

**WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND CARLOS
DRUMMOND DE ANDRADE:
A POETICS OF GENEROSITY**

*Luiz Fernando Valente
Brown University*

In one of the best-known essays on William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Randall Jarrell describes Williams, together with Charles Sanders Pierce, William James and Walt Whitman, as a generous writer: “In spite of their faults—some of them obvious to, and some of them seductive to, the most foolish reader—poets like Whitman and Williams have about them something more valuable than any faultlessness: a wonderful largeness, a quantitative and qualitative generosity” (xiv). It is quite clear that Jarrell’s assessment rests primarily on moral grounds: “That Williams’s poems are honest, exact, and original, that some of them are really *good* poems, seems to me obvious. But in concluding I had rather mention something even more obvious: their generosity and sympathy, their moral and human attractiveness” (xviii). Nowhere in the essay does Jarrell consider the more strictly *literary* question of how generosity affects Williams’s creative process. Although I agree with John Gardner that “to maintain that true art is moral one need not call up theory; one need only think of the fictions that have lasted: *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*; the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; Virgil’s *Aeneid*; Dante’s *Commedia*; the plays of Shakespeare and Racine; the novels of Tolstoy, Melville, Thomas Mann, James Joyce” (105), I also agree with Mark Schorer that “technique is the means by which the writer’s experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it” (9). In other words, I believe that moral and aesthetic issues are intertwined, or to put it more bluntly, that successful literary works are characterized by the connectedness of theme, worldview and technique. Thus,

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I propose that the generosity that Jarrell identifies as inherent to William Carlos Williams and that I regard as similarly inherent to Carlos Drummond de Andrade (1902-1987) plays a fundamental role in the construction of their poetry. In this essay I will attempt to demonstrate how Williams and Drummond participate in the creation of what I would like to call a poetics of generosity.

Before we proceed to the discussion of Williams and Drummond's poetics of generosity, it might be useful to pause for a moment to consider the etymology of the word generosity, as well as briefly to examine some examples of the treatment of the concept of generosity from Antiquity to the present. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, generosity comes from the Latin noun *generositas*, whose literal meaning is nobility of birth or lineage (if one is talking of humans) or excellence of breed (if one is talking of animals). The adjective *generosus* derives from *genus*, a word that signifies stock or race. Thus, unlike good table manners or loyalty to one's clan, for instance, generosity is not something that one learns, but is, rather, a quality intrinsic to humans, that is, it has to do with nature rather than nurture. Moreover, it does not fit into a utilitarian conception of the world as an aggregate of discrete individuals in pursuit of pleasure but, instead, points in the direction of an organic universal community of human beings interconnected by their basic humanity. To be generous is to be authentic to one's human *genus*, that is, one's sacred or quasi-sacred origins as a human being. Not surprisingly, from Saint Paul to Martin Buber, the concept of generosity has drawn particular interest from thinkers with a religious bent.

As Saint Paul underscores in his *Epistle to the Philippians*, at the root of Christianity is God's supreme act of generosity in emptying Himself of His Divinity (*kenosis*) so as to become a human being. This lesson of humility and compassion is to be emulated not only because it leads to salvation, but also because, as was the case with Christ, generosity is, in the end, what makes us human. Paul calls generosity *caritas*, a kind of love that, differently from *eros*,

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is turned outward, towards others, rather than inward, towards the self. The concept of *caritas* is developed at greater length in *Corinthians I*, in which Paul makes it very clear that although faith and hope are important, *caritas* is the greatest of the three virtues (13-13), and declares unequivocally that “though I have faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing” (13-2). During the Middle Ages, the most important proponent of the primacy of generosity is arguably Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), the thirteenth-century founder of an order of friars with a strict injunction of poverty and an unconditional devotion to charity, which would eventually become the Franciscans.¹ To this day the Franciscans are known for their emphasis on a natural, generous way of life, in which charity is absolutely inseparable from faith and hope. Perhaps even more intensely than Pauline doctrine, Franciscan theology includes a humanistic dimension of *caritas*, that is, a love of our fellow human beings in the here and now.² Not surprisingly, the Franciscans, whose influence in the daily life of the Catholic Church in Latin America remains paramount, were at the forefront of the Liberation Theology movement in the second half of the twentieth century. Quoting both Saint Paul and Boethius (c480-525), the Roman philosopher who was the principal transmitter of Aristotelian logic to the Latin West, seventeenth-century German mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) defines generosity as “the virtue which elevates us to do actions worthy of our kind, nature, descent or origin, which is heavenly.” For Leibniz, generosity is fundamental to the existence of an organic, orderly “universal republic of which God is the monarch, and the great law established in this republic is to procure as much good as we can for the world.” Finally, for Martin Buber (1878-1965), the twentieth-century German Jewish philosopher and theologian best known for his classic *I and Thou*, human beings are not autonomous individuals operating according to abstract and impersonal rules. Rather, Buber emphasizes the interconnectedness and reciprocity of all human beings, and of humans with God, the supreme Thou,

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from whom we originate and to whom we return.

Although William Carlos Williams and Carlos Drummond de Andrade are ostensibly non-believers, their poetry is grounded in the quintessential Judeo-Christian concept of generosity. Obviously, their conception of generosity is neither conservative nor literally religious. Quite on the contrary, their secularized approach is self-consciously modern and ultimately transgressive. In the desacralized but morally laden universe of Williams's and Drummond's poetry, moral questions such as generosity take on a notable urgency. They are part and parcel of a search for order and harmony in a seemingly indifferent and precarious but intrinsically meaningful universe, which becomes even more urgent because no longer are there any easy, pre-packaged answers. Indeed, in this desacralized world, the "supreme fictions" of the imagination, to use Wallace Stevens' formulation, assume much of the role previously played by religion. Firmly grounded in the Kantian tradition, Williams suggests, in a manner reminiscent of the Frankfurt School thinkers, that, like a baseball game, which is played "all to no end save beauty," aesthetic creations are moved by "a spirit of uselessness" that frees the individual from naturalistic determinism and calls into question the dehumanizing utilitarianism of modern, materialistic society:

It is beauty itself
that lives

day by day in them
idly --

(Williams, "At the Ball Game")

Williams's poems often reveal the existence of a deeper, harmonious order behind the surface of banal, everyday objects³:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

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glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

(Williams, “The Red Wheelbarrow”)

Moreover, generosity implies an unavoidable connection between self and other, which turns the Cartesian separation between the perceiver and the perceived on its head. As human beings, we inevitably share the fragility of our existence in a contingent universe: “E cada instante é diferente, e cada / homem é diferente, e somos todos iguais” (Andrade, “Os últimos dias”). Always provisional, life’s meaning is not given, but constructed through small, seemingly “useless” actions and gestures, such as poetry itself, which connect us, albeit precariously, with an indifferent outside world as well as with one another:

Eis que o labirinto
(oh razão, mistério)
presto se desata

em verde, sozinha
antieuclidiana
uma orquídea forma-se.

(Andrade, “Áporo”)

Rejecting the Romantic and Symbolist stances, Drummond and Williams do not regard poetry as the expression of the individual’s inner self or as ecstatic vision.⁴ Rather, by transcending the limitations of individualism, poetry serves for them as an antidote to a modern world pervaded by loneliness, solipsism, competition, and anomie—what Hyatt Waggoner, borrowing from John Burroughs, has called the “cosmic chill”⁵—even though, paradoxically, these qualities are the quintessence of the modern human condition and, therefore, the very substance their poems are made of: “O tempo pobre, o poeta pobre / fundem-se no mesmo impasse” (Andrade, “A flor e a náusea”).

Although the choice of poems by Williams and

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Drummond that address these issues is virtually limitless, I shall focus on two relatively short texts, which are exemplary of Williams and Drummond's poetics of generosity: Williams's first of the two poems called "Pastoral," from the 1917 volume *Al que quiere!*, and the second section of Drummond's "Canto ao homem do povo Charlie Chaplin" from the 1945 volume *A rosa do povo*.

"Pastoral" can be broken down into three segments: opening and closing non-rhyming tercets, framing a sixteen-line middle section, also in free verse. The opening tercet establishes the voice of the poem: a speaker looks back with regret and a tinge of remorse on his younger days as a time when he was blinded by a narrow adherence to a goal-oriented, utilitarian and self-absorbed worldview:

When I was younger
It was plain to me
I must make something of myself

Juxtaposed to the ostensibly parodic title, these lines should be read as an indictment of the modern corruption of the values of American self-reliance, as formulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and of the ideals of American individualism, as expressed by Walt Whitman, two writers who exerted a major influence on Williams. Indeed, as the cliché-ridden diction seems to suggest, there ought to be more to the American Dream than the narrowly materialistic goal of "making something of oneself."⁶ In contrast with the initial three lines, the longer middle segment represents an enlargement of the speaker's perspective beyond himself. Whereas the initial tercet focuses on the speaker's narrowly defined goal of self-fulfillment, the middle section shows the speaker wandering about the clutter and debris of a jumbled human landscape:

Older now
I walk back streets
admiring the houses
of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,

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furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves

Despite being a sympathetic observer, the speaker does not fuse with this landscape. In other words, there is no romantic claim for an unmediated contact with external reality. The passage conveys, instead, a respect for the integrity of each object as well as the speaker's awareness of himself and of others as separate though commensurate subjects, regardless of economic differences. At the same time Williams's simple but evocative poetic language uncovers a deeper harmony beneath the seemingly disorderly surface, while conferring dignity on a segment of society that a utilitarian, materialistic, competitive and strictly goal-oriented conception of the world might dismiss as being of lesser value. As Donald W. Markos proposes, "transvaluations, or reversals of value, are an obvious aspect of Williams's poetic world, in which the sparrow is exalted over the nightingale and the street cleaner, over the Episcopal minister—and in which common objects and people are seen to possess dignity, worth, and beauty" (50-51).⁷ The speaker's self-deprecating sense of humor ("and parts of boxes, all, / if I am fortunate, / smeared a bluish green / that properly weathered / pleases me best / of all colors") contributes to the creation of empathy while averting the dual pitfalls of solipsism and condescension.

The closing tercet indicates that the speaker has been transformed by the reality he has represented in the poem:

No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation.

Rather than a one-way relationship between a subject and an object, a dialogue has occurred between the perceiver and the perceived. This reciprocity is encapsulated in the polysemy of the word *this* in the next to last line, which can be construed as referring to the human landscape depicted in the poem, to its representation through poetic language, and lastly to the speaker's new self-awareness. Capping the out-

ward-looking movement that was identified above, the closing tercet also raises the larger question of what constitutes the nation. Firmly rooted in the Whitman tradition, Williams's generous approach appears to accept nothing less than a definition of the nation as an inclusive, all-embracing community.

Clearly "Pastoral" is far from a descriptive poem in the Imagist mode. Quite on the contrary, it reflects Williams's dissatisfaction with Imagism, which the poet faulted in his *Autobiography* for having "no formal necessity implicit in it" (264). Insisting, instead, that imagery must be charged with significance (Markos 122), Williams opposed to Imagism what he called Objectivism. He regarded the Objectivist poem as displaying formal necessity⁸ and therefore serving as an "antidote, in a sense, to the bare image haphazardly presented in loose verse" (*Autobiography* 265). Williams's concern for poetic organicity can be viewed as a formal counterpart to the quest for a harmonious, meaningful, and generous world.

Beginning with an identification between Charlie Chaplin and the common people of Brazil ("Para dizer-te como os brasileiros te amam / e que nisso, como em tudo mais, nossa gente se parece / com qualquer gente do mundo—inclusive os pequenos judeus / de bengalina e chapéu-coco, sapatos compridos, olhos melancólicos"), "Canto ao homem do povo Charlie Chaplin" uses Chaplin's tramp character to envisage the possibility of solidarity and justice in an unjust and inhumane world ("ó Carlito, meu e nosso amigo, teus sapatos e teu bigode caminham numa estrada de pó e esperança"). Composed of three stanzas of fifteen, fourteen and twelve lines respectively, the poem's second section is built upon the dialectic of dark and light, with the first stanza serving as the thesis, the second stanza as the antithesis, and the third stanza as the synthesis. Like "Pastoral," this section is characterized by a progressive opening, contains an epiphany, and culminates in a transformation.

Dominated by darkness and the color black, the first stanza summons an oppressive atmosphere of death, mourning, loneliness and failure:

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Assim o noturno cidadão de uma república
enlutada, surges a nossos olhos
pessimistas, que te inspecionam e meditam:
Eis o tenebroso, o viúvo, o inconsolado,
o corvo, o nunca-mais, o chegado muito tarde
a um mundo muito velho.

Conversely, light and the color white dominate the second stanza. It is not a question, however, of an absolute mood shift from the first stanza. First of all, the light in the second stanza is the fainter, nocturnal light reflected by the moon, not the stronger daytime light emanating from the sun. Whiteness is still associated with death, coldness and destruction:

Branco, de morte caiado,
que sepulcros evoca, mas que hastes
submarinas e álgidas e espelhos
e lírios que o tirano decepou, e faces
amortalhadas em farinha.

Moreover, blackness creeps back in the reference to the tramp's mustache as if to suggest both the impossibility of making neat distinctions and the ever-present possibility of death in a contingent world: "O bigode / negro cresce em ti como um aviso / e logo se interrompe." Nevertheless, towards the end of the stanza an epiphany does occur as the tramp beams a smile: "sozinha, experiente, calada vem a boca / sorrir, aurora, para todos." Picking up where the second stanza left off, the third stanza opens with a transfiguration, which takes us beyond the boredom of daily routines and returns us to a happier, primordial place. Isolation has been replaced by a sense of community, as suggested by the presence of verbs and pronouns in the first person plural:

E já não sentimos a noite,
e a morte nos evita, e diminuímos
como se ao contacto de tua bengala mágica
votássemos
ao país secreto onde dormem meninos.
Já não é o escritório de mil fichas
nem a garagem, a universidade, o alarme,
é realmente a rua abolida, as lojas repletas.

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The stanza culminates in a transformation, which posits a utopian new order:

e vamos contigo arrebentar as vidraças,
e vamos jogar o guarda no chão,
e na pessoa humana vamos redescobrir
aquele lugar—cuidado!—que atrai os pontapés:
sentenças
de uma justiça não oficial.

Throughout this section—and, indeed, throughout the poem—the tramp is never a mere object of description. On the contrary he is always treated as a subject, with whom the speaker dialogues even if the dumb tramp will only answer through gestures, and who is incorporated into the utopian community that is conjured up in the last six lines. Significantly the tramp is addressed in the second person, rather than talked about in the third person—a *thou*, not an *it*, to use Buber’s terminology.

Just as Williams, in order to establish himself as a *strong* poet,⁹ needed to separate himself from Imagism, Drummond’s generous approach towards his subject matter marks a break with Oswald de Andrade’s self-indulgent satire and Mário de Andrade’s self-absorption and ironic detachment, while paving the way for João Cabral de Melo Neto’s masterful synthesis of formal restraint and compassionate humanism.

Generosity also informs Williams’s and Drummond’s approach to poetic language. Both poets move away from conventional poetic rhetoric and opt for a simpler diction, designed to reveal and illuminate rather than conceal. Rejecting hermeticism even in their most “difficult” poems,¹⁰ their attitude towards the poetic word is intrinsic to their “depersonalization” of the poetic experience, a trait that Michael Hamburger has proposed as one of the main characteristics of modern poetry.¹¹ For Williams and Drummond there is no orphic correspondence between the poet’s inner self or vision and the poetic word. Instead, to write poetry is painfully and humbly to search for the kind of always-slippery language that strives to open up to the

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broader human community while struggling with the irresolvable paradoxes of human existence.¹²

Notes:

1. A most enlightening and readable biography of St. Francis of Assisi is Jacques Le Goff's masterful *Saint François d'Assise*. Le Goff views St. Francis primarily as a reformer, who displayed a profound consciousness of the contradictions and conflicts of Italian society of his time, and who was supposedly beset by the changes brought about by the development of a money economy.

2. It is worth noting, incidentally, that together with Pauline doctrine, Franciscan theology was appropriated by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire as he blended Christian belief with Marxist praxis in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which could be described as a politically engaged rendition of the theme of generosity.

3. James E. Breslin has suggested that the "informing myth" of Williams's work is "the discovery of plenty lodged, as it must be in the contemporary landscape, amid barrenness" (62).

4. In *American Visionary Poetry*, Hyatt Waggoner proposes that "Williams was, at least at times—and I should say at his best—a 'visionary poet' despite himself" (111). Nevertheless, for Waggoner visionary poetry is not primarily an ecstatic experience, but, rather, conveys an ability to see beyond surface reality. Its obverse is an alienated, purely materialistic world: "Visionary poetry as I have come to think of it sees us as participants in the world, part and parcel of it, neither objective observers of it nor homeless in it. It thus runs counter to the poetry of alienation. It also runs counter any sort of poetic 'idealism' that would make whatever is valuable in the world the by-product of our minds" (7). Ultimately, therefore, there is no conflict between Waggoner's position and mine.

5. Waggoner uses the phrase "cosmic chill" as the subtitle of a chapter on Edwin Arlington Robinson in his book *The Heel of Elohim*. In this chapter Waggoner quotes the following passage from Burroughs: "Feeling, emotion falls helpless before the revelations of science. The universe is going its own way with no thoughts of us. . . . This discovery sends the cosmic chill, with which so many of us are familiar in these days" (21).

6. As Breslin has aptly put, "the ordinary American, in Williams's view, is a man whose swift-moving commitment to material ends has abstracted him from immediate experience from the New World; his fear of the new, thwarting the creative process of renewal is self-destructive" (43).

7. Markos is referring to the other "Pastoral" poem from the *Al que quiere!* volume, particularly the following lines: "Meanwhile, / the old man who gets about / gathering dog-lime / walks in the gutter / without looking up / and his tread / is more majestic than / that of the Episcopal minister / approaching the pulpit / of a Sunday. / These things / astonish me beyond words."

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8. “The poem, like every other form of art, is an object, an object that in itself presents its case and its meaning by the very form it assumes” (264).

9. I am obviously relying on Harold Bloom’s classic definition of “strong” poets as “major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors” (5) in *The Anxiety of Influence*.

10. As Williams put it in the 1927 essay “Notes in Diary Form,” “the difficulty of modern styles is made by the fragmentary stupidity of modern life, its lacunae of sense, lous, perversions of instinct, blankets, amputations, fulsomeness of instruction and multiplication of inanity” (71).

11. “Contrary to what Hugo Friedrich has asserted, a very good case could be made out for the special humanity of much modern poetry, a concern for humankind as a whole all the more intense for being ‘depersonalized’ as much Romantic poetry was not, because the more confessional of the Romantic poets were primarily interested in their own individuality and in all those things that made them different from other people” (38-39).

12. Juxtaposing these two prolific, influential, original poets, who share an unabashedly humanistic approach to life and literature, was not intended to imply the existence of influence, but to cast light on some significant trends in modernist poetry, which transcend the specific Brazilian and American literary traditions.

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