

Christopher J. MacGowan: On "The Great Figure"

In his autobiography Williams links the incident that produced the poem to a visit to Hartley's studio on Fifteenth Street, repeating the poem's association with Hartley in a 1956 interview with Emily Farnham. (Hartley's correspondence narrows down the probable date of his visit--he lived at 337 W. 15th street in the second half of 1919, where McAlmon also rented a room.)

Williams writes in the Autobiography:

Once on a hot July day coming back exhausted from the Post Graduate Clinic, I dropped in as I sometimes did at Marsden's studio on Fifteenth Street for a talk, a little drink maybe and to see what he was doing. As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it.

Before continuing his account of the visit, Williams breaks his narrative to insert a later reminiscence. He recalls standing on a station platform with Hartley

when an express train roared by right before our faces--crashing through making up time in a cloud of dust and sand so that we had to put up our hands to protect our faces. As it passed Marsden turned and said to me, "That's what we all want to be, isn't it, Bill?" (Auto, 172)

The juxtaposition of the express train anecdote clearly associates the train, the speeding fire engine with its figure 5, and the painter Williams was about to visit. The connection is reinforced by the apparently casual reference that transforms Hartley and his studio into "his number." In an unpublished letter to Henry Wells in 1955 Williams pointed to this larger meaning, explaining, "In the case of *The Great Figure* I think you missed the irony of the word great, the contemptuous feeling I had at that moment for all 'freak figures' [sic] in public life compared with that figure 5 riding in state with full panoply down the streets of the city ignored by everyone but the artist."

By alluding to his painter friend in terms of a numerical figure set against a dynamic, colorful background, Williams matched the strategy of Hartley's 1913-15 Berlin canvases. These abstract works, painted under the impact of his meeting with Kandinsky and Marc, fuse military, sexual, and numerical symbols into what Hartley called "consultations of the eye ... my notion of the purely pictural." As with Williams's figure 5, the numbers scattered across these canvases reflect not only the modernist aesthetic behind their composition, but also an esoteric quality peculiar to the scene or person abstractly portrayed. Many of the paintings

gain further numerical associations through such abstractionist titles as Painting No. 1, Painting No. 2, etc. Most of the works, including Painting No. 5 which Williams may have had specifically in mind, are dominated by the military colors of white, black, red, and gold, mirrored in "The Great Figure" by "lights," "dark," "red," and "gold."

Both Hartley and Williams emphasized their strategy of capturing the 'immediate.' Hartley insisted upon the spontaneity of his Berlin compositions, declaring, "The forms are only those which I have observed casually from day to day." Williams similarly asserts that "The Great Figure" is the record of an "impression ... sudden and forceful," despite the variant printed versions of his poem, and the manuscript evidence of their careful revision.

Writing about Hartley five years after his friend's death in 1943, Williams singled out the Berlin pictures as the painter's most significant accomplishment. He could have seen the works at Stieglitz's 291 gallery in Spring, 1916 or January 1917, or at Hartley's studio, since many were unsold and remained in the painter's possession. Williams's sense of the dynamism, violence, and color of the paintings corresponds to the setting of "The Great Figure".

Hartley knew Paris, and, more important, the Berlin of just before the First World War and painted there ... abstract furies, close to the eye, pressing as it were on the eye, of great significance and beauty. . . . I have seen many attempts to equal them with their bold strokes of primary colors, exploding bombs, the arching trajectories of rockets.... It was a phenomenon unequalled in the history of art. If for nothing else these paintings of this period mark Marsden Hartley as one of the most powerful figures in American painting.

In the context of the Hartley association, "The Great Figure" achieves a level of meaning not noted by Williams's commentators. Rod Townley finds the poem's "tense / unheeded" to be "weak," while James Breslin claims of these lines that "Williams, uncertain that the object can speak for itself ... speaks for it." But the lines are in fact crucial, for like the figure, painter and poet are also "tense / unheeded." "The Great Figure" becomes a type of the artist isolated by an America inimical to its vital, creative talents. The painter still suffered poverty and neglect despite the "phenomenon" of his Berlin pictures, and Williams's work was still buried in little magazines and slim, self-financed volumes.

Yet the poet is about to visit the painter, and the poem finally affirms the hope that America's "unheeded" artists can support each other. As the final poem of *Sour Grapes*, "The Great Figure" qualifies the volume's "disappointment, sorrow." *Sour Grapes* fits into that pattern frequently structuring Williams's work: a despairing "descent," from which the poet emerges envisioning a rebirth of creative activity through the power of a rejuvenated imagination. But the hope that this poem's synthesis of poetry and painting represents--like the hope of "unity" that *Contact* represented--proved vain. In the summer of 1921 Hartley joined McAlmon and the other expatriates in Europe.

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