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Diagramming the Forces in a “Machine Made of Words”:  
Williams' “The Red Wheelbarrow” as Picture Poem  
by Anne Waldron Neumann  
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Henry M. Sayre, in *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, argues persuasively that Williams' poetry draws from the visual arts a non-representational concept of form rather than image. But a representational aspect of Williams' poetry should not be overlooked. Writing between patients in his Rutherford, New Jersey, doctor's office, Williams must have been one of the first poets to compose regularly on a typewriter, constructing what he called his “machine[s] made of words” (SE 256) on a machine made for words. Able to control with workmanlike precision the format in which his poems would appear to readers on the printed page, Williams tried his hand at the “picture” poem, whose shape on the page depicts its subject. “The Attic Which Is Desire” (CEP 353), for example, overlooks an electric sign:

\* \* \*  
\* S \*  
\* O \*  
\* D \*  
\* A \*  
\* \* \*

ringed with  
running lights

More typically, Williams used his typewriter to crop and even the stanzas of his early poems. If “a machine made of words” compares poems to tools for work, and Williams' poems often compare poets and workmen, these cropped and evened stanzas become emblems of workmanship. “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper,” for example (CEP 368), in which roofers on their lunch break are “resting / in the fleckless light / separately in unison” among “sacks / of sifted stone stacked / regularly by twos // about the flat roof,” seems as rectilinear as the materials the roofers use:

The copper in eight  
foot strips has been  
beaten lengthwise

down the center at right  
angles and lies ready  
to edge the coping

One still chewing  
picks up a copper strip  
and runs his eye along it.

“Fine Work with Pitch and Copper,” Williams said, “is really telling about my struggle with verse”: “this was a time when I was working hard for order, searching for a form for the stanzas, making them little units, regular, orderly” (IWWP 57). Williams reported reworking and “concentrating” his poems—like the roofer running his eye along the copper strip—to tighten and square their stanzas as much as possible. “See how much better it conforms to the page, how much better it looks?” he asked of one such revision (IWWP 66). Many of Williams' early poems seem picture poems in this very general sense: their tightened and uniform stanzas reflect his machine esthetic.

We may suspect, then, in “The Red Wheelbarrow” (CEP 272), another poem about a tool for work, that the uniformly lopsided stanzas signify in some way:

so much depends  
upon

a red wheel  
barrow

glazed with rain  
water

beside the white  
chickens

In fact, Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow" also seems a picture poem: many readers have surely felt that its off-center stanzas suggest pictures of wheelbarrows. Sayre, for one, mentions this possibility and quotes J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality* on another possible picture poem of Williams'—but only to reject both conclusions:

Miller is wrong when he says that "a poem like 'The Yellow Chimney' is a picture of what it represents, the slender column of words corresponding to the chimney, and the lines of the poem, it may not be too fanciful to say, echoing the silver rings which strap the yellow stack at intervals." The spatial design of "The Yellow Chimney" (CLP 50) is in fact identical to a score of poems in *Pictures from Brueghel*, and it is as ridiculous to say that "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" looks like a chimney as it is to suggest that the four stanzas which make up "The Red Wheelbarrow" look like little wheelbarrows. (Sayre 124, Miller 301)

As an example of a Williams poem whose spatial design of off-center, two-line stanzas is identical with that of "The Red Wheelbarrow," Sayre (66) cites "Between Walls" (CEP 343):

the back wings  
of the  
  
hospital where  
nothing  
  
will grow lie  
cinders  
  
in which shine  
the broken  
  
pieces of a green  
bottle

These stanzas, certainly, are not meant to figure wheelbarrows. But that "The Red Wheelbarrow" names and describes a wheelbarrow is strong evidence that "The Red Wheelbarrow" *is* a picture poem in the way I suggest. The meaning of any sign is determined largely by its context: the same stanza form can depict different things—or nothing at all—in different poems. And indeed "Between Walls" also deviates from Williams' usual squared-off stanza form to sketch, in its different context, a different picture: its long lines suggest "the back wings / of the // hospital," between which lies almost "nothing" except "cinders" and "the broken // . . . bottle." [1]

Sayre does concede a picture in the opening lines of *Paterson*, Book Five:



becomes one of what J. Hillis Miller calls Williams' "kinesthetic poems," to which readers respond with a subliminal "tension of muscle against muscle" (*Poets of Reality* 315-16). Readers who grasp the first stanza of Williams' poem as a diagram of distributed weight feel subliminally, in arms and backs and legs, how wheelbarrows resolve opposing forces of gravity and lift. As we read this first stanza, we participate, at least imaginatively, in the work of lifting and transporting wheelbarrows help perform.

For Williams, however—and this is the crucial significance of the first stanza of "The Red Wheelbarrow"—poems also aid the work of lifting and transporting that this stanza describes. Indeed, very many of Williams' poems describe acts of lifting, like the roofer picking up the copper strip to scrutinize it. "[T]he major function of the artist," Williams writes, is "to lift to the imagination and give new currency to the sensual world at our feet" (SE 215). The imagination for Williams is both "a medium, a place" to which objects from the sensual world are lifted and "a force, an electricity" which, as it performs this lifting, "free[s] the world of fact from the impositions of 'art'" (I 150). By the intensity of *true* imaginative art, and by the reader's responding imagination—that is, by means of the poem—things from the world of fact are lifted free of a fabricated overlay of traditional or associated values and revealed, like the copper strip, "in the fleckless light" (CEP 368) of their pristine particularity. "The Red Wheelbarrow" is "a machine made of words" designed to transport wheelbarrow, chickens, and rainwater to the world of the imagination.

"[T]he virtual impossibility of lifting to the imagination those things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses" (of giving them "new currency" by focusing attention upon them stripped of associations) is, Williams writes, what "sets a value upon all works of art and makes them a necessity" (I 14). This act of focusing attention both confers and has value because it breaks through the "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world" (I 88). "The poem alone focuses the world" (SE 242) because it restores this conscious attention by eliciting it in response to the poem. The difficulty but the necessity of this act of lifting to conscious attention is mirrored by the opposing forces of gravity and lift in Williams' "Red Wheelbarrow."

In "The Basis of Faith in Art," Williams insists that a poet "is always trying his very best to refine his work until it is nothing else but useful knowledge" (SE 180)—the useful knowledge of refocused attention. America, he urges, in "The American Background," most needs and should most value this restored vision based on exact observations of local conditions, a vision Williams calls a native or primary culture in contrast to a borrowed or secondary culture which applies European words and traditions to the new American situation (SE 135). Culture, for Williams, "isn't a thing: it's an act," an act of the imagination:

It is the realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it . . . .  
It is the act of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole which is culture. (SE 157)

The first stanza of "The Red Wheelbarrow" may seem intrusive and over-literary, the imposition of those false "artistic" values Williams professes to abhor. But the distribution of forces this "machine made of words" diagrams also reproduces the difficult but necessary act of imaginative "lifting" which creates a culture. Williams "has levered that red wheelbarrow into a special zone

of attention by sheer torque of insistence,” Hugh Kenner writes (57). But it isn't only by explicit insistence that Williams achieves this leverage, because the first stanza of “The Red Wheelbarrow” is more than insistence: it reminds us that wheelbarrows themselves—like poems, for Williams—are levers.

The message of Williams' poem—that poems are levers of “things which lie under the direct scrutiny of the senses,” and that “so much depends / upon” lifting red wheelbarrows into an “ordered and utilized whole”—is a message of “useful knowledge” for America, not merely the specialness of “art.” “There is a 'special' space which poems, as all works of art, must occupy,” Williams admits, referring again to the imagination as a *place*, “but it is quite definitely the same as that where bricks or colored threads are handled” (SE 125)—“handled, of course, by the intending mind that can reach through the fingers,” Kenner explains (60). J. Hillis Miller has said that a Williams poem offers few handles for the interpreting mind—few figures of speech, for example, and usually little apparent form (Turnbull Memorial Lecture)—but this may not hold for that part of the mind that handles bricks and colored threads and can feel in reading a Williams poem the heft of the handles of a wheelbarrow.

Bricks or colored threads, we notice, combine to make ordered and utilizable wholes without losing their particularity, just as—“separately in unison” (CEP 368)—the words in a Williams poem combine, or just as, by an etymological pun and a line break, Williams trifurcates the idiom “de-pends / upon,” thus restoring it to literal as well as figurative weightiness. Williams “has cunningly not said *what* depends” upon his red wheelbarrow, Kenner notes (57), but we can surely guess the *kind* of thing Williams had in mind for “the artist figure of / the farmer” (CEP 243) who owns this wheelbarrow: bricks to build a native culture perhaps, or chicken muck to fertilize it. What depends upon Williams' red wheelbarrow, what makes this poem useful knowledge, is that it teaches us, as Williams said, to “raise the place we inhabit to such an imaginative level that it shall have currency in the world of the mind.” [3] The poem refreshes our vision as a glaze of rainwater focuses visual attention more vividly on a worn red wheelbarrow. It teaches us—by evoking it—the kind of attention we must pay to lift the world of fact to the imagination, to become poets of the things around us, and to create in America a native culture.

Can “The Red Wheelbarrow,” therefore, remain only a picture? Its first stanza, though the diagram it contains establishes Williams' poem as depicting what it describes, does not otherwise contribute to describing the wheelbarrow as the remaining stanzas do. It thus prevents us from seeing Williams' poem as “illusion”:

There is only “illusion” in art where ignorance of the bystander confuses imagination and its works with cruder processes [like “attempting to 'copy' nature”]. Truly men feel an enlargement before great or good work, . . . but this is not, as so many believe today a “lie,” . . . a thing to block out “life,” bitter to the individual, by a “vision of beauty.” It is a work of the imagination. It gives the feeling of completeness by revealing the oneness of experience . . . , by showing the individual . . . that his life is valuable, when completed by the imagination. And then only. . . .

Such a realization shows us the falseness of attempting to “copy” nature. (I 107)

Williams admired Cubism's effort to separate “imaginative reality” (I 111) from false “copying,” to demonstrate the value of the imagination in “complet[ing]” and unifying experience. “[S]uch a picture as that of Juan Gris,” Williams writes of a quintessential Cubist work, “is important as marking more clearly than any I have seen what the modern trend is: the attempt to separate things of the imagination from life” while “using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him” (I 107). Though this modern trend in art presents the onlooker with “Things with which he is familiar, simple things,” it strives “at the same time to detach them from ordinary experience to the imagination. Thus they are still 'real' . . . , they are recognizable as the things touched by the hands during the day” (I 110). But, in the Juan Gris painting, as “One thing laps over on the other,” “the onlooker is not for a moment permitted to witness [each object] as an 'illusion” (I 110). Such a painting thereby aids us in “beginning to discover the truth” that “great works of the imagination” have the “power TO ESCAPE ILLUSION and stand between man and nature” (I 112).

As “One thing laps over on the other” in “The Red Wheelbarrow,” similarly, Williams' reader is reminded that this poem too has “ESCAPE[d] ILLUSION.” Like a Cubist painting, it too demonstrates how works of art can raise familiar, simple things to stand detached, between man and nature, in the pure realm of the imagination. Doubly representational, in that it describes *and* depicts, “The Red Wheelbarrow” is also, paradoxically, no mere picture. Like a native culture for Williams, this poem “isn't a thing: it's an act”—“the act of lifting” (SE 157). Like the imagination, this poem is both “a medium” and “a force” (I 150)—both static and dynamic. Like Williams' claim for *Paterson*, even this apparent still life from nature is also “a plan for action” (P 2), one that elicits the very “act of lifting” it describes. “The Red Wheelbarrow” is a machine made of words which, despite its apparent simplicity, continues to lift itself to new imaginative currency.

### Notes

[1] Another Williams poem with the off-center, two-line stanzas of “The Red Wheelbarrow” is “Proletarian Portrait” (CEP 101):

A big young bareheaded woman  
in an apron

Her hair slicked back standing  
on the street

One stockinged foot toeing  
the sidewalk

Her shoe in her hand. Looking  
intently into it

She pulls out the paper insole  
to find the nail

That has been hurting her.

Might the stanzas of "Proletarian Portrait" represent the woman's heeled shoe? And might the last stanza, with its missing short line, suggest that shoe with its heel removed for repair or with the offending nail pounded back in?

[2] In *A Homemade World*, Hugh Kenner skirts the reading I offer here:

Attention first encounters the word "upon," sitting all alone as though to remind us that "depends upon," come to think of it, is a rather queer phrase. Instead of tracing, as usage normally does, the contour of a forgotten Latin root, "depends upon" ignores the etymology of "depend" (*de + pendere* = to hang from). In the substantial world "upon" goes nicely with "wheelbarrow": *so much*, at it were, *piled upon*. In the idiomatic world, inexplicably, "upon" goes with "depends." In the poem, since we're giving unaccustomed attention, these two worlds are sutured, and "depends" lends its physical force, an incumbency as though felt by the muscles, to what must be a psychic depending. (58)

In fact, Williams' poem does play on the etymology of "depend" and, by the diagram that results, sutures the idiomatic and substantial realms more closely than Kenner saw.

[3] "Memory Script of a Talk Delivered at Briarcliff Junior College, November 29, 1945," unpublished ms. In the Lockwood Memorial Library, State University of New York at Buffalo, quoted for its relevance to "The Red Wheelbarrow" by Bram Dijkstra (168-69). Cited with permission of the Poetry / Rare Books Collection, University Libraries, State University of New York at Buffalo.

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