Before we go to William Carlos Williams, we have one important poem of Robert Frost that we didn’t — not Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens — that we didn’t talk about and I’d like for you to look at that for just a minute.

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” This is a strange assemblage, very modern, very experimental. I’ve given you a couple of quotes from Wallace Stevens such as “The greatest poverty is not to live in the physical world” or another one — I want to get it right — “Not ideas about the thing but the thing itself.” Well, here’s another one. “All poetry is experimental.” That seems kind of easy at first glance. But when you think about it, that doesn’t refer just to modern poetry but all poetry is experimental. It’s interesting to me to think of it that way when I think about older poets or poets, you know, from the Romantic period or Shakespeare. They’re all experimenting with what they could say in the forms they were using.

This — these thirteen little bits are all variations on the way the imagination works. A series of examples. The blackbird doesn’t really stand for anything. This thing isn’t assembled. Well, perhaps within each one of the things the bird may have some meaning, but he doesn’t have a universal meaning. Just has meaning within the context of the individual little verses, I guess you can call these things. I call them bits, bites, verses, images. Some of them are images. Most of them are images. But it’s not like Ted Hughes’ “Crow” which stands for an awful lot of things, has a lot of symbolic weight with it. Just a blackbird. Not even a blackbird. It’s an abstraction of a blackbird.

So now that we’ve confused the issues totally, let’s look at some of these. Number I, one of the ways to look at a blackbird.
Among twenty snowy mountains,

The only moving thing

Was the eye of the blackbird.

You do see something, don’t you? Don’t you have some kind of visual response to that? I don’t count out 20 mountains, but I do see the snowy mountains and the blackbird and the eye move. It’s like the jar — like Stevens’ jar on that hill in Tennessee. Eye of the blackbird. Its motion gives order to these twenty snowy mountains. At least that’s the way I see it. There are 13 different ways of looking at this blackbird and there are probably 42 different ways to look at this little poem.

Number II, I think — I think my response is as good as anybody’s.

I was of three minds,

Like a tree

In which there are three blackbirds.

People ordinarily say not I was of three minds, but I was of two minds, right? They’re trying to decide, “Well, I was of two minds about that. Well, I was of three minds.”

Okay. And the image of a tree with three blackbirds in it just — I’ve felt that way.

Haven’t you felt that way?

I have no idea what number III means. Let’s go to IV.

A man and a woman

Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird

Are one.
Here’s another quote from Wallace Stevens. “All poetry is irrational.” I like to think about that, too.

A man and a woman
Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

A man and a woman and a blackbird and a chocolate soda are one. All part of the same thing.

Number V:
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

The beauty of inflections of sounds or the beauty of innuendoes of suggestions.

Remember John Keats was one of Wallace Stevens’ favorite poets. And in the “Ode on the Grecian Urn” it says “heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter.”

Talking about imagining the sound that the pipes on the urn might make on those engraved figures. Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard — the melodies of the mind are sweeter because they are perfect. You know, you’re gonna sound a sour note sooner or later in real music. Tennyson has a line about “dear is remembered kisses after death and [inaudible] and sweet is those by hopeless fancy feign on lips that are
for others." How sweet are hopeless fancy feign kisses? Imaginary kisses, feign kisses, are sweeter than kisses that are not imaginary. And you’re — “Well, I don’t believe in that.” You don’t click glasses and bang teeth together in your imagination. It’s a perfect thing. Everybody’s lined up right, all right? A little piece of spinach in -- The blackbird whistling. The song of the bird or just after, the memory of it.

Some of these have quite eerie tones like number VI. I do want to get to Carlos Williams, but — number IX.

When the blackbird flew out of sight,

It marked the edge

Of one of many circles.

I knew an art professor one time who attempted to do a series of engravings on a stone press of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” and he had plotted out 13 prints. He didn’t get very far. He tried the ones that he thought were most visual first, like the three birds in a tree, and it just kind of wound up with being three birds in a tree. This one was the most successful of the ones that he did try to do. He had — it looked kind of like if you throw a stone in the lake and you get all the little ripples. Or we used to reproduce music with vinyl, with these round disks that we put on a turntable, and it had little grooves. And it kind of looked like that. And the blackbird is — a different spot on there. And once again we’ve got order and nature, right?

At the sight of blackbirds

flying in a green light,

Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.

Well, I don’t know. I like the idea of blackbirds flying in a green light. That’s very pretty. And what a bawd of euphony might be — euphony just means harmony, a beautiful sound, pleasing sounds. But even those producers of pleasing sounds would cry out sharply at the sound of the blackbirds -- at the sight of the blackbirds in a green light. I have no idea. It’s all experimental and irrational.

No more do I know what on earth this means about riding over Connecticut in a glass coach, except isn’t that scary?

Now, number XII I think I understand.

The river is moving

The blackbird must be flying.

And that could just as well be — the blackbird is flying, the river must be moving. Couldn’t it? There’s a little bit of — oh, what was that terrible television show with — I shouldn’t try to think of these things. Kung Fu — the guy wanders the earth. It’s called “Kung Fu”? Is that the name of it? Carradine. Well, you know, he had a Zen master who was always telling him these things — you know, “Take the fettle from my hand, Grasshopper.” And then he would say something like, “The river is moving, the blackbird must be flying,” and we all — I don’t understand any of that. Beat somebody up. This is why we’re watching this.

But number XIII I think is my favorite. I don’t particularly like it if the weather is bad, but --

It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

The blackbird sat

In the cedar-limbs.

You ever felt that way? It was snowing and it was going to snow? It was evening all afternoon? Meanwhile, the blackbird.

One more quote from Stevens. Another reason I wanted to do this poem was I like to throw a few more at you. He said, “Poetry increases the feeling for reality.” The feeling for reality. “Poetry makes the real more real.” I refer you to the first poem that we looked at, “The Snow Man.” Keats talked about the feel of not to feel, and that’s sort of what “The Snow Man” is about. But I think if you try to have a mind of winter and be cold for a long time, and look at the snow that is in the snow, and try to behold — to observe the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is, the reality of it might become a little more real. Part of this thing of Stevens’ stance of often having an observer observing nature, observing the situation, is if you do observe, if you do regard, you do take care to pay attention, the real becomes more real.

That’s a good way to get into William Carlos Williams because I think he pretty much would agree with that. In his note — very beginning: “Carlos Williams thought of himself as the most underrated poet of his generation.” And he did complain about that. There’s some similarities between Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens, but they’re two extremely different poets. They both did write about the physical world, they both talked about the physical world and they both also had professions outside of poetry. The
professions enabled them to write their poetry.

Stevens, of course, was an insurance executive and William Carlos Williams was a practicing physician. He was a pediatrician who delivered all — hundreds of babies and made house calls. He actually said at one time that he chose medicine because he thought this would be a good way to afford his poetry. I would think he would want to choose something that would be less demanding or at least less time consuming. There was a time ‘way back when we still played records also when doctors made house calls. When you were ill, you didn’t put the sick child in the car and take them out. The doctor came to the sick child which made a heck of a lot more sense but it’s not done anymore.

He was born in Rutherford, near Paterson. Paterson, New Jersey — of course he used the name of that for the character and the name of his long poem at the end of his life, “Paterson.” Isn’t that handy for a poet? Don’t you know a poet just looks down and goes Paterson — pater, father, son, Paterson. How perfect. He had quite an ethnic background. His grandmother was English, his mother was descended from Puerto Rican on one side and French and Dutch Jewish on the other side. So he has Puerto Rican and Dutch and French and English all together and thought he made himself pretty cosmopolitan. And that’s where the Carlos comes from. In fact, his English father and his — they spoke Spanish when he was growing up in his childhood home.

He went to dentistry school first at the University of Pennsylvania. The idea of Carlos Williams being a dentist is too bizarre for me. I don’t mine him being a
pediatrician, but being a dentist just doesn’t work. While he was at Pennsylvania, the University of Pennsylvania, he met Ezra Pound and Hilda Doolittle who would, of course, become very important poets in the 20th century. In fact, both he and Pound dated H. D. If you know anything about her, you might find that even more extraordinary.

He married in 1912, Florence Herman, also known as Flossie. It was her nickname. His pet name for her was Flossie. She was a saint. They were married for many, many, many years and she put up with — how do they put it — his continuing interest in other women. She once asked him, “Bill, is there any woman you ever met that you did not want to make love with?” And he thought for a minute and said, “No.” Now, I’m not defending that. I’m not saying this is part of the reason he’s a poet. But it certainly is part of his experience.

He liked to mingle with the intelligentsia. He went to New York and hung out with Wallace Stevens and people like that. Liked modern artists. He was very interested in contemporary art and tried to reproduce some of that in what he wrote, and vice-versa. The artists were also influenced by what he was writing. He took a great interest in ordinary working people, blue-collar people. You don’t have many examples of that in these selections, but there’s a lot of his poetry that deals with the struggle of people who are either poor or very nearly poor. In fact, some of his political sentiments were a little bit too far left for the McCarthy period and that was why he was denied the consultantship at the Library of Congress.

As for his poetry, he wanted to speak as an American within an American
context. He lived most of his life in the same house that he and Flossie bought when they got married, but that’s not to say that he was that provincial. He did travel. He went to — he was educated in Geneva and Paris before he went to the University of Pennsylvania. He went back to Europe a couple of times. He went back in the ’20s. He visited his old buddy, Pound, in London and met James Joyce and that kind of thing. But mostly he wanted to write about America.

He specifically thought T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” 1922, was a catastrophe for modern poetry because of all the attempts to imitate that that followed it. Its obscurity, its difficulty, its references, its intentional obscurity as much of modernist writing is. Of course, Ezra Pound, very similar in his later poetry, almost impenetrable, very difficult, very hard to understand. Pound and Eliot were both ex-patriots, England and Italy. He stayed home and wanted to write American for American audiences.

He also objected to Robert Frost’s version of Americana because to him that was more Norman Rockwell or Currier and Ives, more a depiction of an antique past that perhaps never really existed except in Frost’s imagination, although it works so beautifully in the poems. Whereas he wrote about people with medical emergencies and factories and — you know, “Spring and All,” for instance, is — the scene is on the road to the contagious hospital. That’s hardly something that you would think of as a very nice topic for poetry. Or dead babies in another poem. He wanted to write about the real American present.

Using up-to-date local speech and in a form that he’d created of his own and he refused to call it free verse. Of course, it is free verse but no free verse is actually
totally free. At various times in his life — and I won’t worry you with the prosody so much — but he worked with everything like the triatic line, so many syllables and little steps. You can see an example of that in here. He also used breath units. He also used grammatical units to arrange his lines. But it is arranged. It’s not just — sometimes I’ll look at free verse or examples of free verse like judging high school literary contests and I think the student wrote a little lyric essay and then busted it up by indenting it on the computer — you know, just to get different line lengths. But that’s not at all what he was doing.

He also did not want to write about abstractions — once again, thinking about Ezra Pound. Pound and Eliot both wrote about — to the client of the West. He wasn’t interested in the client of the West. He was interested in what’s going on in America right now. Pound talked about World War ! and said what was it fought for, you know — for a few dozen old books, for some broken statues. For an old bitch gone bad in the teeth, for a botched civilization. Well, that wasn’t what Carlos Williams was worrying about. He also wanted to deal with specific concrete details. Said get the thing out there and the ideas will take care of themselves. We’ll get some examples of this. A poetry of things, in other words, rather than ideas.

Look over on 1274, “A Sort of a Song.” This is from one of the volumes of “Paterson.” And this is his statement on poetry.

Let the snake wait under

his weed

and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

* * *

— through metaphor to reconcile
the people and the stones.

Compose. (No ideas
but in things) Invent!

Saxifrage is my flower that splits
the rocks.

It literally means rock-splitter, that the roots will split rocks. No ideas but in things. And he’s said that in other places as well. And I think if you have kind of a key phrase with Carlos Williams that would kind of fit with an awful lot of his poetry and be one that you would be wise to think about is that. No ideas but in things.

Oh, on this page, let’s talk about “This Is Just to Say” just ‘cause it’s so much fun. Don’t you love this poem? I like to read it so — of course, I like to read ‘em all. I like to read this one.

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

* * *
and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

***

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold

Isn't that nice?  Don’t you wish you’d written that?  Of course, we cannot cross the critical line.  We can’t invade that new critical space and go in there and say that this is Carlos Williams speaking to Flossie.  But why not.  Let’s do it anyway.  I’d like to think that this really happened.

It’s written, isn’t it?  How do we know that it’s written and he’s not speaking to her.  Well, I’m already crossing the critical plain again.  I’m saying he’s not speaking to her.  Obviously, at least two people share a refrigerator and somebody ate the other one’s plums.  So when in doubt and explication, you might as well be traditional.  So the traditional thing would be that this is a male speaker speaking to a woman that he lives with.

“I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox.”  This is written.  This is just to say.  Have you ever written a note that, “This is just to say”?  Or e-mailed now, “This is just to say”?  Where did he leave this note?  On the icebox?  This is probably a real
icebox, you know. This was probably an oak thing that contained ice. This is 1934, but I don't know. It might be. I don't know if they had refrigerator magnets then, if that was the thing. Where did you say?

[INAUDIBLE STUDENT RESPONSE]

In the bowl. That is exactly where it is. That way she gets to reach in and pull out that cold bowl, and there's a piece of paper in it. Look at the shape of this poem. What did he — I can't prove this, but I just know it in my heart. He's in the kitchen when he writes this note. What little piece of paper is almost always available in a kitchen? A grocery receipt. It's even shaped like that. You get in the back of an old paper sack and you'll find an onion skin and a grocery receipt. Flip that over. "This is just to say."

And which — he knows what they were for. When did he eat 'em? Before she got up. Now, did he get up in the morning and eat those plums? She was asleep when he ate 'em. She was in bed, asleep, and he got up and ate 'em. Knowing that in the morning she'd be hungry and not have the plums. Well, that's good enough, isn't it? Does he have to go any further? "Forgive me." Okay. Well, that's fine. But twist the knife. "They were delicious" — ummmmm — "so sweet and so cold." And so American. Americans love cold things. We refrigerate our fruit until it's so cold you practically can't taste it. We refrigerate our beer until you can't taste it. Ummm. Cheese, cold cheese. I know people who refrigerate bananas. Cold bananas. Anyway.

Now, does this poem — what does this poem mean? As Whitman said, "Are you so proud to get to the meaning of poems?" Don't leave the fruit unattended? It has a little moral to it? Is it — what's the attitude of the writer — I'm saying writer here — te
person who wrote this note toward the person who it’s intended for?

Student: I think they’re so close that a person just knows I can go ahead and eat these and it’s gonna be all right, you know. You’re not gonna throw a fit and beat me, or anything.

All right. They get along pretty well, don’t they? He probably shouldn’t have done it but he knows she’ll forgive him. This is just kind of a little — hey, a little courtesy note. “I was thinking about you. I wish I hadn’t done it, but oh, well, you know. You really can’t blame me.” Is this a poem about forbidden fruit? Is this a poem about his straying? I don’t think so, but I’ve read things that say that. You know, that this is Carlos Williams’ — no. This is about some plums. And it’s also about a relationship between two people who have been together long enough, who trust each other enough, that he can give her this kind of little jabbing note and she can go, “Well, I don’t get the plums but I got a poem.” I hope that that’s the way it works.

Student: If it’s about his straying, then that second verse kind of gives you a little trouble.

“And which you were probably saving for breakfast”? Yeah, that doesn’t work at all, does it? The heck with those people with their evil little minds. You’re absolutely right. I always thought it was about plums anyway.

Well, we might as well deal with the big one while we’ve got a minute. Page 1271. I’m confident that you all have come across “The Red Wheelbarrow” at some point and I have no idea what kind of discussions you’ve had about it, and I hope that I don’t further make the issue confusing. But let’s just look at it as something important to
our study of William Carlos Williams and see how it is typical or not typical of him, and what it says about his work and about his attitude towards poetry, and so forth.

There was no title originally. He added the title later, “The Red Wheelbarrow.”

So when he first published this, all you had were these lines.

So much depends

upon

A red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

beside the white

chickens

Now, awhile ago I asked you about blackbirds, whether you saw blackbirds. Do you see this? Can you help but see this? A red wheelbarrow beside the white — a red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water. How many chickens do you see? Five chickens. Anybody else see that many or more or fewer? Three? Two or three? Five chickens. That’s a flock. That’s a lot of chickens. But nobody sees a whole — not a herd of chickens. Flock of chickens, whatever. A whole yard full of chickens? Just a few chickens. What are they walking on? What’s the wheelbarrow sitting on? Grass?
Does anybody see grass?  You see concrete?  Dirt?  Mud because of the rain?  I’ve never really thought about that except this time I really had — I really had some green going with that red wheelbarrow and those white chickens.

What’s the — I always see it from a certain angle.  What’s it called: a Chinese landscape point of view?  I’m up, looking down at it.  You’re to the left, looking — you’re on the ground with it?  I’m inside, looking out a window at it.  It’s just that I avoid agriculture at all costs.  I don’t know.  There are all kinds of stories attached to this and I will not indulge myself by bringing up any of these legends.  You’ve probably heard some of these things.  I’d rather just look at it as a poem.

Poetically, structurally, these are — this is free verse.  So much depends upon the way he’s arranged this.  A red wheelbarrow glazed with rain water.  Is it raining in the scene you see?  But it has rained.  What time of day is it?  Afternoon?  Somehow I see it as afternoon, too.  Is the sun shining?  Huh-uh.  No.  Overcast.  But the water is beaded up and glazed.  This wheelbarrow — is the wheelbarrow — what’s the wheelbarrow made out of?  Metal?  I’ve always seen a painted wooden one.  I guess it’s because if it’s 1923 and I want this antique looking farm implement.  But, you know, red paint or a high gloss paint and how the water would glaze it, would bead on it?  But it would bead on metal.

What I want to try to get across is it doesn’t matter that this is a wheelbarrow.  It doesn’t matter that these are chickens.  What matters is that they are things.  “So much depends upon a red wheel barrow.”  So much depends upon a Styrofoam cup.  It doesn’t matter.  It’s things.  That’s all we have are things and all reality comes out of the
material world. No ideas bud in things. You get the things there and the ideas will take care of themselves, and there’s an idea. It may be wrong, but there’s an idea that comes from that that so much depends — everything depends upon the physical world, the real world. I don’t believe it’s symbolic but just totally physical. And yet there is sort of an empathetic, if you don’t mind, feeling about it. Sometimes you see things and they make a moment. It seems to have been what happened to him, if indeed that’s what happened.

Well, let’s go back and look at some more. Look at “The Young Housewife.” Again, the temptation to be biographical is mighty easy because the point of view is somebody who’s driving his car at ten o’clock in the morning through a neighborhood. And so I want to say, you know, that this is the pediatrician on his rounds or, you know, whatever. But that’s unnecessary.

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligee behind
the wooden walls of her husband’s house.
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands
shy, uncorseted, tucking in
stray ends of hair, and I compare her
to a fallen leaf.
The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

I love that “as I bow.” How many times has he gone by this house? It just occurred to me. Sounds like he’s kind of cruising the neighborhood, doesn’t it? At 10:00 a.m. she’s inside “her husband’s house.” That seems to be significant to him. And he’s solitary. “I pass solitary in my car.” But he must’ve come back because she’s coming out to the curb to call the ice-man, fish-man. This is 1916, 1917. Literally, there were, you know, for those iceboxes people who delivered ice. My grandfather had a business in Kansas City, coal and ice, and that’s what they did. Brought the blocks of ice to the houses. Apparently, the fish people delivered, too.

But as he drives by, he bows. “The noiseless wheels of my car rush with a crackling sound over dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.” What kind of confuses me is the stanza before that. He says “and I compare her.” Were you getting ready for, what, a summer’s day or to a red, red rose? “And I compare her to a fallen leaf.” How is she like a fallen leaf? You know, metaphors and similes have to find similarities between unlike things to say something about ‘em.

Well, what happened to the young housewife eventually? She’ll die. This moment in time for her is insignificant and unimportant, but to the passing stranger who seems to admire her it’s a moment — it’s a precious moment. But one day she will be no more and her beauty, such as it is, with her untouched stray ends of hair will be gone
as well. As well as her “careless negligee behind the wooden walls of her husband’s house.” And then the car passes over these leaves which are symbolic, you know, of the end of life.

I don’t know what’s going on here. It’s almost imagistic. His friendship with Pound and H. D., Pound tried — Pound did influence him in the way of imagism. I’m gonna get off on images too much because it never really — well, don’t go too far with that. But images — and one of the primary things is to make an image in your mind and “The Red Wheelbarrow” is one that does that certainly. The most famous one from Ezra Pound is “In a Station of the Metro.” You probably remember that. Going downstairs into the subway and you see the people coming out.

The apparition of these faces in the crowd,

Petals on a wet, black bough.

Their light faces against the darkness of the depths of the subway. Petals, by the way, I compare here to a fallen leaf. But it’s fun to think about and certainly American, and it’s certainly a common sight and colloquial. Even the way he writes “At ten A.M.” Looks like something — a documentary and official rather than poetic.

“Portrait of a Lady.” By the way, Carlos Williams is considered — you know, when he said he didn’t want to be particularly, he is difficult. And I’ve always loved this poem and I’ve always wondered about the lady whose portrait it was and how she felt about it. Let me read this one.

Your thighs are appletrees

whose blossoms touch the sky.
Which sky? The sky
where Watteau hung a lady’s
slipper. Your knees
are a southern breeze—or
a gust of snow. Agh! what
sort of man was Fragonard?
--as if that answered
anything. Ah, yes--below
the knees, since the tune
drops that way, it is
one of those white summer days,
the tall grass of your ankles
flickers upon the shore--
Which shore?--
the sand clings to my lips--
Which shore?
Agh, petals maybe. How
should I know?
Which shore? Which shore?
I said petals from an appletree.

Those questions — it’s almost as if she’s saying, “What sky? Which shore?” —
you know, “Let me get on with this. Why do you keep interrupting? I’m making this
poem for you comparing your — shall I compare your ankles to a — to tall grass?” She says, “Which shore?— / the sand clings to my lips.” “Agh, petals maybe.” I have no idea. He gets that wrong. Does he get it wrong on purpose? Because he mentions Fragonard but he says where Watteau hung a lady’s slipper. But Fragonard is the one who painted that famous thing. It was called “The Swing.” Have you seen that, the lady swinging? There’s a guy playing a lute or a banjo or something underneath it, looking up at her swinging and her slipper is going through the air. Well, you’ll come across it if you haven’t.

The “Willow Poem” — again, that’s almost enigistic. Can’t you see it? Everybody or nearly everybody told me that that tree in Sara Owen Jewett was an example of the pathetic fallacy. Is this — line 6:

The leaves cling and grow paler,

swing and grow paler

over the swirling waters of the river

as if loath to let go.

The leaves of this willow tree, as if they don’t want to let go? Is that epithetic fallacy? Why isn’t it? It isn’t, but why isn’t it?

[Inaudible student response]

All right. And the leaves aren’t saying, “I don’t want to let go, I don’t want to let go.” They’re not loath to let go. I think the key is — and you sensed it, you knew, line 9 “as if loath to let go.” And so it’s a simile. It’s a metaphoric expression. It’s not saying, “Oh, the little leaves didn’t want to let go of the tree.” It is saying they’re clinging there
as if, if they did have feeling that they wouldn’t. It’s a pretty picture.

Oh, let’s do one more. Because I’ve got some important things to talk about when we get to Spring and all. But look at “Queen-Anne's-Lace.” One more of these early poems. Everybody knows what Queen-Anne's-Lace is. Certainly the Ozarks pastures are full of Queen-Anne’s-Lace. That really pretty, delicate, white weed that sometimes it makes a whole — like a blanket over the field. Everybody also learns early on somehow that that’s — what is Queen-Anne’s-Lace? What's another name for it? They’re wild carrots, yeah. Always displeased me. Carrots? Like some kind of Bugs Bunny image with the Queen-Anne’s-Lace.

This has been — this poem has been discussed as an example of William Carlos Williams’ attention to real physical detail. You can see this. You can see these flowers. You can see this field, more or less. But the way he connects the real things, the real objects, just feeling, so in fact an intimate feeling, to desire, to love, as the description of this plant compared to this woman’s body in a very odd way. As the description builds, so does the feeling. The passion increases as it gets to the end. Look at that.

Her body is not so white as
anemone petals nor so smooth—nor
so remote a thing. It is a field
of the wild carrot taking
the field by force;

So he rejects these traditional images of beauty, the anemone petals, and it’s not so remote a European thing. It’s a pasture in New Jersey. It’s a real field. It’s almost
like he’s reaching, like he wants you to hear the voice of somebody thinking as they compose this. I think it’s similar to the “Portrait of a Lady” where he’s saying “Your thighs are appletrees.” You know, I need a metaphor.

. . . It is a field
of the wild carrot taking
the field by force; the grass
does not raise above it.
Here is no question of whiteness,
white as can be, with a purple mole
at the center of each flower.

Each flower is a hand’s span
of her whiteness. Wherever
his hand has lain there is
a tiny purple blemish. Each part
is a blossom under his touch
to which the fibres of her being
stem one by one, each to its end,
until the whole field is a
white desire, empty, a single stem,
a cluster, flower by flower,
a pious wish to whiteness gone over--
or nothing.

It’s either all this or it’s nothing. And, of course, it depends on the observer, doesn’t it?

Without the poet, without the lover, it’s just nothing. But it’s either all of this — if you can’t take it, if you can’t accept that it’s all this, then let it be nothing.

Well, I think you’ve been very patient and we can quit for today.