Trouble Songs: A Musicological Poetics

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XXII: Trouble on the Line

Poem XXI of Spring and All concludes “so lascivious / and still” and segues into XXII, “so much depends / upon” (Williams 74) — the rest is on every schoolchild’s mind, or used to be, perhaps. People who don’t think they’ve memorized a line of verse can say most or all of William Carlos Williams’s “The Red Wheel Barrow,” only it isn’t called that, and the only “the” in the poem indicates some (white) chickens.

This may sound finicky or even ingenuous, but here’s the trouble: We don’t know what we know. We have the words but forget the form that keeps them coming back to us. Worse, we don’t have the context. XXII is not a stand-alone poem, it’s a proof. It’s in conversation with the “poem” before it, but also with the “prose” that follows.

Let’s see this Trouble Song in prose stanzas, rather than graphs.

And how about a word from our sponsor?

The fixed categories into which life is divided must always hold. These things are normal — essential to every activity. But they exist — but not as dead dissections. (Williams 75)

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36 Thanks to participants in the New School Graduate Writing Program seminar DEEP SURFACE (fall 2013), where some of these readings took shape.
37 Or is it Chapter XXI, or just XXI?
38 Do we dare call it enjambment? No.
39 Let’s be careful here in anticipation of what follows XXII.
40 Is prose poetry in sentences? Yes, prose poetry is in sentences. As for prose, let’s say prose is poetry that doesn’t know how it sounds, unless it’s prose poetry, which too often still doesn’t know how it sounds, distracted as it is by its lack of line breaks. All writing knows how it looks, but some poems look like prose.
From here Williams proceeds (as he has preceded) to show us what he has done, and what he wants to do. *Spring and All* is like that, a manifesto in action. Whereas Charles Bernstein in “Artifice of Absorption” show&tells us what he has been doing since at least 1976’s *The Veil*, while proceeding with a poetics that is surface and depth, Williams sets a program for what his poems will be by the time he finishes the present collection. He describes his poetics into existence, nearly abolishing the distinction between poetry and prose while insisting on that distinction:

[T]here is no use denying that prose and poetry are not by any means the same in intention. But what then is prose? There is no need for it to approach poetry except to be weakened. (77–78)

But then: “Is what I have written prose? The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated” (78). And here let us pause to admire that isolated question mark. Is it a typesetter’s error? No, it must be real! Or must anyway be real, even intentional!

Is Williams’s prose approaching poetry? Aspiring to it, even? And these are different aims: The first is an address, a correspondence; the second is perhaps what Williams describes as ends with the end. Let’s put a fine point on it: Poem XXII becomes itself, XXII, because it breaks the barriers of form while

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41 and call out our bad education, which will proceed to cast XXII as an isolated riddle; the trouble with us is we can’t see and read at the same time

42 Better named in previous editions (though New Directions’ 2011 standalone volume is commendable in numerous ways, including C.D. Wright’s feeling-it intro — method if not methodical, and better for that) by a ligature (perhaps courtesy of an expedient typesetter): *Spring & All*.

43 Bernstein notes that he completed his essay in verse in 1986; it formed the front-and-centerpiece of his essay collection *A Poetics* (1992); dates become important later this sentence.
making form matter (again and henceforth). The prose that follows is free to see itself as poetry: as form and sense.44

We remember the prose, in prosaic line breaks:

So much depends upon
A red wheel barrow
Glazed with rainwater
Beside the white chickens

How different this is from “so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens”! Three stanzas we love for their koan-like demeanor, their question as (unpunctuated) statement. Just what is it that depends upon what, again?

What we have here is a structure that makes sense: 4 stanzas of 2 lines each, always 3 words followed by 1, with the following nearly palindromic syllabic scheme: 4/2 // 3/2 // 3/2 // 4/2.45 More to love: the modernist insistence on the level playing field of lower case.

Those partner lines to each couplet are the most consistent formal element of the poem. Always 2 syllables, always a revelation without being a surprise. They always dangle and usually hinge. The first (“upon”) is the most formally obvious but also the most catchy. Even if we don’t remember the line breaks, Williams taught many of us how to break lines between the first and second stanza of this poem. Revelation, though, (be)comes cheap after a while. Prepositions make for obvious line breaks, particularly when they get visual (as in the tired “over /” and “/ under” break). But this one has more than the sweetness of

44 Poetry, then, is not only prose that hears itself; it is prose that sees itself and shows what it says.
45 If we think of this in terms of blues annotation (or a schematic version of blues scholarship), we have an ABBA structure, which is more properly palindromic.
first blush. The stanza break is excruciating\textsuperscript{46} if you look too closely at it. Our dangling prep hangs over a cliff—depends upon what?—then gives us this marvelous red wheelbarrow.

Compare Williams’s meticulous but somehow naturalistic breaks to the prosaic parsing we recall. One poem is memorable (and memorizable), and the other is bland as fuck. A forgetful 1. So we remember something we can no longer take seriously, while remembering it wrong, but only remembering it because of the formal precision of the original, which we cannot see.

Once we look at the form, and consider it in context (“The fixed categories into which life is divided must always hold” takes on the force of dramatic imperative rather than description; our hinges keep us whole), the structure speaks to us. The koan becomes an illustration.

XXII is not an imagist poem. Nor does it present an image, but the image of an image. 1 thing becomes 4, but it also becomes words, and a poem.

If we insist on investigating the image, we find 3 things\textsuperscript{47} right away:

- wheel barrow
- rain water
- chickens.

\textsuperscript{46} because unbearably exquisite, like a hair so fine it pierces your eye
\textsuperscript{47} & 23 years later, Paterson will insist “no ideas but in things.” Let’s play the numbers game: S&A first arrives in ’23, Paterson 23 years after that. XXII has 22 syllables, and its middle 2 stanzas go 3/2, 3/2, which is backwards & slashed for 23 23.
1 thing becomes 4 formally, but maybe imagistically, 3 things become 4. But our 3-count only counts the last 3 stanzas, cuz that’s where we see things clearly. Stanza 1 is all so much and depends on, so we don’t see ourselves seeing through language, or thinking we do. The 4th thing is language. We see it in the form, as form.

What depends on what? Does the wheel barrow/rain water/chicken need language, or vice versa?

As the language goes on to say, “There is no confusion — only difficulties” (78).

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48 found much later, in the 1st stanza
49 Recall Rosmarie Waldrop, who repeats in “Alarms & Excursions,” “language thinks for us” (46), which we misread as language speaks for us. On the next page, she elaborates her initial proposition: “So, while language thinks for us, there is no guarantee that it will be in the direction we like.” Let’s just say language speaks us, and call it a day.