“Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,” “Spring and All,” and “The Yachts” : William Carlos Williams’s Dual Perspective and Social Criticism

Author(s)
Taira, Masashi

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It is generally said that Williams was influenced by Keats and Whitman while he was still a medical student. In fact, Williams's early poems reflect the romantic notion of the creative energies of nature and man and celebrate these energies. Critics, such as Rod Townley and James E. Breslin, also point out Keats's and Whitman's influences on Williams. Townley says: "To read 'The Wanderer' immediately after reading the earlier work is almost to witness Keats being reborn as Whitman, and to see the pursuit of static and remote beauty give way to a passionate identification with present existence" (37), and Breslin remarks: "But of deep importance for Williams was a new reading of Leaves of Grass" (19). In the Autobiography, Williams himself acknowledges the influences of Keats and Whitman on his poems:

Keats, during the years at medical school, was my God. *Endymion* really woke me up. I copied Keats's style religiously, starting my magnum opus of those days on the pattern of *Endymion*. (53)
Williams further says:

For my notebooks, however (which I don't think anyone ever saw), I reserved my Whitmanesque "thoughts," a sort of purgation and confessional, to clear my head and my heart from turgid obsession. (53)

However, close examination of his poems reveals another phase of Williams, that is, Williams as a social critic. It seems that Williams was much concerned about the social and economic trends in the days he lived, especially the 1910s, 20s, and 30s. Indeed, in his poems, although Williams celebrates the creative energies of nature and man, at the same time he expresses fear and danger of these energies as a destructive power. "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," "Spring and All," and "The Yachts" typically present this dual perspective of Williams and reveal Williams's attitudes toward society.

II

Although "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" was published in Sour Grapes in 1921, Williams actually wrote this poem much earlier. During the 1910s, Williams was one of those artists who gathered at Alfred Kreymborg's "places" in Grantwood and in Greenwich Village. Such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Mina Loy, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Malcolm Cowley often had parties and poetry readings at Kreymborg's "places." Williams recalls those occasions in his Autobiography:

That winter began the evening meetings at various hide-outs
around Fourteenth Street, either at Kreymborg's place or the rooms of Lola Ridge. She made a religion of it. Somewhere in there—was it at the first Armory Show or another similar show?—they had poetry readings at which both Mina Loy and I appeared. It was a big place, I remember, blocked off by screens. That afternoon I read two poems, "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" and "Portrait of a Woman in Bed." (136)

As his Autobiography shows, Williams wrote "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" sometime in 1913, the year when Armory Show was held in New York, and read it at the evening meeting in the winter of that year. The year, 1913, was the eve of World War I, and the massive energy of the people was directed toward the war. The early twentieth century was also an era of rising technology and the machine age. Having lived in the era of an upheaval, Williams might have had complex feelings toward the uprising energy of the people and their machines. This complex feeling toward the powerful energy is strongly expressed in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives."

In this poem, the dominant image is the movement of dance. The movement of dance overlaps with that of the movement of locomotives. As James E. Breslin says: "No doubt the dance affected Williams less than other art forms, but as early as 1908 he had seen Isadora Duncan perform and became a participant in the widespread literary cult of Isadora" (31). Williams was an admirer of Isadora Duncan, and actually wrote some poems dealing with dance, such as "Dance Russe," "The Dance," and "The Wedding Dance in the Open Air." Audrey T. Rodgers also points out that "Throughout his life, Williams would reflect his own hypnotic absorption
with the dance” (5). Rodgers further says: “Since the dance re-
creates a life-giving force, patterns itself into art, and harmonizes
the disparate fragments of existence into a coherent whole, it would
provide Williams with a fitting metaphor for the imaginative faculty
of art” (10).

As Rodgers points out, a life-giving force in the dance is a
controlling metaphor in this poem. In the midst of chanting voices
and calls, dancers with the “rubbing feet” come down through de-
scending stairways to the stage in the soft light. Their “rubbing feet”
echo the “earthcolored walls of bare limestone,” and their hands
move round and round like “the hands of a great clock.” Here, the
platform of the station is associated with the stage, the crowd
and its chanting voices in the station with the audience and its
cheers in the theater, and the wheels of locomotives with dancers’
feet. Williams surely introduces the rhythmical movement and energy
of dance into the rumbling train coming into the crowded station.
When the train comes in, the platforms are filled with the energy
of the movement and sounds of the train, people, a great clock,
the whistle, and porters:

two-twofour-twoeight!

Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms.
This way ma’am!
—important not to take
the wrong train! (29)

The wheels, cylinders, and brakes of the train further increase
the image of the powerful energy of the machine. The life-giving
force in the dance is completely transformed into the movement of
the train. Williams celebrates the powerful energy in the advanced technology of the modern age, represented by the movement in the train, just as he praises the energy in the movement of the dance.

However, the undercurrent of this poem reveals another aspect of the energy, that is, the destructive and misdirected energy of the machine age. In fact, the train coming into the station signifies the image of the machine intruding into the garden. The advanced technology and the subsequent rise of materialism in the 1910s and 20s, as we know, brought about the loss of spiritual values in human life, and writers in those days willingly depicted the conflict of the machine age and reflected it in their works. The monstrous machine controls and supresses human beings:

Covertly the hands of a great clock
go round and round! Were they to
move quickly and at once the whole
secret would be out and the shuffling
of all ants be done forever. (29)

Here, the consistent movement of a great clock symbolizes the un­controllable energy of the machine, and ants come to represent helpless human beings. Man can never escape from the movement of a clock, as his life is determined by time, and the hands of a clock metaphorically grasp and control the shuffling ant-like man. Williams’s description of the relationship between man and machine is rather like a naturalist’s depiction of the dominant machine over human beings. Having been deprived of their substantial existence and spiritual value, people are mechanically packed into the train, a symbol of the machine, and moved away. T. S. Eliot, ten years
after Williams's "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," also describes the mechanical movement of the spiritless people in *The Waste Land* as follows:

Unreal City
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many. (53)

The image of the unreal city and a crowd under the suffocating brown fog signify the image of sterility in the modern mechanical world and foreshadow the fall of modern civilization. Williams's description of the station and the crowd are the same image as Eliot's unreal city and a crowd under the brown fog. "A leaning pyramid," in the fourth stanza, symbolizes the fall of modern civilization, just as the ancient Egyptian civilization fell after having had its prosperous era. According to this view, the refrains—"two-twofour-twoeight," "In time: twofour," and "In time: twoeight" echo hollowly, increasing the apocalyptic atmosphere in this poem like the refrain "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" in "The Game of Chess" of *The Waste Land*.

In view of the fact that "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives" was written in 1913, the eve of World War I, we can also see in this poem fear of the massive energy misdirected toward the destructive war. In fact, when the war broke up in Europe, many young American writers were attracted by the war, and they enthusiastically joined the ambulance corps attached to the French army. Among them were Hemingway, Dos Passos, and E. E. Cummings. Malcolm Cowley describes the war-time enthusiasm of young Americans as
It would be interesting to list the authors who were ambulance or camion drivers in 1917. Dos Passos, Hemingway, Julian Green, William Seabrook, E. E. Cummings, Slater Brown, Harry Crosby, John Howard Lawson, Sidney Howard, Louis Bromfield, Robert Hillyer, Dashiell Hammett ... one might almost say that the ambulance corps and French military transport were college-extension courses for a generation of writers. (38)

Malcolm Bradbury also points out that "For many of these writers, the war was the subject of their first literary utterances. It was an image of fundamental transition, a challenge to the small-town values among which many of them had grown up, to old heroic ideas of battle, to ideas of 'culture' as a body of established values, modes, languages" (58–59). Having witnessed this enthusiasm among young American writers, Williams might have had an uneasy feeling toward this massive energy over the war. In his Autobiography, Williams says:

The third book was Kora in Hell. Damn it, the freshness, the newness of a springtime which I had sensed among the others, a reawakening of letters, all that delight which in making a world to match the supremacies of the past could mean was being blotted out by the war. (158)
The war was in full swing; it was only Pop's illness and the responsibilities involved that kept me from following my brother overseas. I was thirty-two and at that time I knew I would not be drafted. I hesitated several times on the brink of enlisting but finally didn't go. (159)

The two destructive energies, the monstrous energy of the mechanical modern age and the misdirected energy of the war-time enthusiasm, work as strong undertones in this poem. Neil Myers says:

Williams always sees himself as handling the units of a dance. ... Against him is something destructive if uncontrolled by the mind forced against it. The opposition of contending forces penetrates every aspect of Williams's poetry. (466)

In "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives," Williams praises the creative energy of the machine age, represented by the image of the life-giving force of the locomotives, and at the same time he not only expresses the fear of the uncontrollable energy of the machine but also criticizes the misdirected energy of the war-time society in the 1910s. This is exactly the same technique that Williams uses in "At the Ball Game," in which Williams praises the energy of the crowd at the stadium and at the same time expresses the fear of this energy, as "it is deadly, terrifying— It is the Inquisition, the Revolution" (58).

III

Williams's dual perspective can also be seen in "Spring and All."
This poem basically deals with the rebirth and renewal of spring. The "new world naked" in the fifth stanza is the image of the new born baby which is the symbol of the renewal and creation of the life-giving force.

Now the grass, tomorrow
the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf
One by one objects are defined—
It quickens: clarity, outline of leaf (39)

The grass start growing, and the wildcarrot leaves become stiff. Day by day, "the profound change" (40) comes upon the grasses and trees, and the entire natural world begins to "awaken." As romantic nature poets have long been discussing how spring blooms out of winter, Williams here also celebrates the new creative energy of spring.

However, "Spring and All" is not merely a romantic poem which celebrates the renewal and rebirth of the world in the spring. This poem, written and published in 1923, a year after The Waste Land, reflects the society of the 1920s and presents Eliot-like waste land imagery. Dickran Tashjian says: "Spring and All emerges from the grey season of Sour Grapes. The destructive nature of the imagination clears the stale world for spring, for new creation" (108–109). Indeed, Williams begins "Spring and All" with scenes of barren and sterile nature of the early spring. Spring is supposed to be the season of renewal and rebirth. New leaves sprout, trees blossom, and animals awaken from their hibernation after a long and severe winter. However, here, a cold wind still blows, muddy fields are brown with dried weeds, and small trees stand with dead leaves and lifeless
vines. All of these are "lifeless in appearance" (39). The beginning of this poem reminds us of *The Waste Land*, in which Eliot starts his poem with the lines; "April is the cruellest month, breeding / Lilacs out of the dead land" (51). The sense of degeneration is further heightened by the image of the "contagious hospital."

By the road to the contagious hospital
under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds driven from the
northeast—a cold wind. (39)

The contagious hospital not only represents the desolate landscape but also becomes a controlling metaphor in this poem, signifying the lack of substantial communication with other people, for the contagious hospital is separated from the outer world. In fact, the lack of substantial communication is a modernist characteristic of the 1920s, indicating the loss of spiritual values. Hemingway writes about young Americans who are suffering from the physical and spiritual damage of the war in *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald presents the corruption of materialism and the subsequent isolation of people in *The Great Gatsby*, Cather deals with the conflict between material and spiritual values in the modern mechanical world in *The Professor’s House*, and Dos Passos even more vividly describes a highly materialized inhuman machine world in *Manhattan Transfer*. All of the major characters in these novels cannot establish substantial communication with others, and subsequently they are isolated from the world outside. It is also interesting that all of these works were written in the 1920s, three or four years after the publication of *The Waste Land*, and reflect the waste land image. Williams’s
“Spring and All,” which was written in 1923, is not an exception in the sense that it also presents the waste land image of modern society. Although he was rather strongly opposed to Eliot’s academicism, Williams still could not get rid of the influence of The Waste Land, as his Autobiography shows: “It [The Waste Land] wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust” (174). Williams further says: “We needed him [Eliot] in the scheme I was half-consciously forming. I needed him: he might have become our adviser, even our hero” (174).

IV

“The Yachts,” published in 1935, presents Williams’s dual perspective and social criticism even more strongly, reflecting the depression era of the 1930s. On the surface level, Williams portrays the various and elegant movements of the yachts, just as he praises the energetic movement of the train in “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives.” In the well protected ocean, the yachts appear youthful:

In a well guarded arena of open water surrounded by lesser and greater craft which, sycophant, lumbering and flittering follow them, they appear youthful, rare as the light of a happy eye, live with the grace of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and naturally to be desired. (101)

Williams not only evokes the youthful energy and beauty of the
yachts but also celebrates man's creative power, flecklessness, and freedom. Here, nature, the yachts, and man harmoniously reconcile with each other, and the image of the world becomes peaceful and vital. The yachts move through the waves smoothly despite their attacks, for "they are too well made" (101). However, as soon as the yachts move through the waves, they go beyond the control of man, their maker, and become the symbol of the social conflict.

A ship at sea is a traditional metaphor to represent society in which all kinds of human dramas take place. This metaphor is typically introduced in the novels and stories of Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, and Joseph Conrad. Especially, the image of the ant-like man in the ship under the entire control of nature reminds us of Crane's naturalist story, "The Open Boat," in which four men are referred to as ants and literally tortured by a totally indifferent nature. The image of the ant in Williams's "The Yachts" is also equivalent to that of the ant under the control of "a great clock" in "Overture to a Dance of Locomotives." In the first four stanzas, by introducing the common metaphor for ship and ant, Williams sets a general atmosphere for this poem before he tackles the social problem proper in the last parts of the poem.

Indeed, the yachts themselves become an image of a turmoiled society in the last three stanzas. The movement of the yachts here is not the peaceful yacht in the peaceful ocean.

Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows.
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair. (102)

Williams saw the magnificent America's Cup yacht race before he
wrote this poem. However, society in the United States during the middle of the 1930s was in a turmoil caused by the great depression. The New York stock market crash of 1929 caused bankruptcies of companies throughout the nation, and the subsequent widespread unemployment brought about severe tension between corporation and the labor force. In this situation of society, Marx’s theory indicting capitalism became popular among intellectuals. Writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, John Dos Passos, and Richard Wright were actually involved in the Communist movement in the 1930s. Malcolm Cowley describes this chaotic society as follows:

Then, with the German crisis and the banking crisis in the early months of 1933, the intellectual atmosphere changed again. Thousands were convinced and hundreds of thousands were half-persuaded that no simple operation would save us; there had to be the complete renovation of society that Karl Marx had prophesied in 1848. (293–294)

Thus, when Williams saw the America’s Cup race, he might have imagined the race as a reflection of the current social turmoil. Indeed, according to Paul Mariani, Williams was “remembering the magnificent America’s Cup yacht races he had seen off Newport, Rhode Island, and the ambivalence he had felt watching all that aristocratic skill while knowing that it was a nation of poor people who in reality supported this small privileged class” (370). As Mariani points out, the image of the yachts cutting through arms and hands of the bodies “thrown recklessly in the way” is the image of the society where a bloodless exploitation of the helpless poor people by the “small privileged class” takes place. The words—
“broken,” “beaten,” and “desolate” — signify the conditions of the exploited people, and their agonies are expressed in “their cries rising / in waves still as the skillful yachts pass over” (102). “The skillful yachts,” here, come to represent the prestigious society of skillful bourgeois exploiters, and the skillful bourgeois exploiters pitilessly pass over the helpless poor people. The “sea of faces about them in agony, in despair” suggests the agony of the exploited and suppressed poor people. Stephen Tapscott interprets “The Yachts” in the social context:

The struggle of the contending yachts against one another and against the sea suggests a social and economic conflict underlying the scenic upper-class event, the race of the sleek yachts. (127)

Robert Von Hallberg also points out Williams’s social concern and the characteristics of his poems in the 1930s as follows:

As is typical of Williams in the 1930s, he has chosen an ideologically burdened subject: the characters of Williams’ poems, especially during the 1930s, are locatable in class terms: the poor, the old, the recently immigrated, the laborers, and here a hobo couple. (145)

As both Tapscott and Von Hallberg point out, Williams was much concerned with the social and economic problems of American societies in the 1930s. He expresses his unsatisfied feeling toward social inequality in his essay “The American Background”:
Wealth meant, as it means today, the control of movement, mobility, the power to come and go at will. In small communities, being drained of wealth by the demand for it in the cities, men died like rats caught in a trap. And their correctly aimed but crude and narrow beginnings died with them. (148)

In the Autobiography, Williams also says:

The stupidity, the calculated viciousness of a money-grubbing society such as I knew and violently wrote against; everything I wanted to see live and thrive was being deliberately murdered in the name of church and state. (158)

In this sense, the poem “The Yachts” not only reflects the American societies of 1930s but also presents Williams’s social criticism.

V

As we have already seen, the three poems, “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,” “Spring and All,” and “The Yachts,” typically present Williams’s dual perspective and social criticism. In “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,” Williams praises the energy of locomotives as a life-giving force, and at the same time he expresses the fear of the destructive energy of the machine in the modern age and the misdirected massive energy in pre-war time society. In “Spring and All,” Williams sees in spring both destructive and creative energies, by presenting the cyclical pattern of the season from the barren to the fertile soil of the spring. In “The Yachts,” Williams
celebrates the youthful energy and beauty of the yachts, and at the same time he criticizes the pitiless exploitations by the small privileged class over the helpless poor people. By effectively using the dual perspective, Williams expresses his social criticism on American societies in the 1910s, 20s, and 30s in his poems.

Works cited


- 論文要約 -

“Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,”
“Spring and All,” “The Yachts”におけるウィリアムズの二面性と社会批判

平良 柁史

まだ医学生であったころ、ウィリアムズはキーツやホイットマンを愛読し、
とりわけ Endymion や Leaves of Grass の影響を強く受けたことはウィリアムズ自身、『自伝』の中で述べているところであり、The Wanderer や Al Que Quiere! の詩にはロマン派的傾向が強くあらわれているようである。
しかしながら、ロマン派の自然や創造的エネルギーを讃美する一方で、機械文明、物質文明に侵され、精神的よりどこを失いゆくアメリカ社会を鋭くみつめ、批判していくウィリアムズのもとひとつの視点も見逃すことはできない。この小論では、“Overture to a Dance of Locomotives,” “Spring and All,” “The Yachts” の三つの詩の解釈を中心に、ウィリアムズの二面性と社会批判をみていく。