

Pressed Flowers, Crushed Sparrows, and the Posthumanist Variable Foot in William Carlos Williams's *A Journey To Love*

Among the expected stacks of correspondence, photographs and early drafts that fill the boxes of the William Carlos Williams collection at Beinecke Library, there is a more unusual object: a notebook of pressed flowers, gathered by Williams in Switzerland and Italy. While the artefact may initially seem innocuous, it ultimately challenges the pervasive characterisation of Williams as a poet who, above all else, respected the integrity of material objects. Critics often read Williams's economic imagery and his reluctance to impose symbolic or metrical conventions upon the objects he depicts as means of minimising the impact of his own poetic language upon the trees, flowers, plums, wheelbarrows, chickens and human beings that occupy his most renowned poems. Within the context of Williams's representation of nature, ecocritics have read these tendencies as indicative of Williams's desire to offer an immediate and unmediated representation of nature and, in doing so, minimize his own impact upon the integrity of the natural world. Not only do these readings oversimplify Williams's use of language, they are also predicated on the problematic assumption that poetic language and human subjectivity can be abstracted from its place within the natural world. By casting Williams as a benign observer and preserver of natural objects, these reading often draw upon outdated humanist paradigms that cast the human subject as a disembodied consciousness and language as a transparent medium that can be abstracted from its place in the material world. Fortunately, the book of flattened and decaying flowers among Williams's papers persist to remind us what Williams himself certainly knew: that no object, natural or otherwise, can be preserved within a book without some form of impact or distortion. Nowhere is this sentiment echoed more clearly than in Williams's 1955 book *Journey to Love*. The book is replete with images of ruptured, damaged and compressed objects: flowers are picked, wrapped, faded, dried and pressed, sparrows are flattened into the road by car tires, the horizon is severed from the sky by the framing of a photograph, and even the mind of the aging poet seems to be fading away by the ravages of time. Significantly, it is at this stage of his career that Williams's poetry takes on an unprecedented formality; like the pressed flowers in the book or the sparrow beneath the car tyre, the poetic lines of *Journey to Love* are crushed arbitrarily into the triadic-line structure of the variable foot. This paper will conduct a posthumanist reading of the ways in which this parallel distortion and compression of the object, the poet's subjectivity and the poetic line within *Journey to Love* is used to situate humans, animals, plants and words as equal heteronomous members of the material landscape. As such, I will raise the provocative suggestion that the variable foot constitutes the culmination of Williams's posthumanist poetics, a poetics that refuses to ignore the instability and contingency of both

language and human subjectivity and, as such, destabilizes traditional distinctions and hierarchies between human subjectivity and the natural, technological and historical world.

1. The Perfect Human Touch

Throughout his career, Williams earned a reputation as a poet dedicated to preserving and celebrating the integrity and inherent value of material and natural objects. This reputation emerges primarily from his most commonly-anthologized and, as such, most recognisable poems, particularly those from his 1923 collection *Spring and All*. In poems such as “The Red Wheelbarrow,” Williams’s economical imagery and characteristic aversion to symbolism and conventional Western metric structures can be read as an attempt to liberate the object from the poet’s gaze and allow it to stand for itself. When it comes to the nature poems within *Spring and All*, Williams’s respectful approach to his subject matter becomes even more pronounced. As Mark Long points out in his chapter on Williams in the 2002 collection *Ecopoetry: A Critical Introduction*, a majority of the ecocritical readings of these poems focus on the “immediacy” with which Williams represents nature, seemingly allowing his readers to experience the natural object directly (60). Indeed, within *Spring and All*, poems such as “The Rose”, “Rigamarole” and “The Avenue of Poplars” embody a desire, on behalf of the poet, to step back and minimize the impact of the poetic voice upon the trees, flowers and natural landscapes that inhabit the poems. Most notably, in “The Rose” Williams attempts to liberate a natural object, the rose, from its burdensome function as a symbol in Western verse. After first proclaiming that “the rose is obsolete,” the narrator goes on to clarify that the rose has not lost all value in itself; rather it has been, or rather should be, stripped of its role as a passive symbolic receptacle for abstract human emotions:

the rose carried weight of love
but love is at an end – of roses (107-108)

As such, Williams aims to situate the rose outside the limiting structures of human logic and perception, instead embracing the dynamism and multiplicity of its potential forms. Liberated from the single, static perspective of the cultural imagination that would use it as a vessel for abstract human ideals, the rose becomes an undefined multiplicity of fleeting and disjointed material features:

Sharper, neater, more cutting
Figured in majolica...

Plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching (108)

Williams's desire to rid his poem of all vestiges of the human gaze that might confine the rose is reflected in his rejection of classical Western human logic. So much so is apparent in the use of paradox within the poem ("cuts without cutting", the "infinitely rigid... fragility of the flower") and also in the syntactical disruptions of the verse. Williams uses incomplete clauses, parataxis and interjections to disrupt the paradigms of linear logic implicit in conventional syntax. For example, consider the following lines:

Crisp, worked to defeat
laboredness – fragile
Plucked, moist, half-raised
cold, precise, touching

What
The place between the petal's
end and the (108)

Williams's use of parataxis challenges the reader's expectation of an underlying linear logic to the description; the list of disjointed attributes refuses to confine the object of the rose to a single idea. The interjection of "What" is similarly antilogical; it is cut off from the preceding and succeeding lines by the capitalisation of both "The" and "What" respectively. Furthermore, the absence of a question mark (as in the earlier line "whither?") suggests that the line should not be read as a logical interjection. Thus, stripped of all syntactical value, the word stands, like the rose itself, as a mere object, freed from its subservience to the syntax of human meaning. The unfinished clause at the end of this passage, "the place between the petal's end and the" invites the suggestion that there is a truth to the natural object of the rose that lies beyond the limits of human expression and can, as such, only be expressed through silence.

As such, Williams attempts to rid the poem of a single, human perspective. Rather than depicting the rose from a single point of view, the poem evokes a non-Euclidian geometry in which the very structures of spatiality extend outwards from the edge of the flower:

From the petal's edge a line starts
that being of steel
infinitely fine, infinitely
rigid penetrates
the Milky Way (108)

The logic of Williams's fragmented verse seems to emerge, like the infinitely fine spatial threads within the poem, from the rose itself. The rational structures of Western thought, the metronomic poetic meter and the traditional Euclidean spatial grid, structures intended to

fragment the continuum of the material world into discrete chunks for rational human consideration, are thrust aside in favor of a poetics of indeterminacy and fluidity. "The Rose" constitutes the most dramatic example of Williams's humble poetics, in which the poetic voice, and the human subject, must step back and allow the natural object to exist for itself, outside the constraints of human perspective, logic and language.

In his essay, *The Eco-poetics of Perfection: William Carlos Williams and Nature in Spring and All*, Josh Wallaert argues that Williams's reluctance to impose what he saws the artificial syntax and structures of human rationality upon the natural subject matter of his poetry constitutes a radical "ecopoetics of perfection" (8). Wallaert argues that, in *Spring and All*, Williams attempts to strip the human voice of the transformative and destructive agency implicit within the active verb "to do":

When it comes to nature, it should always be remembered that the verb "to do" facilitates a power that is not merely grammatical, a power that has measurable effects in the physical world. When we "do" unto nature, we are agents of change; we clear forests, we drain watersheds, we move mountains with dynamite and drills. (86)

According to Wallaert, Williams recognizes that to define the action of a natural object by confining it to a single moment, is to preclude all potential experiences of the object and, as such, to render the phenomena of the natural world solely as the static phenomenological experiences of a single human perspective. Wallaert identifies Williams's use of present perfective tense in poem such as "To Have Done Nothing" as one of the means by which Williams avoids such temporalisation:

which only to
have done nothing
can make
perfect (*Spring and All*, 105)

As Wallaert argues, Williams represents his own perfective ethics and poetics as analogous to the passivity of moonlight. Examining "Rigamarole", Wallaert argues that, like the gentle light of the moon, Williams's poetic voice is capable of illuminating the natural object it without allowing it to be damaged or confined (89).

so that now at least
the truth's aglow

with devilish peace
forestalling day

which dawns tomorrow

with dreadful reds

the heart to predicate

with mists that loved

the ocean and the fields –

Thus moonlight

is the perfect

human touch (142)

According to Wallaert, the “perfect human touch” is one that allows natural objects to exist outside the limiting perspective of human perceptions of time and space “without temporalizing them, without making them *do* or even *be* anything” (Wallaert, 89).

2. Ecocriticism and Posthumanism

While Wallaert’s reading may be appealing, particularly to those who wish to cite Williams as a precursor to ecocritical thought, the characterisation of Williams’s “perfect human touch” is limited in a number of ways. The main issue with Wallaert’s thesis is that it relies on the assumption that human activity and poetic language can indeed be abstracted from the natural landscape. Many contemporary ecocriticism, however, recognise that to claim such a detachment between the human imagination and the natural landscape is impossible.

Cheryll Glotfelty explains in her introduction to *The Ecocriticism Reader*, that

Literature does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether, but, rather, plays a part in an immensely complex global system, in which energy, matter, *and ideas* interact. (xix)

Interestingly, while Wallaert’s reading of Williams’s moon analogy fails to account for the very real interactions of energy, matter and ideas within the writing process, Williams himself does not. While Wallert reads Williams’s image of the moon as the transcendent, disembodied poet, capable of representing nature without contact or impact, Williams himself shows that the moon, like the poet, is never passive, but rather is forever engaged in an intimately physical relationship with the natural world. In “The Sea”, three poems before “Rigamarole”, he writes:

coom barroom –

It is the cold of the sea

broken upon the sand by the force
of the moon— (*Spring and All*, 137)

The idea that the human imagination can float above the world, abstracted from physical contact, is premised upon problematic humanist dualisms between the the human subject and the natural world. Within this dualism, the human is imagined as a disembodied consciousness, in full command of the transparent medium of language, while the natural world is rendered static and atemporal. The distance between human observer and the natural world not only implies a hierarchy between humanity and nature, but also obfuscates the proximity between human action and the natural world. To imply that the human imagination can indeed transcend the material world is to ignore the very real violence that the human imagination can exert upon nature. “The Rose” is guilty of this, and the result is a rose that is hard, static, timeless and invulnerable; it has “facets” like gemstone, it is “metal or porcelain” and “steel”, it is “figured in majolica”, it is “cold” and it penetrates the world “without contact” (108). Only if humanity can imagine its own transcendence can the rose be left “unbruised” by the poem:

The fragility of the flower
unbruised
penetrates spaces (109)

By representing the rose as timeless and infinite, the poem loses sight of the very fragility of nature that inspired the poem in the first place. Williams’s representation of the unconstrained, infinite rose suggests that there has always been, and always will be, roses.

As I am suggesting, it is not enough for poets to merely distance themselves from nature. As Greg Garrard defines in his book *Ecocriticism*, ecocriticism requires

the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term ‘human’ itself. (5)

Garrard rightly points out that ecocriticism must entail a critique of the humanist paradigms, the legacies of enlightenment reasoning, that distinguish humanity from nature. The humanist characterisation of the subject as a disembodied mind, both critically distant from and sovereign to the material world of nature, must be deconstructed. In this sense, ecocriticism goes hand in hand with the critical movement of posthumanism. The term posthumanism is an intimidating one; it has been used to describe everything from authoritarian fantasies of human perfectibility and eugenic ideology to the anti-hierarchical and empathetic feminist ethics of theorists such as Donna Haraway. Within this context, however, I follow the contemporary definition of the term, laid down by critics such as Cary Wolfe. As Cary Wolfe defines, in his 2009 book *What is Posthumanism*,

Posthumanism in my sense isn't posthuman at all – in the sense of being “after” our embodiment has been transcended – but it is only posthumanist, in the sense that it opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy inherited from humanism itself... (Wolfe, xv)

From this perspective, posthumanism isn't about transcending or abandoning the human. Nor is it about stripping the poem of the human perspective. Rather, it is about abandoning the very notions of immediacy, transparency of language, transcendence and disembodiment that allow humanity to distance itself from their proximity to the natural world. Posthumanist critique allows us to challenge the assumptions of human subjectivity and language that are often taken for granted within the discussion of poetry. Furthermore, it offers us a critical lens for examining the way in which literature establishes, or challenges, cultural binaries and boundaries between humanity and the material, technological and natural world. Within the context of this examination, what posthumanism offers us is this: not an idealistic and naive narrative about Williams's respect for objects, but rather an understanding of the extent to which his poetry is critical of or complicit in the humanist myths of disembodied subjectivity and transparency of language that obfuscates the violence of human activity on the natural landscape. Posthumanism offers us critical reaffirmation of the fact that no human mind and no poem can be truly abstracted from the material world; as such, no poet, poem nor any rose can emerge from an interaction “unbruised”.

3. The Violence of *Journey To Love*

This is what is so fascinating about Williams's 1955 book *Journey to Love*; in stark contrast to the “unbruised” rose in *Spring and All*, this collection is replete with images of ruptured, damaged and compressed natural objects. Flowers are pressed and dried in “Asphodel”, children violently pick and crush flowers in “The Ivy Crown”, weeds are attacked in “Pink Locust”, a sparrow is flattened into the pavement by a car tire in “The Sparrow” and the sky and horizon are severed from the world by the framing of a photograph in “View by Color Photography on a Commercial Calendar”. Within these images, the human imagination and the natural world are forced into close proximity; the “human touch” presented within the book is certainly a physical, and often violent, force. And yet, as in *Spring and All*, the poems are also underscored by a deep appreciation for the beauty of the natural world. This tension is perhaps best embodied in the image of the pressed flowers in “Asphodel.”

Give me time,

time.

When I was a boy

I kept a book
to which, from time
to time,
I added pressed flowers
until, after a time,
I had a good collection.
The asphodel,
forebodingly,
among them. (312)

This image embodies a complexity that vastly surpasses the naive desire to respectfully distance oneself from nature that underpins “The Rose”. On one hand, the process of pressing flowers indicates an appreciation of natural forms, and a desire to preserve the beauty of the natural object. On the other hand, the act of pressing flowers within a notebook constitutes, not just a violent act of force against a natural object, but also futile abstract the flower from the natural process of decay. Unlike the infinite, atemporal rose imagined in “The Rose” even the most well preserved pressed flowers will inevitably fade and decompose.¹ The image of the pressed flowers seems to suggest a truth that Williams would come to terms with by the end of his career: that all forms of creation, including poetry, are predicated upon the same processes of growth, flux, decay and death that defines the natural world.

Yet what is interesting about *Journey to Love* is that Williams no longer distances his own subjectivity, nor his own poetry from these processes. The poet’s voice is revealed as both complicit and subject to the destructive forces of man and nature. Temporality and morality drive the poetic voice. In his book *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist*, James E. Breslin notes the “the strong sense of loss, fading, and mutability with which the poem begins”, And indeed, the poetic voice is underscored by a profound sense of fragility:

Today
I’m filled with the fading memory of those flowers
that we both loved, (Williams, 311)

Time impacts upon the rhythms and structures of the poetic voice. The urgency of the narration gives a very real sense that the poem is being composed within a temporal space, by a poet whose time is rapidly coming to an end:

There is something
something urgent
I have to say to you

¹ The passage of time inhabits the poem both figuratively and literally. Not that the word “time” appears a total of five times within the quoted passage above.

and you alone
but it must wait
while I drink in
the joy of your approach,
perhaps for the last time.

And so
with fear in my heart
I drag it out
and keep talking
for I dare not stop,
Listen while I talk on
against time.

It will not be
for long. (Williams, 311)

Unlike the seemingly-detached observed in “The Rose,” in “Asphodel” the poet himself is finally revealed as organic, temporal and material. His subjectivity, and his poetry, like any other natural phenomenon, appears for a moment only to be dissolved into time:

But the words
made solely of air
or less,
that came to me
out of the air
and insisted
on being written down,
I regret most –
that there has come an end
to them. (325)

As Long points out, when Williams's nature poetry succeeds, it succeeds not by bridging the gulf between the binary opposites of humanity and nature, rather it recognizes the the synonymy and proximity of human activity and the natural world:

The crucial point is that Williams's poetics looks not back at re-establishing a lost connection with the world because, as I have said, we are always already in that world. Rather the problem the poet faces is looking forward to the ways we are able to become present to the possibilities of the phenomenal world where we have been living all along. (Long, 65)

This is certainly what is being achieved in *Journey to Love*. This too, according to Julie Clarke, is precisely the point of posthumanism:

Historically humanist discourse has defined the human in opposition to the animal or technological, however this has been complicated by the emergence of posthumanists who do not draw such clear distinctions. Indeed posthumanists expose the posthuman as a condition that humanity has always occupied, that is, of a continued reliance on technology and non-human others. (Clarke, 2)

In *Journey to Love*, Williams has stripped himself of many of the comforting illusions of humanist thought. He recognizes that he is not a disembodied subjectivity, nor is he in full command of his poem. Rather, he, and his words, are members of a material system, capable of exerting violence and capable of being the subject to violence.

4. The Variable Foot

Most interestingly, in *Journey to Love*, the violent crushing of flowers, weeds, sparrows, horizons, and even the fragmentation of the poet's aging mind, is represented as directly analogous to the act of writing poetry itself. In "The Sparrow," Williams describes the flattened body of the bird as the "poem / of his existence."

Practical to the end,
 it is the poem
 of his existence
that triumphed
 finally;
 a whisp of feathers
flattened to the pavement
 wings spread symmetrically
 as if in flight
the head gone,
 the black escutcheon of the breast
 undecipherable, (294-295)

Here, Williams gives us a valuable key to interpreting the crowning achievement of his later career: the variable foot. In his book *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, Sayre rejects the notion that the variable foot is implicitly connected with the material world. Most significantly, he refutes the association of the variable foot with Charles Olson's theories of breath:

It is *vision*, not sound, that the "variable foot" depends on. And his form is arbitrary, imposed upon his subject matter, not organically derived from it. (Sayre, 4)

As such, Sayre claims that the structure of the poem derives from the human mind and not, as Olson might claim, from the physical world: "In the simplest terms, the visual is the mind's dimension; the aural, the world's" (Sayre, 4). Though I agree with his emphasis on the

arbitrariness and impositional quality of the variable foot, Sayre's distinction between the visual and the physical worlds both rests on outdated humanist dualisms between body and mind and ignores the physicality with which Williams describes his visual poetry. The sparrow, after all, is described with "head gone" (295). For Williams, the process of creating visual poetry was an inherently concrete task. During a discussion with Allen Ginsberg, Williams described the process of creating poetry as: "I just try to squeeze the lines up into pictures." (qtd. in Ginsberg, 4) The writing of a poem is never an abstract mental task for Williams.

As suggested earlier, Williams equates poetry with taking material words "made solely of air" and compressing them into a structure based primarily on the arbitrary beginning and ending of lines. Like Sayre, I agree that this process is "arbitrary, imposed on his subject matter." However, I do not believe that it is imposed by some abstract human sensibility. Rather, the arbitrary and material cessation of lines, disconnected from any greater significance, seems to follow the same logic of natural mortality that inhabits the books. Like the crushed sparrow, the pressed flowers, the fragmented horizon, the fading mind of the dying poet, even the lines of verse are crushed, confined, and brought to an end by the sudden and arbitrary end point that all natural, temporal and mortal objects share. It is no surprise that, in *Journey to Love*, Williams abandons the free verse that defined works such as *Spring and All*. To be truly free is to escape all external forces, and such a concept is no longer possible. Here Williams recognizes that, just as nature can not be free of the violence of humankind, just as humankind can not be free of its entwinement in the material world, neither can a poem even be truly free of formal constraint. The variable foot then, in my mind, is no more than the poetics of the mortal human who, in a surprisingly radical gesture, refuses to turn a blind eye to his own mortality, nor the fragility and materiality of his word and, rather than appealing to a transcendent or idyllic meaning, or escaping into illusions of objective rationality, instead bases his own poetic structure upon the natural arbitrariness that he believes unites all participants upon the material plane. The common ground between the poet, the poem and the natural object can only be found in the forces of the material world that break down the barriers between the no-longer discrete forms of words, humans animals and plants. For Williams, these are the forces that drive his poetry: death, the imagination and, ultimately, love:

It was the love of love,
the love that swallows up all else,
a grateful love,
a love of nature, of people
animals,

a love engendering
gentleness and goodness
that moved me
and *that* I saw in you. (317)

In *Journey to Love*, we can see that Williams's eco-poetics combines a profound humanistic empathy and respect for the humans, animals, plants and objects with whom he shares the world with a deep seated posthumanism that refuses to abstract human subjectivity from the material realm of nature. And in this refusal, the figure of man, traditionally isolated by humanist thought as uniquely rational, self-determining and sovereign to the world, is brought to a sense of equality with the other subjects of the material world. Williams's posthumanism, and his ecocriticism, is founded not upon humanity's capacity for transcendence, but upon the virtues of recognising its vulnerabilities and limits.

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