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Depiction of Modern Materialist American Society in the Select Poems of Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

Any absolute work of art which serves no further purpose than to stimulate an emotion has about it a certain luxurious and visionary taint. We leave it with a blank mind, and a pang bubbles up from the very foundation of pleasures. Art, so long as it needs to be a dream, will never cease to prove a disappointment. Its ladle cruelty, its narcotic abstraction, can never sweeten the evils we return to at home; it can liberate half the mind only by leaving the other half in abeyance. These ideas are central in more than Stevens's sense. They reflect the consensus of English critical thought since it began. Neither Dryden nor Johnson, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats in his brief maturity, or Arnold would have disagreed with them. And perhaps the obloquy heaped on Leavis for repeating them only shows how slow we have been to recover from the aestheticism in which sonic writers of the later nineteenth century took refuge from responsibility. The young Stevens's sense of responsibility significantly manifests itself more in general reflection and resolution about his own mind and character than in theories about poetry itself. It is as if he were already subconsciously aware that 'the first phase of the poet's problem is himself. In his Journal after he left Harvard and, in the letters, replacing it, to Elsie Moll, the girl from his home town' whom he eventually married in 1909, his poet's sensibility is continuously evident. But, unlike most young poets, he is in no hurry. He is content to get on with earning his living and at the same time simply to absorb the particulars of reality that please and move him and to think, in fits and starts, about the enormous issues that underneath it all concern him most. Something of his particular kind of determination can be gathered from these remarks in his Journal a few weeks after he arrived in New York from Harvard.

Key Words: Fantasy and Reality, Imagination, Aspiration, Determination and Aestheticism

Key Concept: The ideas expressed with odd elliptical precision in 'Imagination as Value' arc very close to much that *Santayana* had expounded in a more orderly, but nevertheless a less definite, manner many years before. This is by no means to suggest 'influence' in any crude or careless sense. 'Imagination as Value', like all his prose, is most clearly the fruit of Stevens's own experience and thought. Its ideas are related to *Santayana*'s ideas in the same way that the two men are related in the one's poem about the other: by an identity of feeling and of aim. 'It is as if... two parallels become one, a perspective. In our observance Stevens's insistence on the normal, on the tethering of the imagination to reality. Here, in another passage from the essay, is this insistence pitched at its highest:

The world may, certainly, be lost to the poet but it is not lost to the imagination. And I say that the world is lost to him, certainly, because, for one thing, the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written. I suppose it is that poem that will constitute the true prize of the spirit

and that until it is written many lesser things will be so regarded, including conquests that arc not unimaginable (65).

Santayana several times expressed the same hope, with the same lack of confidence. In *Three Philosophical Poets*, published in 1910, he wrote: It is time some genius should appear to reconstitute the shattered picture of the world. He should live in the continual presence of all experience, and respect it; he should at the same time understand nature, the ground of that experience; and he should also have a delicate sense for the ideal echoes of his own passions, and for all the colours of his possible happiness. All that can inspire a poet is contained in this task, and nothing less than this task would exhaust a poet's inspiration...But this supreme poet is in limbo still. And in *Reason in Art* (1905) there is a passage describing the relation between reality and the imagination which might serve as an epigraph, not only for *To an Old Philosopher in Rome*, but for the whole of Stevens's work:

Literature in the end rejects all unmeaning flourishes, all complications that have no counterpart in the things of this world or no use in expressing their relations; at the same time, it aspires to digest that reality to which it confines itself, making it over into ideal substance and material for the mind... (The writer's] art is relative to something other than its own formal impulse; it comes to clarify the real world, not to encumber it; and it needs to render its native agility pertinent to the facts and to attach its volume of feeling to what is momentous in human life. Literature has its piety, its conscience; it cannot lung forget, without forfeiting all dignity, that it serves a burdened and perplexed creature, a human animal struggling to persuade the universal Sphinx to propose a more intelligible riddle. Irresponsible and trivial in its abstract impulse, man's simian chatter becomes noble as it becomes symbolic; its representative function lends it a serious beauty; its utility endows it with moral worth.

There is much in *Santayana*'s hope for poetry, and in Stevens's, that seems reminiscent of Emerson. Among the hazy rhetorical paragraphs of, for instance, Emerson's essay `Poetry and Imagination', one finds remarks that seem to anticipate the two later writers: Poetry must be affirmative. It is the piety of the intellect...The poet who shall use Nature as his hieroglyphic must have an adequate message to convey thereby. The poet is rare because he must be exquisitely vital and sympathetic, and, at the same time, immovably centred ...The poet is representative, — whole man, diamond merchant, symboliser, emancipator; in him the world projects a scribe's hand and writes the adequate genesis.

But Emerson's ideas about poetry, as about other things, are vitiated by a vagueness, a lack of respect not only for the discipline of organised thought but also for the hard facts of reality and for plain common-sense, that *Santayana* himself exposed in a devastating essay in Interpretations of Poetry and Religion. The object of his attack is Emerson's tendency towards the elevation of the imagination, as some sort of faculty of the absolute, above the real world and ordinary human understanding of it. This tendency *Santayana* calls mystical. of Emerson's 'alternately ingenuous and rhapsodical' reliance upon the imagination alone *Santayana* writes:

By attacking the authority of the understanding as the organon of knowledge, by substituting itself for it as the herald of a deeper truth, the imagination... prepares its own destruction. For if the understanding is rejected because it cannot grasp the absolute, the imagination and all its works art, dogma, worship must presently be rejected for the same reason. On this issue, which is really the issue of a satisfactory definition of the imagination, Stevens, though some critics have linked him with Emerson in an escapist realm of pure wishful thinking, is unequivocally on the same side as *Santayana*. Again and again, Stevens insists, in full accord with *Santayana*, that the imagination divorced from reality is nothing. His view of it, unlike Emerson's, is never transcendental or absolutist. Emerson, defining the imagination, says:

Whilst common sense looks at things or visible nature as real and final facts, poetry, or the imagination which dictates it, is a second sight, looking through these, and using them as types or words for thoughts which they signify... The very design of imagination is to domesticate us in another, in a celestial nature. This power is in the image because this power is in Nature. It so affects, because it so is...0r, shall we say that the imagination exists by sharing the ethereal currents (62).

He believes, in other words, with whatever degree of optimistic imprecision, that there exists a rival reality, beyond or above mundane reality, to which the imagination alone has access. Stevens's view of the imagination could not be more firmly opposed to such a belief. `To be at the end of fact is not to be at the beginning of imagination but it is to be at the end of both', he wrote in his note poetic Anthology. And here is a typical pronouncement:

Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination. It does not create except as it transforms...Imagination gives, but gives in relation. These crisp sentences, from a letter of 1940,1 are part of a gloss on section of 'The *Man with the Blue Guitar*, the long and difficult poem about his theory of poetry that he had written three years before. Nothing could better illustrate the distance that separates Stevens from Emerson's soft woolliness of thought than these dry lines, pared to the very bone of accuracy:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,

From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,

Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,

Things as they arc. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it

An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,

Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,

In the universal intercourse.

The unexpectedness both of the colours and of the sudden pathetic fallacies in the penultimate couplet, particularly in their close proximity to the word 'true', are a swift and subtle indication of the part played by the poet himself in the process described. As Stevens was to put it, concluding 'Effects of Analogy', a lecture delivered in the same year as 'Imagination as Value': 'Poetry... 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.' The 'transcendent analogue' is quite unrelated to Emerson's 'celestial nature': Stevens insists always that 'The imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real.' And Stevens's parallel insistence on the essential role of the creative individual in any act of the imagination is equally remote from Emerson's Neoplatonist visions of the world-soul common to all men. Whenever Stevens in his prose writings moves towards a tentative definition of poetry, his stress is, as above, on

`the poet's sense of the world'. *In The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words* (1941), the first of the lectures in The Necessary Angel, the emphasis takes this form:

The pressure of reality is, I think, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. 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...The role of the poet... is paramount. In this area of my subject, I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none... What is his function? Certainly, it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their leaders' to and for. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfils himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (51).

His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives...He has had immensely to do with giving life whatever savour it possesses. He has had to do with whatever the imagination and the senses have made of the world. He has, in fact, had to do with life except as the intellect has had to do with it and, as to that, no one is needed to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin.

It is worth remarking that in the middle of this passage Stevens makes an observation whose realism sharply limits the apparent extravagance of his argument: *Time and Time* again it has been said that [the poet] may not address himself to an Elite. "I think he may not there is not a poet whom we prize living today that does not address himself to an Elite" (49).

In *The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet* (1943) — his bizarre titles reflect the luxuriance of his care for accurate speech — he approaches the same theme with the same emphasis, but from a humbler direction. He suggests 'that we define poetry as an un-official view of being', and continues: This is a much larger definition of poetry than it is usual to make. But just as the nature of the truth changes, perhaps for no more significant reason than that philosophers live and die, so the nature of poetry changes, perhaps for no more significant reason than that poets come and go.

Conclusion: In the light of this use of the word 'truth' the puzzling firmness of a sentence in the long passage quoted above from 'Imagination as Value' begins to quiver. 'In life what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we sec it.' It becomes clear that 'reality' rather than 'the truth' is what is meant here, as, indeed, the rest of the passage suggests. Meanwhile 'The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet' circles for a little round the question of defining poetry and then settles on a conclusion of resilient exactness. Since we have no difficulty in recognizing poetry and since, at the same time, we say that it is not an attainable acme, not some breath from an altitude, not something that awaits discovery, after which it will not be subject to chance, we may be accounting for it if we say that is a process of the personality of the poet...There can be no poetry without the personality of the poet, and that, quite simply, is why the definition of poetry has not been found and why, in short, there is none.

On this conclusion Stevens comments: 'One does not have to be a cardinal to make the point.' Possibly one had to be a poet: at any rate, those who write about poetry as if it had some mysterious life of its own, and, worse, those who write it as if it had, should be healthily embarrassed by the sanity of these remarks. Stevens add: "We are talking about something a good deal more comprehensive than the temperament of the artist as that is usually spoken of. The readers are concerned with the whole personality and, in effect, we are saying that the poet who writes the heroic poem that will satisfy all there is of us and all of us in time to come, will accomplish it by the power of his reason" (49). The force of the imagination and in addition shows the effortless and inescapable process of his own individuality.

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