

Flow to Unfold: The Fluidness in William Carlos Williams's Poetry

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Abstract: Regarded as one of the greatest American poets in the twentieth century and the prominent poet of the Imagist, William Carlos Williams approaches his poetic world by the special use of images and syntax. In his poems, he invites the common and small things in everyday life as images. By the irregular arrangement of line and stanza breaks, these things are endowed with richer and deeper meanings which is far more than what is shown, open to readers to interpret. The syntax itself in Williams' poems is poetic, and the integration of images and syntax in William Carlos Williams' poems frames the poet's poetic world. This article will review the fluidness of Williams' poems approached by flowing images and flowing syntax in William Carlos Williams' poems. It attempts to prove that although the images may be seen as accumulative rather than surmounted and the lines and stanzas are broken, the sense is flowing. Concisely but accurately, William Carlos Williams applies the images featuring fluidness to reveal the essence of objects. Through the accumulation of images, the lines and stanzas starts to jump down from one to another, activating the whole scene of the poem to flow. And the flowing syntax which includes the irregular line ends and broken stanzas, the omission of capitalization in each line uplifts the limbs of the poem and make it flow.

Keywords: William Carlos Williams, fluidness, flow, imagist

1. Introduction

William Carlos Williams has many outstanding short poems, and his poems have two particularly prominent characteristics. The first is that the poet consistently excels at connecting the simplest aspects of life and crafting them into poetry. His poetic inspiration originates from life itself, emerging from the language of people... just as he himself has written to his friend Robert Coles: Every day I hear those poor souls I visit talk poems to me. Sometimes I run to my car and write a few of their words down [1]. Breslin, in 1967, pointed out that it is involvement in and fascination with the ordinary life that made William Carlos Williams distinct from other poets who adopted god-like vantage points [2]. 'No ideas but in things'—William Carlos Williams' poetics directly guides his writing [3], with 'This Is Just to Say' being a prime example of 'words as things.' It's just the content of a note, a profoundly simple incident of everyday life. Many tend to believe that only the exceptional warrants recording and necessitates writing, thus becoming accustomed to chasing so-called significant events. However, William Carlos Williams seems intentionally to break free from this notion, striving to return to the ordinary, emphasizing vernacular, showcasing life's naturalness, and

evoking a sense of situational context. By allowing the imagination to dance over a commonplace thing [4], poets as well as readers open themselves to discovering a renewed importance within that object and gaining a novel outlook on life.

The second characteristic of William Carlos Williams' short poems is his creation of innovative structural strategies involving line or stanza arrangement. He uses broken stanzas to unfold the images, which allows the printed poems to develop and unfold their stories like the rolling of paper [5]. To transcend the prosaic, William Carlos Williams even attempts to reproduce the object on the page by pictorial means: a soda sign composed of four letters surrounded by asterisks in 'The Attic Which Is Desire'; He also creates metrical variety that can be linked with simple experiences to create dramatic emphasis and possible insight. In "To a Poor Old Woman", Williams shows not only how everyday language can be used to capture the rhythm and joy of an old woman who is "munching a plum on/the street a paper bag/of them in her hand," but also how language could be skillfully used to help us see better the world.

In addition to these, scholars have also analyzed the structural characteristics of William Carlos Williams' poetry from the perspective of cultural studies. For instance, in the context of American modernism's cultural landscape. Dr. Laleh Atashi highlights that William Carlos Williams directed his poems not towards the intellectual elite but to individuals who favored poems composed in the rhythm of ordinary American speech [5-2].

William Carlos Williams' selection of imagery is highly distinctive. Within his poetry, he often expresses his desire to eliminate the use of similes. He believes that mere similarity downplays or completely ignores differences in favor of supporting partial likenesses, whereas he aims to reveal identity while maintaining individuality [6]. This approach intends to avoid the so-called 'pathetic fallacy'. Williams' specific examples of imagery demonstrate a meticulous and precise use of language, allowing readers to transition between factual and imaginative realities seamlessly.

However, this approach has faced criticism from scholars who contend that, like other works in the imagist style, relying on 'accumulated' imagery rather than 'surmounted' imagery has certain limitations in terms of depth [7].

Exactly, William Carlos Williams himself then realized pure objectivism rather leads the objects into what Eugene Jolas would call 'artistic sterility'. This article attempts to analyze the distinct contrasting factors in imagery found in William Carlos Williams' short poems, such as color and differences in characteristics and how they make the imagery and structure of the poem fluid and add artistic tension to the poem. This analysis aims to illustrate the poet's arrangement and handling of imagery in terms of conveying emotions and establishing rhythm.

2. The Analysis of Fluidness

In William Carlos Williams' poem 'A Flowing River', the poet compares 'You' to a river under tranquil skies. The juxtaposition of the two images of a river that is flowing and skies which are tranquil helps shed light on the "fluidness" of river. Fluidness, the noun form of fluid, reveals the instinct of a substance that flow easily, smoothly, or continuously. And poems by William Carlos Williams are brimmed with fluidness, not only because of the flowing images applied by the poet, but also because of the flowing syntax innovated by him, for example, the broken lines and the omission of capitalization. Through the flowing images and flowing syntax, William Carlos Williams successfully achieves a sense of fluidness in his poems, restraintly unfolding his emotions and ideas in a somehow distant way.

Firstly, the images he portrays are flowing. As the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, 'All is flux, nothing stays still.' All things from the physical river to abstract time are flowing, it is an objective philosophy that reveals the endless movement and replacement of all things. William Carlos Williams himself proposes that 'No ideas but in things', his poems show rather than tell readers their

meanings. So his depicting of flowing images may reflect William Carlos Williams' philosophical thinking about the fluidity of everything. Take the poem 'A Flowing River', a eulogy to 'You', as an example. In that poem, the poet juxtaposes 'Dark' and 'Shines'; 'Current' and 'Ripples' to envision how safe and sound it will be after the river branches go through the darkness and reach the sea:

*You are lovely as a river
under tranquil skies—
There are imperfections
but a music overlays them—*

*telling by how dark a bed
the current moves
to what sea that shines
and ripples in my thought
(A Flowing River)*

The key to understanding how a person 'You' could be related to an object 'River' is the word 'Flowing' from the title. On one hand, being a present participial, 'Flowing' emphasises on the current moving status of the river. Were the river frozen, it would never manage to run upon the dark riverbed and into the shining sea. On the other hand, as an adjective, 'Flowing' denotes that its movement will be perpetual, which could be interpreted as it is a river that is flowing and will always flow. It exudes poet's optimistic attitude to 'You' to overcome the temporary obstacles. Thus, by comparing 'You' to a flowing river, William Carlos Williams praises that though there are imperfections, 'You' infuse hope, refreshment and determination to me to conquer the unknown future. In all, in this example, the endless source of optimism is the essential of the flowing river.

In another poem 'Winter Trees' by William Carlos Williams [8], the poet explicitly applies 'liquid' to modify moon, a solid object. The former three lines 'All the complicated details/ of the attiring and/ the disattiring are complicated!' refers to the process by which leaves grow and fall throughout the year, representing the 'Flow' of seasons. Then, here comes the lines 'A liquid moon/ moves gently among/ the long branches.' How could the moon be liquid? Such is an oxymoron that could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, the 'Liquid moon' implies the glowing moonlight is a pool of light, which emphasizes on the purity and clarity of the moonlight. Secondly and most importantly, it poetically visualizes the transient passing of time within a day. The moon runs in its orbit with time. So, it is a liquid moon that gently 'flows' among the long branches to materialize the impalpable 'Flow' of days, similar to the melting liquid clock designed by Salvador Dali. In this sense, ultimately, William Carlos Williams leads the readers to penetrate the solid surface to reach the essential.

It cannot be denied that using fluid imagery or images resembling certain fluid objects in poetry is a matter of artistic serendipity. The presence of fluidness inherently implies the presence of solidity in juxtaposition, akin to a substance transitioning between liquid and solid states, as one might find in melting ice. When describing images, poets are inevitably influenced by their personal subjective emotions, choosing to highlight specific aspects of an image from a certain perspective. Therefore, it is predictable and understandable that not all of William Carlos Williams' poems employ such fluid imagery precisely. However, as a quality or air, fluidness can be observed in his poetry as a whole.

The point is that, firstly, aside from individual images in a poem possessing fluidness, the interconnection of multiple images by the poet also constitutes the fluidity of the poem. Secondly, from a visual perspective, through judicious use of punctuation and layout, Williams' poems realize movement not solely in terms of auditory effects but also in the realm of visual effects. To a

considerable extent, these elements assist in facilitating the fluidity of images, directing the reader's attention to navigate continuously amongst distinct lines.

Subsequently, the following analysis shall be on scrutinizing how William Carlos Williams attains fluidness in his poetry, considering both the comprehensive fluidness engendered by multiple images and the visual fluidness engendered by the poem's structural composition.

From the first perspective, his poetry is extremely concise and precise. As one of the representative poets of Imagism, his poems are often composed of numerous images. When describing these images, the language Williams uses is concise yet accurate, precise but not entirely absolute. He attempts to present 'the thing itself' as accurately and vividly as possible [9]. This means that his detailed descriptions of images can vividly present images in the reader's mind while leaving plenty of room for imagination [4-2]. His poetry is not a simple accumulation of images but a continuous and increasingly specific progression. The picture of the scene in the poem gradually becomes more precise and vivid.

For example, in the poem 'A Negro Woman', the poet presents a simple image of a bunch of marigolds in the first line, without any embellishment. Then, in the next line, the poet reveals that these marigolds are wrapped up. Next, like a movie transitioning from a close-up to a long shot [10], the poet shifts the focus to the woman holding these flowers. As her posture, appearance, gait, and demeanor are all revealed by the accumulative images, the figurative characteristic of the negro woman becomes richer and livelier. What is more, Williams maintain a delicate objective position, observing and recording. In this poem, the store windows on the street are "looked into" by her, and she is gazing by the poet, while the reader watches her through the poet's poem. 'which she announces /not knowing what she does' (A Negro Woman, line 18,19) --However, the poet's and the reader's gaze cannot affect her; she remains oblivious to being observed. Through such an outsider's perspective, the poem conveys a sense that the reader and the poet exist in one world, while the negro woman, marigolds, and shop windows exist in another world, a poetic world. This woman, living in the poetic world, holds the flowers like a torch illuminating the darkness. Where she comes from and where she is going are left unexplained and are waiting in the darkness to be illuminated by the reader's imagination.

The use of imagery in William Carlos Williams' poetry is indeed a powerful technique that creates a sense of coherence and connection among the accumulated images. Rather than being isolated and disjointed, each image serves as a further description and qualifier of the previous one, establishing a poetic linkage between them. These images are no longer isolated dots on the canvas; Williams uses a coherent narrative to connect them with lines, forming tangible shapes.

In addition to using these flowing images to catch the flowing essential of all things, William Carlos Williams achieves the fluidness of poems through the delicate and unique arrangement of syntax. His poems are more likely to be sentences-broken-into-lines. However, they are never prosaic. Through irregular reorganization of lines, ordinary sentences and words point to richer meanings, which seems to tell more, but it makes it difficult to translate more of what that poetry tells for a while. After abandoning the shell of real meaning, the sentence changes from the real world to a composition of the sentence itself, that is, the world of poetry. Take the line-end and enjambment in the poem 'Exercise in Timing' as an example:

*Oh
the sumac died
it's
the first time
I
noticed it.*

(Exercise in Timing)

Read the poem from up to down. At first glance, the emotion behind the word ‘Oh’ is unknown, which could be a gasp of horror, an exclamation of surprise, or a sign of regret. What has happened? The sudden line-end without telling the reason for it triggers readers’ curiosity and attention to go further. ‘the sumac died’—it is a relatively plain and contained statement without any modification to modify how was the tree and how was its death. Then the individual “it’s” separated from ‘the first time’ suddenly and unpredictably forces the poem to pause. The poem is shut down into temporary and blank silence. Segment by segment, step by step, the lonely syllabus ‘I’ is uttered, followed by the persona’s subject activity of noticing the death of the sumac for the first time.

Trees are not immortal. The sumac tree is not exceptional. It dies once and forever. So how could it be the first time for ‘me’ to notice its death? The only possible reason is that it had died for some time until ‘I’ found it and let out the cry. How dumb am ‘I’ and how clumsy ‘my’ perception to the world is! After realizing this, the complex mixture of sorrow to the death, helplessness of the weakness of human and surprise by it is overwhelming. In fact, each line-end is a literally temporary relief or accumulative exhalation to reach the climax of emotion; each leads to a new focus of the meaning and drive into the hazy mist of depression and lost.

Different lines are frequently linked by colloquial conjunctions such as ‘and’ ‘that’ and ‘which’, as well as prepositional description to define and precisely locate the relative position of the images. This serves as a restrictive description, and as the poem unfolds, the imagery not only becomes more specific but also shifts the visual focus of the poem [4-3]. The appearance of these conjunctions reminds the reader of the arrival of the next focal point. The images in the poem gradually string together to create a picture that moves and flows from divergence to convergence, much like a pyramid.

In his famous poem “The Red Wheelbarrow,” the prepositions “upon” and “beside” not only connect the three images—something, a wheelbarrow, and chickens—into structurally complete lines but also tightly bind them together. These two prepositions do not prioritize the images, as they cannot tell us which one is more important. The red wheelbarrow, glistening with rainwater drops, and the white chickens—these three distinctly colored elements blur the focus of the poem. The red wheelbarrow, which is the title’s subject, should ideally be the poem’s focal point, but now it is inseparable from the other objects.

Another syntax trick played by the poet is that he only capitalizes the word when the meaning and sense runs over, which is contrast to those poems which capitalize every word of the lines. The play of enjambment uplifts the sense of the poem to flow continuously. The relentless passage of life and the absent and expired cognition of human beings are firmly hammered into the heart like nails, and the sound of blood slowly dripping will be heard and resonates in every heartbeat.

3. Conclusion

No ideas but in things. William Carlos Williams manages to approach the essential nature of things by a relatively frank and concise language which could not only accurately show the scene of the poem, but also being open for readers to interpret. All is flux, nothing still. Fluidness, defined by this article as a natural instinct of all substances including substantial objects as well as intangible things like poems.

William Carlos Williams’ poems are brimmed with fluidness. The images and syntax in his poems are flowing easily, smoothly, and continuously. This article explains the factors contributing to the sense of fluidness in Williams’ poems from two respects, which are images and syntax. From the perspective of image, through juxtaposing a flowing image and a seemingly still object, the flowing spirit of the latter is revealed. What is more, viewing the whole poem as an organism, the accumulation and interconnection of all images accurately locate the focus of the poem and transport it as the poem proceed. Through this, the picture of the scene in the poem gradually becomes more

precise and vivid, and the intangible poem becomes visually flowing. From the perspective of syntax, the enjambments of lines slow down the poem and expand the space for interpretation. The connections linked by conjunctions, prepositional descriptions, and general omission of capitalization power up the poem to run and flow.

In conclusion, the images and syntax flow to unfold William Carlos Williams's poems philosophically and poetically. Though the line is end, the sense of the whole poem will flow and flow and flow, and the readers' thought itself begin to ripple and flow away.

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