

Imaginative Sexuality in *Al Que Quiere!* and *Spring and All*

Williams remarks in *Spring and All* that “poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination.” Though this statement may at first remind one of Imagism, it underscores, particularly when read in context with the two poems that immediately follow it in that volume, one of the key differences between Williams’ poetics and Imagism. The Imagist poem, per Pound’s tenets, aims at the “direct treatment” of the thing it describes, hoping to shear off any extraneous matter (or words). But Williams’ poetry is not concerned with the thing itself but rather with the imagination. When Williams’ poetry does center around the sort of “thing” treated in Pound’s or H.D.’s Imagism (by which I mean a specific object existing in space and time), he is less interested in gaining direct access to that “thing” and more interested in how the imagination reacts when interacting with it. A characteristic example from *Al Que Quiere!* would be “The Ogre,” a poem inspired by Williams seeing a young girl pushing a toy shopping cart. Were “The Ogre” an Imagist poem, it would be chiefly concerned with the girl herself, but Williams’ poem focuses not on the girl but on what his imagination does when he sees the girl. The poem attends not to the thing that inspires the imagination but the imagination itself, specifically here the reaction of the imagination to the stimulus of seeing a young girl pushing a shopping cart.

To a degree then, especially given the universality of Williams’ statement from *Spring and All*, one could say that *all* of Williams’ poetry is ultimately about the imagination. These poems ask first “How does the imagination respond to this specific idea or situation?” and second, more broadly, “What does the imagination do in general?” It is true that Williams’ poems are frequently occasional (or at least have the appearance of being occasional) and seem to be directly inspired by his interaction with objects in the phenomenological world (i.e. seeing the young girl in “The Ogre”). But Williams does not aim to describe these objects with precision nor does he attempt to

restrict his observations, as the Imagists do, to the phenomenological. Instead, Williams is interested in the world of the imagination, and so his poems present a series of investigations into both how the imagination reacts to certain stimuli (sometimes individual and phenomenological, sometimes not), and, when one views his entire body of work as a whole, also with the central question “What are the things that the imagination does?” If the imagination exists as the subject for all of Williams’ poetry, then each poem presents a response to that question. It seems that Williams hoped that the such explorations could address a variety of issues, including a better understanding of the human experience and the freedom from the restrictions of the technological world. Such things, along with others, cannot come through knowledge of one aspect of the imagination but must instead come through a purposeful understanding (and then poetic employment) of the entirety of the imaginative faculties. Through this concentrated application, one may begin to harness imagination’s potential to re-construct the world. I do not believe that Williams felt that he ever truly achieved a perfect understanding of what it means to be human or a total escape from the technological nor that he believed that such goals could ever be accomplished in their entirety. But this does not de-value the creation of poetry that moves in such directions.

Answers as to what the imagination does vary from poem to poem, but these individual answers present larger, more cohesive responses. Throughout his work, we see the imagination *doing* certain things; it explores, it contemplates, it describes, and so on. One aspect was clearly on Williams’ mind when he made the statement from *Spring and All*: the imagination eroticizes, it turns the things that it sees sexual. The two poems that follow Williams’ statement are “Rigmarole” and “The Avenue of the Poplars,” both of which present a look at the sexual side of the imagination.

Before I continue, I must provide a few qualifying statements. Williams' investigations were not scientific in nature. He employed no real methodology in treating the imagination from poem to poem, and, even as patterns emerge, they do not do so along the lines of the "-isms" that were springing about in the first half of the twentieth century. Though these poetic investigations represent Williams' attempts to answer larger questions about the imagination, he does not, even in *Spring and All*, present a manifesto on what poetry must look like and how poetry must accomplish its goals. Prescriptive methodology is not a Williamsian concept. Additionally, though I have outlined a few of the things that Williams sees the imagination doing, I have not attempted to create a comprehensive schema. Williams did not intend for his answers to this question to be comprehensive, and, though one might reasonably argue that he spent his career attempting to delineate as many aspects of the imagination as he could, he did not believe that one could ever succeed in outlining them all nor that schematizing the imagination would be a productive task. Schematization (by which I meant trying to identify the limits of the imagination and to organize what falls inside of those boundaries) is also not a Williamsian concept. In contrast, the Williamsian imagination is characterized not by its limits but by its limitlessness. More so than perhaps any other twentieth-century American poet, Williams saw the imagination as an infinitely expansive realm. Though a poet can investigate it, he or she can never see all of it, in part because these investigations are restricted by the experiences and abilities of the poet.

To return to the poems I mentioned earlier, Williams connected his claim about what poetry does with one specific aspect of the imagination: the sexual. However, his investigations into imagination's sexuality certainly did not begin with *Spring and All*. Earlier poems, particularly ones in *Al Que Quiere!*, also focus on this aspect of the imagination, especially poems like "Winter Quiet," "Dawn," and the three poems entitled "Love Song." These poems, when read

alongside “Rigmarole” and “The Avenue of the Poplars,” give readers a fuller understanding of the sexual aspect of imagination.

As is often the case with Williams, these poems find their subject matter in the natural world. All of these poems link the natural world with human sexuality. These poems connect nature and the sexual. Williams did not explore the sexuality of the imagination exclusively by means of the natural, but, given my time restraints, I have thought it wise to take a closer look at one specific means (or, in this case, connection) by which Williams conducted such investigations.

In some of these poems, the human and the natural are explicitly collapsed into one another. In the final stanza of the second “Love Song,” Williams and his lover become “a burst of fragrance / from black branches.” In the third “Love Song,” the lover becomes a “stain of love,” on the world, which “eats into the leaves” and “smears” branches “with saffron.” This “honey-thick stain...drips from leaf to leaf” and ends up “spoiling the colors / of the whole world.” This collapsing move finds its most concentrated expression in “Rigmarole,” which ends, “Thus moonlight / is the perfect / human touch.”

In other poems, the human does not explicitly appear at all. Instead, Williams describes natural scenes in ways that lend them to erotic readings. This is the case in the first quatrain of “Winter Quiet”:

Limb to limb, mouth to mouth
with the bleached grass
silver mist lies upon the back yards
among the outhouses.

The poem that follows “Winter Quiet” in *Al Que Quiere!*, “Dawn” forms perhaps the most obvious stylistic manifestation of the act of depicting a scene in an erotic way. The poem is comprised of

one long sentence, a complete act punctuated by frequent caesuras. Aside from its sexually-charged language (“ecstatic,” “quicken,” “beating,” “stirring,” “bursting wildly”), the poem is filled with dashes (nine in all) that set up a kind of uneven rhythm, requiring the reader to read sections in full bursts, stop, and begin again. This rhythm, quickening the reader’s heartrate and forcing him or her into flushed speech with hurried breaths, mounts toward the conclusion of the poem and culminates in a moment of literal and metaphorical ejaculation in the exclamation “—runs free at last / out into the open--!” One final dash occurs, a post-coital sigh of “full release,” and the poet is spent. “Songs cease.”

“The Avenue of the Poplars” represents the most mature expression of Williams’ notion of imaginative sexuality. I believe it productive to split “The Avenue of the Poplars” into six sections, marked off by Williams’ dashes. The first section presents the leaves of the trees as the sexual focus of the poem (“the leaves embrace in the trees”), turning an ordinary poplar tree into the sexual joining of leaves. The poet, who does not “seek a path,” finds himself too sexually engaged, with “Gipsie lips pressed to [his] own.” The purpose of the second section is to explicate the nature of the imagination’s sexuality, described as a kiss. This sexuality is not poisonous (“without being poison ivy”) nor does it sting (“or nettle”). It is instead the harmless kiss of oak leaves, a safe sexual experience (which means much in a poem that is also preoccupied with how the poet can find his way in an overwhelming technological world). The third section shows the importance of the sexual side of imagination. The line “He who has kissed / a leaf / need look no further” argues that the speaker has found in the natural and in his imagination’s sexuality a kind of wholeness or completeness beyond which nothing more must be sought. This understanding of the erotic fits well with the stillness of the poet who “seeks not path” in the first section. The joy in the third section is felt again in the fourth, where the speaker “ascends through a canopy of leaves,”

indicating both that he has given himself entirely over to the natural and sexual and also speaking to the power of this sexuality (the ascension brings to mind the Transfiguration and ascension of Christ). It also speaks to the unspectacular nature of imagination's sexuality. Rather than being violent or overpowering, the sexuality of the imagination is, like the leaves of a tree in a grove, "nothing unusual." The fifth and sixth sections find the speaker escaping the technological by way of the prehistoric, thinking of the world as it existed before the advent of technology. I do not have time here to elaborate on the relationship between the speaker and technology in this poem, although many scholars have rightly seen it as an important component of the poem.

Though Williams talks about the sexual aspect of imagination in these poems through natural metaphors, this is not the only way he approaches the erotic element of the imagination. Different patterns of such investigations play out in other poems. The Williamsian imagination is, ultimately, a boundless realm. What I have provided here represents only a brief sketch of one of its components. Further work in this direction can provide (but never complete) our understanding of Williams' unique approach to the imagination and its part in poetics.