

THE STRUGGLE OF MODERN AMERICAN POETS TO WRITE ORIGINAL AND AUTHENTIC POETRY

AMERİKALI ŞAİRLERİNİN ORİJİAL VE ÖZGÜN AMERİKAN ŞİİRİ YAZMA MÜCADELESİ

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ÖZET

American poetry which initially arose as attempts by colonists to contribute to English poetry in the 17th century relied mostly on the poetic form, diction, and theme of British models. Beyond doubt, literary tastes have changed in time. In old-fashioned poems, the profound influence of Romanticism- the theories of the imagination, the poet's role in art and society, the exploration of the status of art in the world, and the confusing interaction between mind, language, and world- is remarkable. In this sense, modern American poets have rejected the past influences, and viewed poetry as a unit that is composed of carefully and professionally chosen words in order to maintain and increase its capacity. The purpose of this essay is to illustrate that modern American poets such as William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle, and Wallace Stevens have put great effort in order to create a poetry that is completely original, authentic, and American.

Key words: American Poetry, Modern American Poets, the Influence of Romanticism

ABSTRACT

Başlangıçta sömürgecilerin 17. yüzyılda İngiliz şiirine katkıda bulunma teşebbüsleri olarak ortaya çıkan Amerikan şiiri, çoğunlukla İngiliz modellerinin şiirsel biçimine, diksiyonuna ve temasına dayanıyordu. Şüphesiz, edebi zevkler zaman içinde değişti. Eski şiirlerde, Romantizmin derin etkisi- hayal gücü teorileri, şairin sanat ve toplumdaki rolü, sanatın dünyadaki statüsünün keşfi ve zihin, dil ve dünya arasındaki kafa karıştırıcı etkileşim- dikkat çekicidir. Bu anlamda, modern Amerikan şairleri geçmiş etkilerini reddetmektedirler ve şiiri, kapasitesini korumak ve artırmak için özenle ve profesyonelce seçilmiş sözcüklerden oluşan bir birim olarak görmektedirler. Bu makalenin amacı, William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle ve Wallace Stevens gibi modern Amerikan şairlerinin, tamamen orijinal, özgün ve Amerikan şiiri yaratmak için büyük çaba sarf ettiklerini göstermektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerikan Şiiri, Modern Amerikalı Şairler, Romantizmin Etkileri

1. INTRODUCTION

Beyond doubt, literary tastes have changed in time and notably successful modern American poets such as William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle, and Wallace Stevens harshly rejected the barriers of the past influences and 'Make It New' was their battle cry to create totally authentic American poetry. They admired concision, understatement, concentration on the thing itself and they glorified the organization that has grown mostly from juxtaposition rather than purely logical order. Additionally, they considered that rhyme, measurement rules, sonnets, and inversion are worn out devices that are no more capable of reaching the readers at all – they believed that the utmost aim of poetry is to reach the audience, not to show off with the elaborated word choices. In this essay, *The Red Wheelbarrow* by William Carlos Williams, *Sea Rose* and *Oread* by Hilda Doolittle, and *Man With The Blue Guitar* by Wallace Stevens are analyzed in order to illustrate that the concrete idea of creating authentic and original American poetry has been echoing in their writings as innovation.

2. THE RED WHEELBARROW BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

William Carlos Williams who has always been well-recognized as a revolutionary imagist poet attempted to invent entirely fresh, authentic, and unique American poetry and American version of modernism in which subject matters like the everyday circumstances of life and the lives of common people are mostly centered upon. "Say it, no ideas but things" is a simple motto about the kind of poetry Williams envisaged and worked to attain. It became one of the most important poetic slogans of 20th century American poetry. In this respect, the motto is not only emblematic for what he aims at in his poems but it can also be considered as essential for both the imagist and objectivist movements in poetry for it briefly articulates the gist of those movements. David Perkins explains Williams' motto, "Say it, no ideas but things", with the following words:

We are in this world: our senses register it. But like all arguers of this tendency, Williams means that we live too much in our minds, not our bodies, in concepts, memories, worries, hopes, desires, not in the fullness of the moment. The thing offers itself, now and always, in all particularities of its being, but we are too busy, abstracted, repentant, or dreamy, too beset by our own internal uproar or too stereotyped and conventional in our responses. So we do not take it in at all. It is an old theme. Maybe any perception we can have of anything must inevitably be a stereotyped one, so great is the pressure of culture on us, of "tradition". (264)

In fact, Williams did not want poets to observe the world and its objects just to write them down later. In contrast, he encouraged writers to engage the "world", fully enjoy and taste it and not categorize or constrain it according to the self's needs. In addition, as a poet, he theorized almost entirely within a major modernist paradigm built around the question: how does one remake a poetry, and a culture, on the grounds of an exhausted tradition? His antagonism towards all British things was intensified by the domination of Pound and Eliot on this issue - creating authentic American poetry - yet this was not the only reason of his insistence on American art. Creating unique American form and original rhythms that are far from the influence of past eras was one of the key concerns of Williams and he believed that American poets have the capacity to create an identity in poetry that is very different from that of British poetry. In order to make American poetry totally authentic in terms of the language, he says that 'The business of the writer is to study language.' (qtd. Wagner, L.W. in 149).

In fact, Williams' goal as a writer was to capture the immediacy of experience. From his medical practice, Williams created characters who appeared in his poetry; he also remained deeply committed to his patients' lives, to the struggles they underwent and even to their sustaining humor despite their poor health condition. As a doctor, he was surrounded by the real life itself with its all obscurity. Thus, it is obviously seen in most of his poems that he attempts to catch the life itself by re-constructing lines from daily speech. Additionally, his use of local makes his poetry more authentic and American. In his poems, it is vividly seen that he consciously used his own place, time, and personal experience as a doctor and elevated them through imagination into art (Wagner, L.W. 139-40).

For Williams, poetic language must be combined with American everyday life, and he intended to create "tones and movements that are distinctively American" in his verses (qtd. in Solt, 304). He defines poetry in *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* as follows:

Poetry is related to poetry and not to socialism, communism or anything else that tries to swallow it [...] it deals with reality, the actuality of every day, by virtue of its use of language. [...] I live where I live and acknowledge no lack of opportunity because of that to be alert to facts, to the music of events, of words, of the speech of people about me. As well as to the speech of the muse, the intangible perfection of all excellent verse. (qtd in Solt, 305-306)

In fact, Williams did not support complex poems unlike many of his contemporaries and described them as "conformists preoccupied with rehashing the literary glories of the past" (*The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 2003). He felt like the poets of his time were in the wrong direction, and he looked for ways of creating a revolution and freshness in poetry. He wrote to the editor of *Poetry* magazine in 1913, saying, "Verse to be alive must have infused into it something of the same order, some tincture of disestablishment, something in the nature of an impalpable revolution, an ethereal reversal" (*The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 2003). It is obvious that Williams rejected the influence of the past in poetry in all aspects, and he felt that poetry required originality which reflects completely current and future fashions, not old-fashioned ones.

In order to highlight how Williams concentrated on creating completely original American poetry, one of his poems, *The Red Wheelbarrow*, will be analyzed in this part of the essay. Indeed, this is not Williams' best or most significant poem at all; however, it illustrates some crucial aspects of his art. *The Red Wheelbarrow*, which is a very short poem written by Williams, is revolutionary in terms of its length, form, meter, simplicity, language, and description.

Possibly no modern American poem is more widely known than Williams' *The Red Wheelbarrow*. It is written in free verse and composed of only one sentence broken up at various intervals. Williams used no punctuation and no capitalized words in this one-sentence poem, and the first line is longer than the second in each couplet, which makes the poem appear as if the second lines are written just to support the first lines.

In *The Red Wheelbarrow*, it is realized that the subject of the sentence is 'so much,' and the verb of the sentence is 'depends,' and the direct object is 'the red wheelbarrow.' Therefore, it is seen that 'the red wheelbarrow' is just the poem's title, not the subject of the sentence. In this respect, it is quite obvious that Williams aimed to direct the readers into many ways and helped them decide if they need to be more interested in 'the red wheelbarrow' or in the 'so much'. Such kind of approach to the poetry is new and original and this illustrates that he achieved to create something original and totally American. Williams' clarity of expression through the use of precise words and his explicit and sharp language in *The Red Wheelbarrow* illustrate that he refused the typical Romantic and Victorian poetry which included lines written in flowery language and aimed to form a unique way of expression that is totally American, as well.

He also illustrates that he is quite different from many of his contemporaries in terms of the subject matter of poetry. He preferred to capture ordinary moments in everyday life and use simple objects such as a red wheelbarrow or a figure, and this made him as a figure of rebel in poetry. Williams was working as a doctor and a poet at the same time, and he got the idea for *The Red Wheelbarrow* as he was medicating a patient. All of a sudden, he looked out of the window and saw a red wheelbarrow in rain and there were some white chickens wandering around it. The use of this sudden and striking realization which is called epiphany makes Williams and his poetry different, as well.

Additionally, it is seen that he used no word that does not contribute to the understanding of the readers, and no unnecessary vocabulary is seen in this poem. It is also of great significance to state that *The Red Wheelbarrow* is a painting-like poem like. Like photographers and painters, Williams, in this poem, aimed to reflect the object that is often turned a blind eye or go unnoticed, which is completely new and original way of expression in American poetry.

3. SEA ROSE AND OREAD BY HILDA DOOLITTLE

Hilda Doolittle who is prominently known by her initials H.D. is another American poet whose poems will be analyzed in this essay. She was a promoter of the 'imagist' model of poetry, which encouraged the use of common speech, idioms and free usage of rhymes and she put great effort in order to create authentic and original American poetry like William Carlos Williams. It is of paramount importance to state that H.D.'s early poetry, with its bare, almost primitive and

traditional language, and concise style, is often considered to be the quintessential work of the Imagist movement.

Similar to Williams who rejected the influence of the past eras in poetry in all aspects, H.D. considered that poetry needed freshness and originality, as well. Her influence on the development of twentieth century American poetry should not be underestimated. Her *Sea Rose* which is written in free verse encodes a rebellion against Victorian beauty and conventional sentimentality. In terms of the form, meter, and language used in this poem, it can be said that is completely original and American.

At the very beginning of the poem, *Sea Rose*, it is noticeable that the rose is 'marred' and 'harsh' unlike the features of traditional rose frequently described in the poems of Victorian Period. The first 4 lines give some clues that the poem is not inclined to describe roses in a typical way as expected by the readers. At the end of the poem, it is seen that sea rose is more precious than the traditional wet rose.

In fact, both of these roses are used to symbolize women. The former symbolizes a woman who conforms to all of society's standards on beauty and woman who cannot question even her basic rights. On the other hand, the sea rose symbolizes a woman who steps out of the lane that has been designated as appropriate for them. The sea rose is used to represent a woman who does not care for the standards of Doolittle's contemporary society and is rebelling against the rules of the surrounding ideology which forces her to remain totally obedient and live like a machine operating according to some fixed and rigid codes.

Oread which is a 6-line poem is another major work of Hilda Doolittle. *Oread*, one of her earliest and best-known poems, is written in free verse and it has no recurring rhyme or meter as seen in poetic form of the past eras, yet it has achieved to be quite musical. It takes its title from the name of a nymph in classical mythology. According to Greek mythology, an oread is a nymph, a free-spirited woman who wanders happily through the woods, hills, and mountains. She symbolizes the zest of life and vital life-force that imbues life. As such, she is appropriate for the spirit of this poem which is about the wildness of nature.

Although it seems simple, H. D. calls into question traditional constructs that she sees as being inherently bipolar and unequal in this very short poem. The entire poem is a command from a magical nymph to the sea, ordering the sea to send crashing waves over the land. In just six short lines, H.D has offered a concise example of Imagist poetry, presenting an image in the Poundian sense. With no flowery language and unnecessary words in it, it is a great short poem which definitely fits into Imagist poetry. Similar to the expression of William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle addresses her object with direct statements, as well. In terms of the form, meter, language, themes, and expression, these two poems vividly illustrate H.D.'s aspiration to be totally free from Victorian features.

4. MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR BY WALLACE STEVENS

Wallace Stevens, considered as a major twentieth century American poet, devoted his literary energies to the exploration of the possible relations between reality and imagination. Accordingly, he is generally acknowledged to have been preoccupied with the relation of reality to the imagination and conducted "a struggle to determine the nature of reality and the imagination" (Shucard 139). Stevens was a master in style with the precision in creating his poems. It is mostly considered that Stevens' poems are not language games, but urgent responses to a World which was confusing and unsatisfactory.

He was called as one of the best and most representative American poets by most of the critics. Technical and thematic complexity of his work made him a difficult poet, but it is also significant to know that he attached utmost importance on aesthetics, insistent supporting the idea that creative imagination and objective reality are notions of poetry, which makes him different from William Carlos Williams in this respect (Shucard 139).

Additionally, it is known that Stevens is among the most worldly and the most otherworldly of American poets, and it is paradoxically through his otherworldliness that his respect for the actual world is registered (Longenbach, "Music" 1). Stevens' use of striking imagery is a direct output of his creativity which was basically triggered by the way he perceived the reality. Consequently, it resulted in recycling imagery.

Using symbols to represent the outer reality is mostly typical of Stevens as reiterated by Myron Turner in her "The Imagery of Wallace Stevens and Henry Green," she reports that the defining characteristic of Stevens' imagery is the transfiguration of the visible reality into a surreal image or a symbol of supra reality, which "further accounts for [his] representation of reality as something it is and is not, for the surrealistic feel of [his] imagery" (Turner, 66).

Unlike William Carlos Williams and Hilda Doolittle, Wallace Stevens does not reject the traditions of Romanticism and Victorian Period completely; he is between Romanticism and Modernism benefiting from both. In fact, the method of Stevens is mostly dialectical - a ceaseless process of antithetical formulation, sublimation, and synthesis. Indeed, it is possible to claim that Stevens is among the writers who seek freshness and strangeness in poetry in some fresh and strange ways; therefore, his way of creating something original, and authentic seems not the same with his contemporaries.

His *Man with the Blue Guitar* is a long poem that allows Stevens to change perspectives and create abstract realities, and the meter is mostly iambic tetrameter, yet it is noticed that there is considerable variation in this. Most of the sections are made up of two-line stanzas, though this varies, as well. Almost half of the lines are rhymed, yet it seems that they are not a formal structural element in the poem, rather they seem accidental. Within these basic patterns, the poet is able to command a number of tones such as descriptive, confused, self-critical, angry, ironic, satiric, melancholic, visionary, challenging, and savage. In this poem, he professionally takes the reader into the world of the poet and asks the reader to see, feel, or improvise the world from the poet's perspective.

The diction of Stevens is uniformly simple, even colloquial, as well; however, some words require extra explanation, which makes his style difficult to understand when compared to Williams and H.D. Kermode says about this poem that, "*The Man with the Blue Guitar* is an advance toward the mature form of Stevens's long poems, and in itself a notable and original achievement" (66). 'They' in the poem represents a society that demands from the artists an image of the world on the mirror though the guitar is a transformer of reality through the power of imagination changing reality into surreality (Shucard, Moramarco and Sullivan 146).

5. CONCLUSION

As literary tastes have changed in time, the old-fashioned traditions reflected in poems have been rejected by some modern American poets who criticized the poetic form, diction, and theme of British models. William Carlos Williams, Hilda Doolittle, and Wallace Stevens struggled to create poetry that is totally authentic, distinctive and American. As seen in the poems analyzed in this essay, in order to achieve their goal, they applied different literary approaches to their poems in different ways. They wrote poems that departed radically from the established forms of the previous centuries and that were reflective of the age in which they were written. It can be claimed that the renaissance of American poetry is a fact today thanks to their efforts.

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