

ANTICIPATORY DESTRUCTION IN THE WEDGE:  
WILLIAMS, WOMEN, AND THE WAR EFFORT

The fatalism by which incomprehensible death was sanctioned in primeval times has now passed over into utterly comprehensible life. The noonday panic fear in which nature suddenly appeared to humans as an all-encompassing power has found its counterpart in the panic which is ready to break out at any moment today: human beings expect the world, which is without issue, to be set ablaze by a universal power which they themselves are and over which they are powerless.

—Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment (22)

In 1945 the United States possessed the greatest relative material strength any nation has ever had or is ever likely to have. This peculiar situation was the result of the simultaneous flowering of the American economy and military-industrial establishment and the destruction of everybody else's.

—Gideon Rose, How Wars End (81)

My presentation on destructive fantasy in William Carlos Williams's 1944 collection The Wedge forms the core of a chapter on destruction and universals in mid-century modernism. That essay, in turn, will be part of a study on the cultural poetics of modernist authority that follows the influence of Critical Theory in exile during World War II through a series of American and German postwar examples: literary, visual, and cultural. My literary examples will be, at the outset, a series of mid-century "late modernist" American poets writing before, during, and after the end of the war, the destruction of European cities, and the disclosure of the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> In Germany, this moment of destruction is popularly known as Stunde Null, which we may translate as "Zero Hour."<sup>2</sup> I will consider Stunde Null—seen as the punctual moment of political and material destruction that ended Germany's Totaler Krieg (total war) through unconditional surrender on 8 May 1945—as a "metahistorical" concept, after the

work of narrative and conceptual historiographers like Hayden White, Reinhard Koselleck, and Frank Ankersmit.<sup>3</sup> As a metahistorical event, Stunde Null is not simply reducible to its historical date; it has a structural relation to real-time historical unfolding in both narrative and nonnarrative terms.<sup>4</sup> Stunde Null thus did not simply “happen”; rather, it is a structural, narrative, and phenomenological moment that took place “as if” it were an actual event, no matter how many particular details of history coincided with it.<sup>5</sup> Psychoanalytic processes of destruction, repetition, and Nachträglichkeit (retroactive determination) are crucial for making the historicity of Stunde Null into a punctual moment, an opening to the Real “that can only be known in its effects.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, what we term Stunde Null as a historical fact is irreducible to a concept—formed as it is from a complex multiplicity of individual and collective, human and environmental experiences that only retrospectively condense into the univocal date, 8 May 1945. There is, as well, a specific political content to this historical endgame, a combination of the persistent German commitment to Totalkrieg after massive defeats that began with Stalingrad, matched by equally persistent Allied demands for total capitulation.<sup>7</sup> Stunde Null is thus a composite historical fact, viewed through an imprecise historical frame, that extends from a series of moments of destruction and liberation that constitute it. As a historical event, Stunde Null is a punctual moment that is not one, depicted and imagined through a series of iconic images of human bodies and urban destruction that took place with military defeat, the liberation of the camps, the destruction of cities, the mass displacement of peoples, occupation by allied armies, and civilian privation (figs. 1 and 2). A reduction of human experience to material “bare life” as a political, cultural, and even existential reference point—and its overcoming—gives Stunde Null a meaning well beyond its narrative position as “null point.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than moving toward seeing Stunde Null as merely a phenomenological “event,” describable in those terms, we must work carefully through the combined figural logics and material evidence by which it was experienced and represented.<sup>9</sup>

My approach is twofold: first, to identify a series of anticipatory, retrospective, and punctual constructions of Stunde Null in literary and visual art where it is indeed a desiring

projection, absent cause, inescapable fact, and finally narrative frame; then to associate these prior or posterior constructions with the historical and material ding an sich, however it may be accessed. I term this method a “radical historicism,” which seeks to lay bare and make perceptible the radical contingency of a punctual moment, a historical date, a violent event, a psychological rupture as necessary for interpretation.<sup>10</sup> Rather than seeing history as contextual, or worse a mere positivity, a radical historicism discloses the null point of representation as a material fact. Through a perspective of radical historicism, I want to understand the constructedness of literature and cultural discourses in terms of the unrepresentable alterity of events subtending them. To do so necessitates a concept of the historical event in negative as much as positive terms (but not some abstract, phenomenological concept of “the event”); it is the absent cause, the “history that hurts” located in material conditions, around which interpretations congeal.<sup>11</sup> A radical historicism will reject explanations that depend on well-formed narrative as inadequate, as it seeks to constellate material evidence around a central, intractable core. Inspired by the historical deployment of nonnarrative forms in modernism and the avant-garde (in a tradition extending from Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno through Fredric Jameson, Peter Osborne, and Richard Langston), a radical historicism interrogates the formal construction of an absent cause, privileging contingency over necessity and admitting the crisis of representation, the gaps in narrative construction, and the multiplicity of the event as primary evidence.<sup>12</sup> Going further, a radical historicism questions the transparency and self-presence of agency, even in its most autonomous forms (as with accounts of agency that rest on some form of decisionism). An ontological priority of Being cannot offer an adequate historicism, given the thick, embedded, continuous, and intersubjective nature of historical experience and interpretation. A radical historicism seeks disclosure, but it is the disclosure of what is materially contingent or causally insufficient, what “can only be known in its effects” and is simultaneously laid bare in the material evidence of history. What a radical historicism brings to the event, determining it, finally coincides with what is disclosed, indissociable from it. In this sense, I am aware of the dangers of a negative historicism that

simply discloses the traumatic rupture of an event, given the various political narratives that have been projected onto specific, and incommensurate events, each of which bears its own kernel of negativity and should not be reduced to a single rationale for political grievance.<sup>13</sup>

Stunde Null is both the type and example of the material event that concerns the radical historian, in a manner directly opposed to the use of decisive historical dates as narrative, epochal, or periodizing (such as “the end of World War II”). In other words, Stunde Null is not simply a framing concept positioned between historical periods; as an event it is continuously active in its enactment, processing, and representation, even as it may be anticipated in the historical sequence or cultural logics or imaginative works leading up to it with inexorable force. Slavoj Žižek’s overbroad claim that 9/11 fulfilled a long-standing fantasy of the West for its own destruction (as generalizing the meanings of the event as entailed by the cultural logic of late capitalism itself) still contains its kernel of truth: that a wish for destruction is often confirmed in actual destruction, which must be taken into account in any reparation.<sup>14</sup>

We may find, for instance, that the concept of Totaler Krieg imposed on and largely accepted by the German people in early 1943, in which surrender was not an option, conveyed aspects of social fantasy of destruction that were confirmed by the actual destruction that ensued.<sup>15</sup>

But we may also find that condensing a politics of a wishful Totaler Krieg on its victims, who could never have understood the concept itself as a positive fact, is a too easy, retrospective explanation (*pace* Žižek). A radical historian would look for the discrepant convergence of wish, materiality, and interpretation as necessary preconditions for the historical event. The fascination with destruction becomes a scene of psychological and ontological inquiry, one that goes well beyond its representational content while yet being confirmed by the bare material evidence of the images themselves. In recent debates on ruin photography in Detroit, it is precisely this motive to comprehend destruction through its material evidence that is lacking in the ascription of such photographs, and interest, as “pornographic” (figs. 3-4).<sup>16</sup> As with Detroit, or with many other scenes of late modern destruction (Chernobyl, 9/11, Banda Aceh, Fukushima, to name the more recent), so with Europe in 1945—the cultural prolifera-

tion of representations of scenes of destruction, far outstripping any gothic or romantic fantasy, gives the lie to “ruin porn” as mystification. Representing the negative is, and always has been, profound cultural work, undertaken for a variety of motives and in many forms.<sup>17</sup>

Clustering around the conceptual date and material event of Stunde Null are three types of representation I will be concerned with. The first, most readily available, are retrospective: texts and films that provide interpretive frameworks for the moment of destruction at the end of the war, often constructed between documentary and fantasy: Roberto Rossellini’s Germany Year Zero (1948); the anonymous A Woman in Berlin (1954; 2003; 2008); Andrzej Wajda’s Ashes and Diamonds (1958); Stanley Kramer’s Judgment at Nuremberg (1961); W.G. Sebald’s On the Natural History of Destruction (1999; 2004); or Bernd Eichinger’s Downfall (2004).<sup>18</sup> To these literary and filmic texts may be added the numerous visual artists such as Hannah Höch and Karl Hofer who took part in the upsurge of exhibitions after the war,<sup>19</sup> continuing on to later artists concerned with historical retrospection such as Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, and Gerhard Richter.<sup>20</sup> These retrospective texts, at the same time, allow me to propose a series of more strictly literary works from the period up to and including Stunde Null that I term anticipatory: in which a fantasy of destruction is pursued toward ends that escape history but that might become historical. Here the wish for destruction initially posits but then psychically refuses its objective evidence, which it directs toward an encompassing form of ahistorical or universalist wish. A series of late modernist works may be examined for a poetics of destruction and universality, including T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets (1944/44), for its universalist poetics among scenes of destruction; H.D.’s Trilogy (1946), for its specific record of the bombing of London; William Carlos Williams’s Paterson (1946-51, 1958), for its destructive fantasies in both form and content; Ezra Pound’s Pisan Cantos (1948), for its pathos of the “tragedy of Europe” while ignoring its victims; Charles Olson’s “The Kingfishers” (1950), for its explicit post-Holocaust antihumanism; Robert Duncan’s “An Essay at War” (196x), for its psychosexual account of destroyed bodies; Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus” and other poems (1965); for their appropriations of Holocaust image-

ry; and many others. This series of mid-century modernist work move from anticipatory wish for destruction to an anguished positing of that which succeeds it: a historically contingent demand for universals. In each of these modernist, postmodernist, humanist or antihumanist examples, a wish for destruction is the prior condition for positing (or rejecting) any sort of universal.<sup>21</sup> On this basis, I propose: there is no universal without destruction. The historical fact of the promulgation of universals (beyond any mere contingency) in this sense shows, for example, how the perversions of authority that led to fascism and war are their prior condition and overcoming. Critical Theory's dialectic between reason and unreason itself anticipates the historical construction of ethical universals promulgated at the Nuremberg Trials, while it makes a common cause with modernists who either negotiated these perversions or sought a way out through an invocation of universality, however imagined or represented. The poetry of mid-century modernists and the "new categorical imperative" of the Nuremberg Trials conjoin via Critical Theory to delineate the constructedness of universals themselves.<sup>22</sup> In an age that has flagrantly renounced the Nuremberg standards—for instance, in the detention of persons seen as without rights in Guantanamo—or that sees universals as merely the mystification of global capitalism, such a critique is timely and necessary.

### **Anticipatory Destruction**

William Carlos Williams, that mild-mannered physician, is my modernist exemplar of an anticipatory poetics of destruction. The necessity of renewal—by means of a poetry founded on the senses and on the overturning of tradition—is thematized throughout early Williams, from Kora in Hell's negative mimesis to Spring and All and The Descent of Winter's dialectic of creation and destruction. This dialectic is central to the construction of art in Spring and All, and throughout Williams' work: "The decay of cathedrals / is efflorescent / through the phenomenal / growth of movie houses // whose catholicity is / progress since / destruction and creation / are simultaneous";<sup>23</sup> modernity elicits violent change and is only comprehensible once that is recognized. In a prose section, Williams explains: "The word is not lib-

erated, therefore able to communicate release from the fixities which destroy it until it is accurately tuned to the fact which giving it reality, by its own reality establishes its own freedom from the necessity of a word, thus freeing it and dynamizing it at the same time” (1:93). Only by returning to material existence can the word be liberated from being fixated on it: poetry is the destruction of the condition of fixity by means of encounter with the material. In Williams’s modernism, the necessity of destruction elevates the material and particular to the status of a universal, yielding the “so much depends upon” of the red wheelbarrow.

The war-time publication of The Wedge (1944) produced a volume that, in its theoretical framing, objectivist techniques, and thematic disjunction, pursues the same destructive renewal as Williams’s avant-garde volumes, but later in time.<sup>24</sup> At mid century and in middle age—an immanent horizon that concerns him—Williams no longer sees the dialectic of creation and destruction as merely aesthetic but as a fact of life in history. The aesthetic is where we comprehend the creativity of destruction; destruction is the prior condition for the vitality of art. Throughout his disjoint collection of atemporal lyrics and meditative verse, themes of destruction emerge out of nowhere; a feared event (and not only the war) seems to be rapidly approaching—in fact it may already have arrived and there is nothing we can do but record it. This relation of form to discontinuity and destruction is given a chilling reading in the cover and title page art for the volume by Wightman Williams (fig. 5). Within a greenish, inverted triangle, three schematic figures overlap: an elongated classical column supporting an hour-glass; the schematic figure of a broken circle with an emphatic arrow pointing in a clockwise direction, suggesting circular temporality; and a dramatic red rose with curved, thorny stem which might also represent an exploding bomb at the end of a length of barbed wire. Over the entire array are superimposed the crosshairs of an optical device or bombsight, giving the diagram a military interpretation; at the same time, a sexual reading between phallic column, pubic triangle, and clitoral rose cannot be denied. This schematic design—in its reduced referentiality and functionality—points somewhat ironically to the uncanny disjunctions and reinforcements of Williams’s poetic material, each positioned within a formally structured

framework, much like the bomb sight. Poetry is moving toward a coming event of necessary destruction and release in The Wedge. Looking toward the methods of Paterson, Williams practices a radical historicism where the occasion of poetry is identified with a set of disjoint material circumstances that necessitates it. The turn to language that Williams was supposed to have inaugurated—seen in the shift of the original title of the volume, The Language, to a fragment of its material substrate, The Wedge—is motivated by an inexorable historicism.

Every historicism is equally a presentism, and vice versa. Williams's historicism is of the present, as the famous introduction to The Wedge (derived from a lecture at the New York Public Library in October 1943) contends: "THE WAR is the first and only thing in the world today" (CP 2:53). Given the present nature of Williams's address, the claim both concedes priority to the war and insists the parallel necessity of poetry: "The arts generally are not, nor is this writing a diversion from that for relief, a turning away. It is the war or part of it, merely different sector of the field" (ibid.). The difficult assertion that poetry is the war, not just a reflection of it, has gone largely unread in Williams's reception (rather, we get a traditional defense of poetry and concomitant separation of "sectors of the field" in modernism). The Wedge is often noted for its poetics of compression and autonomy, seen as homologous to technological rationality and war production, but not for its destructive aims:

There's nothing sentimental about a machine, and: A poem is a small (or large) machine made of words. When I say there is nothing sentimental about a poem I mean that there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant. (2:54)

A refusal of sentiment and redundancy in poetry ties its expressive potential to formal innovation, figured as the "machine made of words." That and the dedication to Louis Zukofsky position The Wedge in relation to its postwar development with the Black Mountain School and the "turn to language" in poetics.<sup>25</sup> Williams's constructivist moment, originating in the correspondence with Zukofsky and particularly the latter's unsentimental editing of the original MS, thus provides a crucial link between modernism and later language-centered avant-

gardes.<sup>26</sup> However, this reception misses the paradoxical intervention offered by The Wedge as significantly anti-formalist—it is a loosely structured if tightly edited and massively rewritten collection of lyric and occasional verse—into the progressive rationalization of war production: “The making of poetry is no more an evidence of frustration than is the work of Henry Kaiser or of Timoshenko. It’s the war, the driving forward of desire to a complex end” (ibid.). Williams’s constructivism aligns the defeat of personal (and sexual) frustration, conventional norms, and the English Department (and the sonnet) with fresh perception and new form per se, in order to achieve a more complex purposiveness as part of the war effort:

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them—without distortion which would mar their exact significances—into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn’t what he says that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity. (Ibid.)

Williams’s manifesto of poetry as pure “making” stands as a touchstone of modernist poetics, but what he accomplishes through his will to construct is more complex than any objectivism, poetic or otherwise. The form of The Wedge, it turns out, in part and whole, is anything but an example of a “machine made of words”; what finally holds it together is the strict editing of the final MS, and in particular the jettisoning of prose, hybrid, or diaristic writings, that resulted in the collection of 49 autonomous poems Williams saw into print.<sup>27</sup> Even so, the collection itself contains a disparate range of materials and styles, disconnected contents and contexts, that create a space for the dismantling of convention Williams wanted. Desire is both the origin and telos of most of the poems, not theoretically generalized as in surrealism but enacted between writings that vary from objective documentation to destructive fantasy. Poems are sites of particularity, discontinuity, and destruction as much as positive facts.

Williams's pursuit of a destructive poetics of (un)making may be traced to his avant-garde period and the influence of Dada. By the late 30s, Williams's negativity had been modified in a complex synthesis with realist imperatives, particularly in his stories and novels and easily visible in many lyrics (e.g., "To a Poor Old Woman," CP 1:383; "Proletarian Portrait," 1:384–85; or "A Vision of Labor: 1931," 2:81–85).<sup>28</sup> As Williams continued to experience nothing but frustration with the form of his nascent epic, Paterson, and with onset of war at the end of the decade, his middle period (which we may describe as either the "objectivist" or "materialist" Williams) reached a point of crisis, culminating in the fortified lyrics of The Wedge as well as in the surge of destructive fantasies erupting within them.<sup>29</sup> Similar psychic material already found occasion in the early draft of "Paterson: Episode 17," which records the beating and humiliation of an African-American woman ("Beautiful Thing") that would become the culminating figure of destruction, after the burning library, in Paterson book 3. In the early 40s, with the ongoing war as correlative, Williams published two ethically dubious short poems on global destruction that serve to prefigure The Wedge. One, "An Exultation," celebrates the German bombing of England as imagined reparation for British imperialism and class violence: "Let the agents / of destruction purify you with bombs, cleanse / you of the profits of your iniquities to the last / agony of relinquishment" (2:42). The poem was accepted by Partisan Review, along with Williams's "incoherent accompanying explanation," possibly as further evidence of his political unreliability in ongoing debates with the Left.<sup>30</sup> A second poem, "War, the Destroyer!," conveys a more aesthetic agenda in associating war with the formal strictures of modern dance: "When terror blooms— // leap and twist / whirl and prance— / that's the show // of this the circumstance" (2:43–44). The poem was written to accompany a collage image of Martha Graham beneath an exploding bomb, shot at 1/10,000 of a second "to dehumanize facial features and imply Death."<sup>31</sup> At the endgame of his middle period, heading toward the crisis represented by The Wedge and with the work of Paterson still not fully engaged, Williams sought destruction as the royal road to the imagination and hence to objective content. This is thematized in the verse précis of "Paterson: The Falls"—

an advertisement for the later poem positioned at the outset of The Wedge—in which Williams aligns creativity and destruction with the turn to language, seeing the Passaic Falls as correlative to “the modern town, a // disembodied road! the cataract and / the clamor broken apart—and from / all learning, the empty / ear struck from within, roaring” (2:57–58). The roaring in Williams’s head is a fantasy of necessary violence that precedes objective form.

An immediate consequence of Williams’s fantasies of destruction is the dissociation of form and content in The Wedge. Cut from an original draft of 115 pages to 82 through strict editing and massive rewriting, the 49 individual poems (plus introduction makes fifty) of the final version create substantial gaps in material, occasion, address, and form—resulting in anything but a unified affect or totalizing argument. As a result of Williams and Zukofsky’s combined labors, the aesthetic realization of the poetry is nearly flawless—discursively clear, descriptively precise, metrically inventive, and figuratively succinct. The range of content, however, is often inexplicable and unmotivated—ranging from paeans to the aesthetic (“The Dance”; “Writer’s Prologue in Verse”) to brutally direct descriptions of sexual encounters (“The Hounded Lovers”; “Eternity”; “The A, B & C of It”; “The Gentle Negress”) to complex meditations on mortality, in regular verse or not (“To All Gentleness”; “Burning the Christmas Greens”; “Perfection”; “The Forgotten City”). The entire volume, in its material obduracy, may be seen as a memento mori, appropriately beginning with the hard lyricism of the Zukofskyan “A Sort of a Song”: “Saxifrage is my flower that splits / the rocks” (2:55) and ending with the epitaphic “To Ford Madox Ford in Heaven” (“Is it any better in heaven, my friend Ford, / than you found it in Provence”; 2:95). Within this range of fragmented but objectified material, however, are key moments where the theme of necessary destruction is lucidly disclosed. In “Catastrophic Birth,” Williams likens “the big she-Wop’s” sixth child-birth to the cataclysmic eruption of a volcano or a chemical reaction akin to nuclear war:

The fracture will come, the death dealing  
chemistry cannot be long held back.

The dreaded eruption blocks out the valley  
the careful prognosticator as well as  
the idlers. The revelation is complete.  
Peace is reborn above the cinders (2:56)

The poem moves from quotidian observations of a working-class mother in New Jersey to the scale of global or natural cataclysm, seeing birth as the culminating stage of convulsive sexuality. While Williams's praise of sexuality is a vitalism found throughout his oeuvre, its correlation with destruction increases in scale from an association of femininity and wilderness in In the American Grain to its global scale at mid century. In "Rumba! Rumba!":

No, not the downfall  
of the Western World  
but the wish for its  
downfall  
in an idiot mind—  
Dance, Baby, Dance! (2:75)

Sexual allure leads directly to Oswald Spengler's Decline of the West, as a necessary corrective Williams might add. The necessity of sexuality, not merely celebrated but provoked and disclosed throughout The Wedge, links psychic drive to representation without any mediating terms (such as the automatic writing that would provide materials for the surrealists). It is the unmediated moment of embodied sexuality that leads Williams, paradoxically, to his hyperattention to material particulars and poetic form, as if each were only approximations of an underlying drive. Sexuality just is destruction—of any attempt to present it in conventional terms; it is only to be known through the passage à l'act and the resulting restoration of the senses and clarity of understanding not impeded by frustration. It is thus as an imperative of poetry that Williams positions transgressive sexual episodes at the center of his work, as in:

But where shall we go?

We cannot resolve ourselves

into a dew

nor sink into the earth.

Shall we postpone it

to Eternity?

(“The Hounded Lovers”; 2:66–67)

Olympia

would be expecting him, he swam

from her zig-zag through

the dark—

[. . .] drove thence close

to two hundred miles

filling

the tank once near midnight

(“Eternity”; 2:77–78)

Love’s very fleas are mine. Enter

me worms and all till I crumble

and steam with it, pullulate

to be sucked into an orchid.

(“The A, B & C of It”; 2:83)

In the final poem, Williams mocks even his own philandering as a poetic convention, giving additional license to the public admission of what had transpired as a necessary overturning

of constraint. What remains from this corrective gesture is hardly the pleasure of the encounter but its difficulty as representation; the “in your face” attitude Williams pursues with such vehemence becomes, in turn, the site of an ethical imperative to acknowledge the necessity of rupture. So in the famous “Burning the Christmas Greens,” the middle-class family witnesses the limits of its own objectivity within a consumer culture that seemed to ensure its future:

Violence leaped and appeared.  
Recreant! roared to life  
as the flame rose through and  
our eyes recoiled from it. (2:64)

In this way the particularity of everyday life (“No ideas but in things”) gives way to its inert, material substrate—the ashes of the Christmas greens in the fireplace—on which all certainty depends. It is but a short route from Williams’s fantasized sacrifice of his own middle-class security to that of others, as we have seen in his poem on the bombing of London. Williams’s poetics of destruction amounts to a totalizing method that he imagines as world-cleansing:

The bomb-sight adjusted destruction hangs  
by a hair over the cities. Bombs away!  
and the packed word descends—and  
rightly so.

The arrow! the arrow!

Only . . . that is . . .  
the moment is lost! without us, the  
completion, the learned moment. The gates  
opened it also falls away,

unrecognized!

(“To All Gentleness”; 2:71)

Through the trope of redemptive violence as “the packed word descends,” a poetics of defamiliarization rises to the height of sublimity that assumes world-historical scale. In “The Forgotten City,” Williams returns to the direct perception of particulars after a convulsive act of defamiliarization, arguing that the world is only comprehended through its prior negation:

I passed through  
extraordinary places, as vivid as any  
I ever saw where the storm had broken  
the barrier and let through  
a strange commonplace: Long, deserted avenues  
with unrecognized names at the corners and  
drunken looking people with completely  
foreign manners. (2:86–87)

In this pastoral to an uncanny, parallel city, Williams encounters the psychic fantasy of the destruction of the original, familiar world concomitant with the preservation of an alien one. Here the world is indeed everything that is not the case. But in The Wedge this modernist desire is given historical content with the war, whose total destruction occurs elsewhere. The prescience of uncanny alterity becomes a cunning of unreason as self-preservative fantasy.

References to the ongoing war recur discontinuously throughout the volume, despite Williams’s claim that war is “the first and only thing in the world today.” The global scale of the introduction dovetails with a local politics of desire as it pushes toward senses of destruction that are more Sadean than military. Contemporaneous with but unaware of Adorno and Horkheimer’s deployment of Sade in the second chapter of Dialectic of Enlightenment, Williams anatomizes the psychosexual drive of rational domination as the Ding an sich the poet is compelled by at every level.<sup>32</sup> Modernity as destruction is given a sexual and embodied correlative in “The Last Turn,” a poem Williams was fascinated by (publishing it in two different versions) as emblematic of The Wedge’s themes in their most condensed instance.<sup>33</sup> In a

violent tableau, sexuality, destruction, and event coalesce as poetic methodology. Williams's materialism counters the effete abstraction of Wallace Steven's "supreme fiction," as it organizes its materialist account of the aesthetic in terms of jazz rhythms and paint pigments.<sup>34</sup>

Then see it! in distressing  
detail—from behind a red light  
at 53rd and 8th  
of a November evening, the jazz  
of the cross lights echoing the  
crazy weave of the breaking mind:  
splash of a half purple, half  
naked women's body whose jeweled  
guts the cars drag up and down— (2:82–83)

The spectacle of a woman's body, mutilated in an automobile accident, becomes a macabre figure for aesthetic abstraction and materialist ethics; the singular event of the accident and the resulting display of the body cancel any representation and question all concepts:

No house but has its brains  
blown off by the dark!  
Nothing recognizable, the whole one  
jittering direction made of all  
directions spelling the inexplicable:  
pigment upon flesh and flesh  
the pigment the genius of a world,  
against which rages the fury of  
our concepts, artless but supreme. (Ibid.)

Form becomes Georges Bataille's informe, identifying the aesthetic with the sensory presentation of destroyed bodies, as a challenge to rational categories that cannot comprehend it.<sup>35</sup>

The war comes home to an atemporal moment of embodied destruction that invokes as it denies concepts that should render it intelligible but fail to do so. Williams pushes the poetics of renewing destruction to its alogical conclusion, toward a pure materiality that motivates it. Language splits off from matter as the remains of what can be looked at but not comprehended. The incomprehensibility of visual evidence presented here, of course, will become a hallmark of Holocaust photography in the period after the war, seemingly predicted by the poem. What is remarkable is the way Williams's entire aesthetic in The Wedge seems to anticipate and be confirmed by this historical unveiling of destruction as embodied in desire: sexual transgression and material destruction coalesce in a wish that the unthinkable occur.

While in Bataille's case such a perception will remain unsublated as base materiality, for Williams—and many mid-century modernists—an invocation of universals is proposed as the objective correlative to a body reduced merely to itself. To follow the theme of universals in Williams will lead from the local (“the only universal”) as its own instance to a correlative fantasy of greater implication that is its necessary entailment (“so much depends”). Williams develops the relationship of desire and destruction to universals particularly in book 3 of Paterson, but also in the form of his poem as a whole, framing its metaphorical figures for destruction (the burning library; Beautiful Thing; the radiant gist) with the rupture at the end of book 2, which coincides with the “end” of the provocative threat of C's letters.<sup>36</sup> My larger argument, then, is that Williams's anticipatory moments of destruction predict their historical opposite: the universal standard of Paterson's poetics. An occasional poem from the period immediately after The Wedge indicates the scale of universals that are being invoked:

DEATH BY RADIO (FOR F.D.R.)

Suddenly his virtues became universal

We felt the force of his mind

on all fronts, penetrant  
to the core of our beings  
Our ears struck us speechless  
while shameless tears sprang to our eyes  
through which we saw  
all mankind weeping. (2:106)

It is no coincidence that the universal is identified with the fallen leader and the ongoing, unresolved event of global war. At a moment of crisis—Roosevelt’s death—Williams raises the president as particular to the status of universal (in Ernesto Laclau’s sense), rather than rendering it as a unit within a more capacious aesthetic form, as in Paterson.<sup>37</sup> The aesthetic is still invoked, however, in a negative relation of concepts to sensed experience; the “force of his mind / at all fronts” (the war) is experienced in terms of ears that “struck us speechless” and tearing eyes “through which we saw / all mankind weeping.” In putting his faith in the destroyed particularity of Roosevelt, Williams continues his anticipatory theme at a later moment of psychic fantasy (which turns into a retrospective one, as we shall see): when the wished-for destruction has been confirmed. In Leo Bersani’s reading of Freud, such fantasies of destruction stem from an aggressive instinct that is “the derivative and main representative of the death instinct which we have found alongside Eros and which shares world dominion with it.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout The Wedge, Williams without question pursues the self-shattering Bersani sees as fundamental to sexuality, in turn understood as a masochistic projection onto a destroyed object and accompanied by pleasurable sensations that are convertible into the aesthetic. “Somehow it seems to destroy us,” Williams wrote in Spring and All—and, he might add, with relief (CP 1:000). What sexuality facilitates in The Wedge is access to the “world dominion” associated with the destruction of the object and preserved in aesthetic fantasy as incomplete, never to achieve formal unity, narrative closure, or representational adequacy. “In a theory of sublimation as coextensive with (rather than ‘beyond’) sexuality,” as

Bersani writes, “the esthetic would not be a formal achievement, but rather the continuously menaced activity by which an eroticized consciousness is provisionally structured by a perception of the relation among its terms” (110). Such eroticized relations hold together the unformed forms of The Wedge as they give evidence of destructive wishes between them that they cannot represent directly. Only the destroyed particular of the world-historical president can provide the necessary figure for their comprehension—even as, in Bersani’s terms, such an elevation must finally be ironic, nonidentical to the actual world in which destruction exists, and no protection from it. In his cunning of poetic desire, Williams anticipates the limits of any understanding of the destruction to come, as his best and only defense against it.<sup>39</sup>

### Universality and Event

What can be said for the universal at the present moment, where universals are continuously invoked for covert, nefarious purposes and every international standard of justice is revealed as an interested construction? Are robotic drones neutralizing Taliban elements in the tribal regions of Pakistan agents of the universal, in this sense? Even so, if a pseudo-universal may be indicated by such obscene terms as these, there are aspects of “the contingency of universals” to be gained from the attempt. The universal I seek to define is in a demonstrable sense one with a specific historical origin, or better yet the consequence of an historical event: akin to Adorno’s “new categorical imperative” while differentially constructed across its interpretive frames.<sup>40</sup> Such a universal may be critically incomplete, nonidentical, or lacking in some way: a placeholder for the more encompassing universal implied but deferred in its constructedness. As Judith Butler has argued, “to claim that the universal has not yet been articulated is to insist that the ‘not yet’ is proper to an understanding of the universal itself; that which remains ‘unrealized’ by the universal constitutes it essentially. The universal announces, as it were, its ‘non-place,’ its fundamentally temporal modality.”<sup>41</sup> Ernesto Laclau, in insisting that the gap between particular and universal can never be eliminated, theorizes a constitutive dimension of this placeholder, which he terms an “empty signifier,” for the universal itself,

which “requires the production of tendentially empty signifiers which, while maintaining the incommensurability between universal and particulars, enables the latter to take up the representation of the former.”<sup>42</sup> Williams’s poetics of particularity works exceptionally well with Butler and Laclau’s contingent universals, where the universal horizon of “so much depends upon” is contingent on material disclosure of its particular occasion, the “red wheel barrow.” In tracing Williams’s poetics of particularity through its mid-century development, however, we may uncover a more visceral, less objective, more projective account of this relationship. The body on the pavement or the dead president now assume the placeholder function.

It should be clear from both examples of a particularity upon which the universal depends that there is a strong remnant of the unsublatable in each: in each case a material remainder exceeds their symbolic value. The distressed body becomes the material site of both desiring projection and fear of destruction, while the dead president becomes the absent presence of an imagined self that can only be mourned in the lost object. Laclau is correct that any universal (specifically, that of political emancipation) involves both the destruction of the whole and the elevation of the particular: “While all particularity dissolves in the first case [of the prior condition of destruction], in the second a passage through particularity is the condition of the emergence of any universalizing effect” (45). But while both are clear that the movement from destruction to particularity never resolves in an identity between particular and universal, neither Laclau nor Butler specify the precise effects of the remnant or haunting of the particular that results. This is where Williams’s encounter with the particular asks us to comprehend the materiality of a sexual encounter, a destroyed body, a dead political leader as specific to the kinds of universality they may construct. Imagine, then, that the destruction of the Jews or the material evidence of the camps are the particulars on which a universal depends. Butler and Laclau would argue that the particular would never be absorbed into the universal (in a “new categorical imperative,” this would lead to the injunction that such an event should never happen again). But what does such a residue entail? In “Elements of An-

ti-Semitism,” Adorno and Horkheimer correlate emancipation from Enlightenment pseudo-universals with the material history of the Jews as the destroyed particularity of the human:

By conquering the sickness of mind which flourishes on the rich soil of self-assertion unhampered by reflection, humanity would cease to be the universal antirace and become the species which, as nature, is more than mere nature, in that it is aware of its own image. The individual and social emancipation from domination is the counter-movement to false projection, and no longer would Jews seek, by resembling it, to appease the evil senselessly visited on them as on all the persecuted.<sup>43</sup>

The particular here is the former site for false projection as sublated in the pseudo-universal of the master race, which when overturned allows for self-consciousness at the site of projection. It is precisely in this way that the overturned particular grounds, in an “anti-projective” manner (i.e., reversing projection as self-consciousness through difference from the object), the possibility of the genuinely human, never losing the remnant or trace of the particular. It is in this necessity of the particular, which is so distanced as to become a site for awareness, that I see the project of “radical historicism” in the inaccessible materiality of the event.

[The chapter continues with discussions of the 1961 film Judgment at Nuremberg and war photography of Lee Miller as examples of retrospective and punctual fantasies of destruction around the historical moment of Stunde Null.]

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On late modernism, see Tyrus Miller, Late Modernism; my usage differs from his, however, in focusing on the political context of mid-century modernity as much as on the development of the apotheosis of alienation and formal autonomy in authors like Samuel Beckett.

<sup>2</sup> There is an important relationship between the temporality of “Zero Hour” and the comparable spatiality of “Ground Zero,” both at Hiroshima and at 9/11, that I must bracket here. On “Ground Zero,” see Barnett and Mariani, Hiroshima.

<sup>3</sup> White, Concept of the Form; Koselleck, Futures Past and Practice of Conceptual History; and Ankersmit, Sublime Historical Experience.

<sup>4</sup> I have written on narrative and nonnarrative history in Watten, “Nonnarrative and the Construction of History,” in Constructivist Moment, chap. 5; and on the poetics of the “date” as a historical concept in Watten, “Presentism and Periodization.”

<sup>5</sup> On the historical Stunde Null, see Giles, ed., Stunde Null; Rürup, ed., Berlin 1945; Williamson, Germany from Defeat to Partition; and Brockmann, German Literary Culture at Zero Hour.

<sup>6</sup> Here I am concerned not to limit my use of psychoanalysis to negative interpretations such that the traumatic event may be “only known in its effects.”

<sup>7</sup> On the “endgame” of WWII, see Rose, How Wars End; and Taylor, Exorcising Hitler.

<sup>8</sup> On “bare life,” see Agamben, Remnants of Auschwitz.

<sup>9</sup> Here I will generally bracket the contemporary discussion of the “event” associated with Alain Badiou’s work, esp. Time and Event.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term “radical historicism” in several recent essays, esp. on the disconnection of motivation and violence in The Baader-Meinhof Complex, dir. Ulli Edel (2009).

<sup>11</sup> Jameson, Political Unconscious.

<sup>12</sup> See Osborne's use of Benjamin and Adorno in Politics of Time; on negativity and the German avant-garde, see Langston, Visions of Violence; and Jakot, Nazi Perpetrator.

<sup>13</sup> In other words, the political implications of traumatic rupture cannot simply be transferred from very different historical events: the Holocaust, the Cambodian or Rwandan genocides, ethnic cleansing in the Balkan War, 9/11. On the question of comparative trauma, see Rothberg, Multidimensional Memory.

<sup>14</sup> Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, Exorcizing Hitler; on the attitude of the German population after the declaration of "total war," see Rürup, Berlin 1945.

<sup>16</sup> On ruin photography, see my colleague John Patrick Leary's online essay, "Detroitism"; the ascription of voyeurism to "ruin porn" was debated at a panel discussion of the Modernist Studies Association, October 2012, in papers by Michael Stone-Richards, "Detroit: The City as Medium, and an Ethics of Care, and Barrett Watten, "Learning from Detroit: The Poetics of Urban Destruction." See the increasingly large body of photographic work on urban destruction in Detroit, esp. Marchand and Meffre, Ruins of Detroit; Moore, Disassembling Detroit; and Austin, Lost Detroit; as well as my early essay on the Detroit photographs of Stan Douglas, Watten, "Zone: The Poetics of Space in Posturban Detroit," in Constructivist Moment, chap. 8.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, an online blog that celebrates ruins: Francesco Mugnai, "30+ of the Most Beautiful Abandoned Places and Modern Ruins I've Ever Seen," available at [blogof.francescomugnai.com/2013/01/30-of-the-most-beautiful-abandoned-places-and-modern-ruins-ive-ever-seen](http://blogof.francescomugnai.com/2013/01/30-of-the-most-beautiful-abandoned-places-and-modern-ruins-ive-ever-seen).

<sup>18</sup> On postwar German cinema and "coming to terms with the past," see Santner, Stranded Objects; and Kaes, From Hitler to Heimat.

<sup>19</sup> On exhibitions in Berlin after the war, see Gillen and Schmidt, Zone 5; and Fassbender and Stahlhut, Berlin 89/09.

<sup>20</sup> See Barron and Eckmann, Art of Two Germanys; Langton, Visions of Violence; and Jakot, Nazi Perpetrator.

<sup>21</sup> On the constructedness of universals, see esp. Judith Butler, “Restaging the Universal: Hegemony and the Limits of Formalism,” in Butler et al., Contingency, Hegemony, Universality; and Laclau, Emancipation(s).

<sup>22</sup> On the “new categorical imperative,” see Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 365. Rapaport disputes whether Adorno supports any such thing as a universal in [source t/k].

<sup>23</sup> Williams, Collected Poems, 1:59; hereafter cited in the text as CP.

<sup>24</sup> For the biographical account of Williams’s The Wedge, during wartime but also in his creative hiatus in the early writing of Paterson, see Mariani, New World Naked, 478–83. The volume itself is described by Williams in terms of wartime production and scarcity, given that James Laughlin’s New Directions “had run out of paper,” necessitating publication by the lesser known Cummington Press.

<sup>25</sup> A key moment in Williams’s reception was Robert Creeley’s reading of The Wedge, which he cites in an interview as transformative in terms of poetic values: “Its content was revelatory to me”; cited in Terrell, Williams: Man and Poet, 527. While one might wonder what “content” meant for Creeley, the collection’s influence has largely been seen as formal. Typically, for Alec Baldwin, “The ultimate war, as always for Williams, was with his materials, with the very language itself”; “Zukofsky, Williams, and The Wedge,” in *ibid.*, 409.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of digital poetics that translates Williams’s “machine made of words” in technological terms, see Pressman, “Machine Poetics and Reading Machines.”

<sup>27</sup> Zukofsky argued to cut all of Williams’s prose poems and hybrid works; thus, The Wedge would not follow Spring and All and The Descent of Winter in arguing between poetry and prose (or form and content). Zukofsky also persuaded Williams to change the title from “The (LANG) Wedge” to “The Language” and finally “The Wedge,” suppressing as well a risqué epigraph that associated language and tongue in an act of heterosexual cunnilingus; Baldwin,

“Zukofsky, Williams, and The Wedge,” [000]. Williams admitted to Zukofsky that, as a result, “there’s hardly one piece that hasn’t been altered in one way or another”; Correspondence, 329.

<sup>28</sup> On Williams as a Popular Front writer, see Denning, Cultural Front, chap. [00]; on the prose, see Morris, Writings of William Carlos Williams, chaps. [00-00].

<sup>29</sup> Williams’s middle period, from the realist concerns of his stories and novels to the dialogue with materialism in The Wedge and Paterson, is a neglected but crucial period of his work. The usual contrast between early avant-garde Williams and the later poet of “open thus misses the moment of social construction, as I have argued elsewhere. On Williams’s influence split between New American and Language school poetics, see Golding, “What about all this writing.”

<sup>30</sup> Mariani, New World Naked, 451.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, “Excursus 11: Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality.”

<sup>33</sup> “The Last Word” was the final poem in Williams’s chapbook The Broken Span as well as, in a version revised after Zukofsky’s suggestions, appearing in The Wedge.

<sup>34</sup> Mariani notes that Williams found himself in poetic rivalry with Wallace Stevens, and particularly his volume Parts of a World, which Williams proposed to revise as “parts of a greater world,” a poetics of the informe that would break apart the “rage for order”; 479.

<sup>35</sup> On informe, see Bataille, “Formless,” in Visions of Excess, 31; Bois and Krauss, Formless.

<sup>36</sup> Williams identified Nardi’s letters with destruction, but in the sense of legal culpability for printing her letters without permission; see O’Neil, Last Word, especially the exchange with James Laughlin, [000].

<sup>37</sup> Laclau, Emancipation(s), [000].

<sup>38</sup> Bersani, Freudian Body, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Significantly, when Williams heard of the actual destruction of Hiroshima, he was contrite rather than celebratory; Mariani, New World Naked, [000].

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 365; note that Adorno sees this new imperative as irreducibly material and physically painful.

<sup>41</sup> Butler, in Contingency, Hegemony, Universality, 39.

<sup>42</sup> Laclau, Emancipation(s), 57.

<sup>43</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment, 165.

The U.N. has this remarkable influence because nearly every nation on the planet is a member. Advertisement. Advertisement. In this article, you will learn the basics of the United Nations so you can grasp the scope and reach of its operations. The United Nations was born on October 24, 1945, shortly after World War II (which officially ended on August 15, 1945). Its primary goals focus on world peace and the international desire to prevent another world war. The U.N. has 192 member nations -- nearly every nation on the planet (see UN.org: List of Member States for a complete list). All of them have signed on to the U.N. Charter, which was originally written in 1945 by the representatives of 50 different countries. Advertisement. Advertisement. 17. The salon was the most elegant room Madeline had ever seen, despite its AUSTERITY. flexibility. design. In Part B, the questions are based on a variety of reading material (single sentences, paragraphs, advertisements, and the like). You are to choose the one best answer, (1), (2), (3), or (4), to each question. In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of the inadequacies of the judicial system in the United States. Costs are staggering both for the taxpayers and the litigants - and the litigants, of parties, have to wait sometimes many years before having their day in court. In 1971, the great Persian Empire celebrated the 1500th anniversary of its founding. Its founder was Cyrus the Great, who proclaimed himself the King of Kings. The Charter of the United Nations signed in San Francisco of June 25, 1945 by 51 states came into force on October 24, 1945 after it has been ratified by the five great powers - the USSR, the USA the United Kingdom, France and China by the majority of the founder-states. October 24 is now commemorated each year as United Nation Day. The democratic principles of international relations - the principles of equality sovereignty and self-determination of people were put into the United Nations Charter and they were and are being widely supported by all those who are interested in place. 1)When and