

**Organic Form and Prosody
in Selected Poems
of William Carlos Williams**

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Abstract:

William Carlos Williams is one of the most influential poets in American literature. He rejects the traditional poetic forms and prosody. Thus, he adopts a defensive strategy against the artificial European models. Williams has established new poetic forms and prosody, such as stanza arrangement, repeating some phrases, the use of caesura, internal rhyme and rhythm. Therefore, Williams' poetic forms and prosody are natural and organic. They are derived from the music, spontaneity and order of the American language and speech. The most rhetorical feature that revolutionizes Williams' poetry is "variable foot" that brings harmony and flexibility to Williams' poetry. It can be argued that the correspondence of Williams' poetic forms and themes sincerely depicts the tangible and intangible elements of American environment and society.

key words:

William Carlos Williams, New Poetic Weights, Inner Rhyme, and Discourse Musician.

الشكل والوزن العضوي في قصائد مختارة لويليام كارلوس ويليامز

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مستخلص:

يعتبر ويليام كارلوس ويليامز واحدا من أكثر الشعراء المؤثرين في الأدب الأمريكي. وهو يعارض الأوزان والأشكال الشعرية التقليدية لذلك فهو يتبنى استراتيجية دفاعية ضد النماذج الأوروبية المصطنعة. لقد أسس ويليامز أشكال وأوزان شعرية جديدة مثل ترتيب المقطع وتكرار بعض الجمل والوقف والقافية الداخلية والوزن الشعري لذلك فإن أشكال وأوزان ويليامز الشعرية عضوية و طبيعية ومشتقة من ترتيب وتلقائية وموسيقي الخطاب واللغة الأمريكية. ان من أهم الخصائص البنينة التي أحدثت ثورة في شعر ويليامز هي " التفعيلة المتغيرة" التي جلبت التلقائية والانسجام الي شعر ويليامز. ويمكن القول بأن تطابق الأشكال والأفكار الشعرية لويليامز يصف العناصر المادية والمعنوية للبيئة والمجتمع الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

ويليام كارلوس ويليامز ، أوزان شعرية جديدة ، القافية الداخلية ، وموسيقي الخطاب.

William Carlos Williams adopts a peculiar American standard of form and prosody. He urges the American writers to be more interested in their native culture, and to turn away from European models. In his *Autobiography*, Williams notes: “this independence, this lack of integration with our British past gives us an opportunity . . . to make new appraisals . . . which should permit us to use our language, with unlimited freshness.” Thus, Williams confirms the necessity of adapting new forms. He mentions the merit of his organic forms: “the poem is a capsule, where we wrap up our punishable secrets, and as they confine in themselves the only “life,” the ability to sprout at a more favorable time, to come true in their secret structure to the very minutest details of our thoughts, so they get their specific virtue.”

It can be assumed that these new forms arise out of the properties of Williams' subject-matters. These forms are

remarkable for their emotional and physical identification with their subjects. Thus, "Williams' forms are innate and organic. For him, there is no distinction between content and form, because the two are the same progression as Grenier claims (8-9). In this context, Coleridge previously states:

The form is mechanic when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material . . . The organic form, on the other hand is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one, and the same with the perfection of its outward form, Such as the life is, such is the form (qtd. in Grenier 9).

Hence, it can be argued that Williams' poetic forms are organic. They resemble flowers that grow directly from a tree. In regard to the organic form in Williams' poem, "To Waken an Old Lady," there are no line breaks, but Williams divides it into two nine-line halves, each half reacts organically with the incidents of the poem.

The dash at the end of line nine and the question mark at the end of line ten constitute a barrier between two halves:

Old age is
a flight of small
cheeping birds
skimming
bare trees
above a snow glaze
Gaining and falling
they are buffeted
by a dark wind-
But what?
On harsh weedstalks
the flock has rested,
the snow
is covered with broken
seedhusks

and the wind tempered

by a shrill

pipng of plenty. (ll. 1-18)

Again, the poem is halved by the balancing of both nouns and verbs. Each half has seven lexical nouns. In I, there are: age, flight, birds, trees, snow, glaze and wind. In II, there are weedstalks, flock, snow, seedhusks, wind, shrill and plenty. In addition, each half contains two plurals. In I, there are birds and trees. In II, there are weedstalks and seedhusks. As for verbs, in I, there are four present participles, “cheeping,” “skimming,” “gaining,” and “falling,” and there is one past participle “buffeted.” In II, there are one present participle “pipng,” and four past participles “rested,” “covered,” “broken” and “tempered.” Each half has two tensed verbs “is,” “are;” “has,” “is” (Ross 7-8).

In the first half of the poem, Williams displays the human crisis of the old lady. His use of the verb “cheep” together with the form of the present participles suggesting movement indicates a higher,

more random and disorganized twitter of the old. The past participle “buffeted” comes as an object for the dark wind. It suggests that the birds are at the mercy of their environment, and then the snow and cold of approaching death have covered everything with a seamless glaze (Ross 8).

In the second half of the poem, Williams also uses past participles to indicate that the will of living has triumphed over death. Now, the seedhusks and plenty of life have prevailed, and the voice has been wiser and more regular. Williams uses “piping,” instead of “cheeping” that conveys a softer, calmer and more musical tone. This tone is found in the transition to rest and the wisdom of accepting (Ross 9).

A close analysis of Williams’ “The Young Sycamore” reveals that the form of the poem resembles the young sycamore itself in a presence of creativity. The life of the poem is parallel with the life of the tree. Williams employs one main clause “I must tell you/this young tree,” and a group of subordinate clauses that create a tree of

language, and provide a sense of expansion. Moreover, the main clause roots the life of the poem along with the tree in a splendid architecture (Steinman). Williams writes:

I must tell you
this young tree
whose round and firm trunk
between the wet
pavement and the gutter
(where water
is trickling) rises
bodily
into the air with
one undulant
thrust half its height-
and then
divining and waning
sending out

young branches on
all sides-
hung with cocoons
it thins
till nothing is left of it
but two
eccentric knotted
twigs
bending forward
hornlike at the top. (ll. 1-24)

Concerning the poetic form of Williams' "The Great Figure," it coincides with the image of the figure. The lines are short and speedy, perfectly like the quick appearance of the great figure. At the beginning of the poem, Williams fully focuses on the number 5, and then the lines begin to be shorter to attract our attention by "throwing each detail of the seemingly trivial object into relief" (Halter). Williams also places "moving" and "tense" at the heart of

the poem to indicate the high-tension character of the figure 5

(Sayre). Williams notes:

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheaded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city. (ll. 1-13)

In regard to Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow," it is noticeable that the form of the poem looks and behaves like a wheelbarrow.

Sayre argues: “so much depends upon the form into which Williams molds his material.” Louise Bialik illustrates:

In each couplet / stanza, the top portion is a barrow and the bottom portion is a wheel. The top portion depends upon the bottom to carry it to the next destination, and so the wheels (upon, barrow, water, chickens) deliver the antecedent lines (so much depends, a red wheel, glazed with rain, beside the white) to their destinations (11). Williams notes:

So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens. (ll.1-8)

Directing attention to Williams' "Between Walls," he breaks up the syntax of his poem into short phrases to be visualized, as a broken thing made of fragments, totally like the subject it describes (Lizotte 8). Williams notes:

The back wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle. (ll.1-10)

With respect to Williams' "The Rose," it is noticed that its poetic form has many edges which resembles the rose's ones. It can also be assumed that the rose's edges resemble the potential points of

contact, multiple perspectives and new perceptions of the poem (Lizotte 3-4). Williams writes:

The rose is obsolete
but each petal ends in
an edge, the double facet
cementing the grooved
columns of air-The edge
Cuts without cutting
Meets-nothing-renews
itself in metal or porcelain
whither? It ends--
but if it ends
the start is begun
so that to engage roses
because a geometry. (ll.1-13)

Recognizing "The Locust Tree in a Flower" which describes time and change, it is worth mentioning that the poem itself even

looks like a tree. Bialik notes: “The poem’s tree-ish image is achieved by the narrowing of lines into single words which when stacked one on top the other builds a staff” (9):

Among
of
green
stiff
old
bright
broken
branch come
white
sweet
May
Again. (ll.1-12)

Regarding Williams’ poem, "To Elsie," he employs a broken poetic form that resembles the broken human conditions of

America where pure products go worthlessly. Thomas. R. Whitaker notes: “Syntactically, the poem is one long sequence of progressive subordination that is proliferating present apprehension. Williams sums up in swift, passionate and broken utterance the human conditions in which he participates:”

The pure products of America

go crazy-

mountain folk from Kentucky

or the ribbed north end of

Jersey

with its isolate lakes and

valleys, its deaf-mutes, thieves

old names (ll.1-8)

As for the organic prosody, Williams loudly despises the English prosody, because it does not apply to the American heritage and

society. Besides, he attacks the traditional rules of English poetry. He notes: "but most important of all, since the poem is our theme, the prosody of English does not apply to American . . . To build, if we are men, something better. To invent, then, a prosody of our own has been our first objective in our approach toward reality in our place and day (qtd. in Grenier 10).

Williams distinguishes himself than other poets in the sense that he establishes a set of prosodic rules which make a relevant relationship between American prosody and speech. Williams does not have overstuffed poetic models. However, he chooses his prosodic devices to be incorporated with the events and actions of his poems. It is worth noting that Williams also discards fixed poetic devices to freely depict his American landscape. Lizotte comments: "the prosodic structure of Dr. Williams' verse is indeterminate-i.e "free." . . . It is not complex . . . to admit of precise formulation" (5).

It can be deduced that Williams' prosody is organic and natural. It is imitative of the music of actions and events. Wagner emphasizes: "Williams writes consistently in a mode based on the rhythms of the speaking voice . . ." (qtd. in Smith 496). Williams achieves this task through using prosodic devices, such as rhyme, rhythm, the grouping of line into stanzas, the stanza organization in a poem, the number of syllables per line, the duration of the pause in the sound-progression of the poem indicated by the caesura, as well as, that indicated by the line-break, and by the typographical space between words- all matters of "ear" in poetry (Grenier 11).

Williams' short poems are distinguished by the innate wholeness of their subject-matters. Thus, these poems have a coherent prosodic structure. They are a collection of innumerable and discrete sequences of actions. These poems are convincingly presented by means of imitative prosody which often appropriates each event in all its organic wholeness without imposing a mechanic connection upon actually disparate events (Grenier 17).

In the end, Gray comments: “the result of all this . . . the discovery of . . . rhythms more appropriate to the American experience” (45).

In respect of Williams’ adoption of internal rhymes, as a source of organic prosody, in his poem, "Prelude to Winter," Williams uses such a technique which highly agrees with the quietness and stillness of the subject-matter of the poem. Williams writes:

The moth under the eaves
with wings like
the bark of a tree
symmetrically still---
and love is a curious
soft-winged thing
unmoving under the eaves
when the leaves fall. (ll. 1-8)

The stillness of the vowels between “eaves” / “tree,” “thing” / “unmoving,” and “eaves” / “leaves” corresponds with the stillness

of the curious bird on the eaves and the stillness of love in Williams' heart (Grenier 16).

In Williams' "Cat," the internal rhyme is derived from the natural sequence of the actions:

As the cat
climbed over
the top of
the jamcloset
first the right
forefoot
carefully
then the hind
stepped down
into the pit of
the empty
flowerpot. (ll. 1-12)

In that poem, Williams employs resonance in the sounds of “climbed” / “stepped,” “right” / “pit” and “forefoot” / “flowerpot” to create internal rhymes that bind the poem. In addition, the entire action of the poem is divided into separate movements in poetic lines. Therefore, the whole action is completely unified and integrated. Moreover, in his poem, "Silence," Williams uses a similar technique to assert his method:

Under a low sky
this quiet morning
of red and
yellow leaves-
a bird disturbs
no more than one twig
of the green leaved
peach tree. (ll.1-8)

It is worth noting that the correspondence of the vowels of “leaves” / “leaved” / “peach” / “tree” emphasizes the silent statement of the

scene and the fact that the tree is not disturbed by the movement of the bird.

Directing attention to the use of repeated phrases, in Williams' "To a Poor Old Woman," the phrase of "they taste good to her" is repeated in the middle and at the end of the last stanza, so that it may look like a refrain. This poetic aspect enforces Williams' tendency to emphasize a certain conviction:

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand
They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her
You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half

sucked out in her hand

Comforted

a solace of ripe plums

seeming to fill the air

They taste good to her. (ll.1-15)

Similarly, in "The Sea-Elephant," there are some dolphins being taken apart from their original settlement. So, Williams uses these reiterated phrases to assert the necessity of returning them back into their environment:

They

ought

to put it back where

it came from

.....

It's wonderful but they

ought to

put it back into the sea where

it came from (ll. 36-39, 51-54)

Shifting to another point, Williams makes a natural organization of sound the sole base of a poem's purely imitative prosodic structure. "The Cod Head" is one of his imitative poems. Williams carefully varies the length and stress-pattern of his line. Thus, he turns the line to the shifting, suddenly active or torpid motion of the ocean (Grenier 13):

Miscellaneous weed

strands, stems, debris-

firmament

to fishes-

where the yellow feet

of gulls dabble

oars whip

ships churn to bubbles-

at night wildly.

agitate phosphores-
cent midges-but by day
flaccid (ll. 1-12)

Again, some phrases have a semantic relation to their meanings, such as “Miscellaneous” which is long and contains many syllables. Consequently, it imitates the diversity and plenty of weeds. Moreover, “scudding fish” has an effect which resembles the sudden movement of the fish:

the vitreous
body through which-
small scudding fish deep
down-and. . . . (ll. 21-24)

Furthermore, the sudden interjection of “severed cod head” with its shocking effect is regarded as the climax of the poem into the “lulling” rhythms of the ocean:

now a lulling lift
and fall-

red stars-a severed cod-
 head between two
 green stones-lifting
 falling. (ll. 25-30)

Referring to Williams' "Spring and All," he uses poetic devices which ensure the bleak scenes he perceives. Gelpi comments:

The reiterated dental consonants-d and-t especially at the end of words and syllables suggest the balked stasis of the scene: "road"/ "clouds"/ "cold"/ "wind"/ "mottled"/ "northeast" "wind"/ "beyond"/ "waste" / "broad"/ "muddy"/ "dried"/ "weeds" "standing." In addition, the alliteration, assonance and internal rhymes further link in a pervasive sterility: "road"/ "cold" /"northeast"/ "waste" / "broad" / "brown" / "fields" / "weeds" / "dried weeds" (1). Williams notes:

By the road to the contagious hospital
 under the surge of the blue
 mottled clouds driven from the

northeast-a cold wind .Beyond, the

waste of broad, muddy fields

brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen (ll. 1-6)

Moreover, the consonance between “sluggish” describing spring and “reddish” describing stuff of branches asserts the coming of spring to the new world (Gelpi). Williams writes:

All along the road the reddish

purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy

stuff of branches and small trees

.....

sluggish

dazed spring approaches (ll. 9-11, 14-15)

A further characteristic of Williams’ prosody reveals that it is not only corresponded to the actions and events of his poem, but it is originally derived from the inherent natural speech of the Americans.

McCormick emphasizes that Williams' poetry is characterized by the "individual blurring rhymes" (150). Williams notes: "the rhythmic unit decided the form of my poetry. When I came to the end of a rhythmic unit (not necessarily a sentence) I ended the line. . . . 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 (*Poem 15*).

In regard to Williams' rhythmical structures and the use of variable foot, he uses a distinct syllabic design. In his poem, "The Great Figure," Williams writes: "Among the rain / and lights / I saw the figure 5" (ll. 1-3). In these lines, if the first and second lines are combined together, as one line, the result will be: "Among the rain and lights / I saw the figure 5." Each line has six syllables and one of them is accented. Thus, Williams' organic device is the rhythmic equivalence of the dramatic setting of the poem, and the appearance of the great figure. This parallelism enhances the appearance and the effect of the figure. The fourth line of the

poem, “in gold” receives the greatest emphasis. The sole beat of the lines is upon “gold” and a pause after it, or a fermata, “musically speaking,” and also because this line is a climatic endpoint of the first iambic lines (Halter).

Similarly, in the third line of "Pastoral," the line disposition and variable foot suit the actions of the poem and agree with Williams' favor of enthusiasm. Yet, in the fourth line, the foot has changed again to make the reader eager to know what Williams intends to do, when he gets older. Beyond this everything depends on the articulation of lines throughout (Doyle 2). Williams argues:

When I was younger
It was plain to me
I must make something of myself
Older now (ll. 1-4)

To conclude, Williams establishes a distinctively American form and prosody. They are natural and organic. Williams' forms coincide with the subject-matters of the American environment and

society. In addition, Williams' prosodic devices are organic. They follow from the natural speech of American people.

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