

# The Discourse of Things: On the Ecological Subjectivity of Everyday Objects in William Carlos Williams' Poetry

Ting Lu<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou University, Guangzhou, China

## Email Address

2236074254@qq.com (Ting Lu)

\*Correspondence: 2236074254@qq.com

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## Abstract:

William Carlos Williams's poetic principle of "No ideas but in things" represents not merely an innovation in modernist poetics but also implies a profound turn towards ecological ethics. Utilizing the theoretical framework of material ecocriticism, this paper re-examines the representation of everyday objects in his poetry. It contends that mundane things such as the red wheelbarrow and the locust tree are not merely vehicles for human sentiment but possess an inherent vitality as ecological subjects. The poetry constructs a "rhizomatic" symbiotic network where diverse materials interrelate and co-generate, thereby deconstructing the anthropocentric binary opposition. Against the backdrop of the Anthropocene's ecological crises, Williams's respect for the subjectivity of things, his revelation of the traumas inflicted upon matter by industrialization, and his envisioning of a decentralized community of life not only demonstrate his acute ecological consciousness but also offer a significant poetic pathway for contemporary reflections on the human-nature relationship and the construction of an inclusive ecological ethics.

## Keywords:

William Carlos Williams, Material Ecocriticism, Everyday Objects, Ecological Subjectivity, Anthropocene

## 1. Introduction

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), a landmark figure in modern American poetry, anchored his creative principle "No ideas but in things." This tenet not only revolutionized poetic language and form but was also deeply rooted in a unique contemplation of the relationship between humans and their environment. His poetry consistently focuses on the mundane scenes and ordinary objects of American, endeavoring to mine poetry from concrete things, explicitly opposing the "international" style of poets like T. S. Eliot, which relied heavily on cultural allusions [1]. This insistence on revealing "the thing itself" elevates his work beyond mere aesthetic pursuit, pointing toward profound ecological and philosophical implications. Critic Randall Jarrell keenly observed as early as the 1940s that in Williams's poems, "nature is all over the place" [2].

Since the 21st century, the “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences, along with the subsequent development of material ecocriticism, has provided a new theoretical pathway for re-examining material presence in literature. This theory incorporates the core tenets of new materialism, emphasizing that matter is not a static existence but possesses agency akin to humans; materials, among themselves and in relation to humans, can actively interact, narrate autonomously, and participate in the creation of meaning [3]. As Ye Weiwei states, the main thrust of material ecocriticism lies in “exploring the rhizomatic symbiotic relationships of all things, thereby attempting to reconstruct the subjectivity of matter.” [4] This implies that matter is an “actant” capable of exerting influence, generating events, and participating in meaning-making. Every material form possesses its own “story” and expressive force [5], forming a network of “symbiotic interaction” with human life [6]. In his book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American*

*Literature*, Bill Brown begins with William Carlos Williams’s famous maxim and explores the difficulty of grasping objects simply as “things” [7]. American scholar Mark Long argues that Williams’s literary representation is not a simple exchange based on a subject-object dichotomy but rather enacts a “neglected ecopoetics”, the core of which is the recognition that “humans and nature are not opposed, humans are already within nature” [8]. From this perspective, everyday objects in Williams’s poetry, such as the wheelbarrow or the bull, transcend their role as passive images to become subjects with their own narratives and agency. For instance, in *The Red Wheelbarrow*, the wheelbarrow, rain, and white chickens constitute a self-contained micro-ecology; *The Bull* manifests a life rhythm independent of human schedules. By letting the thingness of objects reveal itself, these poems dismantle anthropocentric cognitive frameworks.

Therefore, Williams is not merely a depicter of local landscapes but also a “narrator of matter”. This paper aims to employ material ecocritical theory to systematically interpret his poetry: first, by exploring how he endows everyday objects with subjectivity and voice; second, by analyzing the symbiotic relationships between human and non-human entities constructed in his poems; finally, by examining, within the context of the Anthropocene, how his poetry documents industrial trauma and harbors the potential for ecological healing through respect for material agency. This study hopes to deepen the understanding of the ecological dimension in Williams’s poetry and offer literary insights for reflecting on ecological ethics in the Anthropocene.

## 2. The Subjectivity of Things: Everyday Objects as Living Beings

The subversiveness of William Carlos Williams’s poetic principle, “No ideas but in things” lies not only in its return from abstract speculation to concrete objects in poetic content but also, more profoundly, in its implication of a shift in ethical stance and cognitive mode. The poet strives to suspend anthropocentric observation and instrumental gazes, attempting to let things appear within the poem according to their own inherent nature and logic. From the perspective of material ecocriticism, non-human natural matter similarly possesses its own immanent agency. For instance, the stars shining in the night sky, the wind howling across the plains, and the rain falling from the heavens all contain potent energies, thereby manifesting matter's own active and potent essence [9], and possess a potential for equality with humans[10]. It becomes evident that the everyday objects in Williams’s writing, to varying degrees, break free from a subordinate status as mere carriers of human meaning or decorative

backdrop. Instead, they assert their own material subjectivity as living beings with a full, self-sufficient, and even slightly obstinate presence.

Williams's most widely known poem, *The Red Wheelbarrow* is a quintessential example of this kind of writing that foregrounds the subjectivity of things. Comprising only sixteen words, the poem constructs a miniature yet self-contained ecological field:

***The Red Wheelbarrow***

(Williams, 1951: 277)

*so much depends  
upon*

*a red wheel  
barrow*

*glazed with rain  
water*

*beside the white  
chickens.*

In the opening lines of *The Red Wheelbarrow*, Williams writes: “so much depends/upon”. On the surface, this statement seems to anchor the wheelbarrow within a human-centered, functional framework, suggesting its utilitarian value as a farm tool. However, as Kenneth Burke insightfully noted, the core of Williams's poetics lies in the direct relationship between “the eye and the thing upon which the eye alights” [11]. As the poem unfolds, the poet's gaze quickly penetrates this abstract notion of “dependence”, turning instead toward the concrete and palpable physical presence of the thing itself. The visual qualities—the “red” of the wheelbarrow, the “white” of the chickens—are stripped of their symbolic and lyrical burdens, impacting the senses through their most purely physical attributes. The intentionally fragmented structure of the lines not only mimics the focusing and shifting of visual attention but also forces a deceleration of the reading pace, creating a form of profound “gazing”. This gaze is not an appropriation of an object by a subject, but rather an invitation, asking the reader to immerse themselves in a self-sufficient here and now constituted by light, moisture, color, and form.

Within this momentarily rain-glistened micro-world, the wheelbarrow and its surroundings (the rain that glazes it, the white chickens nearby) form a relationship of equal symbiosis, not a hierarchical structure of tool and background. This aligns precisely with the perspective of material ecocriticism. As Jane Bennett argues, matter possesses a “thing-power”, an ability to “interrupt narrative flow, to provoke astonishment” [12]. The wheelbarrow in the poem, its wood and red paint animated by the rain, suddenly asserts its materiality. It assumes a refreshed and undeniable presence, suspending our habitual associations with farming implements and compelling us to confront it as a material entity with its own vitality and narrative capacity. Here, language becomes a conductor for the object's own radiance, making the poem a direct presentation of the thing's mode of being.

***The Bull***

(Williams, 1951: 336-337)

*It is in captivity—  
ringed, haltered, chained  
to a drag  
the bull is godlike*

*Unlike the cows  
he lives alone, nozzles  
the sweet grass gingerly  
to pass the time away*

*He kneels, lies down  
and stretching out  
a foreleg licks himself  
about the hoof*

*then stays  
with half-closed eyes,  
Olympian commentary on  
the bright passage of days.*

*—The round sun  
smooth his lacquer  
through  
the glossy pinetrees*

*his substance hard  
as ivory or glass—  
through which the wind  
yet plays—  
milkless*

*he nods  
the hair between his horns  
and eyes matted  
with hyacinthine curls*

William Carlos Williams's poem *The Bull* constructs an independent, self-sufficient, and intrinsically sacred subjectivity for a non-human life form through its portrayal. The poem establishes its tone from the outset through a distinction in pronouns: "it" refers to the cow, while "he" refers to the bull. This linguistic choice is not arbitrary but symbolic, placing the cow within the category of a "thing", its image associated with a series of functional, dominated states— "ringed, haltered, chained". The bull, however, is granted a personal pronoun, thereby initially attaining a quasi-subjective status. The poet further elevates the bull by metaphorically calling it a "god", allowing it to transcend completely the utilitarian comparison with the cow. Subsequently, the poem meticulously depicts the bull's state of solitude: "lives alone, nozzles the sweet

grass gingerly”, its movements solemn as rituals— “kneels, lies down, stretching out a foreleg licks himself, stays”. The bull’s body is described as “ivory or glass”, its very existence transformed into a solid and luminous material node. The core of this subjectivity lies in its thorough “non-utility”. The concluding revelation of “milkless” is crucial here. “Milkless” signifies a detachment from productivity and utility, negating anthropocentric measures of value. It is precisely this “uselessness” that safeguards the completeness and autonomy of the bull’s state of being. Finally, the bull’s gaze— “with half-closed eyes/Olympian commentary on/ the bright passage of days”—accomplishes a reversal of subject and object: the bull is no longer the observed object but becomes the subject observing and evaluating its own world. This writing strategy aligns deeply with the theoretical claims of material ecocriticism. The poem presents the bull as an actant possessing its own perception, rhythm, and story, inhabiting a world that does not exist solely for humans.

Williams highlights materiality not only through his choice of subject matter but also by creating forms that echo the mode of existence of things. In *The Locust Tree in Flower*, he condenses the poem into thirteen isolated words, arranged vertically:

***The Locust Tree in Flower***

*(Williams.1951: 93)*

*Among  
of  
green*

*stif  
old  
bright*

*broken  
branch  
come*

*White  
sweet  
May*

*again*

Through the juxtaposition of extremely minimal and ungrammatical words, Williams’s poem mimics the visual form and material structure of the locust flower clusters. Each word, like a petal or a branch, presents itself directly through its own sound, shape, and meaning, thereby weakening the coherence of linear semantics and strengthening the presence of words as material signs. The reading process thus approximates a visual and spatial perception of the words-as-objects. Here, language is reified and the poetic form becomes an iconic mimicry of the plant’s life form [13]. In this formal experiment, Williams not only describes the thing but strives for the poetic language to become the thing or resonate with it. For instance, “stiff” “old” and “broken” directly convey the physical texture of the branches, while “white” and “sweet” evoke the sensory properties of the flowers. The poem is no longer merely a

representation of external objects; it transforms itself into an aesthetic object with material density and form, directly participating in the performance of materiality. This can also be seen as a poetic practice of the material discourse that material ecocriticism concerns itself with—the material world is not prior to or external to signs but is always saturated within semiosis [14]. Poetry, as a highly sensitive form of language, is precisely capable of capturing and embodying the expressivity of matter itself, achieving a deep isomorphism between linguistic structure and the state of being of things.

### 3. The Rhizomatic Symbiosis of Things and Humans: Breaking Anthropocentric Narratives

As defined by Bill Brown in his work *Other Things*, this intellectual trend signifies a renewed engagement with the material world in the humanities and social sciences through an interdisciplinary approach. Its pathways range from material cultural history and phenomenology to metaphysical speculation, with the core aim being to re-examine the agency and constitutive role of things themselves [15]. It is precisely within this framework that we see Williams's poetry does not intend to construct a realm of pure objects isolated from the human world. On the contrary, when "things" attain an independent voice through their full and self-sufficient presence, their relationship with humans shifts from a subject-object model of domination to a more complex, dynamic, and mutually constitutive network. Material ecocriticism is deeply influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizome", emphasizing that all things in the world are like subterranean rhizomes, existing in a decentralized, non-hierarchical state of connection [16]. In this schema, any point can connect to any other point, with heterogeneous elements intertwining and co-generating in unpredictable ways. Williams's poetic practice vividly embodies this "rhizomatic symbiotic" ecological relationship of human-thing entanglement, thereby destabilizing the traditional narrative that places humans at the center of meaning and relational networks.

In Williams's writing, the relationship between humans and things often manifests as a process of reciprocal permeation and mutual transformation, rather than static observation or utility.

#### *The Widows Lament in Springtime* (Williams, 1951: 223)

Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames as It has: flamed  
often before but not  
with the cold fire  
that closes round me this year.  
Thirtyfive years  
I lived wIth my husband.  
The pluntree is white today  
with masses of :flowers.  
Masses of: Bowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes

*yellow and some red  
but the grief in my hear  
Is stronger than they  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turned away forgetting.  
Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white: flowers.  
I feel that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.*

The poem *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, while ostensibly expressing grief over the loss of a husband, enacts, on a deeper level, an ecological drama of the flow and transformation of emotional energy between humans and things. At the poem's outset, the new grass in the yard approaches the widow with the image of a "cold fire". This metaphor transcends traditional scenic description, revealing the kinetic energy of natural matter actively intruding into the realm of human emotion. Material ecocriticism posits that non-human matter possesses significant agency, actively participating in the construction of meaning. The plants and flowers in the poem are not a passive backdrop but become co-shapers of the widow's emotional state. The lush blooming of the plum flowers, once a source of joy in previous years, now becomes an unbearable weight due to the widow's grief. This emotional shift reveals the profound intrinsic interaction between matter and human feeling [17]. A crucial turning point in the poem is the distant scene described by her son—the white flowers at the edge of the woods. This heterogenous space, untainted by personal memory, exerts a powerful summons on the widow, making her wish to "fall into those flowers / and sink into the marsh near them". This desire embodies the core material ecocritical concept of trans-corporeality, where there is no absolute boundary between the human body and the wider material environment, as they exist in a state of constant mutual permeation. The widow's hope, through bodily dissolution, is to merge her grieving self into the non-human, cyclical, and regenerative processes of natural matter. This is essentially a search for a path to reconnect with the material network of all things [18]. Ultimately, the widow's turn towards the distant, untended field can be interpreted as an ecologically ethical longing that transcends anthropocentrism—an acknowledgment of nature's intrinsic value, independent of its utility or capacity to bring pleasure to humans [19].

#### *Autumn*

*(Williams, 1951: 408)*

*A stand of people  
by an open*

*grave underneath  
the heavy leaves*

*celebrates  
the cut and fill*

*for the new road  
where*

*an old man  
on his knees*

*reaps a basket-  
ful of  
matted grasses for  
his goats*

Similarly, in the poem *Autumn*, human activity (the building of a new road) violently intrudes upon the existing material network. The rupture and trauma it causes conversely attest to the pre-existence and fragility of symbiotic relationships among things. The “cut and fill” for the new road creates “an open grave”, disrupting the long-established, tranquil connections among fallen leaves, soil, and the remains of the dead. The old man cutting grass for his goats at the poem’s end represents a traditional, cyclical symbiotic mode on the verge of being severed by modern engineering logic—a survival bond formed between the old man, goats and grasses, rooted in local knowledge. This symbiotic relationship embodies an alternative possibility for human-nature interaction.

Furthermore, Williams’s characteristic mode of cool, fragmented description—its aesthetic linguistic form itself serves a crucial expressive function. This style of “zero-degree writing”, which eschews excessive lyricism and relies on juxtaposed imagery, formally mimics the networked, egalitarian structure of an ecosystem. By presenting the rupture with restraint, it paradoxically accentuates both the violence of the intervention and the preciousness of the original material network. It guides readers to confront the ecological reality head-on, thereby fulfilling the social function of poetry: to evoke concern for the non-human material world and traditional wisdom of existence.

#### **4. Ecological Warnings and Healing Potential of Things in the Anthropocene**

The proposal of the “Anthropocene” as a geological epoch concept signifies that human activity has become the dominant force shaping Earth’s ecology and geological form. This concept points not only to macro-crises such as carbon emissions and species extinction but also, more profoundly, reveals the universal, systemic transformation and trauma inflicted upon the material world by anthropocentric worldviews and practices [20].

The poetry of William Carlos Williams can be seen as a “poetic geological record” of material trauma in the early Anthropocene, with the transformation of his hometown, Rutherford, serving as a core sample of his observation. In *The Defective*

*Record*, he calmly documents the violence inflicted upon the natural material network for urban development: “cut the bank for the fill / Dump sand pumped out of the river / into the old swale / killing whatever was/ there before—including / even the muskrats” . The title of the poem itself is deeply significant: a “record” is meant to preserve the memory of human civilization, yet this account of material destruction is “defective”. This implies the systemic forgetting and erasure, within official history, of the costs of human transformation of nature, aligning with material ecocriticism’s aim to uncover obscured material flows and consequences [21]. In the poem, the original ecological rhizome formed by the river, swale, and muskrats is brutally severed and buried by engineering logic. The “ancient” quality of the swale and the fragility of the muskrat’s life stand in cruel contrast to the efficiency of modern machinery, exposing the greedy essence and ecological nihilism of the developmentalist logic of the Anthropocene. Ultimately, this destructive act points toward an absurd, infinitely looping, desire-driven vision: “for him to build a house / on to build a/ house on to build a house on...” Here, the “house” is no longer a symbol of home but becomes a homogenized unit of human expansionist will, devouring material space. This resonates with Timothy Clark’s reflections in *The Value of Ecocriticism* on humanity as a geological force and its responsibility within the Anthropocene context—namely, that human activity has become a geological energy capable of altering the planetary environment, an impact requiring profound reflection [22]. Williams’s own poetic practice, emphasizing letting things remain in their ordinary state and striving to present them in their authentic form, constitutes, from the perspective of material ecocriticism, a poetic resistance against the instrumental rationality—oriented toward utility and exploitation—that the Anthropocene imposes upon things.

***The Defective Record***

(Williams, 1951: 420)

Cut the bank for the fill.

Dump sand  
pumped out of the river  
into the old swale

killing whatever was  
there before—including  
even the muskrats. Who did it?  
There's the guy.

Him in the blue shirt and  
turquoise skullcap.

Level it down  
for him to build a house

on to build a  
house on to build a house on  
to build a house  
on to build a house on to ...

While revealing the traumas of the Anthropocene, Williams's poetry also constructs a positive, healing poetics grounded in the inherent agency of matter itself. By activating the narrative capacity of matter, Williams's work transforms ecological restoration from an external, technical act into an internal, participatory process of perception and meaning reconstruction.

Williams's contemplation of the rotting apple in the poem *Perfection* profoundly embodies what material ecocriticism emphasizes as the narrative power of matter. Material ecocritic Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann note that the material world itself is a "site of narrativity", where matter inscribes its own stories and meanings through its dynamic processes of transformation. The process of the apple rotting beautifully and completely in the poem is precisely its own material narrative, following its intrinsic rhythm to complete the transformation from organism to humus. This is not a human-led narrative but a performance of matter's own agency [23]. Confronting the Anthropocene's linear time, which tears apart ecological cyclical time, the poetics of the agrarian ritual constructed in Williams's *Rogation Sunday* can be seen as symbolic of a material practice. Material ecocriticism posits that humans and non-human matter mutually shape each other through "intra-action", co-constituting an ecological community [24]. The poem reframes spring planting as a sacrament: "let the seed be planted, the men / and the soil be ploughed equally. The "ploughed" here is bidirectional and generative, vividly depicting the interweaving of human labor with the material logic of the land. This transcends romantic pastoral nostalgia, pointing toward a model of community based on reciprocal relations and material interpenetration. In the poem, "We believe in the wonder of continuous revival" is a resistance to the unidirectional flow of industrial time, suggesting that true ecological health is rooted in an embedded, community ethics that follows material rhythms. This poetic ritual provides symbolic resources for repairing the human-land relationship severed by modernity within the cultural imagination [25].

The most innovative aspect of Williams's healing poetics lies in treating poetic language itself as a key medium for mending the perceptual desolation of the Anthropocene, aligning with material ecocriticism's emphasis on material empathy and perceptual training. Jane Bennett argues that matter is full of agency and vitality, and that humans need to cultivate an empathic capacity for the material world [26]. Williams's formal innovations—such as the minimalist juxtaposition in *The Red Wheelbarrow* and the grammatical dissolution in *The Locust Tree in Flower*—are precisely conscious strategies of cognitive intervention. These techniques force the reader's perceptual rhythm to slow down, detaching from conceptual habits to confront directly the phenomenological presence of color, texture, and other material qualities. Here, language is no longer merely a tool; its own materiality is mobilized as a training apparatus to reshape perception. The act of reading thus becomes a kind of rehabilitative training for ecological perception, allowing the subject to momentarily escape anthropocentric epistemology and immerse itself in a perceptual field constituted by the connections of heterogeneous materials.

## 5. Conclusions

The poetry of William Carlos Williams, centered on everyday objects, never amounted solely to an innovation in literary form; it was, more profoundly, an ecological awakening mediated through verse. Within the historical context of the increasingly apparent ecological crises of the Anthropocene, holding fast to the creed of "No ideas but in things", he employed precise and humble language to re-empower

the material world obscured by anthropocentrism, constructing a poetic ethic that respects materiality and advocates for symbiosis. This ethic is not an abstract concept floating above the text but permeates the very fabric of each poem, becoming a spiritual light illuminating contemporary ecological predicaments.

The most profound contribution of Williams's poetry lies in its deconstruction of the cognitive hegemony of anthropocentrism, liberating everyday objects from their subordinate status as tools or background and restoring their dignity as subjects, as living beings. In his writing, the rain-glazed sheen of the red wheelbarrow, the self-sufficient life rhythm of the bull, and the material form of the locust flower clusters are no longer mere appendages to human emotion but become actants possessing their own narrative power and agency. This mode of writing is essentially a cognitive revolution: it trains us to discard instrumental gazes, to contemplate the authentic appearance of all things with reverence, and to acknowledge the intrinsic value of a material world existing independently of human needs. This very respect for thingness constitutes the ethical starting point for unraveling the ecological crisis and the spiritual cornerstone for building an inclusive community of life.

Confronting the real impasses of the Anthropocene, Williams's poetry offers a dual path of resistance and healing. In the face of the tearing of material networks by urbanization and industrialization, he neither indulges in nostalgia nor succumbs to despair. Instead, he uses poetry as a vessel of memory, making visible in language the ecological costs systematically forgotten. Simultaneously, through writing about the mutual permeation of humans and things, he constructs alternative paradigms of being—the reciprocal nourishment between farmer and land, the bodily recognition of existence as symbiosis. This allows us, even under the pressure of reality, to still perceive the interconnectedness of all things and to imagine alternative possibilities for coexisting with the material world.

Ultimately, ecological redemption does not lie in blind worship of nature or excessive reliance on technology, but in reconstructing a humble relationship with all things—touching objects with precise language, embracing symbiosis with an open heart, and safeguarding the integrity of material networks with a sense of responsibility. At the crossroads of the Anthropocene, as the shadow of ecological crisis deepens, Williams's poetry serves as a clear beam of light. It illuminates not only the everyday landscapes of New Jersey but also a more inclusive and responsible wisdom for existence. The core of this wisdom remains that simple yet profound declaration: “No ideas but in things”. This is both the principle of poetic creation and our ethical maxim for coexisting with all things.

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