Both thrilling and potentially threatening, interpersonal encounters in the modern city are often presented by 20th-century American poets as conducive to spiritual growth. The urban Other as perceived by the poetic personas of, say, T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, or Allen Ginsberg constitutes both a menace and a promise. The situation is, of course, archetypal; a stranger on the horizon, whether in the street or in the wilderness, must have always evoked mixed feelings in another human being. Today’s metropolitan environment, however, offers a highly intensified, extreme version of this archetypal experience. In a big city one is forced, as it were, to deal with a large number of strangers on a regular basis. After all, according to one memorable definition, a city is a settlement “in which strangers are likely to meet” (Jervis 66). Since paying attention to each person in the street is hardly possible, city-dwellers have learned to ignore the omnipresence of alien individuals, reducing the repertoire of possible interpersonal interactions to a limited number of highly conventional behavings.

This social necessity has become a source of psychological tension: though conscious of the often alluring presence of the Other (a potential for a new relationship or at least an interesting experience), most urbanites feel obliged to act as if they hardly notice other people. Needless to say, the resultant standardizing of interpersonal encounters contributes to the much-lamented automatism and impersonality of metropolitan life. This paradoxical situation fosters specific, and sometimes conflicting, attitudes towards the Other, all of them easily noticeable in modern American poems featuring interpersonal encounters in an urban setting. Firstly, the daily experience of social routine combined with a constant exposure to the impersonality of the crowd encourages stereotyped thinking and sweeping generalizations about “man”. In the city it seems easier to see others in generic terms, as representatives of a species rather than as unique individualities. Secondly, while individuals merge into a depersonalized crowd, details of their appearance or attire often become more noticeable. In other
words, while usually deeming a relative or a close friend an organic and complex totality, one is more prone to regard an anonymous person as an assortment of “parts”. (Thus Oscar Williams, for instance, writes an entire poem about an attractive female leg spotted on the subway train.)

Modern poets often consider it their natural duty to violate the urban routine by defamiliarizing the standard encounters between strangers. (See Ginsberg’s series of questions asked of a shop assistant in a California supermarket: “Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?”) Being totally anonymous in a big city is often presented as a formative and liberating experience, enabling one to conduct social experiments not feasible elsewhere.

T.S. Eliot’s “Rhapsody On a Windy Night” (1917), William Carlos Williams’s “The Young Housewife” (1917), and Oscar Williams’s “The Leg in the Subway” (1940) amply illustrate the above-mentioned diversity of urban perspectives. Conscious of the city’s ambivalent potential, the speakers of these poems offer radically different visions of urban social interactions, though all of them seem to be “othering” the encountered urbanites by projecting private axiological preconceptions on the protean metropolitan reality. Significantly, in all three poems the male speakers view the accidentally encountered female bodies as indicative of a feminine presence. This presence, both disruptive and alluring, is posited within a larger (and, as it happens, highly stereotyped) frame of reference wherein the feminine principle invariably stands for the instinctual and the carnal, permanently allotted to the realm of half-articulated desires. Still, even within these cognitive limits — probably resultant, as a feminist critic might argue, from the poets’ immersion in a patriarchal culture — the three poems vary considerably in their perspective on the relation between the woman and the city.

Bitterly self-ironic and disillusioned, the speaker of “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” seems to view his urban environment in largely deterministic terms, the woman being a mere cog in the machine there, an unwitting part — and thus supporter — of the system. Reading the poem, one cannot but recall A. David Moody’s comment on Eliot’s Prufrock: “His fear is a fear of the human city and of human relations” (184). In this context, the poem’s title has obviously ironic undertones. The crucial characteristic of a rhapsodic form, whether musical or poetic, is its seemingly loose, improvised structure supported by recurrent themes. Indeed, Eliot’s poem does read like a collection of
loosely linked imagist variations on one central theme — the sights/sites vary, but the very act of walking and the ominous presence of the street lamps remain constant. The central theme, however, hinges upon the speaker’s final realization that the city is but an extended metaphor of an existential prison: there is, apparently, no escaping the automatism and predictability of human thoughts and emotions. In short, it seems ironic to produce an ostensibly improvised text with a doggedly deterministic message.

That message is signaled already in the first stanza by the street lamps’ beating like “fatalistic” drums:

Twelve o’clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations
Its divisions and precisions,
Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

The lamps’ messages, as it eventually turns out, are indeed fatalistic for they all stress the automatism and predictability of both humans and animals. The similes in the second stanza (in which the door opens “like a grin” and the corner of the woman’s eye “twists like a crooked pin”) introduce the poem’s recurrent motif — the consistent blurring of the boundary between the mechanical and the organic elements of the urban environment:

The street-lamp said, “Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.”
In the poem’s cityscape organisms, whether feral or human, are mere mechanisms. Consequently, the child’s hand in stanza four is described as “automatic”:

The street-lamp said,
“Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter.”
So the hand of the child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.
I could see nothing behind that child’s eye.
I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.

The speaker’s position within this formidably deterministic scheme is ambiguous. On the one hand he seems to be part and parcel of the automatized, naturalistic, (in)human city, with his own memory being hopelessly lacerated and capable of generating only “twisted” things. On the other hand, however, the speaker’s self-ironic stance implies a state of heightened self-awareness, thus belying his spiritual inarticulateness. In the poem’s reality it is children and women who, given the emphasis on the “automatic” character of their behavior, represent the instinctual realm of largely inarticulate suffering. George Williamson’s otherwise cryptic remark that “[in the poem] the woman and the moon are alike” (81) becomes clear if one remembers what the “lunar synthesis” does in Eliot’s lyric; just as the essential sordidness of the city’s reality becomes more apparent in the moonlight, when all the inessential details are barely visible, so the essential hopelessness of the human condition becomes more glaring if enacted by a female/feminine agent. While “the lunar spell dissolves the usual order of the memory and provides a new principle of association” (Williamson 80), the anonymous moon-lit woman acquires a symbolic significance. In this respect “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” amply illustrates the emotional distance towards the feminine principle typical of Eliot’s early verse in general and of The Waste Land in particular. As Moody points out,

Whereas in ‘Prufrock’ and other early poems women were the cause of anxious fear in the male subject, in The Waste Land it is the women
who suffer the anxiety, while the male subject observes them in the
guise of a Seer. What the various women all have in common is that
they are the victims of a man’s world. They have been the objects of
male love and lust; and they know what it is to be unloved – to be
made ‘nothing’. They carry ‘the burden of anxiety and fear’ in the
poem, and they articulate it very effectively. But they cannot be said to
arrive at a detached consciousness of it. *It is the male subject who
practises detachment*, and precisely from them in their suffering (185,
emphasis mine).

The poem’s child, then, belongs in the same province as the woman.
Hence the child’s hand slipping out and pocketing a toy is like the cat’s
tongue slipping out for food (both are automatic responses to instinctual
needs), while the speaker admits he could see “nothing behind the
child’s eye”; the traditional window of the soul displays no view.*

While the child’s eyes seem blank to the speaker, his own memory is
on the verge of going blank too. A hodge-podge of confusing images,
the man’s memory can only throw up a “crowd of twisted things”, a
random (re)collection of unrelated and thus meaningless episodes “that
concentrate the horror of life” (Williamson 81). Significantly, nature
provides no relief; the moon has “lost her memory” too. To the poem’s
all-too-urban speaker nature seems no longer invested with a
transcendental message. The landscape is, apparently, as spiritually
blank as the cityscape; both have been desacralized. Memory can only
help the speaker locate his apartment’s door; it fails, however, to sustain
a meaningful link between the past and the present.

Even the desire for interpersonal interaction – this allegedly most
human of emotions – is rendered in the poem in mechanistic terms.
Eyes “trying to peer through lighted shutters” are implicitly analogous
to an old crab that “gripped the end of a stick” held by the speaker; the
all-too-human longing for contact with others seems as automatic and
predictable as the crab’s response to the stick. The staple nature-culture
juxtaposition has thus been rendered inconsequential. At this point John
Jervis’s comment on Virginia Woolf’s essay “Street Haunting, A
London Adventure” comes to mind: “If the modern city is a
manifestation – and a manifesto – of culture against nature, it
nevertheless ends up posing the same challenges as nature, and is just as
recalcitrant and perplexing” (70).

In William Carlos Williams’s “The Young Housewife” the
psychological interaction between the speaker and the nameless
housewife seems much more complex, while the situation and the setting seem suburban rather than urban. Still, whether metropolitan or suburban, watching the pedestrians from behind the steering wheel of one's car is one of the typically urban pastimes. Moreover, if one chooses to equate the poem's speaker with William Carlos Williams, then, as Barry Ahearn reminds us,

We should remember that in the days when doctors made house calls it would have been no cause for public comment for Williams to drive freely about Rutherford. Other professional men, however, were more firmly anchored to their offices. (A few years after "The Young Housewife," Sinclair Lewis showed how quickly George Babbitt's escapes from the accustomed round of his realty business were noted.) Furthermore, the doctor has the additional privilege of entering any house in town without arousing undue suspicion among the neighbors about the motives. In short, the doctor's opportunities for surreptitious romance are greater than those of any other professional man (34).

The speaker seems to be driving at a rather leisurely pace for he has enough time to catch a little more than just a fleeting glimpse of the young housewife whose house he is passing by. Still, the whole lyric seems to be precisely an account of a momentary emotional state, a fleeting insight into the subtleties of a unique, though quotidian, encounter. Thus the poem's deceptive stylistic simplicity (no metaphors, no rhymes, no neologisms or other overtly "poetic" devices) provides a clue to its spiritual message which could be formulated as follows: If one pays attention, one will notice the mystery, uniqueness and subtlety inherent in even the most casual of encounters. As in the celebrated "Red Wheelbarrow", the boundary between the sacred and the profane, the lofty and the lowly, is purposely blurred here. What on the surface may seem perfectly plain, commonplace and quotidiant contains a dramatic potential for an elevating experience. All one has to do is live attentively. Indeed, on closer inspection the apparently simple, almost austere, poem reveals intricate structural harmonies. Throughout the lyric there is a structural parallelism, particularly visible in the first two stanzas:

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligée 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.

In terms of the poem’s rhythm this parallelism hinges upon the counterpoint effect, in this case the marked contrast between the opening stanza’s long first sentence (or, as in stanzas two and three, the initial clause of the compound sentence) and the short second sentence (or, again, clause in stanzas two and three). In all the three stanzas the shorter clauses refer directly to the speaker (“I pass solitary in my car”, “I compare her / to a fallen leaf”, “I bow and pass smiling”). The longer parts, in turn, refer to what the speaker sees (the housewife and her house) or, as in the final stanza, to what he can hear:

The noiseless wheels of my car
rush with a crackling sound over
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.

Significantly, all the aforementioned sentences have a similar syntactical structure.

The overall effect of internal order is strengthened by sound effects, especially consonance and alliteration. It is because of alliteration (“the wooden walls of her husband’s house”) that line 3 of the first stanza seems to stand out in the poem. This emphasis on the walls of the husband’s house implies their importance to the speaker’s perception of the housewife; to him this woman remains behind a barrier, inaccessible both physically and emotionally. Barriers and boundaries are important in Williams’s lyric. Ahearn writes:

The poem focuses attention on various tangible barriers and containers, as if the poet were mulling over the structures that physically restrain the young housewife. The “wooden walls,” for example, “of her husband’s house” are the major physical barriers that hide her from the view of patrolling males, though it seems that this doctor’s view has the advantage of x-ray vision, for he discerns her moving “in negligée” behind those walls. When she finally emerges, further physical limitations appear. The “curb” seems to be one barrier that marks the boundary between herself and delivery men. Another constraint is prominent by virtue of its absence: she is “uncorseted.” Furthermore, the adjective beginning line 8, “stray,” suggests her possible
predilection for escaping orderly confines, whether in terms of hair arrangement or in terms of more serious transgressions. The poet, too, exists in a physical container – his car (34).

It should be added, perhaps, that the two types of confinement can hardly be viewed as having equal billing. The “solitary” speaker stays, after all, within the safe, private space of his car. One does not need to subscribe to Freudian psychoanalysis (the-car-as-the-emblematic-extension-of-man’s-sexual-organs spiel) to argue that in a patriarchal culture – such as that of Williams’s America – this is a predominantly “masculine”, and empowering, space. In the American suburbia of 1917 it was men who roamed the streets in search of adventure. In addition, according to Ahearn, “One consequence of Williams’s marriage was that the automobile suddenly acquired heightened importance for him. It does not figure merely as transportation. His poems frequently associate it with freedom from the ties of home and marriage” (36). All in all, the automobile’s interior provides the doctor-driver with a somewhat privileged vantage point; he can stare at the people in the street and get away with it. At the same time, however, the car precludes, or at least defers, any direct contact with others. The housewife, in turn, is first seen within the domestic space where she properly belongs. That she feels totally at home in her husband’s house is suggested in the text by the contrast between her relaxed ways inside the house (where she “moves about in negligée”) and her marked vulnerability outside the domestic space; on the sidewalk she is “shy” and reminiscent of a “fallen leaf”, an object that has been separated from its natural and nurturing habitat. The husband’s house, then, may stand for both shelter and confinement.

Having compared the housewife to a fallen leaf, the driver proceeds to run over some dried leaves strewn on the street. His momentarily increased aural sensitivity to the “crackling” sound of the crushed leaves is probably due to the comparison he has just made. The otherwise perfectly realistic episode acquires emblematic connotations in the speaker’s mind. Likewise, the reader intuitively makes the connection between the driver’s unwitting running over the leaves and his, equally unintended, encroachment upon the unknown woman’s privacy. The wheels crushing the leaves with automatic indiscriminateness are at this point emblematic of the driver’s equally unintended violation of the housewife’s fragile domesticity. We are never told explicitly what it was that the driver experienced in that brief, wordless encounter with
the housewife. Two emotional states, however, seem to be definitely there: compassion and an unqualified, somewhat puzzling sense of guilt on the part of the driver. Compassion is clearly hinted at in the second stanza by the speaker's perceptive and sympathetic appraisal of the woman's temporary feeling of uneasiness and his subsequent act of comparing her to a fallen leaf. Given the emotional ambiguity of the whole situation, it is not surprising that critics interpret it in different ways. Barry Ahearn, for instance, writes:

"Fallen," of course, is a term that evokes a number of sexual references—especially to ladies of easy virtue. And the suggestion that the housewife is a leaf carries with it the traditional references to the fleeting life of vegetation as an analogy for human life. But the appearance of "dried leaves" crushed by the "noiseless wheels" of the doctor's car equally as well suggest the noiseless wings of devouring Time and the ephemeral nature of the merely physical. The faint presence of the two contradictory traditions [of carpe diem and memento mori] mingling in the poem reflects the contrary impulses (desire vs. fear of scandal) that move the poet (35-36).

This may well be so, but the critic plays down at this point the logic of the poem, its specific frame of reference. The housewife is compared to a fallen leaf only while standing at the curb, "shy, uncorseted" and trying to look respectable ("tucking in / stray ends of hair"). Like a leaf separated from its tree, the housewife, once isolated from her natural domain, seems particularly vulnerable.

The driver's vague sense of guilt is, as already noted, implied by his increased aural acuity in the last stanza. Viewed in this context, his final act of conventional politeness (bowing accompanied by smiling) may be interpreted as an unconventional apology — expressed via an all-too-conventional gesture — for unintended peeking that might have compounded the housewife's embarrassment.

The speaker's mental state is, as already mentioned, a complex one and thus open to diverse interpretations. Ahearn emphasizes the latent eroticism of the wordless encounter between the "patrolling" doctor and the "uncorseted" housewife:

That the doctor entertains thoughts about some sort of convergence with the young housewife appears in the parallels between the two of them. In the first stanza the state of the young housewife being left alone in "her husband's house" makes the poet aware of his similar position: "I pass solitary in my car." The housewife's self-consciousness
about her appearance in the second stanza is echoed in the doctor’s self-consciousness about his art: “I compare her. . . .” There is outward turning in this poem – the woman leaves the house and encounters other males, the doctor frequently leaves his home to call on women who need his professional services – but there is also inward turning; the woman toward her appearance, the poet toward his art. (Note the parallelism of roles: she emerges as a housewife but also meets people at the curb as an object of desire; he passes by as a doctor, but also as a poet.) Finally, the meeting of housewife and doctor is defused of sexual anxiety by the doctor’s slightly pompous and ridiculous final act: “I bow and pass smiling.” The courtly bow he exhibits at the close can only be executed with difficulty from the seat of a moving car” (35).

Whatever label one decides to put on that ambivalent mixture of compassion, tenderness, sexual attraction, and guilt felt by the poem’s speaker, one thing seems certain: the driver’s complex, though transient, emotional state has been facilitated by his urban environment. The possible interpretations of the poem’s final message are many. The speaker, for instance, may have realized that it is hardly possible to travel in the city (suburbia or not) without interacting with other people, however unwittingly. In other words, in a metropolis one never knows when and how one’s actions, or even one’s mere act of looking at someone, may affect another person’s feelings. Therefore, one had better be careful and attentive.

Obviously, the poem also invites another reading, namely as a deliberately understated account of a missed opportunity: “The encounter between the passing doctor and the young housewife is scrupulously polite and legitimate. Yet the poem hints at potential sexual contact” (Ahearn 34). The driver has spotted a woman with whom he seems to have some sort of temporary emotional bond. Whatever his feelings towards the housewife, she has definitely attracted his attention and aroused his compassion. Yet, he does not stop – he never gets out of the car to meet her. His final nod and smile seem somewhat paltry acts, compared to what is going on in his head. The discrepancy between the subtlety of the driver’s feelings and the conventionality of his behavior is obviously, and thus purposely, jarring. Williams’ poem exposes one of the chief paradoxes of urban relations: being the source of countless social opportunities, the city is by the same token the source of countless disappointments. The city arouses
our expectations concerning other people, but also teaches us how to suppress them.

Whatever our interpretation of the final scene, one thing seems certain: in “The Young Housewife” the city offers the driver a unique opportunity to feel compassion for a stranger, to establish an unspoken, transient rapport with an anonymous human being. As theologians tell us, that state is a preliminary step in the mystic’s journey towards enlightenment.

Oscar Williams’s poem also ends with an insight, though of an entirely different order. “The Leg in the Subway” is, in its very form, a clear reference to Walt Whitman’s rhapsodic verse. The long lines, the accentual rhythm, the anaphoric repetitions, and the syntactical parallelisms are all reminiscent of “Song of Myself”, anticipating, by the same token, the incantatory cadences of Allen Ginsberg (Williams’ poem was published in 1940). However, given the speaker’s uneasy self-consciousness and his attendant observance of the social decorum (he neither accosts nor follows the woman whose leg he has surreptitiously admired), the stylistic reference to Whitman seems self-ironic. In short, Oscar Williams’ speaker exudes neither the ecstatic elation nor the cosmic cool typical of Whitman’s rhapsodic free verse. Unlike the mystic of “Song of Myself”, the commuting urbanite from “The Leg in the Subway” never works himself into frenzied, joyous abandon:

The long tongue of the earth’s speed was licking the leg,

... It drank moment, lit shivers of insecurity in niches between bones:
It was full of eyes, it stopped licking to look at the passengers:

Whitman’s speaker, in turn, though also “full of eyes”, would, needless to say, never have bothered to “look at the passengers” to make sure nobody has noticed his peeking. Thus it is the clash between the Whitmanian style and the effete intellectual’s self-ironic perspective that sustains the central dramatic conflict in Williams’s poem. (At this point the situation is reminiscent of the aforementioned clash between the rhapsodic form and the deterministic message of the Eliot text.)

The emotional rift in the speaker’s mind between reason and instinct, or between the social and the instinctual self, is further emphasized by the structure of the poem, neatly divided into four parts, slightly different in style if not in tone. The first section serves as a rational
introduction to the frenzied vision that follows. "This is what I saw", the speaker declares at the end of this introductory part, thus clearly marking the point of transition from reality to fantasy. Significantly, the subsequent two sections teem with metaphors, thus emphasizing the highly subjective and contrived character of the speaker’s perspective. The final section, though also heavily metaphorical, is detached and explanatory in tone and hence comparable to the first one. In short, the speaker’s experience, however intense, is divided, framed, and made sense of by an ostensibly analytical mind.

The poem’s final metaphors aptly visualize its central message, the ultimate meaning of the speaker’s insight. Having realized that civilization is “as dark as a wood and dimensional with things” the poem’s narrator now sees how “birds dipped in chromium” sing in “the crevices of our deeds”. In other words, he has seen how civilization’s artifacts – such as metropolitan subways – can generate some inscrutably wild emotional states. The symbolic image of “birds dipped in chromium” could stand for the conflicting but intricate merger of nature and culture, or the organic and the mechanical, that seems to define humans as a species. Their “singing” in the “crevices of our deeds” might be the poet’s way of saying that all our motives derive from this central internal contradiction, which truth, however, manifests itself only when the true, and often unrealized, motives of our actions are accidentally revealed, that is when the thin veneer of culture cracks, exposing the creative instinctual chaos lurking underneath.

The speaker’s voyeuristic encounter with a stranger on the subway train is, obviously, a specifically urban experience. As already indicated, the urbanites’ anonymity in the crowd encourages a specific type of spectatorial attitude, a fragmentation of perspective, a focus on details that are often endowed with aesthetic autonomy. (Hence, it is possible to admire a detail of clothing or anatomy on an otherwise unattractive person.) One might even argue that the resultant fetishization of selected elements of clothing and the iconization of selected parts of the body – what John Jervis calls the “fetishistic fragmentation and decomposition of the body” (84) – constitute staple constituents of the metropolitan experience:

Clothes as a ‘second skin’... take on the fetishistic allure of body parts, testifying to the immersion of selfhood in the objects and vestments that may do more than just provide cover for it, but may enter into its constitution, becoming part of the web of fantasy and desire
central to the modern self in its problematical relation to the body (Jervis 118).

The lesson the speaker learns is that of his own susceptibility to largely uncontrollable drives. Brigid Brophy once referred to the city as "one of the great indispensable devices of civilization (itself only a device for centralizing beauty and transmitting it as a heritage)” (169).

In the three poems discussed above it seems that the city is primarily a device for intensifying the emotional impact of interpersonal encounters.

Notes

1 The interactions with strangers are always heavily ritualistic, even in the cities usually associated with multiculturalism and spontaneity. Thus New York, the apparent epitome of cultural contingency, is also a city of well-established “street codes”, so to speak. In Paul Auster’s The Moon Palace the narrator-agent notices that seasoned New Yorkers, though invariably unimpressed by even the most extravagant, exotic, or provocative outfits donned by metropolitan eccentrics in the streets, can get easily alarmed by any unconventional behavior in the streets. Thus, Auster tells us, it is not so much the clothes but what one does inside these clothes that is subject to a rather strict code of acceptable and unacceptable/“abnormal” (i.e. potentially dangerous) behavior in New York City.


3 “Hence Baudelaire’s celebrated demand that the poet pick up his halo from the gutter, and his contribution to what Elizabeth Wilson has called ‘an aesthetic of the ugly’, whereby poets and novelists have found in ‘the very ugliness and squalor of those cities a melancholy, perverse beauty and eroticism’. In doing this, the artist can avoid being trapped in the deadening utilitarianism of project, the bourgeois subordination of everyday life to material goal, of experience to purpose, and can reclaim the sense that life is ‘rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. The marvellous envelops and soaks us like an atmosphere, but we don’t see it’” (Jervis 68).

4 In ancient Greece a rhapsodist was “an itinerant minstrel who recited epic poetry. Part came from memory, part was improvised. A rhapsodist was thus a poet who ‘stitched’ together various elements” (Cuddon 570). Eliot’s poem, then, has a title which is both deceptive and ironic, a title that, as George Williamson points out, “in music suggests a composition of enthusiastic character but indefinite form. But if we take it as an effusion marked by extravagance of idea and expression, and without connected thought, we shall be coming short of the mark. This rhapsody has method enough; it concerns a windy night on a street ‘held in a lunar synthesis,’ and the speaker is returning to his lodgings. The lunar spell dissolves the usual order of the memory and provides a new principle of association; then time successively shakes the memory in an irrational but symbolic fashion, producing in each instance a synthesis which is both an emotion and a comment. The ‘lunar synthesis’ gives a different ordering of things: the daily synthesis appears only at the end” (80).
At this point I find it hard to agree with Francis Scarfe, who states that “there is no clue, for the intelligent reader, as to the connection between the cat and the child. All this is shorthand précis of Baudelaire’s prose-poem ‘Le Jou jou du pauvre’. Baudelaire compared the poor child receiving a toy, with ‘les chats qui vont manger loin de vous le morceau que vous leur avez donné’, then went on to show how the rich child might well envy the toys of the poor, which are living things; ‘Or, ce joujou, que le petit souillon . . . secouait dans une boîte grillée, c’était un rat vivant!’ Thus the ‘toy that was running along the quay’ was a rat or a mouse” (50). Scarfe is surely right when pointing out the borrowings from Baudelaire, but he ignores Eliot’s creative adaptation of the scene to his own poetic purposes. The parallels between the cat’s and the child’s equally automatic behavior seem explicit enough. George Williamson, among others, acknowledges the connection when, in his discussion of the “human machines” in *The Waste Land*, he notes that the much-quoted “automatic hand” has “already appeared, with a similar implication, in ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’” (143).

“Carl Rapp notes that the automobile in Williams’s work represents a poet’s freedom [96]. But it can also suggest certain limitations, such as the obligations and responsibilities that go with the profession that makes owning a car necessary. . . . One indication of Williams’s interest in the world as a place where things are in motion is the early appearance of automobiles in his poetry. Not only are they ubiquitous in his work, his are among the first poems in English to admit motor vehicles as worthy of poetic consideration” (Ahearn 168). Charles Altieri rightly notices that in lyric poetry metaphoric styles usually have “self-reflexive implications” (51).

**Bibliography**


APPENDIX

T.S. Eliot

Rhapsody on a Windy Night

Twelve o’clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations
Its divisions and precisions,
Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

Half-past one,
The street-lamp sputtered,
The street-lamp muttered,
The street-lamp said, “Regard that woman
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin.”

The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things,
A twisted branch upon the beach
Eaten smooth, and polished
As if the world gave up
The secret of its skeleton,
Stiff and white.
A broken spring in a factory yard,
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left
Hard and curled and ready to snap.

Half-past two,
The street-lamp said,
"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter."
So the hand of the child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.
I could see nothing behind that child's eye.
I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.

Half-past three,
The lamp sputtered,
The lamp muttered in the dark.
The lamp hummed:
"Regard the moon,
La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.
She smoothes the hair of the grass.
The moon has lost her memory.
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,
That smells of dust and eau de Cologne,
She is alone
With all the old nocturnal smells
That cross and cross across her brain."
The reminiscence comes
Of sunless dry geraniums
And dust in crevices,
Smells of chestnuts in the streets,
And female smells in shuttered rooms,
And cigarettes in corridors
And cocktail smells in bars.
The lamp said,
"Four o’clock,
Here is the number on the door.
Memory!
You have the key,
The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair.
Mount.
The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

The last twist of the knife.

**William Carlos Williams**

**The Young Housewife**

At ten A.M. the young housewife
moves about in negligée 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.
Oscar Williams

The Leg in the Subway

When I saw the woman's leg on the floor of the subway train, Protrude beyond the panel (while her body overflowed my mind's eye), When I saw the pink stocking, black shoe, curve bulging with warmth, The delicate etching of the hair behind the flesh-colored gauze, When I saw the ankle of Mrs. Nobody going nowhere for a nickel, When I saw this foot motionless on the moving motionless floor, My mind caught on a nail of a distant star, I was wrenched out Of the reality of the subway ride, I hung in a socket of distance: and this is what I saw:

The long tongue of the earth's speed was licking the leg, Upward and under and around went the long tongue of speed: It was made of flesh invisible, it dripped the saliva of miles: It drank moment, lit shivers of insecurity in niches between bones: It was full of eyes, it stopped licking to look at the passengers: It was as alive as a worm, and busier than anybody in the train: It spoke saying: To whom does this leg belong? Is it a bonus leg For the rush hour? Is it a forgotten leg? Among the many Myriads of legs did an extra leg fall in from the Out There?

O Woman, sliced off bodily by the line of the panel, shall I roll Your leg into the abdominal nothing, among digestive teeth? Or shall I fit it in with the pillars that hold up the headlines? But nobody spoke, though all the faces were talking silently, As the train zoomed, a zipper closing up swiftly the seam of time.

Alas, said the long tongue of the speed of the earth quite faintly, What is one to do with an incorrigible leg that will not melt - But everybody stopped to listen to the train vomiting cauldrons Of silence, while somebody's jolted-out afterthought trickled down The blazing shirt-front solid with light bulbs, and just then The planetary approach of the next station exploded atoms of light, And when the train stopped, the leg had grown a surprising mate, And the long tongue had slipped hurriedly out through a window:
I perceived through the hole left by the nail of the star in my mind
How civilization was as dark as a wood and dimensional with things
And how birds dipped in chromium sang in the crevices of our deeds.