

TRIANGULATING TWO CUBISTS:
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND OSWALD DE ANDRADE

Richard M. Morse

Once upon a time as a budding Latin Americanist I wavered, as I still do, between two ways of looking at civilization in the northern and southern Americas. One might, it seemed, consider the New World as dichotomized by the projection of two versions of the European heritage. Or one might seek out commonalities of a hemispheric "American" history. Such speculation drew comfort from the large generalizations of the Hiperión group in Mexico and of fellow historians of ideas whom they recruited throughout Latin America. The object of the quest was an elusive "identity" of New World peoples or cultures, and certain pathfinders were inspired by the intuitions, at once luminous and nebulous, of Hegelian, Husserlian, and Orteguian philosophy. In practice, however, the evidence for an American "project," whether dichotomous or hemispheric, rested on somewhat literal renderings of New World *pensadores*, social philosophers, and neonaturalist novelists. The method was for the most part discursive and analytic, not synoptic and metaphoric (always excepting *Rendición de espíritu* by Juan Larrea, that transplanted Spanish surrealist given to mysticism and numerology)

This intellectual adventure was interrupted in the 1960s when the academy subordinated cultural concerns to the dictates of international economics. It was left to a motley band of "with novelist preeminent, to sustain a vision of cultural beginnings and identity. This salvage operation, which in the 1980s finally threatens the economic persuasion, harked back to the vanguardists or Modernists of the 1920s, who had instinctively probed toward origins with expressive command, iconoclastic intention, often with moral sensibility, but without benefit (save for Borges as he matured) of philosophic technique. The Modernist era, misunderstood and even embarrassing in its time, now comes to stand as the benchmark for the Latin American *prise de conscience* in our century. or, less a

benchmark than a thousand prisms for penetrating received certainties of the industrial age. In our universalizing quest, Modernism insists on the single lens. The historian must turn from trends and shared visions to the private eye.

As private vision became radiographic, Modernism at its apogee in the 1920s gave purchase for triangulating tensions among Europe and the northern and southern Americas. In confronting the trauma of Western rationality, technics, and violence (whether industrial or martial), Americans throughout the hemisphere were thrown back on transatlantic history to erect platforms for engagement. Here I select two for comparison, both of them masters of verse, prose, and optics: William Carlos Williams (North American, 1883-1963) and Oswald de Andrade (Brazilian, 1890-1954). We first juxtapose the men, then scrutinize a short poem by each, a total of thirteen lines or thirty-six words. Tiny though the verses be, they are two of the sturdy hinges on which the door of Modernism swung in the New World.

Both writers matured at the brink of renovation in arts and letters in their respective countries. Both were allured by the avant-garde in Europe. Williams went there as a child and returned in 1909-10; Oswald went first to Paris in 1912. In 1913 Williams burst out laughing at Duchamp's descending *Nude* in the New York Armory Show. "I felt as if an enormous weight had lifted from my shoulders," he wrote fifty years later (1). That same year Oswald's Sao Paulo had a miniature analogue to the Armory Show in the one-man exhibit by a young Russian expressionist, Lasar Segall. Although Segall later settled in Brazil and became one of its finest artists, his first show was too premature, and immature, to cause explosion (2). By 1917 the time was ripe, and an exhibition by the Brazilian expressionist, Anita Malfatti, just returned from Europe and the United States, had its shock. In about this year Oswald and his cronies began concocting ingredients for the Modern Art Week of 1922 that implanted Modernism on the Brazilian scene. Also in 1917 appeared Williams' book of poems, *Al que Quiere*, where he abandoned cherished models for a "cubist" style.

Both Williams and Oswald were more radical than their fellow Modernists in stripping language of discursive, ready-made elements. Their subjects were distilled, intensified, and directly rendered. Photography, cubism, and dadaism gave lessons for connecting discourse with typography, for achieving instantaneity through montage. Williams, himself a painter, was an *habitué* of the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, the famous "291" of Fifth Avenue, where Stieglitz became his mentor for the "hieroglyphics of a new speech."

Oswald too used a “Kodak” technique in prose as well as poetry to seek “constructive innocence” and create a “new syntax” for direct presentation of materials (3).

Yet for all the illumination shed by Parisian experiments, neither poet could follow “the radical steps being taken by the European artists toward abstraction or toward the more destructive aspects of Dadaism.” (4) Both felt obliged to define, or *render*, the American scene and to abjure cerebral imperatives of Modernism that led to *blague*.

They began with the medium itself, language. It was not enough to discard hand-me-down rhetoric and fixed form. That left one still in Europe. One must discover American languages if one were to convey experience directly. Linguistically, Modernism began at home. Williams found out that because Americans slur their speech into a common stress level an American poem should abandon a quantitative for a qualitative measure. The poet must base his line on “sensestresses,” not the inherent accents of syllables. (5) For Oswald “Brazilian” was a stripped-down, plasmic vernacular, the common denominator of American Portuguese and its immigrant influences, especially African: “Language with no archaisms, no erudition. Natural and neological. The millionfold contribution of all errors. As we talk. As we are.” (6) If Williams found the sonnet form fascistic for an American language, Oswald found it bureaucratic: “I was never able to count syllables. Metrics were something my mind couldn’t accept, a subordination I absolutely rejected.” (7) Neither poet hankered for symbols, contexts, and poetic “beauty.” They demanded that things be starkly exposed, not painfully copied in the realist’s sense but absorbed and imitated in Aristotle’s sense. In this they went beyond their respective compatriots, T. S. Eliot and Mário de Andrade. Of Eliot’s “Waste Land” Williams wrote: “I had to watch him carry my world off with him, the fool, to the enemy ” (8)

To discover American language meant to discover American history and reproduce it in clean camera shots. Here our poets necessarily diverge. One can speak of linguistic Americanization throughout the hemisphere. One can speculate on commonalities of New World time, space, and identity. But the specifics of history, its political and psychosocial burdens, differ vastly. Transatlantic legacies come into play.

Williams tackled history with *In the American Grain*, published in 1925. He set out to discover “what the land of my more or less accidental birth might signify.” The plan was “to get inside the

heads” of some American founders, a fine instance of the subjectivism of Stephen Spender who in his chapter “Subjective America, Objective Europe”, holds that Europe offers a cultural past that engulfs each person and his generation, while unexplored, “subjective” America is geographical; it speaks in the present tense, forcing an American to achieve a private relation with his fellows and with nature. For Williams nothing was “to get between me” and what the founders had recorded. (9) Such founders include the Spanish, to whom Williams, whose parents grew up in the Caribbean, felt drawn. Not only did he recreate original texts but he composed his chapter on the destruction of Tenochtitlán “in big square paragraphs like Inca *sic* masonry.” He admired boulders fitted without plaster. It was how he wanted his prose: no patchwork. (10)

Williams starts with Red Eric, who “left the curse behind” in reaching Greenland. “Rather the ice than their way” are the opening words. He repeats them near the end in explaining Edgar Allan Poe, whose eeriness and isolation made him the first original North American writer. Williams refuses to blame the conquistadors for the work of their terrible hands. They traveled on instincts as deep and ancient as the seas that carried them. Against them he sets the Puritans, the first to come as a group, prompted by private desire. They were to make everything like themselves, for no man led them. Stripped and little, their sole authority was the secret warmth of their tight-licked hearts. “Each shrank from an imagination that would sever him from the rest.” On the other hand he praises Champlain for his skill at detail, his woman’s tenderness, “the perfection of what we lack, here.” There follows a panel on the Salem witch trials, when suddenly the author plunks us down in Paris of the 1920s amid Picasso, Braque, Stein, Tzara, Joyce, Pound, Léger, and the whole Modernist crew.

Williams had indeed revisited France while writing the book, to find himself with his ardors “beaten back, in this center of old-world culture where everyone was tearing his own meat, *warily* conscious of a newcomer, but wholly without inquisitiveness — No wish to know; they were served.” Yet precisely this remove brought the New World into focus and with it the opposition of Puritan and Catholic. (In 1924 Paulo Prado wrote that Oswald de Andrade, “from high in an atelier of the Place Clichy, navel of the world, was dazzled to discover his own country ” (11)) In conversation a French interlocutor found Williams brimming with three things, all embattled: the Puritans’ sense of order, the Jesuits’ practical mysticism, and the qualities that both of them defeated in the Indian. This led Williams to discuss Père Rasles, the Jesuit mar-

tyred in Canada, who lovingly labored to release the Indian from his pod of isolation, but *as an Indian*. The Jesuit's world was one of touch, acknowledgment of femininity, mystery, not the Protestant heaven where everything is Federalized, all laws are prohibitive, and where the blacks alone make religion vital. Now Williams had his touchstone for judging heroes like Daniel Boone and Aaron Burr and Poe, his heroine Jacataqua, or the antihero Ben Franklin. He ends (at his publisher's request) with one page on Lincoln, presented as a brooding, compassionate woman in an old shawl, the beard and stovepipe hat lending unearthly reality

The history that informed Oswald was vastly different. And he was, despite convergences noted, a vastly different person. Williams, the devoted obstetrician who delivered lower-class babies of all races in Rutherford, New Jersey, was not the same young man who bought a Cadillac in Sao Paulo because it was the only model that had an ashtray. One was a no-nonsense physician bringing things to light, unmasking sham and meanness in a land of power and plenty. The other came from a *terra incognita* with no world image. Its colonial status, never dismantled, was reinforced by the North American success story. The issue for Oswald was not lack of compassion but lack of liberty; the therapy was primal emancipation, not psychoanalysis.

If both writers used cubist composition and the bare Kodak shot, the Brazilian tilted the picture. He needed irony, parody, and *jeux de mots*. Take Williams' pronouncement that North American wealth, a product of fear and torment to the spirit, makes us "the flaming terror of the world." Amid our opulence "we have the inevitable Coolidge platform: 'poorstateish' — meek. THIS will convince the world that we are RIGHT. It will not. Make a small mouth. It is the acme of shrewdness, of policy." (12)

Had Oswald read *In the American Grain*, his reply would have been his poem, "hip! hip! hoover!," celebrating the visit of the United States President-elect to Brazil. This "message to the Brazilian people" commences with three lines, anticipating Brazil's concrete poetry of the 1950s, that affirm the heat, sweat, and sheer geological presence of the southern continent:

<i>América do Sul</i>	South America
<i>América do Sol</i>	Sun America
<i>América do Sal</i>	Salt America

A "south" that implies indolence and "underdevelopement"
an impassive "sun" that voluptuously tans the flappers of Copacaba-

na while mercilessly flaying workers in the fields the “salt” of waves cooling to bathers and of sweating bodies that wield machetes. The rest of the poem tells how the whole country turned out to welcome the guns of the warship *Utah* (an implicit rhyme with, or ellipsis for, the Portuguese “puta”) and the leader of the Great American Democracy: the corporation, the families, every pickpocket, every bird in the sky All flocked “to see him, Hoover” (“para o ver, Hoover”). The pun in Portuguese turns the phrase into a commercial jingle. For not *everyone* turned out to see Hoover. Not even on that festive day did the police stop persecuting factory workers, the human bedrock for an “advanced” industrial nation. (13) How then could Brazilians have reduced their problems to such a fact as Williams deplored, that Emily Dickinson starved of passion in her father’s garden? Granted, the obverse is: Why should Puritans who pay a toll even to “reach out and touch someone” worry about factory wages in Brazil? But Williams saw this too when he observed that North American violence extends even to the enterprise that puts bananas on the breakfast table. (14)

In 1925, the very year of *American Grain* (to resume our miraculously synchronic account, Oswald published his volume of verse *Pau-Brasil* (Brazilwood). It opens with eight prose poems which, in Williams’ manner, “photo-synthesize” the early chroniclers, but with greater brevity, and conclude with a letter of the first emperor of independent Brazil. The remaining poems are cubist miniatures that juxtapose snapshots of industrial, Frenchified, North-americanized, immigrant Brazil with those of a cultural undertow, African and Iberian. The poems themselves are not the developed, editorialized recreations of Williams. Oswald saves his programmatic statements for manifestoes: the Pau-Brasil Manifesto of 1924 (an abridged version of which introduces the Pau-Brasil poems) and the Anthropophagy Manifesto of 1928. (15) We commiserate with Williams for being sickened by North American adoration of violence, the thrill at fires and explosions, the use of violence for “service” and of battleships for “peace.” But after all, the world knew what he was talking about. No one, not even Brazilians, knew what Brazil *was about*. Oswald had to employ *rhetorical* violence simply to establish footing. Hence his poem about the “error of the Portuguese.” What a pity the Portuguese arrived in a thunderstorm and put clothes on the Indians! Had it been sunny, the Indians might have undressed the invaders. In other words, *suppose* that things are the opposite of what they seem. Suppose Montaigne was right about the humanity of the cannibals. Or suppose the Indians didn’t need the Christian compassion of Père Rasles but that the Europeans

(who, by invading, became colonials as well as colonizers) needed to learn from the cannibalism of the Indians.

Oswald was necessarily more radical than Williams. The Brazil-wood Manifesto declared that by emancipating their language Brazilians could export poetry as they had long ago exported dyewood and all the commercial crops that followed. By insisting on the co-presence of forest and school, of witch doctors and military aviation, he moved toward his primitivist theory of Anthropophagy. Brazil should *ingest*, not *copy*, Europe just as Indian cannibals had once consumed the white man and absorbed his powers. Imposed authority must be demolished; tabu must become totem. Before 1500 Amerindian Brazil had already invented bolshevism and surrealism. It had revealed natural man to Europeans, starting with Thomas More, and thus natural rights. Oswald's was not a plea for ethnic sympathies and Christian compassion. He invoked indigenous values like leisure, fraternity, abundance, sexual freedom, and edenic life as a revolutionary program for a technified world. He would restore instinct and enchantment to an industrial age. (16)

The insurrectionary force and stark oxymorons of Oswald's manifestoes made a lasting imprint on highbrow and popular culture in Brazil. (17) Williams' antri-Puritanism, on the other hand, was scarcely so inventive. He had even derived it, to an extent not fully acknowledged, from Paul Rosenfeld and the Stieglitz group. (18) Obstetrical skill rather than revolutionary instinct gave him prominence. Oswald adopted Modernist grammar and syntax but went beyond Europeans in reconceiving their Eurocentric world. Hard and withered Puritan hearts required different therapy than did a repressive church-state apparatus that was renewed over the centuries under changing forms of patriarchal, cultural, and even linguistic domination. Brazil's Padre Anchieta may have been even more saintly than Père Rasles, but for Oswald the Jesuit project could only be repressive.

All this is a backdrop to two poems which energize our present categories and, because they are poems, somewhat elude them. Each poem can be taken as self-complete although each is plucked from context. Williams' "Wheelbarrow" comes from a long poem "Spring and All" while Oswald's "Farm" is from the "Colonization" section of his book *Pau-Brasil*. Both poems portray a "farm," but from the titles we note that Williams has anatomized it to an instrument of leverage while Oswald retains the cluttered view of a social entity. In both, however, the central action is "lifting." Neither farm, what's more, can we mistake for a European one.

Here is Williams poem:

The Red Wheelbarrow
So much depends
upon
a red wheel
barrow
glazed with rain
water
beside the white
chickens

Visually the stanzas present four identical little barrows composed of words in 3+1 blocks. They suggest that, with the trick of leverage solved, nature becomes infinitely organizable and the farm infinitely replicable: mass production. The extra short syllables in line one of the first and last stanzas invite us to duck and pick up the barrow to see how light it is, then to set it down. (“Eye it, try it buy it”, said the old Chevrolet commercial.) A child could do it; yet we see no human in the picture. The mechanism “runs itself.” At the outset we learn that “so much,” perhaps “all,” depends on the barrow. Hugh Kenner reminds us of the ambiguity of the word “depend.” (19) It means “hang from,” implying vital “dependence” or suspension *from*; yet idiomatically the verb takes the preposition “upon,” implying a load piled *on* the barrow to relieve the owner’s shoulders.

If humans are now a ghost in the machine, nature too has strangely evanesced. Williams’ farm(s) are no longer Wordsworth’s “plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts, / Which at this season, with their unripe fruits, / Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves / ‘Mid groves and copses.” No “natural” colors remain. We have only red — an eminently human color used for barns, fire engines, stop lights, and “red light” districts — and an achromatic white to which the chickens have been bred. Nature becomes a *tabula rasa*. The only natural element mentioned is rain, which cannot penetrate the barrow to rot its wood but merely glazes the paint. The lines break wholes into parts (wheel/barrow, rain/water). Nature and human effort resolve into the Cartesian triangle, vectors, and circle of the barrow and pivot on its single axle. Such is the spare and functional vision of the physician, or the Puritan.

Here is Oswald’s poem:

A roça

*Os cem negros da fazenda
comiam feijão e angu
Abóbora chicória e cambuquira
Pegavam uma roda de carro
Nos braços*

The Farm

The hundred blacks of the fa-
zenda
ate beans and cassava gruel
Squash chicory and pumpkin-
vine stew
They could hoist the wheel of
and oxcart
In their arms

First off, the title is ironic. Portugese and Spanish have no word for the commercial, efficient, family-owned “farm.” Their lexicon describes, at one pole, the subsistence plots of squatters and peasants — or peasant plots whose income is siphoned to intermediaries — and at the other, large enterprises, industrialized or not, that command dependent labor. The “farm” here is called a *roça*, denoting a marginal subsistence plot; yet the first line tells us it is a *fazenda*, or plantation, with a hundred black slaves. Not however, a large and prosperous *fazenda*. Hence the epithet *roça*.

Oswald places a hundred humans at the center of his picture. The “machine” which doesn’t function, comes later. Slaves, or human energies, are the motor power for production and society. Unlike the wheelbarrow, which needs neither food nor fossil fuel — and precious little human exertion — the blacks require constant stoking, although not with meat or white chickens. Luxuriant nature invades the *fazenda* from all sides to offer a host of European, African, and local crops, some wild and some cultivated, some pulled from the vine and some described as already cooked. Enterprise and wild vegetation interpenetrate. Yet the poet never mentions the commercial crop, presumably sugar, but only the foods needed to sustain human labor. Both poems can be called “cubist” for being reductive and sculptural. But Oswald’s *tableua*, although quite as economical as Williams’ cannot fully submit to technical regimentation.

One poem demonstrates control asserted over nature to a point where human agency evanesces. In “Salt” or In “Sweat” America, however, control’s exerted over human beings, a less perfectible endeavor. The meter shows this. The flat first line (in Portuguese) presents a captive, disciplined work force. The second line ripples as the slaves disband to eat. The third line falls into disarray. The fourth line solidifies as they return to common labor. The final line crystallizes into a statuesque image of sheer exertion.

Here nature is not “managed.” Rain, instead of glazing a barrow, creates huge potholes in the road. Therefore the wheel cannot take

precedence as a secret of power but comes last as an encumbrance. Sheer human muscle must rescue it. The phrase, "They could hoist the wheel," has frightening ambiguity. It suggests the hyperbole that to lift the immense wooden wheel of an oxcart took a hundred blacks. But if "they" means not "all but "any" of them, then we are left, in the powerful and pivotal last line, with a single African supporting the weight like Atlas carrying the globe. Or like a savior crucified, arms outstretched to frame the poem. Oswald, the future Communist, unveils a society where religion, whether European or African, escapes translation into science.

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