

영어어문교육 8권 2호 2002년 겨울

## Imagism of The Early Poems of William Carlos Williams

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**Yang, Hyun-Chul (2002). Imagism of the early poems of William Carlos Williams. *English Language & Literature Teaching*, 8(2), 117-130.**

This paper attempts, not to evaluate, but to describe William Carlos Williams' poetic techniques in accord with his poetic theory of Imagism; it does this by showing the early poetry in 1910's. The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Williams developed his poetic techniques with his theory of poetry. The progress of his poetic theory is drawn from the influence of another poet, Ezra Pound. William Carlos Williams' poetic development in Imagism threads the periods of his writing from the early 1910's to the early of 1920's. William Carlos Williams forms progressively the theory of his poetic technique of Imagism in this period. He treats the poems as images. In his theory of Imagism, his art continually demonstrates the development of poetic techniques by the help of other artists. This period represents Williams' attention to the essence of poetic elements: 'the thing itself.' All of these things in life come before us in his poetry in such a way as to be a technical process divided into the well-formed theory of poetry. The development of William Carlos Williams' poetic technique takes a particular pattern in order to achieve a theory of Imagism. At last, the steps of his poetic technique arrive at an organic unity of poetic theory in the early poetry of Williams.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The subject in this study is the imagism in selected early poetry of William Carlos Williams as a modern poet. Williams himself frequently emphasized, "it is not what you say that matters but the manner in which you say it"(Williams,

*Selected Essays* xii). This study attempts to discuss the early years of Williams' creative activity by reconstructing the elements of influence which determined the style of his work during his formative years. In Williams' poetry such attempts at reconstruction lead inevitably to the realm of the other arts, to the world of those artists who have been associated with him as Williams once remarked, "a poet should take his inspiration from the other arts, too"(Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem* 59). This study will describe the progressive influence of other artists who aided in the development of Williams' poetic techniques.

It discusses the 'imagistic phase and the thing itself' covering the first period from 1914 to the late 1910's. During this period Williams was influenced by Ezra Pound's three tenets of Imagism. Williams said in *I Wanted to Write a Poem*, "before meeting Ezra Pound is like B.C. and A.C."(32). Williams' poetry underwent great changes due to Ezra Pound's influence. The nature of such changes is shown generally in the discussion of the aesthetic theory of Imagism. Especially, this study shows how Williams centers on "the direct treatment of the thing"(Ezra Pound 3) in his poetry.

However, the Imagist poem must be considered as a visible sign of the poet's success in exercising authority over the thing itself. 'No ideas but in things' becomes Williams' poetic manifesto throughout his career. The first part of this paper shows his experiment with the image in poetry, leading to his involvement in the Imagist movement.

But he soon loses interest in Imagism because he feels it is too narrow, too static, "to state and stress one aspect, or pole, of the complex that is the total experience"(Suzanne Juhasz 21). Williams uses metaphor as the means to deal with the problems raised by the Imagist aesthetics. The end of this paper analyzes his attitude towards Imagism and examines his characteristic use of metaphor and the function it fulfills in his work.

The representative volumes, *Al Que Quiere* (1917) and *Sour Grapes* (1921) and the poems, "The Red Wheelbarrow," "To Waken An Old Lady," "Postlude," "To a Poor Old Woman," and "Tract" are most suitable for this study; they are principally discussed. The discussion of these poems focuses on the images of the 'thing itself.'

The development of Imagism in his poetic techniques in the early works of William Carlos Williams are indicative of his ability to transcend the movement as an American modern poet.

## II. IMAGISTIC PHASE AND THE 'THING ITSELF'

Modernism in American poetry is said to have begun in 1914, with the publication of the first Imagist anthology, Ezra Pound's *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*. The Imagist movement as a poetic school was short lived. Anti-Romantic and Anti-Victorian, it is the first phase of a literary movement characterized by a 'clear,' 'hard,' and 'unillusioned' way of writing: it is the poetry of the 'real,' and its emphasis is on concreteness, a lasting feature of Modern poetry.

Pound presents the fresh, poetic doctrine which becomes the basic tenets of a new school of poetry. The Imagist advocates three principles of poetry as follows.

1. Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.

Rule 1 means that the poet should not intrude himself into the poem, and those images are to be intrinsically 'poetic' by themselves. Rule 3 applies to language. The Imagist poet must use free, or 'musical,' lines of verse rather than counted meter. Rule 2 states a general principle which underlines rule 1 and 3. The Imagist's treatment of language and his subjects must be as precise and economical as possible. Redundant words, unnecessary emotions and ideas cannot be used to make a subject poetic.

Amy Lowell expands the original three rules into six in her first anthology, *Some Imagist Poets*.

1. To use the language of common speech, but to employ always the 'exact' word, not the nearly exact, nor the merely decorative word.
2. To present an image (hence the name: 'Imagist'). [Imagists] are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent or sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art.
5. To produce poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite.
6. Finally, most of us believe that concentration is of the very essence of poetry.

By these standards the Imagists judge their poetry, using 'Precision' as a watchword. This movement had such a rigid set of principles that it is difficult to find many poems that deserve to be called 'pure' Imagist poems by the standard they set. Waggoner sees two hard-core Imagist ideas:

first, the idea that the poet's work is essentially the 'recording of observation,' with 'observation' conceived as a completely objective, nonpurposive process; and second, the idea that the poem should present what is being observed, the 'thing,' 'directly,' which we are now in a position to understand as meaning 'without interpretation or comment' of the poet as person. (Hyatt H. Waggoner 338).

These two ideas imply what characterized not just Imagist poets but Modernist poetry in general; the poem requires craftsmanship. The poet must have skill like a carpenter. The poet watches what happens, then writes about it. Therein lies the skill, the craft. In short, the Imagist theory attempts to stress the objective, the particular, the concrete, and the visual. The image is the 'thing itself' perceived by the poet. In "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist," Pound expresses his famous definition of the image: "An 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time"(9).

Williams was associated with those poets whom Pound called Imagists. Louis Simpson said: "William Carlos Williams believed in Ezra Pound. He took to heart the Imagist principles that writing must be based in sensory experience, and that poetry does not declaim nor explain, it presents"(245). Williams tries to give the reader the thing itself, whatever it may be. He tries to make the reader see it and hear it the way he did. In 1938, Williams stated this basic principle in simple terms: "In my own work, it has always sufficed that the object of my attention be presented without further comment"("A Note on Poetry" 82).

Williams, a doctor, pediatrician, poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist, was able to learn the landscape of American experience by his varied careers. He radically rejected modern economic practice. Wallace Stevens said: "The man has spent his life in rejecting the accepted sense of things"(Hillis Miller 62). V. Koch remarks thus: "Williams rejected the customary poetic rules" (Vivienne Koch 37). Despite these repeated denials, Williams desires to write the 'pure' poetry, and defends and celebrates native and local beauty. He uses primarily American common speech and images. According to James Guimond, "his forte [is] to write poems with varied feet

and meter at a time, when American writers could not rely upon his material to be musical or poetic in itself"(J. Guimond 37). He wanted to affirm the beauty and interest of the commonplace, the ugly, the trivial, the outcast, the outward and the despairing.

Each of Williams' poems is "the world contracted to recognizable images"(J. Guimond 61): the sycamore tree, the red wheelbarrow, the butterfly, the flower chicory. His poems are acts of discovery in which the poet takes possession of his world as he names the details of the world so that the reader may see beauty and meaning, in the images that contain meaning intrinsically.

About 1917 Williams begins to utilize in his writing the Imagist principles of the precise and direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective. He explains the significance of his subjects and states his attitude toward them directly in his poems in *Al Que Quiere*. For example, "The Old Man" concludes with Williams' direct expression of sympathy for the "Old men cut from touch"(Williams, *The Collected Earlier Poems* 158). In other poems like "Chicory and Daisies," he concludes with explicit assertions of the importance of his subjects. "Tract," "Riposte," and "Gulls" explain his theories of life, death, and poetry to his towns people. Williams presents his subjects more objectively and asserts himself more carefully in *Sour Grapes*. He is particularly careful to communicate the meaningfulness of the subject in "Great Mullen," "Daisy" and "Primrose." Therefore, what is unique about Williams' development as an Imagist is his determination to apply the movement's principles to local, modern subject matter in colloquial language. In "The Wanderer," Williams speaks of 'the filthy Passaic' of contemporary life.

Asked what the Imagist should write about, Williams says, "No ideas but in things"(Williams, *Paterson* 6). He keeps repeating this through all his life. Even when he writes of 'things,' he does so as a completely involved and wholly committed man: "I have always had a feeling of identity with nature, but not assertive; I have always believed in keeping myself out of the picture. When I spoke of flowers, I was a flower...."(Hyatt H. Waggoner 343). Williams is able to discover and isolate 'things' from "the amorphous, the conglomerate normality with which they are surrounded"(Williams, *Selected Essays* 213). Thus the momentary appearance of 'things' in the Imagist poem has little to do with the intrinsic importance of the things themselves. Rather it signifies a momentary intensification of the mental powers of the poet. For Williams the expressive power of the thing is explained by the fact that "it is necessarily saturated with the thought and

emotion of the poet who uses it"(Carl Rapp 85).

"The Red Wheelbarrow," the best-known Imagist poem, illustrates the ideal that Imagist poems ought to be. Although the poem is very short and simple, it follows Pound's three principles and is an example of the Imagist credo.

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens. (*CEP* 227)

The wheelbarrow appears without comment or interpretation; it treats 'things' with the intrinsic values of the speaker and the reader. Waggoner says, Williams does not 'treat' the wheelbarrow; instead "the poem celebrates 'things.' By doing so, the poem moves beyond Imagism to Williams' philosophy of Realism, his insistence that by paying the closest attention to the 'thingness' of things, we find value, not just neutral, external' fact"(Hyatt H. Waggoner 342). The poem begins with, 'so much depends upon'; two precise images follow; the red wheelbarrow glazed with rain and the white chickens beside it. Everything 'depends' on the way we see color, shape, and relationships; "the scope of our understanding of life depends on it, the freedom of our consciousness, the way we transcend limitations and communicate with one another as human beings"(M.L. Rosenthal 114). Williams describes it with the precision of details as clear as intense, as perfect, as independent of one another as the poet can make them. Alan Ostrom emphasizes the wholeness of this poem.

that wheelbarrow is indispensable if their wholeness is to be kept. And you remove one point where the human, the natural, and the mechanical world meet in harmony, where the wheelbarrow, its implied user, the chickens and possibly even the rain have that quality-in-common for which Williams is always seeking that he may at last from a paradigm—minute, perhaps, but

of infinite worth—of the true order of our world. (69)

The natural images in Williams' early poems have vitality and picturesqueness. The most striking surface characteristic of Williams' writing is its definite responsiveness to trees and flowers. For example, "The Red Wheelbarrow" and "Chicory and Daisies" are explained by the fact that Williams momentarily seizes the image with an immediate and explicit attention. Williams talks about "Chicory and Daisies" in *Kora in Hell*:

A poet witnessing the chicory flower and realizing its virtues of form and color so construes his praise of it as to borrow no particle from right or left. He gives his praise over to the flower and its plant themselves, that they may benefit by those cooling winds of the imagination, which thus returned upon them, will refresh them at their task of saving the world. (106)

His intention, 'to borrow no particle from right or left,' advocates the 'direct treatment of the thing.' That is why this explanation of the poem stresses the intrinsic importance of the natural images themselves.

As a doctor, Williams had come to know intimately a great variety of people intimately. In his earlier poems, particularly those in *Al Que Quiere*, all of his human subjects are earthy, vital, and from the lower classes: negroes, children, workmen, drunkards. He is much concerned with the problem of portraying those people, emphasizing individual life, importance and moment. Their language, actions and appearances are intrinsically unique, candid, and picturesque. These lives and moments are so precious that we cannot ignore any truth about them. Williams says in *New Directions* 17: "I'm not the type of poet who looks only at the rare thing. I want to use the words we speak and to describe the thing we see, as far as it can be done. I abandoned the rare world of H. D. and Ezra Pound. Poetry should be brought into the world where we live and not be so recondite, so removed from the people" (253).

Frank Kermode considered the difference between Williams and the other Imagists with relation to the selection of a poetic subject and its treatment:

The other Imagists usually derived their images and language from worlds of rare things—worlds where language, feelings, and objects are so intrinsically musical, significant, and beautiful that they would be poetic no

matter how barely or directly they might be presented. Some of the Imagists, H.D. and Richard Aldington, for example, found this type of world in the pristine landscapes and delicate emotions of the Greek Anthology. Others like Pound and Eliot adopted for their norms great ages of past art—archaic Greece, medieval Ravenna, seventeenth century England—some epoch, some golden age...when the Image, the intuited, creative reality, was habitually known and respected. (310)

And yet, in his intensely personal acceptance and affirmation of this world of particulars, what Williams seeks is an image of wholeness and of perfection. Williams has already moved beyond the flow of the orthodox Imagist. His hardness and concentration on particulars in this period set a unique standard in the poetic world.

Williams deals directly with the subjects of his own experience, not conforming to previous rhetorical conventions. He presents his subjects more objectively and asserts himself more directly than the other Imagists in most of the poems in *Sour Grapes*. Occasionally he expresses his own feelings as the subject matter of poems in *Sour Grapes*. But when he does this, his feelings are more objectified than are those of the other Imagists. "To Waken an Old Lady," and "The Old Lady" are expressions of his sympathy with the elderly, even as he describes the woman's condition entirely in terms of an objective, natural image.

To Waken An Old Lady

Old age is  
 afflight of small  
 cheeping birds  
 skimming  
 bare trees  
 above a snow glaze.  
 Gaining and failing  
 they are buffeted  
 by a dark wind—  
 But what?  
 On harsh weed stalks  
 the flock has rested  
 the snow



is covered with broken  
seed husks  
and the wind tempered  
by a shrill  
piping of plenty. (*CEP* 200)

By avoiding the conventional simile in line one, by not making her condition like the birds, Williams makes it an objective equivalent of birds' winter flight rather than a poet's subjective comparison. In the second half of the poem, he sympathizes with the old woman's condition. He describes those details of the bird's flight which express his desire that the old woman enjoy food and shelter in terms of a tempered mind. Williams presents this emotion precisely, even though he does not state it directly. His sympathy for the old woman is shown by the feeling of her identity with nature, but the sympathy is not assertive. He is already moving toward his Objectivist ideal of poetry which doesn't declaim or explain; it presents the object.

However, Suzanne Juhasz holds that "the problem faced by the Imagist poet is to state and stress one aspect, or pole, of the complex that is the total experience"(Suzanne Juhasz, 1974, 21). When looking at early Imagist poetry including the poems by Williams and others in *Des Imagistes*, a struggle to achieve this goal is found. "Postlude" has all images—words or phrases that represent sense experience.

Your hair is my Carthage  
And my arms the bow  
And our words arrows  
To shoot the stars,  
Who from that misty sea  
Swarm to destroy us. (*CEP* 16)

I begin with a design for a hearse.  
For Christ's sake not black—  
nor white either—and not polished!  
Let it be weathered—like a farm wagon—  
with gilt wheels(this could be  
applied fresh at small expense  
or no wheels at all:  
a rough dray to drag over the ground. (*CEP* 45)

However, the difficulty to be 'objective' is evident; the description of objects and actions is complicated by the comparison of similes. Nevertheless, the poem shows the several linguistic possibilities available to a poet with which to create an image.

William Pratt discusses Williams in his "Introduction" to his anthology, *The Imagist Poem*:

It is true that both Williams and Stevens recognized the limits of Imagism, and went considerably beyond it in later poetry. Imagism might have failed as a movement, but as theory it succeeded, and in the later poems of both Williams and Stevens there is the convincing proof that the Imagist discipline continued to work on them to the end of their lives. (37)

Until now, truth is found in Pratt's statement, but the limits of Imagism is solved by Williams. Suzanne Juhasz discovers Williams' use of metaphor as a structuring element in poetry as a means by which he has dealt with the problems raised by the Imagist aesthetic. Metaphor is an important method or technique for rendering a complex perception, 'the basic unit of experience.' Williams' use of metaphor inheres in the structure of his poetry. S. Juhasz continues as follows.

Metaphor functions in Williams' Poetry as the linguistic embodiment of the imagination. The imagination, for Williams, is that power which meditates between the mind and the world. It liberates both words and objects by transposing them into the medium of the imagination. Williams uses metaphor to define the relations that exist between the particular forms and objects in the world. He views these relations in terms of dualities, so that metaphor's primary function is to suggest the nature of dualities and especially, to conjoin their elements: to bring them together as closely as possible for the purpose of revelation. Metaphor, as the agent of the imagination, can accomplish this movement toward unity, toward the reparation of what Williams sees as the essentially divorced condition of modern life. (21)

In his earlier poetry Williams uses metaphor in this way to express complexities and to indicate the nature of the relation between the 'idea' and 'thing' for he is aware of the gap, in some form, between the inner and outer world. Thus his use of language utilizes "the existence of the nonliteral as a means of bridging that gap"(Suzanne Juhasz 17).

One of the most common charges raised against the Imagist poem is that it is too narrow and static. This problem is, also, solved by using metaphor; the image has to do with a moment of perception, but long poems require many moments. Images must be organized in some way in the construction of a long poem. Metaphor can provide this organization. Williams uses metaphor as an integral ingredient of his poetry, so that an understanding of this metaphor can lead us to an understanding of his poetry as a 'whole.' The following poem exemplifies this tendency:

To a Poor Old Woman

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 (*CEP* 99)

This poem concludes with one basic metaphor and the phrase that has been repeated throughout the poem, 'they taste good to her.' The metaphor is 'a solace of ripe plums,' which seems to fill the whole atmosphere of the poem. S. Juhasz explains the phrase is a metaphor for at least two reasons: "The first is that plums do not literally have, or feel, or offer solace: plums have been given human qualities. The second is that solace, an abstraction, in seeming to fill the air, begins to achieve a physical form, which it literally does not have"(42).

### III. CONCLUSION

As an aesthetic movement, Imagism is clearer in theory than in practice. To present an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time is not a simple matter. The poet's technical struggles to create such images in Imagist poetry are reconciled. Thus, the task of the poet is to reveal the whole experience. Metaphor contains within itself the dual aspects of experience and can allow the poet to communicate the experience to the reader. Metaphor, then, has been a controlling force in the development of the poetry of Williams.

Williams developed this theory of Imagism in his early poetry. He performed this theory in his poetry. The task of poetry is to represent the poet's sensory experiences. When Williams tells us that it is the artist's duty to render an experience exactly as it appears "what actually impinges on the senses... untouched, or when he refers to such literary virtues as integrity to actual experience," (Williams, *Selected Essays* 118-9) he is speaking in terms of this Imagist theory. According to this theory, the poem presents a faithful image of what the poet has seen or heard in his experience of the phenomenal world—"to direct observation of the senses"(Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge* 135). Thus the Imagist poem is a poem that describes something—a person or object, or persons or a group of objects in a single scene. Typically, William Carlos Williams, the Imagist poet tries to give us 'the thing itself' in his early poetry.

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Received in October, 2002  
Reviewed in November, 2002  
Revised version received in December, 2002