

# Change and Transcendentalism in Modernist Poetry

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“No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it’s not the same river and he’s not the same man”- Heraclitus.

The Catechism of ‘changes’ determined the way the Modernists perceived the world. They refused to accept things as fixed entities; the concern regarding the ‘how’ of things pixelated their understanding of the changing reality. Industrialization, with all its juddering, steered the world into innovations and discoveries, ‘change’ became the most happening event of the twentieth century. Philosophy and art deal with the idea of change that kept the Modernists vigilant.

The shared Romantic premises of Modernism with the Transcendentalists are problematic because the quest for a distinct voice only disguises the Romanticism and Transcendentalism couched in the Modernist contemplations. The attentive efforts at displaying their independence only make their anxiety of being influenced more observant. The Modernists subjected the implicit latent Romanticism to polemical disguise. As Bradbury and Mcfarlane remark, “A number of critics have been tempted to see Modernism as a resurgence of Romanticism, though conceivably in a more extreme and strained form of pure irrationalism” (46). The Modernist approach to the object, of looking at the whole as a configuration of small parts, is remindful of the romantic approach as well. W B Yeats can be perceived as a romantic-Modernist poet. He responded to the changes that were happening in Ireland at the time, the civil war and the concord displayed by his nation during the war such that some of his later poems begot the romantic and the Modernist traits. *Sailing to Byzantium* is a prime example of this:

...I have sailed the seas and come  
 To the holy city of Byzantium.  
 O sages standing in God’s holy fire  
 .....  
 ...be the singing masters of my soul

.....  
 ...gather me  
 Into the artifice of eternity.  
 Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such form as a Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
 .....  
 ...set upon a golden bough to sing  
 .....  
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come

Here the Romantic traits of referring to nature, beauty and Greek art, as well as the Modernist elements of fragmentation, allusions to mysticism and the celebration of the future instead of the past can be comprehended. The poet is already in Byzantium in the beginning of the excerpt. The act of sailing suggests traversing from the past to the present. Then we see the poet at present, who demands an eternal life such as the golden bird. Though Modernism tried to hide the implicit Romanticism in rancorous ways, the resistance to the perforation from Romanticism could not be camouflaged in seemingly ambiguous contexts.

The Modernists' inclination towards dealing with the cogency of changes is evident from their skepticism towards metaphysics. All metaphysics is a kind of metaphor; it is like an act of "bundling", where things do not have names but labels, which generalizes rather than specify the aspect of being. The inquiries regarding what is ultimately real, the nature of 'reality' of the world around us, and the 'being as such' of things was critical for metaphysics; 'Are there objects in the world?', 'What kind of objects?', 'What class of things exist?' were concerns that kept them uptight. Heidegger remarked, "Why are there beings at all, instead of Nothing?" Metaphysics' lack of attention towards the changeability of things dissuaded the Modernists to argue that there cannot be true Metaphysics. In *The Highland Around Modernism*, Robert C. Neville says:

The concept of totality seems to be central to systematic philosophy. Rightly or wrongly, both Modernists and Postmodernists take it to be central when they reject metaphysics, speculation and system. The concept of totality marks the scale or domain of things to be understood and is thus related to the problem of identifying reality (111).

The Modernists' predilection for change can also be seen in their method of questioning the art. Art usually represents things that are static, it ventures to find a stable point in a world that is incessantly changing, and 'change' cannot be tethered to any stable point. The objects that art represents are still, which also suggest that they remain historically invariant; they stay the same way all throughout the time. Modernist art could not remain blind to the continuous changes that were taking place in the modern world, and it tried to be representative of the times.

Modernism probes the tendency of art to freeze moments. The questioning of the validity of changes in a world that is constantly changing can be seen in Marcel Duchamp's *The Nude Descending A Staircase*. The painting though titled "nude" does not show the anatomical nude, but only abstract lines which suggest her sequential static postures. The rhythm of postures that accompany this painting was a challenge posed at the static Cubist art. Duchamp exposed his nude from multiple angles at one view, thereby challenging the traditional methodologies of art in general.

### **On Transcendentalism**

All knowledge is built upon the coincidence of an objective with the subjective. The immediate concern of the transcendental is the subjective-inner sense is a vital organ for this body of philosophy. The prime object of transcendental philosophy is the action of the intellect in accordance to determinate laws. It is only through inner intuition that these actions can be understood. In philosophizing, one becomes not only the object, but the subject of contemplation as well. It requires one to be engaged in a sort of constant inner activity of producing the acts of intellect. Also, it requires a constant reflection upon this process of production. Natural science brings forth idealism out of realism-it spiritualizes the natural laws into the laws of the mind. Transcendental philosophy, on the other hand, brings forth realism out of idealism - it materializes the laws of the mind into the laws of nature.

The rise of the realist prose and the realist paintings of the early part of the nineteenth century created a context in which the Americans really tried to represent their times. The American Modernists could not but be reliant upon the heritage of their past to be illustrative of the changing world. American Transcendentalism was a philosophy in which Modernism grew up. Transcendentalism was interested in unchanging entities and Modernism tried to move away from it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson says that the scholar should be open to the reality around him; a call to pay attention to the transformations that were happening around them at that time, and not just look at those things of the past. The Transcendentalists in general wanted their works to have an altering effect upon their readers. He calls for a new kind of poem, or a new kind of writer who will be able to bear the changes that were taking place then. In his essay *The American Scholar* he says:

The mind now thinks; now acts; and each fit reproduces the other. When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness, he has always the resource *to live*. Character is higher than intellect. Thinking is the function. Living is the functionary. The stream retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think (7).

Transcendentalists believed in intuitive thought – the ability to depend on instinctive feelings rather than conscious reasoning. They also emphasized on imagination. This makes it possible to transcend one's personal experiences, mind and body to deliberate upon something new. The Transcendentalists wanted man to participate in the world – to look at it carefully, to take actions and to live.

In another of his essay *The Over-Soul*, he explains the idea of the universal soul:

...within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. Only by the vision of that Wisdom can the horoscope of the ages be read, and

by falling back on our better thoughts, by yielding to the spirit of prophecy which is innate in every man, we can know what it dwell in the same thought on their own part (1).

He tries to say that the knowledge as well as the splendor of the of the world lies within man. He called the poets “liberating gods”. Along with the other Transcendentalists, he performed the idea that writers are the seers of the world. It is the duty of the writer to see the world openly and to summon the world to life. They saw literature as a platform to liberate people, to help them see that which requires to be seen: nature, spirituality, self-identity and social injustice.

How did Transcendentalism look at changes and Modernity? Transcendentalists tried to represent the world around them as it is, who were contingent upon the English romantics to understand how things were represented during their time, and to discern the differences. Transcendentalism attempted at elating nature, whereas, Modernist poetry was an attempt at absorbing the Modernism that was then changing the world. Though Transcendentalism was escapism in many ways, it helped Modernity to accept changes without losing on spirituality. The Modernist fragment is also a Transcendentalist fragment, because it contains the evidences that would enable the reader to establish a connection between the both.

Ezra Pound’s poem “A Pact” can be read as typical of the Modernists’ attitude towards the Transcendentalists:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman -

I have detested you long enough.

I come to you as a grown child

Who has had a pig-headed father;

I am old enough now to make friends.

It was you that broke the new wood,

Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root -

Let there be commerce between us.

The Modernists wanted to address the new world and not escape from it. Transcendentalism was not enough for the Modernists—they were always on the lookout for something new; a reactionary standpoint. The home of the romantics was the home for Transcendentalists, and later on for the Modernists too. The difficult admission of the Modernists' lineage with the Transcendentalists is seen here. The “wood” that has been broken by the Transcendentalists is used now by the Modernists. The act of “commerce” perhaps suggests the trading in ideas that the Modernists had done with the Transcendentalists.

### **Change and reality**

Metaphysical reality is recognized in terms of change and reality by the process philosophers. A number of modern thinkers grant importance to process than substance. Alfred North Whitehead's seminal work *Process and Reality* is regarded vital by the process philosophers. Robert Mesle, in his work says, “There is urgency in coming to see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us” (9). He rejects the theory that reality is constructed with fragments of matter that have independent existence. He argues that reality is comprised of processes and not material objects, and that processes can be best define in terms of their relation with other processes. It is very much similar to the romantic stance that the world out there is a projection of our imagination.

Henri Bergson appreciates novelty as the product of wavering creation and not as the result of mechanical forces. His system of philosophy emphasizes on mobility, novelty, creativity and freedom. He has also attempted at redefining relations between science and metaphysics, and intelligence and intuition. According to Heidegger, the mere presence of a thing does not ensure its existence as being. Though it may operate in an environment of determined laws, its essence of being is acknowledged only when it ceases to operate. His name for human being is “Dasein”—it is not just human, but also means “to be”. The act of becoming should be the fundamental question, and it should be understood as physical being, he opines.

## On 'Changes'

The Modernists were on a quest to find new ways of looking at the reality, which at the time kept on changing at a fast pace. In the first place, there is a compulsion to ask why, or how the change has happened. It can be said that the change was the reflection of changing attitude of Modernity. The world had changed. The advent of industrialization brought along with it an assembly line mode of production. Parts were configured to prepare the final product – fragments or pieces became parts of whole. The invention of radio and X-rays resulted in better communication apparatuses. Cities developed resulting in urbanization. There was technological progress in general. The buzz of changes resulting in newer things day-by-day impelled the Modernist poets abandoned outmoded ways of looking at them, which they found to be inadequate to represent the fast pace of the changes. They welcomed innovative modes like “vers libre” (free verse)-experimentation with various forms became a matter of necessity.

The avant-garde spirit of Modernism is an instance of contemporaneity. It is a kind of demand that art and poetry wake up to the task of displaying, transforming and engaging with the contemporary reality. Poetry, which was until then in pursuit of English models, was more or less imitative. Emerson stressed on self-sufficiency and insisted that one create their own structures. The self-sufficiency, the depiction of reality and the call to contemporaneity are all parts of the Modernity with which it tries to distinguish itself. The Transcendentalists wanted to be able to address the contemporary reality. The stress that the American scholars placed upon the American poets' ability to address their own times on its own terms are a call to Modernity.

### Wallace Stevens

The poems of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams discuss the theme of change in crucial ways. Death seems to be a topic that never exhausted them. They were concerned with life, as in its worth we fail to recognize during the course of our life. It is upon Death's arrival that man begins to appreciate the value of life; the call of mortality awakens him. The Civil war a great deep wound for the Americans. Nearly six lakh soldiers were killed in this war; Americans had a sudden experience of witnessing so many deaths. Modernity therefore can become a disastrous force that can sometimes kill people, the First World War being a suitable

example for this. This might have impacted the Modernist poets to ruminate upon the concept of death, the mortal nature of our lives and how we fail to appreciate the time that we are granted on this earth.

Stevens was more of a transcendental poet. Most the poems of *Harmonium* reminds the Emersonian poems. In the essay “The Necessary Angels: Essays on Reality and the Imagination” Stevens opines:

One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time. Ordinarily he will disclose what he finds in his own poetry by way of the poetry itself. He exercises this function most often without being conscious of it, so that the disclosures of his poetry, while they define what seems to him to be poetry, are disclosures of poetry, not disclosures of definitions of poetry.

In “The Snowman” he says:

One must have a mind of winter  
 To regard the frost and the boughs  
 Of the pine-trees crusted with snow...  
 To behold the junipers shagged with ice...  
 Of the January sun...

The evocation of landscape to a transcendental one happens here; if the frost has to be seen, then the beholder has to have a mind of winter. Stevens calls for looking at facts as facts itself and not as substitutes for other facts:

...and not to think

Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land

To have an experience of this large metaphysical entity, one has to stop listening to the sound of symbolic resonance in the sound of the wind, which is the sound of a few leaves. The act of beholding becomes the key



criteria in the poem. In order to see through things, one needs to have the mind with which the thing has to be seen. The beholder beholds nothing that is not there. Emerson in “Brahma” says “I am the doubter and the doubt”. Nothing seems more important than the act of beholding. It becomes the ore of all doubts as well as the answers.

The theme of change, for Stevens, mostly meant spiritual transformation. Change for him was the realization of truth and reality. Numerous poems of *Harmonium* speaks of the transient nature of all things beautiful, the trivial nature of worldly pleasures, and changes as instruments that help us to see things differently. His poem “Tattoo” speaks in terms of light. Though the title suggests permanence, the poem talks about change; the ability of light to bring about changes in the way we see and understand things. Light has the skill to penetrate and see things that otherwise cannot be seen. “The light is like a spider”, says Stevens, which suggests that the locomotive tendencies of the spider apply to the movement of light as well. Each movement of the spider is calculated, there is so much of attention and care involved in every move. It seems like a warning-to be cautious in the modern world of changes. The web is not superficial – “The webs of your eyes/ Are fastened/ To the flesh and bones of you”. Change is something that cannot be dismissed as soon as it is seen or felt. The reverberation of change spreads like a web – it bears in it the potentiality to spread, to bring awareness to realize change in its wholeness.

In *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, the poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” emphasizes on the necessity of why things have to change: “Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar”, which speaks of the obligation of change to change itself according to the consequent changes. The guitar can be looked at as an instrument of Modernity, and things changing upon it suggest that when an object is looked at with imagination, then imagination would exercise its facility to transform the thing or the way we perceive the thing. It suggests the birth of change; how things happen and how circumstances force the happening of transformations.

“The Worms at Heaven’s Gate” seems a reversal, a challenge to the universal truth that beauty is transient. Badroulbador, the Princess of Aladdin, the epitome of beauty and charm is referred in the poem. The “worms” revive her once she is dead on account of her beauty. It is said that the worms are at Heaven’s gate.

This is a silent implication that things of beauty are pristine, such that it can never be associated with anything iniquitous. “Within our bellies, we her chariot”, suggests decay or disintegration on one hand, but it also suggests coming back from death. “Here is an eye”-the eyes, finger and cheeks are picked up, it seems, and is praised for its beauty and how it had attracted people to her. The description almost gives the picture of a procession, she being carried outside the tomb, in whatever form it might be. However, it is evident that she is venerated for her beauty. What makes this poem different is that it seems to go against the current. People come into terms with the fact that beauty is transient in nature, but here, even after death, she is lifted out of the womb for her beauty. It somehow seems to question as to why beauty or beautiful things have to be of mortal nature. The theme does not seem to be conventional.

It is reminiscent of Christ who was brought out of the tomb. He resurrected for the spiritual welfare of the world. Here, the princess is brought out of the womb not because she wanted to live again, but because the “worms” could not accept the loss of an unparalleled beauty. The “worms” may stand for the powers of nature that would never let go of the good, or it may even stand for the mortal beings, who find it difficult to let go of transient things, especially youth and beauty.

With the arrival of Modernity came comforts and pleasures. People lost significantly in their religious beliefs. They began to chase momentary joys by staking their faith. Stevens seems to be cautioning the people of his times to remain spiritually healthy. In “The Emperor Of Ice-cream”, he uses something as trivial as an ice-cream to explain the mad pursuit for sensual pleasures; the momentary joys at the expense of the inner Spirit. The soberness and spirituality associated with funerals seem to be forgotten here. Direct references to sensuality lies in terms like “concupiscent curds” and “horny feet”. We are what we pursue, and that which we pursue changes our self. There occurs transcendence from what we were to what has come out of it. “Let the light affix its beam” suggests hope, that light be brought into the world that has been blinded by the pursuit for transient, sensual joys.

Transcendentalism helped Modernity to preserve whatever was left of their religious consciousness. “Sunday Morning” embodies spiritual transformation, it appears to be a bundle of questions and doubts which were bothering the people of the time and the poet only seems to echo it. “What is divinity if it can come/ Only

in silent shadows and in dreams?” Stevens’ questions regarding the divine and the spiritual forms the crux of this poem. He does not mean here that the modern man was always a doubting Thomas, but what he tries to expose is the modern man’s attitude towards religion. Stevens says that spirituality should come from within. By spiritual, he refuses to adhere to the conventional mode; rather, he questions every aspect regarding the same. “Death is the mother of beauty”, Death, the mother brings up the child only to kill it at the end. It may also mean that likewise Modernity too may have a disastrous ending. Another interpretation is that beauty is fleeting, and the fear of death hastens desire to remain beautiful forever. Man’s attempt at freezing beauty, rather locking it away into an impenetrable chamber is probed.

### **William Carlos Williams**

What I found interesting about the poems of Williams is the way he puts forward the notion of changes.

In “Disputants”, he says:

...the flowers remain composed.

Coolly their colloquy continues

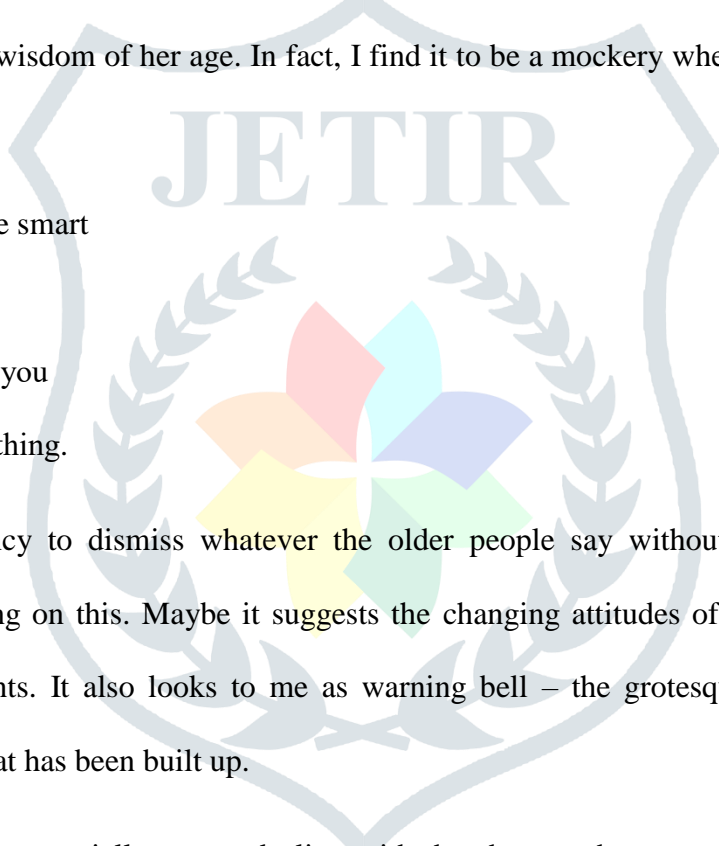
above the coffee and loud talk

grown frail as vaudeville.

He speaks of how a thing of beauty remains itself even when the surroundings exert pressure on it. It looks at change from a different perspective. Changes happen all around the object in question, but it is unable to touch it. It may suggest those things or aspects of the traditional times that have not yet yielded itself to the pressure exerted by the changes of Modernity.

“Poem” talks about how a cat moves from one position to the other. The “jamcloset” is a product of Modernity. Cat is partly tamed and partly wild, which symbolizes the slow transcendence of the traditional world into the modern. It shows the co-existence of Modernity and the traditional in a single frame. The movement of the cat may suggest the fall of a person from bounty to nothingness. When applied to the then prevailing scene, it may sound like a counsel, where one is advised to take heed in each and every movement that is trotted by them in the changing modern world.

Mortality has always been a topic of discussion, and it has always been compared with nature and its quality of being eternal. In “The Last Words of My English Grandmother”, William Carlos Williams describes his grandmother, and how she refuses to be taken to the hospital. This poem speaks of change in a metaphorical way. Old age is the prime focus here. The change that has happened to her is not described in detail, rather she has become the product of change. It also talks about death. Here, what seems different is that mortality is not craved for. She desires to die, in some sense. Death is waited for, like the arrival of liberation from the wearisome life she has been leading. I cannot be sure as to whether she passes away at the end of the poem, however it shows some sort of a change or transformation. The poem might seem to us as the nagging of an old lady, but it does reflect the wisdom of her age. In fact, I find it to be a mockery when she asks the helpers from the ambulance:

The logo for JETIR (Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research) is a watermark in the background. It features a shield-like shape with a laurel wreath. Inside the wreath is a stylized flower with five petals in different colors: red, cyan, blue, green, and yellow. The word "JETIR" is written in large, bold, grey capital letters across the top of the shield.

Oh you think you are smart  
you young people,  
she said, but I'll tell you  
you don't know anything.

There is a general tendency to dismiss whatever the older people say without any second thought, and Williams might be reflecting on this. Maybe it suggests the changing attitudes of the modern world towards their conventional precedents. It also looks to me as warning bell – the grotesque growth of changes may destroy the entire empire that has been built up.

To be contemporary essentially means dealing with the changes that were happening then. The age in which the Modernist lived was a very fast changing world-change is the essence of Modernity. The rapid pace of industrialization and associated technological transformations made them aware of the presence of “speed” that was lingering around them at the time. This had significant impact on the writing practice of the modern poets.

Stevens in “So-and-so Reclining On Her Couch” describes the painting of a picture in technical terms such as “mechanical” and “projection”. The subject of the painting is anonymous, and is called “so-and-so” which is later substituted with “Projection”. The usage of these terms suggests the influence that

industrialization has had upon the lives of people. Moving from one projection to the next until the expected result is achieved, the process of painting is described as a mechanical activity involving strictness and precision. “If the poetry of X is music”, Stevens says in “The Creations of Sound”, immediately evokes the idea of a mathematical theorem. “X” stands for the unknown. It is the anonymous. Here too, it can be seen as the influence of technology. What lies in common for the both is the use of technical or scientific terms. It can be discerned from both the poems that technology effaces identity. With mass production came surplus goods-objects and things became common and familiar, and this was reflected in the poetry as well.

Williams in “The Descent of Winter” describes a hot afternoon:

On hot days  
 the sewing machine  
 whirling  
 in the next room  
 in the kitchen  
 and men at the bar  
 talking of the strike  
 and cash

The sewing machine is a product of Modernity. The objects of the modern world encroach into the writing of the times – the poems echo of the juddering of the machines. The extract also gives an idea of the labour crisis of the times. Machines replace a significant portion of the workforce resulting in unemployment. The coexistence of machine and strike in the extract tells us how a beneficial object becomes disadvantageous as well. It also throws light on the destructive face of Modernism.

“New England” too gives us a picture of the city life that was emerging then:

is a condition-  
 of bedrooms whose electricity  
 is brackish or made into  
 T beams – they dangle them  
 on wire cables to the tops

of Woolworth buildings

Electricity, wire cables and tall buildings, the sudden surges of Modernism is rightly captured in the poem. “The Great Figure” is tense -it sprints to the reader with all its rumbling. The poem describes a short time sequence, probably a few seconds of a dark city evening. The ripples of modern life are captured in words here. It is different, typographically as well as with respect to the content, from the early modern poems:

Among the ram

and lights

I saw the figure 5

in gold

on

a red

firetruck

moving

tense

unheeded

to gong clangs

siren howls

and wheels rumbling

through the dark city.



Changes became an integral part of the writing. The speed and technology made its way from the factory to the pages of books. The Modernists found the Transcendentalists method inadequate to express the changing scenario, and their quest for newer mediums of expression resulted in innovative methods of writing that captured the essence of all the happenings around them.

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