

“The Red Wheelbarrow” and “The Snow Man”: A Reading

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I

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), to whom Theodore Roethke, speaking for the next generation of American poets, once paid tribute by mentioning him as “our father,” was a private and reticent man leading a secluded life (McMichael, 1989). In spite of his original talent and dedication as a poet, he was not part of the mainstream movement of modern poetry represented by Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Stevens had his first book of poetry *Harmonium* published in 1923 at the age of forty-four. His recognition came slowly, as did appreciation of his work, although he was to become one of the most celebrated of American poets in his final years. For the common reader, he was generally viewed as being either abstruse, eccentric, masterful, philosophical, or even inane depending on the reader’s taste or preconception. Whatever the judgment, the tenacious and not infrequently playful metaphysicality of the poet’s creative imagination is central to the understanding of his poetry, which characteristically explores the relation between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, fiction and fact, and so forth.

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), together with Marianne Moore, was one of Stevens’ literary associates during the latter’s New York years. Williams was a successful physician educated at the University of Pennsylvania where Pound was a student. His professed motto, “no ideas but in things,” which characterizes his poetry superbly, may as well inform his personality which is spontaneous, open, unaffected, sympathetic, and democratic. Randall Jarrell, who helped the

poet with the selection of poems for the 1949 edition of the *Selected Poems*, found in him something of "the this-worldly optimism of the 18th century" and "the amused, admiring, and affectionate certainty that one has about Whitman." (Jarrell, 1963) Such pure delight in the way things look is the special quality shared with Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens.

Williams and Stevens have often been brought together in the discussion of literary taste and history. The major reason Williams and Stevens render themselves to ready comparison lies in the fact that they shared a great deal in artistic aims and temperament regulating their poetic imagination. Reflecting the circumstantial influences of the symbolist-imagist momentum in modern literary history, both of them concentrated a great deal in their respective ways on the aesthetics of perception vis-a-vis the objective world rather than on the more conventional themes of emotive expression or realistic representation. Williams's frequent use of vegetable imagery and Stevens's occasional indulgence in primordial images hint at the subdued romantic strain in both of them so far as the tonal effect is concerned. But genuine Romantic self-expression or self-definition rarely intrudes into their realm of concern. If there is a way in which their poetry embodies their personal temperament, it seems to be more in the nature of the stylistic effect rather than of any thematic intention. Williams seems to indulge in the spontaneity and affirmation of things as they are, whereas Stevens is more committed to the poetic ideation of the world of things.

In this paper, I have chosen two poems, one by Williams and the other by Stevens, to compare and examine in a self-imposed session of close reading. Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," is shockingly slim and flimsy in terms of length, being just a handful of syllables arranged methodically or willfully. But it is certainly the poet's showpiece by general consensus. Stevens' "The Snow Man" is also a well-known familiar piece much anthologized since its first appearance in *Harmonium*. These two poems, although each of them must have its own hidden ways of being representative of the author, are apparently all too short to embody the vision of a poet in a manifest way. On the other hand, the relevancy of the comparison may equally be justified, apart from the fact of their immense readership, on two points: first, since the craftsmanship and power of the poems,

considered by many commentators to be masterful and typical, draw a great deal upon the condensed construction, they may reveal all the more succinctly the quality of imagination of the poet, and secondly, both pieces are built on similar perceptual ideas with the "red wheelbarrow" and the "snow man" presented as a single object to be described. Thus, the comparison may help to reveal how the two poets converge and diverge.

II

Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow" is a verbal artifact that embodies an intense visual impression and is constructed in an extreme economy of words. The sixteen words or twenty-two syllables that make up the poem resemble the seventeen syllables of a haiku in its condensation of construction and the intensity of imagery. The whole poem reads as follows:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Syntactically the poem is one plain sentence in modest colloquial length and diction grouped in four pseudo-stanzaic sections. A fullstop marks the termination of the statement but capitalization is deliberately ruled out as if small letters are just right for the seemingly lusterless and quotidian object in question and as if the poet were wary of the fragility of the perceptual moment that might crumble even under the weight of a single obtrusive capital letter. The delicate intensity of the poem simultaneously "depends" upon the multiple factors of visual composition. Any semantic congruence is entirely subservient to that composition. In this sense, Williams' poetic inspiration here, as is the case elsewhere, is typically that of a

painter in full unreserved recognition of his or her subject.

The semantic components of each of the four mini-stanzas are in turn represented by tangibly concrete images. The composition of the whole picture comes alive in the familiar visual situation wherein "a red wheel/ barrow// glazed with rain/ water" stands "beside the white/ chickens." The mundane and commonplace nature in what furnishes a farmhouse garden is saved from negligence and rendered into a fresh recognition. This characteristic recognition of Williams's is achieved in a Whitmanesque way in that there is no questioning and doubting eye that encroaches upon the world of things. Both poets affirm the world as it is in "supreme unconcern" to quote D. H. Lawrence (Lawrence, 1950). There is no violation whatever of the internal order of things. Reality is supreme in its own right, and the poet's prime task becomes equatable to unprejudiced indulgence in what one may call the thingness of things.

This characteristic aspect is superbly realized in "The Red Wheelbarrow" not simply because the poem describes an object in objective terms but because the object is made to realize itself in the logic of its own property. In the internal structure of the poem, the named images of the wheelbarrow, the glaze, rain water, and the chickens are accumulated to gain force, as in backwash, to effect a reverse infiltration into the opening phrase, "so much depends/ upon," and create there a solid tangible quality as if dependability could be numbered among the ordinarily visible objects. Such an illusion of thingy presence in the opening phrase has a way of illustrating Williams' central maxim, "no ideas but in things." If so, the word "depends" needs some further clarification.

Much of the tension in the poem originates in the double connotation of the verb "depends." "To depend" is in its concept transitive, abstract, and subjective, and means "to exist by virtue of a necessary relation" according to Webster. This first lexical meaning of course initiates the access to the ensuing series of images and regulates the mediation between the observer and the observed. The verb "depend" has another important dimension of implication. Apart from its apparent function within the poetic text, its specific lexical meaning is capable of extending extra-textually: it points to the intensity of the perceptual moment, to the subtle process of composition

itself, and to the vulnerability as well as tenacity of a creative act. Such signifying potentiality of the word, assisted by the easily recognizable etymology of the Latinate word, "to hang down," subtly transfigures the abstract semantic functionary into a more physical and visible form on par with the ensuing cluster of images of really solid objects.

"Things" ought to remain as they are. Any prejudice of the mind should not intrude on the self-sufficiency in the order of things. The imagination is not to transform but to participate in that self-sufficiency. "The Red Wheelbarrow" realizes this tenor typically through typological and imagistic composition. The sensations of things themselves are increased by the contrasts between the evasive subject and the denoted complement—the wheelbarrow and its accessories—of the verb "depend," between red and white, between the inanimate vehicle and the animate animal, and so forth. The repetition of a three-word line comprising three to four humble syllables followed by that of a single word, which rhythmically arrests and releases the unhurried progress of reading, seems to envisage the physical participation in things as they are.

III

The occasion of Stevens's "The Snow Man" is, as I have said in the first section of this paper, similar to "The Wheelbarrow" in that whole lines concentrate on the observation of a single object. It is also to be noticed that such a setting for the poetic situation is the arrangement commonly favored by both poets. But their actual process of imaginative creation diverges rather than converges. An act of perception presupposes the interaction between the perceiving mind and perceived object. Williams, wholeheartedly embracing the objectivity of reality, abandons himself in the non-subjective wonderland, forgetful of the function of subjectivity to the point of self-abnegation in his joyous appreciation of things as they are. Stevens, on the contrary, puts greater emphasis on the workings of the imaginative mind vis-a-vis reality. He wrestles incessantly with the tension between things as they are and things as they are imagined. As a meditative introvert exempt from any

softheadedness or sentimental looseness of thinking, Stevens seems to be obsessed with the idea of the transmutability of reality. Metaphysical questions on the problem of perception and knowledge, arrogantly pushed aside by Williams, constitute the central poetic concern of the poet.

"The Snow Man," read against "The Wheelbarrow," manifests a widely different focus in its perceptual posture. In the act of identification and recognition, the object to be perceived, here presumably the snow man, has become rarefied and lost much of its concrete physicality. The snow man's "mind," its seemingly imposed point of view, and not the substantial and tangible presence of it, is shown forth in the description of the landscape constituting the poem. The whole poem reads as follows:

One must have a mind of winter
 To regard the frost and the boughs
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

 And have been cold a long time
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
 The spruces rough in the distant glitter

 Of the January sun; and not to think
 Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
 In the sound of a few leaves,

 Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place

 For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The five three-line stanzas of the "The Snow Man" are syntactically an extension of a single sentence just like "The Red Wheelbarrow" by Williams. In the meditative cadence of casual three-beat (sometimes four) verse lines, the lines build on one another to reveal one by one the elementary components of the bare winter landscape: frost, boughs, pine-trees, junipers topped with ice, the wintry sun, the fallen leaves, the sound of the wind, and so forth. The naming of these climatic landmarks continues

up to the third stanza. In the fourth stanza we find a noticeable shift of tone. A process of abstraction is taking place:

Which is the sound of the land
 Full of the same wind
 That is blowing in the same bare place.

Here the particulars in the preceding three stanzas go through a vortex of elemental blending, in which the abstracting catalyst is the wind of the "land," itself a geographical abstraction, and its sound. This tonal shift suggesting the idea of transmutability of phenomena through imagination stands in sharp contrast with what Williams could effect in the opening phrase of "The Wheelbarrow" as discussed above. It parallels with the tonal quality of the penultimate section of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

The river is moving.
 The blackbird must be flying.

A further elaboration on this point can be found in "It Must Be Abstract," the first part of the famed poem, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where the poet ponders on the Platonic "first idea." The act of contemplating the phenomena, Stevens seems to believe, is coterminous with their transformation manifested by the abstracting potential. The last stanza of "The Snow Man" half mystifies the abstracting process of the mind working in contact with the reality.

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
 And, nothing himself, beholds
 Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

The sudden and epiphanic intrusion of the "listener" here opens up another level of abstraction. The presence of this vacuous listener, endowed all of a sudden with the coign of vantage, obliterates the need to distinguish between the perceiver (the poet) and the perceived (the snow man), thereby drawing forcefully on the opening line reading "One must have a mind of winter." The focus has shifted from the particulars of the

first three stanzas, through reordering by abstraction in the fourth stanza, to the mystic resolution in which ideas cannot be separated from things. This is cryptically manifested by the paradox of the last line: "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

IV

It can be momentarily concluded that these two poems were worked out in an apparently opposite way. Both poets concern themselves with an intense moment of perception, but one ends in the joyous participation in the scheme of things as they are while the other, metaphysical in temperament, seems to end in an indulgence of the power of ideas working behind the phenomena—perhaps with some strain of austere nihilism. The two poems seem to manifest such general tendencies in a small scale but revealingly. One goes for things themselves; the other, for the idea of things.

But there are other aspects not mentioned in the previous section. For instance, note the fourth stanza of "The Snow Man," and consider how inane and windy the lines are. The cyclical reiteration concerning the wind and its sound and the bare land where the wind blows is self-reflexive in a subtle, teasing way. In fact, the reflexivity of the wind motif covers over five consecutive lines, which amount to the middle bulk of the poem starting in the eighth line and ending in the first half of the thirteenth line. There is a nursery rhyme, well-known and funny (and, of course, nonsensical), that is as cyclical and as repetitive:

This is the house that Jack built.

This is the rye that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the rat that ate the rye that lay in the house that Jack built.

The same kind of fun and nonsense that inheres in the rhyme called "The House That Jack Built" subtly informs Stevens' "The Snow Man" as well. Both pieces depend upon the form of syntactic aggrandizement called "right-branching" by modern grammarians.

What saves Stevens from the danger of inane metaphysics is this kind of subtle playfulness that often accompanies the more serious tone of transcendental searching. The surprising "metaphysical conceit" in the title (and the refrain) of the poem, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream", is one fine such example. "Bantams in Pine-Woods," which, beginning with

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

pours forth hearty and wonderful ridicule through plosive sound imagery, is another remarkable example showing how funny this grave-looking meditative poet could be despite the transcendental strain he has.

The playful sounding of nonsense in the third stanza of "The Snow Man" turns out to be unexpectedly felicitous if it is read, as it should be, as a preamble for the culmination in the last stanza, where the non-being of a listener confronts the nothingness of what he listens for. This listener is presumably the snow man of the title, but the same "snow man" is typographically absent from the textual scene. This absence maneuvered by the poet could be part of an arcane arrangement that bears on the culminating theme of nothingness. But emphatically, the theme of final nothingness has its momentous foreboding in the grave-cum-teasing tone of the preceding fourth stanza that runs on into the fifth to describe the vacuous music of the dreary wind.

"Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" runs the title of the last poem in Stevens' final *Collected Poems*. None the less, as we have seen so far, "the thing itself" is fated to be read "the idea of the thing itself" by the kind of poet that Stevens was. The title just mentioned should also be a fit motto *verbatim* for William Carlos Williams. But just as their life-long friendship was something less than warm with an unnarrowing respectful distance between them, so was their poetry (Mariani, 1984). Williams' similar motto, "no ideas but in things" was not a metaphysical search into an abstract order of things; it was a grand Whitmanesque revival of American ideals. Indeed, in a centennial essay on *Leaves of Grass*, he upholds American democratic ideals with great warmth, for which he regards

Whitman as the father figure and Europeanized Eliot as his antithetic renegade (Williams, 1955). Williams delighted in calling himself a "United Stateser" (Feder, 1991). "The Red Wheelbarrow," which is in itself both objectivist and minimalist and imagist unlike any of Whitman's poems, intends to be as spontaneous and as liberating as the latter.

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