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Commentary on “Proletarian Portrait” by William Carlos Williams

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In this mid-1930s poem by Williams, we can find another exemplary manifestation of his poetic style’s exactitude, now seemingly progressive in his interpretation of social class struggles in the up-and-coming American nation. Tracing back the roots of his artistic evolution, we could draw out Bill’s maxim of “no ideas but in things” from the 1927 version of “Paterson”, presented as a sort of self-interpellation (Say it!), to further explore the connotation of the objects he mentions in his verses. By carefully reflecting over the placement of said items, the reader will arrive at an understanding that the apparent colloquiality of the unfolding scene in “Proletarian Portrait” partially holds a politically charged message which, in some sense, reinstates Walt Whitman’s penchant for the all-encompassing solidarity shown toward the common citizen.

Once we approach the text through the lens of a poem we had previously examined from 15 years prior: “Portrait of a Lady” (The Dial, 1920); this other portrait begins to posit a reassessment of the image of beauty amongst the criteria of the feminine across the Western literary canon. The closely alliterated adjectives “big” and “bareheaded” on the first verse straight out give us a sort of pedestrian introduction of this woman who is exposed to the scrutiny of the poet-passerby. The first telling object, the apron, presents the idea of her métier as a kitchen worker or housemaid and suggests a subjugated position on the social ladder. One has to keep in mind that during the interwar years, especially after 1929, the United States was on its way to recovering from severe economic depression. Therefore, the social class differences could have been easily remarked at a quick glance from the type and state of the person’s outfit.

Moreover, the image Williams is painting here structurally resembles that of his popular “The Red Wheelbarrow”. That which “so much depends/ upon” could be recognized in each

of the constituents the poet chooses to focus on. In the second couplet, for example, a sensation of vulnerability is evoked by positioning her figure in the middle of the street with a habitually unfeminine “slicked back” hairstyle, in contrast with the description that follows in the third couplet. It is as if the author has disdainfully started registering the least appealing part of the woman’s body, just to bring down the weight of the subject and her significance by means of zooming in to the lowest part of her physique, in tender interaction with the walkway. This head-to-toe appreciation is emphasized by the fact that her “stockinged foot” is veiled, unlike her hair, thus drawing the reader’s attention downward to this area, to produce a pivotal description at the center of the text.

According to William Rowe, in one of his comparative essays between Vallejo and Williams, he argues that the North American writer:

unites the perceived object and the work of the imagination by means of a concept of forces within a field... what he has in mind is the idea of an electromagnetic field in which the disposition of the objects is related to a force field—in opposition to the idea of ‘isolated, inactive particles’. The difference is intellectual and social because there could be a more energetic force (from the imagination) in one social class than the other.

Such tension, henceforth placed on the object’s location as playing an integral part in the poem’s arrangement, is extended from its halfway point, as the shoe appears to accrue the main motif of the issue at hand. Akin to the centripetal force exhibited by a body in a circular motion, the shoe is held (probably at the heart’s level) to be examined meticulously in order to unearth the hidden nuisance. As a result, we are left wondering how in heaven the nail ended up inside her shoe, given that the usual accident happens by stepping on a nail and getting it stuck on the outer sole.

The enigma could be deciphered symbolically by taking into account the temporality of the last verse. This “has been hurting” does not exactly encapsulate a definite period of time and it might be inferred that the nail actually represents the subject’s preexisting inner pain, properly lodged in a hard-to-reach region of her footwear (psyche?). We could further imply that it is the irksome effect of a capitalist system that pushes this spikey item afloat: The young woman realizes that her alienation has reached a critical level and she is finally taking action, even though in a mundane manner. Williams, evidently, leaves it up to us to figure it out:

Jamais le poète ne nous dit que penser. Les femmes ne parlent pas non plus, leur plainte ne franchit pas les lèvres, seuls leurs gestes nous sont donnés à décrypter, qui, malgré le soulagement final, laissent entrevoir les stigmates d’une société malade et indifférente au sort des plus nécessiteux, condamnée au déséquilibre

social. Les poèmes font émerger l'humain enfoui sous les machinations robotiques de la société capitaliste et de la guerre (Aublet 214).

The above passage recaps Anna Aublet's opinion on the poem we are currently examining, in conjunction with "To a Poor Old Woman", which appeared in the same collection *An Early Martyr and Other Poems*. It is fair to think that the poet here constructs an ambiguous arena so as to let the reader continue on a quest to develop a personal vision of what this unrestrained, consumerist humanity elicits.

Furthermore, it is important to remember Ezra Pound's reaction to this poem, particularly his dislike "because of the proletarian tone. He thought it was obvious and so what? 'She might have done as well in Russia as in Passaic'" (Thirlwall). With a tinge of sarcasm, the expatriate poet bridges the vast political gap in the midst of fascist Italy with a statement that would raise more than one eyebrow throughout a moderate American crowd. This is why Williams' style is consistent with some kind of subliminal discourse that compels us to reconsider what we've been looking at. I agree with Milton Cohen when he says that "it is possible that Williams intended the title ironically; note the grandiosity of an earlier title for this poem: 'Study for a Figure representing Modern Culture'". Modernism in 1935, after its many twists and turns from its preceding three decades, has been worked out by the New Jersey poet to a method of agency that subverts traditional referentiality to opt for direct treatment of the matter. The last 5 verses of this early version of the text read:

Her shoe in her hand she is looking intently into it —
pulls out the paper insole to find the nail
that was hurting her

Besides inserting the pause on the initial verse in the fourth stanza with the period in the most recent version, for purposes of uniformity, the personal pronoun "she" gets bounced to the fifth couplet to summarize the action as a whole and illustrate a big picture of the figure studied. The last verse is switched to present perfect tense (was to has been) to stress the lady's ongoing struggle even after the poem's end. Williams' outlook retains a cubist trademark, as it displays compact vignettes of the unfolding scene, to at last show the full image, rendered fully visible from what initially seemed to be disjointed elements.

One decisive link that supports Williams' left-wing inclination is the antecedent of the Whitmanian oeuvre. In a blog entry from a decade ago, Kit Fox asserts that "one crucial keystone to Whitman's work was his ability and drive to connect to the whole population... achiev[ing] this by the inclusiveness of his catalogs". The underlying current is that such

stories need to be taken into account, especially since there was a mounting worldwide pre-occupation with extreme right-wing political movements taking over, and which exploded at the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Toward the end of the third section in “Song of the Exposition”, the Long Island bard writes:

Making directly for this rendezvous, vigorously clearing a path for herself, striding through the confusion, By thud of machinery and shrill steam-whistle undismay'd, Bluff'd not a bit by drain-pipe, gasometers, artificial fertilizers, Smiling and pleas'd with palpable intent to stay, She's here, install'd amid the kitchen ware!

The female personality hereby given shape to has certainly undergone tons of outer disturbances to arrive at her homely position in the kitchen. In fact, the above stanza recapitulates the toil of Lady Liberty's embodiment, thus giving Williams ample ground to unravel his own poetic project. However, his verse is bereft of the epic factor that characterizes Whitman's, and which consequently fosters the reader's interpretive labor plus the esteem for this proletarian, apron-bearing figure. Hence, Bill's task could be ascribed as a tactic to keep on with America's progress from the headquarters of a “conventional” individual.

All in all, “Proletarian Portrait” is a prime example of William's signature verse. He draws extensively from the style of his previous poetic outings, namely “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “Portrait of a Lady” to achieve a thorough treatment of a young female subject at the edge of Vorticist & Objectivist creations and pave the way for a “resolutely American” strand of Modernism. We can say the poem is instinctively suspect as it doesn't remain stable to a straightforward interpretation. The ultimately undogmatic discourse he provides is akin to a vehicle for estrangement that attaches to no particular political ideology yet drives us seamlessly on the sympathetic path toward Alterity.

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