We’ll finish talking about William Carlos Williams today. Two great poets for next time, E. E. Cummings and Edna St. Vincent Millay — or some would say one great poet and one kind of great poet. I’ll let you decide which is which. No quizzes on poems. I don’t know. I can’t do that. I just do not know how to do it. So it’s just up to you to read it and I hope you are reading it ’cause it’s always better to have read it first and worked with it a little bit.

Talking to a few of you going over these tests reminds you that everything that went before, you can forget about it. I certainly will not be asking you anything about Bret Hart or those people on that previous exam. But this stuff that we’re doing now, starting with Wallace Stevens, is difficult. This is not easy material, I don’t think, at all. It’s very hard. I don’t fully comprehend it at all and I do my best to try to get you an idea of it to reject or accept. But I do also try to give you a couple of handles and from time to time I’ll give you a quote from one of these writers. I’ll give you one in just a second. Well, I’ll give you one right now from William Carlos Williams.

In reference to “Spring and All,” is one way to — in reference to a lot of his poetry, but it particularly strikes me with this poem. He said eyes, e-y-e-s, eyes stand first in the poet’s equipment. Eyes stand first in the poet’s equipment. The most important equipment that a poet has to use is his eyes. And I think you can really see that in William Carlos Williams because of how visual he is. So much depends upon a red wheelbarrow. It’s just — you can see it.

I mention that because these are things that — aw, I’m having a hard time today. We might have to redo this whole thing. I’ve met with several people today and I’ve just
talked myself blue in the face, and so I’m a little tongue-tied right now. When you take these tests, you should prepare answers for them. You really should. And the people who are successful with these tests, most often I believe they really do. Sometimes if they study together they prepare so well together that I’ll get answers that are so similar I have to think back as to where they were sitting in the class. It’s that way and it’s not a bad idea.

Wallace Stevens — we started with Wallace Stevens and I have been very reductive about that and simplistic and said that Wallace Stevens had two main ideas that you needed to carry forth. What would they be? What were the two major ideas — major themes of Wallace Stevens that we talked about? We spent one day on one and one day on the other. The idea that art orders nature, that art gives nature order. The artifact, the created thing, the combination of the observer, the intellect of man, however you want to do it. But the “Anecdote of the Jar,” that jar takes dominion everywhere and it makes the slovenly wilderness surround that hill.

Another poem on a similar theme, “The Idea of Order at Key West.” I would have an answer ready for either one, for a quote from either one of those poems. They’re both about art imposing order upon nature. The song the woman sings, the artist, because she was the maker of the song she sang. She creates the reality, the creates the order for nature. Now, if you have an answer ready for both of those poems and you get either one of ‘em, you’re fine. And if you get the “Anecdote of the Jar” but there’s no quote from “The Idea of Order,” that doesn’t prevent you from mentioning “The Idea of Order.” It also doesn’t prevent you from even quoting it if you have read it
so often you've got a line or two down.

See what I'm trying to say? You can prepare yourself for these things and I try to give you answers to what I think is the more important quote from a particular poem. I read an awful lot of this stuff to you which is — makes it a little more difficult with the poetry because I really believe you ought to hear the poetry. I'm gonna read you a long poem by William Carlos Williams today if I get to it because I think it needs to be heard. Unless you're accustomed to reading poetry written the way he writes it, you may not even know how to read it. And I think I can kind of help train you in it, as far as that goes.

But I guess that's my point, is that if I write something on the board or take time out to say — well, who said this: “The greatest poverty is not to live” — splitting that infinitive — “The greatest poverty is not to live” — no, he doesn't split it. That’s why it sounds so funny. “The greatest poverty is not to live in a physical world.” Wallace Stevens. “All poetry is experimental.” Wallace Stevens. “Poetry makes the real more real,” or something like that is good enough. Okay? All right.

Look at “Spring and All.” Well, the title — oh, good. A poem about spring. First line: “By the road to the contagious hospital” — aagh, you know. But then, of course, a doctor might be traveling the road to the contagious hospital frequently. But that’s just the fact. That’s just straightforward.

Under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast [absolutely visual, absolutely seasonal. You can see it] — a cold wind.
Beyond, the waste of broad, muddy fields
brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen

* * *

patches of standing water
the scattering of tall trees.

Okay. So what’ve we got? A road to the contagious hospital, some broad, muddy fields that are brown with dried weeds in ‘em, and puddles, patches of standing water. And a mottled blue sky with a cold wind coming out of it. So far, so good. So far no spring.

All along the road the reddish
purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
stuff of bushes and small trees
with dead, brown leaves under them
leafless vines--

More — and with five lines there of just description of things. No ideas but in things, said William Carlos Williams. There’s another quote I gave you from him. And they’re not particularly beautiful things, are they? “Twiggy stuff,” he says. “Twiggy stuff of bushes.” But we know exactly what he’s talking about.

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish
dazed spring approaches--

Wow. What a departure for William Carlos Williams who always seems to be so concrete in writing about the real and the nature. Suddenly he’s personified a season.
Spring is approaching and she is sluggish and dazed. Why? Oh, come on.

[Inaudible student response]

She just woke up. Most of us are sluggish and dazed. They — now, wait a minute. They. What’s the pronoun reference? “They enter the new world naked.” The antecedent was certainly not spring. But back up there we have all these bushes and small trees.

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter. All about them
the cold, familiar wind —

* * *

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf

* * *

One by one objects are defined —
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf

* * *

But now the stark dignity of
entrance — Still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken.

Great transformation in this poem that took place here to talk about now. This is
an instant. Emily Dickinson can do that. When she talks about a certain slant of light winter afternoon, she’s talking about a moment in time, a moment in nature. Line, oh, 22, I guess. “One by one objects are defined.” He has stopped by the road to the contagious hospital, the point of view of this speaker, right? I don’t think they’re driving by. He’s looking on these fields, looking on these bushes, but they’re becoming clarified. “It quickens.” Quickens. The flesh under your nail is the quick because it’s live, because it’s living. When a pregnant woman first feels life it’s called the quickening, when she first feels that movement within her. The quick and the dead, the living and the dead. It quickens. It comes to life.

“Not the stark dignity of entrance.” That’s that moment that we all pray for throughout the winter, that we know it’s turned. Usually there’s some kind of appearance. Like you see a crocus in the yard or something like that and go, “Oh, boy. This is the time that the birds come back,” you know. Emily Dickinson. But also there’s those moments and sometimes it fools you, like Frost talks about in “Two Tramps in Mud Time.” You know, you think you’re halfway into May and then a cold wind comes and you’re back in the middle of March. But this is just a moment that we can all see and it’s just done with objects. And anything is a fit subject for poetry, even muddy bushes on the road to the contagious hospital. A lot of things going on with that poem.

Speaking of anything’s a fit subject, “The Dead Baby.” How’s that for a title for a poem? Martin Amos’s second novel was titled Dead Babies. I don’t know how his publisher let him get away with it. Not a very good book, either. Remember that the author — ’cause we can remember these things since we’re no longer bound by the
constraints of new criticism — was a pediatrician. And the idea of the child’s death would be, I think, extraordinarily significant for a children’s doctor. But look at the attitude.

Sweep the house

under the feet of the curious

holiday seekers--

sweep under the table and the bed

the baby is dead--

And then he describes the parents’ visual imagery.

The mother’s eyes where she sits

by the window, unconsoloed--

have purple bags under them

the father--

tall, wellspoken, pitiful

is the abler of these two--

But at any rate, the baby is gone. He says:

Hurry up! Any minute

they will be bringing it

from the hospital--

a white model of our lives

a curiosity--

surrounded by fresh flowers
Defeated. The attitude towards death is even more clear in the poem called “Death,” 1272. Let me try to read this to you because I think just the inflection can help with the meaning of it.

He's dead
  *
  *
  *
the dog won't have to
sleep on his potatoes
any more to keep them
from freezing
he's dead
the old bastard--
He's a bastard because
  *
  *
there's nothing
legitimate in him any
more
  he's dead
  *
  *
He's sick-dead
  *
  *
  He's
a godforsaken curio
without
any breath in it
* * *
He’s nothing at all
he’s dead
* * *
Shrunken up to skin
* * *
Put his head on
one chair and his
feet on another and
he’ll lie there
like an acrobat--
* * *
Love’s beaten. He
beat it. That’s why
he’s insufferable--
* * *
because
he’s here needing a
shave and making love
an inside howl
of anguish and defeat--
   * * *
He's come out of the man
and he's let
the man go--
   the liar
   * * *
Dead
   his eyes
rolled up out of
the light--a mockery
   * * *
   which
love cannot touch--
   * * *
just bury it
and hide its face--
for shame.
Love's defeated. Love can't whip this. Think about Wallace Stevens’ “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” and the lady that they stretch out there. “If her horny feet protrude, they come / To show how cold she is, and dumb.” You have to look at it. “Let
the lamp affix its beam.” Get him out of my way. He’s no longer valid, he’s no longer legitimate. He’s dead. There’s nothing for us here.

Read some of this poem, “The Wind Increases.” Trying to emphasize that free verse still has form. That’s on the same page as “Death.” I try to give a little end stop to each line ending. When people read enjambed poetry— when they read poetry and the line goes on to the next line and it’s called enjamment, remember? Sometimes they never pause at all. I believe there should be the slightest — slightest, slightest, slightest hesitation. A little bitty hesitation that comes with just the fact that the line ends. Not a full stop, not a big beat, but a small hesitation in free verse.

The harried

earth is swept

The trees

the tulip’s bright

tips

sidle and

toss--

***

Loose your love

to flow

***

Blow!

***
“Blow” is just one word, one line, a one word line. With an exclamation point and a capital letter, which he doesn’t always do. It’s kind of trying to tell you how to read it. It’s trying to tell you how to make it sound. Everybody’s seen tulip trees. These are tulip trees, not just tulips. “The tulip’s bright tips sidle” and then he puts “toss” way over to the other side. “Sidle and toss.”

You can really see that in a poem like “The Dance” at the very end of this section.

When the snow falls the flakes
spin upon the long axis
that concerns them most intimately
two and two to make a dance
  * * *
the mind dances with itself,
taking you by the hand,
your lover follows
there are always two,
  * * *
yourself and the other,

I think you can see the motion of the snow a little bit there ‘cause it’s a snowflake. The dance of life is like snowflakes falling. They pair up, they seem to. And if they lose one, they’ll pair up with another one as they spiral down.

But only the dance is sure!
make it your own.

Who can tell

what is to come of it?

Once again, the dance of life.

I guess I confused everybody because there’s another poem called “The Dance” on 1274. There are a couple of Brueghel paintings that include these dancers, but this one’s called The Kermess and it’s a peasant wedding and a big celebration, and all these people are somewhat overweight and wearing tight clothing. It’s kind of an odd picture as they are dancing.

Look at the rhythm.

In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess,

the dancers go round, they go round and
around, the squeal and the blare and the
tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles
tipping their bellies (round as the thick-
sided glasses whose wash they impound)
their hips and their bellies off balance
to turn them.

Look at that rhythm. What is the time signature to this if this were a piece of music? It’s a waltz, isn’t it? “In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess, the dancers go round, they go round” — 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3. Isn’t that cute? Always using your stressed and unstressed syllables. “In Brueghel’s great picture.”
“Burning the Christmas Greens.” I’ll have to explain this because culturally you don’t know about it. It used to be that people burned their greens, their Christmas greens. They didn’t haul the Christmas tree out and dump it in the lake, and all that greenery that you put up around the mantlepiece or whatever. It was real greens and when it got dry, of course, it was an awful fire hazard and you burned it in your trash burner or in the barbeque or whatever. Inside the city limits. And it was a great, nice smell. It’s just like in the fall there used to be great clouds of acrid smoke from burning leaves that I still miss, that we can’t do now because of pollution and other matters. But do you get the picture about what they’re doing? They’re not breaking the law. It was okay to do it in 1944. But these greens that have been so comforting and so beautiful and so much a part of their celebration for the first 35 lines or so, they stuff them — line 35:

We stuffed the dead grate

with them upon the half burnt out

log’s smoldering eye, opening

red and closing under them

* * *

and we stood there looking down.

Green is a solace

a promise of peace, a fort

against the cold (though we

* * *)
did not say so) a challenge
above the snow’s

hard shell. Green (we might
have said) that, where

* * *

small birds hide and dodge
and lift their plaintive
rallying cries, blocks for them
and knocks down

* * *

the unseeing bullets of
the storm. Green spruce boughs
pulled down by a weight of
snow--Transformed! [by the fire]

* * *

Violence leaped and appeared.
Recreant! Roared to life
as the flame rose through and
our eyes recoiled from it.

* * *

In the jagged flames green
to red, instant and alive. Green!
those sure abutments . . . Gone!
lost to mind
And so forth. Isn’t that a beautiful description literally? Eyes stand first in the poet’s equipment. Can’t you see that? It’s exactly the way it looks. And, of course, this contrast is still — is exciting and invigorating.
   Breathless to be witnesses,
as if we stood
ourselves refreshed among
the shining fauna of that fire.
What a wonderful line, “the shining fauna of that fire.” He was not averse to making pretty noises, alliterating fauna and fire. Fauna, of course — well, how can it be fauna? “The shining fauna of that fire.” We’re burning flora, right? So we have this life, this seeming life of this flame.
   Well, “Lear” — he was 65 years old when he wrote this, that old mad age. That second paragraph is a pretty good description of youth from the viewpoint of 65.
   Yesterday we sweated and dreamed
or sweated in our dreams walking
at a loss through the bulk of figures
that appeared solid, men or women,
but as we approached down the paved corridor, melted--Was it I?--like
smoke from bonfires blowing away
Today the storm, inescapable . . .

And remember King Lear opens up with him out — winds up with him out there, blow wind crack your cheeks in the storm of old age. “Pitiful Lear,” he says.

‘Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” Who else wrote a poem about that? I won’t try to draw you a picture of this painting, but has everybody seen that? Another Brueghel? Most of the picture plain is a great big oxen or ox who’s pulling a plow and another big peasant who’s behind the oxen, pushing the plow. It’s not a very attractive picture and that’s most of the picture. Over here you can see some mountains and you can see the sea, and there’s a little bitty boat. And down in the corner there are two little legs sticking up out of a splash of water. You remember Icarus. He’s the one whose father, Daedalus, designed the labyrinth and devised these wings so he could escape and fly. And what did he tell the boy? Don’t fly too close to the sun because the wax melts the feathers and the feathers fall out, and Icarus plunged to his death in the sea.

I used to tell my kids myths, Greek myths, because they’re the greatest stories. You know — and there’s so much good violence. You know, the part about the cyclops and when they ran that burning stake into his eye and it sizzles — read that to a 6- or 7-year-old. They’re going, “Ohhhhhh.” The giant part is scary enough and then the pssssshhh — you know, that part’s good. But my favorite one was Icarus and Daedalus because what’s the moral of that story? Listen to your Daddy. He tells you the truth and that’s what you need to do. But at any rate, there’s another poem by W. H. Auden
called [inaudible] which describes the same painting, and he says nobody notices those little white legs disappearing into the water `cause the earth is too busy.

Well, let me see if I can at least do a good job for you with this one poem that I want to read, and that’s “The Ivy Crown” on 1277. This was published when William Carlos Williams was 72 years old. I think that there’s no way for us to — of course, you can’t say now this is Dr. William Carlos Williams talking to Flossie. That’s not fair and not allowed to do that, and that just passes all kinds of critical — it fails a lot of critical tests. But at the same time, there’s a speaker talking to his love. And it’s a speaker in old age talking to his lover and so I think it’s perfectly all right to put a little biographical twist on this when you think about what Mrs. Williams put up with all her life. That at least they achieved this at the end. It wasn’t quite the end, but he was 72.

“The Ivy Crown.” Of course, the ivy crown is what you put on the poet or the victor who won the race. It’s also sacred, as they point out, to Dionysus, the god of wine, ecstasy, sacrifice, regeneration, and poetic inspiration. But I think it’s just the crown that they receive for having come to what they’ve come to. These lines are examples of the triadic line Carlos Williams developed when he wrote the long poem “Patterson.” It’s like one long line divided into kind of three stages. Not necessarily a long line, but you can see how it works — the way it looks like steps, the way he sets it up. I think it’s interesting to try to read these — I encourage you to try to read these things aloud when you’re on your own and have some privacy. Observe the punctuation and observe the end of the line, even if it’s a one-word line like line 2, which is complete with punctuation. Has a slightly longer pause. But let me try to read it to
you. "Love Poem in Old Age," is what it could be called.

    The whole process is a lie,

    unless,

    crowned by excess,

    it break forcefully,

    one way or another

    from its confinement --

    or find a deeper well.

    Antony and Cleopatra

    were right;

    they have shown

    the way I love you

Well, what happened with Antony and Cleopatra? They both killed themselves. You think about Dryden’s play about them, all for love with the world well lost. You know, without love their lives weren’t worth living.

    Antony and Cleopatra

    were right

    they have shown

    the way. I love you

    or I do not live

    at all.
Daffodil time

is past. This is

summer, summer!

Spring is gone. Look at the obvious metaphor. I think it’s pretty good when you’re age 72 to write a poem and say this is summer. I think you’d be more inclined to say this is just about midnight on December 31st. But this is summer.

the heart says,

and not even the full of it.

No doubts

are permitted --

though they will come

and may

before our time

overwhelm us.

We are only mortal

but being mortal

can defy our fate.

We may

by an outside chance

even win! We do not

look to see

jonquils and violets
come again
    but there are,

still,

the roses!

How late do roses bloom? I have a rosebush that blooms right into December.

Romance has no part in it.

The business of love is
    cruelty which,

by our wills,

we transform
    to live together.

It has its seasons,

for and against,
    whatever the heart

fumbles in the dark

    to assert
    toward the end of May

Just as the nature of briars
    is to tear flesh,

I have proceeded

through them.

Keep
the briars out,
they say.

You cannot live
and keep free of
briars.

Children pick flowers.
Let them.

Though having them
in hand
they have no further use for them
but leave them crumpled
at the curb’s edge.

At our age the imagination
across the sorry facts
lifts us
to make roses
stand before thorns.

Sure
love is cruel,
and selfish
and totally obtuse --
at least, blinded by the light,
young love is.

But we are older,

I to love

and you to be loved,

we have,

no matter how,

by our wills survived

to keep

the jeweled prize

always

at our finger tips.

We will it so

and so it is

past all accident.

Wow. How would you like for somebody to love you that much someday? Or at least to write you a poem like that. I hope Flossie said, “That’s good, William. You can have those plums.” Or something. But that’s just absolutely beautiful, a beautiful description of two lives that have come to that point, I think. Anyway, so just remember that when the jonquils are gone that there’s always the roses, okay?