

Dr James Williams: 'Some Aspects of English Poetry'

Tenses are verb forms that relate the situation of an action in time relative to some other time, usually the present moment (past, present, future). *Aspects*, by contrast, “are different ways of viewing the internal temporal consistency of a situation” (Bernard Comrie, following Jens Holt). A clear example of this in English is the distinction between the simple present or past (“Alex *sings* well; Alex *sang* well”) and the present or past *progressive* (“Alex *is singing* well; Alex *was singing* well”). Although these are often casually referred to as different tenses, the distinction is really one of aspect: *how* the event is structured in time, rather than *when* it happened. Standard English has fewer grammatically differentiated aspects than some other languages—Slavic languages for example, or, intriguingly, vernacular African-American English—but this does not mean that aspectual implications and distinctions are lacking. Both of the forms above (the “simple” and the “progressive”) are capable of housing multiple aspectual implications: “Alex *sings* well”, for example, can describe, depending on context: an action happening right now; a capacity; a prediction; or a habitual action. This means, therefore, that aspectual force tends to present in English as ambiguity and nuance: the aesthetic materials, in other words, of poetry. This is where (as a literary critic and not a linguist) my interest lies. In this paper, after giving a brief introduction to aspect and illustrating the concept with some examples, I will consider the place of aspect in particular poetic effects. What are we to make of the aspectual implications of “She dwelt among th’ untrodden ways”, or “I go, I go, look how I go!”, or “The woods decay, the woods decay and fall”? This paper attempts to gather the right examples and frame the right questions: and perhaps even suggest some answers.

James Williams teaches in the Department of English and Related Literature at the University of York. His publications include *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry* (ed. with Matthew Bevis, OUP, 2016), *Edward Lear* (Northcote House, 2018), and articles and book chapters on writers as diverse as Samuel Beckett and Charles Darwin. His most recent publication is an essay on “Echo and Narcissus in Victorian Poetry” in *Essays in Criticism* (April 2019).

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