

Kinetic Energy in William Carlos Williams's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

William Carlos Williams captures the essence of life, which is movement. Since he captures movement, his objects exude kinetic energy. He captures this energy through various cinematographic techniques such as motion blurs, spanning and close-ups, but in order to apply these cinematographic techniques, he requires an object. Williams uses various personas as objects. At times, objects or personas are not actually in motion but their potential for movement is mentioned or the personas' latent energy is encaptured such as the energy created through a sexual encounter. Williams is able to portray various angles of the subjects/objects he writes about because he employs the cubist technique which relates to conveying various vantage points. The objects/personas in Williams's poems are not the only energy carriers, in fact the form of Williams's poems carry a kinetic energy of its own.

There are two types of energy, potential energy and kinetic energy. Potential energy comes about when an object is static, it relates to the amount of work an object can do if it starts working. The kinetic energy of an object is the energy it possesses because of its motion. It indicates the amount of work the object could do as a result of its motion (Nardo, pg. 7). Thus, kinetic energy involves two main principles: 1. motion, 2. energy. In Williams's poetry there are various dimensions of kinetic energy. Williams says in his introduction to his essays, "A poem is a large or small machine made out of words...As in all machines, its movement is intrinsic, undulant, a physical more than a literary character" (ii). Williams's poetry encompasses this 'physicality', he places more emphasis on the creation of motion, than the actual object/subject of the poem. Williams employs not only physical movement which is conveyed through various cinematographic effects but he also intensifies action by juxtaposing it with stagnant images or with objects embodying potential energy.

Physical kinetic energy is the most prominent type of movement seen in Williams's poetry. Most of the time he portrays a persona moving (as in *The Right of Way*, *Romance Moderne*, *The Young Housewife*, *The Descent of Winter*). It is important to note that in the examples given above the persona is driving a car throughout the poems. Dr. Amra Raza ⁱ, in her D.Phil dissertation, entitled "Spatial Constructs in Alamgir Hashmi's Poetry" (pg. 19), mentions that Alamgir Hashmi uses a frame within a frame, in other words, the gaze is directed at and through windows, doors, or pictures. Raza points out that the windows and doors serve a two dimensional purpose, they are frames of viewing as well as frames which create psychological space. Williams, on the other hand, uses frames within frames one-dimensionally, both the inner and outer world reflect each other (in terms of motion) but this reflection has nothing to do with the psychology of the viewer, he just observes and nothing more. Whether the persona is moving in a car or on a train, he can see other people in motion as well. At times, the window is not just a space from which energy and life is observed it becomes a portal to let in energy such as in his poem *A Goodnight*, William Carlos Williams writes

A black fungus springs out about the lonely church doors--
sleep, sleep. The Night, coming down upon
the wet boulevard, would start you awake with his

message, to have in at your window. Pay no
 heed to him. He storms at your sill with
 cooings, with gesticulations, curses!
 You will not let him in. He would keep you from sleeping.....
 The open street-door lets in the breath of
 the morning wind from over the lake.
 The bus coming to a halt grinds from its sullen brakes--
 lullaby, lullaby. The crackle of a newspaper,
 the movement of the troubled coat beside you--
 sleep, sleep, sleep, sleep . . . (9 SG)

In the example given above, night is equated to a menacing force which will repel serenity. The doors are uninhabited but they still have the potential to be a breeding ground for fungus. Despite the loneliness of the church door and the menace of the window sill which may let in terrifying forces, the morning transforms the door into a soothing force which breathes in fresh morning wind and becomes a source of observing the movement of life. Williams's use of a moving car reminds one of Philip Larkin who has also written poems which are about the persona moving in a train or car (such as *Whitsun Weddings*) but Williams unlike Larkin does not progress from the descriptions of the moving visual scenes to meditation. He describes these glimpses of the scenes for just what they are, without any attempt at meditation. At times, the movement is not mentioned but the subject being observed is mentioned in terms of motion, for example in *The Girl*, the girl being observed is described in terms of movement "crossing the street/reading a newspaper" (444 CW). Similarly, the mobility of *A Negro Woman* is captured as she carries marigolds which cause her to waddle "as she walks" (103 CW). Not only human beings but objects themselves are also moving. The fire truck in *The Great Figure* is also described as "moving" (47 SG) or as in *Overture to a Dance of Locomotives*, the trains are depicted as

dancing wheels repeating
 the same gesture remain relatively
 stationary: rails forever parallel
 return on themselves infinitely.
 The dance is sure (11 SG)

At times, the persona as well as the observed object are moving as in *The*

Young Housewife, not only is the persona moving in his car, but the young housewife is also constantly in motion either she “moves about” (17 AQQ) in her house or she “comes to the curb” (17 AQQ) or a part of her body is moving. At one point in the poem, she is standing on the sidewalk but she is “tucking in/stray ends of hair” (17 AQQ). By looking at these various examples, it seems the reason these objects have captured Williams's attention is due to their movement, in other words their kinetic energy, it is as if motion is the primary source of Williams's poetry. Even those images that are stagnant in Williams's poetry have the potential to generate energy for example, *The Right of Way* ends with the line, “I saw a girl with one leg/over the rail of a balcony” (24 SG). At times, the movement as depicted in the poem mentioned above reaches completion, on the other hand some poems deal with movement which has yet to reach its climax such as in *Young Sycamore*, Williams writes:

the tree will keep on growing,
dividing and waning
sending out
young branches
on all sides- (266 CW)

Flashes of movement are significant in Williams's poetry as he writes in *The Great Figure*

I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
fire truck
moving (47 SG)

and later says in his autobiography, “I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by” (10).

Closely related to the physical movement is the cinematographic effect. In cinematography, skippingⁱⁱ is a term which relates to how a cameraman focuses on individual objects and then quickly moves on to the next in order to create an effect of vibration. Williams uses skipping in order to create an effect of pictures which are moving very quickly, like as if they are a reel of pictures. For example, in *The Right of Way*, the persona glimpses people involved in various types of motion such as an old man

who “looked away” (24 SG) or a woman laughing and leaning forward. Williams also employs the cinematographic technique of a motion blurⁱⁱⁱ. A motion blur involves moving objects which leave a trail behind them. In *Romance Moderne*, the vanishing trees and the dancing gnomes “Trees vanish--reappear--vanish: /detached dance of gnomes--/as a talk dodging remarks, glows and fades.” (13 SG) leave a trail behind them thus fixing them in the persona's mind.

The reader's attention is focused on these objects not only because of the quick frame per second but also because of the cubist effect. Cubism^{iv}, gives various vantage points in order to represent a multiplicity of views. Through cubism, artists painted not still life pictures but ‘real’ pictures, by giving not just one perspective or angle of a picture but different angles of an object. Williams employs this technique and it is while showing different perspectives that he also incorporates movement. Williams generates motion through the movement of angles. For example, in *The Great Figure*, Williams talks about the fire truck and then gives a wide-angle shot of the city. Similarly, in *Queen Anne's Lace*, Williams starts off with describing the beloved's body, then he moves on to a field, then to flowers and then again to the field and finally to the flowers again. In *Daisy*, he uses the same technique; he starts with a rapid overview of spring and then takes a close-up of the subject of the poem. Williams actually depicts the eye's movement through the cubist technique of multiplicity of viewpoints. It is as if the eye jumps from one perspective to another.

Visual spectacle is not the only means that Williams uses to convey movement, sexual kinetic energy is also portrayed in many of his poems. As mentioned above, energy is of two main types: potential and kinetic energy. Potential energy is the type of energy which is latent in a stationary object, as soon as the object starts moving it changes into kinetic energy, when Williams describes sexual acts he refers to both of these types of energies. First he gives the potential sexual energy of an object and then when the sexual act has started he describes the kinetic energy. In *The Young Housewife*, the young housewife is described from the beginning of the poem in terms of sexuality, she is “in negligee” (17 AQQ) and is “uncorseted” (17 AQQ). This latent sexual energy comes to life as “The noiseless wheels of my car/rush with a crackling sound

over/dried leaves” (17 AQQ). It seems as if the male persona has engaged in a sexual act by moving over the dried leaves, leaves suggesting the young housewife whom he has earlier compared to “a fallen leaf” (17 AQQ). In *Portrait of a Lady*, energy is created through conflict, as the persona continuously makes advances to the lady which she repeatedly foils. In some poems, such as *Queen Anne's Lace*, Williams describes an actual sexual encounter through the metaphor of a field of flowers. First there is the primary touch which is the initiation of the sexual act “Wherever/his hand has lain there is” (31 SG). Then the lovers increase the momentum of their lovemaking “until the whole field is a white desire” (31 SG) and finally they are spent after reaching the orgasmic height of their experience “a pious wish to whiteness gone over--/or nothing” (32 SG). At times, the people presented in Williams’s poems create latent sexual energy such as his description of *The Young Laundryman*

His muscles ripple
Under the thin blue shirt;
And his naked feet, in
Their straw sandals, lift at
The heels, and find new
Postures continuously (122 CW)

Williams also freezes kinetic energy. He captures motion at a certain period in time without arriving at conclusions, for example, in *The Pictures from Breughel*, he does not take the pictures further and write poetry about possible actions that take place after the pictures have been painted. In fact, he describes the paintings which have frozen a certain moment, for example in *The Landscape with the fall of Icarus*, Icarus's fall is frozen and other actions taking place are captured, such as the farmer ploughing his field. It is significant to note that Williams does not place emphasis on only dramatic moments in time, such as Icarus's momentous fall, he also describes the farmer’s mundane movements. Paradoxically, movement is made stationary as a certain moment in time is frozen.

Thus, motion is juxtaposed with stationary images for example, in *Peasant Wedding*, the immobility of the bride is presented in contrast to the hustle and bustle of her wedding

gabbing all but the bride

hands folded in her
 lap is awkwardly silent simple
 dishes are being served
 clabber and what not (412 CW)

At times, different types of kinetic energy are juxtaposed with one another, in *Flowers by the Sea*, Williams says “chicory and daisies...and the movement-or the shape/perhaps-of restlessness, whereas/the sea is circled and sways/peacefully on its plantlike stem?” (122 CW). Thus, the flowers seem to be restlessly moving whereas the sea is peaceful in its movement. At times, Williams conveys action through figures seemingly averse to movement. In the *Spring and All* poems, he portrays the emergence of life out of death, poetry unexpectedly blooming in a parched industrial landscape. Similarly, in *To Waken an Old Lady*, Williams writes “Old age is/a flight of/ small cheeping birds” (20 SG). Thus, old age which is usually associated with inactivity is compared with the movement of small birds, which seems appropriate since they are not involved in rigorous activity but like old people their movement is mild, mellowed, nevertheless, these small birds have their whole life ahead of them, whereas old age leads to demise not to vistas of youth. At times, Williams uses this contrast of mobility and immobility to convey energy which has been hindered. For example in *Portrait of a Woman in Bed*, Williams portrays the gap between a woman's energetic mobile mind and her sick body's incapacity to move as he says, “There's my things drying in the corner/that blue skirt/joined to the grey skirt/ I'm sick of trouble!” (129 CW). The woman is tired of being a helpless invalid. At times, the absence of the kinetic force serves the purpose of conveying some sort of message, for example in *Gulls*, the eagle does not attack the three gulls, which seems to be sending a message of peace or harmony which Williams later on exemplifies by saying, “You see it is not necessary for us to leap at each other: (11 AQQ). Likewise, in *To Elsie*, the mobility of the young men “railroading/out of sheer lust for an adventure” (67 CW) is contrasted with the passivity of the women who can only escape through sexual surrender “succumbing without/emotion/save terror” (68 CW). Williams is pointing out the helplessness of women by comparing their immobility to the mobility of men.

It is not only through movement that kinetic energy is conveyed. Color is

also employed to convey potential energy which can at any point be turned into motion and thus kinetic energy. For example, in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, Williams says “so much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow” (224 CW), the wheelbarrow possesses no distinguishing feature except for its color. It is as if the color red is the important aspect of the wheelbarrow. The color red, according to psychologists is associated with energy, heat, passion, etc. Then the “figure5/in gold/on a red/firetruck” (47 SG) is contrasted to “the dark city” (47 SG) indicating that lack of color leads to immobility whereas the brightness of the golden and red color suggests movement. Red is one of the most recurring colors used by Williams and this color is used for energy, speed, heat, power and strength. It is used continuously in *The Descent of Winter*, to convey the energy and vitality of spring such as “the cannas flaunts/their crimson head/darkly crimson heart” (242 I) and “Dahlias/what a red...with a red face” (243 I). In his poem *Primrose*, Williams uses a variety of colors which suggest vitality; the primrose itself is yellow which is associated with sunlight, a force which provides energy. He also talks about “green walnuts swaying” (30 SG), it is important to note that he does not use the brown color which is usually associated with walnuts but the unripe green color which is associated with vigour and youth.

Another means of conveying kinetic energy is through the use of language and the arrangement of words. Williams uses many onomatopoeic words to convey motion. For example, in *A Goodnight*, he continuously uses words such as “thundering” (9 SG), “rattle and swish of spray” (9 SG), “mass and surge at the crossings” (9 SG), “the engaged roar of the traffic, machine shrieks: (9 SG), “the rustle of your clothes as you raise them__” (10 SG) and “the crackle of a newspaper” (10 SG). Many poets use a causative factor as a main agent to create action, for example Keats, in his *Ode to Autumn*, uses the figure of autumn which makes the trees laden with ripened fruit. Similarly, Williams also uses a causative factor which initiates the action. For example, in *Peasant Wedding* it is the wedding which leads to all the activity of waiters, servants and people. Williams also uses caesura, which is an audible pause to break up a line of verse and enjambment, the breaking up of a syntactic unit by the end of a line or two verses, to keep the reader's eye in constant motion. At times, Williams uses a Dickinsonian^v like dash to suggest interrupted motion, the trajectory of the sentence is broken off in mid-arc. For example, in *Spring and All*, he

says “blue/mottled clouds driven from the/northeast-a cold wind” (88 I), the reader expects the subject of blue to be in the same line but Williams uses enjambment in such that the next line has to be read to complete the phrase. Also, this enjambment connotes that the clouds are moving rapidly because of the wind, also throughout *Spring and All* there is heavy enjambment such as

but now the stark dignity of
entrance-still, the profound change
has come upon them: rooted, they
grip down and begin to awaken

(102 I)

This enjambment is apparent because of the absence of capitals at the beginning of the lines and this implies interplay between lines. Taking a look at the eighth and ninth line of *Proletarian Portrait* we can see how the use of caesura creates motion, “Her shoe in her hand. Looking intently into it/She pulls out the paper insole” (312 CW). The full stop creates a gap between the action of looking and the holding of her shoes; it is a scrutiny and then an action. It seems that the energy moving from word to word is like that of the eye moving from object to object which is a result of the rough, broken rhythms.

Williams uses nature to describe an ongoing process of growth, a movement. In *Spring and All*, Williams says “lifeless in appearance, sluggish/dazed spring approaches...it quickens, clarity, outline of leaf” (134 I) thus there is a sense of incipient growth which can at any time turn into growth. Or as in *The Locust Tree in Flower*

Among
Of
Green

Stiff
Old
Brightness

Broken
Branch
Come

White
Sweet
May

Again (366 CW)

He visually describes the birth of white blossoms from stiff boughs. In the *Young Sycamore*, Williams describes the tree as animate, thrusting towards the sky as if the process of life is in continuous motion. Nature becomes energy moving in cycle. In order to convey this cyclical aspect of nature, Williams uses the form of the poems, as in *Young Sycamore*, while the reader reads downwards throughout the poem, the tree moves upwards, he starts with “round and firm trunk” (266 CW) and ends with “knotted/twigs....hornlike at top” (266 CW). Thus an upwards and downwards cycle is produced in this poem.

As mentioned above, Williams introduces kinetic energy in his poems through their form. The way he arranges his poems leads to movement. In the poems of *Pictures from Breughel* and other poems, such as *Proletarian Portrait*, there are long sentences over short lines which create a feeling of high speed. At other times, these long and short sentences also seem wave-like with up and down motion such as “A big young bareheaded woman/in an apron” (66 AQQ). In *Young Sycamore*, the curve, pitch and sway of free verse creates a sense of life being a continuous process. The *Young Sycamore* ends with the line ‘hornlike at top’ (266 CW) which is open-ended, without any punctuation as if to indicate that the tree will continue to grow even after the poet's imitation of it has ended. The indentation in Williams's poetry is very important as it creates a sense of constant motion, as if the lines sway back and forth. For example, in *A Negro Woman*,

Carrying a bunch of marigolds

Wrapped

in an old newspaper: (103 CW)

Or as in *The Descent*, the poem creates a ladder like effect which conveys a descending motion

The descent beckons

As the ascent beckoned. (389 CW)

In *Spring Storm*, the indentation creates a flow which becomes the flow of water

Rain falls and falls

As if it would never end

....

But water, water is seething

From a thousand runnels.

(23 SG)

The rush of a line may be arrested by a single static word in a preceding line such as in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, “so much depends/upon/a red wheel/barrow” (224 CW). The poems themselves become forms of movement, for example in *A Sort of Song*

Let the snake wait under

His weed

And the writing

Be of words, slow and quick, sharp

To strike, quiet to wait,

Sleepless.

(93 CW)

The arrangement of the lines as well as the alliteration of the 's' consonant creates the s-shaped movement of a snake. The foot of the verse also creates motion, such as in *The Dance*

In Breughel's great picture, The Kermess,

The dancers go round, they go round and

Around

(468 CW)

It seems as if the dactyls skip happily over the line breaks, and the reiteration of the word 'round's seems like the repeated steps of a dance. Later in this poem, the internal rhyme "prance as they dance" (468 CW) creates the same dance-like motion. At other times, the speed of the poem is stunted as in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, the long 'o' in barrow slows down

the speed created by the short 'uh' in much and upon.

As argued in this paper Williams successfully captures the kinetic energy of various objects. The poems acquire a life of their own through not only the objects mentioned in his poems but also through the form and language. By using the cubist technique, his poems become rounded rather than flat, they have the potential to change even after the poems come to an end. Movement is viewed through movement; the doors, windows and cars become frames to observe and record movement which also reflects their kinesis.

Notes

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- i Dr. Amra Raza in the second chapter, of her thesis entitled 'Framed Spaces' discusses windows, door and pictures as frames to observe the outer world. She also mentions that Hashmi uses these frames as psychological registers. They reflect the inner turmoil displayed by the personas. The windows create a liminal space which is also affected by the dichotomy of light and dark. Thus, Raza contends that these windows are not only one-dimensional, they depict various dichotomies, whether that of light and dark, silence and sound, inner psychological world and outer exterior world. Williams, on the other hand, does not mention the two-dimensionality of windows but he creates depth through his focus on motion.
 - ii Skipping in cinematography, refers to how the camera's shutter is used to create a vibrating effect or movement. This effect increases by faster movement and a narrower shutter. For instance, if you record a fence in this mode it will appear to be vibrating. Williams creates this effect by focusing on each object individually and then quickly moving to the next object.
 - iii A motion blur occurs when either the camera itself or the photographed subject moves. When the camera or the object moves too fast, the camera shutter is not able to freeze the moment which results in blurriness of a picture. Photographers deliberately use this in order to create a sense of speed, usually in sports, for instance, the picture of a race car driver.
 - iv George Braque and Pablo Picasso were the founders of Cubism. Cubism is related to representing objects from different vantage points, in order to do this the artist gives his pictures a two-dimensional appearance, geometric lines and subtle colors. By doing this the artist is enabled to give a fuller, detailed picture of the subject.
 - v Dickinson uses dashes to convey an interruption in thought. At times, she also uses dashes to convey that a sentence is ending but at the same time, it has a connection with the following sentence.

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