



Celebrating Modern America: William Carlos Williams and His Artist-Friend Charles Sheeler

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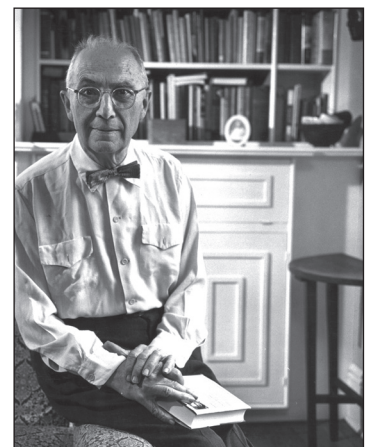
The present paper explores the relationship between William Carlos Williams and his artist-friend Charles Sheeler and it also examines the extent to which Williams found visual sources of inspiration in Sheeler's art. Williams praised Sheeler in several essays dedicated to his artist-friend for his ability to give the local a universal dimension. Williams, too, tried to emphasize the American vernacular by making use of common, ordinary things in his poems. Both Williams and Sheeler believed that the work of art should possess autonomy, it should have a rather objective than subjective character as well as focus on a more impersonal perspective rather than a personal one. Williams also agreed with Sheeler's belief that a work of art resembled a machine which could serve as both model and subject for the painting and the poem.

Keywords: the local, American vernacular, objective reality, ekphrasis, autonomous work of art



Williams met Sheeler in 1923 and from that point on they became very close friends. Williams's essays on Sheeler testify to the fact that he considered the painter and photographer as one of the few American artists who succeeded in combining concrete and abstract elements, the local and the universal in his art. James Guimond claims that Sheeler's art complements “one of the most serious elements in Williams' personality, his desire to see and experience life with absolute clarity” (Guimond 1968: 43).

Both Williams and Sheeler believed that a subject should have some sort of personal identity which could only be achieved through a classical approach; by this they did not mean any art form of the past or a revisiting of the past. Sheeler considered that “the classic in this country may still be found in many places if it is sought



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without prepossessions of magnitude and grandeur. It has often been overlooked; one surmises that much of it still remains to be discovered....it cannot be copied or overlooked but is the outgrowth of a special mode of life and feeling” (Rourke 1938: 77, 184).

For Williams, the classical note referred to discovering “in today the conditions and aspects comparable to those which were used excellently in the past and to invent a means for using them as new and excellent in our days as were the inventions of other days” (qtd. in Guimond 1968: 54). For Williams, the meaning of the local lifted to universal purposes was essential: “The local is the only thing that is universal... The classic is the local fully realized, words marked by a place” (id).

In many of the essays dedicated to Sheeler as well as in his *Autobiography*, Williams praised Sheeler for his artistic achievements and ability to convert the local into the universal: “It is this eye that most distinguishes Charles Sheeler—and along with it to know that every hair on every body, now or then, in its minute distinctiveness is the same hair, on every body anywhere, at any time, changed as it may be to feather, quill or scale. The local is the universal” (qtd. in Guimond 56).

Both Williams and Sheeler stressed the autonomy of the work of art, its objective rather than subjective character, the impersonal rather than the emotional nature of it. Williams considered the poem an object which he could make use of through language; a case in point is the representation on canvas of the Ford plant in Detroit.

The painting is entitled *Classic Landscape* (1931) and Sheeler claims that the plant was a perfect model for his painting. Probably this triggered the appearance of Williams’ poem “Classic Scene” that has its counterpoint on canvas Sheeler’s *Classic Landscape*.



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)
Classic Landscape (1931)

What strikes the readers as odd is the fact that the poem has its own sense of imagery apart from the subject of the canvas. However, the word that comes to bring the two art works together is “classic” although it is difficult to find a classic perspective in a factory. Of the two, poem and painting, the painting seems to come closer to classical shapes in the sense that Sheeler makes use of geometric forms in order to render the Ford plant in Detroit.

He thus manages to suggest the idea of order, structure, mechanisms and the way they work together in a factory by focusing specifically on the buildings and the way they were reproduced on canvas. Sheeler seems to suggest that he was trying to connect the geometry, balance and beauty of forms in the past with the order, balance and harmony imposed by these geometric buildings in a technological era.

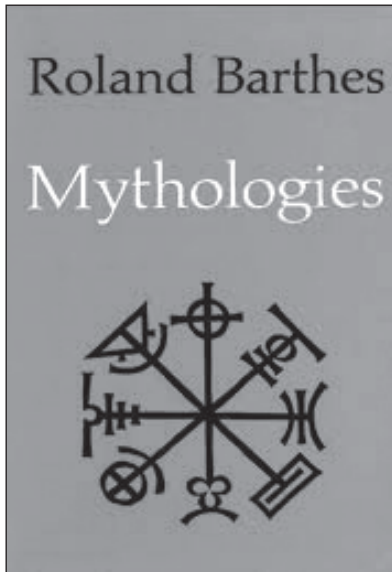
Classic Scene (1937)

William Carlos Williams

A power-house in the shape of a red brick chair
90 feet high on the seat of which sit the figures
of two metal stacks—aluminum— commanding an area
of squalid shacks side by side— from one of which buff smoke
streams while under a grey sky the other remains passive
today—

Williams’ poem seems to be more problematic in the sense that it has nothing to do with the classical tradition, the English one namely, of writing poems. The poem as such does not have an identity, it does not have an existence of its own since it is mainly focused on the description of a powerhouse “commanding an area of squalid shacks”. The placement of words in a more or less linear order suggests that the poem’s main objective is to emphasize the relationship poem-object, a construct made of words.

Moreover, the simple description of the powerhouse seems to leave no room for another, metaphoric interpretation. Critics have, however, inferred a second meaning of it: the smoke stacks resemble figures of

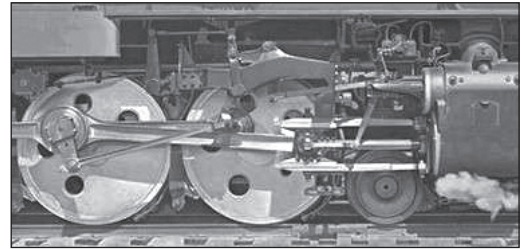


gods sitting perhaps on their thrones, “commanding’ the labor of their subjects” (Schmidt Contemporary Literature, 393). Thus, on a second reading, one manages to detect the gap Williams was trying to bridge between old, past forms and the machine era. Schmidt’s opinion is that Williams, like Sheeler, considered the adjective “classic” quite important as it renders the idea that “the monumental power and nobility of previous civilizations have been reborn in America” (id. 394).

Another poem that celebrates the age of the machine, urban America, the symmetry of people and machines moving in some sort of a dance, is “Overture to a Dance of Locomotives” which appeared in Williams’ collection of poems *Sour Grapes* (1921). Its visual counterparts are represented by two of Sheeler’s paintings celebrating the technological era: *Rolling Power* (1939) and *Steam Turbine* (1939).

Williams’ poem might seem intriguing at a first glance; the opening lines indicate the voice of men chanting names of cities in a “gallery”. Even more baffling seems “the rubbing feet of those coming to be carried” as the reader wonders if this might be a re-interpretation of Dante’s *Inferno* where dead people were taken to the underground world and, according to the legend, they were expected to pay their obolus so as to be ferried over by Charon, the boatman.

Neither of these two interpretations has any connection with Williams’ poem. The reader comes to understand that the men with picked voices shouting names of cities are porters in a train station and that the bustling crowd is waiting on the right track for the train to come. The tone of the poem seems formal in the beginning through the use of tetrameters and of end rhymes but this formality fades away as the lines advance into the poem. The poem has a downward movement indicating the people’s rush to find the right platform. The rubbing of feet on the pavement makes



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)
Rolling Power, 1939. Ulei pe pânză.

the domed ceiling and the “pale earthcolored walls of limestone” change gradually into “soft light that rocks to and fro”.

Even if people rush to and fro’ and change tracks, even if porters yell the names of cities in the station, even if the trains themselves smoke and churn in the station, there is nothing that reminds one of chaos. On the contrary, descriptions of porters and movements are suspended for a short while only to let the narrative voice focus on the light piercing through the windows of the station as if the station were a dome to modern industry.

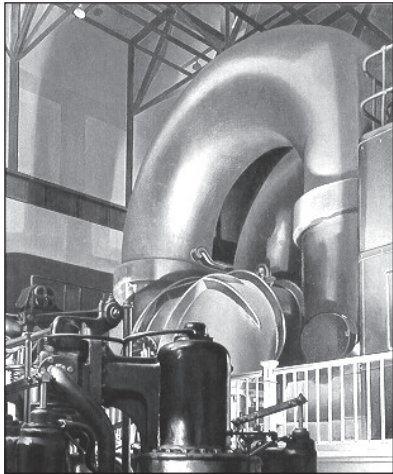
In the next stanza, the reader’s attention seems to be drawn to the “hands of a great clock” dominating the station only to descend once again to the mechanical bodies in motion and thus suggesting that one of the drawbacks of the technological era is this obsession with time, or the lack of it and that in their daily struggle to go to work, raise children, cope with everyday routine, people do not belong to themselves any more but are rather the humble slaves of a mighty god: the clock above their heads that keeps grinding their lives.

The tempo in this stanza seems to be gradually increasing as if preparing the reader for the culminating action: the departure of the train. The narrative voice seems to be playing with the concept of “overture” mainly because it is related to movement, to dance and ultimately to the movement of the wheels that set the train into motion. An overture in music is an introductory part to an opera or a larger musical piece which is slower in tempo and serves a limited scope to the whole musical piece.

Overture to a Dance of Locomotives (1921)

Men with picked voices chant the names
of cities in a huge gallery: promises
that pull through descending stairways
to a deep rumbling.

The rubbing feet
of those coming to be carried quicken a
grey pavement into soft light that rocks
to and fro, under the domed ceiling,
across and across from pale



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)
Steam Turbine, 1939. Oil on canvas

earthcolored walls of bare limestone.

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.

A leaning pyramid of sunlight, narrowing
out at a high window, moves by the clock:
disaccordant hands straining out from
a center: inevitable postures infinitely
repeated—
two—twofour—twoeight!
Porters in red hats run on narrow platforms.
This way ma'am!
--important not to take
the wrong train!
Lights from the concrete
ceiling hang crooked but--
Poised horizontal
on glittering parallels the dingy cylinders
packed with a warm glow—inviting entry—
pull against the hour. But brakes can
hold a fixed posture till--
The whistle!

Not twoeight. Not twofour. Two!

Gliding windows. Colored cooks sweating
in a small kitchen. Taillights—

In time: twofour!
In time: twoeight!

--rivers are tunneled: trestles
cross oozy swampland: wheels repeating
the same gesture remain relatively

stationary: rails forever parallel
return on themselves infinitely.
The dance is sure.

Attention is again shifted from the “shuffling ants” to the “pyramids of sunlight” entering the “high window”. Williams compares the station to a sacred place, a dome or a church, or to monolithic constructions made by man: the pyramids. The symmetry of the four stanzas is broken by the fragmented sections introducing the porters’ warnings against not taking the wrong train. The blow of the whistle sets the train into motion and with it a whole welter of images and scenes pass before the viewer’s eyes: colored cooks sweating, trestles crossing oozy swamplands, etc.

The persona perceives trains arriving in or leaving a station as a dance which suggests an infinite celebration of the modern age and of industrialized America. The poet does not consider trains as isolating the human from nature but on the contrary as elements that are typical of the modern age and of its inventions and that participate in the people’s life of. A second reading of the poem might suggest that Williams offers just an overture, an introductory part that seems rather insignificant as compared to the real artistic experience offered by his object of interest—the train.

Williams’ poem has visual counterparts in Sheeler’s paintings in which the latter celebrates the age of the machine and the technological era by focusing on the theme of locomotives. In fact, the first painting, entitled *Rolling Power* (1939) was one in a series of six that were commissioned by Fortune magazine to represent America’s industrial power. By the time *Rolling Power* and the rest of the paintings appeared, the train had already been acknowledged as the product of American technology. *Rolling Power* clearly follows the format of the Precisionist style, foregrounding very well-defined forms, static compositions and abstract shapes. A closer look at the painting evidences the fact that it is very descriptive but that Sheeler managed to control the painting by simplifying its component parts by means of geometric shapes.

In fact, Sheeler confessed that the things he was most keen to point out in *Rolling Power* were “neither the quaint nor the historical” but rather the “intrinsic realities of forms and environment” (qtd. Wight, 1954: 28, 35). In fact, his use of geometric shapes, his close perspective on the locomotive, the choice of two dominant colors (black and white) testify to the fact that the painting is not simply a descriptive study of a Hudson steam locomotive but also a study in abstract relationships between objects.

When asked in an interview with Martin Friedman, dated 1956, whether his style or his motivation in painting resembled Georgia O’Keeffe’s he vehemently denied it, claiming that “There’s a large

element of symbolism in O’Keeffe’s work, as you can readily see, and none whatever in mine. It’s purely a visual thing. What you see is what you intend to see and no overtones of symbolism” (Sheeler Archives of American Art Journal, 17). This is also true of his painting *Rolling Power*: the image of the locomotive is very sharp and Sheeler did not intend to create any sense of illusionism.

Rather than an interplay of shadows on the locomotive to indicate depth, he deploys shadows to underscore geometric shapes. Thus he achieved a perfectly static image but he managed to create a visual object by using repeated forms working in opposition to each other: for instance, the circular wheels working in opposition with the horizontal piston rods. His sources of inspiration in producing these *Power* paintings go back to Cezanne, Cubism, Marcel Duchamp’s artistic perspective on the machine, as well as the simplicity of form and lines as seen in the American Shaker objects.

A recurrent element in these series of paintings and in those picturing the Midwestern industrial landscape, that strikes the eye as odd, is the absence of humans. In the same interview with Martin Friedman Sheeler confessed that his landscapes were mainly “depopulated” as his belief was that the world would be more beautiful if there were no people in it (id. 18). This element of “depopulation” is in fact interpreted by James Maroney as perfect silence inhabiting all *Power* paintings: “...the *Power* pictures contain dialogues between left and right, in and out, and sky and earth. Yet each dialogue suggests the Zen Buddhist koan of one hand clapping—something is clearly amiss. In each of the *Power* pictures there is silence” (Sheeler *American Art*, 50).

Steam Turbine (1939) was the sixth in the series entitled *Power* and it renders a turbine at the Hudson Avenue Station of the Brooklyn Edison Company in New York, one of the largest steam power plants in the world. Karen Lucic, in her work *Charles Sheeler and the Cult of the Machine*, claims that in *Steam Turbine* Sheeler focused on the “geometric perfection and the implicit power of the forms” (Lucic 1991: 12). The text in the *Power* portfolio of *Fortune* magazine referred to the fact that “The heavenly serenity of Sheeler’s style, brings out the significance of the instruments of power he here portrays.... He shows them for what they truly are: not strange, inhuman masses of material, but exquisite manifestations of human reason” (qtd. in Nye 1994: 141).

Steam Turbine is a close-up view of a modern machine: the smooth, curving lines of the loop filled with steam clearly dominates the composition even if the foreground is taken by a various number of other machines: exchangers, pumps and automatic valves. Karen Lucic is right in claiming that in this painting the “precision of the geometric structure, the subtlety of the



Charles Sheeler (1883-1965)
Pertaining to Yachts and Yachting
 Oil on canvas. 1922

paint surface, and the nuances of color simultaneously convey both the information of a photograph and the qualities” of a painting (Lucic 1991: 12).

Friedman considered that Sheeler pictured power “at absolute stasis” and that “[i]n his hermetic visualizations, power is not treated in terms of crashing strength but as an intellectualized concept with its mechanisms always in mint condition” (Friedman 1975: 129).

Williams’ attempt to make “contact” with the contemporary environment as well as discover new technical skills and forms in his poetry are reflected in one of his poems written in the late thirties, “The Yachts”. A strong characteristic of most of the poems in this period is the absence of personal tone in favor of expressing feelings and emotions through the presentation of concrete details.

Sheeler, too, showed a propensity for concrete, abstract details, expressing his “contact with the materials of his environment in purely objective terms” (Dijkstra: 1969, 154). What gives “solidity” to most of Sheeler’s early compositions is the sense of “spatial fragmentation” which he had inherited from the Cubists (id.154). A fine example in this respect is Sheeler’s canvas *Pertaining to Yachts and Yachting* (1922).

The painting is very much unlike Sheeler as he did not enjoy sports and knew next to nothing about sailboats. However, it is meant to emphasize motion as the sharp edges of the boat seem to “cut” through the waves of the sea. The geometrical, intersected shapes of the sails may also suggest human faces thus softening through curves the sharpness of edges. Marling contends that “the canvas is not typical of Sheeler’s color, but its ochre to cobalt-blue range is common in Futurist painting” (qtd. in Neuman and Payne 1987: 141).

The Yachts (1935)
 contend in a sea which the land partly encloses

shielding them from the too-heavy blows
of an ungoverned ocean which when it chooses

tortures the biggest hulls, the best man knows
to pit against its beatings, and sinks them pitilessly.
Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute

brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails
they glide to the wind tossing green water
from their sharp prows while over them the crew crawls

ant-like, solicitously grooming them, releasing,
making fast as they turn, lean far over and having
caught the wind again, side by side, head for the mark.
In a well guarded arena of open water surrounded by
lesser and greater crafts which, sycophant, lumbering
and fluttering 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. Now the sea which holds them

is moody, lapping their glossy sides, as of feeling
for some slightest flaw but fails completely.
Today no race. Then the wind comes again. The yachts

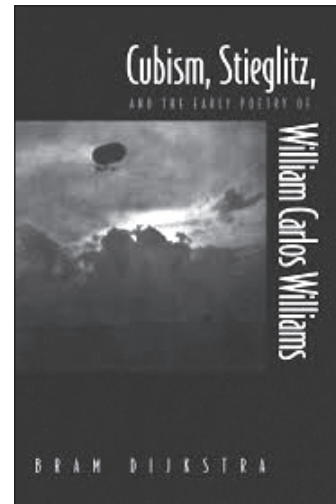
move, jockeying for a start, the signal is set and they
are off. Now the waves strike at them but they are too
well made, they slip through, though they take in canvas.
Arms with hands grasping seek to clutch at the prows
Bodies thrown recklessly in the way are cut aside.
It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair

until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind,
the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies
lost to the world bearing what they can not hold. Broken,

beaten, desolate, reaching from the dead to be taken up
they cry out, failing, failing! their cries rising
in waves skill as the skillful yachts pass over.

Williams achieves the same effects in his poem as Sheeler does in his painting: he describes the movement of yachts in a bay that shelters them from the “the too-heavy blows/ of an ungoverned ocean” as they are just about to start the race. As these huge boats are just about to leave the harbor there is a sense of awe at the graceful shapes of the yachts: “Mothlike in mists, scintillant in the minute // brilliance of cloudless days, with broad bellying sails...”

The poet seems to closely follow the themes employed by Sheeler in his painting: the art of mastering the graceful craft, the power of the sea over them, the all-contending power of the ocean, the insignificance of the crew in both painting (where sailors are visible only through the viewer’s mind’s eye)



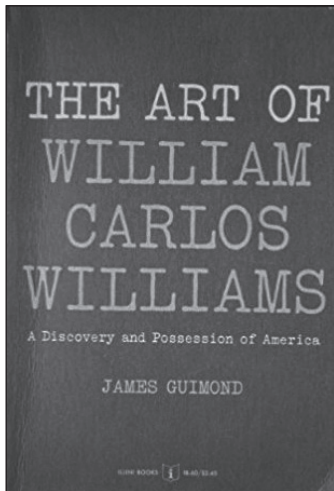
and poem where the sailors are compared with small, unimportant creatures such as ants, etc.

Williams describes the beauty of the yachts’ motion, comparing their imposing stature to “broad bellying sails” which “glide to the wind tossing green water / from their sharp prows” and describing them at the same time “the best man knows to pit against”. The middle part of the poem is more compositional describing the greater craft in contrast to lesser, “sycophant” ones.

The yacht race in this part is meant to enact man’s victory over the brutal forces of nature: “waves strike at them but they are too / well made, they slip through...” However, the inference here is that such victory is possible only if man makes good choices in his battles with nature. This time man proved victorious as the craft are more powerful than the rough winds and the ocean. The yachts are described as living “with the grace of all that in the mind is fleckless, free and / naturally to be desired.”

This impressive vision of the great boats is possible only if one represses the knowledge that yachts were and are still considered emblems of wealth affordable only by the upper social classes of society. In his book entitled *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes proposes that wine is a “good and fine substance” and that that it can be considered an “unalloyedly blissful substance” only if “we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation” (Barthes 1972: 61). Much in the same way the impressive craft make an impression on the spectator only if they disregard issues related to capitalist exploitation attached to the yachts.

From an apparently relaxed narrative in the first eight stanzas, the reader is forced into considering a nightmarish perspective in the last three ones: “It is a sea of faces about them in agony, in despair / until the horror of the race dawns staggering the mind, / the whole sea become an entanglement of watery bodies / lost to the world bearing what they can not hold.” James Guimond considers that the message of the poem



is very specifically directed at criticizing people taking interest in yachts when “much of beaten, desolate humankind is drowning in “agony, despair” (Guimond 1968: 97). He also claims that “Williams presents both the appealing perfections of the yachts and the agonies of mankind in a deliberately impersonal manner with as little explanation as possible’ (id.).

The same social meaning is assigned to the poem by Paul Ramsey, in his article “William Carlos Williams as Metrist: Theory and Practice” where he claims that

The world the poet sees has its cruel habitations, the rich ignore the poor, the healthy the dead. The dead in the poem may be literally the dead. Those killed and crushed in the struggle for American riches, including those killed at sea, but also all the dead, whom the living evade. Whatever exactly the dead may be in the poem, they are part of a reality as beautiful and terrible as the poem says, and becomes. (Ramsey, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 588).

A possible interpretation of the poem may take a more artistic perspective in the sense that the closing lines of the poem infer the existence of an “I” that controls our experience with this poem through imagery and symbolism. “The Yachts” is about the positive energy and beauty of these powerful craft but at the same time it is also about an artistic experience that can either plunge the reader into lavish descriptions of yachts or force them, through the act of imagination, to get a sense of reality.

To sum up, both Williams and Sheeler tried to achieve in their art the three unifying entities they strove for throughout their careers: “the natural, man the social, practical being who is united to nature through his use of it; and man the imaginative being who is distinct from nature because of his mental powers of abstraction and formalization” (Guimond 1968: 60). In fact, both Williams and Sheeler sought a sort of “organic unity” they were so keen on representing in their works:

the realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it; embracing everything involved, climate, geographic position, relative size, history, other cultures—as well as the character of its sands, flowers, minerals and the condition of knowledge within its borders. It is the act of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole.... (Williams 1954: 157)



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