

[*Editor's Note:* This essay is reprinted here for the first time since its original publication in *The Poetry Journal* (Boston) 8.1 (November, 1917): 27-36. The text of the 1917 printing is followed to the letter. Copyright © 1987 William Eric Williams and Paul Herman Williams.]

America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry

William Carlos Williams

U nless I speak of that which exists or create a new art I speak nonsense. There is no art of poetry save in poetry itself. In America to speak of the art of poetry is pure imbecility unless there be an art in America. And if I cannot speak of that which exists here where I can know it, it stands to reason that I cannot speak of the art anywhere.

Whitman created the art in America. But just as no art can exist for us except as we know it in our own poetry even our own art cannot exist but by grace of other poetry. Nothing comes out of the air, nor do we know whence anything comes but we do know that all we have receives its value from that which has gone before.

There is no art of poetry save by grace of other poetry. So Dante to me can only be another way of saying Whitman. Yet without a Whitman there can of course be for me no Dante. Further than that: there is no way for me to talk of Whitman but in terms of my own generation—if haply such a thing may be.

To speak of the art there is no way but to speak in terms of my own generation whereby, touching the art today, I touch it everywhere and at all times or failing to find my own terms I fail to find the means to speak.

I speak of Marianne Moore, Carl Sandburg, and a few more. How else to derive benefit from that which I love, unless I create a new thing of my own.

Having gained a certain devil-may-care disregard for poetry's long used forms by abusing them as best we know how, thereby having put joy into our own hearts, let it be stated with finality that "free verse" is a misnomer. Some of us have been lucky to do better than we knew. There have been a few institutional works of good significance. This is the very thing we set out to do: to establish our intuitional [*sic*] background. It has been the proper turn for us to take. But because we have worked in a careless mood along hidden channels would be a poor excuse for any declaration of freedom. The only freedom a poet can have is to be conscious of his manoeuvres [*sic*], to recognize whither he is trending and to govern his sensibilities, his mind, his will so that it accord delicately with his emotions. Free verse merely means verse whose proper structure escapes a man's efforts to control it. And without comprehension there will be little unfolding—Demuth.

A few have cleverly taken up old forms and as cleverly refurbished them. Not all are unconscious of the necessity for new canons. Not all fail to realize that in the end all verse is built upon one ground. But the difficult thing would be to escape a mere reversion to classical forms in the mass—forms representing other temperaments, other emotional fibers, other adjustments of sense. A few have seen that all art is one, all poetry in all ages is alike and have gone back—missing Whitman on the way—to certain

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staid forms (not yet to the quatrain, nor even the sonnet among serious workers, of whom only am I speaking) to pentameters, hexameters and even yes, to quatrains.

But back of these aristocratic forms lies the democratic groundwork of all forms, basic elements that can be comprehended and used with new force. Being far back in the psychic history of all races no flavor of any certain civilization clings to them, they remain and will remain forever universal, to be built with freely by him who can into whatever perfections he is conscious of. It is here that we must seek.

Have we broken down far enough? Are we ready to build? Have we elaborated enough substance to work on or must we carry Whitman further on until by mere force of mass we are able to say we are rich?

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And yet American verse of today must have a certain quality of freedom, must be "free verse" in a sense. It must be new verse, in a new conscious form. But even more than that it must be free in that it is free to include all temperaments, all phases of our environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental and moral. It must be truly democratic, truly free for all—and yet it must be governed.

This is no small demand to make of a new verse form. Its elements must not be too firmly cemented together as they are in the aristocratic forms of past civilizations. They must be perfectly concrete or they will escape through the fingers—but they must not be rigidly united into series. The elements of the new form must be simple and single so that they are capable of every form of moulding. Not only that but they must retain a certain color, a certain flavor, a certain mood quality that will make them capable of being moulded or fitted freely.

In the most elemental structure of poetry itself only will this be found. We can expect to invent nothing of our materials. Our age isolate will fall apart from sheer surrounding emptiness. To live, our poetry must send roots into the past. To live freely it—as we—must live free of time. To be free of time it must live for all time, past and future. It must have the common interlocking quality that establishes it in its environment. It must live or be capable of living from the beginning to the end.

Whitman aside from being the foremost analyst was above all a colorist—a mood man. He destroyed the forms antiquity decreed him to take and use. He started again naked but built not very far. What he did do was to color everything he touched with the hand of a J. W. M. Turner. His poems fall apart structurally but the sweep of his mood, the splendor of his pigment blends his work into some semblance of unity without which no work of art can be said to exist. Whitman laid all waste and lolled in the ruins as he lolled on the deck of a sailboat on Long Island sound under the stars. He is our rock, our first primitive. We cannot advance until we have grasped Whitman and then built upon him.

What are we doing—we new poets—to sweep into our task with the breadth of vision of a Whitman? Let us follow the lead of France? Or of China? Or shall we take Whitman holus bollus à la Van Dyke or the rest of the fools. My God, what is poetry, anyhow? Is it a spade or a lace handkerchief? Is it something to eat or to be rolled in many squares joined by rows of perforations upon a spindle? Is it something to breed like rats? The only way to be like Whitman is to write *unlike* Whitman. Do I expect to be a companion to Whitman by mimicking his manners? I might even so please some old dotard, some "good grey poet" by kow-towing to him; but not Whitman—or if I did

please Whitman I would not please myself. Let me at least realize that to be a poet one must be himself!

What have I done now! "Be himself?" What the devil difference does it make to anyone whether a man is himself or not so long as he write good poetry. "Be a Whitman, if you will, only please, if you love your kind, *don't write like Whitman.*"

And so, having studied Whitman, and put foot, so to speak, upon "good U. S. A.," I will turn to the past. I will read Dante with what poise and comprehension I can muster and with what discrimination my immediate forebears managed to save for me out of their harrassed lives.

But I delegate that part of my screed to Ezra Pound who knows how to do it better than I do.

Old friend, I salute you with deepest gratitude, alive with high desires.

What is being done? There are magazines and books of verse to be studied: I speak of course of the surface only. Rhythmus—and all such bunk—be damned eternally. There is only poetry. Either it is good art or bad art. Why make subdivisions that have only partial and superficial significances? It simply distracts from the truth. It is like saying the musical scale is divided into high notes and low notes. Has a work a unity of form? Is it in conformity with the content? Has it been skillfully handled? That is all that need be asked about the form of a poem. Slow or swift, high or low, what has that to do with the structure?

What is unity of form? If I knew—! It is better than pretty rhymes. But it may be pretty rhymes. Forms are of course of greater or lesser significance. It is only with the deeper, more inclusive forms that a person of any seriousness needs concern himself.

There are of course the periodicals. *Contemporary Verse* is a discreet protest against too much liberty. Imagine too much liberty! Where is there more liberty that I may go and get a bucketful of it? If they mean that in running loose one runs amuck—why what will I care for fools. But if by "too much freedom" they mean that a man binds himself by ignoring the truths that he cannot escape, no matter how hard he may run, then I will listen. But in that case why sit in a coffin and have one's friends screw the lid down! Why write sonnets? Brghu!

Poetry is a good packhorse. It is so amiable that it has made amiability almost a virtue.

The Soil makes a peculiar mistake in imagining that a mere ability to live well is art. J. P. Morgan was not an artist. Neither was Wm. Cody. Merely by adjusting one's life delicately to a single distinguished purpose does not make one an artist as Pietro de Medici should disclose. Great men feel the lack of artists; that is why they draw them about themselves. It is all very democratic, all very decorative, this apotheosis of trust magnates and trip hammers and Jack Johnsons. I like it. I think it makes a fine lively magazine. But mere adjustment of mechanical parts to a purpose—what shall I say? I don't know. Perhaps I am wrong. After all I am speaking of poetry, not mechanics, and I do not like the poetry that is published in *The Soil*. It is not given a proper frame. It is trivial. It is sometimes good but it is always handled in the same manner. There is no discrimination.

Such things as *The Blind Man* are very useful, very "purgative," very nice decoration, even very true. It sponsors an art rather glad to be in a state of decay. It is rather naïve, I think. It prefers not to know when it is imitating the Chinese or the late French. It likes to reach out of the cabinet and grab whatever it touches and to imagine it has hit upon a new thing. In the dark all is in transition. It must be, for when nothing

exists all must be changing from one thing to another. What else can there be? Oh, Chaos! Oh yes, but chaos is somewhat overdone. Du Champs' "chocolate grinder" is good stuff for a print. Brown has cleverly likened cocotte's eyes to oysters. Demuth likes to walk down corridors, peeping into other people's rooms but—*ici il n'y a pas grand chose*.

Ah, but *Others*, the magazine with which I am connected, is of course excellent. Here we have an attempt to present a blank page to Tom, Dick and Harry with the invitation to write a masterpiece upon it. If *Others* came out once or twice every three years and consisted of four pages it would be the ideal magazine for poets. It is at least naked. "But the rain it raineth every day."

The Bookman and the *Yale Review*, etc., are nice papers with some good conventional stuff in them for high school and middle-aged readers.

The Poetry Journal is Edmund Brown's magazine. It is unfortunately connected with a commercial house and must be careful.

The Seven Arts is a brave pioneer in discretion. It prints only good new work by significant men. It is made for middle-aged, semi-brave revolutionists who have fixed their canons of taste beyond question—a commercial article for the intelligent public.

Masses cares little for poetry unless it has some beer stanches upon it—but it must not be beer stench. It must be beer stench—but not beer stench, it must be an odor of hops and malt and alcohol blended to please whom it is meant to please. Oh hell!

Then there are the coast magazines and *Reedy's Mirror*. I do not see *Reedy's Mirror*. And the *Little Review*.

Not one of all these magazines has the purpose to print only poetry and criticism of poetry plus the financial ability to thrive. One is poor, the other has wealthy guarantors to please and one is a commercial venture [*sic*]. Not one of them has a policy big enough to include all, nor the inclination to include all, nor the ability to carry on the work. A large, thoroughly financed magazine in which all may join and with a clear-sighted tyrant for an editor. An American. Where is this fine folio—like *The Soil*? Where is this perfect simplicity of presentation, like *Others*? Where is the financial backing, like *Poetry*? Where is the business-like management—like *The Poetry Journal*?

Then there is *The Poetry Review* or whatever Braithwaite's sheet is called. But Amy Lowell appears in that—God bless her. For whom is this ideal magazine to be edited: for Amy Lowell by Amy Lowell? Amy Lowell is building rather better than most. She is in the spirit of Whitman.

Fletcher and Eliot and Stevens are going over the forms of yesterday and making fine stuff to read and enjoy. So is Pound.

Kreymborg is concerned with "finger exercises." That is, he is studying musical form.

Bodenheim is indifferent to everything but the delicate adjustments of his adjectives. And so forth.

Either a magazine is concerned with its own pet little aversions, or it is too poor to exist, or it is hopelessly without a broad comprehension of what modern verse is about. Such magazines as the *Century* are an abomination before the Lord.

Either the men who act as editors for all these magazines are positively disgusted with the work of everyone but themselves and their little group of proselytes (*à la* Pound) or else they are vaguely appreciative of others and defined that as the ideal of art (*à la* Kreymborg) or else they are subtly and timorously reverting to popular forms (*à la* Eliot etc.). It's not as bad as that. I wish we might pass the ball though, with a little more skill.