

William Carlos Williams's Struggle for the Real in Poetry

by

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This study attempts to investigate William Carlos Williams's concept of the real in his poetry. His sense of the real means a definite way of verbalizing his perception. Perception is, in a sense, a choice and a thinking, and Williams often shows a unique poetic observation. And Williams's poetry has a good deal of something that baffles a reader. It is not necessarily easy to appraise his poetry, because it often defies a reader's preconceived ideas. The reader is required to mobilize all his experiences to understand Williams's poetry, and, what is more, not to insert his or her biases into the poetry.

Williams's poetry breaks open an entirely new dimension, as Williams says that his poetry is made with "naked imagination." By the naked imagination, Williams means that he totally immerses himself into the reality of things and that nothing intrudes between the poet and the things. In order to penetrate into the core of the real substance of things, the poet's imagination must first be washed clean. That is the way to see things anew. The important thing is not to create superficial

images of things imaginatively, but to have “a direct contact” with the things. The poet, therefore the reader also, must speak to things directly, but not to his imagination. Williams mentions that the relationship between things and a man’s eyes is a poem, which indicates that the point is not to put any medium between things and a man. Just putting things down as they are is “to refine, to clarify, to intensify” the direct contact. To understand the nature of things in their real bearings is the first priority. It is for this reason that Williams’s famous tenet goes, “no ideas but in things.” In *Spring and All*, he asserts that “works of art . . . must be real, not ‘realism’ but reality itself.”¹ In what follows, I will examine Williams’s idea of reality by paying special attention to his tenet “contact” through his poems.

In “Tract,” a poem Williams wrote when he was thirty-four, he depicts the absurd situation of a funeral and criticizes the convention of his society:

I will teach you my townspeople
how to perform a funeral
for you have it over a troop
of artists—
unless one should scour the world—
you have the ground sense necessary.

Williams feels that the townspeople dress up as if to disguise their true feelings. A funeral is strangely gilded and its true sense of sorrow is lost. The people appear as if they try not to accept death as death. Williams suggests that the reality of life must be faced. First, it is necessary to awake from false biases:

Knock the glass out!
My God—glass, my townspeople!
For what purpose? Is it for the dead
to look out or for us to see
how well he is housed or to see
the flowers or the lack of them—
or what?

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For heaven's sake though see to the driver!
Take off the silk hat! In fact
that's no place at all for him—
up there unceremoniously
dragging our friend out to his own dignity!
Bring him down—bring him down!

Williams is indignant against the sham convention of society and implies that it is important not to be blinded by customs and biases. It is important to perceive the reality of things. Summing up this poem, Alan B. Ostrom says that "'Tract' is a valuable statement of Williams' view of the propriety of the natural as contrasted to the impropriety of social convention, of the inherent dignity of men as opposed to the degradation of men by the shams of society."² This poem is an example that perceiving things with naked imagination becomes a social criticism. The reason that it does not fall into didacticism is because of the poet's anger.

What is Williams's search for the real in "Queen-Ann's Lace"? In this poem, a girl's body is described as natural objects in a field, so she appears more real and natural than she is. In other words, she is given a more and exact universal existence by being united with the living objects of nature:

Each part
is a blossom under his touch
to which the fibers of her being
stem one by one, each to its end,
until the whole field is a
white desire, empty, a single stem,
a cluster, flower by flower,
a pious wish to whiteness gone over—
or nothing.

The imagery is astonishingly subtle and beautiful. The concise use of words and the gradual changes of intensifying images created by the rhythms of staccatos suggest a sort of (sexual) consummation. The parts of her body are restructured with the concrete images of real objects, and she gains an expansive breadth of life. She becomes a perfect, beautiful

flower, as her existence acquires more reality. Williams once wrote, "beauty is related not to 'loveliness' but to a state in which reality plays a part."³ For Williams, beauty without reality does not exist; rather, reality is beauty.

The poem "The Widow's Lament in Springtime" begins with the definite statement, "sorrow is my own yard," as if describing the widow's mind picture. The use of comparisons is effective and suggestive: for example, the cold fire and the springtime, the white plumbtree and bushes yellow and some red, grief and joy, and the yard and the meadows. These comparisons intensify the fluctuation of the widow's mind and culminate in her wish for self-annihilation:

I feel that I would like
to go there
and fall into those flowers
and sink into the marsh near them.

Grief is not an imaginative thing, but a reality. Because of her sorrow, the widow cannot help feeling her mind is numb towards the regenerative power of nature in the springtime. Her grief prompts her to think of immersing herself into the nothingness of white. Her wish, in a way, comes from her impulse to free herself from the sway of grief. The grief awakens her to a new dimension of life, and in her imagination she breaks away from her present condition. What is important is that she desires to be united not with the flowers of her yard but with those of the meadow, which, she is told by her son, are blooming white. This means that she unites with the imaginative flowers, and she falls into the marsh of imagination. There is a promise that her imagination saves her. In her imagination, the white flowers and the marsh, which are the solid reality, compel her to go through regeneration. Her reality lies in her imaginative meadow, with which she establishes a firm contact.

The poem "The Great Figure" also shows Williams's imaginative attempt of the direct contact with things. The images of the running movement of a firetruck are consolidated in relatively a few words, and there are no superfluous words. Things are what are perceived and heard: rain, lights, the figure 5 in gold, a red firetruck, gong clangs,

siren howls, wheels rumbling, and the dark city. Thus, the poem is made of visual and auditory images, but one exception: the words "tense / unheeded" are impressions. Why does Williams use "tense / unheeded" to describe the firetruck? Because of the words the firetruck appears as if it has a life of its own. The situation of the poem is described as strained, yet the sudden appearance of the figure 5 causes some interesting effect. The effect is that of imbalance, which comes from the contrast between the static and aloof image of the geometrical pattern of the figure 5 and the active, clamorous movement of the truck and our world. The poem is imagistic, and the impact of the imbalance suggests some fundamental gaps between order and disorder, both of which are the realities of our world. The significance of this poem is implied in the instant fusion of things and impressions.

Williams's attempt to grasp the real in things is also seen in "Spring and All." Life comes out of lifeless things, and what is abstract becomes concrete. In spring, lifeless things start to have the definite forms of life:

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

This poem reminds me of the prologue of T. S. Eliot's celebrated poem *The Waste Land*, though the viewpoints of the two are apparently different. While Eliot's poem focuses on the lifeless condition of nature in the springtime, Williams's poem shows the solid images of the creative phases of living things in nature. In Williams's poem there is a sinewy certainty that lifeless objects assume concrete outlines and entities. The object of nature go through the renewal of life:

They enter the new world naked,
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter.

Williams views the renewal of life as the completely fresh change from death to life, and he sees in the renewal the "stark dignity," which signifies the reality of the harsh, weighty solemnity of life. Williams focuses his attention upon the marvelous process that a reality is being born.

Williams's vision of reality is deeply related with his poetic perception. In "The Eyeglasses," a way of looking is the point. In this poem Williams describes the values of things in connection with the interesting power of human eyesight. The eyesight itself is imaginative:

The universality of things
draws me toward the candy
with melon flowers that open

about the edge of refuse
proclaiming without accent
the quality of the farmer's

shoulders and his daughter's
accidental skin, so sweet
with clover and the small

yellow cinquefoil in the
parched places. It is
this that engages the favorable

distortion of eyeglasses
that see everything and remain
related to mathematics—

Williams is enthralled by the appearances of things, which form, though at first they are separated, a sort of enchanting unity in his imaginative vision. He serves himself to what he sees, not enslaving what he sees to himself. The things in the poem are originally unrelated: the candy, melon flowers, the edge of refuse, the farmer's shoulders, his daughter's accidental skin, clover, the small yellow cinquefoil, and the parched places. They come to be united, however, by the imaginative association of images. Williams calls this associative unity as "the favorable distortion of eyeglasses." The eyeglasses are, in a way, the poet's poetic vision. Interestingly, Williams regards this poetic vision

as having mathematical precision. What exactly does this mathematical precision signify? It suggests the presence of certain stable laws between the poet's vision and things. In other words, the precision suggests some strict order based upon the accurate and meticulous observation between the poet's imaginative mind and things. It is meaningful to recall that Williams's poem "The Great Figure" likewise points to the contrast between mathematical order and noisy disorder.

The relationship between the poet's vision and things is also examined in his famous poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," in which concrete objects are extremely limited in number. The poem is designed to show, without any superfluous words, some fundamentally primitive images:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

The poem implies that a new aspect of reality wholly depends on newly arranged things. Colors play an important part, too. Doyle says that "vividness" is the main objective in this poem.⁴ But more than that, this poem creates a microcosm of the combination of basic elements. A human tool, natural phenomenon, and living animals are combined in as few a words as they can be. Also this poem gives an impression of a photograph shot. The created imagery is static and strangely soundless as well. Williams mentions in *Sewanee Review* (Autumn 1944), "The rhythm though no more than a fragment, denotes a certain unquenchable exaltation." It is certain that the rhythm causes a sort of rapture, but the image of the poem is still and calm.

"The Red Wheelbarrow" is similar to "The Great Figure" in terms of style and effect. Both poems call attention to the flashy pictures of

moments. The red wheelbarrow shines with rain water, so does the figure 5 in rain. What exactly does depend upon the wheelbarrow, however, is not told, yet the reader cannot but feel that something serious totally depends upon the wheelbarrow and the poem itself. (A symbolical reading may also be possible: a red wheel, with the enjambment of barrow, may refer to the great flaming wheel of fate manipulated by the Fates of Greek and Roman mythology.) The poem contains a solid reality, and the poem itself is a living reality.

In "At the Ball Game," a fresh facet of reality is dealt with mob psychology. When a crowd gathers, some strange power may be born, which is often purposeless, spontaneous, and unintelligible. It is at once a blind and creative force, so it is revolutionary, destructive, and beautiful. Williams explains the power as a force "to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads."⁵ The power Williams sees is primitive, and he views this primitiveness as fundamentally relevant to poetry. Primitiveness is a basic element of poetry, because poetry liberates man's natural force. The more Williams seeks for a naked, raw reality, the more he discovers the increase of primitiveness. Thus, the pure mind approaches barbarism.

The problem is, however, whether primitiveness in itself can be called poetry. Though primitiveness is an element of poetry, it solely does not make poetry. The difficulty lies here, and Williams does not necessarily succeed in making poetry when he deals with the primitive nature of things. In any case, his brave search for the real even into the primitive condition of things is laudable.

In "The Yachts," the yachts symbolize human situations surrounded by the ocean of life's severities. The sudden rushes of austere realities are horrifying. Thomas R. Whitaker says: "The Yachts' combines a relaxed narrative mode with a sudden nightmare shift of images to render the mind's discovery of the relentless tyranny exercised by its own beautiful instruments—whether they be economic institutions, conquests over nature, or other images of ideal competence."⁶ The part leading to the end of the poem is, surely, an appalling description, which is loaded with death imagery:

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

What does the death imagery signify? Under the sea and above Williams sees the entanglement of life and death, and the yachts are nothing but the symbols of his consciousness sliding on the boundary of life and death. In the phrase "the horror of the race" the "race" is used as a pun, meaning both a contest of speed and a tribe. What does Williams find, then, as the horror of the tribe. Does he imply some nameless lives buried in the collective memory and history of the tribe? In any case, "The Yachts" is a unique poem that Williams sees a horrible metaphysical world of death and memory behind the reality of the ocean.

The poem "These" likewise describes the relationship between the horrifying reality of our world and poetry. Williams shows that the oppressive condition of reality—a war here—tends to kill poesy:

the people gone that we loved,
the beds lying empty, the couches
damp, the chairs unused—

Hide it away somewhere
out of the mind, let it get roots
and grow, unrelated to jealous

ears and eyes—for itself.
In this mine they come to dig—all.
Is this the counterfoil to sweetest

music? The source of poetry that
seeing the clock stopped, says,
The clock has stopped

that ticked yesterday so well?
and hears the sound of lakewater
splashing—that is now stone.

The reality exterminates words. Here, a question arises as to what is fundamentally poetry. If the reality of our world is something unfitting for poetry, what is, then, the significance of poetry? Is poetry powerless against the crudities of our life? Is poetry not a splendid tool that is able to express in sheer methods even the extremes of life? Does not poetry have the power to overcome “emptiness, / despair”? And is poetry really able to express the spirit of an age? Williams thinks that “the source of poetry” in his particular time has dried up, for the time is bad and devastating for poetry; yet admirably he copes with the concrete realities of the overwhelming conditions without flinching away from them. A romantic note is from the first lost, and what makes the splashing sound of lakewater is not a fish but a stone.

Again in “Burning the Christmas Greens,” which is one of Williams’s masterpieces, he deals with the solid, epiphanic reality of life concealed in the essence of things. In Book I of *Paterson* Williams presents his tenet in poetry, “no ideas but in things,” and he shows that a precise observation of things generates poetry. His close attention to things colors his poetry as solid and concrete, and his poetry and method appear anti-poetic; he tries to exclude from his poetry what is called romantic. Interestingly, however, he is not totally successful in resisting a strain of romantic mood in his poetry. At the root of his mind he is romantic. “Burning the Christmas Greens” is such a poem that shows a romantic mood. Though Williams tries to focus on the minute particulars of things, he cannot help falling into a sort of romantic mysticism:

and quick in the contracting
tunnel of the grate
appeared a world!

Williams’s idea of the anti-poetic breaks open a new poetic dimension, yet it is still romantic, as the real needs the unreal to be fecundated. It may be beneficial to look into the process of the transformation of

things into the real by analyzing the poem. The Christmas trees are burnt in the fire, and they look as if they begin to assume new life:

All recognition lost, burnt clean
clean in the flame, the green
dispersed, a living red,
flame red, red as blood wakes
on the ash—

When the figures disappear, a fresh full-blooded vision begins to rise up. The green, which is “a solace / a promise of peace, a fort against the cold,” is purified in the fire, and strangely a fresh life is significantly born:

yet uncolored—and ash white,
an infant landscape of shimmering
ash and flame and we, in
that instant, lost,

breathless to be witnesses,
as if we stood
ourselves refreshed among
the shining fauna of that fire.

The fire sublimates the green of nature, and we feel as if we also go through a transformative renewal of life. We experience the baptism of fire and the primitive rebirth of life. Williams's search for the real again goes back to primitiveness.

To conclude, through his poems Williams has made efforts to embody precise, clear, and unmasked reality. His poetic method is the direct treatment of things. This treatment fills in the gap between the poet and things. It creates new combination of things, and the reality that emerges from these combinations is totally new and fresh. Such reality unmasks people's illusion in “Tract” and reveals the true feelings in “The Widow's Lament in Springtime,” gives vivid pictures in “The Great Figure” and “The Red Wheelbarrow,” discloses hidden human, purposeless passion in “At the Ball Game,” and unveils a human, real existence in “These” and “Burning the Christmas Greens.”

To borrow from *Paterson*, "to make a start out of particulars and make them general" is just to create a new order of this world.

Williams's search for the real begins by concentrating on the minute particulars of things. He relates the method in the preface of *Paterson*:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general

What is required in this process is first a perception with great precision; as Williams says in the same preface, things move "from mathematics to particulars—." The more he seeks for the naked condition of things, however, the more they reveal primitive conditions. The problem for Williams is to know exactly how these primitive conditions take the form of poetry. Of course, it is a delicate problem whether a primitive reality changes into poetry or prose.

Williams discovers the real concealed in the primitive nature of things, and in order to take it out, he must have a direct contact with things. Thus, his poetry first appears as the solid and concrete arrangement of things. However, the arrangement is made through his imaginative perception, and in his poetry is hidden a poetic world of tremendous beauty and truth. His perception of the real is always combined with the unreal. Behind the superficial description of things we can often discover the delicate, tender, and penetrating touch of his sensibility.

NOTES

1. William Carlos Williams, "Spring and All," *Twentieth Century Views: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1966) 22.
2. Alan B. Ostrom, *The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams*, with a pref. by Harry T. More (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1966) 21.
3. Williams 22.

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4. Charles Doyle, *William Carlos Williams and the American Poem* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1982) 31.
5. Williams 26.
6. Thomas R. Whitaker, *William Carlos Williams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, ca. 1986) 121.