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*An Imagist Reading of William Carlos Williams' "The Wanderer"*

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper examines William Carlos Williams' "The Wanderer," one of the earliest poems in his poetic career, in terms of one of the Imagistic tenets that Williams adopted, that is "Direct treatment of the 'thing', whether subjective or objective." Although Williams was highly influenced by Keatsian idealism which appeared in his early works, yet "The Wanderer" presents his attempt of making this romantic ideology as a starting point for his more imagistic approach. The paper follows and investigates the journey of the poet (in the poem) in his flight from the heights of his past romantic wanderings into more local and modernist encounters which he presents as episodes and images. The culmination of this experience leads to a baptism ritual through which the poet announces a new wandering that is would be purely imagist.

**Key words:** William Carlos Williams; Imagism; The Wanderer; Modernism; Romanticism, American poetry

**1. Introduction:**

Williams' early poetry nearly has a totally romantic voice, but when he explains his intentions and what he believes poetry to be, he typically uses anti-romantic formulations similar to those of Pound and Eliot. Williams frequently mentioned how his scientific training had influenced his writing, and it is explicit in his notion of the poem as an object, a sign by its very existence of the poet's expertise in exercising authority with words and expressions.

Published in 1914, "The Wanderer" is one of Williams' early poems. This is the year that marked the breakthrough of the poetic modernism and the emergence of the Imagist manifesto, a literary movement that Williams is largely associated with. The poem supposedly indicates Williams' entry into the modern era and, specifically, the emergence of his maturing objectivist aesthetics. Some critics believe the poem to be the step that placed Williams'

poetry beyond the romanticism of his earliest poems. Williams famously states that “No ideas but in things” (Paterson, 6) which indicates his alliance with Imagism, it is a statement of the influence of Ezra Pound’s Imagist rule “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective.” Other critics would argue that Williams demonstrates, not a conflict but rather a union between the object and the subject. In this paper I aim to show that “The Wanderer” reveals a progression in the way the poet deals with the subject-object conflict that takes romanticism as its starting point rather than breaking with it. This should be achieved through presenting imagination as a succession of episodes, fragmented images, directly taken from the actual world. The effect of the imagist principles on “The Wanderer” appears in the form of a paradox through which Williams achieves a surreal flow that resembles the romantic free roaming in the realm of dreams, while the imagistic fragments and pieces through which he describes the ‘local’ modernity are the manifestations of the things as the poet sees them and as he attempts to lighten them to the reader’s imagination in their ‘thingness.’

## **2. The Poet’s Ego and the Object:**

Andrew Lawson (1994:2) points to two traditions in the interpretation of “The Wanderer.” The first one sees the poem as an identification with modernity and an attempt to cope with its materialistic aspects, while the second tradition reads the poem in Keatsian terms as an attempt of transcendence from the drastic reality of modernism into a realm of romantic idealism. Romanticism has long been thought as the ideology that exalts the individual vision as the highest form of certitude. It has been criticized as well for being an ideology that caused the consciousness, which is the source for meaning in personal and social life, to be finally cut off from the self and the world. The total immersion in the inwardness of the self could be dangerous. The unreliability of the romantic self’s experience arises from the fact that what is felt individually fails to attain any kind of unanimous truth or certitude. What an individual feels belongs to the individual’s consciousness alone, thus their own experience could lead to a kind of seclusion. Modernism asserts that the ego should be abandoned so that objects can manifest themselves as they are, Williams states that, in his work, “it has always sufficed that the object of my attention be presented without further comment” (A Note on Poetry, p1313). William Heyen (1970:23) argues that Williams’ conception of new poetry is characterized by ‘an imaginative leap’ from feeling into the word. Words should be released of their traditional symbolism, meanings and personal associations. The poet has to place his words in new contexts that are more local and real, “the commonplace, the tawdry, the sordid all have their poetic uses if

the imagination can lighten them.” (A Note on Poetry, p1313) In “The Wanderer,” Williams is engaged with the experience itself as a whole, it is a contemplation in the world, a journey through which the poet is guided by a muse of an old lady. The first part entitled “Advent” begins with the arrival of the muse and the initiation of the poet’s self with introduction of the “I”, he decides to aspire to her height and be guided by her inspiration,

I saw her eyes straining at the new distance  
And as the woods fell from her flying  
Likewise they fell from me as I followed  
So that I strongly guessed all that I must put from me  
To come through ready for the high courses (l. 8-12)

Immediately after this introduction, Williams attempts to establish his own poetic vision which is mainly instigated by the cityscape of Manhattan. The great skyscrapers and the images of modern city locality face the poet with pressing questions of the possibility of translating his visions in verse. “How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?” is a question which entails not only the poet’s bewilderment with modernity, but also his concern with presenting an image of this modernity that is as accurate as possible, as if the reader is looking at a reflection on the mirror, without the interference of the poet’s subjectivity. In this manner, art becomes significant as much as it lifts reality by the means of imagination.

In the section entitled “Broadway,” the flight of the poet with the muse takes a notable shift. As the journey goes downward, the scenery changes and the poet starts to see images of the devoid and spiritually impoverished modern city,

There came crowds walking-- men as visions  
With expressionless, animate faces;  
Empty men with shell-thin bodies  
Jostling close above the gutter,  
Hastening – nowhere!... (l. 67-71)

This shift could be understood as a leap from the heights of a sublime soaring into a realistic wandering. The challenge that the poet faces now is how to turn these realistic images into a poetry that mirrors reality as it is to the readers. If this transformation is taking the poet into this direction, then the concept of the ‘romantic wanderer’ is reshaped here, the poet as a subject is a wanderer by birth, yet he is not a subject that is lost in some imaginary realm, nor he is detached from the world around him or immersed in some delusional state of dreaming. He is not losing his soul in some other entity like a romantic hero, instead he is taking advantage of the immediacy of his experience with the place and people to create his own poetic identity

which is characterized by repeated new beginnings, every new contact with life is a new beginning. (Riddel, 1974)

### 3. The Image of Modernity and the Keatsian idealism

Ezra Pound (1913, 200), the founder of Imagism, states in his “A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste,” that, “an “Image” is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” In “The Wanderer,” Williams presents a number of images of the modern city. In the part entitled “The Strike,” the speaker declares in the beginning that the muse roused him in the very first thread of dawn. He rose trembling and astounded by her call, “Go!” she said, and I hurried shivering/Out into the desert streets of Paterson.” (l. 118-119)

Her call lunge him directly into the streets of the city and specifically into Paterson, the city that witnessed the famous Silk Strike in 1913, where “Nowhere/ The subtle! Everywhere the electric!” (l.129) He confronts again scenes of people standing in long breadlines and he describes them as, “all stood patiently,/ Dominated by one idea: something/ That carried them as they are always wanting to be carried.”(l. 131-133) These lines are followed then with a description that reveals an important insight about Williams’ ideology,

The flat heads with unkempt black or blond hair!

Below the skirt the ugly legs of the young girls

Pistons too powerful for delicacy!

The women's wrists, the men's arms, red,

Used to heat or cold, to toss quartered beeves

And barrels and milk cans and crates of fruit! (l. 146- 151)

The poet in these lines sounds like an outsider, from an upper class who is superior to the poor people, and he seems surprised by the ugliness of the images of poverty. As to his intention of becoming a mirror to modernity, these images cause a perplexing effect on him. This portrayal of the poet as a solitary figure toiling away to actualize the symbolic order of what Billitteri (2007:52) calls his ‘aristocratic revolution’ is representative of Williams's concept of the role and responsibility of the intellectual at a time of crisis. Like a romantic, the poet stands at a distance from his object, but what makes the wanderer of Williams’ poem different is that he is not guided by some prominent muse figure, instead he is guided by an anonymous lady figure who keeps thrusting him into the viciousness of the modern world to the point that he is able to see even her ghastly appearance. The poet’s perplexity is caused by the fact that his subjective yearning for transcendence is hindered by the images of modernity that could not be easily reflected. Yet he desires to incorporate the real world around him into his poetry, and he shows that he had been around the people he wrote about for a long enough time to avoid abandoning

reality in favor of a return to the sentimental Keatsian elaborations that had distanced and artificialized his earlier works. This is what Norman M. Finkelstein (1983:236) would call the “poet’s struggle to accept historical truth, necessity, the brutal immediacy of reality, seemingly at odds with his remote aesthetized “Romantic” notion of beauty.” Both romanticism and modernism are concerned with relatively similar notions; the attempt of art to establish itself in a privileged stance where the world around is becoming more positivistic and materialistic.(Ibid: 234) The wanderer, then has to find out a new way to convey this new understanding and he turns again to the muse for help,

...“Marvelous old queen,  
Grant me power to catch something of this day’s  
Air and sun into your service!” (l. 87-89)

...

To you, marvelous old queen, give me always  
A new marriage—”(l. 102-103)

The realization that the poet/wanderer accomplishes places him within new responsibilities as a poet. Creativity is not to be sought by retreating into the interior world but rather by going outward, via a process of “organic growth” as James. E. Breslin (1970:22) calls it. It may seem that Williams is departing Keats influence in this poem, yet there is another reading that shows the Keatsian idealism as a starting point for the poet into that growth or at least an attempt of compromise with it.

Carl Rapp (1984:13) states that the narrator of the poem is “purged” of his longing towards a transcendence once he achieves it. The poet’s ego does not become one with the world as much as it goes through a process of abnegation that allows the objects of the world to be revealed with integrity. By the end of the section entitled “The Strike,” where he was faced with the ugliness of modern city, the wanderer declares what looks like an end of his ecstasy,

Ugly, venomous, gigantic!  
Tossing me as a great father his helpless  
Infant till it shriek with ecstasy  
And its eyes roll and its tongue hangs out!  
I am at peace again, old queen, I listen clearer now.

Hélène Aji (2005:59) argues that “Williams deals with Keats’s Romanticism in terms of liberation but proceeds in his poetry in terms of appropriation and adaptation.” And this, according to Zacharia Pickard (2009:86) is what marks a success of Williams’ impersonality, unlike Pound and Eliot. Williams succeeds in creating a poetic world of tremendous, impersonal quietness. Even though it is impossible for

a poem to completely abandon its speaker, Williams comes incredibly close. More significantly, he accomplishes this without depleting the poem's vitality, thus creating a world that is paradoxically both entirely calm and entirely alive.

Paul Mariani (1981) sees “The Wanderer” as filled with ironic promises of rebirth, springtime, and rejuvenation, promises that ultimately came to nothing. What he had created in the end was a poetry of crisis, one that was inspired by the yearning to advance while being unable to do so. However, it is more likely to look at these promises as attempts to control the experience as a whole. The poem itself becomes the first object that the poet exercises authority on.

#### **4. The Spatial Imagism of the Local**

Williams’ earliest poems acknowledge the need for a connection to one's surroundings, no matter how little, so that one might, like a doctor examining a patient, see the universal in the specific. Williams defends and reveres the beauty of his native land and aspires to compose "genuine" poetry that communicate to the reader a pure experience, not affected by the poet’s subjectivity. He must learn when to let the images act on the reader without his subjective help. “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...” (as quoted in Hyatt H. Waggoner, 343).

However, it would be the contact with the real that would demolish his fantasies of converting genuine experience into artificiality, to which his conception of Keatsian poetry conforms. The Keatsian aesthetic kept the impoverished at a distance, keeping the unusual, ugly, and terrifying from the poet’s sensitivities. Contact with the underprivileged would force him to reevaluate his aesthetics and add a local perspective. In the section entitled “Abroad,” the fourth in the poem, Williams declares that “Never, even in a dream,/ Have I winged so high nor so well,” (l.162-163) after a long journey the wanderer admits that he is awakened of the dream-like flight into a more realistic realm. Poetry, then, cannot be a dream in the sense of an escape or a haven; regardless of where it resides in awareness in relation to interiority and exteriority, poetry is always realistic; it is beautiful in the sense that it is influenced by actual occurrences (Finkelstein, 1983). The muse announces to him that “You are safe here,” (l.169) which sounds like he has reached to a familiar place. Next, she calls him, “child” when she tries to drive his attention into images of the place the poet identifies earlier as Jersey Mountains,

You are safe here. Look child, look open-mouth!  
 The patch of road between the steep bramble banks,  
 The tree in the wind, the white house there, the sky! (l. 169- 171)

After presenting these images, the muse calls the poet to deliver them to people, “Speak to men of these, concerning me!” (l. 172) The flight over these places, not only introduces new geographical perspectives, but also helps the poet to reminisce about his childhood. Williams' imagery of location negotiates and transforms both the past and the present, the observer and the observed, and serves as a medium between memory and expectation in a never-ending conversation. Childhood memories are brought into alignment with "mallows," which are marshland flowers, while "crawling trains" provide a simultaneous allusion to both the industrial modernity of the city and the "cedar swamp's" primordial region.(White, 2016:12)

. . . the great towers stood above the meadow  
 Wheeling beneath, the little creeks, the mallows  
 That I picked as a boy, the Hackensack  
 So quiet, that looked so broad formerly:  
 The crawling trains, the cedar swamp upon the one side –  
 All so old, so familiar – so new now  
 To my marvelling eyes as we passed  
 Invisible. (l. 206-213)

Poetry that solely engages with the past is produced by a poet who overlooks present society and Williams is showing that he is torn between images of the past that are totally different from the modernity that he attempts to reflect. This encounter with these juxtaposing images makes him realize the limitations of the mirror, which as precise as it is in conveying the image reflected in it, seems to lack the connective element that the poet needs with his world (Callan, 1992:105). At this point, Williams begins to discover how to carry on as a poet in his task, he now has a sense of what he really needs in order to reflect the modernity of the new world. As an imagist, he should not be only engaged with the images of the place, but rather to be involved in the local, the images that do not reflect the place as much as they reflect the culture. Then, what follows the purge from the Keatsian influence that he achieves earlier is an immersion in the spatial imagery of the local. Thus, the question of being a mirror to the modernity, that he poses in the beginning of “The Wanderer,” leads him to the realization that being lost is a necessary step in the process of going forward. It is noteworthy that Williams was concerned with the notion of culture, J. Hillis Miller (1965:286) in his *Poets of Reality*, points to the relation between language, imagination and the place in Williams’ poetics, “Naming and imagining are the

same. They are that originating act which creates a culture.” The wanderer is suffering from the inability to find a language that could express his local culture because it appears to him fragmented and distorted after being himself dislocated from it. Here the wanderer should no longer look from a distance, like an elite observer, who thinks that only by an act of “aristocratic revolution,” order can be retained. The new poetry should not stand on the wreckage of the past, it should be reconstructed through establishing a new connection with the ordinary, the local and not to be deformed to conform with the deformity of the world. Language is the means by which consciousness gives verbal forms to the objects, the world enters into the mind and is shaped through this connection. Williams thought that Eliot’s vague allusions and his expression of discontent in *The Waste Land* not only present what Williams was trying to avoid in poetry, but also shows that Eliot was not a poet who lived in the local. For Williams, the reproduction of culture through imagination and the language of the everyday is what constitute the new role of the poet.

To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I’m sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated. (Williams, 174)

In “The Wanderer,” Williams elevates the local poor and their material surroundings as the new objects of poetry. He uses the local poor and their environments for more than just an atmosphere or as the embodiment of a larger, more universalized metaphysical despair.

### **5. The Final Baptism:**

In the last section entitled, “St. James’ Grove,” a baptism takes place, and the guiding muse plays an important role in its execution. The wanderer declares in the beginning of this section that he is on the verge of a new beginning, perhaps a new wandering,

And so it came to the last day  
 When, she leading by the hand, we went out  
 Early in the morning, I heavy of heart  
 For I knew the novitiate was ended  
 The ecstasy was over, the life begun (l. 248-252)

It is not only a declaration of movement, the speaker also states how he feels knowing that the change intended means that he must put away all that he has learned, the ecstasy is over and his heart is heavy. After that, he declares that they are heading to Passaic river, “that filthy river.” The lady muse addresses the river as if they are



acquainted, “Old friend, here I have brought you/The young soul you long asked of me,” (l.270-271) she introduces the wanderer to the river in an act of ceremonial baptism, to which the river answer with consent. The speaker then feels “...the utter depth of its rottenness/The vile breadth of its degradation.” (l. 289-290) Williams comes from baptism better than before, yet this water cleanses even while it is unclear. He even watches his old clean version “being borne off under the water!” After the metaphorical submersion of his body and spirit into the river, which symbolizes his whole locality, his modernism becomes a part of him and expands his thinking, “I knew all – it became me.” (l.299) Most critics view the poem's concluding scene as proof that the young poet was finally abandoning the romantic language and mythological women of his earliest works. Bernard I. Duffey (1986:20) argues that this wandering, in the particular way that this poem defines it, is a hallmark of the poet's separation from any viewpoint or overarching sense of his world. His baptism was formal but without any obvious implications. The poet's environment is valuable not for itself but for what it reveals to and within him. However, Lawson (1994,15) refers to this final scene as a ‘sacrifice,’ the wanderer finally decides to jump into this river which is half-water and half-sewage, half-life and half-death, “the baptism enacts the divisions of modernity as something to which the subject is part of and committed to, a necessary dialectic of self and world.”

This baptismal event alludes to an experience that Williams mentioned in a letter to Marianne Moore, through which he declares what concerns the inner security of his work, “It was a sudden resignation to existence, a despair- if you wish to call it that but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of a nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up.” (Williams, 1957) Williams was able to acknowledge both the shortcomings of his prior poetic theory and the necessity of a new one. He is able to create poetry that expresses his internal angst and his incapacity to see as he wishes in order to demonstrate his empathy, and he is aware that he cannot start the voyage he has set out on his own without first starting it, without initiating a new wandering as it is announced in the end of the poem,

Live, river, live in luxuriance  
Remembering this our son  
In remembrance of me and my sorrow  
And of the new wandering! (l. 327-330)

Thus, this baptism contrary to Duffey’s statement, does have some implications. The wanderer proves, not by some dreamy flight, nor by standing totally away from the objects he wishes to convey in

his poetry, that only through diving in the experience itself, being part of it, a poet may reveal the purity of experience, “whatever it may be Williams’ purpose remains the same: to empathize or identify with the thing, not just describe it but to imitate it in words, to allow it to express itself, to give it verbal shape, a voice.” (Gray, 1991:82) A process of regeneration or rebirth will occur after the destructive components of the filthy, sewage-filled Passaic are evened out, allowing for the restoration of the lost Eden.

## 6. Conclusion

Williams’ poetry may seem paradoxical in the sense that it asserts the organic existence of the poem, the importance of freeing the words from their usual associations, yet it does not totally abandon the subjectivity of the poet. The starting point for Williams was not a sudden break as much as it was a process of discovery, and self-consciousness. He realizes that a poet is a witness who, not only relate the history of the community, but also contain things in their originality and deliver them to the universe. “The Wanderer” is the poem that catches this nuance between the romantic subjectivism and the objectivist aestheticism that is a characteristic of modernity. The speaker/wanderer struggles to express two differing modes simultaneously, the first one is the beauty of life as a constant discovery of beauty and truth; the second is determining the social and the personal responsibility of the poet to uncover the beauty and truth he discovers (by means of imagination) to his readers. This struggle reveals an interesting matter about Williams, he is an objectivist who seeks to strengthen and deepen his images of exterior objects, not by subjective statements, but by immersion in pure experience and inviting readers to do the same. The wanderer chooses to follow a muse who is not a mythological figure nor a well-known persona, hoping to be guided by her as he searches for an answer to his question, “how shall I be a mirror to this modernity?” In the beginning, the flight belonged to the poet and it took him to the heights over the woodland, but once the direction changes, he finds himself struck by the scenes of the city and poverty. The moment he decides to accept the historical truth of this modernity marks the moment that he realizes his responsibility as well as his poetic identity. A poet as a wanderer is destined to new beginnings all the time, he is compelled by the changes that take place in the world around him, so he constantly looks for new wanderings. The final baptism in the Passaic river demonstrates that the wanderer knows that to reconcile with the his new consciousness he needs to delve into the experience, and the river, being a place of continuous beginnings and ends is the appropriate place for this ritual. His concentration on “the local,” as he puts it, helped him create a distinctive poetic voice and

themes that are relevant to American culture. Williams' early poems served as the foundation for his Imagism theory, he uses this Imagist view when he says that it is the artist's responsibility to capture an event precisely as it appears, leaving what genuinely impinges on the senses untouched, or when he talks of literary qualities like faithfulness to actual experience. Williams' poetry eventually evolved from being Imagist to being significantly more Modernist.

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### قراءة تصويرية لقصيدة "الجوال" لويليام كارلوس ويليامز

م.م. زهراء طاهر عيسى

#### الملخص

يدرس هذا البحث قصيدة "الجوال" للشاعر ويليام كارلوس ويليامز وهي من أوائل القصائد في مسيرته الشعرية، و ذلك في ضوء واحدة من مبادئ الحركة التصويرية التي تبناها ويليامز، "المعالجة المباشرة للشيء سواء كان ذاتياً أو موضوعياً". على الرغم من تأثر الشاعر بالنزعة المثالية عند الشاعر الرومانتيكي جون كيتس في أعماله الأولى إلا أن قصيدة "الجوال" تظهر محاولته جعل هذه الأيدلوجيا الرومانتيكية نقطة البداية للانطلاق إلى نهج أقرب للتصويرية. يتعقب البحث الرحلة التي خاضها الشاعر (داخل القصيدة) بدءاً من تجواله في عوالم رومانتيكية نزولاً إلى عوالم محلية وحديثة أكثر قام بتصويرها كحلقات وصور. يصل الشاعر إلى ذروة التجربة عندما يقوده التجوال إلى طقس تعميد يعلن من خلاله أنه سيقوم بتجوال جديد يتصف بكونه تصويرياً بحتاً.