

## Luigi A. Juarez: On "The Great Figure"

Among the rain  
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.[1]

Often anthologized beside other poems of Imagism, William Carlos Williams's "The Great Figure" (1921) features a number "5 / in gold," cast into relief by the surrounding "red" of a hurtling "firetruck" (3-6) and the chiaroscuro of night.[2] Williams renders this image so sharply that he must have seen it in person,[3] and even assigning a speaker to the poem—which I will now do—doesn't really change that. My primary concern, however, lies with the poem's dramatic situation and how it awes, unsettles, and humbles the speaker. Yes, the poem is extremely visual, composed in free verse, and takes place during modern times. But it has more in common with early Wordsworth than early Pound. "The Great Figure" ultimately uses these imagist graces to direct us to when and how its dramatic situation asks of-- the speaker's sentiment amid an increasingly non-sentimental world.

We begin *in media res*, significant since the pre-existing movement it ushers in recalls epic poetry: "Among the rain" (1).<sup>[4]</sup> The preposition "among" indicates an image already in the process of being seen since it's used here as a locator of something appearing in the "rain," and we are thrust into that observance through the mere act of reading. This movement speeds up with the next line: "and lights" (2). The syllables of these opening lines fall in perfect iambs, the enjambment between the two impels vocal delivery, and we go from dimeter to mono.

Suddenly, the three feet of "I saw the figure 5" (3) staggers the overall momentum and prevents the rhythm—however briefly—from gaining traction. Although the common reading of the poem is to go through it quickly (since its formal qualities are meant to assume the speed of its content), the trimeter asks us to rest on this line a bit longer. Doing so rewards us in a couple of ways: First, the "I" here harkens back to romantic poetry in that it personalizes matters. Because of that "I," we as readers are at once distanced and also made privy to the intimate knowledge of the speaker. Recognition and interiority thus intersect. This is no longer an experience we can fully imagine ourselves living through since it's obviously someone else's, but moving forward, at least we're allowed access to the speaker's take on the whole thing. Let us also note that line 3 quotes the "figure" from the poem's title. That word is double-faceted, as well: it's a number but also implies shape. The speaker could have just said "I saw the number 5" and generated the same literal meaning. However, the speaker's chosen diction emphasizes movement, since a "figure" often needs to "take shape" in order to be seen clearly. He or she understands the problem in trying to capture a fast-moving image: its parts will almost always emerge before the whole.

The next four lines reveal the titular "figure" in this careful way. Like the speaker, we are supposed to perceive that it's "gold" (4) before we perceive that it's painted onto the side of a "red" (5) "firetruck" (6) that's "moving" (7). A moving firetruck provides great context given that it provides a source for the "lights" from line 2 (they are its headlights), a setting (it's a darkened street), and exposition (it's going somewhere). But the primary importance of these four lines is to accelerate the poem again and confirm that whatever the speaker sees can be only as clear as the synchronic space within each line allows it to be. We can now conclude that the gold-colored "5"—as a synecdoche for the red firetruck—is in motion, and something about its sudden identification in relation to the position of the speaker connects inwardly with him or her. Is the speaker too close to the curb? Or perhaps the firetruck is traveling at top speed—or both?<sup>[5]</sup>

Either way, it's "moving" as we "move" onto line 8: "tense." If this word gives us pause, it should. The past two words, "firetruck" and "moving," were also lonely in their respective lines. The next, "unheeded" (9), is as well. But "tense" is monosyllabic and therefore stressed.

This, in addition to its emotional currency, vies for our attention. "Tense" denotes a tightening up due to the nervousness or anxiety of a situation. It is, therefore, a relational word by definition; any one situation can only be considered "tense" if there's someone else there, a willful subject who could observe, recollect, and respond to it as such. But like free indirect discourse in prose, we are not quite sure to what or to whom "tense" is attributed here. The "5" can be "tense" because the speaker has every right to personify it in such a way. The larger situation can be "tense" since it involves a firetruck brushing past the speaker. The speaker him or herself can feel "tense" for any of these reasons and more. All of these are possible conclusions, but the one truth is that we are meant to land and stay on this word for

some time. We are meant to wonder about these things. We are meant to "tighten up." Thus, line 8 adheres to Pound's imagist tenet of funneling readers into a single instant in time.

But there's one major departure from Pound: "tense" has no image. Sure, one could envision a body straining in front of a charging fire engine. But the speaker's tone wants us to read it as a word, which beautifully points to *other* words, across the entire emotional spectrum. In this modality, "tense" has much more in common with the famous "Oh!" moments of romantic verse. The poetic utterance coincides with a self-reflexive turn on the part of the speaker, a Wordsworthian overflow of feeling. Most of Williams's imagist poems don't hinge on such emotional responses, opting instead to leave that task up to readers (e.g., "The Girl," "This Is Just to Say"). Either that or his poems hinge on just one "wonderment" which is often the most immediate response one has to a striking image (e.g., "To a Poor Old Woman," "The Red Wheelbarrow"). "The Great Figure" begins in wonderment, but with "tense," the speaker can feel anything, from admiration to fear, distress to relief. At last we can see the poem itself "take shape." The vehicle is a modern experience pedaled by structured, controlled free verse. Its tenor? Sentiment.

The next line, "unheeded," sets the staggered movement of the poem into motion again. Like the work itself, this figure 5 must soldier on regardless of the speaker's heed, regardless of his or her sentiment. If there really is an emergency, the firetruck needs to get there no matter what. Thus, "unheeded" alerts us to the speaker's realization that the encounter is much bigger than him or herself.

The last four lines protract the scope of the poem as the "5" moves away. "Gong clangs," "siren howls," and "wheels rumbling" add sound to the still-moving image. They also strengthen context (there really *is* an emergency) and re-introduce metrical feet to the poem. However, the main purpose of adding these words is to marry the poem's aesthetic "shape" with the "sound" of its dramatic situation. Concretely, the poem inverses the rising and falling pitch of the firetruck's Doppler effect, and we might be inclined to read the poem aloud in this manner (increasing our volume until "tense," and reducing our volume thereafter). Like the noises heard by the speaker, the final line (the longest of printed text[6]) trails off the page—"through the dark city," past the speaker, into the distance. That it includes a preposition like the opener is not a coincidence.

The poem's single yet heavily enjambed sentence finally end-stops with a period, but its incident begins and continues on outside the thirteen lines. The enjambment between all those lines is cut like speech[7] but is also meant to simulate the difficulty in articulating the various parts of a rushing image. As a motionless observer, the speaker needs to versify movement in this way, and as a modern human being, the speaker might feel powerless when met with a roaring, "unheeded" fire engine. But it doesn't matter if he or she utters the verses in "real-time" or if they're "recollected in tranquility" afterward. The poem proposes a dramatic situation that requires a solitary speaker to confront the reality of modern life—and feel it, too.

The person in "The Great Figure" figures out this affect. Maybe that's why it's so "great." As for Williams himself? For being such a brief, imagist poem, it contains multiple traces of epic, romantic, and sentimental verse. Perhaps it's also a self-reflexive turn for him, as he "figures" out his legacy from the poetic tradition he has inherited.[8]

## Works Cited

Williams, William Carlos. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1967.

???. ?The Great Figure.? *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1909-1939*. Vol. 1. Ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan. New York: New Directions, 1986. 174.

## Notes

[1] This is the revised version of the poem included in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams* and the version that is most anthologized. It omits (rightly) the line "with weight and urgency," which only appears in the first printings of Williams's *Sour Grapes* (1921) collection.

[2] In 1928, Charles Demuth responds directly to this visual with his painting *The Figure 5 in Gold*.

[3] The secret's out on this one; in his *Autobiography*, Williams writes: "Once on a hot July day coming back exhausted from the Post Graduate Clinic, I dropped in as I sometimes did at Marsden's studio on Fifteenth Street for a talk, a little drink maybe and to see what he was doing. As I approached his number I heard a great clatter of bells and the roar of a fire engine passing the end of the street down Ninth Avenue. I turned just in time to see a golden figure 5 on a red background flash by. The impression was so sudden and forceful that I took a piece of paper out of my pocket and wrote a short poem about it" (172).

[4] Like Williams's own *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920).

[5] Questioning his position on the street might bring to mind one of the "axioms" from "XXV" in *Spring and All*: "Don't get killed" (*Collected* 232).

[6] And second longest in terms of syllables (at five).

[7] Williams's "American grain."

[8] Williams's first collection of poetry?1909's *Poems*?is actually so indebted to the ghosts of two literary giants that he quotes both of them on the cover. Throughout *Poems*, his use of compound adjectives recalls Keats ("balmy-blossomed" ["June?], "hush-throated" ["The Uses of Poetry?]), while his synopes ("n'er" and "o'er?"), Shakespeare. But the influences don't stop there. He also plays with couplets ("Innocence?"), test-runs a ballad ("Ballad of the Time and the Peasant?"), and reimagines Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric" ("Imitations") and Donne's "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning" ("Love?"). The result is poetry unable to telegraph free verse because it's deeply tied to so many poetic traditions. However, Williams

does begin to experiment with irregular rhyme scheme in his second book, 1913?s *The Tempers*, and finally wields free verse poetry as his own in his third, 1917?s *Al Que Quiere!*

**Publication Status:**

[Original Criticism](#) [1]

**Criticism Target:**

[William Carlos Williams](#) [2]

**Review Process:**

Single Review

**Poem:**

[The Great Figure](#) [3]

**Author Bio:**

Luigi A. Juarez is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at Brandeis University. He studies American modernism and is currently writing a dissertation on narrative innovations of the automobile in the works of Edith Wharton, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and John O'Hara.

**Tags:**

[modernism](#) [4]

[Imagism](#) [5]

[Romantic](#) [6]

[sentiment](#) [7]

[William Wordsworth](#) [8]

---

**Source URL:** <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/luigi-juarez-%E2%80%9C-great-figure%E2%80%9D>

**Links**

[1] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/original-criticism>

[2] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/william-carlos-williams>

[3] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/great-figure>

[4] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/modernism>

[5] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/imagism>

[6] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/romantic>

[7] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/sentiment>

[8] <http://modernamericanpoetry.org/category/tags/william-wordsworth>