Capturing the Transient

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William Carlos Williams intentionally sets himself apart from other modernist poets of his time. He rejects the imagist style of Ezra Pound and his entourage and remains true to his American idiom. In the poems “The Red Wheelbarrow”, “This is Just to Say”, and “Danse Russe” there is a recurring pattern that marks the unique style of Williams. Each poem deals with a specific, finite moment in time - either in the past or present - which is the focal point of the speaker. Using these three poems, I will demonstrate how Williams brings his poems into contact with this temporal moment through careful structuring of his poems and strict attention to diction. Once the image is complete, the poems reveal the speakers’ emotions.

Williams demonstrates keen insight to everyday language and how people really speak English. Although his poetry lacks regional dialects, it maintains an American essence. Williams (1954) admits, “language is not clear in poetry” (Interview). He thinks most poetry is already convoluted, and if a poet uses language that the general population does not understand, then he loses the interest of his readers. With this in mind, he looks at the “speech of the day” and how it works in daily situations (Williams, 1954, Interview). He observes the context in which people use words and the connotations associated with them. Boone (2006) calls words “Williams’s poetic philosophy” (12). She says, “Williams was fascinated by words, and his creative mission became an effort to maximize their potential” (Boone, 2006, p. 12). By using commonplace language, most everyone can read and understand his poetry, which allows Williams to “communicate with the world directly” (Ramazani, 2003, p. 285).

Using middle diction expands Williams’s reader base, which in turn, adds to his popularity. William Wordsworth holds this same concept. He believes, “such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more
philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets” (Wordsworth, 1905, p. 14). Both agree that using everyday English is the best way to approach writing poetry. This type of language connects readers to the entire poem because no word is misunderstood. The image is not lost in trying to understand the language and, therefore, Williams clearly paints his mental images in his readers’ imaginations. This aspect of his poetry enhances reader interpretation and fully allows individuals to connect with the poem’s speaker and the emotions he/she experiences.

Williams conscientiously uses specific words to capture the ephemeral nature of the moments he depicts in poetry. In “The Red Wheelbarrow” for instance, there are only nineteen words in the entire poem. Each word bears its importance to the one image the poem creates. There is a “red wheelbarrow” and it has been “glazed with rain water” (Williams, 2003, Collected, p. 295). The word “glazed” indicates that the rain just ended and the wheelbarrow is still wet. The water on the wheelbarrow will not stay there forever. Soon the sun will come out again and the water will evaporate. This image has about a fifteen-minute window before it disappears. Why is this significant? The wheelbarrow is typically used for work purposes; since it has been rained upon, the inference is that no one is using the wheelbarrow at the moment. Williams creates a speaker who is most likely inside and looking out his window at the wheelbarrow. Through the eye of the speaker, Williams tells the reader what this scene looks like, and from his language, the reader can feel the speaker’s mood. The poem indicates that the speaker is relaxing, taking a break from everyday affairs. For someone who works with a wheelbarrow on a regular basis, this small amount of time is cherished.

In the second poem - “This is Just to Say” - the balanced structure of this poem reveals the contemplative mind-set of the speaker through a secondary orator. I say orator in that the
poem reads like a note left for someone else. The voice reading the poem is doubtfully the same person who wrote it. The intrinsic complexity of this poem is that the reader aligns him/herself with the person reading the note, who simultaneously receives the note’s message. The first transient moment for this poem has already occurred. The note is written after the speaker succumbed to temptation and ate the “plums” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 295). This is clearly a past action because the first verb in the poem is in the present perfect tense.

On a surface level, the speaker ate the plums. When reading poetry, objects are often symbolic to something more intimate and personal. Although Williams “opposes symbolism,” it is unlikely that he sat down and simply wrote a poem about plums (Ramazani, 2003, p. 285). The plums must have a significant meaning attached to them. It is not perfectly clear what the plums directly represent, but the window of interpretation is left open for the reader. I am of the opinion that the plums represent something sensual because the speaker took great pleasure in eating them. Only later does he feel obligated to ask forgiveness. He follows up his plea for forgiveness with an explanation for why he ate the plums. Tacking on an explanation for a wrong decision reveals the speaker’s rationality for making that decision. In this case, the reason he ate the plums is “they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 295). All of these components show how the speaker was overtaken by a moment in which he had to make a decision: to give in to temptation or not give in to temptation. Because the plums were “sweet” and “cold”, he could not resist eating them. Then, the speaker introduces the results of his decision and the steps he takes to seek forgiveness. Based on this moment, Williams shows how this speaker follows his desire in a moment of ambivalence and feels no remorse, only an obligation to explain his actions.
The third poem, which exemplifies Williams’s style of contact with the moment, is “Danse Russe.” In this poem the speaker waits until everyone in the house is asleep to let his inner emotions emerge. He says, “when my wife is sleeping / and the baby and Kathleen / are sleeping/…I…dance naked, grotesquely / before my mirror” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 288). The verb “dance” is in the simple present, which indicates this is common for him - he has done this in the past and still continues to dance in front of the mirror. However, as the poem progresses it becomes clear that while dancing by himself, the speaker reveals, “I am lonely, lonely. / I was born to be lonely. / I am best so!” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 288). This second, darker layer to the speaker’s moment of bliss reveals his true inner emotions and feelings. The speaker prefers to be alone, as he admits “I am best so!” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 288).

The last couplet of this poem adds an interesting twist to the loneliness of the speaker. While dancing in front of the mirror, he ponders the question “who shall say I am not / the happy genius of my household?” (Williams, 2003, *Collected*, p. 288). The article “the” indicates that he is the only happy person in the house. Choosing the word “genius,” Williams (2003) shows how the speaker thinks he is intellectually superior to the others living in his house and this is his reason for being “happy” (*Collected*, p. 288). He says he is lonely, but he finds delight in his little dancing ritual. Since this brings him a short-lived amount of joy, it temporarily makes him “the happy genius” of his household. In this poem, Williams gives us a double realization about the speaker’s emotional state. First, we infer that when his wife and the others are awake, he feels isolated from them and lonely because he cannot connect with them on an intellectual level. Second, the silly dancing he does allows him to relish in himself and enjoy being alone with his own thoughts.
William Carlos Williams is like Baudelaire’s favorite artist, Monsieur G. in that he, too, tries his best to capture a passing moment in a work of art. Baudelaire (1964) describes a typical night in which one could find Monsieur G. “bending over his table, darting onto a sheet of paper… skirmishing with his pencil, his pen, his brush… in a ferment of violent activity…afraid that the image might escape him” (p. 11). Boone tells in her article how a film documentary shows Williams working on his art in the same fashion. “The film portrays Williams typing and retyping the draft of this one-sentence poem, experimenting with the line breaks to maximize the semantic potential of each word” (Boone, 2006, p. 12). Monsieur G. produces visual art in paintings and sketches, while Williams uses words as his medium. Although the two use different forms of art, they are after the same type of moment that will slip off into the past if no one captures it and produces it in a viable, permanent form. The goal of these two artists is to take a fleeting moment and capture the full essence of it through art so that at any future point in time, one could use the artwork to relive the moment.

Why does Williams focus on capturing a single moment in time? In his Prologue to Kora in Hell, Williams talks about modern day art and what makes it so different from past works. His friend, Walter Arensberg, tells him, ‘truly a fresh creation is good art’ (Williams, 1920, Kora, p. 11). This statement aligns with the ideals of imagist poets. Pound (1934) notoriously calls for a poet who can “make it new” (p. 2). But for Williams, being new in and of itself is not enough. Poetry is for the imagination and it should lift “to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses, close to the nose” (Williams, 1954, Interview). Making something new does not necessarily make it better. In order to reveal the things that are “close to the nose,” Williams relies on language and structure to capture ordinary moments and make them memorable. He uses language that is not convoluted, but, instead clear and
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straightforward. Furthermore, Williams knows that everyone experiences these types of situations and emotions, which make them universal. The task he undertakes in bringing out these fundamental emotions is “to make these incidents and situations interesting” (Wordsworth, 1905, p. 14). According to Wordsworth’s doctrine, Williams can accomplish this “by tracing in them…the primary laws of our nature” (Wordsworth, 1905, p. 14). In these three poems, Williams finds the moment in which the speaker comes into contact with basic, human emotions and he verbally dramatizes the intricacies of said emotions. In “The Red Wheelbarrow” the speaker has a moment of relief from work. He also has sense of appreciation for the wheelbarrow because he depends upon it. The speaker in “This is Just to Say” has an overwhelming desire to eat the “plums.” Then, his next feeling is gluttony from eating all the plums. Lastly, the speaker feels obligated to apologize for relenting during moment of temptation. “Danse Russe” shows a man who is generally lonely but finds happiness during the times he dances naked and alone in front of his mirror. This speaker also thinks he is a genius and this type of happiness is self-indulgent. All these feelings – relief, appreciation, desire, gluttony, apologetic, loneliness, self-indulgence – are basic, common emotions that any given human being has had at some point in his/her life. This is why people can relate to Williams’s poetry – they see aspects of themselves in the poems’ speakers and the situations which confront them.

Williams has his own unique poetic style that is similar to other artists, but his colloquial language and contact with the moment set him apart from the popular imagist trend during the Modernist period. He is similar to imagist poets in that he deals with the moment directly and he does not use language that obscures or does not add to the images in the poems. However, he uses American English, not British English. He also uses free verse which allows him to
structure his poems in a way that adds depth to the simple language. Williams dares to make something new out of common occurrences, which prove to be effective in establishing himself as a modernist poet. His ability to find a passing moment and stop its natural ebb by recreating it in a poem proves his pure genius as a poet.
References


