

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Motivation of the Project

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is known as one of the most outstanding modern American poets. In comparison to artists of his own time who sought a new environment for creativity as expatriates in Europe, Williams lived a remarkably conventional life. A doctor for more than forty years serving the rural town of Rutherford, New Jersey, he relied on his patients, the America around him, and his own ebullient imagination to create a distinctively American verse. He advocated American poetry must be rooted in America as its fount of inspiration and its source of information and subject matter. In his *Autobiography*, he says that a poet must base his ideas and thought on the ordinary lives of people. He drew his subject matter from ordinary surroundings, such as paintings, the change of seasons, flowers, a red wheel barrow, etc. Named as “father of postmodernism American poetry” (Riddel 17), Williams had his own distinct views concerning the nature of poetry, the function of the poet, and the poetic process. The viewpoint of Williams is embodied in his famous doctrine “No ideas but in things” (Ostrom 12).

He devoted all his life to persistent exploration and innovation of poetic form. In his time, modernist poets, including Ezra Pound, were

drawn to the strategies of the painters by the nature of the modernist poetic. The years 1909 through 1930s were marked in New York, Paris and London by an unparalleled collaboration between the poets and the painters. Poets painted and the painters wrote. Poets cited painters in their manifestoes, and painters wrote out their painterly theories and incorporated linguistic elements into the visual strategies of their paintings. Perhaps more than any other poet, Williams looked to painting for new strategies to bring to his work. The development of his early poetry is the development of an increasingly complex series of patterns – within poems, and within sequences of his poems – leading up to his 1923 *Spring and All*. Williams' poetry is possessed of the visual characteristics, as many of his poems are apt to create visual pictures in the readers' mind. Like the works of several other poets in the twentieth century, Williams' poetry reflects the influence of many types of visual arts. In this research, the author finds similarities between the early poetry of Williams and the techniques of impressionism. Those paintings which are impressionistic often emphasize the atmospheric conditions in a certain place at a specific time. Light and its effect on the objects depicted are also very important to the impressionist. This impressionistic attitude toward visual art can be applied to poetry as well. Through a close and concentrated observation of Williams' entire body of poetry, the social historical and cultural background of his time and a careful study of the techniques of impressionism and literary impressionism, based on previous studies on Williams' poetics and poetry, the author of the book intends to focus on exploring the impressionist strategies in Williams' early poetry (1909-1939), through social-historical analysis and with close textual attention. Essentially there have been two periods in Williams career, an early period from about the time of 1900 to the 1939, works of which period are collected in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams (1909-1939)*, and a later period is after the publication of

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Paterson IV, during which time he seems to have settled pretty much on one scheme (Ostrom 77). Of the two periods, the earlier is more interesting and important to examine. It is a period of apprenticeship in which – apparently at Pound’s insistence – he turned from the conventional poetic modes of the earliest 1900s to newer forms, especially from about the time of *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) to the middle 1940s in which Williams explored and developed various techniques of his own. It is essentially a time when Williams was getting to know himself and the new ways of the poem, and his work from that period is now of little interest other than the historical. With great interest and curiosity, the research aims to reveal the influence of impressionism on his early poetry. In this book, the author plans to interpret more than 30 Williams’ early short poems, from the year 1909 to 1939. Impressionism in Williams’ poetry is the reflection of the revolution and innovation of his poetry and poetics, and the reflection of his time.

1.2 Literature Review

As a full-time physician, William Carlos Williams made most use of his spare time to write stories, novels, plays, essays as well as poetry. However, until the last few years of his life Williams was almost entirely neglected by the literary critics. Not only the academic critics, but the “little magazine” critics, too, acted, for the most part, as if he did not exist. Some few made passing references to him, and even fewer took him seriously, none wrote of him as a major figure of their time, though, Pound and occasional reviewers in *Poetry* magazine spoke well of Williams. In 1936 Babette Deutsch in his *The Modern Poetry* helped establish an important place for him. Then, as the sections of William’s *Paterson* began to come out (the first four of the five sections to be completed appeared between 1940 and 1951), recognition slowly followed; *New Directions*,

publisher of that long poem, brought out the first book on Williams in 1951 (by Vivienne Koth). Williams' importance as an influence in modern poetry grew until he became, in the late fifties, perhaps the greatest single force in American poetry. In his later life (he died in his eightieth year in 1963, five years after the last fully finished part of *Paterson*), Williams received various literary prizes and several honorary degrees. And a good more was written about him. Over the last few years Williams has become popular, not only in the avant-garde circles, but also in the academic world, in college courses in American literature. The interest has continued. In 1966, Williams was the first author to be featured on a National Educational Television series broadcast from a hundred stations. Some important characteristics of Williams' poetry result in his leading position in poets of his time.

Concreteness and short line, colloquial tone and idiom characterize Williams' poetry, while probably the most important element is his experiment on the form of poetry. The old methods, he saw, were useless; they were measurements of a language his world did not speak, of an old-world English rather than of a new-world American. As a result, there appears a lot of criticism on Williams and his works. For example, Harry T. Moore's *The Poetic World of William Carlos Williams* (1965) brings together Williams' various sorts of poems, providing a thorough evaluation of Williams' poetry. Mike Weaver's *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (1971) looks at various sources for Williams' art. *The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1972, by Rod Townley), after showing how Williams' earliest works reflect conflicting allegiance, both spiritual and literary, follows the poet through the transition years 1910-1917, when he found his own unmistakable poetic voice. In the book, Townley devotes a chapter each to *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920),

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Sour Grapes (1921), and *Spring and All* (1923). In the afterword, Townley summarizes his view of the early Williams and looks toward Williams' later life and work. Carl Rapp describes Williams' relation to Romanticism in *William Carlos Williams and Romanticism* (1974), and shows that Williams is very much a part of the Romantic tradition, even though many of his poems seem quite un-Romantic. Dickran Tashjian's *William Carlos Williams and the American Scene 1920-1940* (1979) points out that Williams' cultural significance derives precisely from his marginality during those two decades between the wars – a marginality that deeply shaped his ambiguous and ambivalent perception of the issues of his time. As a quintessential avant-gardist, precisely because Williams grasped the ambiguities of art in America, he guides his readers through the complexities of the American scene during the 1920s and 1930s. The argument of Henry M. Sayre's study in *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (1983) goes against the "traditional" Williams. Its claim is that his last poems, the ones in which his new measure is finally achieved, are meant to be read, with the eye, on the page. The visual dimension of Williams prosody has, furthermore, far-reaching epistemological implications. Stephen Tapscott's *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman* (1984) investigates Whitman's influence on Williams. To get the immediate evidence of Whitman's "influence" on Williams' poems, Stephen Tapscott puts Williams into the historical context that provoked his response to the Whitmanian "tradition." In *The Early Politics and Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (1987), David Frail's study is best read as a biography of William Carlos Williams' early politics, their relation to his poetics, and their expression in his poems. Bryce Conrad's *Refiguring America* (1990) demonstrates a study of William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain*. In *William*

Carlos Williams and Transcendentalism: Fitting the Crab in a Box (1992), Ron Callan looks at the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau as part of the development towards Williams. A good collection of recent criticism about Williams is *Critical Essays on William Carlos Williams* (1995) edited by Stephen Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese. Now some critics have shown an increasing interest in the relationship of literature and medicine in Williams' writing: *Modernism, Medicine, and William Carlos Williams* (1993) by T. Hugh Crawford, and *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture* (1993) by Brain Bremen.

Moreover, some critics have noticed the visual elements in William's works. In *The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism Stieglitz, and The Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1969), Bram Dijkstra examines the relationship between cubism^① and the early poetry of Williams, demonstrates that Williams attempted to emulate the Stieglitz group in focusing on the object itself, delineating it as precisely as possible. In *The Visual Imagination of William Carlos Williams* (1976), Margaret Morgan Starr demonstrates a study of *Pictures from Brueghel*, examines the graphic design of punctuation, line length, and syntax in Williams' poetry. The argument of Marling William supplies a lot of solid biographical influences between Williams and the New York avant-garde in his *William Carlos Williams and the painters, 1909-1923*(1982). In *William Carlos Williams' early poetry: the Visual Arts Background* (1983), Christopher J. MacGowan documents Williams' contact with painters and theories within the modernist visual arts, and applies this background material to a careful study of the poems. Peter Schmidt discusses the relationship between

① Cubism is an early-20th-century avant-garde movement pioneered by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, joined by Jean Meizinger, JuanGris, et al. that revolutionized European painting and sculpture, and inspired movements in music, literature and architecture.

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cubism and the poetry of Williams, and the relationship between dadaism^① and the poems of Williams in his book *William Carlos Williams, the Arts, and Literary Tradition* (1988). Peter Halter makes a further exploration of the connection between the visual arts and Williams' concept of the modernist poetry in his *The Revolution in the visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams* (1994). The perspective analyses of these critics have provided the background for its later study.

The domestic research of Williams' poems did not seriously begin until 1990s. Some articles were published in both minor and major journals, mostly focusing on his language of clarity and conciseness, and on simple and vivid images in his poems. The visual elements in his poetry began to be noted in recent years. The monograph *In the American Grain: On the Pragmatic Poetics of William Carlos Williams* (2006) by Zhang Yuejun is pathbreaking: it demonstrates a study of Williams in the light of American pragmatism, especially that formulated by John Dewey, and shows that Williams' writing is pragmatic and that his pragmatic poetics is deeply engrained in the native tradition of America. Liu Xiaojie in "On the Color Language of William Carlos Williams' Poetry" (2003) and "On the Spatial Consciousness in William Carlos Williams' Poetry" (2009) demonstrates that Williams' poetry is a fusion of painting and poetry.

Moreover, there are also some studies on Williams' acceptance of classical Chinese poetry. Chinese American Scholar Qian Zhaoming's *Orientalism and Modernism: The Chinese Heritage of Pound and Williams* (1995) convincingly demonstrates Po Chu-I as Williams' Chinese craft, tutor and bosom friend. Stephen Field has made a good research of this kind in "'The Cassia Tree': A Chinese Macropoem." (1992) Zhang Yuejun

① Dada or Dadaism was an art movement of the European avant-garde in the early 20th century. The movement primarily involved visual arts, literature, poetry, art manifestoes, art theory, theatre, and graphic design, and concentrated its anti-war politics through a rejection of the prevailing standards in art through anti-art cultural works.

also discusses the underlying dialogue between Williams and classical Chinese poetry in his monograph.

Compared with the abundant researches on Williams abroad, in China, more introductions to Williams' poetry and poetics should be made in college courses in American literature, more analysis and interpretation of his poetry should be made, and more efforts should be made to the criticism of Williams' marvelous poetry.

1.3 Brief Introduction of Impressionism and Literary Impressionism

Since the research is to study Williams' early poetry from the impressionistic perspective, a brief introduction of impressionism and literary impressionism is necessary.

Impressionism is the name given to the school of painting that started in France in the second half of the 19th century. As a technical term, it made its debut in 1874, used by a journalist whose intention in using it was to make derogatory comments on Claude Monet's painting *Impression, Sunset* (1873, Figure 1), a painting styles impressionism that finds no echo in the then popular aesthetic values. Impressionism defies easy definition. Although it now refers to the most popular movement in Western art, it originated as a term of abuse – applied to an exhibition of works that appeared shockingly sketchy and unfinished. The artists who created these works were united in their rejection of the old, “tame” art encouraged by the official Salon, but their artistic aims and styles varied. They were not only of diverse characters and gifts, but also, to a certain extent, of differing conceptions and tendencies. They did have two fundamental concerns: depicting modern life and painting in the open air. Alfred Sisley, for example, had little interest in anything but landscapes, while Edgar

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Degas ardently opposed painting outdoors. Despite their differences, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissaro, Alfred Sisley, Gustave Caillebotte, Edgar Degas, Charles Demuth and Mary Cassatt developed a new way of depicting the world around them, and, together with other artists they displayed their work in the “Impressionist exhibitions” held between 1874 and 1886 in modern Paris, which was the catalyst, birthplace, and subject matter of much of Impressionist art. The impressionists of Paris were not alone in their approach to art. Around the world, artists also began to choose modern-day subjects, painted outdoors, used bright colors, and sometimes even called themselves “Impressionists”. The works of the impressionists seemed at first glance much revolutionary. This was in itself a break with established customs. It took years of bitter struggle for the impressionists to convince the public to accept their talent. The term, afterward, was also employed to refer to their works, especially of the later 1860s to mid-1880s.

“The most important characteristic of impressionism lies in its insistence on the perceptual reality instead of the conceptual one” (Kronegger 67). That is to say the impressionist painter draws what he actual sees from nature without caring what his mind thinks. The painter is more fond of faithful record of the sensual effect of the object in the sensitive mind, than the representation of the object itself. He gives precedence to his subjective attitude. In order to record the primary impression accurately and precisely, he paints “emphasizing spontaneity and immediacy of vision and reaction” (Smith 3). Nowadays, the term “impressionism” is put into use in a broad sense. Any artist or work that evokes the audience’s impressions in a subjective way can be called an impressionist.

Impressionist movement is a good example of the modern spirit. Literary impressionism grew out of impressionism in painting. The term

“literary impressionism” was first used by the late nineteenth-century critics to mainly describe the spontaneous, sketchy and unfinished qualities of writing. Alphonse Daudet, Jules and Edmond Goncourt, Emile Zola and George Moore associated with and wrote about many of the painters. Henry James, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford and others were acquainted with many of their works.

Impressionist writers have created a new vision of the world. With them, faith in an absolute has disappeared, the world has been relativized. The Cartesian tendency to divide up the world, to fix and determine it, to comprehend and classify, to recognize in the world things we already know, this conceptualization of the world is for the impressionist writer and artist a “thing-in-itself,” a reality with no possibility of growth, a dead world (Bender 37).

Impressionist writers begin with an empirical reality rather than an abstract idea. Reality, for the impressionists, has become a vision of space, conceived as sensations of light and color. Space is no longer a geometrical medium, but a medium of light which the impressionist artist can render by color. Color also does not render depth, but atmosphere. Impressionist writers oppose irregularity and variety of sensations to the order of reason, being convinced that both in nature and in art all beauty is irregular. (Konnegger 30)

What all impressionist writers wish to achieve is harmony, a rhythmical effect of beauty, stressing the autonomy of their creation. Their work reflects dominion of the passing mood over the permanent qualities of life. The sum total of these qualities of impressionist works seems to point to the same underlying forces which are evident in the ideas of the age: