

## WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS' THEORY AND PRACTICE OF POETIC MEASURE

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William Carlos Williams' idea of poetic measure diverges considerably from what is commonly understood by the term: that is the systematized organization of regular rhythmic patterns in a poem. Without abandoning the usual prosodic functions, which, however, differ in execution from the traditional ones, Williams elevates the notion of poetic measure to the status of philosophical category. "... what is reality? How do we know reality? The only reality that we know is MEASURE", writes Williams in his essay *The poem as a field of action* (Williams 1954 : 283).

Generally speaking, Williams' concept of a poem as a measured field of action comprises two points: 1) the contact with the immediate environment (reality) and a response to it, which involves action, and 2) the process of the poem as a discovery and formalization of the relationships between that action and words; the latter, in turn, involving another kind of action — the poem. Poetic measure plays an important role in both these points. It is a way of viewing the world and life, and subsequently, it becomes the organizing principle of poetic materials. Over and above this concept Williams defines his poetic purpose as follows:

To seek (what we believe is there) a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurable with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past. It is in many ways a different world from the past calling for a different measure.

(Williams 1954: 283)

The idea of the epistemological finality of the poetic measure, is, significantly, the concluding note of *Paterson*, the most important of Williams' works:

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

(Williams 1963: 278)

It is not difficult to guess that here Williams identifies the poetic measure with

the form or structure of poetry. Continuous changes of poetic materials (reality) and of the poetic medium (language) require an organic form which in order to be adequate, or commensurate, to use Williams' term, should be alive to these changes. On the other hand, Williams views the poetic form as the only fixity and certainty amidst the fluidity and uncertainty of the world and life. Of the structural potentiality of poetic measure Williams writes in *The poem as a field of action*: "The language is changing and giving new means for expanded possibility of literary expression and, I add, basic structure — the most important of all." (Williams 1954 : 291). Such a view of the formal aspect of poetry and such emphatic belief in the finality of form is very similar to the earlier attitude of the moderns in the post World War I period, and may be considered as its continuation and further development.

Williams' concepts and ideas mentioned above are but a restatement of his earlier tenet that the poem's structure reflects the order (structure) of reality which must be perceived behind the disorder of actuality and rendered by a new, revived language and by the rhythmic pattern of the poem. In his later rendering, however, Williams emphasizes the dynamism (rhythmic movement) of the poetic creation.

This prosodic concept springs from Williams' awareness of organic interdependence between content and form: content functioning as a generating and determining factor of form and form as the only medium in which content may be discovered, so that, in fact, content emerges through form. In this respect, as already mentioned, Williams' is not an isolated opinion; analogous views are shared by his contemporaries of both the older and the younger generation (such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov and others). Williams' individuality grows more outspoken in the later phase of his writing when he proceeds in the direction of endowing the traditional prosodic elements of rhythmic discipline (measure and foot) with structural functions.

Williams' experiments and the resulting theory develop from his attack upon the exploitation of the false connotation of the term "free verse". "No verse can be free", writes Williams, "it must be governed by some measure". (Williams 1954 : 339)

Verse is measure, there is no free verse. *But* the measure must be one of more trust, greater liberty, than has been permitted in the past. It must be an open formation. Whitman was never able fully to realize the significance of this structural innovations. As a result he fell back to the overstuffed catalogues of his later poems and a sort of looseness that was not freedom but lack of measure. Selection, structural selection was lacking. (Williams 1954: 212)

As will be pointed out below, Williams' concept of free verse implies discipline and order on one hand, and variability, flexibility, the unbounded choice of materials, on the other.

Just as Williams' treatment of materials for poetry and his life-long experiments with poetic language were based on his Americanism and his theory of American idiom, so were his investigations into poetic measure. The basic point on which Williams grounded his theory was that American and British English are altogether foreign languages. Williams sees the difference between the two dramatically as:

the unrelenting warfare between England and the United States over a language which had burst the bounds of a narrow world and was spreading helter-skelter over a vast new continent. (Williams 1954: 172 - 173)

In this respect Williams was right to a certain extent since there are differences in accent, the manner of pronouncing syllables, and intonation, and all these do affect the rhythmic flow of speech even in everyday usage; words as they are spoken come in groups which form rhythmic units related to thought, breathing, syntactical and emotional emphasis, general pace and so on. Thus, the acute awareness of difference between British and American English brought Williams to the conviction that the structure and diction of a poem are inseparable: structure in the aspect of its being a rhythmic organization of words as they form syntactical units of thought, action, and speech; diction in the sense of individual words involved in the formation of units. More daringly than Pound and Eliot, Williams has made the American idiom the basis for the structure of his poetry (Solt 1965). As Williams himself writes:

The practice of the poem has been the decisive factor in determining the character that any language has taken. The whole character of any people has been fixed there. It will be the same today. Whatever America has to say that is new emotionally and intellectually will be found after the passage of time, if Americans are to be of any importance in the world, by what they have marked upon the poems. Since the poem is formally the place where language most carries the mark of any race that uses it... In language we know as the American... what we do with our poetic opportunities... will determine how our language is to be formed. That is the importance of Ezra Pound for us, he, though it is not blatantly apparent, is forming our language.

(Williams MS)

Already Williams' earlier poems reveal his concern with the question of the rhythmic arrangement of the poem and the need for basic changes in the traditional methods. Thus, the length of lines already in the early poems is determined by the thought-emotion-unit criterion. As Williams himself described his early method in *I wanted to write a poem*:

The rhythmic unit decided the form of my poetry. When I came to the end of the rhythmic unit (not necessarily a sentence) I ended the line. The rhythmic unit was not measured by capitals at the beginning of a line or periods within the lines. I was trying for something. The rhythmic unit usually came to me in a lyrical outburst. I wanted it to look that way on the page. (Williams 1967 : 15)

Quite early Williams discovered another structural-rhythmic device which Linda Wagner terms "paragraph" organization (Wagner 1963: 77). In this system one paragraph (an individual stanza) represents one unit of thought. In the case of a single theme-thought poem one stanza was enough. Frequently Williams was recording conversations to emphasize his use of natural idiom using punctuation marks to indicate various speakers.

As Linda Wagner points out, in the poetry of the 20's and 30's Williams uses enjambement, capitalization and punctuation to mark the divisions between structural units of thought (Wagner 1963: 81 - 83).

More interesting experiments started during the Objectivist period when Williams maintained that a "poem like every other form of art is an object, an object that in itself formally presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes" (Brinnin 1963: 30). To give a concrete example:

There!  
           There!  
 There!  
           — a dream  
 of lights  
           hiding  
 the iron reason  
           and stone  
 a settled  
           cloud —

(Williams 1957: 389)

The shape of the whole poem of which a fragment has been quoted above is established by individual lines. The typography in this particular poem is unusual for Williams' poetry of those years since, as a rule, he arranged lines in vertical columns. The typography emphasized the individuality of word groups and their arrangement on the page — the division into sections foreshadows later triadic combinations.

Until the 40's Williams was continuing his experiments with the structural possibilities of individual lines and combinations of several lines into stanzas and paragraphs, all varying in length. In the late 40's Williams decided that some kind of basic regularity was necessary to obtain effectiveness in poetry. It is from this period that his concern with measure dates. As Mary Solt expresses it, Williams' task became

to endow poetry with the "auditory quality" of music, which he thought his hitherto poetry lacked. Thus, in his concept of rhythmical pattern of the poem Williams adds the dimension of musical time to the earlier requirement of the natural movement of words.

(Solt 1960: 11)

Williams' words are not primarily visual at all. The poet assumes "That we smell, hear, see with words, hear and see afresh" and he is sensitive to the "complexities of the world about our ears" (Williams 1954: 266). Thus, it is

hearing that Williams places before sight as the primary quality of language. Williams' emphasis on the musical quality of poetry is expressed in one of his later poems:

It is all in  
 the sound. A song  
 seldom a song. It should  
 be a song — made of  
 a gention — something  
 immediate, open  
 scissors, a lady's  
 eyes — waking  
 centrifugal, centripetal.

(Williams 1962b: 33)

Williams' focusing on the auditory aspect of poetry reminds one of Pound's principle: "compose in the sequence of musical phrase, not in the sequence of metronome". Williams expresses his aim as a search for a "metric structure" which is regardless of grammatical restrictions and in which "the progression goes over into the next bar as much as the musical necessity requires ... a sequence of the musical bars arranged vertically on the page and capable of infinite modulations" (Wagner 1963: 85). "The Orchestra" renders these assumptions both in prosody and in theme. The poem is composed in a four part symphonic structure. The musical arrangement is carried over into theme of the poem. The problems of poetic technique are expressed in terms of musical performance and lead to the coda's theme of love and art.

The purpose of an orchestra  
           is to organize these sounds  
           and hold them  
 in an assembled order  
           in spite of the  
           "wrong note". Well shall we  
 think or listen? Is there a sound addressed  
           not wholly to the ear?  
           We half close  
 our eyes. We do not  
           hear it through our eyes.

(Williams 1962a: 81)

This kind of poetry with primarily auditory concerns and quantitative principles Cid Corman has named "oral poetry". Corman wrote to Williams: "I don't know any other poet who works so nearly in the oral vein as you do." (Corman 1957)

As has been already mentioned, to counteract the unorderedliness implied by the term "free verse" and to prevent poetry from petrification due to the use of traditional measure Williams proposes his own concept:

The iamb is not the normal measure of American speech. The foot has to be expanded or contracted in terms of actual speech. The key to modern poetry is *measure*, which

must reflect the flux of modern life. You should find a variable measure for the fixed.

(Williams 1962a: 183)

The fundamental unit to achieve musical regularity in the flow of the poem Williams found in the device he called the "variable foot" which he further specifies as a "relatively stable foot, not a rigid one" (Williams 1954: 340). In contrast with the traditional prosody Williams' foot is not a unit of stress but one of time that is, in a sense, similar to the classical foot. Williams is not concerned with the distribution of accents but with "the spaces in between various stresses of verse". By the very essence of natural speech these intervals are variable. In Williams' own words:

The grammar of the term (variable foot)... is simply what it describes itself to be; a poetic foot that is not fixed but varies with demands of the language, keeping the measured emphasis as it may occur in the line. Its characteristic, when it differs from the fixed foot with which we are familiar, is that it ignores that counting of the number of syllables in the line... for the measure more of the ear, a more sensory counting. As in counting the breaths of a phrase, following speech in any language, they occur keeping the same rhythmic structure, whatever it may be, dactylic, anapestic, amphibracic, to which they have been dedicated.

The advantage of this practice over the old mode of measuring is that without inversion it permits the poet to use the language he naturally speaks, provided he has it well under control and does not lose the measured order of the words (Williams MS).

The first practical application of the "variable foot" appeared in *Paterson*:

Outside

outside myself

there is a world

he rumbled, subject to my incursions

— a world

(to me) at rest,

which I approach

concretely —

(Williams 1963: 57).

and more systematically in the following shape:

The descent beckons

as the ascent beckoned

Memory is a kind

of accomplishment

a sort of renewal

even

an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places

inhabited by hordes

heretofore unrealized,

of new kinds —

since their movements

are towards new objectives

(even though formerly they were abandoned)

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat — since  
the world it opens is always a place  
formerly

unsuspected

beckons to new places

and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory  
of whiteness

(Williams 1963: 96).

The above quotation is arranged in a staggered tercet pattern with the seventh and fourteenth lines unstaggered. The divided lines with each foot relatively long give the effect of a "descending" waterfall. This effect related thematically to the subject at hand, namely memory. At this point of the poem's action the protagonist is physically at a distance from the Passaic Falls. However, as indicated by the poem's intricate symbolism, he is constantly conscious of the Falls since their waters represent the flow of his thoughts and/or language. Thus, in this case the typographical arrangement of the passage brings back the symbol of the Falls, the more so, since the typography of the passages which precede and follow is totally different.

It is interesting to note that at the time of writing Williams himself was not aware that this passage would reflect his final conception of the prosodic aspect of free verse. Here is his own account of the process of the realization of this idea:

Several years afterward in looking over the thing I realized I had hit upon a device... which I could not name when I wrote it. My dissatisfaction with free verse came to a head in that I always wanted a verse that was ordered, so it came to me that the concept of the foot itself would have to be altered in our new relativistic world. It took me several years to get the concept clear. I had a feeling that there was somewhere an exact way to define it, to give it an epitaph, and I finally hit upon it. The foot not being fixed is only to be described as variable. It allows order in so-called free verse. Thus, the verse becomes not free at all but just simply variable, as all things in life properly are (Williams 1967: 82).

The "variable foot" is also a factor reflecting the pace of thought or emotion of the poem. Shorter units of measure indicate a more energetic movement and characterize the tempo of actual vigorous speech:

The petty fury

that disrupts my life —

at the striking of a wrong key

as if it had been

a woman lost

or a fortune

(Williams 1962a: 146).

Longer units fit a more reflective mood as in the passage from *Paterson*, quoted above.

The triadic lines or *versos sueltos* provided much freedom of movement within the basic regularity of structure. A kind of pattern variation is supplied by the use of quatrains alone or in combination with tercets.

It should further be noted that the "variable foot" is not only a time unit of duration, but also a semantic whole or a unit of attention (Stepanchev 1965: 128). Each of the sections possesses a discernible meaning or grammatical completeness of its own, and often does not follow the argument of logic of the preceding one. Thus, the lack of linear logic in the overall structure of the whole poem is carried over into the poem's particular units — the lines themselves. However, Williams plays down this lack of semantic causality within a single line by dividing it into three parts and arranging these sections in staggered patterns. This device produces the effect of smoothness and facilitates the reading as the eye gradually descends down the page. In consequence, it also eliminates additional effort caused by returning back to the left side of the column of lines as well as the difficulty of deciphering the run-on lines.

Thus, the device of the "variable foot" can be defined as an ordering factor for the freedom of free verse. Every individual foot is determined by physical and semantic factors. Physically, it is based on the principle of the equal duration of particular feet and constitutes the smallest unit of rhythmical sense; semantically, it forms the smallest unit of thought or emotion. As a semantic and physical unit, the "variable foot" provides shape and regularity to the logical and rhythmic patterns in the structure of the poem. The length of each foot is relative, due to the natural variability of spoken language whose rhythmic unit it reflects. Individual feet typographically arranged in staggered tercets or quatrains constitute a line.

It should be noted, by the way, that Williams' ideas on poetics have fecundated the minds of younger poets, especially of the Projective Verse group — the movement started by Charles Olson. The poets of this group admit their indebtedness to Williams and develop the line started by him. In the light of Olson's concept of "open field composition" which reminds one of Williams' "composition by field" discussed at the beginning of the present paper, the poem's kinetics is seen as the basis for structure.

A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it... by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader... The poem itself must, at all points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. (Allen 1960: 387).

Basing their theory on the statement that "form is never more than an extension of content" the poets of the Projective Verse group show a vivid concern with the poetic line, insisting on hearing as a measuring factor. For Olson, the line is primarily a breath unit, the principle which he states as follows:

The HEAD by the way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
The HEART by the way of the BREATH, to the LINE

(Allen 1960: 390).

Likewise Allen Ginsberg has considered his lines or his paragraphs as breath units. Breath as the basis for poetic measure has been noticed also in Williams' poetry.

The importance of Williams' achievement lies not only in the fact that he influenced recent American poetic thought and practice, but also in the universal applicability of the "variable foot" system to poetry of any tongue. Due to its relative count, flexibility, and basis on actual everyday language the variable foot is considered by Williams himself as a verse form of a "new dimension — a new idea of measurement, a measure that all languages can recognize, a denominator, which they will have in common" (Williams MS).

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