

Whenever I Say “I”, I Mean Also “You”: Domestic Communion and Justice in “This Is Just to Say”

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In *Spring and All*, William Carlos Williams explores the imagination to define the characteristics of its generative powers. He finds that the imagination has an ability to overcome the barriers of traditional art forms, allowing it to renew life and even complete¹ reality. For Williams, poetry lets these forces take shape, so it moves beyond representation or observation. Through poetry, the imagination receives form and cleaves² to the physical world, resulting in a true experience filled with real

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¹ Williams, William Carlos, *Spring and All* (Paris: Contact Publishing Co., 1923), (50).

² Ibid.

"things"³ and sensations. This experience serves as the expression of a poem's contact with the moment.⁴ According to Williams, to attend to the moment is to recognize being; to participate in life exactly as it occurs. Ultimately, this poetic theory culminates in one of Williams's most significant ideas: "In the imagination, we are from henceforth (so long as you read) locked in a fraternal embrace, the classic caress of author and reader. We are one. Whenever I say "I" I mean also "you."⁵ The unity of author and reader not only makes many of Williams's abstract claims more accessible but also underscores a key theme of his poetry—communion.

Understanding William Carlos Williams's famous poem, "This Is Just to Say," requires careful attention to the central idea of communion. Reading this poem through the lens of communion reveals interesting ideas associated with marriage, transgression, and reconciliation. These ideas are especially apparent when considering the dramatic context of the poem as a note shared between husband and wife.⁶ Situated within this domestic setting, the poem suddenly conveys an intimate relationship between "you" and "I," which betrays a greater complexity hidden behind the plain façade of the poem's casual language. Their intimacy is a subject of both their marriage as well as their orientation as author and reader, and each of these features must be interrogated to determine the state of this couple's relationship and the poem's aim as a shared object between the two. These concerns are partial catalysts for the questions behind this study: what is the nature of this marriage and what does the poem, as a note, seek to achieve? The final element, however, pertains to the title of the poem itself. As Charles Altieri significantly observes, the "Just" of the title is less addressed to "considerations of accuracy" and "the

³ The concept of "things" comes from Williams's often quoted "no ideas but in things," found in his collection *Paterson* (1927). As some critics have it, this theory suggests that ideas should be inseparable from the things they occupy.

⁴ Williams, *Spring and All*, 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ This understanding of the poem is so widely held that critics rarely argue its validity. It may be variously sourced but reading the poem as a note written by a husband and found by his wife has many parallels to biographical (and sometimes autobiographical) accounts. In fact, in a later collection, Williams even includes a "Reply" to this poem, composed from a sarcastic note his wife wrote. Much of Williams's poetry refers directly to his own home, wife, and family.

casual...properties of the statement,"⁷ and more interested with its quality as a function of justice. This revelation leads to the following question: how are the words of the poem just? I argue that the poem, as a note, is just because it offers to rectify the separation of man and wife, caused by transgressions, which themselves raise barriers, through a reconnection with reality and a communion with one another in both understanding and experience. This process of justice, which begins with transgression and ends with forgiveness, relies on Williams's conception of the imagination and roots itself in a freedom necessary for authentic meaning-making.

The beginning of "This Is Just to Say" presents the relationships of the poem directly. Recalling the "found"⁸ nature of this poem as a note, we first encounter a reader, and that reader is immediately confronted with the "I" of an author. We soon discover that the reader and author share a domestic space, which communicates their second identity as husband and wife. These relationships become active within the course of the poem when the wife begins to read and when she learns of her husband's actions in the first stanza. To resolve these events the wife must do two things: finish reading and choose a reaction. On the other side of these relationships, the active events have already been resolved. The author has completed his writing and the husband has confessed and asked for forgiveness. These conditions are all instigated by the antecedent scenario, which is a separation of both characters by time and space as well as by transgression.

Piecing these two sides together will help us see how the note is just, not only because it honestly admits to transgression and guilt, but because it freely offers a present opportunity for marital re-communion through forgiveness. As reader, the wife already participates in the imagination of the author, revealed through the note. Yet her participation likely lacks total volition. Although she shares this imaginative space with her husband, she certainly experiences disappointment as a natural response to his transgression revealed in the first stanza. At the beginning

⁷ Charles Altieri, "Presence and Reference in a Literary Text: The Example of Williams' "This Is Just to Say,"" *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (1979): 499.

⁸ Stephen Matterson, "Contemporary and Found," in *World, Self, Poem: Essays on Contemporary Poetry from the "Jubilation of Poets"*, ed. Leonard M. Trawick, (Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990), 187-195.

of the third stanza, however, the wife is presented with a choice, and in that choice she may embrace her husband and fully enter willingly into communion with him. Her forgiveness in this moment, which he presents as a voluntary option, has the capacity to mend the separation caused by transgression and allow the two to reunite in experience, which forms the concrete reality of their marriage.

Before discussing justice as it arises at the end of the poem, we must first turn to the transgression that begins this process. The husband's transgression is evident in the first lines of the poem: "I have eaten / the plums."⁹ In Williams's rebuilding of Genesis,¹⁰ the husband transgresses his wife when he violates her will and expectation.¹¹ His honesty plainly reveals the event that led to his note and, rather than hiding like Adam in the garden, he confronts the trespass more directly. His admission alone, admirable as it may be, in no way solves the problem of his offense because the separation of husband and wife persists, especially as his "I" remains isolated within the confines of this first stanza. It is not hard to imagine the immediate negative emotions that would arise in the wife upon reading these lines, and her indignation certainly keeps the two apart, separated by different frames of mind. Their continued separation, however, is much more complex.

The husband, by eating the plums, has gone across a boundary and initiated a potential series of events that his wife alone must endure. The new boundary is a social convention dictating what his wife must do. This convention, as Stephanie Spong points out, is part of a concept of the "fallen woman,"¹² so prevalent in love poetry. Construing women as such permits the imposition of narrow limits on how a woman, especially a wife, should and should not act, because it presupposes an imagined guilt

⁹ William Carlos Williams, "This Is Just to Say," in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams: Vol. 1: 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1991), 372, lines 1-4.

¹⁰ There are many relevant parallels to Eden and the fall present in this poem, and not all have been exhaustively explored by critics, but this analysis will only make passing references to Williams's use of the archetype.

¹¹ The husband's expectation also contributes to his transgression. He expects that he will suffer no consequences for his action, which is undermined when he begins to write the note.

¹² Stephanie Spong, "'This Is All beyond You': Transgression and Creative Force in the Early Love Poems of William Carlos Williams," *William Carlos Williams Review* 33, no. 1-2 (Spring/Fall 2016): 241.

connected to her sexual maturity, which she must hide for the good of society.¹³ The woman is, therefore, guided by restrictions of respectability and is “subject to societal expectations for composure.”¹⁴ In the normal course of events, the wife in this poem might enjoy the plums alone in her home without any need to consider “proper” behavior; the act is innocuous enough. Her husband’s transgression, though, begins a new course in which she must consider her reaction through a framework of respectability, applied in her role as housewife. This barrier of expectation, which requires the wife to be silent and not upset the order of the household any further, is part of what now blocks husband and wife from communion because it prevents the communication necessary for understanding.

The disunity caused by eating the plums is not, however, the only transgression that separates the couple before the poem begins. In fact, transgressions by both husband and wife have raised barriers between their mutual understanding of one another. Although the wife is present as reader at the beginning of the poem, she enters in word—“you”¹⁵—as the explicit audience in the second stanza. Using Helen Vendler’s explication of a stanza,¹⁶ Daniel Morris observes husband and wife occupying their own spaces within the poem.¹⁷ Their isolated occupancies of the first and second stanzas not only mimic their physical separation but also highlight the parallel transgressions that separate their shared understanding.

When the author reflects on the purpose of the plums, he hypothesizes that his wife was “probably / saving”¹⁸ them for her breakfast. This revelation offers two facts concerning the plums: the

¹³ According to the argument of this trope, when a woman reaches maturity, and especially after she is married, the awareness of her sexuality by an audience detaches her from innocence and marks her with sin. Though erroneous, this assumption demands that the woman, now connected to transgression, conceal her guilt by adhering to accepted standards of dress, speech, behavior, etc., to prevent others from scandal.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁵ Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” 6.

¹⁶ Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology* (Boston: Bedford, 1997), 37. Vendler uses the Italian translation of stanza to suggest that a stanza is a room, and a poem is a house.

¹⁷ Daniel Morris, “This Is Just to Say This Is the End of Art: Williams and the Aesthetic Attitude,” *William Carlos Williams Review* 32, no. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2015): 59–60.

¹⁸ Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” 6–7.

husband and wife do not share an understanding about what these plums are intended for, as indicated by the relative uncertainty of "probably," and because the wife holds an uncommunicated idea about the plums and her designs for them, she has also transgressed, at least by her omission. If the wife always or even frequently eats plums with breakfast then her husband's guess would be unnecessary, as the routine would already exist. Including that he found the plums "in / the icebox"¹⁹ points toward some degree of concealment on the part of the wife.²⁰ Perhaps she has hidden them purposefully, intending to eat them all herself, or maybe she has withheld her intent from her husband, fearing he might cross her anyway. Nevertheless, she has kept information about the subject from him and has, therefore, created a rift in their understanding of one another by raising a barrier of doubt.

To rectify the disunity of husband and wife, created by their separation in time and space as well as their independent transgressions, the barriers to mutual understanding must be deconstructed. First is the husband's transgression, which, if neglected, would leave husband and wife silent, committing them to their own isolated thoughts and emotions. Of course, the husband immediately attends to his transgression by writing the note. The very fact that he leaves behind a confession undermines the silence that would typically result from the adherence to societal expectations. It begins a line of communication that could not otherwise occur given their separation in space. Similarly, the note demonstrates the husband's recognition of his obligation to treat his wife as a co-equal participant in the actions and maintenance of their marriage and mutual understanding rather than a passive receiver of his transgressive abuse. In any case, the note reveals his independent knowledge and begins the process of eliminating their transgressive privacies.

The barrier raised by the wife's transgression starts to erode when her husband finds and eats the plums. His discovery of the plums in the icebox brings him into the understanding of their existence in the home,

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

²⁰ William Eric Williams, "The House," *William Carlos Williams Newsletter* 5, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 1. Williams's son describes their residence and identifies the "old icebox" that held the famous plums. It is located in a small hallway, accessed through the back door and would have been distinct from the refrigerator.

which eliminates the private knowledge held by his wife. Additionally, he comes to share in an even more intimate knowledge of the plums when he eats them and comments on their quality—a quality the wife would already know.²¹ Moreover, his subtle revelation of her purposes honestly conveys his understanding of her design without attaching any reproach. Most importantly, however, is how the grammatical construction of the second stanza positions and affects the sense of the wife’s transgression in relation to the whole event.

As the part of the note with the fewest words and written as a subordinate clause, the second stanza demonstrates that the wife’s transgression is neither more significant than her husband’s nor primary in his thoughts about the subject. It is, instead, an interruption, highlighted by the stanza’s placement in the middle of the note. Furthermore, the verb, “were...saving,”²² constructed in the past continuous (or past progressive)²³ and interrupted by the husband’s speculative “probably,” parallels the interruption of his action on her expectations. Phrasing the stanza in this way not only recognizes his wife’s role and participation in these events but also acknowledges the simple fact that he can only atone for his own transgression. This acknowledgement resists the temptations to either assume facts about his wife and harbor resentment based on those assumptions or rely on solipsism as a defense against mutual understanding. In the end, the barrier of doubt falls because the husband determines that it is not strong enough to hold him isolated on his own side; doubt is ultimately weaker than his need to reconcile himself to her.

Beyond these barriers, which relate to the plums themselves, is the theoretical barrier of one’s unconscious reversion to internal escape. This barrier is resolved through the form and imagination of the note, which create a communal space for understanding, experience, and freedom. In *Spring and All*, Williams laments that there is a “barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world,”²⁴ and that writing raises and maintains this barrier “between

²¹ Plums would not be refrigerated unless they were already ripe, as the cold would stunt the ripening process. This ripeness is what the wife in the poem already knows.

²² Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” 6–7.

²³ This verb form indicates an action occurring in the past that was then stopped or interrupted.

²⁴ Williams, *Spring and All*, 1.

sense and attention to the moment."²⁵ In response, he creates a new kind of poetry that opposes the security provided by the "fantasy"²⁶ of traditional literary forms and releases the reader into the present so that she may engage with the living world. As a note, this poem directly interacts with authentic sensations—at least sight, touch, and sound—that ground the reader in an unalterable reality. Unlike other kinds of writing, the note is a "thing" itself and all its features are integral to what it is.²⁷ Although it could be re-written on another piece of paper, its connections to time, place, and the moment would be lost, altering its meaning.

This particular note is a physical artifact inextricably linked to the event of the poem itself. The plums (and the residue of their pits) are absent and if there were no note, the wife, like her husband in the second stanza, would be left to speculate the reason behind their disappearance from the icebox. The note left behind is part of the action—part of the moment. Without a physical note or some other related artifact, the shape of the moment would change, either through rehearsed and reproduced words, or through memories that falsely recall the past, or through disengagement from the thoughts and emotions tied to the immediate moment, or through the inaccurate characterization of events that forms in the subjective consciousness while silently waiting for a resolution. The note, therefore, deconstructs the barrier between the reader and her sense of the world around her while also committing both husband and wife to a commonly understood expression of the moment eternalized in the form itself. Their temptations to turn inward and escape the real experience of the present are counteracted by the note's physicality, which binds them to the moment. This condition allows author and reader to engage with one another without deceptive attachments to, or opinions about, circumstances that exist outside this singular occurrence.

The couple's connection to the moment is only one half of the total force that raises them out of their isolation. The second and most important half is their unity in the imagination, which ushers them into a

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2. This fantasy, which he also calls a "beautiful illusion" (3), is the escape that he thinks literature offers the reader. He suggests that traditional forms, like those of romantic poetry, allow the reader to disengage from her suffering and enter a space that is disconnected from her tangible reality.

²⁷ The novel, for instance, can be reproduced using different pages or even on different mediums without changing its meaning. Its physicality does not shape how it is understood.

shared reality even more complete than the tangible note. Williams claims that “poetry is a reality in itself” and it reveals, in words, the “movements of the imagination.”²⁸ As a reality, Williams’s poetry does much more than simply relate equivalences and representations of phenomena. It lets the author and reader exceed passive observation and “enjoy ... taste ... engage the free world.”²⁹ This kind of engagement in the moment is possible because, according to Williams, poetry and the imagination emancipate man from negative physical attachments and emotions. The husband, having eaten his fill of plums, is released from his carnal desires—the “banal necessity of bursting [himself]”³⁰—and is able to seize upon this opportunity to complete reality with his writing. Through reading the note, the wife then joins her husband in the imagination, as if she were having a time and space-oriented conversation with him, and becomes locked in the “fraternal embrace.” Here they can participate in a reality together and encounter a “oneness of experience”³¹ and a “unity of understanding.”³² So, to “just say” is to create a moment in which both parties can “engage the free world,” and in that engagement with freedom, they may finally repair their separation.³³

Participating in the freedom of the moment garnered by the imagination allows a unification of understanding and experience between husband and wife. To reach a total unity of understanding, they must take the pivotal step of forgiveness presented to them at the climax of the poem. The act of forgiveness, as an expression of freedom, compels both husband and wife to recognize their agency in the process toward reconciliation and justice. The individual independence of “I” and “you” in the first two stanzas comes to a head in the third stanza. The husband maintains the autonomy between the two in his command, “Forgive me,”³⁴ but in the verbal implication of the subject— “[You] forgive me” —

²⁸ Williams, *Spring and All*, 67.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 50. In this way, the poem is ekphrastic because it speaks. But it goes beyond ekphrasis because the “saying” or speaking is the event and experience itself.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

³² *Ibid.*, 48.

³³ In *Spring and All*, Williams argues that without this freedom, man is seriously burdened by the world, “which he carries like a bag of food, always fearful lest he drop something or someone get more than he” (50). In the poem, this “bag of food” is removed from the start, meaning that husband and wife can move freely without its burden.

³⁴ Williams, “This Is Just to Say,” 9.

he invites his wife to participate freely by inserting herself into the equation of forgiveness. She may then turn the statement around and say, "I forgive you." Though tempting to read this line as a performative request or as an aggressive demand, Williams's poetic theory insists that the word is "real" and, therefore, cannot be conceived as artificial. Additionally, the request for forgiveness, if real and truly desired, requires the speaker to assume a supplicating position. This line, then, indicates the importance of both forgiveness and the relationship between the two parties in the act of forgiveness. As the first instance of directly shared space in the poem, it brings husband and wife together at a vital moment. The implied "you" and the "me" (an extension of the "I"), emerge from the "rooms" of their respective stanzas and meet with an opportunity to participate in the only act that can fully reconnect their transgressive separation.

The opportunity of this line, expressed by the husband as an appeal, notably differs from the speculative and judicial reflections that surround it. Here at the climax of the poem, the speaker moves the reader's attention away from the past and into the present. What has been done cannot change and, according to Williams, the husband who ate the plums and the wife who probably saved them for breakfast no longer exist, at least insofar as concerns the present. The *act* of asking for and offering forgiveness is the immediate present and both husband and wife have the freedom to choose who they will be in that moment. It is the only part of the poem that both requires participation and invites the reader into an existing reality. Furthermore, this expression of the eternal moment in the imagination of the author permits a renewal of oneself and one's circumstances. The husband's renewal is evident in the simplicity of the statement itself. "Forgive me" is isolated from other constructions in the note, which focuses the appeal on its most important aspect. At the same time, this focus demonstrates who he chooses to be in the exact moment. The reader will not find argument or justification surrounding this appeal. Instead, the appeal confesses humility and recognizes the severity of this singular act in relation to their marriage. It reveals that the husband, within the moment, knows he is reliant on his wife because she is the only one who can provide what he needs, namely forgiveness.

From the second perspective of this line—the reader's—the command of "Forgive me" and its momentary nature posits direct action

rather than deliberation. The transgressed reader is compelled to act before moving on. What is at stake is the possibility for her renewal and the potential latent in the final lines. To renew oneself in this moment only requires one to *be*, without distraction or definition, proof or equivocation. Forgiveness, which would unite their understanding, requires nothing other than asking and giving. The final three lines of the poem, then, present the potential for a shared experience between author and reader; a uniting experience of the sensuous pleasure of eating the plums. If forgiven at the beginning of the third stanza, both may delight in the knowledge of the plums in lines 10–12. If not, the two remain separated in their experience: husband remains happily unaware while wife seethes in her resentment. The reader has this choice, and her response actively shapes the ending of the poem. She may either enter the present created in the imagination of the author, her husband, and enjoy the moment with him or she may proceed with indignation and widen the gap of understanding between herself and her husband, which will take place if she denies his appeal without his knowledge and withdraws from the imaginative present, disgusted at the final lines. Regardless, their re-communication is dependent on forgiveness, and the husband's note is the only way he may reach across the distance of space to join his wife in the present of her discovery and unite himself to her in a shared moment of communicated pleasure, she need only accept his invitation.

If the wife acquiesces to forgiveness in the ninth line, then she opens herself up to the justice of their reconciliation. When she, as reader, encounters these plums in the note, she is brought back to them in a very real sense given that they are not simply representation or abstraction, but concrete reality. Before reading the note, she has some foreknowledge of the plums and their quality, as expressed in her expectation of and subsequent attempt to preserve their ripeness. What she lacks, then, is the sensual reality that would come from consuming them. This lack is resolved when the concrete image comes to life, and she reads “they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold”³⁵ at the end of the note. Morris suggests that she might receive the appeal of the aesthetic “taste” of these plums, and wonders if “the ‘saying’ of his words on her tongue...[will] serve as adequate compensation” for the lack of physical experience.³⁶ The answer

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 10–12.

³⁶ Morris, “End of Art,” 61.

to his question is "yes," precisely because Williams's aesthetic claims that the image is "a physical rather than a psychological entity."³⁷

The reality of the plums is therefore a key to their unity. The importance of their transgressions—his theft and her omission—lies in the knowledge they potentially come to share in the final lines of the poem. Engaging with the sweetness and coldness in the present moment of the imagination allows both to transgress together, to eat the fruit as one and to know its sensuous pleasure. This sensuousness, rather than the emotions that saturate transgression (which poetry liberates), is the primary focus of the final act. What can be known and felt is the physical sensation of transgression—what results from eating the fruit—so it is not important that an actual transgression occur in this moment. If they participate in this act together, obviously neither husband nor wife will transgress the other, but since the poem creates an inextricable link between eating fruit and transgression, both can really *feel* the reality of the act through the last lines. This mutual transgression, if granted, is the final experience of communion in the poem. Not only are husband and wife united as author and reader, not only do they share an understanding, but they experience an acute intimacy in their mutual consumption, which once and for all subjects one and the other to an eternal process (noted by the indefiniteness of "so") of cold and sweet transgression and forgiveness.

If we direct our attention back to Williams's conception of the relationship between author and reader, we may finally apply his assertion that "whenever I say 'I,' I mean also 'you.'" Having finished the note and received the sensual pleasure of the deliciously "sweet" and "cold" plums, the wife may now return to the beginning again and read the note as the first-person speaker. She now becomes indistinguishable from the original "I," and so shares fully in the original transgression through the reality of the imagination.³⁸ So long as she reads, she joins herself to her husband, the author, in the moment, which allows her to encounter what Williams would consider to be the real matter of the

³⁷ Emily Lambeth-Climaco, "'This Rhetoric Is Real': William Carlos Williams's Recalibration of Language and Things," *William Carlos Williams Review* 28, no. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2008): 43.

³⁸ It is important to remember that the imagination, for Williams, is not a separate realm of possibility or a casual product of fancy, but the place where reality becomes whole. It is not what *could* be, but what *is*.

transgression. At the same time and for the same reason, however, she now also shares in the reception of absolution, freely given. Thus, the individual and communal processes of transgression and forgiveness repeat themselves eternally in the note, providing an exemplary model of conduct for similar domestic experiences within the course of a marriage. The original event of this note is certainly not the first transgression and will not be the last, so the image and remembrance of forgiveness that this note illustrates should serve as a constant connection to the communion of understanding and experience with her husband. Her potential free consent in forgiveness, the sensual pleasure in consuming the plums, and her husband's participation with her in the imagination all reflect their original covenant, and its repetition in the poem by "just saying," which restores the bond broken by transgression, results in the just renewal of their marriage.

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