

IMPRESSIONISM IN  
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'  
EARLY POETRY

威廉·卡洛斯·威廉斯  
早期诗歌中的印象主义

李慧 著

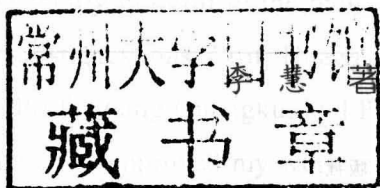


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The poetry of William Carlos Williams often lives in that imaginative space between visual and verbal art. Some critics have already noted the visual element in his poetry and claimed that Williams' verse is very similar to painting. They examine the relationship between cubism, dadaism and the poetry of Williams. The critics recognize that there is more than a casual relationship between Williams' poetry and the visual arts. These critics have laid a solid foundation for later studies. In order to understand the significance of Williams' poetry, one must consider the visual techniques Williams perfects during his poetic career. Among the major schools of modern painting, impressionism plays a more significant role in the history of the modern arts, greatly owing to its spirit of innovation. As a poet who is enthusiastic about painting from childhood, Williams was unavoidably influenced by the spirit of impressionism in his early time. While, what are its concrete influences on the poetry of Williams? On the basis of the important notions of impressionism the present research intends to explore the similarities between the techniques of impressionism and the early poetry of Williams.

As the fountain of modernist arts, impressionism breaks away from the Academy with a brand new version of the world, focuses on depicting

the environment that surrounds them with special attention to light, its transitory and changing qualities on the landscape. As a literary style growing out of impressionism, literary impressionism aims to a depiction in literature of a certain scene, character or emotion. With the style, the author presents the object as it is heard, felt and seen in a single passing moment. Williams' sharp perception in painting enables him to take inspirations from the ideas of impressionism and his poetry demonstrates the conspicuous techniques and stylistic features of impressionism. In his early works, we can find obvious traces of the techniques of impressionism.

On the basis of the important notions of impressionism, the research analyzes impressionism in Williams' early poetry from the following seven chapters. Chapter One is an introduction to the book. The second chapter traces back to the influences on Williams in visual arts. With a close study of the culture of Williams' time, his own experience, and his early poetry, a useful sense of the visual arts background to Williams' early poetry is gained by starting with his earliest poetry and his important early relationships with his mother, who had great artistic talents and once studied art in Paris, his brother Edgar, Ezra Pound, and some painters of his time. Chapter Three explores an important impressionist characteristic, the interplay between the observer and the observed, in the early writing of Williams. Impressionism suggests impressionistic artwork is the interplay between the observer and the observed. Similar to it, the contact between mind and thing (through the agency of the senses) is justly advocated in Williams' poetics. The fusion of the individual's consciousness with the

world creates a unity between visual appearance and mental reality. Reality is seen as a harmony of illusion and reality. Williams asserts that readers and the poet should work as co-maker to complete the work; the reader is invited with their imagination to learn complexities underlying the “simplicity” of the materials. Chapter Four works on the characteristics of a most important notion of impressionism, the act of perception, in Williams’ early poetry. Williams has said the poem’s “sensuality” is the poem’s rootedness in the physical world of actuality. The characteristics of impressionist perception, the fresh relationship with the world, the immediacy of impression, the conflict between sensual response and rational response, are so fully responded in Williams’ early poems. Chapter Five, entitled “Spatial Time in Williams’ Poetry”, discusses the impressionistic interpretation of space and time, the harmony of light and color and the philosophy of water in Williams’ early poems. Impressionists often emphasize the atmospheric conditions in a certain place at a specific time. Light and its effect on the objects depicted are so important to the impressionist. In literature, the reader is also intended to seize the impressionist works spatially in a moment of time, rather than a time sequence. All these impressionistic techniques are so vividly applied in the early poetry of Williams. Chapter Six focuses on discussing impressionist narrative in Williams’ early poetry. Different from the traditional omniscient narrative in which the author’s view dominates the way of telling, the impressionist text advocates to render rather than to narrate life. To literary impressionists, limited narrative and fragmental narrative are important new narrative methods to achieve the impressionist effect. The

present study intends to articulate how these two impressionist methods are greatly applied in William's early poetry. Chapter Seven is the conclusion of this book.

The innovative spirit of impressionism provides inspirations to Williams in helping him to see the world with a brand new version, know more about human consciousness including more about himself, find his own ways of poem, and establish his particular poetics. The application of the impressionistic techniques in his early poetry enriches the contents and forms of his poems. From then on, Williams in his later years underwent various experiments to incorporate different schools of visual arts into poetry to fashion the themes, and developed techniques in his poetry. His employment of the various visual elements sets an example for the modern poets, shows his strong sense of social responsibility to search for the outlet for the American modernist poetry.



## 前言

美国现代诗人威廉·卡洛斯·威廉斯的诗歌常常活跃于文字艺术与视觉艺术的想象空间之中。某些评论家已注意到威廉斯诗歌中的视觉元素，并宣称其诗近似于绘画。他们研究威廉斯诗歌与某些现代视觉艺术流派（比如立体主义、达达主义）的联系，认为威廉斯诗歌与视觉艺术之间绝不是一种偶然的关联。从这些视角所进行的研究为后继研究提供了一些背景。若想深入理解威廉斯诗歌所富含的深刻意义与独特魅力，需不断探寻与挖掘诗人在创作生涯中进行的视觉艺术技巧实验，进一步追溯与梳理其诗歌视觉艺术的影响源。作为现代艺术的发源地，印象主义以革新姿态出现于历史舞台，在现代艺术史中占有开先河之重要地位，而威廉斯所生活的时代，正值现代文艺思潮勃兴之时，毋庸置疑，自小酷爱绘画的诗人早年接受过印象主义先锋思想的洗礼。相对于其晚期成熟的艺术创作而言，其早期诗歌（1909年至1939年间）的创作颇为重要，这段时期的作品介于不成熟与成熟之间，这期间诗人的思考相当活跃，承前启后。因此，深入系统研究印象主义对威廉斯早期诗歌的影响就尤其重要。那么，印象主义对威廉斯诗歌的具体影响究竟体现在哪些方面？本书试图以印象主义重要理论观点为线索，运用诗画结合的方法，分析威廉斯早期诗中显现的印象主义元素，发掘其诗歌风格和表现手法与印象主义之间的关联性。

19世纪下叶兴起的印象主义向日益僵化的学院派和传统艺术观念发动大胆的挑战与变革，它以全新的视角审视世界，重视光以及光投射

于被描绘的物体上所产生的效果，注重捕捉感觉的瞬间印象。受绘画印象主义技巧和美学观念的启发，20世纪初出现了文学印象主义，它所采用的技巧和达到的效果和印象主义绘画相似，由于文学创作的特质，文学中的印象主义更注意这些瞬间感觉如何转化为情感状态。威廉斯在绘画上的敏锐感悟力使其从印象主义思想中获得诗学灵感，赋予其诗歌强烈的印象主义风格，特别是其早期诗作，显现出明显的印象主义特色。

本书共分为七章。第一章为绪论。第二章从威廉斯的诗歌、传记以及书信入手，探溯诗人与现代视觉艺术（特别是印象主义）的缘起。自幼受到擅长绘画的母亲影响，威廉斯与兄弟埃德加对绘画的兴趣由来已久，兄弟间保持着长期的联系与交流。同时，与重要诗人庞德以及同时代的画家朋友德穆斯等人的长期交往与切磋，也是催生威廉斯诗画灵感的重要影响源。第三章阐述印象主义的重要观点“观者与被观者的互动”在威廉斯诗学及其早期诗歌中的体现。威廉斯与印象主义可谓不谋而合，主张个体意识与外部世界的亲密接触，从而在视觉世界与心理世界之间建立起一个合力，实现想象与现实的和谐，他的诗作强烈呼唤读者与作品的互动，吸引读者运用自己的想象去理解材料的“简单性”之中涵盖的“复杂性”。威廉斯“概念只存在于事物之中”的诗学主张与印象主义“观者与被观者的互动”的观点有着强烈共鸣。第四章论述印象主义的另一重要概念“感知行为”在威廉斯早期诗歌中的体现。印象主义坚持从感知出发，主、客体从二元对立走向二元共生，这种打破主客分野的姿态同样符合威廉斯的诗学主张。威廉斯曾说过，诗的“感知性”是诗歌扎根于现实物质世界的根基。本章拟呈现“感知行为”的内涵特征（意识与世界的全新关系、感觉印象的瞬息性、感觉反应与理性反应的冲突）在威廉斯早期诗歌中的突出体现，证明威廉斯明确认同印象主义坚持从感知出发的观点，意识必须是事物之中的意识，思想与事物水乳交融。第五章阐述威廉斯早期诗歌中蕴含的印象主义时空内涵。在这方面，威廉斯早期诗歌的运诗技巧与印象主义技巧明显近似，强调在某一特定时间的某一特定地点里的氛围条件下捕捉事物或情感的瞬息存在，光与色彩的和谐在威廉斯的诗中有着出神入化的运用。“水”作为最能体现光与色的完美结合的意象，一直是印象主义画家和作家们笔下

的最爱，印象主义关于水与时间的哲思在威廉斯的水意象诗里更有着淋漓尽致的发挥。第六章阐述印象主义叙事技巧在威廉斯早期诗歌中的运用。威廉斯反对传统的叙事技巧，追求诗歌叙事上的革新与创作自由，印象主义的重要叙事技巧（如：有限叙述、碎片化叙述）在他诗里均有明显体现。通过对传统全知全能叙事的反拨，有限叙述和碎片化叙述的运用揭示现实其实不可能被任何个体所完全理解，诗人在文本中对权威声音的去除，宣示对真理本质的种种假设统统都无效，赋予了读者一种全新的“看”的态度。第七章为结语。

印象主义革新思想给予威廉斯一种“看”的态度，使他对世界、人类意识及其作为人类文明重要成果的诗歌开始全新审视。在其探索新诗新路的早期阶段，印象主义诗学为威廉斯建构自己独具特色的诗学观奠定了理论基础，印象主义视觉艺术元素丰富了威廉斯诗歌的表达内容和表现形式。自此以后，威廉斯毕生不断尝试诗歌实验，继续将继印象主义革新之后如雨后春笋般萌生的其他现代视觉艺术流派（如：立体主义、达达主义等）纷纷融入于诗，在风格和技巧上日臻完善。他对于视觉艺术元素的独特阐释，既确立了他在现代诗坛的重要地位，也为 20 世纪美国新诗开辟了出路。

本书从想象性和感知性诗学观、时空观和叙述方式四个方面详细而周密地论证威廉斯诗歌与印象主义绘画艺术通感的有效性，揭示威廉斯诗歌的先锋性和艺术特征，从而有助于深化国内外威廉斯的诗歌研究。目前，国内外有关威廉斯与视觉艺术的影响关系研究仅提及印象主义对威廉斯诗歌产生过影响，但具体在哪些方面对威廉斯产生了影响，尚未有深入系统研究。本书以印象主义理论为线索，运用诗画结合的方法，专门深入系统研究印象主义对威廉斯早期诗歌的具体影响。这一研究视角和研究方法都属于国内具有开拓性的研究尝试。

由于自身的学术水平有限，书中肯定存在不少欠缺的地方和错误，恳请读者和专家不吝赐教。

# Abbreviations

- ARI* *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists.* ed. with an introduction by Bram Dijkstra. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1978.
- Au* *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams.* New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1967.
- CP I* *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams.* Volume 1. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1984.
- CP II* *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams.* Volume 2. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1984.
- PB* *Pictures from Brueghel.* New York, New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1962.
- SE* *The Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams.* New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1969.
- SL* *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams.* New York: McDowell, Obolensky Inc., 1957.
- SLP&W* *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams.* New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1996.



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Chapter 1 Introduction // 001

- 1.1 The Motivation of the Project // 001
- 1.2 Literature Review // 003
- 1.3 Brief Introduction of Impressionism and Literary Impressionism // 008
- 1.4 The Organization of This Book // 011

### Chapter 2 Influences of Visual Arts on Williams // 014

- 2.1 Williams' Contact with the Visual Arts // 014
- 2.2 Pound's Influence on Williams in Visual Arts // 027

### Chapter 3 The Observer and the Observed as Co-maker in Williams' Poetics // 036

- 3.1 The Interplay of the Observer and the Observed // 036
- 3.2 A Harmony of Illusion and Reality in Williams' Poetics // 044
- 3.3 "Glass" Poetry: A Case Study on Williams' Poetics // 053



<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>The Act of Perception in Williams' Poetry // 062</b>
4.1	A Fresh Relationship with the Everyday World // 062
4.2	The Immediacy of Impression // 070
4.3	The Conflict between Sensual Response and Rational Response // 078
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Spatial Time in Williams' Poetry // 085</b>
5.1	The Harmony of Light and Color // 086
5.2	The Philosophy of Water // 097
5.3	The Image of Spatial Time // 107
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Impressionist Narrative in Williams' Poetry // 117</b>
6.1	Williams' Limited Narrative // 118
6.2	Williams' Fragmental Narrative // 129
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Conclusion // 142</b>
	<b>Bibliography // 147</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Illustrations // 157</b>

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1 The Motivation of the Project

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is known as one of the most outstanding modern American poets. In comparison to artists of his own time who sought a new environment for creativity as expatriates in Europe, Williams lived a remarkably conventional life. A doctor for more than forty years serving the rural town of Rutherford, New Jersey, he relied on his patients, the America around him, and his own ebullient imagination to create a distinctively American verse. He advocated American poetry must be rooted in America as its fount of inspiration and its source of information and subject matter. In his *Autobiography*, he says that a poet must base his ideas and thought on the ordinary lives of people. He drew his subject matter from ordinary surroundings, such as paintings, the change of seasons, flowers, a red wheel barrow, etc. Named as “father of postmodernism American poetry” (Riddel 17), Williams had his own distinct views concerning the nature of poetry, the function of the poet, and the poetic process. The viewpoint of Williams is embodied in his famous doctrine “No ideas but in things” (Ostrom 12).

He devoted all his life to persistent exploration and innovation of poetic form. In his time, modernist poets, including Ezra Pound, were

drawn to the strategies of the painters by the nature of the modernist poetic. The years 1909 through 1930s were marked in New York, Paris and London by an unparalleled collaboration between the poets and the painters. Poets painted and the painters wrote. Poets cited painters in their manifestoes, and painters wrote out their painterly theories and incorporated linguistic elements into the visual strategies of their paintings. Perhaps more than any other poet, Williams looked to painting for new strategies to bring to his work. The development of his early poetry is the development of an increasingly complex series of patterns – within poems, and within sequences of his poems – leading up to his 1923 *Spring and All*. Williams' poetry is possessed of the visual characteristics, as many of his poems are apt to create visual pictures in the readers' mind. Like the works of several other poets in the twentieth century, Williams' poetry reflects the influence of many types of visual arts. In this research, the author finds similarities between the early poetry of Williams and the techniques of impressionism. Those paintings which are impressionistic often emphasize the atmospheric conditions in a certain place at a specific time. Light and its effect on the objects depicted are also very important to the impressionist. This impressionistic attitude toward visual art can be applied to poetry as well. Through a close and concentrated observation of Williams' entire body of poetry, the social historical and cultural background of his time and a careful study of the techniques of impressionism and literary impressionism, based on previous studies on Williams' poetics and poetry, the author of the book intends to focus on exploring the impressionist strategies in Williams' early poetry (1909-1939), through social-historical analysis and with close textual attention. Essentially there have been two periods in Williams career, an early period from about the time of 1900 to the 1939, works of which period are collected in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams (1909-1939)*, and a later period is after the publication of



## Chapter 1 Introduction

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*Paterson IV*, during which time he seems to have settled pretty much on one scheme (Ostrom 77). Of the two periods, the earlier is more interesting and important to examine. It is a period of apprenticeship in which – apparently at Pound’s insistence – he turned from the conventional poetic modes of the earliest 1900s to newer forms, especially from about the time of *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) to the middle 1940s in which Williams explored and developed various techniques of his own. It is essentially a time when Williams was getting to know himself and the new ways of the poem, and his work from that period is now of little interest other than the historical. With great interest and curiosity, the research aims to reveal the influence of impressionism on his early poetry. In this book, the author plans to interpret more than 30 Williams’ early short poems, from the year 1909 to 1939. Impressionism in Williams’ poetry is the reflection of the revolution and innovation of his poetry and poetics, and the reflection of his time.

### 1.2 Literature Review

As a full-time physician, William Carlos Williams made most use of his spare time to write stories, novels, plays, essays as well as poetry. However, until the last few years of his life Williams was almost entirely neglected by the literary critics. Not only the academic critics, but the “little magazine” critics, too, acted, for the most part, as if he did not exist. Some few made passing references to him, and even fewer took him seriously, none wrote of him as a major figure of their time, though, Pound and occasional reviewers in *Poetry* magazine spoke well of Williams. In 1936 Babette Deutsch in his *The Modern Poetry* helped establish an important place for him. Then, as the sections of William’s *Paterson* began to come out (the first four of the five sections to be completed appeared between 1940 and 1951), recognition slowly followed; *New Directions*,