



William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

The Red Wheelbarrow (c.1923)

So much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water  
beside the white  
chickens

ANALYSIS

This poem is in free verse, which, as the name implies, is verse that does not conform to a fixed pattern. But there is no knife-edge line between formal verse and free verse, just as there is no knife-edge line between verse and prose. Rather, there is a shading off from a scrupulous meter toward greater and greater informality. Over the years there has been much debate about locating the precise point where informality in free verse becomes so marked that free verse should not be called verse at all. There is certainly a point where the sense of form can be lost (except the form dictated by the principles of prose--syntax, grammar, and the like), but discussion that aims at fixing theoretically such a point is fruitless....

We must keep firmly in mind that we are talking about verse and not poetry. Poetic effects--the exciting turn of phrase, the metaphor that opens up a dazzling perception, and so on--may appear in prose. Such effects must, of course, appear in any poem, in meter or free verse, if the poem is to be truly a poem. Associated with this is the fact that writers of free verse tend to emphasize typographical features--the visualized line is more significant in free verse than in formal verse, where the heard, or felt, meter defines the line. The most famous name in this connection is that of E. E. Cummings....

What most obviously distinguishes a piece of free verse from prose? It is the lining on the page. Even in the dreariest piece of writing that aspires to be free verse, the fact of its being set off in lines has some

significance. It is significant, for one thing, because it pretends to be significant. That is, we have to dwell on the line as a unit, even if, by ordinary standards, we can find no unity. The very arbitrariness of the slashing across the prose sentence may be important. The line set off by this slashing, whatever its content, is brought into special focus; it makes a special claim on our attention by the mere fact of being set off; the words demand to be looked at freshly. And the whole composition makes, we may say, an important negative claim--the claim of not being prose.

The only line of "Red Wheelbarrow" that is not absolutely arbitrary is the first, which does have a certain intrinsic structure, the structure of a clause. The lining is so arbitrary that we have to see the poem in print before we have any notion that it is intended as a poem at all. But the very arbitrariness is the point. We are forced to focus our attention upon words, and details, in a very special way, a puzzling way. Now the poem itself is about that puzzling portentousness that an object, even the simplest, like a red wheelbarrow, assumes when we fix attention upon it. Reading the poem is like peering at some ordinary object through a pin prick in a piece of cardboard. The fact that the pin prick frames it arbitrarily endows it with a puzzling, and exciting, freshness that seems to hover on the verge of revelation. And that is what the poem is actually about: "So much depends"--but what, we do not know.

Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren  
*Understanding Poetry*, 3rd edition  
(Holt 1938-61) 172-74

In this notably sentimental piece, Williams can only dimly specify "what" depends—himself in his vocation as poet. He assures himself that he is what he is by virtue of his power to collocate such objects into sharply annotated images like these. He must feel himself into the things of his world; for he is as dependent on them as occasions to be himself—as poet. Perhaps—and herein lies the pathos—they depend on him as much as he depends on them. "So much depends" too upon a poet's being there to make them what, at their best, they can be: objects in a poem. At its worst this is togetherness in a chicken-yard. At its best it is an exercise in the creation of the poetic out of the anti-poetic. Not the least significant characteristic of Williams' work is that the best in it cannot but bring out the worst. Like his friend and enemy Pound, he has had the courage to go all the way with his convictions.

Roy Harvey Pearce  
*The Continuity of American Poetry*  
(Princeton 1961) 339

Compared with Pound's poem ["In a Station of the Metro"], the anthologists' other favorite illustration of the practice of Imagism is both a more attractive and interesting poem and considerably less "pure" as an example. Williams' "The Red Wheel Barrow" [*sic*] treats "things," but treats them as though the speaker *is* and the reader *ought* to be related to the things because they contain intrinsic values. Instead of "treats," it might better be said that the poem "celebrates" "things." In doing so, it 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."

The poem begins by saying, "So much depends" on the two precise images that follow, of red wheelbarrow glazed with rain and of white chickens beside it. It does not tell us *what* "depends" on these objects, but by the precision of detail with which they are described it gives us the clue we need. If we are to live in the "real" world, Williams in effect is saying, and not move into the transcendent realm of meaning too quickly... We must pay the closest, most loving attention to what both the thoroughly "practical" and the thoroughly "transcendental" man might call "insignificant" details. We must look long, carefully, and lovingly at the details of the world if we are to see their beauty and their meaning. Images are important because they contain intrinsic meaning and value.

This poem does not fit Pound's first principle of Imagism nearly so well as "In a Station of the Metro," especially if that principle is interpreted in the light of Pound's definition of the image. There is no suggestion of determinism in Williams' poem, or of the alienation of the observer from his own observations, or, finally, of an "impersonal" art. Indeed, the poem begins with, and is totally dependent on, a forbidden "comment" or interpretation. A *mind* is at work here, not a chemical reaction. Williams, we

would conclude on the basis of this sample, was either no Imagist at all, even early in his career, even though he himself thought he was, if we use the term *Imagism* strictly; or the best of the Imagists, if we use the term very loosely, ignoring Pound's principles and definitions and making it mean only a kind of poetry that emphasizes the concreteness and particularity of experience, and does so at the expense of *interpretation* of experience.

Insofar as Imagism implies something like the dispassionate and objective observation supposedly characteristic of the scientist in his laboratory, no poet could well be further from the Imagist ideal than Williams. He wrote always as the completely involved and wholly committed man, even when he wrote most simply of "things." What he said late in life describes even his early "Imagist" practice: "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  
*American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present*  
(Houghton 1968) 342-43

Michael Hollister (2015)