

William Carlos Williams

(1883-1963)

The Yachts (1938)

contend in a sea which the land partly encloses
shielding them from the too heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses

tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beating, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute

brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls

ant-like, solicitously grooming them, releasing,
making fast as they turn, lean far over and having
caught the wind again, side by side, head for the mark.

In a well-guarded arena of open water surrounded by
lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering
and fluttering follow them, they appear youthful, rare

as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace
of all that in the mind is feckless, free and
naturally to be desired. Now the sea which holds them

is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as if feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.
Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts

move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas,

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they cannot hold. Broken,

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over.

ANALYSIS

“Hear me out, for I too am concerned,” wrote William Carlos Williams in one of his poems. “The Yachts” is well worth the concentrated and extended concern it asks of the reader. The poem begins in the

literal and ends in the symbolic. It starts with an unusual device: the title is part of the first line. The first long sentence (lines 1-5), one of twelve sentences which make up the poem, sets up the contest between “an ungoverned ocean” delivering “too heavy blows” and “the best man knows to pit against its beating.” This is unrhymed free verse, but there are interesting little assonances (half- or one-third rhymes), here and there, such as *encloses, blows, chooses*.

The second, even longer, sentence (lines 6-12) integrates a series of concise and precise images with Williams’ skillful word music: “Mothlike in mists”; “*minute* / brilliance of cloudless days”; “tossing green water / from their sharp prows”; “the crew crawls / ant-like, solicitously grooming them”... Note, for example (in lines 6 and 7), the sound effects of “Mothlike in *mists*,” “scintillant in the *minute* / *brilliance* of cloudless days, with *broad bellying sails*”...and how the repeated *m*’s and *s*’s and *b*’s enable the reader to experience the very sound and feel of this day of the yacht race as well as to see it.

The third sentence (lines 13-18) introduces a contrast between the “youthful, rare” racing yachts and the “lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering and fluttering follow them.” The yachts “live with the grace / of all that in the mind is feckless, free and / naturally to be desired.” Here the symbol of the yachts begins to be delineated and we see that the yachts represent youth, freedom and skill. Now the poem loses the comberlike sweep of the long sentences. The next seven sentences, crowded into eight and a half lines, become as choppy as the moody sea has become. The wind comes, the waves strike, the yachts take in canvas, the sea gets so rough it seems that “Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows” and “Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside” by the yachts.

Then, resuming the long sweep, the final two sentences (lines 27-33) reveal about the yachts a sea of faces in agony. Instead of there being a race among the yachts, what now happens is a confused and tangled competition between the waves, representing the little people (the inadequate losers), and the yachts, representing the people of power (the skillful winners). Here is tribute to the competitive spirit. There is admiration and approval for the winners, the “free and / naturally to be desired,” but no gloating. The competition is a horror for the little people, and the poet has deep compassion for the defeated, the failures, and above all a sense of the tragedy of the losers--without whining, or sentimentality, or bitterness.

James M. Reid
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966)
with Laurence Perrine

This poem was written during the Great Depression of the 1930s and is a critique of the economic system. It is realistic until the ninth stanza, where people appear in the water: “Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows / Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.” Here the poem becomes an Expressionistic allegory of the capitalist system, depicted as a cruel competition among the rich winners at the expense of the losers, especially the poor: “It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair / until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind.” The “race” also refers to the human race, transcending time and place. Williams does not advocate Socialism here, but the severity of his critique in this brilliant poem is consistent with the Socialist tradition in American literature, as represented by Edward Bellamy, Jack London, Upton Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis.

Michael Hollister (2015)