

Peter Halter: On "The Young Sycamore"

A complex iconic use of eye movement is made in "Young Sycamore"/ The poem, which is based on Stieglitz's photograph *Spring Showers*, as Bram Dijkstra has shown, records the eye's linear movement as it follows the tree from bottom to top. . . .

A peculiar tension in this poem results from the fact that the process of reading takes us down the page while the inward eye is moving upward, so that the iconic dimension comes in via inversion. (The very last word at the bottom of the poem is "top.") This inversion has its deeper justification in the fact that the life force embodied in the tree (with which the speaker's self and we with him empathize: "I must tell you / this young tree") exists in a world of process in which growth and decay, creation and destruction are simultaneous. Thus Peter Schmidt's interpretation indicates that - perhaps unintended but nonetheless present - the movement upward contains its inversion or counterpart:

A second reading ... will show that the poem is hardly without personification or metaphor, although they are implied rather than stated. Williams hints that Stieglitz's sycamore is also a tree of life, starting with youth's "round and firm trunk" and then "waning" gradually until the branches are "bending forward" like the bodies of the old. Both men and trees have offspring: seed "cocoons" hang from the leafless branches. The eye's movement thus merges with the inner eye's vision of time's passage. ("Modernist Pastoral," p. 391)

In such poems as "Young Sycamore," Williams makes a particularly effective use of iconicity. It blends the sequential act of reading with the eye's and the mind's step-by-step appraisal of the object under scrutiny to the point where the linguistic force is coextensive with the life force of the tree and thus brings about an empathetic fusion of self and scene in a space-time continuum. The unfolding or expansion of the poem becomes an icon for the unfolding and expansion of the tree, and thus mirrors the process. Together with the sum total of the other poetic devices, such as the force contained in the many finite and nonfinite verbs ("rises," "undulant / thrust," "dividing and waning," "hung," "thins," "knotted," and "bending") and the words that activate the sense of touch and the sense of hearing ("round and firm trunk," "rises / bodily," "where water / is trickling"), the poem can no longer be said to simply talk about the tree but rather becomes an object that shares or embodies the tree's life. Such a poem is, as Williams says, not opposed to nature but apposed to it. The process of exploration and appropriation (of which the poem is an icon) and the involvement of several senses beyond the distancing sense of sight make of the poem a kinesthetic and synesthetic object in which the self relives or recreates the life of the tree, in a way that fully justifies Williams's dictum, "A thing known passes out of the mind into the muscles."

From *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*. Copyright © Cambridge University Press.

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism [1]

Publication:

- Private group -

Criticism Target:

William Carlos Williams [2]

Author:

Peter Halter [3]

Poem:

The Young Sycamore [4]

Source URL: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/peter-halter-young-sycamore>

Links

[1] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/william-carlos-williams>

[3] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/peter-halter>

[4] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/young-sycamore-0>