
The Poetics of William Carlos Williams: The Use of ‘Rolling’ in *Paterson* as a means of transfiguration of ‘Actual’/ ‘Linguistic’ Space

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In William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* the individual’s association with the land is seen to be essentially libidinal, mingling desire with the stoic, rational approach towards land, and through such a dialectics can be said to change the traditionally assumed relationship between American industrialism and the genre of Pastoralism in Poetry. Although there have been various ways in which critics have studied Williams’ engagement and consequent transformation through language the space that he chooses to describe, in this paper I would like to focus on how the use of the word ‘rolling’ in the preface, firstly, captures the essence of modern American space, where the pastoral is never quite apart from the industrial and secondly conjoins landscape and language not only by effectively transposing the poem’s flow onto the movement of the Passaic, but also by stressing the affective interconnections between the ‘language of the Falls’ and the ‘language of the poet’.

The use of the word ‘rolling’ delineates the manner in which the language of technology becomes incorporated into the language that delineates the interaction of the people with their everyday surroundings. It does so because it contains within itself the dual referential function, at once referring to the Passaic Rolling Mills

industries and also towards the unbridled power of nature as manifested in the rolling Passaic river. “The idyllic section III of Book IV is built around the factory neighbourhood of Paterson below the Falls, and the mills which were powered by the old Race. We first see it in its rustic aspect: then there is a sudden transition to the early days of industrial revolution. Hamilton and L’Enfant’s grandiose plans for an aqueduct to Newark, mentioned earlier in the poem, had vanished, leaving a small town depending on its manufacturers, but still tied to the land.” (qtd in Sankey, 204) The fact that the inhabitants of Paterson are dependent upon the manufacturers but are still tied to the land is the most crucial aspect of American existence that Williams has attempted to capture within the poem.

One can argue thus that by playing upon the word’s dual referential contexts, William Carlos Williams helps bring about the merger of the two kinds of spaces, essentially the ‘space of consumption’ (industrial space) and the ‘consumption of space’¹ (pastoral space). This merger driving forth an eirenic reconciliation between the industrial space and the ‘real’ space generated for the satisfaction of our aesthetic needs is not forced but occurs with the characteristic smoothness of an artist himself trying to build a bridge between aestheticism and rationalism. The merger of these two kinds of spaces (the first being the space of industrial development within the city of Paterson and the other being the space of the ‘elemental’, the unaffected vestiges of nature present to let man enter into a better understanding between himself and the surroundings) show that within the space of industrial America there can be no permanent differentiation between the pastoral and the industrial (This will later be even more apparent by studying the word’s ekphrastic relations to Charles Sheeler’s painting).

The importance that William Carlos Williams gives to the word rolling and the way in which it is intimately connected to the history

of the land that serves as a referent for the poem shows that Williams' understanding of space is very different from the ways in which poets like T.S. Eliot apprehended it-

“Williams feels very keenly about place, a concept which anchors his philosophy of “no ideas but in things”. He disagrees with Eliot’s rather glib assertion in the Quartets that place is only place, and that what is actual is actual only for one place. On the contrary, he believes that only in some one place, and that what is actual is actual only for one place. On the contrary, he believes that only in some one place does the universal ever become actual, and that therefore place is the only universal.”² (Quinn, 92)

William Carlos Williams’s primary objective in writing *Paterson* was to seek out newer ways in which language can relate to the world and how that can help establish a more immediate and intimate relationship between the perceiver and the perceived. In the beginning of *Spring and All*, Williams writes that “There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between”. (pg 501, Rainey) The task of the poet is to devolve this barrier from the level of sensory experience to the level of intentionally correlating the object of sensory experience with the mind that seeks to judge and appreciate it.

The concrete nature of experience remains at once ‘rolling up’ with the meaning-making mechanisms of mind, to gently drive in the fact that “no ideas but in things”-

“To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means”

The word “rolling” is of great significance for understanding William Carlos Williams’ use of language in *Paterson* and also helps to emphasize on the manner in which language bears upon the articulation of space in the poet’s consciousness.³ The repetition of the word “rolling” in the poem *Paterson* has been analysed by critics like Ian D. Copestake who argues that the use of the phrase “rolling up” “gives a sense of movement to the Preface because the continuous use of the phrase in these first pages, reflecting the derivation of the word “rolling” from the Latin “rotula”, meaning a “little wheel” becomes structural. “ Thus, Copestake takes the word “rolling” to be symptomatic of the structure envisaged by Williams for the poem. In a way that is uncharacteristic of Stevens’, Williams makes the word “rolling” the very kernel from which he could investigate and elaborate upon the structure of the poem and also metonymically build a very strong bond with the land that produced it.

On the one hand I find the word “rolling” to be important because it presents itself as the necessary characteristic of a structure (essentially circular) which had very inordinately come to be the defining characteristic of the workings of American society. There is a particular cycle of squalor and disillusionment at work at the very heart of American society where the spiritually barren American woman comes to cause the American man to treat the “earth under our feet” as the “excrement of some sky/ and we degraded prisoners/ destined/ to hunger until we eat filth” (Nelson, 438) The only way out of this vicious cycle for Williams is to create a language that could allow for a co-mingling or “rolling up” of the communication between the male and the female, between man and his environment.

Therefore, the word “rolling” is telling of the manner in which the substance of the poem actually relates to the language used to write the poem. I think also through the etymology of the word “rolling”

we can actually strive to build a very integral relationship between the poem and the history of the city that the poem refers to. In his Autobiography, Williams writes, "I took the city as my "case" to work up, really to work it up...Paterson as Paterson would be discovered, perfect, perfect in the special sense of the poem, to have it- if it rose to flutter into life awhile-it would be as itself, locally, and so like every other place in the world" (Lloyd, 56) This perfect city that Williams refers to can very well be said to prefigure the shape of the proverbial circle, perfect in its conceptualization and the manner in which it is delineated by the poet.

In the late nineteenth century, Paterson had been taken up by American industrialists to be made into a city that would redefine the mightiest industrial cities in the world. Paterson in itself has a rich history as the United States' first planned industrial city, as well as containing some of the country's oldest textile mills and businesses. The Passaic Rolling Mill Company became one of the most famous manufactures of rolled iron and contractors and builders of iron road and railway bridges and similar structures in the whole country. It was the first of the manufacturing centres that was able to supply quickly within itself the necessary material used in its various industries. It thus came to re-define the logic of self-sufficient industry and we find that the foregrounding of the word rolling by Williams in the Preface to the poem actually can be taken to be unconsciously hinting at this ideal of self-sufficient industries, something that for him was the necessary ideal of development for America.

David Trotter in his book *The Making of the Reader* talks of the many ways in which economy serves as a primary foil to the writer's choice of language. He quotes the words of Antonio Gramsci who enumerates the ways in which capitalism has actually engendered a new type of work in America, "In America 'rationalization' has determined the need to elaborate a new type of man suited to the new

type of work and productive process' [...] technology would purge the old type of man, the 'sedimentations of idle and useless masses living on "their ancestral patrimony", pensioners of economic history'." (Trotter, 56) We can see that Gramsci is here delineating an experience that is not negatively dependent upon the forces of technology. Instead, technology is seen to be engendering a new kind of being, giving rise to new beginnings, transforming the perception of reality. By letting the word's industrial referent co-exist with the particulars of everyday life it becomes apparent that Williams was accommodative of the practices of technology, of the changes it introduced into the lived space and the way in which it transformed the relations between the individuals as well.

The word "rolling" does not appear to retain any distinctions between the "particulars" that Williams talks of and girdles up all the myriad differences present between the "things" to-

"roll[ing] up out of chaos
a nine months' wonder, the city
the man, an identity"

Don Scheese in his assessment of the relationship between the human and the non-human states, "the nonhuman environment is a dominant character in the worlds both inside and outside the text; [...] authors themselves subscribe to this belief; [...] and an important interaction occurs between nonhuman environment and author, place and text, which can result in [an] insistence on the primacy of a physical world." (Scheese, 8) In Williams' poetry we certainly find that there is not merely an emphasis on the "primacy" of the external world, but there is an active interaction between the human beings and their environment through whose mutual interaction the separate subjectivities actually come to form themselves. The word 'rolling' becomes the protean symbol around which the imaginative powers of Paterson can be centred. The word in itself through the myriad

associations that it draws in into the poem (primarily through the unconscious of language) actually helps calibrate the readers' experience of the actual, physical world and at the same time draw further illumination about the manner in which language functions to delineate the nature of man's experience of space. The phrase from Paterson that has come to be identical with Williams' poetic thought, "No ideas but in things", takes on a different meaning here all together because one finds that Williams' concern wasn't merely to separate the idea from the thing or to discount its existence, but actually to see it in close and intimate relation with the objects, in this case, the Passaic River (it's influence upon the lives of the people, its ability to produce enough water power to at once supply manufactured goods for the whole of America) and the Rolling Mills.

The unconscious of language which is at work through the use of the word 'rolling' also comes to be very significant when seen in light of the existing tradition of landscape poetry, thus allowing us to penetrate into the foliage of human thought pruning and re-pruning the world around itself in order to better understand the network of affects that are held in place around the individual and his space. Denise Riley in *The Words of Selves*, states that the author, no matter how hard he tries to keep his words from wayward associations, always comes to be "dethroned authorially" by being "spoken across by words (by the word's anarchic sound associations, by their echoing of other's speech)" (Riley, 2). This fact comes to be very important when seen in light of Williams' ceaseless desire to craft a language that was singularly American. Riley goes on to state that the manner in which the artist comes to make peace with the infinite ramifications of words and their affective cadence gets decided when the artist is able to locate the "solid history of words in the world". (Riley, 73 It is with regard to this that the use of the word "rolling" becomes significant as we find Williams insinuating himself into a

long intellectual tradition of poets attempting to delineate the space around them, through words that betray their affective connect with their surroundings.

In ‘Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey’, Wordsworth can also be seen making copious use of the word ‘rolling’.

“and again I hear

These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs

With a soft inland murmur. – Once again”

We are aware of the fact that the Wye River Valley was the site of a big ironworks industry and as critics like John Bard McNulty say, Wordsworth made no disguises to the fact that the landscape was actually infiltrated by objects that were vestiges of modern day civilization. However, we find that though Wordsworth was actually genuine in his description of the landscape, yet he was not completely able to separate the object world from his own poetic self and this attempt to differentiate reality from actuality actually led to the creation of a poetic reality that was interfused by the consciousness of the poet. The adjectival positions of “blue”, “round”, “living” etc before the objects are telling of that -

“And I have felt

A presence that disturbs me with the joy

Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky and the mind of Man

A motion and a spirit, that impels

All thinking things, all objects of all thoughts

And rolls through all things.”

The word “roll” thus comes to serve the purpose of a poetic consciousness that attempts to merge the idea so completely with the

thing, that in the end what remains is merely just another assertion of the idea, in the form of the imagination actively structuring the creative process of the poet.

In Williams' poem however we find, there is an understanding of the fact that the world as it appears to us in the form of ideas is a distortion of the external world that exists objectively, independent of our attempts to structure it into our consciousness. With Wordsworth, there is the feeling that the knowledge of the world is indeed "rolled" up in the course of our thought, but with Williams there is the genuine assertion of the fact that our knowledge of the world is at best incomplete and this can be read into the positioning of the word "rolling" in the Preface to Paterson. The word "rolling" is positioned either at the end of enjambed lines or placed in close proximity with each other through the omission of conjunctions, that almost give the verb a noun like quality.

Again, if we want to study how the verb "rolling" appears with relation to land in traditional American poetry, we can take an example from Emerson's poem-

"Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird;—
Beauty through my senses stole;
I yielded myself to the perfect whole." (Emerson, 9)⁴

Here, the word has completely been stripped of its primal energies, and has been reduced to a mere qualifier, which is again in keeping with the larger romantic argument of making nature co-extensive with the subjective self. ("I yielded myself to the perfect whole"). However, in William's preface, we find that the word retains its enigmatic energies and effectively combines nature's wilderness, the nation's industrial fantasies, all through the perspective of a poet who sought to see the mechanical as nourishing the aesthetical experience of a city.

Again, I want to also argue that the word rolling also brings in many ekphrastic associations into the poem that also works to insert the poem in a different manner into the grander meta-narrative of American culture. Charles Sheeler, a precisionist painter of the same time as Williams (and also his close friend) had very much influenced Williams' perception of reality. William comments on his works saying, "I think Sheeler is particularly valuable because of the bewildering directness of his vision, without blur, through the fantastic overlay with which our lives are so vastly concerned, "the real" as we say, contrasted with the artist's fabrication". (Williams, 231-232) I find that there can be a trajectory drawn between the works of Charles Sheeler made in the 1940s, a collection of five paintings under the title *Power*, of which the painting 'Rolling Power' bears many formal similarities with the structure of the preface.

In the painting, Sheeler, rather than showing the entire engine or train, instead depicts two drive wheels, a bogie wheel, and engine parts of a Hudson-type New York Central locomotive designed by Henry Dreyfuss. The minimalistic manner in which Sheeler paints the painting is in fact admirable and in keeping with his understanding to render reality poised at the very delicate precipice of what a man knows and what a man sees. Sheeler painted it in pristine condition in a palette of browns and grays, and the only trace of movement in the painting is the vapour that exudes at the bottom right from the engine. In Williams' poem as well, we find that the proliferation of asyndetons do not actually yield up a sense of energy or vividness as we find that they often are present to serve the function of apposition. The lines,

"Rolling in, top up,
Under, thrust and recoil, a great clatter:
Lifted as air"

Attempt to delineate motion of the river but the movement of “great clatter” is carefully balanced in Williams’ workings of the variable foot. From this we can actually argue that language can actually help present an ironic diminution of real space, (a thing that had already been showcased in Sheeler’s works.)⁵

The word ‘rolling’ within the space of the poem can thus be seen as playing upon its various referential contexts to free itself from its proverbial ankylosis in history whether it be through apathetic usage or by the calcification of the relation of arbitrariness between the meaning of the linguistic utterance and the manner of its expression, and through its own polysemous nature stress upon the multivalent nature of the space that engenders it and that it seeks to describe.

End Notes:

1. Henri Lefebvre calls the ‘space of consumption’ to be the space “which coincides with the historical locations of capital accumulation, with the space of production, and with the space that is produced [...] a space which the state controls- a space, therefore, that is strictly quantified.” (Lefebvre, 352) On the other hand, the ‘consumption of space’ is the space that is qualitative, the space that is aesthetically pleasing, the space that can be said to improve the quality of life.

2. On being questioned on the validity of his views formulated in a lifetime spent in a small city, Williams gives his apology, “We live only in one place at a time but far from being bound by it, only through it do we realize our freedom. Place then ceases to be a restriction, we do not have to abandon our familiar and known to achieve distinction but far from constricting ourselves, not searching for some release in some particular place, rather in that place, if we only make ourselves sufficiently aware of it, do join with others in other places”. (Quarterly review, 126)

3. Regarding the functionality of verbs, Fenollosa puts forward the argument that a new science could make progress in getting at the nature of things only if it refused to submit to the authority of classificatory logic. Then it might discover “how functions cohere in things” because it could express its results “in grouped sentences which embody no nouns or adjectives but verbs of special character.” Correspondingly Chinese writing teaches us that poetry is richest when it “agrees with science, not with logic”: “The moment we use the copula, the moment we express subjective inclusion, poetry evaporates. The more concretely we express the interactions of things, the better the poetry.” “The true formula for thought is: the cherry tree is all that it does. Its correlated verbs compose it.” (Altieri, 45) The verb “rolling” thus becomes very effective in the manner in which it brings out the material nature of language effectively transposing

itself onto the movement of the river, one of the most crucial symbols in the poem for maintaining a continuous relationship between nature and man.

4. Emerson's choice of words also needs to be seen in the manner in which he perceives land to be physically possessed by man (and not just mentally),"The charming landscape which I saw this morning, is indubitably made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns the field, Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eyes can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet. This is the best part of all these men's farms, yet to this their land-deeds give them no title". (Nature, 1836) We can obviously chart the difference in which the use and exchange value of land comes to be quantified within the theories of Marx. The representation of land becomes problematic in light of the fact that it at once retains a relationship with the idea that "land is the ultimate wealth" and is at the same time impervious to human possession while at the same time quantifying it in the form of aesthetic property. Perhaps the reason why for Emerson the possession of land is 'un-tabooed' within the space of the poem is because in the early nineteenth century, landscape could more effectively hide the social relations that were integral to its formation.

5. Charles Sheeler's works had been influential on Williams also by way of helping him to locate the object of representation in the artist's consciousness. Williams says with regard to his paintings, "His paintings give the impression that his subjects have happened to him: he has been able to find the form which expresses reality more truly than their original, natural shapes." (Rourke, 181) Again, Williams says, "I think Sheeler is particularly valuable because of the bewildering directness of his vision, without blur, through the fantastic overlay with which our lives are so vastly concerned, "the real", as we say, contrasted with the artist's "fabrication". [...] It is the measurable disproportion between what a man sees and knows that give the artist his opportunity. He is the watcher and surveyor of that world where the past is always occurring contemporaneously and the present always dead needing a miracle of resuscitation to revive it" (qtd in Ostrom, 18) The manner in which the craft of seeing can actually transform the object of perception can be clearly seen in Charles Sheeler's 'American Landscape'. The very title of the painting is telling of the fact that Sheeler wanted to envision the industrialized American landscape as a "modern Arcadia." (Danly and Marx, 140) The painting showcases all the hallmarks of classical landscape painting and as Dominic Riccotti notes, "[is] in keeping with a classical spatial system, add[ing] more breadth and depth" (Danly and Marx, 142). However Riccotti states, "For all its deliberate classicism, Sheeler's image of the landscape is nonetheless "American" because it acknowledges the economic transformation of the land while recalling through its design vision of the once natural landscape." (ibid) For Riccotti, this actually helps establish an association between the modern painting and the tradition of landscape art in America (as shown earlier the word 'rolling' also helps establish a connection between modern poetry and the tradition of landscape poetry in Europe and America).

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