WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS – CUBISM AND POETRY

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Rezumat

Lucrarea de faţă exploatează mai mult sau mai puţin în detaliu două fenomene artistice avangardiste la început de secol XX în America. Pe de-o parte Cubismul, de origine franceză, avea să dobândească prin Marcel Duchamp, emigrat în Statele Unite, şi prin discipolii săi, Charles Demuth şi Charles Sheeler, evidente trăsături ale unei noi locaţii. Precizioniştii sau cubist-realiştii şi poeţii imagişti ai vremii au împărtăşit „obsesia" pentru „obiectul în sine care este transcendent". William Carlos Williams, imagist la începuturi, avea să preia din tehnica fotografierii geometrizate a lucrurilor realităţii şi să exploateze valenţa transpoziţionării obiectului din real – fragmentar – abstract – mişcare – emoţie – atitudine – ton – imagine. Rezultatul apare sub forma unei noi structuri, lingvistice sau iconice, poetice sau picturale, structură ce se constituie într-un artefact. Nu în ultimul rând, lucrarea analizează poezia lui Williams şi pictura lui Demuth, ambele rezultatul unui proces simplu: „Există ochiul şi există obiectul pe care îl priveşte, în timp ce relaţia care se stabileşte între cele două este un poem" (Burke, apud. Fauchereau, 1974: 77-78) şi mai apoi o pictură.

'NO IDEAS BUT IN THINGS'

In 1913, an international exhibition held in New York at the Sixty - Ninth Regiment Armory, known as the "Armory Show", revealed the gap between American artists and French avant-garde painting. With WW I, some of the European avant-gardists began to migrate to the USA and at least two names are suggestive: Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. In 1917 Duchamp helped organize an exhibition of modern art following the European practice of independent exhibitions that showed the work of artists rejected by the state-supported academies. Any artist would be allowed to exhibit works. There was to be no jury to select the works and thus impose its taste upon the exhibition. Duchamp tested the principles of the organizing committee by submitting to the exhibition a porcelain urinal entitled *Fountain* and signed it "R. Mutt", who was a famous Manhattan plumber at the time. The organizing committee rejected the entry and Duchamp resigned from the committee and issued a manifesto in defense of his gesture. An artist, having selected the artifact, made the urinal be art. He said: "the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges" (Williams, apud Tashjian in Luedtke, 1992: 155). He meant that Americans, with their commitment to technology, were creating art all along but did not know it. Duchamp's *Fountain* called distinctions like *fine art & craft, high & low art or fine art &commercial art* into question. At the time, conservative American artists considered the selection of a urinal for an art exhibition scandalous. Yet Duchamp's gesture suggested the possibility that *mass-produced objects, products of machine technology*, might posses an aesthetic dimension even though such objects had been overlooked as art. As a consequence, Duchamp's observation about American bridges and plumbing might be a validation of some artifacts for their aesthetic qualities previously ignored.

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Alfred Stieglitz, who even before the turn of the century had taken pictures of New York, anticipated Duchamp's ironic play with machines during his stay in New York. Charles Demuth, a friend of Duchamp, painted witty and ironic images of factories and machines. He tried to transpose them from concrete objects to geometries that totally lacked affection. Light effects and straight lines, metallic or gray outlines create detachment and no feeling. Such an art is the perfect intermingling of Duchamp's cubism and mechanics and Stieglitz's objective photograph. The object becomes geometrical rhythm. Demuth's art is not as impersonal as he would have wanted it to be. At first sight, similarities with Duchamp are obvious but Demuth's paintings do have something of the " American character." *My Egypt*, 1927, is a metaphorical allusion about the dry places and the gigantic buildings of America and not of ancient historical places. Charles Sheeler explored industrial scenes also. He suggested a more simplified vision of reality. The concrete is so precisely outlined that his reality is hallucinatingly clear (Grigorescu, 1997: 249).

Industrialization and the rise of the skyscraper were perceived as the quintessence of the modern everywhere in the world. The rise of modernism did not signal the emergence of a uniquely American art in the early 20th century. The American academies were simply versions of their European counterparts, as modern too had its roots in 19th century French painting. However, precisionist painters, as stated above, began to add something of their region. As Tashjian affirmed in *The Artlessness of American* Culture, "the most radical striping away of European artifice was achieved by Duchamp in his *presentation of the thing itself*, a *ready-made* artifact"; and then: "In declaring the artlessness of their culture [as "the only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges"], Americans were ambiguously setting themselves apart from Europe" […]"Finally, artlessness became a way of developing one's own art" […] "These cultural attitudes would have a lasting imprint upon the creation of American art" (Tashjian apud. Luedtke, 1992: 162)

The language of painting as well as that of the American speech provided William Carlos Williams with a means of getting rid of the traditional conventions of poetry. The Armory Show of 1913 introduced modern modes of European painting to a shocked public in New York and Williams admired Duchamp and the "precisionists" Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. His poems are as clear and vivid as the analytic abstractions and the fragmentation of objects in Cubism. The lines follow the precise linear outlines of Demuth's watercolors of flowers. All in all, they resemble pictorial combination of objective realism with geometric abstraction.

Men with picked voices chant the names
of cities in a huge gallery: promises
that pull through descending stairways
to a deep rumbling.
The rubbing feet
of those coming to be carried quicken a
grey pavement into soft light that rocks
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,
across and across from pale
earthcolored walls of bare limestone.
[…]
A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing
out at a high window, moves by the clock;

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discordant hands straining out from
a center: inevitable postures infinitely
repeated –
two – twofour – twoeight!
[…]
Lights from the concrete
ceiling hang crooked but –
Poised horizontal
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders
packed with a warm glow – inviting entry –
[…]
--rivers are tunneled: trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively
stationary: rails forever parallel
return on themselves infinitely.
The dance is sure.
(*Overture to a Dance of Locomotives*, 1921)
(Williams, apud. Norton, 1979: 1436-1437)

With *The Red Wheelbarrow* and all the poems written before 1930, Williams, as an imagist, includes himself in the category of the precisionists or Cubist-realists artists simply because of his belief, that it would be the *thing* itself that is *transcendent*. This equals the philosophy of cubism: the object is the very source of painting. The objectification of perception and feeling became more pronounced in Williams's poems of the 1930s, when his poetry became one of the models for the movement known as "Objectivism", which he helped to sponsor.

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(*"The Red Wheelbarrow"*, 1923)
(Williams, apud. Norton, 1979: 1443)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
sand which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

(Williams, apud. Fauchereau, 1974: 83)

William Carlos Williams' essay, "*The American Background"* (1937), discerned a culture split between what America had to offer and a reactive fear that sent Americans back to European culture. As an avant-garde poet, he preferred the new but he acknowledged that the new was not to be inevitably associated with America. He was aware of a more profound

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impulse characterizing American artists. "Academic or avant-garde, what Williams called painting "*in the American grain"* would be generated by the same values that drove the colonies to declare themselves a new nation" (Tashjian in Luedtke, 1992: 163).

Paterson represents the American street, its ads, its drug stores, its traffic lights...all being rather collage that remind of cubism.

"Seventy-five of the world's leading scholars, poets and philosophers gathered at Princeton last week …

Faitoute ground his heel
Hard down on the stone

Sunny today, with the highest temperature near 80 degrees; moderate southerly winds. Partly cloudy and continued warm tomorrow, with moderate southerly winds.

Her belly her belly is like
a cloud a cloud
at evening
His mind would reawaken:
He
Me with my pants, coat and vest still on!
She
And me still in my galoshes!"
(Williams apud. Norton, 1979: 1472-1473)

The poem is a challenge to the expatriates in combining a panoramic American scale with minute notation and direct or intimately personal statement. By means of its strategy of disjunction or discontinuity, the poem is a collage of actual letters and other prose documents along with verse, in its montage. The poem confronts directly the raw realities of modern urban America. The expatriates had fled from that "immediate contact with the world" on which original writing depends. Williams called for a confrontation with immediate reality. The "filth" and "ignorance" of the present gave sense to the "new locality" that was to "clear the GROUND" (Williams, apud. Norton, 1979: 1433). "No ideas but in things" recurs in Williams poetry and prose stating that actual things and elements of the locality construct meanings. In his essay *In the American Grain*, Williams emphasizes what figures of the American milieu had the nerve to do, i.e. touch the reality around them. To make this contact possible in poetry, to confront the crude, elemental realities and the primitive profundity of the personality, poets were to address their locality.

" Words are the keys that unlock the mind. But is that all of poetry? Certainly not – no more so than the material of dreams was phantasy to Dr. Sigmund Freud.

There is something else. […] The one thing that the poet has not wanted to change, the one thing he has clung to in his dream – unwilling to let go – the place where the time-lag is still adamant – is structure. Here we are unmovable. But here is precisely where we come into contact with reality. […] The only reality we can know is MEASURE.

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[…] Now we come to the question of the origin of our discoveries. Where else can what we are seeking arise from but speech? From speech, from American speech as distinct from English speech […]. In any case (since we have no body of poems comparable to the English) from what we hear in America."

(Williams, apud. Norton, 1979: 1458; 1463)

The imagination's exposure to reality in each poem is contingent on the creation of a new, striking and flexible poetic form which Williams called a "structure". Williams' poems avoid traditional rhyme or stanza and line patterns. They are structures made up of a mixture of attitudes or tones, of jumble images and allusions - all making the reader perceive unusually constructed images. Objects, figures, and emotions are vividly exposed through words and speech in all their facets. The effect comes trough fragmentation that is "to induce the reader to focus with unusual intentness on concrete objects, phases of emotion and movement, specific aspects of the subject, and particulars of the poem's language and rhythm, while drawing attention at the same time to the discrete lines and the artifice of their sequence which articulate the structure of the poem" (Norton, 1979: 1434). This technique resembles analytic abstractions and reminds of the fragmentation of objects in Cubism. Thus many of Williams' poems, in presenting the things themselves, become *ready-made* artifacts. "The procedure is easy: There is the eye and there is the object that the eye sees, and the relationship between the two is a poem" (Burke, apud. Fauchereau, 1974: 77-78). The red wheelbarrow, the great figure five, the wrapping paper, the bed or the chair, the iron fence – all are objects whose significances make the foreground. Yet they appear to be something more than their own image. This new image, the ready-made, restores the reality of the image, by changing its perspective. Whether it is Duchamp's *Fountain*, a reversed urinal, or his *Wheel Bicycle*, a bike wheel on a chair, the artifact would become the new structure coming from the American speech, *"from what we hear in America"* (Williams, apud. Norton, 1979:1463). The procedure will support the apparition of Objectivism and Pop art, later on, as profoundly American cultural movements.

One of the most famous poems of William Carlos Williams, *The Great Figure*, was, at least according to what the poet himself stated in his *Autobiography*, the result of the objects clenched tightly in the seer's eyes:

"*As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it."*

(Williams, apud. Barnet et.all, 1997: 1014)

Here is the poem:

"*Among the rain*
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs siren howls
and wheels rumbling

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through the dark city"
(The Great Figure, 1920)
(Williams, apud. Barnet et.all, 1997: 1014)

Eight years later, Charles Demuth, a friend of William Carlos Williams, painted *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold*. The striking similarities between the poem and the painting are evident, due to the alikeness of the technique rather than to the mere figure 5. The poem is the radiography of 7 fragmented pieces of reality: rain, lights, figure 5, fire truck, siren, wheels, dark city. The clarity and vividness of the things perceived suggest ideas that directly superpose a new image over the objective realist one. The painting is a cubist-realist piece of art. The seven elements of the poem are significantly constructed through geometries of contours.

The first thing mentioned in the poem is the rain. Similarly, rain appears in the foreground of the painting by means of straight lines from top to bottom and from left to right – lines that crisscross.

The lights in the street are the four circles – 2 are top left and right cornered and two are smaller, yet following the 2 diagonals of the rectangle. These circles immediately create the idea of a three-dimensional perspective: a street in the foreground that directs to the background and the angle closes in the very center of the canvas.

The same impression of something that advances from fore- to background comes with the 3rd element of the poem and painting: the figure 5. The intensity of the sensation comes from the light ochre of the figure 5 that appears three times, in three different dimensions, from bigger to smaller. The fire truck, which is the 4th thing, is a combination of overlaid geometrical shapes, painted in nuances of red, from light to dark. The technique of superposition makes the image dynamic and it suggests movement. Elements 3 and 4 would make "the figure 5/ in gold/ on a red/ fire truck/ moving/ tense/ unheeded/ to gong clangs".

The "siren howls", says the poem, and the painting renders this by means of a pyramidal form. Further more, the sixth element, "and wheels rumbling", misses in the painted image. The dynamism of the painting, in a three dimensional overlay, strongly encompasses the speed of the truck and this annihilates the wheels.

The last element of the composition, the dark city, makes the background. The preposition "through" positions the city behind and aside the red truck; light, dark, black or gray geometries of shapes constitute the buildings in the street. A building on the right has a neon sign, rendered by means of very small drops of white paint.

The red initials "*W.C.W*", positioned down, center, and "*C.D.*", down, left, as well as the red capital letters "*BILL*" enables the painter let his source of inspiration known. It also connects the two signs, the linguistic and the iconic one, closely together.

Things built up images. Their clarity was transposed in analytic abstractions and fragmentations. The object became geometrical rhythm. In the beginning, the object was the very source of the poem, as the poet himself affirmed. The effect of the objects' fragmentation was to induce the reader to phases of emotion and movement, while drawing attention at the same time to the discrete lines and artifice of their sequence. The process built a linguistic structure and it initiated the painter's descent into constructing the iconic one.

The eye and the object articulated both poems and paintings.

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