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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature**

Band (Jahr): **16 (2003)**

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100009>

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Williams and Moore: Wasps, a Gentian and Real Toads

Robert Rehder

THE POEM

It's all in
the sound. A song.
Seldom a song. It should

be a song – made of
particulars, wasps,
a gentian – something
immediate, open

scissors, a lady's
eyes – waking
centrifugal, centripetal (CP II 74)

Williams' "The Poem" (1944) published in *The Wedge* is a cut down and revised version of "The Poet and His Poems" (1939). The change in the title is indicative of the principle used in re-forming the poem. Williams has discarded the poet and focused on a single object: the poem. What he has rejected is the poet's angry, irritated, self-dramatizing talking to himself in section one and the aggressive and somewhat self-pitying comments in section two. He has excised feelings and concentrated on the thing itself, defining one object in terms of other objects. Greater definiteness is gained by excluding emotion. This is the principle that produced Williams' great short lyrics.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that in these poems, emotion is managed differently, as all good poems involve the expression or denotation of feeling. What is excluded is sentimentality. Williams very often has difficulty talking about feelings in the first person, a difficulty overcome only at the end of his life in some of the poems of *Journey to Love* and *The Desert Mu-*

sic. When Niedecker or O'Hara employ the first person, it usually rings true; when Williams does, it frequently sounds false, because, I think, it brings out, in one way or another, too much aggression. The object is a refuge from this anger and self-pity (which is a form of aggression) and offers a sense of immediacy that is, strangely, lacking in Williams' first person.

The poem should be a song composed of "particulars," as definite and unambiguous as wasps and a gentian. The four objects and two pairs are chosen for their incongruity and disconnectedness. Although they are components of a song, they are all mute and whatever noise they might make (you can hear wasps and scissors, and a lady's eyes are said to speak in a different sense), they impose a silence on the poem. The natural world comes first, next the domestic, practical scissors, and then everything is changed by the lady's eyes, which offer a hint of sensuality and the chance of love and communication. Williams uses the formal, old-fashioned *lady* instead of the more democratic *woman*; thereby introducing a suggestion of idealism and associating himself with a poetic tradition going back to the troubadours. Together, the four items can stand for the world.

Williams is clear about his values. He wants *particulars*, specifics, details, objects, nothing vague or abstract. He wants something *immediate*, emphatically present and easily apprehensible, and *open*, available, clear, that can be seen at once for what it is. "Waking / centrifugal, centripetal" denote the poem's energy, the two latter, coined from Newton's Latin, its dynamic order. The poem should wake up as well as make the objects it contains come alive. It should be a new dawn, an illumination, scattering to make contact with more of the world and drawing things to its center. The words should be arranged so as to include more and more experience and to create a unifying force or forces holding everything together. Appropriately, *centripetal*, the word denoting unity, is placed last.

Another poem that Williams improved by revision is "A Sort of a Song" published in *The Wedge* (1944):

A SORT OF A SONG

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

– through metaphor to reconcile
 the people and the stones.
 Compose. (No ideas
 but in things) Invent!
 Saxifrage is my flower that splits
 the rocks. (CP II 55)

The first version "A Possible Sort of Song" was printed in 1943, five years after "The Poet and His Poems," but the revised version, also published in *The Wedge* (1944), was completed shortly before "The Poem" and probably affected its reworking. "A Possible Sort of Song" is fifteen lines, three stanzas of five lines each; "A Sort of a Song" is twelve lines, two stanzas of six lines each. The first version is longer, wordier and more diffuse. Again Williams strengthened the poem by cutting and re-arranging. He reduced the number of examples and put the abstract and summary statements in the center, surrounded by particulars. Two objects figure in the poem, the snake and the saxifrage, one in each stanza, each, by implication, a metaphor for poetry. The poem is governed by four imperatives: *let* (employed once, implied a second time), *compose* and *invent*, and ends with the poet's declaration that the saxifrage is "my flower." Although "A Sort of a Song" is a personal statement, the *my* is the only sign of the poet's presence and Williams keeps all personal reflections and feelings out of the poem. The tone is emphatic and matter of fact.

The phrasing, as usual in Williams' best poems, constantly catches us unawares by its small variations from standard American. The ordinary way of saying it would be "in the weeds." *Under* hides the snake more, the possessive pronoun domesticates the setting and puts the snake in charge, and the singular *weed* sounds almost archaic. "Be of words" is similarly old-fashioned and slightly formal, as is *let*. *Sharp* and *quiet* appear to reverse the order of *slow* and *quick*. The poem is a snake in the grass, waiting to strike.

The first stanza ends with a period to indicate that the thought is complete; the second opens with a dash and the uncapitalized *through* to show that the ideas are continuous: Williams has it both ways. At the start of the second stanza the people are to be reconciled with the stones; at the conclusion, the rocks are split. The reconciliation is through metaphor and would appear to involve bringing together the human with the inanimate, natural world, except this is too narrow a construction given the variety and range of Williams' work. Perhaps, in the context of the poem as a whole, it is better understood as reconciling us with all the world's objects, the matrix in which we find ourselves and the form of our lives, with reality. Metaphors are to do

the work, because they affirm the equation of two unlike things. This is unusual, because Williams in his prose is on record as opposing metaphor and in his best poetry uses it almost not at all. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the poem as a whole is a metaphor in which the first term, usually an object, is defined and the second, usually feelings, only suggested or implied.

Compose might simply be construed as: write or be creative, but after *metaphor* and *reconcile* would appear to mean ordering or establishing control over a group of things, as in: “she composed herself.” The word has musical connotations in keeping with the idea of song and given the parenthetical comment seems also to refer to the choice of materials. *Invent* is Williams’ equivalent of Pound’s “Make it new.” He writes in the “Author’s Introduction” to *The Wedge* in which “A Sort of a Song” is the first poem:

When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them – without distortion which would mar their exact significances – into an intense expression of his perceptions and ardors that they may constitute a revelation in the speech that he uses. It isn’t what he *says* that counts as a work of art, it’s what he makes, with such intensity of perception that it lives with an intrinsic movement of its own to verify its authenticity. (CP II 54)

The poem, for Williams, is an object. Four sentences later, he states: “There is no poetry without formal invention . . .” *Invent* in this context refers to form and suggests that each poem has its own form and, consequently, a new form must be invented for each new poem.

“No ideas / but in things” is perhaps Williams’ most famous phrase and first appears (three times, as a kind of refrain) in the short, early version of “Paterson” (1927). The phrase is sometimes interpreted as a rejection of ideas, but what Williams says is that ideas should be presented in terms of things. What he rejects are vague, indefinite abstractions; what he wants is the brass tacks and nitty-gritty of the world’s objects, reality, and in this case, reality is associated with snakes, weed, saxifrage and rocks rather than philosophical concepts or emotions, although our feelings are also real – and what we know of the world is our perceptions of it. Although abstractions may be derived from objects, the phrase, as Williams uses it, is not an invitation to decipher objects. The phrase suggests a certain wariness about feeling and introspection, a fear that to be lost in thought is to be separated from reality, that to be yourself and know who you are, you have to keep your eyes open and your feet on the ground. Dr. Johnson’s “I kick the stone and thus I refute Berkeley” echoes in Williams’ phrase.

Marianne Moore's "Poetry," her best known poem on the subject, was even more severely revised than the two Williams poems. Published in her first book, *Observations* (1921), and revised for the second edition (1925), it was radically cut for *The Collected Poems* (1951). She kept three lines, slightly reworked, of the original twenty-nine. The note that she put at the head of *The Collected Poems* (which did not collect all her work): "Omissions are not accidents" makes her view of the matter clear. This is the final version.

POETRY

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine. (Com P 36)

I heard Moore read this version, along with other poems, when I was a student at Princeton. The audience, not a particularly large one, was seated, waiting for her, when she came in, followed by Richard Blackmur (who had invited her), and walked the length of the room to the table where she sat to read. Small, dressed entirely in black, wearing a black dress with matching black jacket, black cape and the black three-cornered hat that was almost her trademark and in which she was often photographed, ramrod straight, she radiated a no-nonsense determination and reserve. Her long hair, neatly and tightly braided, was coiled around her head. Among the iron gray were traces of dark red-brown. She did not look her some seventy years, nonetheless, she seemed to belong to another time, her demeanor was so old-fashioned. By her manner and carriage she reminded me of my grandmother McConkie. She kept her hat on to read.

She impressed you as alert, sharp, vigorous and wary at the same time as keeping herself very much to herself. The comments she made to introduce the poems were minimal and her answers to questions were brief and to the point. She was comfortable with a habit of reticence. She was not a particularly good reader of her poems. Too much of their music and the sensuousness of the words was underplayed, although she read with authority in a clear, matter-of-fact voice, and often a slight shade of irony. The reading was perhaps a little too much on one tone and a little too dry.

At the end, one of the first, if not the first question, was about "Poetry." Why had she cut it so radically – with the implication, if it was not stated, of how could she have cut so many good things? Moore acknowledged that she

was often asked this question, but that, on rereading the poem, she saw that everything had been said in the first lines and that the rest was merely repetition and, therefore, she had cut it. This was stated in a calm, even tone that admitted of no further comment or argument. The subject was closed. Most of those present, I believe, regretted the catalogue of animals and other items, and everyone missed the imaginary gardens with real toads in them. So many people share this regret that the new *Complete Poems* (1994), edited by Clive Driver, prints both versions, Moore's revised version among the other poems, the longer version in the notes.

Unlike Williams in his revision of "The Poet and His Poems," Moore keeps her aggression in both versions. Poetry is defined by its capacity to survive her aggression. Despite her *dislike* and *perfect contempt*, it, *after all*, has its value, because it provides "a place for the genuine." The longer version shows her hostility to "high-sounding interpretations," "derivative" art, bad critics and "half poets." Moore is a moralist. For her, poetry is a way to moral clarity and beauty.

The final version of "Poetry" marks a difference between Williams and Moore in that it is an example of ideas without things. The genuine for Williams is found in or through the object. The inner world gets in the way. Reality is not only precious, but fragile and difficult of access, and that difficulty is, in part, because, at a certain point, it has, for Williams, no meaning but itself. Consequently, ideas, feelings, are a falsification. Moore's *genuine* includes real feelings. Unlike Williams, she is a keen observer of the behavior and character of other people, hence, her admiration of Henry James (see her essay, "Henry James as a Characteristic American"). A number of her poems are psychological portraits. Morals and the world's objects, in her work, support each other.

When she revised "Poetry," Moore cut from the first line the statement: "There are things that are important beyond all this fiddle." The wonderful "all this fiddle" is Moore's rejection of the fussiness that feels like pretentiousness and the worrying of the subject that suggests a loss of direction. This rejection by a poet of fine discriminations and intricate syntax suggests that Moore saw her complexities as going right to the heart of the subject, as a form of simplicity and directness. Much of the longer version of "Poetry" (Com P 266-267) is taken up with a list of "things" that "are important," analogous to Williams' wasps, gentian, et cetera. Both poets feel the need to define poetry in terms of somewhat random collections of objects. Moore begins her list of important things with the body, with the ability of hands, eyes and hair to respond physically to the world. This physicality and

definiteness is continued in the list of bat, elephants, wild horse, wolf, critic, baseball fan, statistician, "business documents and school-books." The list is deliberately various and disparate, as if to indicate that all the world's objects are important. Why they are important or what their importance is, is not considered. Moore, like Williams, appears to believe that reality, in and of itself, has an intrinsic value. The disconnectedness of the objects suggests the difficulty in finding an order for them and that naming is a substitute for assigning meaning. Perhaps the insistence on the things themselves is a recognition that they have no meaning, or rather, that their value is a feeling? Their otherness removes us from the dream-world and defines us by setting limits to our being.

Moore then uses two phrases to further elucidate her idea of poetry. Poets must be "literalists of the imagination." The phrase is taken from Yeats' essay on "Blake's Illustrations to Dante," but, as the citation that Moore puts in her note shows, it is, despite the quotation marks, not a quotation. Yeats says that Blake "was a too literal realist of the imagination" (Yeats 119-120). Moore has elided "literal realist" into *literalist*. The elision is a hint at her meaning. To read literally is to read only and exactly what the text says, to read without imagination. For Moore, it would appear that the poet must present what she imagines as if it were real, without any "fiddle" or "graces of style" that obscure the "lineaments" of the object. The context tempts us to think that *literal* refers to the specific, the definite, the real, so that "literalists of the imagination" suggests a balance of imagination and reality, analogous to "imaginary gardens with real toads in them."

The curator of the Moore papers at the University of Pennsylvania is said to have telephoned Marianne Moore to ask her for the source of this phrase in quotation marks. Moore replied that she had forgotten, so the source of the poem's best-known phrase will probably never be known. The imagination comes before reality as myth comes before history. The human infant imagines the world and only gradually, in a process that is never finished, does experience cause this initial vision to be modified and reality to take the place of phantasy. Moore's image is backed by the truth of human development, which is one reason why her wording is so much better than "real gardens with imaginary toads." Another has to do with the choice of *toads*. The toad with its knobby, proverbial ugliness and pedestrian, unprepossessing, down-to-earthness is the perfect representative of reality. Kiss a toad, it does not turn into a prince. Touch it and you get warts. Chamfort is right: it is necessary to swallow a toad every morning before breakfast in order to meet nothing more disgusting the rest of the day.

The garden may be in some never-never land, but the toad is emphatically, matter-of-factly there. The image gives us Wordsworth's world which we half-perceive and half-create, marking our share in our every perception, the problematic interaction of the inner and the outer world, beauty and anti-beauty. The combination reminds us of Stevens' remarks on Williams that "The anti-poetic is his spirit's cure. He needs it as a naked man needs shelter or as an animal needs salt. To a man with a sentimental side the anti-poetic is that truth, that reality to which all of us are forever fleeing" (769).

The "romantic poet now-a-days," says Stevens, including Williams among them, is "one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life there would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump" (770). This is Moore's preference for the "raw material of poetry in all its rawness." The phrase suggests that like Williams she does not want poetry to change reality, but rather to make contact with it. Moore's *dislike*, her emphasis on the genuine and the evidence of the senses, her list of animals, her inclusion of baseball, statistics, business documents and school-books are her way of fighting sentimentality and pretentiousness.

The poems about poetry that are a characteristic of the poetry of the last two hundred years or so can be said to begin with Wordsworth's autobiographical poem (1798-1850) which starts in the 1805 version with an account of its composition. Coleridge and Wordsworth inaugurate the poetry of consciousness and self-analysis that continues down to the present day (see Rehder, *Wordsworth and the Beginnings of Modern Poetry* and "Wordsworth to Stevens"). This explicit, usually first person, description of feeling is developed in various ways by all the major poets after Coleridge and Wordsworth, although starting with the generation of Williams (1883-1963) and Moore (1887-1972), in an attempt to bring new experience to consciousness, the first person is either used in different ways: for a *persona* (Browning, Yeats, Pound, Eliot), very sparingly and often in combination with descriptions of objects, or avoided altogether (Williams and Moore) – or, in the case of Ashbery, transferring the material to other pronouns, *we*, *you*, *he*, *she*.

There is a change in the attitude to emotion. The composer, Roger Sessions (1896-1985), a contemporary of Williams and Moore, comments:

"Emotion" is specific, individual and conscious; music goes deeper than this, to the energies which animate our psychic life, and out of these creates a pattern which has an existence, laws, and human significance of its own. (19)

Whether or not he is right in thinking that in this respect music is essentially different from literature (6), it is certainly the case that for poets such as Williams and Moore, emotion was felt to be too definite and too conscious and that they both wanted to go deeper, and to establish the object as other than emotion.

Moreover, this change occurs as a response to the work of Freud and his successors, whose effect is difficult to overestimate. Psychoanalysis explains and elucidates so many psychological phenomena so clearly and coherently that it has taken over many of the older functions of literature analogously to the way that science has made much of philosophy obsolete. Psychoanalysis has so extended the frontiers of our self-consciousness, regardless of whether we accept its conclusions, that writers have had to rethink their techniques. This, I believe, is one of the major causes of the radical changes in artistic form that occur around 1922 (Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Dos Passos, Woolf, Faulkner).

The idea that a poem shorter than a sonnet and not a song can be as serious and say as much, if not more, than a longer one is introduced by Blake and Wordsworth. "The Sick Rose" (8 lines), "Ah! Sun Flower" (8 lines), "A slumber did my spirit steal" (8 lines), "My heart leaps up when I behold" (9 lines) are the foundation of Williams' and Moore's short lyrics (the revised "Poetry" is 3 lines) and of some of the techniques in their longer poems (Rehder, WBMP 215).

Their notions of simplicity and everyday language go back to Wordsworth and to Whitman, even when their language, like that of Wordsworth and Whitman, is anything but ordinary. Wordsworth and Whitman are major creators of the notion of self. With Wordsworth, the individual discovers itself and its feelings in relation to a landscape; with Whitman the self is at once the container of and opposed to the world's objects, however, it is Scott who, perhaps more than any other author, changes the idea of the object. Scott, who acknowledges in *Lives of the Novelists* his debt to Ann Radcliffe, is the first novelist to set his stories in specific historical settings and to include long, detailed descriptions of these settings (see Rehder, "Ann Radcliffe" and "Walter Scott").

Every object is, of course, the first object, and the recovery of this initial moment and founding process of self-definition and world recognition establishes perception (including self-perception) on a new basis. The result is also a more detailed, more sharply defined description of the other, both other persons and inanimate objects, the things of the world. Knowledge of the inner world is symbiotic with knowledge of the outer world and vice

versa. This greater strength of the self makes possible a greater tentativeness in the face of the unknown that allows for the freer abstraction needed in art for representing amorphousness, at the same time as it enriches the possibilities of a scientific approach. This is both a cause and effect of secularism.

Gradually objects detach themselves from long descriptions to become the building blocks of our world. Everything is individualized – self, object, person, language, poem –, which involves everything being located with ever increasing precision in space and time (Rehder, “Realism” and WBMP). This new relation to the object can be seen, in different ways, in Proust, Joyce and Hemingway. Whitman is probably the most important single poet in this shift from a landscape (Wordsworth) to a world of objects (Williams and Moore), but there are many contributors. For Wordsworth the exchange of glances between mother and baby is “the first / Poetic spirit of our human life” (1805, II 275-276). We are always looking into “a lady’s eyes.”

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