concerned with it all has chosen
a winter-struck bush for his
foreground to
complete the picture . . .
```

These lines feature Bruegel, alongside the hunters, as a subject of focus for Williams. Bruegel, “the painter,” controls the action and depiction of this winter scene. He chooses
to arrange the skaters in a “pattern” on the hill and completes the composition with a
“winter-struck bush” placed in the foreground. Some scholars have noted that Bruegel
was perhaps attempting to create an idealized landscape in seasonal paintings like
_Hunters in the Snow_, since the 1560s were a time of religious upheaval in the
Netherlands. Bruegel’s seasonal paintings, then, present an idealized, framed (and stable)
image of what he or his patron desired in the representation of peasant life at this time—
that was the horizon of his moment. The idealized landscape of Bruegel’s craftsmanship
is not lost on Williams, who conveys the scene with similar detail, though with a
modernist sensibility.

Williams is the only poet of those who have written on this painting to mention
the painter or emphasize his importance as the artist who has captured this scene. The
three other poets, all in their own ways, describe the action of the painting—but they all
speculate on Bruegel’s vision while Williams takes the position of remaining on the
“surface of the picture” (Halter 84). Berryman and de la Mare both comment on the
“mystery” of the hunters and question their task. Langland focuses on the Flemish tone of
the painting in lines like “When Flemish children are gray-black-olive, the
“Imperturbable Flemish cliffs” and the Flemish town “Hertogenbosch” and province
“Brabant.” Williams also notices the “inn-sign” that Bruegel so closely detailed with the
words “_dit is in ‘t her_” or “The Deer,” adding a tone of irony to the return of the hunters,
who come home without any captured game. Williams takes pride in noticing these
seemingly insignificant details in the world around him and in the world of paintings.
The punctuation here also emphasizes that signs and hinges can be connecting elements,
as in the lines: “the inn-sign / hanging from a / broken-hinge is a stag a crucifix / between his antlers” (lines 7-10).

Joseph Leo Koerner, in his article on “Bruegel’s Ethnography,” suggests the following about what Bruegel presented to modernist poets: “The challenge posed by Bruegel is not, for these modernists, one of finding significance but of learning to attend to insignificance” (Koerner 224). This note is crucial, because it ties back into the themes connecting Bruegel to Williams in the first place (and likewise, to other modernist writers). These include themes of everyday life and labor, images of what Koerner calls “earthbound humanity” (Koerner 224). Jason Miller, in an essay on the fate of modern art, states that: “The beauty of modern art lies in making significant the insignificant” (Miller 44). Insignificance is brought up in many contexts in speaking about modern artistic work—both visual and literary—and it certainly suits Williams’s method of writing, with his focus on (at times) mundane objects that would pass unnoticed by many others. This attention to insignificance was also an important theme in Bruegel’s time, as scientific discoveries and explorations began to slowly undermine theology’s dominance in the world. To quote Miller again (who in this passage is quoting Hegel):

When art sheds its religious occupation, it turns its gaze to the particulars of existence and ‘exalt[s] these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice’ (Hegel qtd. in Miller 44).

Bruegel was not trapped in the constraints of “medieval devotion,” and his sense of truth to art was closely tied to his sense of ethics and his connection to the human experience.
Thus, he could turn his focus to nature, in landscapes, seasonals, and genre scenes of daily life.

This naturally leads to a discussion of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, perhaps most famous for the seemingly “insignificant” detail of Icarus drowning in the corner of the painting, if one is not familiar with the allegorical tale behind it. Bruegel’s attention to the farmer ploughing his field in the foreground and, in Williams’s words, the “edge of the sea” that is “concerned / with itself” is contrasted with Icarus’ splash that goes “unnoticed” in the background. Williams, in his poem about the painting, even uses the term “insignificantly” in alluding to the mythical event (of Icarus’ fall in Ovid’s tale) that Bruegel’s portrays:

```
insignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning
```

Williams’s description of the painting, however, remains on the surface of things. He focuses on the detail of the “farmer… ploughing / his field” and the “sun / that melted / the wings’ wax.” If Williams’s poem does make any commentary on the painting, it is seen in his choice of words that both detail the scene and show a contrast between awareness and unawareness. For example, the words “spring,” “pageantry,” “awake,” and “tingling,” all suggest an awareness or awakening but also, possibly, a spectacle or performance. Beyond these minor suggestions, however, Williams does not explicitly delve into Icarus’ mythical history or its cultural significance.

Critics like Joseph Koerner see Williams’s position justified in an “elimination of
allegory and myth” that is akin to Bruegel’s interest in peasant subjects and everyday events as opposed to myth, perhaps why we see the peasant farmer looming so large in the foreground while Icarus’ splash off to the far right in the background is less distinguishable (Koerner 224). However, literary critic Christopher Braider stands on the opposing side of this discussion. He criticizes Williams for his “lack of allegorizing exegesis” and his refusal to elaborate on the mythological subject (Braider 72). Braider, instead, favors W.H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” for its “richly descriptive” nature, which he insists is more “faithful to the picture than Williams’s” poem since it confronts and details the mythological history in the painting (Braider 74). In short, Braider is critical of Williams for receiving Bruegel in a specific modernist context—one which was different from Auden’s simply because the two poets had different beliefs and artistic styles. He states:

What Williams sees in Bruegel is his own modernism, the realistic representation of tangible objects divorced from symbolism paradoxically echoing the antirepresentational idiom of the American cubists of the twenties and thirties (Braider 75).

And this is true—Williams was viewing Bruegel in the mid-twentieth century in the context of his own modernist, secular expectations, and thus the poems of the Pictures from Brueghel sequence reflect this in many ways. Braider also opposes the thought of Williams’s historicizing spirit by noting: “However directly Bruegel may seem to speak to us, we cannot lift him from his historical context as a mid-Renaissance painter” (Braider 77). Williams refutes this thought by taking themes from the sixteenth-century past of the painting to the modern (twentieth-century) present and by putting them into
the context of his own expectations. Williams affirms the evolving nature of Bruegel’s painting (when viewed in a modernist light), and the fact that Auden—another poet from the same period, but with a distinctly separate horizon of expectations—also wrote a poem about *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* is very interesting. It suggests that both Williams and Auden are extracting meaning from the Bruegel painting, meaning that existed at the time of its production, but over the years has been richly discovered, defined, and historicized by its audiences. As Hans Robert Jauss comments in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*: “In the triangle of author, work and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history. The historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participations of its addressees” (Jauss 19). And this, too, is applicable to visual works like the Bruegel paintings. A question to consider, then, with these ideas in mind, is what is the role of the audience/beholder and how do William Carlos Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel* poems realize formal aspects of the paintings they describe? This question will be discussed in the following section on “Trends in Formal Composition: ‘Haymaking,’ ‘Corn Harvest,’ and the ‘Parable of the Blind’” in the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence.
IV. TRENDS IN FORMAL COMPOSITION: “HAYMAKING,” “CORN HARVEST,” AND “THE PARABLE OF THE BLIND”

“As mentioned above, Williams incorporates in several poems from the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence the basic elements of design, composition, color, and pattern. His poems pay special attention to the way in which the formal aspects of the paintings contribute to their internal meaning. Although these trends are referenced in many poems from the sequence (including “The Hunters in the Snow,” which was previously discussed in section III), they are most evident in the poems “Haymaking,” “Corn Harvest,” and “The Parable of the Blind.”

One of the most important formal aspects of the Bruegel paintings in this set is their use of perspective, which was mathematically and rationally defined by the Renaissance intellectuals of Bruegel’s time. Perspective became an extremely important element of design, because it gave two-dimensional objects the effect of being three-dimensional—thus giving them a sense of realism. Additionally, Braider comments in his essay “*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*: The Death of Allegory and the Discovery of the World in the Elder Pieter Bruegel” on perspective’s effect:

“In this sense, more crucial than perspective itself is the project to which all of these devices contribute: a certain realism reproducing the look of the world of ordinary secular experience” (Braider 79). As Braider insightfully comments here, the introduction of perspective allowed paintings to more accurately portray the world of everyday experience instead of relying on medieval notions of space or following the
practice of sizing figures according to their religious or symbolic importance.

For perspective to work effectively, though, there is a reliance on the beholder/audience to provide the “third dimension,” or the comprehensive point of view that brings it all together. E.H. Gombrich states in *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* that the “psychology of perception is crucial” and he places great emphasis on the beholder of the work of art (Gombrich 243-250). There must be “visual cues” on the canvas which lead the beholder to a specific way of seeing—and of course, the goal of perspective was to get the beholder to see in three dimensions.

Williams’s *Pictures from Brueghel* poems act as that outside point of view which completes the perspective of the painting. Each poem is an idiosyncratic response that communicates the formal design of the painting as well as the subjective impression it makes. Thus, in the three poems that focus heavily on elements of formal composition and design (“Haymaking,” “Corn Harvest,” and “Parable of the Blind”), Williams is realizing those formal details in his poems. This is achieved largely through their self-construction, vibrant imagery, and verbal expression.

“Haymaking” is the sixth poem in the sequence of *Pictures from Brueghel*. It is based on Bruegel’s *Haymaking or July* painting of 1565. The painting is formally constructed with a foreground in which we see peasants harvesting berries and vegetables, three peasant women carrying rakes while walking along the dirt road, and a man repairing his scythe to the far left. In the middle ground, marked out by a bright, golden yellow that distinguishes the wheat fields from the rusty-colored dirt road, smaller figures are seen pitching hay in the field. The baskets on the peasants’ heads in the
foreground echo the distant haystacks of this middle ground. Finally, a dark green forest of trees and domestic buildings sets off the background and a winding river leads on to the next village far beyond. Bruegel creates a vast sense of space in the layered composition of this seasonal scene and Williams senses this in his poem.

From Williams’s point of view in “Haymaking,” Bruegel’s painting is not simply just showing an idealized, harmonious landscape in which the people physically work with the land and, in return, it provides them with the sustenance they need. His first lines—“The living quality of / the man’s mind / stands out”—suggest an importance placed on the force of man’s imaginative capacity. Certainly in the next few lines of the poem, we see how Williams is playing on physical versus immaterial properties of life and art. He says:

```
painting
  that the Renaissance
  tried to absorb
  but
  it remained a wheat field
  over which the
  wind played
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These lines indicate that there is some sort of failed attempt on the part of artists who tried to convert the immaterial into the material i.e. in the form of paint on their canvases. Williams remarks that they could not grasp the ineffable quality of nature, hinted in the lines that give a whimsical, Romantic image of the wind lightly playing over the wheat field (lines 10-12). The image of the wind here is perfect, because it’s something that one cannot see, touch or shape. The idea of trying to acquire control over nature’s processes is again referenced in the lines following those above: “men with scythes tumbling / the
wheat in / rows.” The men with their scythes are just like the artists with their paintbrushes, attempting to grasp and control nature through their respective tools. But Williams appears to be linking man’s imaginative processes to nature—the “living” immeasurable “quality of…man’s mind”—is like the wind playing over the wheat fields. It cannot be taken or controlled (“no one / could take that / from him”).

Williams’s poem, in this way, is mirroring the composition of the painting on which it is based. In the painting, we clearly see the peasant figures in the foreground, but because of the perspective used, we (and Williams) also see the vast expanse that lies beyond the immediate moment of these peasants working during the haymaking season. By supplying the third dimension, and completing the perspective of the painting, Williams’s “Haymaking” realizes both the physical work of man, the attempt to control and “absorb” (as in the foreground) and also the things that make this impossible (as reflected in the vastness of nature in the background). And perhaps in this contrast Williams is also commenting on the difference between making and mimicry. Here, again, we see Bruegel lauded as an artist who makes original works according to the atmosphere of his own artistic moment and he is set apart from the general reference to the “Renaissance” made in Williams’s poem. He is, instead, connected to the unique “living quality” of the mind that has the force to survive throughout the centuries and become immortalized for future generations, as Williams hoped his own work would be. Overall, though, this “Haymaking” poem incorporates aspects of the formal composition into its own meaning and affirms the perspective of the painting (the vastness of space Bruegel wants to portray) in its reference to things unreachable or ineffable (the idea of something “beyond our grasp”).
The poem that follows “Haymaking” in the sequence is “The Corn Harvest,” which also represents a seasonal scene, of late summer and the time of harvesting. Williams describes the spatial organization of the painting in terms of the organization of work and leisure in his poem. He notes that the “painting is organized / about a young // reaper,” pointing to the central focus of the composition, which is repeatedly brought up in the diction of the poem (emphasis added). For example, other references to the “center” that the young reaper inhabits are in lines 5 “noonday rest” (noon being the “center” of the day) and 22-24 “resting / center of / their workaday world.”

With this painting, as well as the preceding Haymaking painting, Williams realizes the perspective of the picture in his poem, and directs our focus of vision to the young reaper. The reaper who is “enjoying his / noonday rest” is positioned near the center of the composition, sleeping by a large tree that divides the painting into those figures who are working (the men in the rows of wheat) and those who are at rest. In terms of formal positioning, the figures who are at rest, including the young reaper and the group of peasants who gather in a circle beside him, are larger to us than the figures working in the fields or with bundles of hay off to the side. This formal element reinforces the main focus of the painting, and Williams is attuned to this and elaborates on it in “The Corn Harvest” poem. The curved dip of the cornfields following the path of the road gives a dynamic tone to the picture, shadowing the motions and movements of labor. This is contrasted with the stasis of the figures at rest in the foreground of the painting. While Williams sees this dynamic between labor and leisure and by referring to the young reaper at the center of the painting, he also is simultaneously commenting on the lunchtime hour of leisure that divides the two halves of the workday (as in “center of /
their workaday world”). The title “Corn Harvest” belies the central focus of the composition and Williams notices that the organization of the painting points as much to leisure as it does to the work of the harvest.

It also seems obvious that Williams would have noticed the intense coloring of The Corn Harvest painting. At noontime on a summer’s day the sun rises to its peak, covering the entire landscape with its bright glare. To reflect this summertime brightness and hotness, Bruegel has painted the cornfields in a richly saturated yellow. Williams recognizes this is in the poem, by first exclaiming “Summer!” to indicate the season to his reader, and then by noting that the young reaper does not share the shade of the tree with the other peasants. This is indicated in the lines: “they gather gossiping / under a tree // whose shade / carelessly / he does not share” (17-21). And, if one looks closely, it does appear that there is a shade given by the large tree near the painting’s center.

Through attention to color and shading in the composition of the painting, Williams is finding ways to make the difference between labor and rest spatial and compositional.

Finally, “The Parable of the Blind” is another poem in the Pictures from Brueghel sequence that realizes formal elements of the painting through its subjective expression. To continue with the discussion on emphasis of color (as in “The Corn Harvest”), Williams remarks that this “parable of the blind” is “without a red // in the composition.” When looking to the painting itself, there is actually a bit of red present, but it is much darker in hue than the red of “Self-Portrait” or “Haymaking.” This detail is important for Williams, because it registers with him as not only an absence of color, but also as a reflection on the lack of vibrancy or liveliness in this scene. The vivid red color could be representative of a life-giving force (blood, health, flushing cheeks, etc.) that is absent
from this scene. This ghastly parable is told in tones of grays, greens, and browns. Williams remarks on this in his first line—“This horrible but superb painting”—indicating that although it is a sad depiction, it is done masterfully.

Color is just one formal element of the painting, however, and Williams mentions composition in this poem more explicitly than any other from the sequence. He first uses it in the lines about the absence of red ("without a red // in the composition") and then twice more in the poem in lines 11 "the composition ends back" and 22 “no detail extraneous // to the composition” (line 22 is also important to Williams’s theory that a poem should be constructed with nothing but the essentials). Williams comments on the descending motion created by Bruegel’s composition in: “a group / of beggars leading / each other diagonally downward,” which is also similar to “The Hunters in the Snow” with the hunters leading in from the left and moving diagonally downward as well. Both scenes represent a loss of some sort, for the hunters it was returning from the hunt without any game, and for these beggars it is a loss of faith or reason (depending on the viewer’s reading). Williams also repeatedly refers back to Bruegel’s visual depiction of the parable with words like “painting,” “canvas,” and “picture.” It is clear from these aspects of the poem that Williams was very concerned with the formal construction of Bruegel’s painting and that he thought that its formal elements significantly contributed to the painting’s meaning.

What is most interesting about this painting is that it is read so differently by a secular modernist like Williams than it would have been by the Christian humanist audience of Bruegel’s time. Bruegel’s Parable of the Blind would have been recognized as an illustration of Christ’s parable of the blind leading the blind. Jesus Christ in the
Gospels asks, “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?”

(Matthew 15:14) The parable is that one cannot teach what one does not know. For example, one cannot judge on spiritual matters when he/she is not illuminated by a spiritual force from above. This is the “light” that Williams speaks about in his poem. However, for him, it is a belief in the “light” that “blinds” the beggars and causes them to be ignorant of the disaster that lies right before them. This can be seen clearly in the last two stanzas:

```
the faces are raised
  as toward the light
there is no detail extraneous

to the composition one
  follows the others stick in
hand triumphant to disaster
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The line “as toward the light” here says it all. It is Williams’s way of saying: their faces were raised, as if toward the light (if the light existed, which it does not for Williams).

In addition, other parts of the painting’s composition could be seen differently based on whether the point of view is a secular twentieth-century one or a Christian humanist sixteenth-century one. For instance, the steeple of the church in the background directly lines up with the beggar’s outstretched hand upon the stick that separates the blind beggar who will soon fall from the one who has already begun his descent. In the sixteenth-century Christian humanist reading, this formal detail would represent the moment at which the individual is lead astray from the teachings of the church or fails to follow its doctrine—the descent marks a “falling away” from the church’s teachings. On the other hand, from a secular twentieth-century point of view, this element could be read as marking the point of false belief that leads to a false step. In other words, blind belief
in the church and its teachings will cause one to blunder, and that kind of unrestrained belief that goes unchecked could possibly lead to disaster. In either reading, that element of the formal composition is crucial.

To sum up, in the poems “Haymaking,” “The Corn Harvest,” and “The Parable of the Blind,” the reader’s particular point of view could determine the interpretation of the painting’s meaning. As seen with these poems, the formal composition of the paintings, including elements such as color, organization, detail, and perspective, all count. Williams captures this thought in the formal construction of his own poems and in the repeated references to aspects of composition. Overall, these poems help to realize internally the meaning packed into Bruegel’s works, and as seen in works like The Parable of the Blind, the paintings can be read differently according to the audience. There are certain “visual clues” that the artist leaves on the canvas (like the church steeple in The Parable of the Blind), but final interpretation is really based on the historical position of the viewer.
V. TYING IT ALL TOGETHER: “CHILDREN’S GAMES”

“EVERYTHING / IS MOTION”

- WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

“Children’s Games” is the final poem of the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence. It is divided into three parts, perhaps because of the density of action depicted in the painting, which requires that equal space be reserved for verbal description. In many ways, this poem is an ideal resolution to the themes discussed in earlier poems from the sequence. The focal point of the poem (in my opinion) is the statement that “everything is motion” (lines 11-12), a phrase where Williams removes the “in” from between “is” and “motion” for economy of phrase and to make it feel all-encompassing and swifter in execution. The quote represents the atmosphere of the painting and the quality of art’s shifting status over time. Williams opens us up to the “historically evolving possibility of art,” or the dynamic nature of art’s meaning in different historical moments.

As literary critics have pointed out, there are even references to some of the other poems in the sequence in “Children’s Games.” A “play wedding” (line 16) could refer back to “Peasant Wedding” or “Wedding Dance in the Open Air,” “christening” (line 17) likewise with “The Adoration of the Kings,” the “boys / … swimming / bare-ass” (lines 7-9) may allude to “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” and finally the game of “blindman’s-buff” (line 30) to the “Parable of the Blind” (Connaroe “The Measured Dance” 577). Another interesting fact, recorded by Joel Connaroe in his article on “The Measured Dance” of *Pictures from Brueghel* is that “a reproduction of this painting still occupies a prominent place in the picture-lined living room of the Williams house in Rutherford” (Connaroe “The Measured Dance” 577). This fact certainly serves as evidence of Williams’s deep interest in Bruegel’s work, in addition to a connection with
this painting in particular.

The painting encourages a very active, involved way of looking, and Williams’s poem reflects the busyness and compressed action of Bruegel’s painting. For instance, the following lines catalogue, in a very compressed manner, the variety of games (which add up to at least 82 according to Robert L. Bonn’s *Painting Life*) being played:

blindman’s-buff follow the
leader stilts
high and low tipcat jacks
bowls hanging by the knees

And the poem continues its description in this way, expressing the compacted action of the picture in the enjambment and compression of its own lines. Just as Bruegel does with the formal perspective of paintings like *Haymaking* and *Parable of the Blind*, he presents a complex way of seeing in *Children’s Games* that relies on our participation in the picture. As Bonn puts it:

What Bruegel has accomplished in this painting is to present painting as a way of thinking. And this painting entails a way of looking, a certain willingness to credit what one finds inside images…one has to marvel at how Bruegel can transport us across four centuries into the immediate kinesis of the game (Bonn 34-35).

Williams has picked up on this fact, that Bruegel’s paintings (and especially one like *Children’s Games*) have the force to “transport” us back to the sixteenth-century through the act of the game. And, in a way, Williams is also “transporting” them forward, by bringing the picture back into focus in the mid-twentieth century. Robert Bonn also later notes on *Children’s Games* that: “the very act of looking at the painting becomes a
“Children’s Games” for the viewing audience (Bonn 35). This statement comments on the playfulness and “grim // humor” of the picture as well as the multiple layers of meaning embedded in the picture. There are so many different ways to enter into the painting—from a viewer’s perspective—that the interpretations of the painting are equally varied and diverse.

“Children’s Games” also captures an element of violence and disorder that is clearly a part of the painting. The games played involve the enthusiasm of play, but they also show the opposite side, of the injuries that can be incurred while participating in the games. For instance, Williams in his poem talks about a game in which children “make use of / a swinging / weight / with which // at random / to bash in the / heads about.” The simultaneous involvement of joy and violence in the game is metaphorically connected to life itself and the creation of art. Art, for example, may appear to be ordered and simple on the surface (like Williams’s poems often do), but artistic works are often deeply concerned with internal questions of life, death, suffering, and violence. But this is the visual intelligence of Williams’s descriptions. He manages to verbally express what they visually convey, and Williams does it with thematic cohesion as well as formal continuity. As quoted earlier: “…even when the subject matter is of a very violent nature, as is often the case with Williams [and Bruegel], the extreme surface of the poem remains or attempts to remain at a dead calm. It is a poetry as closely allied to painting as any I know” (Shapiro 106).

Williams’s choice to end the sequence with “Children’s Games” emphasizes the focus of Pictures from Brueghel on the elements of color, activity, energy, motion, and change. These values are present in everyday life and in art that represents the activities of daily living, as Bruegel’s genre paintings and Williams’s poems convincingly do.
Additionally, Williams ends with a painting that is very dynamic in terms of structure and composition, thematically related to the previous poems of the sequence, and in his poem Williams refers to Bruegel directly. In the section on “Bruegel as a Model for the Modern Artist,” I discussed how Williams repeatedly focused on the act of Bruegel’s creative work in the poems “Self-Portrait,” “Wedding Dance,” and “Adoration of the Kings.” The movement of the sequence comes full circle with the conclusion of “Children’s Games,” then, as Williams pays tribute to the painter that recorded these actions on his canvas:

Brueghel saw it all
and with his grim

humor faithfully
recorded
it

This complements nicely the first poem of the sequence, “Self-Portrait,” which details the artist with his “blond beard half trimmed / no time for any- / thing but his painting.” Thus, the sequence ends by directing our focus back to the importance of the role of the artist, in creating and preserving cultural histories through the generations.
As I stated in the introduction, it has been my goal in this paper to illustrate the ways in which Williams actively “reawakens” history for us, in his *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence, through the lens of reception theory. I employed the method espoused by Hans Robert Jauss in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, which suggests that meaning is historical and that it evolves through successive acts of reception over time. In addition, I looked to Wolfgang Iser, who insisted that the reader/beholder was integral to discovering meaning in an object and that texts can outlive their historical circumstances and have a fresh impact on future generations. It became clear through my research that Pieter Bruegel the Elder and William Carlos Williams certainly had a shared sympathy for everyday subjects, irony, human interactions, color, activity, and energy. In a broader sense, too, Bruegel’s work resonated well with the modernist moment and Williams’s historicizing spirit brought it into communication with his time. Williams serves as an appropriate “guide” to Bruegel for us because of their shared sensibilities and because he always respected the “true essence” of the work. Since reception theory proposes a synthesis of both traditional, historical (conventional art historical work--strong focus on work) and “presentist” points of view (modern/contemporary work--strong focus on reader/beholder), it seemed to offer a nice balance of these two oppositional methods and to allow for intimate, individualized connections with the work that result in a rich variety of interpretations.

In the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence, Williams restores these painted scenes from their sixteenth-century past, both for his own modernist audience and for our post-modern enjoyment. Williams uses a number of formal and thematic strategies to create a sense of continuity between Bruegel’s work and his own. Additionally, Williams
discovers “visual clues” Bruegel has left in the formal construction of his paintings to
guide our vision and interpretation. An examination of the *Pictures from Brueghel*
sequence and other modernist poems written about Bruegel’s paintings show that often—
in reception terms—the dialogue between work and viewer/beholder can be highly
idiosyncratic and can yield a vast number of reactions. This is one of the more positive
aspects of reception theory, in that it invites a multiplicity of responses instead of
privileging one dominant interpretation over all others. As Margaret Sullivan notes in
“Bruegel’s Proverbs: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance”: “Since it is
assumed that ‘seeing’ is culturally determined and not necessarily constant in every era,
patterns of reception are explored and we are better able to understand the ways in which
a sixteenth-century audience ‘saw’ a ‘loaded’ image, not one stripped to a single ‘correct’
meaning communicated in a single, ‘correct’ language” (Sullivan 465). This quote
reflects the way that these modern “readings” of Bruegel continue the original work of
reception and aid us in understanding Bruegel’s work more fully in our time.

The reception theory method is very useful in the way it shows how Williams was
engaging in a dialogue with these paintings to produce a deepened understanding of these
works in the modernist moment, and for the way that it describes how one dominant
interpretation of meaning in a work of art is inadequate. As the poets of the twentieth-
century writing on Bruegel have shown, different ways of seeing and saying add to the
cultural history of a work. Often different viewers are able to illuminate parts of a work
that another viewer or critic would not have thought important.

However, this reception work can only lead us so far. The approach ultimately
falls short because instead of being a good balance between two methodological extremes
and leading us back to the work, it eventually abandons the work and its maker. This happens because of reception or reader-response theory’s strong emphasis on the viewer of the work of art. Over time, successive acts of reception (done by the viewer) can distance us from the work instead of bringing us closer to it. The effect is one of unraveling and undoing the integrity of the work itself. Obviously this was not Williams’s intent in the *Pictures from Brueghel* series, since he repeatedly references Bruegel as artist and recorder, as an homage to Bruegel in his poems. I noted this in the section, “Bruegel as a Model for the Modern Artist,” in that, from the beginning of this sequence and to its last lines, the focus is on Bruegel. Although a reception theory approach can begin to make the distant objects of our past more accessible to us in the present, to wholly embrace the reader-response method and give the beholder precedence over the image upsets the original relationship—which *starts* with the image and then leads to us, the beholders. Overall, though reception theory makes us acknowledge the fact that things of our present shape the past, as the past shapes objects of our present, its emphasis on the ability of a work’s internal meaning to significantly change over time is simultaneously a refusal of the artist’s importance or role in the work (Didi-Huberman 33). To reflect on how a work of art affects us subjectively can often aid in our understanding of the work itself, if intertextual or cultural links are called up in our mind (as they most likely were when Williams first viewed these Bruegel paintings).

However, in order to remain honest to the work itself we have to allow this kind of experience to lead us back into the work and not away from it. Therefore, the ongoing work of interpretation and understanding through different modes is the best way to confront an artistic text/object. To acknowledge that meaning radically changes over
successive acts of reception is to alter something about the work itself and its original meaning. What changes is our relationship to the work, as it’s viewed in different contexts or historical situations. As Hirsch remarks in *Validity in Interpretation*, “It is not the *meaning* of the text which changes, but its *significance*…” to us, to the author, to future generations (Hirsch 8). Certainly, we’ve seen that the Bruegel paintings have had a place of shifting cultural significance and impact, but their foundational meaning has not changed.

I found that throughout my work, while implementing this receptive method, at times it was more useful to my analysis than at others. I noticed this especially in examining formal elements of the poems and paintings side by side, in the way that Williams was realizing the perspective of the paintings with his poems and therefore completing the triangulation between author, work, and viewer/beholder. For instance, while examining *The Parable of the Blind*, it was clear that Williams realized that the formal composition of the painting—with the division of the church steeple and the outstretched hand of the beggar marking the point of descent/fall—was a crucial part of interpreting the picture. Thus, he mentions “composition” three times throughout his poem and references other formal elements. This aspect of composition in *The Parable of the Blind* is integral for determining a reading of it, whether it be a secular, twentieth-century reading, or a Christian humanist sixteenth-century reading. This poem-painting pair was an example of how looking at the *Pictures from Brueghel* poems in terms of Jauss’ reception theory and Iser’s reader-response could work. The completion of perspective by the beholder could be compared to Iser’s theory of the “gaps” of literary works that are filled in by the reader. Though, when the beholder completes the
perspective of the picture, it is a very simple process (as simple as looking); it is direct, one-way, and, most importantly, it leads into the work, or fully realizes what the artist wanted us to see in the first place. On the other hand, with Iser’s theory, readers who are filling in the “gaps” that a work leaves for us are not engaging in a direct process. It results in multiple interpretations and often leads outside of the work itself.

On the other hand, there are thematic markers in Williams’s poems about these Bruegel paintings that do indicate his position and suggest a way of looking for us. Since I have already fully discussed the poems of the sequence, I want to bring in another Williams poem which makes an interesting comparison with “The Adoration of the Kings,” of the full sequence, as they were both written about this Bruegel painting. The poem, titled “A Brueghel Nativity,” was published on May 31st, 1958 in the Nation. It was published two years before the Pictures from Brueghel sequence was first published in The Hudson Review. It certainly differs in terms of formal structure and length from “The Adoration of the Kings.” Williams is not working with the triad structure here and he is much more descriptive, whereas he employs an economy of phrase in the poems of the sequence. But Williams does make several points in this earlier poem that are very intriguing. For example, in the first stanza he compares the faces of the “armed men” at the nativity scene to “features like the more stupid / German soldiers of the late / war.” By making this connection, Williams is uniting Bruegel’s time with his own. In addition, further along in the poem, in the fifth stanza, he remarks that the wise men “…had eyes for visions / in those days—and saw, / saw with their proper eyes, / these things.” This line suggests that the three wise men somehow had a right to this “vision,” and that the “vision” is constrained to those of certain historical circumstances (specifically in “they
had eyes for visions / in those days”). Then, Williams likens the “gifts” that the wise men have brought to “works of art,” but he questions whether they have “picked / them up or more properly / have stolen them?”—which relates back to an earlier moment when Williams first addresses the men and asks if they might be “highwaymen.” What Williams seems to imply here is that we who “adore” these works of art may do so without the “proper eyes” for such a task. With its added description, “A Brueghel Nativity” certainly adds to the breadth of Williams’s thoughts on this painting and how he thought Bruegel viewed it. He also references Bruegel as artist, as he does in “The Adoration of the Kings,” commenting on his work and how it was completed “dispassionately,” though with an imaginative vision. “A Brueghel Nativity” shows that Williams also thought we should carefully receive works of art in the present and that our “vision” may be slightly limited by our historical circumstances.

Finally, there are a few things that we, as viewers and interpreters, must recognize. We need to remain open to the influence that works of our present can have on works of the past, as images often have complex qualities and artists may often seem to exist anachronistically out of their time or tradition (as Bruegel and Williams both did, in a way) (Didi-Huberman 42). But it’s only ethical to continue an acknowledgement of the artist as well. With reception theory, over time the artist can vanish “out of the picture,” as the viewer’s opinions take precedence. As E.D. Hirsch notes, “once the author ha[s] been ruthlessly banished as the determiner of his text’s meaning, it very gradually appear[s] that no adequate principle exist[s] for judging the validity of an interpretation” (Hirsch 3). Williams provides an example of the way to make a “valid interpretation” while remaining conscious of Bruegel’s importance. He guides us to a
better understanding of Bruegel’s work in our contemporary moment, without losing sight of the essence of these works or Bruegel’s original purpose. Maybe reception theory doesn’t fully suit our purpose, but it helps us to partially realize what is happening in these works, in the sense of their temporal layeredness. To view Bruegel’s painting as a strict historian, who rejects anachronism and only looks at objects within their past historical context can render these works virtually inaccessible to us in the present.

Therefore, we need to be open to the thought that works can have a resonance outside their time, and that if we free them from strict historical limitations we can make them more accessible while still remaining “in the spirit” of the artist’s original intentions. Just as Jackson Pollock allowed Didi-Huberman to better understand Fra Angelico, so Williams—with his Imagist focus on detail, energy, and spontaneity—is perfectly suited to lead us back to Bruegel’s vibrant works, keeping them alive in his text and in our minds (Didi-Huberman 41).

To conclude, the *Pictures from Brueghel* sequence richly contributed to how Bruegel was received and understood in Williams’s own time, and they still today have a forceful vision that contributes to our understanding of Bruegel’s works in the 21st century. The poems of the sequence recreate the energy, life, color, and vibrancy of Bruegel’s sixteenth-century, Flemish world and stand as a rich historicization of Bruegel’s work. Perhaps, we can take our cue from Williams, and find a new method of analysis that opens up the possibilities the work of art presents to us while still retaining a respectful, critical distance and remaining true to its vision.
“PAINTING BY BRUEGEL THE ELDER, ON VIEW; ‘the Harvesters,’ in Art Museum, may have been Owned by Archduke William in 1659. ONE OF FIVE WAS LOST Charming Flemish Picture in ‘Seasons’ Series was Brought here Early in the War." New York Times. Print. May 17, 1921.


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