



William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

Poem, or, Spring and All (1923)

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,

patches of standing water,
 the scattering of tall trees.

All along the road the reddish,
 purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy
 stuff of bushes and small trees
 with dead, brown leaves under them
 leafless vines —

Lifeless in appearance, sluggish,
 dazed spring approaches —

They enter the new world naked,
 cold, uncertain of all
 save that they enter. All about them
 the cold, familiar wind—

Now the grass, tomorrow
 the stiff curl of wild-carrot leaf.

One by one objects are defined —
 It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf,

But now the stark dignity of
 entrance — Still, the profound change
 has come upon them; rooted they
 grip down and begin to awaken.

ANALYSIS

“Consider the opening lines of the poem by Williams. The nervous meter, words like ‘surge,’ ‘mottled,’ ‘driven,’ suggest an intensity of feeling not justified by the actual perceptions in the lines. These words are therefore conventional. The content of the passage is factual to a greater degree than it is perceptual, and in itself has extremely little interest. In thus describing the lines, I employ the terms *perception* and *perceptual* solely with reference to the awareness of the author of fine relationships between facts observed (or perceived directly) and language, or the medium of judgment and communication. More feeling is *assumed*, or *claimed*, by the poet, in a passage such as that under discussion, than is justified by his language: he claims more than he is able to communicate, or more, perhaps, than he chooses to communicate.

At first glance a passage of this sort appears a trifle strained, to use a common but somewhat vague epithet. But in the present poem, the strain is deliberately sought and exactly rendered. The tempo established in these lines, the whole quality of the feeling, the information conveyed, are all necessary to, in fact are a part of, the effect of the eight central lines. (Now the grass, etc.) differs widely from the feeling in the preceding six, but is dependent largely upon the feeling already established in the preceding six for its existence. The feeling is one of pathos, aroused by the small and familiar in austere and unfriendly surroundings. It is related to the feeling of *Animula Vagula*. The last six lines of Williams’ poem revert to the conventional level, but carry with them, if read in their context, an echo of the precedent intensity.

My analysis of the poem has been oversimplified for the sake of momentary convenience. The conventional passages are not devoid of perceptual value: the skill with which the details of the landscape are placed in juxtaposition in the opening lines is in itself an act of perception. The beat, also, in lines nine, ten, and eleven, taken in conjunction with the material described, has perceptual value, and one could point out other details. The details are not of a uniform level of intensity: No two details can be so. The important thing for the moment is that the intensity claimed by the passage is on the whole in excess of the justification within the passage, and that the intensity assumed is indicated with the greatest of firmness, with the result that departures from it can be made with equal firmness.

For example, I have said that the beat in lines nine, ten, and eleven has perceptual value, as indicating the ‘twiggy’ appearance of the landscape. Yet the meaning-content (as distinct from the sound-content) of every adjective contributing to this perception is a little vague: ‘reddish,’ ‘purplish,’ for instance, are by definition uncertain in their import. But the vagueness is willed and controlled: one has a definite measure of vagueness set against the definite intensity of the meter. To make these perceptions more precise would lessen the impact of the central lines. This mastery of emphasis and of the conventional is one of the marks, and probably the most important mark, of the great stylist: without this mastery poetry degenerates into slipshod sentiment at worst, and at best, as in much of [Hart] Crane, into brilliant, but disconnected, epithets and ejaculations.”

Yvor Winters

In Defense of Reason

(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 79-81

“The best example of Williams’ skillful development of ‘things’ into forms is the opening poem of *Spring and All*. The slow, painful arrival of the spring season, together with the universal meaning of such an event, is brilliantly suggested through objects, natural things, which slowly respond to the early invitation of the season. The observer travels along ‘the road to the contagious hospital,’ and he notes the transition from winter to spring: the ‘blue mottled clouds’ driven by ‘a cold wind.’ Beyond, evidences of the waste revealed by the departure of the winter: the ‘waste of broad, muddy fields / brown with dried weeds.’ Their entrance into the new world is attended by uncertainty; they are sure only ‘that they enter,’ and the entrance is the key to the change, growth, rejuvenation, that the spring symbolizes. ‘One by one objects are defined—’ Gradually the objective fact of spring is fully seen and defined, in terms of an awakening of life.

The essential for Williams is not to violate the integrity of these ‘things,’ since they are reality itself and need only to be encouraged to offer (in their being objects) the most natural kind of commentary upon

themselves. Ideas are, then, in things; there are no ideas but in things. This does not mean that ideas do not belong in poetry; only that they do not overtly belong there but should be developed from the particulars talking among themselves. Williams is concerned with the basic poetic difficulty of communicating this reality without distortion.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
 (Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 210-11

“Here...the procedure is to discover ‘things’ and to view what has been discovered sharply and precisely and separately; yet at the same time (since the seeing is a continuous process) through the creative force of the seeing, to realize the paradox of continuity in change, relatedness in non-relatedness. In the poem...a perception of a series of objects is made to blend into a thought (‘It quickens’), so that it *is* the thought. The implicit claim is not that one sees objects and then expresses their meaning, but rather that they are there, ready to express themselves for one’s seeing. The poet sees their meaning, as he hears the meaning of those who populate his ‘talking’ poems. His role as poet is to recognize, by a kind of affinity, their vital principle and to find the words whereby it might be expressed. No ideas but in things, as Williams says in *Paterson*.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
 (Princeton 1961) 341

“‘By the Road to the Contagious Hospital,’ which Williams once called merely a ‘picture,’ says, or ‘means,’ or suggests through its total symbolic structure, that ‘realism’ as Williams conceives it means finding the promise of life, and the struggle toward it, in the most unlikely places, where most of us would not think to look. ‘One by one objects are defined,’ and as they are defined, we sense the quickening of life. The poem ends with a paradox: the ‘rooted’ things have to ‘grip down’ before they can come up into the light and air. ‘Awaken,’ the last word in the poem, toward which all the details move, gets its power chiefly from the fact that all the *difficulties* of awakening have been faced. This ‘picture’ poem, then, is ‘about’ something—about how to find signs of *life* in an urban waste land.”

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
 (Houghton 1968) 381

Michael Hollister (2015)