

ON "THE COD HEAD" BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

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The Cod Head (1932)

Miscellaneous weed
strands, stems, debris—
firmament

to fishes—
where the yellow feet
of gulls dabble—

oars whip
ships churn to bubbles—
at night wildly

agitate phosphores-
cent midges—but by day
flaccid

moons in whose
discs sometimes a red cross
lives—four


fathom—the bottom skids
a mottle of green
sands backward—

amorphous waver-
ing rocks—three fathom
the vitreous

A ARTE ALEGRE
#14

Partilhe:

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Leia depois:  Kindle

body through which—
 small scudding fish deep
 down—and

now a lulling lift
 and fall—
 red stars—a severed cod-

head between two
 green stones—lifting
 falling

Of the poems by William Carlos Williams from the early 1930's, there are several that are on the topic of the ocean or beach trips. These can then be further divided into two groups: poems that are full of lightness and nostalgia for days on Nantucket, for example, and others that contain illustrations of the marine in visions of the sublime and the grotesque. "The Cod Head," as the poem's title may evince, pertains to the latter group.

The poem first sets forward a dichotomy we might call the "nature above" and the "nature below" the surface of the sea. The cod head at the end of the poem breaches this great divide. To grasp this, we begin with the first lines of the poems that suggest there is a chasm between two natures. This is because they have two respective firmaments: one that is green, with "weeds" and "debris" (what is essentially trash), which filters the light that reaches the fish below; and one that is in the open air, full of light.

The question of the two natures is more complex than the opposition between good and evil. Oars pass through both, as do ships. What seems apparent is that there is a kind of freedom in the world above, a place for gulls and ships to move about as they please, a freedom that is granted by sight and a limited understanding that is nevertheless greater than the one below (first and foremost, the creatures above will recognize the seaweed as seaweed and not as sky).

Within the deep, there emerges what looks like a hierarchy of what goes on at four fathoms and three fathoms beneath the surface. (The unit of measurement—the fathom—serves the purpose to push the reader to *imagine* the underwater economy in addition to understanding the

depth.) Thus, at the bottom, at four fathoms, there is only a mosaic of green sand. This is a foundation; it is the start of something. In that place, according to this picture, there is nothing living. Existence seems short and passive. A force moves the green sand backwards, rearranging the hues of this ocean dust. A current, or the same force perhaps, makes the rocks "amorphous" and "wavering" as though the rocks themselves are unsure of what they are. Our vision of them is certainly faulty, but this could be the fault of our own nature as well as the general instability down this far.

At three fathoms, the sea appears to lay bare its more active part. We see, as though peering through a pane of glass, the "small scudding fish." The description of what the fish are doing—"scudding"—is certainly not a pretty word; these small fish do not move about in a graceful way. They rush toward something with little discrimination, and this seems to be what defines them: a movement with a characteristic ugliness. The fish, in their own way, are a more elaborate version of the green sand due to this thing they do. They are unlatched from the ocean floor, but they do little to make themselves more remarkable. They follow something, pushing themselves and some perhaps are pushed. Although we may see them clearly, it appears that they do not have a clear notion of their destination or their great desire. These creatures at three fathoms simply move without thought into the void.

Williams then breaks away from this specific view of the ocean as fathoms by interrupting its progress with a "lulling lift and fall." As though brought up to the light by a greater hand, we suddenly glimpse a different member of this underwater club: a severed fish head.

The brutality of this image, of the "severed" head, not only comes from the vision of the head itself, but from the fact that it was obviously removed from the rest of its body. The head appears unnaturally in the other realm of nature—that is, in the world above. It immediately evokes an image of sacrifice. This severed bit is that element of the body where the mind dwells; it has reached the light, as though finally able to articulate those questions that give purpose to life and to the unrest in the world (be it in the land of daylight or in the space below). The fish has made it: its

eyes are above the water's surface. But the struggle, which has brought it here, has left it unable to act and unable to continue as it was.

The world above goes on as it seems to have always done, in the light that it may not know it has, with gulls poking their yellow toes into the weeds. In this sense, everything in this world disregards that one creature's sacrifice presumably because it is an unfortunate thing to look at. The cod is a relic of that world below and is discarded among that which serves as the lowest part of the upper nature.

The severed cod head appears to reposition itself in the distracted and poignant way that things seem to move here above: the gulls "dabble," the man-made tools forcibly disrupt the peace (the oars "whip" and the ships "churn"). The head yields to the successive lifting and falling, and to that porous elevator that brought it up in the first place. It rears itself up before us for as long as we can stand it and then slips away. At the moment we catch sight of it, we are immediately imperfect; this is not only because looking at it makes us uneasy but also for the fact that we do not challenge our desire for an unremittingly luxurious aesthetic experience.

A false consolation whispers that we can look below into the depths whenever we wish—to a long, half-forgotten history—with oars that cut through to illuminate the way. But how little does anyone learn from that kind of movement. It elicits the question: does our ignorance of what we are looking at compare in any degree to that different manner of ignorance, when the light to see was entirely shaded by debris?

The severed symbol does all that it can to bring about a realization, in all the ways that a head on some stones can. As time passes, it becomes obscured and washed over and our ships move forward. We easily turn away from that instance of brutality, and our culture continues to thin. Yet like clockwork the cod head reappears; it is again lifted, and our freedom is reified in our choice to look at it.