Unsuspected Hope in Williams’ “The Descent”

William Carlos Williams wrote “The Descent” toward the end of his life after experiencing a heart attack and several strokes. In this poem he examines some of the trials of aging and approaching death, such as loss of memory and looking back on defeats. Rather than feeling completely defeated by these scary and distressing ideas, Williams examines the descent with an unusually hopeful outlook. He achieves this hopeful tone by emphasizing contrasts among descents and new beginnings. Williams uses contrasts and contradictions between ideas, words, and physical space to illuminate unexpected similarities and to produce this effect of hope in the face of seemingly hopeless topics.

Williams begins his poem with a title that addresses death in a surprisingly neutral way. I assumed that Williams’ title is referring to the descent of his life. The word “descent” is very neutral and watery, not particularly emotionally powerful or evocative of thoughts of death. Descent can mean a decline, but “decline” has far more negative connotations when used to refer to aging, health, and death. By choosing a less evocative term to discuss aging, Williams leaves his poem open to a more hopeful viewpoint.

Williams also plays with physical space to emphasize his ideas of descent through the poem’s form. Williams uses an interesting pattern of indented lines in this poem. Physically, the lines look like steps on the page, especially at the beginning of the poem. This step pattern ties in to the theme of the poem, as in descending a flight of stairs. The precise step pattern of the first four stanzas deteriorates into a more chaotic spacing of lines as the poem develops. This descent into chaos mimics the loss of control and regularity as life progresses.

Williams also uses his line spacing to emphasize his points, as in the lines “a sort of renewal/even/an initiation”, with “initiation” beginning back at the far left of the page, starting a new set of steps. Again with “realizes a new awakening:/which is a reversal/of despair”, Williams really emphasizes this reversal by pushing the “despair” back to the far left of the page rather than following the step pattern. In addition to reinforcing the meaning of the words, Williams’ step pattern also emphasizes the comfortable ease of his descent theme. With the reader mentally descending these steps as she reads, there is a natural and gradual feel to this descent that follows Williams’ theme of hope and growth rather than anxiety about death.

The unusual use of periods that float several spaces past the last word of the sentence also serves to emphasize the words and emotions of the poem. We considered in class that this strange spacing might have been an artifact of the way Williams was writing on his typewriter, but I am also interested in the effect it has on the reading of the poem. These spaces make the reader wait in anticipation of the end of the sentence. For example, the line “and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory of whiteness .” exemplifies the point of the image, with a white space that must be looked over before getting the period that ends the thought. This line plays with opposition between presence and absence, as Williams talks about losing whiteness but then presents the reader with a stretch of whiteness that cannot be ignored. This contrast also plays into the hopeful theme of death because things that appear absent can still be present in unexpected ways. Another place where the delayed period emphasizes the line before it is with “[shadows] grow sleepy now and drop away/from desire .” Again, as the reader waits for the end of the sentence, there is a feeling of the sentence dropping away or fading rather than ending with a swift period after the last word. The last line of the poem also uses this effect to keep the reader thinking about the “endless” descent as a fading idea rather than a neatly closed one. This waiting with baited breath for the inevitable end of the sentence is reminiscent of waiting for the inevitable end of life and helps the reader feel the theme of the poem through the contrast between what is expected and what is experienced.

Within the poem, Williams also uses unexpected words to provide contrasts that reveal unexpected relations and surprising hopes. Williams begins “The Descent” by comparing the descent, presumably of life, with the ascent. Both “beckon” to him, a word with a connotation of being inviting and enticing. This “beckoning” is interesting because while children often find the idea of getting older and having more freedoms enticing, after a certain point growing older loses its allure. Beckoning suggests that the descent can also be appealing, desirable, and natural. The repetition of the word “beckons” highlights the contrast between the opposites of descent and ascent by following them with the same verb. Equating these two opposite concepts allows readers to view the unfamiliar descent in terms of the familiar ascent. Here, death and aging become an enticing form of growth rather than a mere end.

Next Williams uses contrasts between something lost and something new to show reversals of typical conceptions of aging. I was fascinated by Williams’ treatment of memory, something commonly lost with age. He isn’t lamenting the loss of memory, but rather extolling its creativity and wonders. He describes memory as “an accomplishment” and a “renewal.” Three times he emphasizes that memory is something new (“new paces”, “new kinds”, “new objectives”). While memory is often seen as a creation of something new, it seems a bit strange for him to be taking comfort in this fact as his life and memory deteriorate. He emphasizes this newness of memory in contrast to the lack of accomplishments that he brings up at the end of the poem. He can look at his memory and find solace in the accomplishment of creating something new and unique, shedding light on the productive nature of life, even as it declines and descends toward death.

Williams uses his word choice to create unexpected moments in the poem that draw attention to the contrasts and reversals he discusses. I especially found his use of the word “hordes” curious, both in its sound and meaning. “Hordes” is a dense and clunky word with a hard consonant blend. This word felt somewhat out of place among softer, more flowing words like “renewal” and “spaces/places”. The contrast in sound emphasizes this word, but the emphasis of meaning is ambiguous. “Hordes” seems like it should be followed by an object, rather than standing alone as a noun. Hordes of what? My initial reaction upon seeing this image of “movement of hordes toward new objectives” was of neurons and synapses in the brain forming new pathways upon creation of memories. In this case, literal hordes of neurons form new connections within the brain that allow new memories to form and be consolidated. Williams could be emphasizing these “hordes” to show that the capacity for change, growth, and new memories may not be lost, but rather available in new places, giving a sense of hope to a seemingly tragic facet of aging.

Williams again uses a reversal among opposites to create hope with the line “no defeat is made of entirely of defeat.” Here he simply negates the idea of “defeat” by encouraging the reader to look for the hope that is hidden in the defeat itself. He repeats the idea of opening new places. He also repeats the contrasts between an unsuspected world and a new place. Williams challenges the misconception that unsuspected places are automatically unfavorable. Here again he uses the word “beckons” to make these new places enticing. Like earlier in the poem, he has something scary or seemingly undesirable (“a world lost”) “beckon”, creating a contrast between what is expected and what he says, and creating a hopeful tone from a frightening idea.

In contrast to his abstract musings that lack visual images, in the middle of the poem Williams introduces the image of love waking up. This also creates a contrast because Williams talks about love waking in the evening and night. Williams uses this image to talk about new things waking in times that seem to be an end. He describes “love without shadows” that occurs when the shadows leave as the sun goes down. This nods to his idea that even though things are lost as life progresses, new and different things can awaken. What specifically this love refers to is unknown. Williams says the shadows “drop away from desire”. Williams shows that although desire fades with age, love can continue to evolve and awaken. Although things can change with darkness, they are not lost and are able to be seen with new clarity.

The last stanza wraps up the poem on a hopeful, but jarring, note. Williams uses several clauses to set up the ending, building several thoughts toward a reversal, something that will make all of these negative ideas better. However, his consolation for these sad things—denied love, failed accomplishments—is the descent. Although a descent wouldn’t usually seem favorable, the way he sets it up in this stanza makes it sound very hopeful and desirable. The adjectives he uses to describe this final descent—“endless and indestructible”—are especially powerful and intimidating words. Williams uses these strong words to emphasize the finality of descent, something that likely instills fear in most readers, but also to allow the reader to accept powerlessness and take comfort in the inevitability of descent. With this endless inevitability, though, can come positive things like renewal and enduring reality.

Overall, this optimistic view of aging is itself a contrast to many poems and ideas about death. Without evoking religious consolations about death, Williams finds a way of looking at the descent of life as hopeful and new. He takes comfort in memories and perhaps views his poems as a way of creating a more permanent memory that will outlive his descent. This very act of writing contradicts the theory that all is lost with aging and death. Although he is letting go of life, Williams finds a way to endure through his poems.