

Dynamic Modernism in William Carlos Williams's Poetry

Jaxon Parker

From his early involvement in the Imagist movement, William Carlos Williams would develop his own poetic style which elevated a distinctly American-pragmatic approach to excavating the revolutionary cultural force of Modernity. The realism implied in Williams's adage "not ideas, but in things," materializes in his poetry as a remarkable concern with the dynamism of working-class American life, exemplifying the dissolution of traditional artistic expressions and social bonds by the cultural propulsion of Modernity. Akin to the Marxist adage, "all that is solid melts into air," Williams's poetry intently examines how Modernity has radically changed the relationship between working-class Americans and their material existence, which has reshaped social hierarchies, domesticity, aesthetics, and the everyday experience. With Williams's concentration on the dynamism of everyday American life, it's necessary that Williams's poetry is also concerned with a new relationship between art as a "thing" of Modernity and how it reflects the radical transformation of American culture and its people. It's no wonder that Williams is frequently associated with the flourishing American avant-garde painting and art movements of the 1920s and '30s, such as in his friendship with Charles Demuth, as his poetry often reflects the dynamism and fractured meaning expressed in Cubism, Futurism, and the uniquely American movement of Precisionism.

Like Cubism and Precisionism, Williams's poems "The Great Figure" and "The Young Housewife" unfold the immediate and transient sensations of the chaotic, everyday interactions of Modern life. What these poems offer is two dynamic yet solitary perspectives on the Modern world, with "The Great Figure" having a still speaker looking onto the blurring motion of a passing firetruck, and with "The Young Housewife" portraying its speaker inside a vehicle driving past and privately fantasizing the world around him. In "The Great Figure," Williams utilizes free-verse to reflect the speaker's sensual experience of an abrasive yet profound encounter with a firetruck passing by, with the line structure tightening to single-worded lines at the peak intensity of the speaker's close proximity to the firetruck, which then lengthens again once the fire truck has passed the speaker with its "wheels rumbling / through the dark city." This profound experience of the speaker to a seemingly mundane encounter of the modern city is elevated by how the speaker is alone at night "among the rain / and lights," where the speaker doesn't even recognize the firetruck itself before his eyes catch the 'great' "figure 5 / in gold / on a red / firetruck." A major component of the speaker's profound experience is this diffusion of various sensations of sights and sounds, such as "moving / tense... / to gong clangs/ and siren howls," along with the speaker's depth of perception and time it takes for him to recognize the

source of the fragmentary stimuli. What “The Great Figure” articulates then is the bizarre, frantic, and isolating environment of the Modern world, with the speaker becoming overwhelmed by the sudden “tense” and “unheeded” speed of the firetruck, which materializes at first to the speaker with the sublime image of “the figure 5 / in gold” before its entire form becomes wholly apparent.

This dynamic temporality and experience of Modern life is shared with “The Young Housewife,” which reverses the formula of “The Great Figure” by pitting its speaker into a moving vehicle, and who, from a distance, briefly fantasizes over a young housewife in a distinctly working-class section of the Modern city. Where “The Young Housewife” departs the most from its similarities with “The Great Figure” is how it depicts Modern life more closely mediated and fantasized by the isolated speaker. This is also reflected by how Williams utilizes free-verse to allow its lines to more coherently construct the speaker’s observations through three stanzas, each representing a distinct slice of time and a corresponding shift in the speaker’s mood. The poem begins with the speaker’s voyeuristic observations of the “young housewife... / in negligee,” with the added projection by the speaker that she is seemingly trapped “behind / the wooden walls of her husband’s house,” painting a domestic scene ruled by the gender politics of patriarchal ownership.

However, the speaker’s apparent sexual envy for the housewife in the first stanza shifts as the speaker “compare[s] her / to a fallen leaf” in the second stanza, where the speaker more empathetically observes her “tucking in stay ends of hair” as she performs domestic errands in the market “call[ing] the ice-man, [and] fish-man.” While the speaker certainly objectifies the housewife still by describing her “shy, uncorseted,” and the description of “tucking in stay ends of hair” could be a euphemism for promiscuity, these

same descriptions could also be sympathizing with the housewife’s humanity and her working-class conditions as the speaker briefly drives by her. This is perhaps best demonstrated by how the speaker is emphatically isolated in his vehicle and distant from the actual realities of the housewife. The speaker’s vehicle itself is like a subjective window which only allows the speaker to observe the housewife from a one-dimensional and distant perspective, the ambiguities of which are filled by the speaker’s innermost fantasies about her domestic life and desires. The speaker’s vehicle then becomes a stand in for Modern industrial and cultural life itself, expressing an increased sense of isolation and longing as Modernity pressures individuals to devote themselves to work more and perform the expectations of bourgeois domesticity. The final stanza supports this in how the comparison of the housewife to a “fallen leaf” suddenly becomes subsumed by the other “dried leaves” which the speaker rolls over with his car, indicating how the speaker can only briefly fantasize and observe the complex and transient life swirling around him. When these brief moments of private observation and fantasizing are over, the only thing the speaker can do is “bow and pass by smiling,” a final recognition of the housewife’s humanity.

From the urban exploration of “The Great Figure” and “The Young Housewife” with their emphasis on the radical dynamism and isolation of Modernity, “Pastoral” illuminates William Carlos Williams’s optimism of Modern working-class American life in its breakaway from European traditions of social hierarchy and idealized collectivity. In “Pastoral,” there is even perhaps an echo of the mass violence inflicted in World War I, as the speaker observes the apparent innocence of the “little sparrows” who “hop ingenuously... quarreling / with sharp voices / over those things / that interest them.” The speaker then sharply contrasts his projection of the innocent quarreling

of the sparrows to the real destruction which results from the quarreling of adult humans, “who are wiser / [to] shut ourselves in,” since “no one knows / whether we think good or evil.” The poem’s progression from the ‘natural realm’ of the youthful quarreling of the sparrows to the ‘human realm’ of violent social conflicts, which have sapped any sense of innocence or even right or wrong, then leads to the poem’s reversal of the ‘Pastoral’ in the Modern age, depicting an “old man who goes about / gathering dog-lime... / in the gutter / without looking up.” This mundane image of a presumably economically poor old man collecting dog-lime by the city’s sewers and gutters is profoundly invested in by the speaker, as he contrasts the old man’s poor means of existence to be far more spiritual and fulfilling than “that of the Episcopal minister / approaching the pulpit / of a Sunday.” This reversal of the ‘Pastoral’ in the Modern setting emphasizes how the pragmatic existence of American working-class life can be more meaningful than Pre-modern traditions and morals, such that from strict social

and religious hierarchies and beliefs.

As the advent of Modernity has drastically changed the material existence of Western cultural life, with European literary figures such as T.S. Eliot taking a profoundly academic and perhaps hierarchical approach to understanding its cultural upheaval, the poetry of William Carlos Williams seeks to examine the resilience of American working-class life. Williams’s poetic development towards realism and the dynamism of material “things” in working-class life reveals his optimism towards new expressions of humanity by the productive and aesthetic forces of Modernity. With his poetry reflecting the artistic developments of Imagism in the early 1910s to his eventual splintering to develop his own American style alongside Precisionism, William Carlos Williams locates new possibilities of human expression in the pragmatic and material means of Modern American life.

WORKS CITED

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