The inadequacy of mimetic theories of art, when considered in terms of their inability to move beyond the empirically given, becomes a defining theme in Modernist poetry, particularly when Europe and its literary representatives begin to lose their centrality to avant-garde literature. In this respect, the poetry of William Carlos Williams can be taken as a test case. Williams’ inaugural Modernist poem, *Spring and All*, was clearly in touch with the European avant-garde during its formative and most creative phase, just as it demonstrates how aesthetic strategies drew upon advanced theories in forging links between poetry and painting. During his middle phase, Williams moves deliberately toward verbal austerity in resisting a facile popularization of Imagist technique in order to renew aesthetic radicalism among second-generation Modernists. Hence, *The Descent of Winter* takes up the challenge of Objectivism, a literary movement that demonstrates how a shift from European content was matched by the adoption of a more rigorous conception of poetic structure. The present discussion of both literary works will be followed by a concluding summary of how Williams’ later work adopts the theme of the imagination in a way that casts light on the allegorical nature of his literary achievements.

**Cubist Aesthetics in Spring and All**

William Carlos Williams published a short collection of twenty-seven lyrics in Paris under the title, *Spring and All*, in 1923. The writing of these poems followed the translation of Rimbaud’s work into English as well as the British and American reception of Guillaume Apollinaire’s critical study of Modernist art, *Les Peintres Cubistes: Méditations Esthétiques*. After reading both Rimbaud and Apollinaire,
Williams took part in what might be called the anti-Symbolist phase in the twentieth-century avant-garde. As a response to early Modernism, this literary work questions the significance of artistic mimesis. Apollinaire’s own art criticism indicates the aesthetic significance of the new painting: “Cubism differs from the old schools of painting in that it aims, not at an art of imitation, but an art of conception, which tends to rise to the height of creation.”\(^1\) A positive assessment of Modernism is echoed in *Spring and All*, where Williams affirms the capacity of the imagination to shape its own world according to analogies between the sister arts of poetry and painting.

This seminal work depends on the typographical experiments of Mallarmé and the techniques of Rimbaud and Cubist montage, but it also involves a contestation with the neo-classical apotheosis of order that often characterizes the poetry of Eliot and Pound. The explosive mixture of poetry and prose that typifies this collection is perhaps closer to Dadaism that it is to anything that can be found in Modernism as it came to be institutionalized.\(^2\) Moreover, this unique work also testifies to a concept of literary form that combines aspects of the written treatise with sensitivity to verbal presence as the continual translation of renewable experiences. Throughout *Spring and All*, Williams casts aspersions on “the traditionalists of plagiarism” whose falsely mimetic approach to the actual world is enshrined in all symbolic art that aspires to official status.\(^3\) But as an alternative to the art of the past, Williams does not prescribe realism or even naturalism but recommends an active immersion in the powers of the imagination, which he radically re-conceptualizes along counter-mimetic lines.

While alluding to Mallarmé’s well-known statement concerning the musical basis for poetry, Williams also endorses the central claims

---

3 Riddel interprets this phrase in terms of the relationship between Williams’ opposition to both traditionalism and literary realism. Although apparently dissimilar, both traditionalism and realism employ aesthetic distance in ways that invoke the “illusion of a world ordered by authority” (see Joseph Riddel, *The Inverted Bell: Modernism and the Counterpoetics of William Carlos Williams*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1965, 127).