

The Poetry of William Carlos Williams: An Approach to His Variable Foot

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William Carlos Williams rejected all *form* in poetry. He tried to break down the iambic line and invented a substitute what he called *measure*. Poetry he says, is based on *measure* which is something like “the natural and subtly varying rhythms of the spoken voice, based on the natural rhythms of breathing...” (Richard 49). Indeed his importance lay in creating a specifically American poetics based on the rhythm and colorations of American speech, thought and experience.

Williams gradually came to be acknowledged as ‘Grand Old Man’ of letters in the twentieth century American verse. His experiments are striking in that his work is more expressive of American sensibility, and more saturated with American speech and its rhythms, than any other poet since Whitman. For these reasons a new generation of poets on both sides of Atlantic took him as their master. Allen Ginsberg, Robert Lowell, Paul Blackburn and many others show strong traces of his influence. And indeed his poetry has also cast net of ‘Americanisation’ overseas, in the form of some poets’ stylistic reorientation. We find writers like Charles Tomlinson and John Montague, for example, reflecting this influence while adapting it to their own countries’ colloquial turns and poetic traditions.

Williams, explaining his theory of measure in a letter to Richard Eberhart, said that he had never been one to write by rule, even by his own rules. “The rule of counted syllables in which all poems have been written hitherto has become tiresome to my ear” (Critical Heritage 295) He believed that English prosody is a fixed dispensation from above and we are taught to take over prosody without invention and on loan from another language.

It requires us to first understand form and meter before discussing Williams’ views on modern verse. The elements of poetic form are: rhythm and rhyme. Rhyme becomes necessary in poetry as rhythm weakens. The Greeks of the great period scorned rhyme; and so did Latin versifiers. Greek and Latin could do without rhyme because they had clear meters. About English verse Murray says the renewed popularity of rhyme in the time of Dryden followed upon an increasing looseness in the treatment of blank verse by the later Jacobean dramatists, and was part of a general reaction toward severity of form. Meter is rhythm. It makes a difference between prose and poetry. Verse differs from prose in the return of certain number of syllables that have a peculiar relation to one-another as accented and unaccented, or as long and short. This ordering of long and short at regular pace gives rise to pleasure and the origin of this pleasure is to be traced back to the sense of time with which men are generally endowed. There are bodily rhythms which might illustrate mankind’s sense of time, and with which a definite pleasure might be said to be connected. A living man has rhythm built into him, as it were. His heart beats. He has a pulse. He breathes. This rhythmic principle underlying human actions regulates the steps of a man or the stroke of an oar; and hence the pleasure we experienced in beholding step of company of soldiers in their march, and the simultaneous sweep of the oars of a well manned boat. We can think of rhythms in sowing, reaping, threshing, washing clothes, rowing and even in milking. The variety of

rhythms in sea shanties hauling up sail or pulling it down; coiling ropes; pulling and pushing and climbing and lifting is preserved for us, fast or slow, smooth or rough in sailors' songs.

In the light of this understanding of meter and form Greek poetry seems to be a highly sophisticated and complex affair: the fruit of centuries of trial and error, of matching rhythm to language and language to rhythm; of a complicated and civilized relationship between dance and song. When we come upon the epics of Homer, written in the infinitely resonant and infinitely variable dactylic hexameter; or, later, when we read the no less variable Sapphics or alcaics of the Greek lyric, we have come far beyond Stone age. Man has become a worker in metals; the cymbal and the bell have been added to the castanet and the drum; man is now a musician as well as a dancer. Thus we see that rhythmic variations in folk songs, sailors' songs and later in Greek poetry are all based on changes in rhythmic speech of the language and on human rhythmic principle. Now we can understand the reason why the Greek rhythms became unusable in English language. Why Greek hexameter, which managed to pass-over into Latin poetry, remained forever outside any feasible use in English. Greek and Latin both being inflected languages are nearer to each other than any of them to English. A highly inflected language, Gilbert Murray says in his valuable study *The Classic Tradition in Poetry*, must have each syllable clearly spoken, because each syllable up to the last may seriously alter the meaning". Due to this reason in Latin and Greek pronunciation quantity was the chief variable while modern uninflected languages have increasingly inclined to the easy method of stress. It can, therefore, be said that every language devises its own meter which is capable of accommodating varying rhythms of actual speech, sensibility and experiences; it seek its own large meter – its own dramatic carrier, capable of long breaths, capable of bearing weights, capable of projecting maximum emotional power; and yet allowing for delicate variation ; capable of assuming various speeds, and capable of letting through intricacy of thought and sharpness of wit; a meter sited to the syntax and the rhythm of any given language, to the preponderance within that language of actual vowels and consonant sounds (Bogan 128-38).

Formal poetry should renew and revitalize itself by continually remaining in contact with the speech and life around it. Its twin attitudes "verse as speech" and "verse as song" should perennially be renewed and resuscitated by the actual speech. Otherwise the technique of the formal poetry becomes rigidified. Poets take to the rules which the scholars deduced from one or the other poetic canon. And thus the technical traditions run unbroken, and lose capability to accommodate true and lively experience. Dr. Williams rejected all form and strongly advocated the invention of a new form based on the use of American idiom. Dr. Williams' views merit our attention:

Let me jump to a present reality: we live, in which we call America we call America, in a present world where we speak a language (the basis of the poem which we hear about us every day). It is not the English any longer if it was ever so – as Mr. Mencken has pointed out. It is our only language. It has structural elements in time and pace – time, pace and contours which are not that of English – but of a language that has originated from a wholly background – not in the deep past but the immediate present. It is more Mediterranean than North Sea and it is more loose – jointed than English and I believe, for that reason more serviceable for the necessity of

change – more dynamic as contrasted with the static nature of English (which by the way we can not hear – since it is not spoken about us). But most of all since the poem is our theme, the prosody of English does not apply to American. (Contemporary Poetry 127)

Williams seriously experimented with his concept of *measure* and matured its use in his later works. However, this *measure*, eventually ‘the variable foot’ prefigures long before in a sentence of *Kora in Hell*: “A thing known passes out of the mind into the muscles”. Kenneth Rexroth, reviewing *The Desert Music*, attested to Williams’ achievement in metrics: “his poetic line is welded to American speech like muscle to bone” (Rexroth 275-77) Structure, not subject matter, Williams.....often said, is the poet’s contact with reality, the one way he can modify it. The only reality we can modify it. The only reality we can know is MEASURE” (*Selected Essays* 283), he wrote in *The Poem as a Field of Action*, When he was working on *Paterson Books Three and Four*. Nearly twenty years earlier he had said, Pounds’ line is the movement of his thought! Such declarations implied relativity and organicism which are further adumbrated in Williams’ well known 1954 letter to Eberhart giving samples of ‘the variable foot’. This shows the affinity between Williams’ ‘variable foot’ and Olson’s conception of a ‘breath unit’ or ‘cadence unit’, first published in *Projective Verse* (1950). Both men would hold that an American poet, employing the American idiom, will have American speech rhythms. But the whole notion of measure as ‘variable foot’ continues to be technically elusive. Williams’ sense of the dependence of measure on the individual’s psycho-physical nature (even while he may be seen as part of a large ‘ process’) lends some credence to Roy Harvery Pearce’s finding in *The Continuity of American Poetry* that his poetry grew increasingly subjective. Eberhart takes up the question of measure in reviewing *Journey to Love*, but he straddles the problem with generalizations, noting that the verse line is “based on the natural rhythms of breathing” adding, “ I do not mean that there is not a great deal of strategy” (Eberhart 49).

Williams explains his theory of measure in a letter to his friend Eberhart which needs to be quoted in detail to understand:

By measure I mean musical pace. Now with music in our ears the words need only be taught to keep as distinguished an order, as chosen a character, as regular, according to the music, as in the best prose.

By its music shall the best of modern verse be known and the resources of the music. The refinement of the poem, its subtlety, is not to be known by the elevation of the words but – the words don’t so much matter – by the resources of the music.

Williams further adds that the lines must be capable of being counted, that is to say, measured, may be half consciously, even count the measure, under your breath. He gives an example:

1. The smell of the heat is boxwood
2. when rousing us
3. a movement of the air
4. stirs our thoughts
5. that had no life in then
6. to a life, a life in which

(or)

1. Mother of God! Our Lady!
2. the heart
3. is an unruly master:
4. Forgive us our sins
5. as we
6. forgive
7. those who have sinned against

Counter a single beat to each numeral. Over the whole poem it gives a pattern to the meter that can be felt as a new measure. It gives resources to the ear which result in a language which we hear spoken about us every day... (Selected Letters 325-27).

“There is no form, *thing* is the form”, John Ciardy recalls Williams, waving his arms at the audience, “sonnets, iambic pentameter, couplets – you have to do away with all that old stuff”(277). And he does away with it. But at the same time he invents a new measure. His success in doing so is a tribute to his own immense inventiveness. And even more, to the fact that he is richly stored with the very traditions, he sweeps away with a wave of his arm. John Ciardi maintains that Williams’ poems that really lift and go are the ones whose free cadences are haunted by the memory of meter. He quotes the last twelve lines from ‘Daphne and Virginia’ and puts them closer to metric form:

A pair of robins
Is building a nest for the second time this
Seasons
Men against their reson, speak of love
Sometimes,
when they are old. It is all they can
do
or watch a heavy goose who waddles,
slopping
noisily. In the mud of his pool. (*Pictures from Brueghel* 78-79)

To typeset it closer to metric form is no help. The poem looks better in Williams’ own triple – split line. His poems in the triple – split line have been an exciting experience. The three parts of the line, if not measurably the same length, *feel* equal. A nice principle of containment seems to be at work, neither to demanding nor inadequate. Yet Williams allows himself to break away at many points from even as simple a measure as this as he said that he had never been one to write by rule, even by his own rules.

Williams’ conception of a poem was, therefore, based on theme and the structure: the dream and the reality. That which is appraised as phantasy to which we flee from our dilemmas, in a difficult world for comfort – belief, faith and the reassurances of philosophy and religion generally, the subjective contents of the poem on the hand and on the other the structure, the physical make up of the poem itself as a small machine constructed of words and the spaces between of them. Elaborating the point further, Williams says that we seldom think of poetic structure as we do of engineering: a field of action worthy of a masculine attack: where invention is not only possible but constitutes one of

the most moving elements of our world – or any world. We accepted structure as something static, given to us as by the hand of God or at least by Geo Saintsbury, late of the English university (*Contemporary Poetry* 125). It is curiously interesting that under such circumstances men come to think that the value of the poem is in what is said in the poem. “Where as the real value of a poem is in what we make of it, in what it stands to be as a metrical invention, something new in the world that once more asserts the world as real for you” (*Contemporary Poetry* 125). The solution, says William, is simple if covert: our dreams are escapes: from an oppressive reality – But dreams may be dominated and put to great service for the individual and the race by the poet, by structural imagination and skill – to astonishing effect in the world as the evidence of history proves. Poems so constructed, have been sometimes the only connection we have with reality of the past (*Contemporary Poetry* 124).

Pictures from Brueghel show that Williams had far more a painter’s eye than do most poets. His famous but somewhat baffling, yet nevertheless, valuable concept of the ‘variable foot’ (each ‘foot’ or line fragment a held moment or unit of measure within an unfolding appreciation) gives a typographical movement to his later poems something of the character of animated abstract painting. It is clear that he felt a compelling convergence of visual and aural patterns as he wrote. All the poems in *Journey to Love* have a uniform versification. It is repetitions of the triplet where each dash is a beat of meaning that may contain from one to about ten ametric syllables, one to six or seven words. ‘A beat of meaning’ means any word or a group of words that can momentarily be attended to in itself. Pauses fall most frequently at the end of the triplet: the versification is such as to keep you running on.

The careful study of the poems shows that this meter is laid across a serious nervous common speech given just as it might actually be spoken, without inversion, compression, or other alteration by which poets tailor speech. For, instance, omitting the versification: “I should have known, though I did not, that the lily-of-the-valley is a flower makes many ill who whiff it”. “This would be a fine day to go on a journey. Say to Florida where at this season all go nowadays”. “She fed the King’s poor and when she died left them some slight moneys under certain conditions”. “In the name of love I came proudly as to an equal to be forgiven. Let me, for I know you take it hard, with good reason, give the steps if it may be by which you shall mount again to think well of me” (Pictures from Brueghel 79).

‘Actual common speech’ does not men prose. It is more profitable to regard common speech as the matrix from which both prose and verse are formed (and back towards which certain species of prose and verse aspire). We can hear this when we listen to William Carlos Williams and then notice that people sound like that when they talk. Williams gives us mostly the speech of a man explaining to us, perhaps over a cup of coffee, how it is with him, and trying to be accurate clear, quick and modest. Let us see some verses:

Once
at El Paso
toward evening,
I saw – and heard –
ten thousand sparrows
who had come in form

the desert
to roost. They filled the trees
of a small park. Men fled
(*Pictures from Brueghel* 130)

Paul Goodman believes that this versification has a twofold genealogy and is a fairly viable compromise between the conflicting demands of both lines:

1. These are the three beats of meaning to a line of normal English blank verse. (As in blank verse, Williams occasionally four). Quite often Williams triplets are perfect pentameters: “Can not surpass/ the insistence/ of his cheap”; “keen eyes/ serviceable beak/ and general truculence; “does it pretend? / A war will not erase it.” There is a pervasive blank verse with the usual variations. And within the poetic program of achieving the actual common speech unaltered, the most direct way of writing blank verses is to keep the triplets of meaning but to give up the pentameter..., rather filling each beat with whatever is required ametrically. This is just what Williams does. (Goodman 366-70)

2. The other genealogy of this versification is seen if we consider the following blank verse:

throws back his head
and simply
yells! The din
(*Pictures from Brueghel* 130)

Each beat of meaning is like an image. Such brief bursts are the direct heir of the imagist poetry of the beginning of the century. At the start of his career to be sure, Williams was concerned with the common objects, generally pictorial and generally static, and he used to construct them handsomely with these isolating phrases. Or we can take these little bursts as a kind of pointillism every spot a color, every color a spot; from this beginning Cummings and Pound went off in their own directions – to bursts of surprise, shapes of words, glancing references and fragmentary allusions etc. But Williams has taken up a program of actual common speech that does not fragment into little entities in exactly this way; he has according tried to get back to a regular underlying flow, in which the sudden accents and turns and digressions can sound out more like the actuality of talking.

Thus Williams manages to get an imagist blank verse serviceable for this purpose. However its wide – spread utility stands questioned. In the first place there is a difficulty of breathing. The bread-and-butter virtue of pentameter blank verses – or Alexandrines or Greek iambic trimeters – is the that each verse is one breath; this is the modulus for dramatic recitation, and to maintain it poets have been willing to make large alterations of what is actually spoken. By contrast many of Williams’ lines have to be rehearsed, or contrariwise, there is the temptation to disregard the verification altogether and recite straight on, a very sweet melody but swifter than he intends. Secondly and more important, it is very difficult to make these cut-up ametric little units flow and grow into true paragraphs, the way blank verses grow with power and intensity into large wholes.

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