Falling Rocks and the Poetry of Paul O. Williams

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Reading and writing are very human things. The connection through the written word between people across space and time can be remarkable in its strength of feeling. That feeling of understanding another person's thought, perhaps even a long dead person, is a wonderful and mysterious thing. Writers and readers of haiku, senryu, tanka, and all the associated forms might grasp this more than most, given that this genre of poetry is more focused on the image, the moment of experience that one tries to capture in a distilled short form. Sometimes, we can identify a foundational image for a writer because they make it an explicit centerpiece of their thought and of the portrayal to the world of readers. Other times, it is like connecting the dots through various pieces of their writing, as the author returns to an image. While it is not possible to reconstruct a life or a thinker from their imagery of experiences, one can certainly touch on the high points. We can find an interesting and instructive example in the writing of the late Paul O. Williams (1935 – 2009), a past President of the Haiku Society of America. Williams took his Ph.D. in English from the University of Pennsylvania, taught at several universities throughout his career, and along the way wrote a great deal of fiction and poetry in various forms. We can trace his use of a single image or theme and, due to that focus, perhaps along the way see some of the underpinnings of his thought.

In 1982, Williams published his second haiku collection, *Tracks on the River*. The volume contains a previously unpublished poem that resonated with me as it has numerous other readers, and as we will see, resonated particularly with the author himself.

thawing rain —
from a high outcrop, a rock
clatters down and stops

The poem has excited comment from a number of other poets, including then-Haiku Society of America President Jay Friedenberg in the HSA Bulletin.[1] In his review of *Tracks on the River*, Stephen Gould singled this haiku out: "Among the very finest in the book, this is a haiku wrenched from chaos."[2]

The likely site for the observation that sparked this haiku was the bluffs surrounding Elsah, Illinois, from which rock used to be quarried and made into lime until the Western Whiting Mill closed in 1927.[3] Principia College, where Williams taught English, was built on the Elsah bluffs. According to an email communication from Anne Chadwick Williams, Paul Williams' daughter, "My father didn't keep a journal, but the location would certainly be around where I grew up in Elsah, IL along the Mississippi River. Bluffs line the River Road, and the college he taught at was on top of those bluffs. He may have been down along the river one day and saw this happen. He found the area very inspiring." The grounding in observation of an actual event highlights the importance of being a prepared observer, or as Williams described it, developing a thought of Walt Whitman's in his *Song of Myself*, "loafing alertly."[4] This is similar to his perspective on the need for developing the eye for detail in the significant moment: "In a sense, all haiku are based on heightened moments, and the earnest writer of haiku works to perceive such moments often and distinctly ..."[5]

Where else is this image mentioned? In the introduction to that same 1982 volume of poetry, Williams wrote,

> When you hear a stone dislodge itself from the high river bluffs and watch it tumble down to rest again, or when the pine branches move slightly in the winter breeze, or when you hear the late-winter ice fringe on the river swish and hiss quietly as it breaks up in the current, you know each of these events, together with the human response to it, contains a poem, a complete artistic entity.[6]

In 1989, Williams returned to this image in an article in *Modern Haiku*, writing, "The writer makes the weathering rock permanent in the reproducible, hence enduring, medium of words."[7] The theme of erosion is

also treated in Williams' 1991 collection of Western verse, *Growing in the Rain*. In the poem, "Wind Soil," he wrote:

> This chilly, slanting rain is grooving down,
> again, across the fields, through gullied brooks,
> is sliding Illinois south towards the Gulf
> in moiled suspension. As I stand on top
> of this high knob and think erosion, I
> too seem depressed—the tendency to drag
> all down seems everywhere—is leaching off
> the ground beneath us, spoiling, beating down.[8]

This imagery made its final appearance in the 1999 introduction to Williams' final haiku collection, *Outside Robins Sing: Selected Haiku*. In that introduction, entitled "The Burst in Haiku," he wrote:

> Haiku discovers the unusual and significant in daily life, showing it is not quotidian but often startling. Things happen. Haiku sees the astounding nature of these things, or the universality, or the fineness of quality there, or the uniqueness and significance. When sedimentary rock, once part of a sea bottom, now in a high Midwestern bluff, finally is frost loosened and tumbles down the bluff, that is an event that took millions of years to prepare.[9]

In fact, the theme of that introduction, "the burst in haiku," was illustrated by this image. That idea of the "burst" was, incidentally, not a later revelation of Williams', having appeared in the introduction to his first collection of haiku from 1968, *The Edge of the Woods*.[10]

Why this image? In 1982, Williams discussed the importance of enduring events and their auras.

> The poet's job, then, is to contain that event and its aura of feeling succinctly, without the interference of word-play or cogitation. The whole task is that of conveying the unique atmosphere present. Often this aura itself is so delicate and indefinable that while the poet can sometimes tell if

> he has caught it, he doesn't always know what it is he has caught. He simply recognizes its presence. It always lies beyond the image presented—in the image's escaping hints of implication.[11]

Williams concluded his digression in the 1982 article with his own justification for dwelling on an image. "The poet, for his part, because he values the process and wants to continue it, must be convinced enough to go on his own way and risk puzzling people, confident that somebody will probe and enjoy what he is doing."[12] In fact, Williams had an eye for this sort of intertextuality and had previously enjoyed tracing it in others' writing. In a 1963 article for the Thoreau Society, he noted that Thoreau's mention of building his house on Walden Pond with a borrowed axe, long thought to be an actual happenstance occurrence, was likely a Biblical reference, drawing a parallel between himself and 2 Kings 6:1-7 to establish a "symbolic overtone, the attempt to establish an identity with the prophet Elisha, who with his followers also built a house apart from society."[13]

This is, one hopes, more than the sum of its parts, a mere collection of mentions of a theme akin to a bullet list. Williams highlighted the importance of this image over the course of years and presented it in different ways. What we have, then, is a series of lenses providing us different facets of a single experience for an observant author. Furthermore, the consideration of that image over time traces for us the theoretical underpinnings of a poet's thought. Indeed, in both of his seminal discussions of "burst" and "aura," the significance of which was highlighted by Gurga and Welch,[14] Williams utilized this image. I like to think that Williams was more than justified in his confidence that somebody would probe and enjoy what he was doing.

Notes

[1] Friedenberg, Jay. "From the President." Haiku Society of America Bulletin May 5, 2020: http://ww.hsa-haiku.org/newsletters/2020-05-HSA-News.pdf.

[2] Gould, Stephen. Untitled Review of *Tracks on the River*. *Frogpond* 6.1 (1982), 42.

[3] Hosmer, Charles B. and Paul O. Williams. *Elsah: A Historic Guidebook*. Elsah: Historic Elsah Foundation, 1967, 60.

[4] Willaims, Paul O. "Loafing Alertly: Observation and Haiku" in *Frogpond* 4.4 (1981); reprinted in *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, eds. Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch. Foster City: Press Here, 2001, 23.

[5] Williams, Paul O. "Haiku and the Art of Fiction." *Frogpond* 14.4 (1991); reprinted in *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, eds. Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch. Foster City: Press Here, 2001, 51.

[6] Williams, Paul O. "The Aura of Haiku" in *Tracks on the River*. Elsah, Illinois: Coneflower Press, 1982, 4; reprinted in *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, eds. Lee Gurga and Michael Dylan Welch. Foster City: Press Here, 2001, 29-30.

[7] Williams, Paul O. "The Lasting and Ephemeral in Haiku" in *Modern Haiku* 20.1 (1989), reprinted in *The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*, 35.

[8] Williams, Paul O. *Growing in the Rain: Fifty-four poems*. Smythe-Waite Press: Santa Rosa, California, 1991, 26.

[9] Williams, Paul O. *Outside Robins Sing: Selected Haiku*. Decatur, Illinois: Brooks Books, 1999, unpaginated.

[10] Williams, Paul O. *The Edge of the Woods: 55 Haiku*. Elsah, Illinois: privately published, 1968. The preface to the work, long out-of-print, has been preserved by Michael Dylan Welch on his website: https://www.graceguts.com/further-reading/preface-to-the-edge-of-the-woods.

[11] Williams, "The Aura of Haiku," 30.

[12] Williams, "The Aura of Haiku," 30.

[13] Williams, Paul O. "The Borrowed Axe—A Biblical Echo in Walden?" *The Thoreau Society Bulletin* 83 (1963), 2.

[14] Gurga, Lee and Michael Dylan Welch. "The Middle Way: Paul O. Williams' Essays on Haiku," *The Nick of Time*, 7-14; e.g. "Paul is able to discern the delicacy, the aura that remains around each fine haiku after it has been experienced by the reader, and communicate what is special about this."