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The Modernist Era: Tang Dynasty 2.0

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The Modernist Era: Tang Dynasty 2.0

A person's mind is nothing more than a bank of memories. Everything that he thinks, imagines, and writes is an improvised rehash of past experiences. Therefore, those with similar backgrounds will inherently produce similar works. Given the plethora of people that have lived on the Earth, it is difficult to find an individual with truly unique recollections. Modernists are no exception. The defining characteristic of modernism is its utter disregard for tradition and regulation. Over a millennium earlier, poets from the late Tang Dynasty had the same philosophy. Thus when modernist poets such as Ezra Pound state that they want to 'make it new', they are only dreaming. The writing styles of these two types of bards are strikingly similar. In fact, one could justify that every 'groundbreaking' technique utilized by a modernist has already been employed by a Tang poet. This is even the case for William Carlos Williams, one of the most famous poets from the Modernist Era.

A favorite Chinese poetic tactic used by Williams is emphasizing certain words by dividing them. In his poem "Red Wheel Barrow", Williams separated the single sentence into four two-lined stanzas. The first line of each stanza contained three words while the last line had only one word. In the center two stanzas, he separated single words into two separate ones. For example, in the second stanza, the term 'wheelbarrow' is written as 'wheel' and 'barrow', with barrow being the second line of the stanza ("Barrow" 3-4). He formats the poem in this way so as to emphasize certain aspects of the initial sentence. The emphasis is on the words wheelbarrow, rainwater, and chickens. Though effective and uncommon at the time, this concept is far from revolutionary. Li Bai employed this method in his poem "Thoughts in the Silent Night".

Although written in the traditional Jue Ju form, each of Li Bai's sentences has a three word section and a two word section. The first three words can be interpreted as the crescendo to the two word climax. Take the first line for example: “床前明月光”, or “By my bed a beam of light” (“Thoughts” 1). The first three words directly translate to “beamed by the bed” while the two final words mean ‘moonlight’, separated into ‘moon’ and ‘light’. This is the same case for each successive line. Although not identical to that of Williams, the poem uses the three or four preceding words to add effect and emphasis on the final ones. Li Bai even took the poem a step further. When analyzing only the final words of each sentence, one can see that the words are: moonlight, hoarfrost, moon, home. The first and third lines refer to the moon while the second and fourth refer to frost and home. What Li Bai is trying to convey through this poem is that his familial relations are as cold and visible as frost. This poem was written around 744 AD, when Li Bai was sent into exile by the King of China (Poetlibai.org). As can be seen, “Red Wheel Barrow” may be an interesting poem, but it does not ‘make it new’. In fact, Williams’ writing technique is only a small portion of that of Li Bai’s.

Others may argue that the use of enjambment in “Red Wheel Barrow” is revolutionary, but this belief is not quite true either. Cao Zhi used this technique almost a millennium earlier in his poem “The Brothers”. In fact, enjambment is used twice in this poem. The entirety of Cao Zhi’s poem can be translated to: “Beans cry when their stalks are boiled. Why must we brothers fight?” (“Brothers” 1-4). Like “Red Wheel Barrow”, the poetic nature of this poem can be questioned by the fact that it is simply two sentences. The reason why either is considered a poem is due to the profoundness of their meaning. Both poems strive to portray a single picture. Williams formatted his sentence in order to emphasize the image of a wheelbarrow in the rain next to chickens. In the case of Cao Zhi, he was accentuating the sacred bond between brothers.

It is true that there are some thematic differences between the two poems, but this is not the main focus of the poem. “Red Wheel Barrow” is famed not for its content, but how it displays it. In this specific case, it is the use of enjambment that receives the most attention. Both Cao Zhi and Williams used enjambment with the intention to portray a single concept. Thus, although William’s use of enjambment is effective, it is recycled.

Ekphrastic poetry, another form of writing utilized by Williams, is quite common in Chinese poetry. As is defined, ekphrastic literature is writing that vividly describes a scene or work of art (Poetryfoundation.org). For example, Williams’ poem “The Fall of Icarus” describes and analyzes Pieter Brueghel’s painting, “The Fall of Icarus”. In it, he explicates the various farmers and fishermen going about their daily work when Icarus made “a splash quite unnoticed this was Icarus drowning” (“Icarus” 16-19). He is trying to capture Brueghel’s depiction of the ‘insignificant’ incident. This form of poetry was quite novel during the modernist era, but Ancient Chinese poets had already used ekphrasis for centuries. Take notice of the two drawings on the next page. Both have a paragraph of lines running along the top. These lines compose a poem that the artist himself wrote. It is common practice for Chinese artists to write a poem to describe the painting and the inspiration from which it originated. The two pictures below are only a couple of the myriad of scenic drawings found in China. Although Williams may be credited to being one of the earlier modernists to use ekphrasis, he is not one of the first.

From 650-850 AD, China experienced the decline of its greatest dynasty, the Tang. What was once a vibrant and powerful nation was now a weak country plagued by infighting and foreign intrusion. During this span of time, many poets and educated individuals lost faith in their nation. The effects of this decline are strikingly similar to the effect World War 1 had on modernists. Due to both events, poets from both these times began to turn away from regulation

and tradition. One could say that modernist and Tang poets are of the same caliber. It is due to this similarity in background that their poems have such a striking resemblance to one another. Thus, modernist poets could not possibly “make it new”. The Tang poets have already done so before.



Red Wheel Barrow	The Fall of Icarus
<p>so much depends upon a red wheel barrow glazed with rain water beside the white chickens.</p>	<p>According to Brueghel when Icarus fell it was spring a farmer was ploughing his field the whole pageantry of the year was awake tingling near the edge of the sea concerned with itself sweating in the sun that melted the wings' wax unsignificantly off the coast there was a splash quite unnoticed this was</p>

	Icarus drowning
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Thoughts in the Silent Night

床 前 明 月 光 ，
疑 是 地 上 霜 。
举 头 望 明 月 ，
低 头 思 故 乡 。

By my bed a beam of light,
Reflects on hoarfrost.
Lift my head to the sky,
Lower my mind to home.

The Brothers

煮 豆 燃 豆 萁 ，
豆 在 釜 中 泣 。
本 是 同 根 生 ，
相 煎 何 太 急 ？

Boil the stalk to get the beans,
The beans cry out in the pot.
We are born of the same root,
Why must there be infighting

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