

3 poems

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



In the talk William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost weaves several loosely connected topics into the general theme of a meaningful American identity in "The Red Wheel Barrow", "The Road Not Taken" and "Stopping By Woods": the European discovery of America and war with England, the balance between liberty and equality, between ability and weakness, regionalism, American versus English "languages," loneliness and solitude, fraternity and society. In this talk they ultimately reflect on the function of poetry to clarify thought in an attempt to balance competing distinctions. It was Williams who famously said, "The pure products of America / go crazy-." Yet Clifford also notes that "nostalgia holds no charm" for Williams; he may long for a time when culture seemed coherent, "when privileged authorities could routinely 'give voice' (or history) to others without fear of contradiction," but he knows there's no going back. Hence, Williams turned to Paterson, to a poetry that revels in colloquial language and dialects, and (à la Walt Whitman) a shift away from formalism, the imagined order of the perfect iamb. Still, modernist poetry (as with modernist anthropology) does not give up its ghostly hope for essential order. Williams, "the ethnographic modernist searches for the universal in the local, the whole in the part." We see this too in the modernist stance of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, as he plumbs the "thick description" of daily life: the road to the general, to the revelatory simplicities of science, lies through a concern with the particular, the circumstantial, the concrete, but a concern organized and directed... [by universalist] analyses of physical evolution, of the functioning of the nervous system, of social organization, of psychological process, of cultural patterning, and so on... Not for nothing

does Williams claim in a similar vein, " so much depends / upon // a red wheel /barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens." What depends? We don't know, and unlike the anthropologist, the poet won't tell us. Williams seems to follow the advice of Emily Dickinson, " Tell all the Truth but tell it slant--...." He still believes there is a larger or even universal truth pointed to by the particular, but he approaches it obliquely and only through reference to immediate experience, as though to name it would reduce it to cant, trivialize it by too much talk. Contrast this with poetry today. Guarded optimism is often replaced now by wariness, disquiet, even an outright refusal to make any and all pronouncements. Consider Robert Frost in " Stopping By Woods", an extraordinary poet, but not one willing to name truths, even on the slant. In a section of the poem " Stopping By Woods" from *What Work Is*, he remarks, Frost 's poetry, written invariably in free verse, typically consists of a gloomy, nebulous, rather burdensomely alliterative and assonant natural description, heavy with abstruse allegorical intent and often permeated by violence. In some poems an animal--a snow owl, a hawk--is at the symbolic center; in others it may be an oyster boat, a river, a pine cone, a duck pond. Sometimes the natural description is accompanied by a spotty memory from the poet's childhood or an anecdote about his own children; more often than not it yields some sort of murky epiphany or vague metaphysical speculation about passion, fear, reality and illusion, the passage of time, the triumph of death, the endurance of life. Where as in another poet this nexus between the natural, the personal, and the cosmic might give the impression of being emotionally valid, in a typical Frost poems the connections between the elements appear to be arbitrary.

The average Frost poems , indeed, seems held together not by the force of his love or distress or wonderment but by an act of will. One finds oneself imagining what would happen if one played mix-and match with his verse-- borrowing a description of a swooping hawk from the beginning of one poem, modulating into an anecdote about the poet and his father from another poem, and concluding with some epistemological musings from a third poem. Would this randomly rearranged set of words be any worse, look any more manufactured, than Smith's originals? ...