

Lisa M. Steinman: On "The Young Sycamore"

The poem is based on an aesthetic shared with paintings and photographs by members of the Stieglitz circle; indeed, Bram Dijkstra argues that Williams is literally describing Alfred Stieglitz's photograph, *Spring Showers*. "Young Sycamore" and other Williams poems like it seem to resist explication, to be purely descriptive, although, as J. Hillis Miller points out, Williams takes a firm stance against "the falseness of attempting to 'copy' nature," desiring "not 'realism' but reality itself." Miller's argument is that the poem does not represent a tree, but rather as a poem it "is an object which has the same kind of life as the tree." If, as he argues, "Young Sycamore" is not symbolic but an object in its own right, it nonetheless presents an analogy between the growth of a tree and the growth of a poem. The motion described is paradigmatic, familiar to any reader of *Kora in Hell*, *Spring and All*, or *In the American Grain*. The tree's "bodily" rise ending in the near still life of the two twigs is a motion very like Williams's description of imaginative creation. In "How to Write" from 1936, Williams says that poems begin with "the very muscles and bones of the body itself speaking, [although] once the writing is on the paper it becomes an object. . . . an object for the liveliest attention that the full mind can give it." The poem takes its place as another artifact, an object in the world, but also refers to a series of parallel motions: Nature produces the tree, in a fashion very close to the way we have seen the production of inventions described; Williams produces his poem; and the reader is invited to join in the creative process, not by looking through the language to that which it describes, but by paying attention to the poem itself, and, if the paradigm of the poet and nature holds, producing some object of his own.

Even without knowing Williams's theories about poetry, by turning mind and attention to the poem-as-object, the reader is referred to Williams's process of creation in language. Although the poem describes an act of detailed perception, and thus at first recalls Williams's statement that artists teach us to see, a closer examination of "Young Sycamore" shows that it places equal emphasis on speaking and language. The urgency of the first line focuses attention on the poet's voice, while the careful syntax of the main clause and the enjambment suggest that Williams is not showing us a tree or even clearly telling us about one; he is creating a tree of language: "I must tell you / this young tree."

At the same time, it is no accident that the verbs, like the tree, thin out towards the end of the poem, nor that the one simile occurs in the last line, as the flow of language ends. Williams said he disliked similes: "The coining of similes is a pastime of very low order." It has been a commonplace of Williams scholarship to use such statements as evidence of Williams's desire to present poems as objects or as being objective descriptions of discrete, non-symbolic objects in the world. As Henry Sayre argues, however, Williams's similes and metaphors are not lapses by someone who wished to but could not avoid "subjective observation and interpretation"; they serve rather to make the poems work as "the site of the interplay between the mind and reality." The overt figure at the end of "Young Sycamore" deliberately calls attention both to the poet's act of interpretation and to his linguistic creation. It shifts our attention from trees to poems at the same time that it recasts the poem as an emblem or, at least, as a series of figures. Not only is the tree's growth like the poet's creative process, but the waxing and waning of the tree is also echoed more succinctly in the cocoons' simultaneous image of death and potential life, and in the contradictory motions finally

abstracted in the stark image of the two knotted twigs.

The central concern of the poem is the process of growth or creation with its inevitable culmination in an object. But objects can yield new realities, new life, like the cocoons or like the emblem of the eccentric twigs. The twigs are eccentric because they are off center, leaning forward, but also because the literal center of the poem images the process of creation yielding both multiplicity and destruction as the trunk's "one undulant / thrust" begins to divide between the third and fourth stanzas, and the poem widens its focus to include the cocoons, which, as a gardener like Williams would have known, spell destruction for trees. The final image is eccentric as well because the twigs remain stubbornly particular, even as they tempt us to align their double nature with the other dualities to which the poem calls our attention--the process behind the product; the cocoons' destruction in creation; the poem as object and figure, physical and intellectual. As Williams says, "nothing is left of it / but two." Delaying the noun by a stanza break and a line of adjectives, Williams makes "two" seem for a moment the object itself. The final duality is formal or structural.

One might say that all of the oppositions suggested in the poem are given their purest expression--not resolved, but expressed--in the image, which is the fruition of the poem, but which is so well "knotted" that nothing remains to be said: "The detail is its own solution." The twigs for example, suggest both an upward movement (top is the final word of the poem) and a return to earth in their horn-like bend. Like the ornament and the steeple or the contrast between a squat edifice and the moon in "To a Solitary Disciple," the image of the two twigs moves Williams's readers in two directions simultaneously. Similarly, the poem both is and is about a unique object even as it suggests that all objects, once subjected to lively attention, can be made to release a creative energy that necessarily transcends the discrete structure of individual objects.

Finally, the result of the creative energy alluded to in the poem is the revelation of a structure. As the life of the poem is parallel to the life of the tree, creativity is itself another version of the structure imaged by the entire movement of the poem from the poet's presence, insisted upon in the first line, which roots the poem in a creative, human, speaker, to the final equation of the formal essence of the poem and the bare architecture of the leafless tree.

Williams often described the force or energy of poems as an essence or rare presence. These images occur quite early in his writing. A 1921 editorial in *Contact*, discussing Burke's article on Laforgue, describes the search for a "milligram of radium," while the essay on Marianne Moore published in *A Novelette and Other Prose* speaks of the "white light that is the background of all good work." In the *Rasles* section of *In the American Grain*, Williams isolates within himself a "core of nature" analogous to "the strange phosphorus of the life" that he seeks throughout the book. At all stages of his career, Williams refers to an incandescent universal presence that informs and perhaps is in all art and all natural objects, but the status of this essence varies. In "Young Sycamore," at least, it is presented as a structure, and finally as impersonal, and this reading is reinforced by the poem's use of language. That is, the visual regularity of the quatrains and the sparse, unembellished lines and vocabulary, like the imagistic progression of the poem, add to this effect.

Descriptions of such poetry as impersonal, or at least as objective, are commonplace in modernist poetics, and the link between this style of poetry and science is widely noted. Moore identified Louise Bogan's terse pronouncements as being "rendered with laboratory detachment." And Eliot, to choose a poet with whom Williams generally took issue, suggested that it is in "depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science."

Williams's own descriptions of the use of language in poems such as "Young Sycamore" similarly invoke science, as when he approvingly says in his 1931 review of Moore's poetry that words are "separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface." Here Williams praises removing the emotional and conventional associations of words, and sees the poet's cleansing activity as akin to the laboratory or assembly line worker's.

Williams thus recognizes that his insistence upon words as objects or structures, central to the style and content of "Young Sycamore," might be linked to science, to technology, and ultimately to the products of technology. The link, indeed, is subtle. The poem not only appeals to a taste for the clean lines and efficiency associated with industrial technology, but it is defined as a discrete structure, a "machine made of words" that does not need to refer outside of itself for its effect since "its movement is intrinsic."

Williams describes the need to reclaim the essence of poems, trees, and other objects "nameless under an old misappellation" with a new, cleaner language to be provided by the poet. What the poet reclaims then, in "Young Sycamore," is not a particular tree, but a method of reclamation and an essential structure that is in one aspect purely formal. In fact, "Young Sycamore" 's reference to the poet's process of creation recasts creativity itself not only within but also as a formal structure.

To force Williams's poetic to one possible conclusion, it is not that poems, more self-consciously than machines, reveal human inventiveness, but that knowledge, language, poems, plants, and men are structurally similar, and their structural essence is best described by analogy to machines or technological products. Indeed, in 1919 Williams wrote in an article for the magazine, *Others*, with which he was involved: "Poets have written of the big leaves and the little leaves, leaves that are red, green, yellow and the one thing they have never seen about a leaf is that it is a little engine. It is one of the things that make a plant GO." Similarly in "Young Sycamore," the human mind, another example of a biological design, is reenvisioned as a mechanism, analogous to the formal structure of the poem. Williams, however, was not fully comfortable with this view to which his acceptance of a certain style seemed to commit him. In the 1937 dialogue on poetry and architecture, for example, he tries to explain why he rejects the "'back to humanity, back to the soil' business" about the organic production of art while still believing that people are the "origin of every bit of life that can possibly inhabit any structure." His prose reflects his difficulties with the vocabulary he had available to him. People, he continues, "represent, in themselves, the structure which art . . . Put it this way: If we don't cling to the warmth which breathes into a house or a poem alike from human need . . . the whole matter has nothing to hold it together and becomes structurally weak."

The first ellipsis in the above quotation is Williams's, and seems to indicate his unwillingness or inability to say what the structure of art has to do with the structure of people. The logical way to complete the sentence would be to suggest, as "Young Sycamore" suggests, that art also represents, or repeats, the structure found in human beings. Such a conclusion, however, does not locate people as the origin of the life that inhabits structures like plants as well as poems and buildings. And Williams usually wanted to insist, as an essay from around 1926 entitled "What is the Use of Poetry" put it, that poetry "returns authority to man." Hence he stops and proposes instead that all inventions arise from human need. This proposal avoids the more radical implications of adopting a machine aesthetic, but still it does not fully answer the question of how, in the practical American context Williams set for himself, one might show that poetry is important and necessary. Indeed, moments such as this in

Williams's prose underline why he felt the need to find a more convincing way of defining poetry and its importance.

In 1944, Williams cautioned that the "arts have a complex relation to society." Exploring one aspect of his attempts to define this relationship illuminates the development of Williams's poetry and poetics. More importantly, in adopting a modern style commonly associated with the rise of technology and in simultaneously attempting an analysis of American modernity generally, Williams reveals the difficulties involved in sustaining a defense of modern poetry or in describing its importance given the values of modern America and the Americans for and to whom Williams wanted his poetry to speak.

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