

ENG 538

So Much Depends Upon Things: William Carlos Williams' Echoes of the Puritan Style

In a 1958 essay, “An American Language,” originally delivered as a series of lectures, historian Perry Miller traces the path of the ‘plain style’ through early Puritan discourse and some canonical high points in American literary prose. Though Miller himself acknowledges that the Puritan “plain style” branches off from a European tradition (and one with roots, though Miller doesn’t say so, in both classical rhetoric and Christian sermon), the instances he observes manifest themselves in uniquely American ways, the manner modified by the matter of each writer who employs it. It may seem far-fetched to extrapolate from Miller’s argument to locate Puritan affinities in 20th century modernist William Carlos Williams, especially because Williams was a critic of the Puritan influence on American culture, but his own stylistic “plainness”, of a radical kind, continues the migration of Puritan plainness away from the transmission of religious doctrine and into the conveyance of more pronouncedly secular material, from “Gods altar,” which needed no linguistic polish, to Williams’ ordinary “red wheelbarrow.” This sinking of the plain manner, along with its increasing employment to describe concrete objects, nonetheless retains, in Williams’ writing, some of the same impulses toward rigor, roughness and verbal restraint, rather than the didactic intentions that Puritan plainness had in common with classical oratory, or the mere “purity” of style in the British poetic tradition.

Surprisingly, the Puritan label came up frequently in Williams’ contemporaries’ assessment of his early work in the 1920s. Harriet Monroe, in the December 1920 issue of *Poetry*, gives a brief review:

Dr. Williams is like no one else — he is himself. Only, this poet of mixed blood is not quite all of himself; for he is always most strenuously and emphatically — indeed, violently — denying the Puritan in him; and the Puritan strain is the strongest of all. To assert his freedom he must play the devil, show himself rioting in purple and turquoise

pools of excess — I don't mean in these poems, but in certain others. (Monroe, *Poetry* XVII.3)

Williams' originality ('he is himself'), being qualified by 'mixed blood', suggests both Williams' ethnic background and his 'Puritan strain', though the latter, given that both his parents were immigrants, could not have been inherited in the home. Instead, he would need to have inhaled some odor still in the American air. Williams' 'excess' is not easily identified, since Monroe admits the description doesn't fit the poems under consideration, but only unnamed 'certain others'. "These poems" never come in for any reading more specific than a magazine's broadside, so Monroe's criticism can only be taken as a general and superficial impression.

But Monroe chooses Puritanism to describe that impression, because the colonial Puritan was a recurring villain of 1920s America, a broad signifier of American tendencies toward cultural repression. The caricature was inaccurate, as Miller knew:

In much of literary discussion, especially since the heyday of H.L. Mencken, the term ["Puritan"] has generally been used pejoratively to mean those Americans who are afraid of life, who would impose moralistic restraints on free expression, who for long enforced the sway of the "genteel" over both creation and criticism, and who have at last been put utterly to rout by the upsurge of a vigorous, liberal, outspoken literature. (Miller 208)

Miller is eager to rehabilitate Puritanism from this charge, but it needed his rehabilitation. The label had, in that decade, great force, and Frederick Hoffman's 1949 reflection in *American Quarterly* likewise observes: "the Puritan had been associated with grim, stark, colonial reality;" (Hoffman 248).

Though Monroe accused Williams of straining to deny anything remotely Puritan in his work, "grim" and "stark" can fit moments in some of his poems in Spring and All, including the

volume's first, 'By the road to the contagious hospital', which speaks of "the / waste of broad, muddy fields" and "patches of standing water" lacking any life to soften the starkness of the scene with its thriving (only "reddish / purplish, forked, upstanding, twiggy / stuff")--though spring, by the end of the poem, approaches.

The Puritan slur crops up again when Paul L. Mariani, in the 1975 volume, William Carlos Williams: The Poet and His Critics, relays Conrad Aiken's 1919 comments, which are as brief as Monroe's, but more substantive in their linking of Williams' personality to his poetic technique. Mariani first quotes Aiken, then paraphrases him, then weighs in:

"Williams... seldom goes below the surface. He restricts his observations almost entirely to the sensory plane. . . . [His] world is a world of plane surfaces, bizarrely coloured, and cunningly arranged so as to give an effect of depth and solidarity; but we do not get depth itself." (Mariani 7) Was Williams a puritan, Aiken wondered, who could not "let go " to express his emotions¹? Was it this fear of emotion that forced upon him a technique which tended to suppress beauty and opt for a mere prose cadence? Aiken makes a good prognosis, but...What Williams was looking for was not grand feelings or variations on the old rhetorics, but a distinctively modern voice that could capture "a vision into the desolate PRESENT." (Mariani 7)

Surface observations, restriction, 'fear of emotion', and 'prose cadence' all suggest restraint, plainness, and the general caricature of the Puritan. Williams certainly neglects emotion in the

¹ This label also comes up in a scuttle with the un-plainly named Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who published an unusual 1921 essay about Williams' 'Kora in Hell' Mariani comments that "the baroness had charged Williams, one gathers, with being emotionally and imaginatively suppressed by his American Puritanism and monogamy." (Mariani 12)

Romantic sense, and, as Mariani comments, he has no interest in “grand feelings” but in a “desolate PRESENT.” “Desolate,” of course, comes from the same neighborhood of adjectives as “grim” and “stark”, and some general sense of Williams lacking life or liveliness seems not an unfair observation². Mariani comes to Williams’ aid, but in justifying Williams’ artistic decisions, he gives weight to Aiken’s accusation- if the poet depicts a “desolate PRESENT,” he betrays a very specific emotional orientation to the world, one without the traditional aesthetic pleasures of beauty, depth or intense feeling.

Williams seems to have these criticisms in mind when he begins Spring and All with thirty-seven prose paragraphs before reaching its first poem. In the second of these, he imagines a reader accusing him, introducing the accusation by asking, “What do they mean when they say”:

“You seem neither to have suffered nor, in fact, to have felt anything very deeply...the poems are positively repellent...Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why there is none in your work whatever...It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns!” (Williams 177)

This reader’s sense of “antipoetry” is of something vaguely Puritan: repellent, un-rhythmic, austere, and annihilating life. And Williams’ voice returns:

² Williams attempted to address these criticisms in the prose beginning of Spring and All, but they have a hint of truth, and one might read a later poem like ‘Danse Russe’ as a strained attempt to perform acceptance of his own body (“if I in my north room / dance naked, grotesquely / before my mirror / waving my shirt round my head / and singing softly to myself / ... / If I admire my arms, my face, / my shoulders, flanks, buttocks / against the yellow drawn shades,— // Who shall say I am not / the happy genius of my household?”). Though I don’t side with that reading, I can understand the critical response, especially from his non-academic contemporaries, who are more likely to see him as a peer and question the authenticity of his poetry relative to his person.

Perhaps this noble apostrophe means something terrible for me, I am not certain, but for the moment I interpret it to say: ‘You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?’—By it they mean that when I have suffered (provided I have not done so as yet) I too shall run for cover; that I too shall seek refuge in fantasy. And mind you, I do not say that I will not. To decorate my age.

But today it is different. (Williams 177)

He defends his aesthetic as one of plain truth, without fantasy or decoration, and leaving its readers “naked” and uncovered—his style, like the Puritan one we will examine, privileges truth, simplicity, and the avoidance of “cover” or decoration. Neither Williams or the Puritans, though, would accept that their style actually annihilates life—they write plainly to show life’s plain truths.

Regardless of how much healthy flush Williams had in his cheeks, and whether he was, in any way, “repressed,” his style and aims in Spring and All overlap with what Perry Miller celebrates in the plain style of Huckleberry Finn, Moby Dick, and Walden:

One reason why I like to think of these three as the finest achievements of the plain style in America (again admitting that there are rhetorical flourishes in *Moby Dick* which almost disqualify it from being so accounted) is that they use words to stand for things, objects, concrete entities. ...Mark Twain’s reveling in things for and in themselves frequently becomes an ecstatic inventory... (Miller 238)

Williams would proclaim famously in his long poem, Paterson, decades after Spring and All, “No ideas but in things”- and though Miller makes no mention of Williams, the overlap and affinity here are significant because both writers give such strong emphasis to “things”, and hold

the plainness of language in high esteem because it can treat those concrete objects most directly, without distraction or abstraction.

The plain style has ample historical precedent, in Europe and in the classical world, but Miller's emphasis on "concrete entities" gives his version of American plainness a distinct character, and Williams' own radical concreteness is distinct even within that American literary arc. The plain style had its roots in classical oratory and rhetoric, and in Christianity, but with a sense that it fit well only some subjects and occasions; it was not a general mode for all seasons. Čelica Milovanović-Barham, in a 1993 article in *Rhetorica*, quotes Augustine quoting Cicero:

he, then, shall be eloquent, who can say little things in a subdued style, moderate things in a temperate style, and great things in a majestic style. (Milovanović-Barham 3)

Cicero associated plainness also with the speaker's intentions toward his audience: the style ought to match the content, but primarily so that the language would have the desired impact on one's listeners, whether to bring about their understanding, to persuade them to a cause, or to arouse their emotions. Miller recognizes this when he connects the Puritan plain style to the communication of religious mysteries to the laity, but as the plain style comes unmoored from religious doctrine, and from explicitly social causes, it migrates to "things for and in themselves."

That migration of plain to "things" has some European precedent itself, in an emerging school of scientific writing. Michelle Burnham explains how "Bacon and others urged a plainness that Croll [says]...aimed "for a bare and level prose style adapted merely to the exact portrayal of things as they are"" (703). That empiricism, though, was not just about objects and "concrete entities" but about truth, which is a more abstract version of "things as they are." Burnham further quotes Croll on a

call for members of the Royal Society of London to adopt a style of economy, brevity, and simplicity. Such prose was identified as neutral, accurate, and transparent, qualities that served to establish and transmit scientific truth. (703)

Empirical, neutral writing about “scientific truth” raises more complicated metaphysical questions than empirical writing about objects. “Truth” can equally categorize, Twain’s “reveling in things”, or Williams’ exacting attention to them, is not oriented toward the pursuit of a higher phenomenon, but becomes an end in itself. We will see, too, that Williams’ poetics valued an imaginative writing which was not strictly “transparent,” though also not a way of coloring the world with its perceptions—rather, it was both transparent and uniquely subjective at once.

The most noted practitioner of ‘plainness’ in the British poetic tradition was Ben Jonson, but again his aesthetic of plainness was not oriented toward individual objects, but to a general precision and purity of speech. In Wesley Trimpi’s 1962 Ben Jonson’s Poems: A Study of the Plain Style, Trimpi quotes lines 17-24 of Jonson’s ‘Inviting A Friend To Supper’:

Ile tell you of more, and lye, so you will come:

Of partrich, pheasant, wood-cock, of which some

May yet be there; and godwit, if we can:

Knat, raile, and ruffe too. How so ere, my man

Shall reade a piece of VIRGIL, TACITUS,

LIVIE, or of some better booke to us,

Of which wee’ll speake our minds, amidst our meate;

And Ile professe no verses to repeate: (Jonson 17-24)

Trimpi attributes the “idiomatic purity” of these lines to “rhythm” equally as “diction and syntax”- and a more thorough investigation of Williams’ style would require greater attention to the differences of rhythm in poets, like Jonson, and prose writers like the Puritans Hooker and Bradford. At first glance, these plain-spoken lines would seem to jar directly with the argument for Williams’ uniquely, genealogically American attention to objects or things, since Jonson offers a menu of food and literature, without any adjectives to season the plain meat of the concrete nouns. Yet the menu has the flavor of a list, like menus do, and not of the precise delineation of things- instead of isolating the objects it describes, the plainness blends them into a series, even in the syntax and rhythm. Compare Williams’ 1934 poem, “This Is Just To Say”, which also treats the relationship between food and manners:

I have eaten

the plums

that were in

the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious

so sweet

and so cold

(Williams 372³)

A single item, the plums, on this anti-menu, a simplicity and directness of observation (the plums / that were in / the icebox), of motive (which / you were probably / saving / for breakfast), apology and sensory experience (Forgive me / they were delicious / so sweet / and so cold), all collaborate to precisely define a single gesture, of domestic conflict rather than domestic hospitality. Jonson's example, despite its plainness, attempts to invoke abundance, and even acknowledges its own courteous exaggeration; Williams looks squarely at the personal exchange.

The most characteristic example of Williams' unique, radical plainness comes in 'Spring and All' (1923), generally considered to be Williams' first major work, the volume whose aesthetic is the primary reference for this argument. He writes:

so much depends

upon

a red wheel

barrow

glazed with rain

water

³ I put the parenthetical citation underneath this poem, and the next, in deference to the white space to the right of each line that affects its visual composition.

beside the white
chickens.

(Williams 224)⁴

Williams' plainness at its most radical isolates individual objects in order to give them emphatic presence, to show how "so much depends / upon" those objects. The auditory and visual rhythms of the poem accentuate each object, so that 'barrow', 'water' and 'chickens' bear a metrical stress inherent in the phrases "wheel barrow," "rain water," and "white chickens," and an additional visual stress that comes from occurring at the beginning of a line and alone on that line. The human presence in the poem is removed from the scene as well, since a person must have made the wheelbarrow, and left it outdoors in the rain, and raised the chickens, but the reduction is to singular objects. A different poet would describe the wheelbarrow in detail, or construct a nuanced psychological scenario, as in Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." Williams' version of that Frost poem might be "so much depends / upon // a wall." Williams' aesthetic is, as we will see, ultimately one of secular immanence, the revelation of material entities in the fullness of their being. Ironically, the poem also echoes the starkness of early Puritan survival in the wilderness, where so much did depend upon instruments of agricultural labor.

⁴ Imagining the above Jonson poem revised in imitation of these two clarifies the major difference in the poets' plain styles:

come for partrich, knat
and LIVIE

to let our tongues
both like
and
speak.

Regarding that Puritan moment in the New England wilderness, Miller stresses that the Puritan verbal style was not only a superficial mannerism, but a component part of a complex ideology or worldview, and backed by a “doctrine of the word.” He writes:

The founders of New England thus brought to these shores not only a highly developed theology, cosmology, logic, psychology, and a sophisticated concept of state and society: they also brought a doctrine of the word. (Miller 211)

But in so legitimating the Puritan intellectual universe, Miller keeps the plain style at that abstract level, and overlooks any connection to Puritan behavior or manners. Miller was eager to refute the anti-Puritan caricature of joylessness and erotic repression, but most defenses of the health of the Puritan libido focus on sermonic encouragement of sex within marital relationships. While that evidence certainly defeats the charge of entrenched asceticism, it suggests exclusively a private, domestic sexuality, and leaves open the question of the Puritan public sphere, and the warmth or chill of their social world. Historians disagree about Puritan sexual mores, but their laws punishing sexual misconduct, regardless of how rigidly they were enforced, were far more severe than in the 20th century. Else L. Hambleton takes up this argument in “Regulation of Sex in Massachusetts,” pointing out that the Puritans:

were implacable in their opposition to any expression of sexuality outside of marriage. A wide range of heterosexual activities, ranging from lewd or promiscuous behavior to intercourse, were illegal, as was sexual activity that did not promote conception, such as homosexuality, masturbation, sodomy and bestiality, which were capital crimes.

(Hambleton 102-3)

On this subject Miller says nothing, and one might see in the tension between Puritan laws and behavior a conflict about the manners and affect of the public world. If early American authorities were in one sense concerned with enforcing a restrained, plain, “homely” public square, one can imagine that same restraint impacting their language. A possible connection exists here to Monroe and Aiken’s version of Williams, between erotics and poetics, and to Leslie Fiedler’s charge that American literature, as a whole, was pathologically unable to treat adult heterosexual love. Miller provides a slight suggestion of this possibility when he quotes Hooker:

That the discourse comes forth in such a homely dresse and course habit, the Reader must be desired to consider, It comes *out of the wilderness*, where curiosity is not studied. Planters if they can provide cloth to go warm, they leave the cuts and lace to those that study to go fine. (Miller 215)

Miller focuses on Hooker’s invocation of “wilderness,” and the plain style as a means of engaging a harsh natural environment, but homely and coarse attire, “cuts and lace,” fineness, and vanity can have implications for the construction of the Puritan body, a site policed to lack any excess sensory satisfactions that might arouse excess desire. Perhaps language was policed in the same way.

Williams pays his own attention to ‘cuts and lace’ and the body in the poem opening his 1928 collection, The Descent of Winter, with a somewhat equivocal sentiment:

*“What are these elations I have
at my own underwear?”*

*I touch it and it is strange
upon a strange thigh.*" (Williams 291)

The quotation marks and italics are his, so the moment of self-consideration has already been distanced from Williams himself as an implied speaker, and the moment, which seems near to a kind of wonder, manages to estrange the speaker's awareness from the naturalness of clothing and of the body itself. One might take the poem as a celebration of the body's mystery, and the mystery of social customs for concealing it, and its shame, or as a declining motion from elation or pride at the sight of his body and clothing to confusion once in tactile contact with it. Walt Whitman might be typically elated at this moment, and discourse on the magnificent pleasures of the body, but Williams betrays something more equivocal.

Puritan stylistics themselves referred not just to 'dresse' but implicitly to the body as well. Miller quotes William Ames that "The efficacy of the holy Spirit doth more cleerly appear in a naked simplicity of words, then in elegancy and neatness." (Miller 219) It is unfair to simply pounce on the word "naked" here, especially in the same sentence as the "holy Spirit," but the same aesthetic contrast of simplicity and neatness from Hooker is reiterated in this passage. Nakedness of the body, as a physician like Williams would have known, can itself be "homely" and "course," is not inherently and exclusively sexual. It might be fair to suggest a similarity between Williams' conception of his body and the Puritans', something between the 20s caricature of dour Calvinists and Whitman's reveling in the physical self, and an overlapping discomfort with the elegance of language.

The above is just one speculative line of argument, but even without it, there are, again, telling overlaps between Williams' style, the way his critics discussed it (contemporaneous with Spring and All and since), and the way scholars and Puritan writers treated the plain style. The

commentators on Williams and Puritanism share, at the least, a vocabulary for talking about plainness, and Williams and Puritan stylists share some methods for deploying it. “Ornament” occurs frequently in Miller’s version of the Puritan ‘plain style’ as a negative quality, and likewise in Ezra Pound’s account of Williams. Miller writes:

“Though the universe might change⁵ ...the word would still serve this culture, because it had always seen the word as primarily a serviceable thing. ... Through thick and thin, through wars, plagues, revolutions, they had never, or seldom, yielded to the temptation to use the word to ornament their woes.” (Miller 210-11)

The Puritan never embellishes for the sake of self-pity. To “ornament” one’s woes is to give the appearance of heightened affect or stature, to add grandeur to one’s suffering, and here Miller links verbal restraint to emotional restraint. On Williams’ verse, Pound similarly labeled it: “not overcrowded with false ornament” (Mariani 3). Pound exhibits a craftsman’s fineness in his observation, since his careful language might imply “false” ornament as something distinct from “true” ornament, and overcrowding as something different from normal or proportionate crowding (a tasteful and appropriate density of ornament). But the broader sense is of all ornament as false, and that Williams’ virtue lies in his refusal to embellish.

Puritan aversion to ornament, though, was not only an affective dispossession, since the same attitude occurs with theological import in Thomas Hooker’s preface to his 1648 Survey, called by Miller “a perfect summation...of the plain style as...the presiding rule of American prose”:

⁵ Miller means by “universe” what we might call the “paradigms” which explain it: in his account, Puritan ideology was made obsolete by a new psychology and epistemology stemming from the work of Descartes and John Locke.

As it is beyond my skill, so I professe it is beyond my care to please the niceness of mens palates, with any quaintnesse of language. They who covet more sauce then meat, they must provide cooks to their minds. ... if I would, I could not lavish out in looseness of language, and as the case stands, if I could answer any mans desire in that daintinesse of speech, I would not do the matter that Injury which is now under my hand: *Ornari res ipsa negat*. The substance and solidity of the frame is that, which pleaseth the builder, it's the painters work to provide varnish. (Miller 213)

Miller's gloss on the passage immediately follows:

Ornari res ipsa negat—"the thing itself refuses to be ornamented"! There in a nutshell is the principle by which the Puritan word, the spoken or written word, must be regulated. Or as the compilers of *The Bay Psalm Book* strikingly phrased it in their preface of 1639: 'If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect; let them consider that Gods Altar needs not our polishings.' For the 'Altar' of God was in the Puritan view not only verses in the Bible but the propositions of theology and polity, the factual record... These were things in themselves; to ornament the handiwork of the Almighty was a presumption of inherent depravity: it was to set daintiness, looseness of language, above the objective facts of creation. (Miller 213)

Roughness is the danger risked by Puritan aesthetic values here- lacking smoothness or elegance (unlike the Jonsonian style, which aspired to a plain, tactful elegance), polishing, or "varnish." Against it lean "quaintnesse," "looseness," "daintinesse," "ornament," and "depravity" (One might investigate the etymological history of those words for the connection to Puritan sexual attitudes). The passages generally assert that linguistic ornament was an affront to God, the

master builder who prefers the substance and solidity of his altar over any additional varnish or polish.

Williams likewise omits varnish, polish, and “looseness” in the interest of facticity, but instead with entirely secular motives. The second paragraph of Spring and All explains the stakes in his poetry:

There is a constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world. If there is an ocean it is here. Or rather, the whole world is between: Yesterday, tomorrow, Europe, Asia, Africa,—all things removed and impossible, the tower of the church at Seville, the Parthenon. (Williams 177)

Varnish is not the word for Williams’ ‘constant barrier’, and it might be more appropriate, borrowing Hooker’s metaphor, to say that Williams observes a mental “sauce” that obscures the taste of meat, that rather than having his readers “provide cooks to their minds,” he would have them get the world raw, without any obscuring flavor. But the Puritan metaphors won’t translate precisely here; the barrier is not just a matter of words but of cognitions: a mental surplus of information (an ocean), of concepts like “Europe,” mental projections into past and present (“Yesterday, tomorrow”), memories or imagined versions of monuments (the Parthenon), all preventing direct apprehension (“immediate contact”) with the world, with things and objects as they are.

The barrier between consciousness and the world occupies Williams’ thinking not only in the last passage, but throughout the book that contains it. In short, he conceived his own “doctrine of the word” as a way to remove the barrier. The following passages get the essence of his poetics:

nearly all writing, up to the present, if not all art, has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its agonized approaches to the moment. It has always been a search for “the beautiful illusion.” Very well. I am not in search of “the beautiful illusion.” (Williams 178)

And if when I pompously announce that I am addressed—To the imagination—you believe that I thus divorce myself from life and so defeat my own end, I reply: To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see.

(Williams 178)

The language is not Puritan, quite- ‘vaporous fringe’ and ‘beautiful illusion’ suggest something pleasant but vague, deficient in truth, while Hooker and Miller conveyed a sense of gratuity and even immorality in ornamental language. The fault for them lay in applying excess verbal description, while the fault for Williams seems not only verbal but perceptual, so that not only the description but the choice of things described distract from the “moment.” And Williams’ “eternal moment in which we alone live” is a secular one, eternal but solitary, accessible to individual perception but not transcending it. The Puritan world was “Gods Altar,” and apprehending and describing it would inevitably place one in relation to the divine. Yet the relation to “objective” facts is similar, because the world, whether divinely constructed or not, benefits most from direct description.

Calling Williams’ writing “objective” would not quite fit his sense of his aesthetic model, in which the consciousness (the “imagination”) of the poet somewhat idiosyncratically, with the uniqueness of its personality, selects objects, things, perceptions to name with language, and puts

them in a personally unique order. In lines 16 to 28 of “VI,” from Spring and All, he asserts his understanding of linguistic composition:

everything

I have done

is the same

if to do

is capable

of an

infinity of

combinations

involving the

moral

physical

and religious

codes

(Williams 191-2)

For Williams in his textual doings, terms can be arranged in an infinite number of syntactic relations, combining and recombining endlessly. “Codes” carries the sense of laws and rules, but the word was present to Williams’ era from the telegraph, and the OED defines “code” as “A system of words arbitrarily used for other words or for phrases, to secure brevity and secrecy”

The second half of the definition has no relevance, but the first suggests how all words are arbitrary, and can be replaced by other terms. They are signifiers for objects, names for things but not the things themselves.

Williams is acutely aware of words and names as his best aesthetic tools. From Spring and All:

Understood in a practical way, without calling upon mystic agencies, of this or that order, it is that life becomes actual only when it is identified with ourselves. When we name it, life exists. (Williams 202)

I find that there is work to be done in the creation of new forms, new names for experience (Williams 203)

The value of the imagination to the writer consists in its ability to make words. Its unique power is to give created forms reality, actual existence (Williams 207)

As in “VI,” new forms are created by the doing of infinite combinations, but those forms are themselves akin to new names: he not only comes up with new or better signifiers, but puts those new terms in infinite combination to create new, imaginatively unique forms.

Naming was a special issue in early America, since the English language encountered a new environment with new objects, new social roles, and new ways of relating to both. Michelle Burnham, in her article about William Bradford’s plain style and its relationship to economic anxieties, references William Spengemann:

The European encounter with the New World posed profound challenges to language, since the task of describing the “new things” encountered in the Americas required that “every Old World language involved in the discovery would have to change.” One of the measurements of such change, Spengemann notes, is the number of newly coined words and familiar words with shifting definitions. (Burnham 697)

Burnham argues that merchants were the social agents best able to capitalize on the new words, and the new meanings for the old ones, and that Bradford’s plainness was an adaptive defense against new economic dangers. The plain style was a way of responding to this challenge of the unfamiliar, both natural and social, and may be peripherally at work in Perry Miller’s argument that the plain style’s excellent communication of religious doctrine and “mysteries” would ultimately serve democracy and undermine the authority it was meant to strengthen. He writes:

A tradition of prose thus irrevocably committed to making all things, even the most impenetrable mysteries, comprehensible to the democracy would, almost of necessity, be courting perilous adventures. As also, I might remark in passing, would poetry: ... the rhetorical discipline, left to itself, would turn into an instrument not of a conservative utility but of a reckless subjection of historical certitudes to corroding examination. The forthright method proved to be, once it survived as a method, the most subversive power that the wicked could invoke against those generalities it had, long ago, been designed to protect. (Miller 220)

That inadvertent subversion of Puritan content by Puritan form reaches an ironic end in Williams’ poetry and prose, with their democratic populist leanings, sympathy for the poor, and their direct retelling of American history. “To Elsie” is a key text on this note, as is Spring and

All's "III", where Williams identifies with "the artist figure of / the farmer—composing"; In *The American Grain* offers an alternative narrative of the American past with figures typically neglected replacing the Puritans as positive exemplars of American-ness.

Recognizing Williams' work as an ironic terminus for the Puritan style requires a brief sketch of Miller's literary historical narrative: in short, the plain style can migrate across discursive boundaries where Puritan ideology could not. Benjamin Franklin, for example, is attributed with "the complete secularization of the plain style." Herman Melville critiques Franklin's plainness harshly in *Israel Potter*, exposing it as an affected simplicity, a deceit meant to advance Franklin's calculating, selfish interests. That calculated simplicity cuts against the authenticity of the original plain style, which was used to communicate morally edifying religious truths. In the mouth and hand of Melville's Franklin, the plain style becomes a problematic disguise-- rather than serving the thing itself, it serves the individual. Miller nonetheless claims Melville has perpetuated the plain style in *Moby Dick* (the least convincing part of his argument, as does Thoreau in *Walden*, which continues Franklin's ethic of thrift and utility while valorizing nature and eschewing society entirely. *Huckleberry Finn*, finally, offers a "catalogue of loot" from a flood-wrecked house, floating on the Mississippi River, which Huck and Jim opportunistically pillage:

We got an old tin lantern, and a butcher-knife without any handle, and a bran-new Barlow knife worth two bits in any store, and a lot of tallow candles, and a tin candlestick, and a gourd, and a tin cup, and a ratty old bedquilt... (Miller 238)

Miller admires this "ecstatic inventory," which lists object after object, all in a plain style and without ornament, but his admiration has no relish of religion in it. He sees one of "the finest achievements of the plain style," but a destroyed house, its contents left for scavenging, has

floated the Puritan linguistic mode far downstream from where it first depicted “Gods altar.”

Williams, then, terminates the drift of the Puritan style with his single “red wheelbarrow,” far from religious doctrine, far from Franklin’s industriousness, Thoreau’s nature, and even Twain’s lengthy list of detritus—the red wheelbarrow exists on its own, thrown into relief by rain water and white chickens, but lacking any explicit thematic framing. Some is implied (“so much depends / upon”), but the force of the naming goes to the objects themselves, things that need no ornament. They need, emphatically, *no* ornament to be seen as they are. That is, maybe, the ultimate *telos* of plainness, the radical danger Miller sees of “corroding” authority might ultimately corrode all human valuations, eliminate adjectives that weigh and parse qualities and human meanings, and leave nothing but objects, or, in the case of Huckleberry Finn, mere junk.

But Twain’s catalog of junk, severed from its original domestic purpose (there is a similarly striking moment in Walden where Thoreau writes of putting his furniture out of his house onto the grass), gets put to new purpose by Huck and Jim. One man’s trash, the saw goes- and Williams, too, conceives himself restoring value to things, unveiling the immanence of material objects. He enshrines plainness and factuality as literary modernist virtues, placing them on a secular altar of his own, but also turning aggressively against his sense of the Puritan legacy. In the American Grain, published in 1925, 2 years after Spring and All, yokes Williams’ attention to names with the reporting of history. Its epigraph:

In these studies I have sought to re-name the things seen, now lost in chaos of borrowed titles, many of them inappropriate, under which the true character lies hid. In letters, in journals, reports of happenings I have recognized new contours suggested by old words so that new names were constituted. Thus, where I have found noteworthy stuff, bits of writing have been copied into the book for the taste of it. ... it has been my wish to draw

from every source one thing, the strange phosphorus of the life, nameless under an old misappellation. (Williams)

Here, later than his statements of prose poetics in *Spring and All*, Williams flexes a strong confidence in his naming and form-making—in addition to dispelling the “vaporous fringe” preventing unmediated contact with the world, he wants to use plain language and precise naming of things in order to expose an alternative narrative of the American past (“new contours”). He actually quotes and excerpts older texts, though it’s unclear how literally his epigraph applies to that excerpting, and whether he actually replaced old words with new ones as a kind of editor. The reversal from the Puritan origin of plain American English is major, both in its secularism (the “strange phosphorus of the life” put into words rather than “Gods altar”) and in the book’s explicit critique of Puritan culture. He also makes the modern poet a focal point for this reversal, one who uniquely configures or recombines verbal and cultural codes to demonstrate the particularity of his imagination; the Puritan writer was a collaborator in the propagation of a complex religious ideology, not a visionary individual who tried to eschew ideological ties.

Williams ultimately fulfills Miller’s narrative of the plain style’s radicalness, but sits as a figure and stylistic both democratic and aristocratic at once. He blends modernist complexity and difficulty with an accessible, demotic, and “plain” register. The difficulty of reading Williams is not in knowing a foreign language, recognizing Eliot or Pound’s literary and historical references, or sweating through elaborate, periodic sentences. His syntax taxes the mind, but not to the point of incomprehensibility. The difficulty is in recognizing his reconfigurations of the ordinary, recognizing the ordinary in its new forms—bent, folded, re-

sequenced by Williams' imagination, combined in unexpected ways and rendered with the precision and factuality that the Puritans shared in describing, but not ornamenting, "Gods altar."

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