"The Creation of Reality through Imagination in Wallace Stevens' Poetry"

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Abstract:
Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American modernist poet. He spent most of his life working as a lawyer for the Hartford Insurance Company in Connecticut. The present study traces the relationship between imagination and reality in his poetry and shows how the poet is fully satisfied with this world. To him, reality may be factual or invented. However, he is a critic of factual reality because it has neither meaning nor content. Hence, Stevens considers it pointless to limit oneself to factual reality. Reality, he believes, is an abstraction with many perspective possibilities, and he struggles to create original perspectives out of it. He aims at creating a new modern reality in his poetry. Stevens sees poetry as an arena of heightened powers, continually creates cognitive depictions of the world. These cognitive depictions find their outlet and their best and final form as words.
Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American Modernist poet. He spent most of his life working as a lawyer for the Hartford insurance company in Connecticut. He was considered as a master stylist, employing an extraordinary rigorous precision in crafting his poems. He was also a philosopher of aesthetics, wonderfully exploring the notion of poetry as the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality.

The present study traces the relationship between imagination and reality in Wallace Stevens’s poetry and shows how the poet is fully satisfied with this world. To him, reality may be factual or invented. However, he is a critic of factual reality because it has neither meaning nor content. Hence, Stevens considers it pointless to limit oneself to factual reality. Reality, he believes, is an abstraction with many perspective possibilities, and he struggles to create original perspectives out of it. He aims at creating a new modern reality in his poetry. Stevens sees poetry as an arena of heightened powers, continually creating cognitive depictions of the world. These cognitive depictions find their outlet and their best and final form as words; and thus he says: "It is a world of words to the end of it, in which nothing solid is its solid self."¹

Stevens suggests that we live in tension between the shapes we take as the world acts upon us, and the ideas of order that our imagination imposes upon the world. As he says in his essay "Imagination as Value," “truth seems to be that we live in concepts of imagination before the reason has established them.”²

Stevens believes that imagination is not equivalent to consciousness nor is reality equivalent to the world as it exists outside our minds. Reality is the product of the imagination as it shapes the world. It is constantly changing as we attempt to find imaginatively satisfying ways to perceive the world. Reality is an activity, not a static object. He approaches it with a piecemeal understanding, putting together parts of the world in an attempt to make it seem coherent. To make sense of the world is to construct a worldview through an active exercise of the imagination. This is no dry, philosophical activity, but a passionate engagement in finding order and meaning.³ Thus Stevens writes in his “The Idea of Order at Key West”: 
Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The Maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  

(Ll. 51-55)

In these lines, the Maker has such a rage to find order between levels. It has always been the human tendency to try and stitch together the worldly and divine and put things in order and make them more understandable. Everything must have an order and meaning to somehow relate to life. The lines between heaven and earth will always be “ghostly demarcations,” hazy lines, filled only with the jammering of humanity, trying to find a way to make sense of things.

Throughout his poetic career, Stevens was concerned with the question of what to think about the world now; his solution might be summarized by the notion of a "Supreme Fiction". In this example from the satirical poem "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," Stevens plays with the ideas of accessible notions of reality:

> Poetry is the Supreme Fiction, madame.  
> Take the moral law and make a nave of it  
> And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,  
> The conscience is converted into palms  
> Like windy citherns, hankering for hymns.  
>  
> (L. 1-6)

Stevens’ poem shows an object or group of objects in aimless oscillation or circling movement. Earthly and imaginative desires, in constant motion, without epitaph, becomes one to revel reality:

> I am the angel of reality,  
> seen for a moment standing in the door.  
> ...  
> I am the necessary angel of earth,  
> Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,  
> Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,  
> And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone  
> Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,  
> Like watery words awash;
In his "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour", Stevens describes the experience of an idea which satisfies the imagination:

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous,
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing,
Light, power, the miraculous influence,
Wherein we can forget ourselves,
Sensing a comforting order,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,
within its vital boundary, in the mind.

(L. 4-11)

In the above lines, Stevens travels into his heart, his soul to speak to the power of imagination; a final place where we gather together as one. Through all space and time, Stevens transmutes each one of us to a place of silence, of peace, of being together. We stay present to each moment, transcending our egos and our judgments. What remains is the source of God to guide us to objective reality. He believes that this knowledge necessarily exists within the mind, since it is an aspect of the imagination which can never attain a direct experience of reality. The poet proceeds on to say:

We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark.
Out of this same light, out of the central mind
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

(II. 14-18)

Stevens also finds a definite value in the imaginative contact with reality. Only, in fact, by this stark knowledge can he attain his own spiritual self that can resist the disintegrating forces of life. The idea is that essential reality stands before all others, but since all knowledge is contingent on its time and place, that supreme fiction will surely be transitory. This is the necessary angle of subjective reality—a reality that must always be qualified, and as such, always
misses the mark to some degree; always contains elements of unreality; imagination.

James Miller summarizes Stevens's position: "Though this dissolving of the self is in one way the end of everything, in another way it is the happy liberation."\(^5\) This indicates that there are only two entities left now; man and nature, subject and object. Nature is the physical world, visible, audible, tangible, and present to all the senses.

In his "Men Made out of Words," Stevens suggests that life consists propositions, and that poetry is not about life; but intimately a part of it:

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. It has  
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage,  
And, like an **insatiable** actor, slowly and  
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,  
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,  
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound  
Of which, an invisible audience listens,  
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one.

(L 1. 1-13)

To create a stage is, for Stevens, a metaphor for the need of modern poetry to make its own new arena or realm in which it should be presented and in which it can be understood. Modern poetry is like "an insatiable actor" because it continually must be in "the act of finding what will suffice."\(^6\) There is pun in the meaning of "act." In the one sense, poetry is an act, learning the speech, meeting the women, facing the men, etc. In another sense, it is a dramatic performance meant to be heard by an audience, as it speaks words that echo in the mind of the listener. The audience is "invisible" in the sense that a poet rarely meets his or her readers. The typical reader picks up a book of poems and reads a poem or two, and the author never sees this happening. The reading of poetry is often a conversation between strangers. In this poem, the two people are the actor, that is the poem, and the audience is the listener, and their
emotions should become "one". The poet should find the words that will speak to the most delicate ear of its modern listeners, echoing what it wants to hear but cannot articulate for itself. The poet, in the act of the poem, finds the sufficing words for the audience and they allow the listeners to hear what is in their ear, and mind. As a result, the emotions of speaking and listening, of the poet as actor and listeners as audience, should become one, and thus forming their reality.\textsuperscript{7}

In his “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, Stevens metaphorically provides the similarities and differences between musicians and poets. The guitar serves as an instrument for the musician to relate themes. In the first section, the poet writes:

\begin{quote}
Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar,
And they said to him, but play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar,
Of things exactly as they are,
\end{quote}

(L.1. 4-8)

These lines conceptualize the guitar as an instrument of perception. The guitar does not express reality, but instead creates a new reality as a perception. This section further articulates the poet’s pressures to recreate reality. Clearly, the listeners do not understand the duality of their own request, especially when Stevens felt that his instrument could only allow him to represent reality, not create reality. Amongst other things, this section provides the metaphor for music and poetry. It also exposes the demands of reality on the musician / poet.\textsuperscript{8}

In the next section, Stevens clarifies the value of his instrument in revelation. The musician speaks only without the quotation marks. In a typical Stevens's fashion, the musician's speech allows for the distinction and realization of similarities and differences between the poet and musician. The musician appears as a shearsman in the first section, which changes slightly to a tailor-like comparison, as the musician now must patch the world. Section two starts with the struggle of presenting reality, then moves to the conversion of shearsman to tailor, “I cannot bring a world quite round,/Although I
patch him as I can. / I sing a hero’s head, large eye / And bearded bronze, but not a man”. Reproducing reality is as impossible as drawing a perfect circle. The patchwork falls inevitably short of the hero's actual aesthetic. The head, eye and beard are all parts of the actual hero, but are not the entire reality. Each section of the poem functions as pieces of reality being patched together. Whether separate from each other or together, the sections of the poem can only present Stevens’s reality. As good as the musician’s patchwork is, he can only “serenade almost to man” and that serenade is the guitarist’s creation. A poem is a poet’s creation based on individual style. In the first two sections, there is a shift from perceiving the musician in the third person to the musician as the speaker.

The poet proceeds to address in section three the art of constructing an image large enough to enclose its own maker:

A tune beyond us as we are; 
Yet nothing changed, except the place, 
Of things as they are and the place, 
As you play them on the blue guitar, 

(L1. 1-4)

Again, Stevens notes the blue guitar as an instrument in relating perception. He has now forced himself and his readers into the poem with the guitarist. If ourselves are in the space of the tune, then we must view the tune from all perspectives. This final atmosphere implies a sort of walking around the space of the tune to realize all perceptions. The perceptive shifts that occur in this section are also significant, for the guitarist is simply playing a song in a different place and is not changing the song. The song doesn’t change and neither does the theme, but this still doesn’t change the fact that the song is a version of reality and not reality itself. The final line of this section is “A composing of senses of the guitar.” The instrument here has senses and the musician’s style relates those senses. Stevens does not have the guitar compose the senses, instead he gives the instrument senses. As Patke wrote, “the canvas and the guitar do not remain instruments or means to an end, they themselves create or, rather, are the space in which the end exists.”
Section four is an example of drastic perception leaps: “It is the sun that shares our works. /The moon shares nothing. It is a sea.” The perceptive shift includes the guitarist, but does not separate his work from “our works.” The mood of this section is disparaging. Patke interprets Stevens’s use of the sun and moon, by suggesting that “the moon and the sea have nothing to offer by way of warmth, and even the sun seems to have failed humanity.”

The perception in this section is formed by the cold winter sun; “there are no shadows in our sun.” Summer and winter perspectives are part of reality and the experience of this cold reality shapes the tone of the section, which includes “creeping men” as “Mechanical beetles never quite warm”. The final sentiment is of cold guitar strings. The dreary winter weather constructs the musician’s perception, which is cold like the guitar strings and the “mechanical beetles.” Here, the weather is one example of how experience can shape perception.

Again, the poet gives another experience of perceiving reality, where in section five of the poem he immediately constructs a storm that leads to “cold chords”, “impassioned choirs”, and “my lazy, leaden twang.” The “lazy, leaden twang” is the response to the storm or “like the reason in a storm”. The perception that the experience of the storm provides is “lazy” and “leaden”, “And yet it brings the storm to bear. / I twang it out and leave it there.” Stevens recognizes the effect of experience on art, and ends this section leaving the role of the artist / musician / poet to present this reality as it affects him and his art.

Conclusion

Poetry is thus the subject, but the subject created leaves “an absence in reality”. Poems allow for sun’s green, cloud’s red, or earth feeling. In poetry, Stevens can give reality certain qualities that are otherwise absent, like a thinking sky. Poems take reality and form it into a sensual reproduction, and then gives the representation to readers of the poem. Stevens’s remarks as well the style he adopted suggests that poetry is part of the world. There is, first, the process by which the world is known, including both imaginative projection and the human urge for closer reality. There is also an implicit appeal to the flux that characterizes the self and the natural world. Life is
rapid; he believes that the self consists of endless images. Stevens concentrates on the idea that poetry is the perfect synthesis of reality and imagination, in which reality and imagination are depicted as fusing at the instant of perception.

Notes

- All texts of poems included in the research are taken from the internet.

2 Ibid, P. 61.
9 Ramji Lall, p. 104.
10 Ibid, P. 111.
11 Ibid, P. 115.
12 Ibid, 117.
13 Ibid, 119.
14 Ibid, 121.
15 Ibid, 127.
Bibliography


