

## WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND SOME YOUNGER POETS

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The nature of the influence of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams on the poets of the younger generation has been treated rather vaguely by the critics and historians of the recent American poetry. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to examine closely one of the many complex aspects of the recent poetry, namely, the influential role and contribution of W. C. Williams to the formation of the new poetic tendencies. The word "influence" should be applied with great caution since the phenomenon under discussion is of more subtle nature. Williams' role may be described in terms of collaboration or advice, and his work should be considered as a starting point for further development.

In discussing the effect produced by the work of W. C. Williams I do not want to imply that he provided the only impulse for the whole of the poetry of the 50's and 60's. What I mean is that there is a group of younger poets who show a definite tendency to exploit further Williams' ideas and techniques. These are the poets of the so-called Black Mountain School, or otherwise the Projective Verse poets, and also some of the so-called confessional poets. The main projectivist poets discussed here are: Charles Olson — the theoretician of the group and the founder of the term: Projective Verse, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley; among the confessional poets Allen Ginsberg is the most striking example.

Examining the problem of Williams' influence one has to remember that there is a considerable disresemblance between his work and that of the younger poets under discussion since, naturally enough, each of them reacts to the outside reality in a different manner. That, in turn, bears upon their individual choice of themes and techniques. Yet, there is a definite dependence of the poetics of the younger poets on this of Williams. This is even more evident in the light of the fact that the young poets along with poetry produce articles and essays explaining their work as well as stress their formal indebtedness to Williams.

The nature of Williams' contribution is twofold: thematic and formal, both aspects affecting the poetry of the younger poets. Unfortunately, the brevity of the present paper does not permit even a very general presentation of the whole range of Williams' influence. Therefore, I shall limit my discussion to the most important aspects of his participation in the forming of new tendencies in American poetry, that is the problems of general approach to poetry and the poem as well as some prosodic questions.

Together with Pound Williams continues the Romantic concept of the organic form of poetry which in their case has been sifted through the achievement of the Symbolists and the Modernists. As a result they not only rejected the conventional poetic form by maintaining that the poetic materials suggest the form of the poem to the extent that form and content are organically united and practically inseparable but also they worked out a specific concept of organic poem which on close examination differs from the preceding ones. Perhaps the basic principle of the later Poundian and Williamsian poem is its dynamism, the feature which was either unobserved, unnoticed or not so emphatically considered as fundamental to the poem by their predecessors or contemporaries such as the Symbolists, the Imagists and even the Vorticists. Taking dynamism and continuous movement as the main symptom of modern life Williams says: "the essence of the modern poet is speed at the greatest acceleration that we have ever known. The sensory image has to be squeezed up into a ball and tossed about without blocking speed" (Williams 1956). This is precisely what the static Imagistic poems lack and the reason of their limited possibilities. Most illustrative of the new approach is Williams' use of the dance image as the symbolic reference to the poetic process and the resulting poems. Actually, the dance image as a poetic symbol of the artist's work was in frequent use before Williams. As a matter of fact, it began to be associated with poetic art simultaneously with the development of the theory of organic form especially among the French Symbolists, English decadent and Modernist poets and, obviously enough, involved a great variety of treatment and interpretations depending on the ontological assumptions of the respective schools and individual poets. A very brief historical look at the evolution of the dance image with reference to the concept of the poem may help us to understand the main tendencies in the twentieth century poetry. For the Symbolists the dance image was not only emblematic of "pure" art, Beauty and the artifact nature of the poem but also, especially in view of the dance—dancer organic unity, it demonstrated the possibility of reconciliation of the major antithetical opposites such as: body and soul, subject and object, form and content, concrete and ideal. Moreover, just as the painters of the period the Symbolist poets associated the movement of the dance with stillness, which gives another pair of antithetical notions. Thus, the dance image in the Symbolist poetry incorporates the idea of the "Romantic Image"

in the aesthetic entity — the poem. This approach puts art above life as the reconciliation of the natural polarities is possible only in the perfect motionless yet moving form of the poem which, though it has nothing in common with organic life, functions as an individual organism (cf. Kermode 1957). W. B. Yeats' use of dance and dancers may be considered as the fullest expression of the Symbolist approach to the concept of the poem by means of the dance image.

The idea that dance is primarily a dynamic art and relies on movement rather than stillness gradually becomes more and more apparent in the poetic adaptation of the symbol. The doctrine of the Vortex is quite significant in this respect. "Vortex is energy" was the chief point of the Vorticists' poetics. Yet, one has to remember that the motionless centre of the vortex plays an important part in the structure of the poem as its pivotal point.

Throughout Williams' long poetic career the dance image is among the most frequently recurring motifs and already at the earliest stage seems to have shed some of the Symbolist features especially stillness and artificiality. As early as in the youthful *Kora in hell* which is a pure example of Bergsonian intuition in its upward movement Williams elaborates the dance image as emblematic mainly of the dynamism of life and its organic unity. Also the Symbolist Beauty and perfection of Dance in Williams undergo a considerable metamorphosis in the direction of the commonplace and search for adequate means of expression. The latter, significantly enough, suggesting the lack of perfection. Viewed from this angle the dance image just as the concept of the poem becomes enriched with a new referent: the poetic process of composition which the Symbolists and the Modernists carefully hid. Williams remained faithful to his original concept of dance poem, which is most impressively stated at the end of the last completed book of *Paterson* (Williams 1963: 278):

We know nothing and can know nothing  
but  
the dance, to dance to a measure  
contrapuntally,  
Satyrically, the tragic foot.

Backed by the rich symbolic texture of the poem's quest "the dance" — Williams' victory over his own formal "incompetence" appears as very much removed from the Yeatsian dance. First of all, contrary to the Symbolist concepts the existence of this dance depends on the actual life with all its "non-poetic" problems. Thus the dichotomy of life and art — the Symbolist assumption — is broken. The dance is contrapuntal since it involves complementary and contrastive rhythms: complementary as it reflects the dynamism of life, and contrastive since springing from the formal requirements of the poem. At this stage the formal aspects of the poem lie mainly in the adequacy of

language: its natural, live character, rhythmical arrangement in a line and so on. The dance, therefore, is a matter of imagination grounded in perception, poetic materials, and language, all these being organically unified and creating the rhythmical universe of the poem.

Another feature of the new dance concept is its open form as opposed to the closed form of the Symbolist dance. Since life is a continuous flow perpetuating constant changes it cannot be given a finished artistic expression which the formal perfection and closed structure of the Symbolist-Modernist poem suggest. Moreover, as in life and Cosmos there is no end, nor is there dead stillness or formal fixity in the artistic processes: movement, action and change are the only absolutes which the new dance expresses.

At this point we are able to specify the nature of the change in the ontology of the poem. From the Symbolist use of the dance as the emblem of the poem-artifact, the perfect self-sufficient form which is external to the poet and the process of composition we are gradually passing to another symbolic sense: the poem as synonymous with the poetic process — the moving unaccomplished process of discovery. The movement without which the materials of the poem would become a mass of incoherent non-poetic bric à brac emerges as the organizing principle of the structure of the poem and, further, as the factor of all knowledge — the epistemological category which extends its structural function into the field of philosophy and poetic Weltanschauung.

Though the dance as it is applied by Williams refers to what goes on in the poet's psyche and not to its product there is at least one feature common to all its uses: the curious identity of the dancer and the dance — their organic interdependence as neither of them can exist without the other. This identity illustrates the nature of the poem's organism — the integral fusion of form and content.

The final note of *Paterson* should be treated as the starting point for the younger poets. As their main concern lies with the dynamic quality of the poem and its structural function it is not coincidental that they also use the dance image in the sense which is very much similar to Williams'. For instance Robert Duncan's poem *The dance* demonstrates his theory on both literal and metaphorical level as it is about an actual dancing and about writing this particular poem. The organic link between the two is stated in: "Writing it down now is the aftermath... part of the dance too, an articulation of the time of dancing..." (Duncan 1963 : 9). Earlier in the poem Duncan notices that "the dancers mimic flowers" (Duncan 1963 : 8), which sums up his treatment of the dance as symbolic and ordered expression of life processes in movement and gesture. On the level of the poem the dance is a verbal articulation of the above and thus involves mental processes — that is a specific sphere of human life processes such as: cognition, feeling, thought, imagination and aesthetic

sense. Similarly, using the dance image in reference to the poetic process Duncan said the following in an interview:

The dancer comes into the dance when he loses his consciousness of his own initiative, what he is doing, feeling or thinking, and enters the consciousness of the dance's initiative, taking feeling and thought there. The self-consciousness is not lost in the void but in the transcendent consciousness of the dance

(Nemerov n. d.: 177).

The dancer who enters the "dance's initiative" represents the emblem of the Projectivist poet who in the poetic act loses his egoistic stimulæ (such as the Romantic inspiration or the Modernistic concern with purely formal problems i.e. "objective correlative") and not only does not conform to any external formal design but follows and consciously obeys the laws inherent in the poetic materials. Just as in Williams', in this approach the poetic act becomes a transcendental fusion of the poet's consciousness with his materials, which invariably results in the acquisition of knowledge. The initiative, feeling and thought — that is the elements forming the organizing principle of the poem — are provided by the materials, but are objectified in the poem by the poet-dancer (the perceiving mind).

Stressing the dynamic quality of the poetic process Charles Olson views the poem as "at all points ...a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge" (Allen 1960 : 387). "The kinetics of the thing", as Olson puts it, lies at the basis of his experiments with the so-called "composition by field". "Composition by field" or the "open form" means simply an organic form the concept of which grows, so it seems, from the Freudian principle of the inherence of a natural (that is organic) form in the non-rational. Stated otherwise it means that the subject and the materials entering into the making of the poem establish its form. The affinity of the Projectivists' theory with Freudian psychology was observed by Robert Duncan who said: "After Freud we are aware that unwittingly we achieve our form" (Allen 1960 : 400). One reservation should be made, however, that the Projectivists do not intend to go into the extremity of automatic or Dada writing but only let their definite material follow its "natural" order with the poet's consciousness and therefore the poem's range staying within the limits set by the theme. Olson clarifies the matter in the following way: "From the moment he [the poet] ventures into the Field composition — puts himself in the open — he can go by no track other than the poem under hand declares, for itself" (Allen 1960: 387). Duncan's elaboration of the dance image discussed above reveals identical awareness of the poet's programmatic conforming with the laws of the "dance's initiative", feeling and thought.

In Olson's theory of the composition by field, the term "composition" seems to mean both the structure of the poem and the creative process, which again may be considered as basically Freudian. The ambiguity of the term

emphasizes the identity of both: the psychological process in the poet's mind and the objective structure of the finished poem. This brings us back to the kinetic character of Williamsian, Poundian and Projective poems. Olson says the following about the process of composition and about the process of the poem itself:

the process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that form is accomplished. And I think it can be boiled down to one statement...: ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means... get on with it, keep moving, keep in speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can... (Allen 1960: 388).

The poetic process as seen by Olson results in the dynamic shaping of energies working among the elements of the poem — that is the form. "Form is never more than an extension of content", say Olson and Creeley (Allen 1960: 387). Similarly, Duncan explains his own poetic process of composition:

In writing I do not organize words but follow my consciousness of... orders in the play of forms and meanings towards poetic form. This play is like the play of actors upon a stage. Becoming conscious, becoming aware of the order of what is happening is the full responsibility of the poet. (Nemerov n. d.: 176).

Thus, the projective poem is a complex rational creation which preserves a marked quality of inner spontaneity resulting from its organic nature. Combining the theory of composition by field with the implications of the dance image the projective poem appears as a kind of organic movement the biological rhythm of which Duncan sees in terms of the birth of a child:

The coming into life of a child... that the breath-blood circulation be gained, an interjection! the levels of the passions and inspiration in phrases; second, the focus be gained, a substantive, the level of vision; and third, the complex of muscular gains that are included in taking hold and balancing, verbs, but more, the movement of the language, the level of the ear, the hand, and the foot. All these incorporated in measure (Allen 1960: 411).

Here Duncan stresses the organic order in the gradual process and in the interdependence of the particular stages of composition. All the elements work simultaneously, individually and together, to create the total effect of the poem. The above concept points out the natural progression of the projectivist poem as not hampered by external laws; the birth process beginning from the emotional breath and going through verbal expression of emotion (phrases) made communicative by the vision (content), and all that held together by the laws inherent in the musical movement of the language.

In its philosophical assumption this principle seems to preclude any possi-

bility of applying a fixed smaller structural unit which would be of universal use outside one specific poem. Yet Williams who was very much aware of the shortcomings of the early twentieth century free verse poetry after long search for a solid structural unit arrived at his concept of the variable foot which served him both as prosodic and structural element in the organization of the free verse line and, ultimately, of the whole poem. Someone has noted that the idea of the variable foot is as vague as the notion of the flexible inch and, on the one hand, he was right. But the critical tone was not necessary since flexibility is a feature of speech. It is precisely this notion that served Williams as the starting point in his fight against and his departure from the traditional prosody. It was also the leading motive of his attempts to find a prosodic form to accommodate the rhythms of American speech. On the prosodic level the variable foot broke with the rigidity of the classical foot and this results in apparent irregularity so far as the pattern of accents is concerned. Yet, on the other hand, Williams' foot is a unit of time, which paradoxically, makes it similar to the ancient classical foot. Another, and perhaps more evident basis for fixity or regularity of it is its semantic aspect in the sense that it forms the smallest unit of poetic meaning. Thus the diversity of the actual length of particular feet makes for their variability. On the other hand, the integrity and wholeness of a single thought answers the prosodic requirements of regularity without losing the organic (semantic) logic of the design of the whole. Being determined by physical and semantic factors the variable foot brings together prosodic and structural aspect of the line (and the whole poem) under one category and thus intensifies the organic interdependence among various elements of the poem which in a more conventional approach disintegrate. (For more detailed discussion of the variable foot see my article in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* no. 3.)

Williams' invention may be considered as the symbolic meeting place in the formal experiments of the poets of older and younger generation, and its history points to the collaborative character of Williams' contribution. In this respect it is enough to say that Williams himself felt indebted to Olson for his essay on the Projective Verse since it helped him to clarify his own germinative idea of the variable foot. Besides, Williams felt a fatherly pride in Olson's essay as it seemed to him an extension and development of his own theories.

Like Williams the Projectivists were also aware of the new technical problems and difficulties arising from breaking away from traditional prosody, and academic "symbolic" poems. In Olson's concept "every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the sense) must be taken up as participants in the kinetic of the poem just as solidly as we are accustomed to take what we call the objects of reality" (Allen 1960: 391). The

basic units working in the creation of the tensions of the poem ("the threshing floor for the dance"), otherwise the structure are, for Olson and the poets of the group, the syllable and the line, both very much related to Williams' concept of the variable foot and the line. Olson's schematic definition of his units is:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (Allen 1960: 390).

Thus, the first factor of order in the poem — the syllable — is a unit of meaning. Proceeding from the head — that is the intellect — it expresses the thought or content of the poem by means of verbal units. The line as a combination of syllables unavoidably carries their collective meaning. Yet, in Olson's theory, it appears first of all as the unit of emotion. Paradoxically, this concept is a repetition of Eliot's creed of the unity of thought and feeling as contrasted with the phenomenon of dissociation of sensibility.

The measure of the projective verse line is for Olson breath which in this case should be treated in its double Latin meaning, and it emerges eventually as both spiritual and physical category. On the one hand, it reflects the quality of emotional involvement, and on the other, it is physiologically controlled by the heart throbs which vary in accordance with the state of excitement. So the breath-stopped lines reflect the pace of the poet's emotions.

Though distant from the main tenets of the Projective Verse Allen Ginsberg's theory of line as dependent on breath is essentially of the same nature. In his experiments with the poetic line Ginsberg places himself in the tradition of Walt Whitman and within the range of Williams' influences. In his own words: "By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from W. C. Williams' imagist preoccupations" (Allen 1960: 414-415). Later, as the length of his lines increased, Ginsberg realized the advantages of Whitman's long line and developed his theory accordingly. Theoretically, Ginsberg claims that in his composition as well as in his readings each long line is a single breath unit. Again here we may think of the double Latin meaning of the term as physical and spiritual. "My breath is long — says Ginsberg — that's the Measure, one physical—mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic breath" (Allen 1960: 416). Ginsberg explains the improbable length of his single breath line as the result of his state of excitement under which he writes and he contrasts it with Williams' and Olson's "cooler, average, dailytalk short breath" (Allen 1960: 416).

In the projective poem line and syllable serve as flexible yet solid units of order in the organic form the rhythm of which is dictated by thought and

feeling. With this we enter the problem of the organization of the elements which Olson calls objects within the line. He presents the problem in the following way:

each of these elements of a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed to, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions.... Do not tenses, must they not also be kicked around anew, in order that time, that other governing absolute, may be kept, as must the space-tensions of a poem, immediate, nontemporary to the acting-on-you of the poem? (Allen 1960: 391 - 392).

The above ideas reveal Olson's concern with evoking the sense of natural movement by means of free handling of syntax, departure from linear logic in order to render the non-discursive nature of the outside reality — that is the poetic materials. Similarly, Williams' negation of grammatical rules reflects his perception of complex, non-linear relationships in the outside reality. From the practical point of view, his method of breaking the line into staggered pattern in which each unit corresponds to an individual foot, serves not only as means of rendering the natural flexibility of spoken language but also helps to avoid the danger of intelligibility which might result from the non-discursive logic of the line. Olson is also aware of the practical dangers and difficulties inherent in the new anti-syntactical method. Therefore, he advocates the use of the achievement of the elder poets in this field. "It is time we picked the fruits of the experiments of Cummings, Pound, Williams", writes Olson (Allen 1960: 393). Here he specifically means the advantages of using the typewriter due to the vast functional possibilities it offers in the freedom of marginal arrangement, great variety in the length of breaks between the words and selection of punctuation marks. All these may serve the purposes of communication, suggestion, implication, sometimes pictorial or symbolic rendition of thought and, finally, clarity. The introduction of the typewriter as one of the poet's tools Olson considers as a revolutionary event: "For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had" (Allen 1960: 393).

Olson's comparison of the poet to the musician points out one of the chief characteristics of recent American poetry — its preoccupation with the aural quality of poetic language. The young poets exploit musicality, the sound quality and rhythm, that is the physical qualities of language as means of viewing and reflecting the outside reality, and further, as a philosophical category of absolute law, structure and order. This viewpoint stands in radical contrast with Eliot's technique and philosophical assumptions which are based on his interest in the pictorial concreteness of the poetic image. The new tendency among the young poets, again in this respect seems to be encouraged by Williams and Pound who have moved from their earlier thought-image

unity to the unity of thought and sound. Music besides dance is another attribute Williams places in his idea of the poem, both notions being organically linked in that the music should be treated as an accompaniment to the dance. Both are forms of sensuous recognition of life, the senses involved being hearing, sight and muscular movement. Thus, just as dance music carries deeper connotations than just physical, acoustic quality and serves as a perspective or technique of viewing life, man, and the world.

In his two line statement on syllable and line quoted above, Olson reveals his view on syllable as the agent of the music (sound) of the language. Such conscious linking of the notions of sound and sense means that thought has to be heard — even mentally — before it is realized in the mind to be of full poetic use — that is, as the carrier of poetic vision, structural factor and musical element. Such multiple function of music Robert Creeley noticed in Williams' management of the rhythm of the line: "your powers over a rhythm are the quantity, breath, accent of your words, and the image and the thought you give them" (Creeley 1955).

Also Robert Duncan views poetry in terms of its musical quality. Following Carlyle's thought that music constitutes the heart of nature, Duncan considers poetry as the discovery of "the unyielding sentence that shows itself forth in the language as I make it" where "an absolute scale of resemblance and disresemblance establishes measures that are music in the actual world" (Nemerov n.d.: 176-178). Thus in Duncan's poetics too, music together with dance constitutes a philosophical category. Moreover, he treats even the individual phonetic units: vowels and consonants as important structural elements in the poem, for they are already "structured in their resonance, [and] we have only to listen and to cooperate with the music we hear" (Nemerov n.d.: 176). Thus one can see that the aural quality of the poetic language is treated by the poets not only as the musical flow of language adding a pleasing quality to the melody of the poem's sound pattern but is also a structural device — the overall quality of the intellectual, emotional, and physical pulsation of the poem.

Generally speaking, the Projective Verse poetics continuing the achievement of Ezra Pound and, most of all, William Carlos Williams carries further the Symbolist and Modernist modification of the Romantic organic form. Consequently the younger poets discussed here view the poem as a verbal expression of human life processes and the dynamism of life in general as they are emblematically envisioned in the movement and gesture of dance. Furthermore, the traditional prosodic and other "technical" devices acquire here more fundamental philosophical and structural functions, which enlarges and intensifies the concept of organic form and, at the same time, increases the integrity of the poem.

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