

**Interest in the Past in William Carlos Williams' Selected Poems****Asst. Lect. Muhanned R. Al Sultani****University of Kufa \ College of Arts****Department of English**

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الاهتمام بالماضي في اشعار مختارة للشاعر وليام كارلوس وليامز

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**المخلص:**

ويليام كارلوس ويليامز هو شاعر رومانسي تأثر بأكثر رواد الرومانسية. شعره يزخر باستخدام السمات المميزة للرومانسية. واحدة من هذه الميزات هي الاهتمام في الماضي والذي استخدمه الشاعر في العديد من قصائده. لذا، تحاول الدراسة الحالية تسليط الضوء على هذه الميزة وكيف تم توظيفها من قبل الشاعر، من خلال الإجابة على السؤال التالي: كيف وظف ويليام كارلوس الاهتمام في الماضي في اشعاره؟

من أجل تحقيق الهدف من الدراسة والإجابة على السؤال الذي طرح أعلاه، تم تحليل ابیات مختارة من قصائد ويليام كارلوس والتعليق عليها. وخلصت الدراسة إلى أن وليامز عكس اهتماماً قوياً بالماضي وخاصة في الثقافة الشرقية والأدب الهليني. وهو يعتقد أن الماضي يُمكن الشاعر من تجاوز الوقت وهو ينتقل عبر الماضي الشخصي والعرقى، ويصل إلى الأبدية والمثالية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاهتمام بالماضي، الرومانسية، التاريخ، ميزات الرومانسية.

**Abstract**

William Carlos Williams is a romantic poet that has been influenced by the most pioneers of Romanticism. His poetry is rife with the utilizing of the distinct features of Romanticism. One of these features is the interest in the past that the poet makes use in several poems. So, the present paper tries to shed light on this feature and how it is exploited by the poet. It specifically tries to answer the following question: How William Carlos employed the interest in the past in his poetry?

In order to achieve the aim of the study and answer the question raised above, selected lines from the poems of William Carlos are analyzed and commented on. The study has concluded that Williams has reflected a strong interest in the past especially in the Oriental culture, and the Hellenic literature. He believes that the past enables the older poet to transcend time as he moves back through personal and racial past, he gets to the eternal and the archetypal.

**Keywords:** interest in the past, Romanticism, history, features of Romanticism

**1. Introduction**

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) is reared in an educated family that opened for him ample horizons in his literary career especially in versification, overcoming all the obstacles and limitations placed in the way of the liberty of the word. For Williams tries to crystallize the words rendering them into pictures, imparting them with a concrete description through the use of his strong sight and subtle description. Furthermore, he calls for the use of the experiences taken from the past. As a Romantic poet, he evokes the past to create a rooted picture that has dimensions which can never be neglected.

As it is well known that the interest in the past is one of the features of Romanticism; therefore, William Carlos is described as a Romantic Poet. He has adopted this feature in a wide range of his poetry. He sees the past as the origin of human beings. So, they have to give their past a special care and to try to learn from it.

As such, the present paper falls into two sections. The first section sheds some light on William Carlos Williams and his career and how he sharpens his poetic abilities. Furthermore, a brief theoretical survey is presented in the first section about the idea of the interest in the past. The second section, on the other hand, has dealt with some lines of poetry taken from the poems of Williams. The theme of most of these lines shows how the poet makes use of the idea of interest in the past in his poetry. Then, the lines are followed by a commentary to show how the poet evokes this theme in his poetry.

### 1.1 The Author's Biography

As a Romantic poet, painter, novelist, dramatist, and pediatrician, William Carols Williams was born in "Rutherford, New Jersey, and was educated in Switzerland and at the University of Pennsylvania where he received a medical degree in 1906". (Hoffman, 1979: 4). Following that by an internship in New York which lasted for two years, and spent one year where he graduated in Leipzig, he returned to Rutherford, where he practiced medicine ever since. (Brown and Flanagan, 1961: 677).

The most important poets who shaped Williams's artistic measurement were John Keats and Walt Whitman, for he said, "I was so preoccupied with the studied elegance of Keats on one hand and with the raw vigor of Whitman on the other." (Breslin, 1971: 614).

Williams was reading Keats with reverence, thus, he considered him a perfect model to be imitated when he said that "Keats, during the years of medical school, was my God." (Ibid.). In 1902, Williams read a copy of Whitman's **Leaves of Grass** that he recalled "I took that book with me, and I absorbed it with enthusiasm. I loved to read the poems to myself." (Breslin and Lams, 1970: 4).

Whitman, thus, helped Williams to be himself, "he helped Williams to discover, release, and to affirm those creative powers repressed by his family." (Breslin, 1971: 613). But Whitman had exerted a very little stylistic influence on Williams, for he wrote that "the only way to be like Whitman is to write unlike Whitman." (Ibid: 619). In fact, there were many common things that brought the two poets together, especially their "self-reliant need to break apart all conventional poetic forms, in order to release their passions, and their belief that these secret passions were shared by their audience." (Ibid.).

Being an upholder of the role of the refined young man, Williams made his poems to have the sense of purgation and confession when he said, "they worked as a sort of purgation and confessional to clear my head and my heart from turgid obsessions." (Dickey, 1973: 91).

Williams dedicated himself to art, and emphasized that man should work to the last moment of his life. Thus, he said, "I would not die for art but live for it, grimly! And work, work, work (like Pop), beat the game (like Mom, poor soul) to write, write as I alone should write, for the sheer drunkenness of it." (Breslin, 1971: 615).

Williams was always searching for new methods to convey his expressions in poetry. Moreover "his career was a series of attempts to enter this moment; his art is a continuous search for the new forms required for its expression." (Ibid.). James Dickey had made a brief but illuminating commentary on Williams's career, for he said that "If a man attends Williams closely he will be taught to see, to fasten on the appearance and the meaning that is for him in the appearance on the sensory apprehension and truth of an object or scene that is perpetually open to him." (Breslin, 1971: 3). Hence, James Dickey had affirmed that through reading Williams "one would write solid and usually short, unrhymed near-prose poems about how the concrete particulars of the world look and feel to him." (Dickey, 1973: 192).

Williams had joined the subject with the object in his poetry for this act would bring about a change in man's relation poetry, to the world. This work of union between the subject and the object would give the poet momentary possession of that distant reality the object symbolizes. Such a poetry would be the enactment of a journey which may take the poet and his reader to the very bourne of heaven. The union of the subject and object was the basic assumption of his poetry. For Williams, there is no need to achieve harmony, because it is already there from the beginning. Therefore his poetry is content to let things remain as they are. Worth mentioning that the most illuminating remark ever given by critic is that of Wallace when he says what Columbus discovered is nothing to Stevens

what Williams is looking for. Hence, in 1962 Robert Lowell wrote "It's as if no poet except Williams had really seen America or heard its language." (Stevens, 1980: 124).

William Carols Williams is known for the fecundity of his works, that he has written in various fields of literature including poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and essays. Most important is that Williams published his first volume of poems privately in 1909." (Hoffman, 1979: 484).

### 1.2 An Overview about Interest in the Past

The Romantic writers are all, but in different ways, profoundly affected by history and the great historical facts.

Consequently the eighteenth century produced such major historians as Montesquieu, Gibbon, Hume, and Robertson, hence it witnessed the development of the methods of historical research. (Eichner, 1982: 16).

The Romantics have admired the timeless the universal, and the general, but they have taken into consideration the temporal, the local, and the individual, thus "history seemed to them the most obvious and the only explanation for the temporal, local, and individual." (Ibid.) Friedrich Schlegel has declared that "the world is not a system, but a history and the best theory of art is its history." (Ibid.). Moreover, he has exalted history and assigned it in the highest position compared to other sciences, when he has said that "All science is genetic, and history therefore is the most universal, the most general, and the highest of all sciences." (Ibid.).

Most of the Romantics are fascinated by the past because "they wished to improve life in the present, still they sought an ideal life apart from here and now." (Inglis, 1991: 351). It is quite lucid that the American Romantics have manifested an extreme interest in the past. Cooper and Parkman have "displayed their admiration to the primitive red men." (Ibid.: 499). Whereas Irving has expressed his passion for the romantic nature of the Hudson Valley, for old country houses in England and old castles in Spain (Ibid.). Even Hawthorne has penetrated through his works into the dark past of the puritan Salem, and the past of England and Italy.

History is wider than everything, then the present of the day will be the past of tomorrow. Moreover, Feyerabend has extolled history when he says that "there is no idea however ancient and absurd that is not capable of improving our knowledge." (Eichner, 1982: 22). Despite this grave tendency in the past, the American Romantics seek to move out of time and into some of space. For time means history, and history means traces sort of men and society, and society means not only the loss of that wild image but also the spaces it provided and the limitless freedom to sport in air. It is taken for granted that history means a lot of things to the fate of human beings, and a nation without history is just like bubble which has no roots, for history is the root which endows the nation with its most highly sublime ideals and traditions.

### 2. Interest in the Past in William's Selected Poems

Being unsatisfied with the present time which has been lost, Williams resorts to the past to compensate the original vitality and shortcomings of his present time. Williams holds that the present time is essentially unsatisfactory by comparison to the remote past and to the future and that is so because, for the moment, we have lost an original vitality or innocence which we must struggle to regain.

Indeed, Williams has very dim view of his own modern period of American culture as though it is "an age of darkness with only occasional flashes of promise." (Rapp, 1984: 82-83)

Williams insists that a man should study his origins else he would lose his past just like the Americans who have lost their past by refusing to study their origins, and as the true character of the American past is obscured by the very document which is supposed to preserve it. (Ibid.).

Hence, Williams believes that the cultural inertia is manifested in "the niggardliness of our history, our stupidity, sluggishness of spirit, the falseness of our historical notes, the complete missing

of the point." (Ibid.). Consequently, it seems almost nothing remains of the great American New World but a memory of the Indians.

The deeply plunged poet in history has paid special attention to time and its divisions. So, he places history at the top of his category, while the future is put below the past, hence, the present is given the bottom rank. Moreover, he emphasizes that the present can neither attain the past nor the future. Paterson exemplifies Williams' point of view lucidly:

"The past above, the future below  
and the present pouring down the roar  
the roar of the present, a speech-  
is, of necessity, my sole concern  
They plunged, they fell in a swoon  
or by intention, to make an end- the  
roar, unrelenting, witnessing  
neither the past nor the future." (MacGowan, 2001: 89).

In addition, Williams affirms the importance of remembering the past in order to transcend time. He declares that it is the memory that, reawakened, enables the older poet to transcend time: as he moves back first through personal and then the racial past, he gets to the eternal, the archetypal.

Furthermore, Williams is greatly touched by the occidental and the oriental literature. Hence, his poems bear witness for this point. Concerning the oriental influence "March" which was written in 1921 sheds the light thoroughly upon this point. Thus, the poet in "March" travels to the East to observe the pyramids in Egypt and to contemplate the Iraqi history in Babylon represented by the two great figures: Ashur- bani pal and Nebuchadnezzar.

March  
"you remind me of  
the pyramids, our pyramids  
.....  
See!  
Ashur-ban-i-pal,  
the archer king, on horse-back,  
in blue and yellow enamel!  
with drawn bow-facing lions  
standing on their hind legs,  
fangs bared! His shafts  
bristling in their necks!" (MacGowan, 2001: 32).

In these lines, it is obvious that the king is at a moment of climatic tension with his drawn bow confronting lions:

"Sacred bulls- dragons  
in embossed brickwork  
marching - in four tiers-  
along the sacred way to Nebuchadnezzar's, throne hall!  
they shine in the sun." (Ibid.).

In the above mentioned lines, Williams visualizes the beauty of In the bulls - dragons that cleave their way to the throne hall of Nebuchadnezzar. They are very interesting because they bull four tier chariots.

Concerning the occidental interest, Williams manifests spectacular love especially for the Hellenic literature. Thus, he says I like to think of the Greeks as setting out for the colonies in Sicily and the Italian peninsula. It is worth mentioning that Williams often expresses in his poems mythical illusions about the Greek literature. But still Williams is "ruled by the myth of immediacy, the myth

of an original state of mind or condition of being from which we have grievously departed and to which we must return at any Cost." (Doyle, 1980: 42).

In his poem "Pence on Earth" which was written in 1913, Williams speaks about Orion who is the son of Poseidan god of the sea:

"Orion is listening!  
Gold against blue  
His sword is glistening!  
Sleep!  
There is hunting in heaven-  
Sleep safe till tomorrow." (MacGowan, 2001: 22)

Once again, Williams addresses Apollo-god of the sun, poetry, and music in the Greek Mythology, In "After Song", Williams shows the beautiful clothes worn by the Greek in the past time. Moreover, he resorts to use the archaic diction to have a sense of antiquity in this poem.

"So art thou broken upon me, Apollo,  
Through a splendor of purple garments  
Held by the yellow haired clymene  
To clothe the white of thy shoulder-  
Bare from the day's leaping of horses  
This is strange to me, here in the modern twilight." (Ibid.).

There is no doubt that Williams travels in his poem "IDYL" to Greece to observe the beautiful scenery of the Greek architecture:

"Watching  
The white clouds  
Passing  
The great Hermes  
And flying.  
Flying toward Greece,  
I saw  
The fluted columns  
(Not ground  
piece into piece  
but fitted with plaster" (MacGowan, 2001: 110).

Williams has a special treatment with poetry to maintain history. Thus, he believes that "the history of his verse is the history of his attempt to make the poem a mean of synthesizing the power of things with that of the idea." (Rapp, 1984: 88).

In "History", Williams makes an excursion into a museum in where he can see the sarcophagus that contains the body of Uresh-Nai-the priest:

"This sarcophagus contained the body  
Of Uresh-Nai, priest to the goddess Mut,  
Mother of All-  
Run your finger against this edge!  
- Here went the chisel!- and think  
Of an arrogance endured six thousand years  
Without a flaw!" (MacGowan, 2001: 98).

The poet in this poem plays upon time, in other words he employs time shifting technique to create an outstanding dimension in his poetry with a sequence of occurrences. Thus, the reader is drawn into dimensionality, which permits him, however, to add to the predominantly time illusion of space

by naming sequence of objects to convey passage by those objects. For a moment Williams says that the tomb has enclosed the priest and separated him from the outer world.

"The priest has passed into his tomb

The stone has taken up his spirit!

Granite over flesh:" (Rapp, 1984: 89).

But at the other moment, Williams indicates that the priest is still able to move among people, and proves the failure of the tomb in preventing the priest from the spiritual intercourse. Thus, the priest is fully charged with love that can destroy the rocks:

"For granite is not harder than

My love is open, runs loose among you!" (Ibid.).

Finally, as Williams takes the reader from an outside setting into the interior of a museum, he returns him to the outdoor where the present is set to work again.

To sum up, Williams pays an extraordinary attention to the past because he believes that a man without history is history, mainly like a tree without roots, so he would certainly vanish. This just aspect endows Williams with a Romantic aspiration to understand himself through his history

### Conclusions

Williams has reflected a strong interest in the past especially in the Oriental culture, and the Hellenic literature. However, he believes that the past enables the older poet to transcend time as he moves back through personal and racial past, he gets to the eternal and the archetypal. So, he believes that through history the man can realize his origin, and consequently know himself. Hence Williams declares that a nation without history is not an original nation.

Williams has manifested a national awareness of his locality through his works, he glorifies the public language, the history and the geography of his locality. Hence, he has strived to establish a peculiar American language and literature quite independent from any foreign influences.

Hence, historical documents have increased the poet's anguish. So, he asks the Americans to know their history well in order to know themselves well.

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