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Stevens' Idea of Poetry: A Study of Stevens' Selected Essays

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Abstract:

There had always been an admirable critical labour devoted to Stevens' eccentricities, the problems of his form and rhetoric, technique and style. He was found either too odd or too obscure by most of the critics. The dandy kept baffling the critics, who enthusiastically attempted to place him in some school of poetry. But any established system of expression had but little power over the poet. The proposed paper attempts to define Stevens' own idea of poetry as reflected through his theoretical postulates. Most of Stevens' prose is included in *The Necessary Angel* and *Opus Posthumous*. Every essay collected in *The Necessary Angel* is a kind of meditative poetic act woven around a central image. *Opus Posthumous* contains Stevens' uncollected poems, plays, prefaces, speeches, essays and miscellaneous statements gathered by the poet's official biographer, Samuel French Morse.

Keywords: metaphor, image, analogy, reality, imagination, co-existence

A poet's poet and yet a part of the mainstream of business culture, Stevens attracted the critics as an anomaly. Most of the critics focused their studies on this fusion, some wondering whether such a fusion is really capable of a fine synthesis. As for Stevens himself, he hardly finds any paradox, "It gives a man character as a poet to have this daily contact with a job," and as further quoted in *The New York Times*, "It(poetry) is the way of making one's experience, almost wholly inexplicable, acceptable." Stevens is the poet who has written extensively on the theory of poetry. In the introduction to *The Necessary Angel*, he is somewhat diffident about defining poetry because in writing about one function of the poet at any time, the poet tries to discover by his own thoughts and feelings, what seems to him, poetry at that time. However, like all great poets, he is deeply conscious that while writing about the function of poetry in his own times he is at the same time underlining the function of poetry *per se*. In this sense, it does not amount to defining poetry. Neither does he desire to form another *ars poetica* as he had no such ambition to supply the techniques of poetry as did Horace. All that he wished was to address "poetry itself, the naked poem, the imagination manifesting itself in its domination of words."(639)

The first piece of his prose, “*The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words*”, begins with Plato’s words in *Phaedrus*, when Socrates speaks of the soul in the figure of winged horses of a noble breed. The horses are not only of noble breed, they are also the horses of gods. This is in contrast with those horses belonging to human beings. The latter are of mixed breed, one noble and the other of ignoble breed. It is in this way, the mortal differs from the immortal creature. Stevens, in this figure of horses, points out Plato’s pure poetry. It is not a mere mythology. Mortal nature differs from the immortal nature precisely in regard to that while the former is bound by sufficient reasons, the latter is undetermined, “We cannot yield ourselves. We are not free to yield ourselves.”(644) Our imagination is moved by the statement that the horses of the gods are all of them noble. It moves us that they are not bound by the impurities of our mortal existence. They may be unreal for Coleridge, but they give us a sense of delight in the nobility and noble breed. It may be a temporary delight. The result may be, as Stevens put it, that we recognize even if we cannot realize the feeling of the robust and clear image. The mortals, however, cannot yield for they are not free. The imagination may not supply sufficient reasons for a thing to exist, but the thing as an idea has its reality. Stevens is not for pure imaginative, but for a fusion of the real and the imaginative. He believes that the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real;

“When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have. In Plato’s figure, the imagination does not adhere to what is real. On the contrary, having created something unreal, it adheres to it and intensifies its unreality.” (645)

Stevens attempts to further clarify this relationship between the real and the unreal by saying that howsoever we may be moved by the sense of the unreal, we do not participate in it. This is what the mortals miss in the figure of the noble horses. Stevens’ poetry itself exemplifies his idea of poetry which is participatory both in terms of the real and the unreal. While we live in the world made possible by four sufficient reasons, we find the unreal world mythical. Nevertheless, if we realize the world of determination and realize at the same time our freedom from it, we can partake of the two worlds together. While being determined, we must realize that we are more than what determines us. Our freedom lies in realizing that we have to get free from our sense of too much reality on the one hand and sheer fancy on the other. Here we are reminded of Coleridge’s perception of imagination. For him imagination is of two kinds, primary and secondary. It is the secondary imagination which is creative, for it diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which, he adds, we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. If we follow Coleridge’s *discordia concur*, imagination reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects and so on.

In Stevens, it is this imagination that's found at work, for it also harmonizes the real and the ideal. Stevens, the poet does surely feel the pressure of reality. The true genius, however, enters into, as Stevens quoting Robert Wolseley says, "the hardest and driest thing, enrich the most barren soil, and inform the meanest and the most uncomely matter..."(654) By the pressure of reality Stevens means the pressure of external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation. The emphasis falls on the poet who feels the pressures of reality, "a pressure great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another."(656)

What he means by imagination coming at the end of the era of reality is that having gone through too much of the pressure of reality, people wake up to realize what they have suffered in attaching themselves to one reality after another. The pressure of reality then leads people to contemplate that is to rise above the pressure. It is this dialectic which determines the artistic character of an individual. According to Stevens, "The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned."(656) This resistance to the pressure of reality provides the basis to figure out the poet. Of course, he can't be a charioteer traversing vacant space, however ethereal. He must have lived all of the last two thousand years, and longer. He must have studied the best of poets, bringing past to the present. This makes it possible for him to abstract himself from reality and make him realize that it is not enough to live in reality. The real and the imaginative would then become one.

Stevens' attempt, in his theory and practice of poetry, is to extend the range of human sensibility, so that his readers could also feel a sense of elation and elevation from the normal range, a task which both philosophers and poets have ever been performing. The poet communicates this sense of elation in a much better way. The poetic truth, according to Stevens, means fact, and fact includes the whole of it as it is between the extreme poles of sensibility -- a thing as extensible as possible. Stevens is at the same time conscious of the fact that since the poet cannot extend his perception to the extreme limits, his sensibility remains, in some degree ambiguous. A poet cannot be God, in whom everything falls in his range. The poet is sure to be short of this widest possible extension. Here come the errors and confusions are generated. It is precisely for this reason, Stevens tells in "*The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet*", "We have excluded absolute fact as an element of poetic truth. But this has been done arbitrarily and with a sense of absolute fact as fact destitute of any imaginative aspect whatever." (680) This again takes us to Coleridge's division of imagination between primary and secondary imagination. The primary imagination is almost of absolute truth, of "I Am" and therefore is destitute of any imaginative aspect. For precisely the same reason it is not creative. Critics have been mostly concerned with Stevens' view of imagination and attempted to reconcile the two, the real and the imaginative. And he himself lent credence to it. It is because both are true to a degree, excluding the absolute. The poet himself fights shy in claiming absolute knowledge and to say it is to admit

that he possesses secondary imagination. To take Stevens' example, a beach extending as far as the eye can reach, bordered on the one hand, by trees and, on the other, by the sea. The sky is cloudless and the sun is red. In what sense do the objects in this scene resemble each other, he questions. When the vision is not extensive enough, as for example, of the beach but sufficiently clear in the other case, the poet then searches for some resemblance. For instance, there is enough of the sky reflected in the water to create a resemblance. The sand is yellow between the green and the blue. In short, the light alone creates a unity not only in the receding of distance, where differences become invisible, but also in the contacts of closer sight. Such a vision enables the poet to see that one thing resembles the other, the beginning of time with the end of time, one woman with other women, one world with other worlds. According to Stevens, this is the significant component of reality. It binds everything together. The real in him, therefore, is resemblance between things. Stevens' poetry creates resemblance by the imagination and indeed metamorphoses reality through metaphors, giving some resemblance to parts of reality, between real and something imagined. The point of interest here is that the world of reality and that of imagination, being short of the absolute, are seen as resembling each other.

For Stevens, "Poetry increases our feeling for reality."(*Opus Posthumous* 162) In his "Three Academic Pieces", he desired to formulate an accurate theory of poetry in terms of the structure of reality. Since reality is whole, poetry in Stevens' terms, should search for a holistic view. It is, as we have seen, the source of resemblance in things. When Stevens' critics put emphasis on imagination as the source of his poetry, they ignore the fact that resemblance of imagination is often disruptive as the happiness in the world of Keatsian nightingale. This world has no resemblance with the unhappy world of reality, "where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;" and "where but to think is to be full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs". Stevens himself says in this essay: "The statement that the imagination has no level of resemblance is not to be taken as a statement that the imagination itself has no limits. The imagination is deceptive in this respect. There is a limit to its power to surpass resemblance and that limit is to be found in nature."(688) Stevens adds to this statement that imagination is able to manipulate nature as by creating three legs and five arms but it is not able to create a totally new nature. If it does, it is a false exaggeration. This false exaggeration disturbs the balance between reality and imagination.

Thus imagination has to stay with resemblances between one object and another, one egg and another, if it is not to be deceptive. More than this resemblance, there is a necessary connection in things under the form of eternity. This is the universal essence found common in all things. This is the highest kind of knowledge. One has to have a mind to see this resemblance, not the eye, because the latter may see resemblances in a narrow context;

"The study of the activity of resemblance is an approach to the understanding of poetry. Poetry is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance. As the mere satisfying of a desire, it is pleasurable. But poetry if it did nothing but satisfy a desire would not rise above the level of many lesser things. Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for

resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it.”(690)

For Stevens, seeking resemblances in all structures of reality or art may not reach perfection but that is the ideal being sought. Metaphor has this aspect of the ideal, as it has ever been so. This aspect of poetry cannot be dismissed merely because we think that we have long since outlived the ideal. The truth is that we are constantly outliving it and yet the ideal itself remains alive with an enormous life, of course with a difference. Stevens, in his poetry, searches for a metaphorical-metaphysical view that all physical events are at the same time psychological. Of course, he is equally well aware of the fact that we cannot perceive objects mentally unless our sense organs and brain are in the requisite relationship to it physically. Erroneous sense perceptions lead to inadequate ideas. It is only when the mind and the body are perfectly adjusted that we see resemblances in wider possible extensions. Stevens’ theory of poetry thus lies within the rational scheme of things and seems to agree with the rationalism of Spinoza, Descartes and Leibniz. It is again for the same reason that he in his poetry is the least emotional. He treats his subjects as if it were a matter of a geometric proposition. There is no personal expression in his poems.

In “*Effects of Analogy*”, Stevens discusses the effects of analogy on poetry. He sees analogy as likeness, as resemblance between parallels and yet parallels only in imagination. Marginal poetry is created when the poet feels his imagination to be just a part of much larger imagination which is much more potent. Through his poetry, he tries to get at that. Central poetry is created when imagination, as a power within, has such insights into reality that keep the poet in the very centre of consciousness. Both kinds of poets start from being mystics, while the former pass from one mysticism to another, the latter move away from mysticism towards that ultimate good sense which is called civilization. The analogy contained in poetry is much more than the mere analogy of the figures of speech. Poetry involves a “rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of the exquisite appositeness that takes away all their verbliness.”(714) Speaking of the origin of images Stevens observes that every image is a restatement of the subject of the image in terms of an attitude and every image is an intervention on the part of the image-maker. A particular of the subject of the image is elaborated depending on the attitude of the poet. Stevens analyses a passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew where he says that Jesus went all about the cities, teaching and preaching, and “when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they...were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.”

Though there exists little analogy between man and sheep, the given image an elaboration of the particular in the mind that Jesus was a shepherd. Stevens further observes a horrible kind of analogy, established by Kenneth Burke, between the spontaneous sensations of a poet and the muscular twitching of a decerebrated frog. The image has originated from Burke’s feeling of scorn for the doctrines on which he was commenting. Such analogies are part of much larger ones that are omnipresent but elusive. Even the imageless world of a man for whom reality is

enough has analogies of happiness and unhappiness, thoughtlessness or the heaviness of mind, innocence or tragedy. Men, for whom the world exists as a world and life exists as life, come and speak before the objects of their passions, with intense choosing words that we remember and make our own. Their words create a world that is able to transcend this world and the life becomes livable. The direct contact with an object may not be of the beautiful. That is why, we search for analogues, parts and resemblances in order to find a coherent picture. This way, for Stevens;

“Poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that sense.”(723)

Contrary to the opinion of most of the critics, Stevens’ use of the terms reality and imagination is not that of parallel opposition. For him imagination is not a realm separate from reality. Stevens considers imagination as the mechanism of human consciousness that made possible the very perception of the state of the world called reality. In “*Imagination as Value*”, Stevens attempts to assess the value of imagination in the past and the present. A generation ago, it should have been considered as an aspect of the conflict between man and nature. But now, in the changed scene, we are more likely to say that it is an aspect of the conflict between man and organized society. The imagination is the power of the mind over the possibility of things and as such is the source of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things. Though ordinarily considered abnormal, Stevens considers imagination as a power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, an order in the chaos. Stevens’ theory of poetry cannot be called a well-defined one, but certainly attempts to define the important aspects of poetry. It is based on the co-existence of all apparent polarities: body and mind, money and poetry, earth and heaven, and reality and imagination.

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