

Wallace Stevens: Reality Versus Imagination

Arwa Hussein Al-Douri
Assistant Instructor
University of Tikreet / College of Education
The Department of English

Abstract

Wallace Stevens was one of the American most admired and unique poets who had a philosophical and meditative prospect to poetry. He explored his own notion of poetry as the supreme unity of creative imagination and objective reality. Stevens' profundity resulted in an extreme technical and thematic complexity in his poems.

This study is an attempt to review Stevens' poetic theory, analyzing his philosophical understanding of poetry. It begins with a general survey on Wallace Stevens the man and the poet, secondly a critical survey on his poetic output, following up, chronologically, his major poetic volumes and the development of his poetic career. It ends with an outlook on the relationship between the concepts of reality and imagination in his poetry, including a brief critical examination to some of his selected poems.

A Brief Survey of Wallace Stevens the Man

Wallace Stevens was one of the American unique and admired poets who had a meditative and philosophical prospect of poetry. He was a master of employing an extraordinary utterances in precise sentence to provoke a notion of poetry in

which there is an ultimate unity between reality and imagination.

Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania. His father was the lawyer of the city and a poet as well, and his mother a school teacher. The couple had their own austere viewpoints to keep their social standing. They opposed their sons' and the daughter marriage to inferior social classes.

Stevens learned French and German at a private school, then attended a school attached to the church. He was a very smart student in learning classical language, math, and physics. He conceived an ambition to become a poet when he was at Harvard University, where he acquired Knowledge of various fields of study and published his first poems in the university magazine.

Steven worked as a journalist in New York for some time, then he left his job as a reporter since he felt it unsuitable for him. Following his father's advice he joined the New York Law school in 1901, to become a lawyer and became a vice-president at a very big surety company; nevertheless he remained active as a poet.

He got used to publishing an average of eight poems a year beside delivering many lectures and essays on the theory and nature of poetry, in addition to being interested in the deep history of his family.

As one of American's respected poets, Wallace Stevens was awarded many prizes, especially between the year 1950-1955. he died in Hartford in August 1955.

A Brief Critical Survey of Wallace Stevens Poetic output

Stevens' first poetic volume was published in 1923, including his important poems "Comedian as the Letter C", "Sunday Morning", and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle", proving him as a poet of extraordinary talent. In the first poem, he employs the phonological nature of the letter C as a motivation for the thematic purposes. The poem has a personal element, adopting a narrating tone in which the central character in the poem "Crispin" is telling the story of his heroic journey from his city of Bordeaux in France over the high seas to Carolina in a search for reality establishing his own colony. The poem has a controlling tone of "ironic indifference" highlighting three major themes which are: (i) nothingness or death; (ii) life, and best represents of the use of the mock-heroic technique has an auto-reality of his purpose in life. an attempt of Crispin to realize the adventures that renders him from a romantic to realistic person. Stevens stated: "I suppose that I ought to confess that by the letter C I meant the sound.... To play on that sound thought the poem..." (Quoted in J. Hillis, 1966, p.175).

In his other two poems "Sunday Morning" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier", Stevens echoes the same theme of death as the mother of beauty, confronting the idea of the theological bankrupt of the twentieth century. Both poems bear notions of immortality in portraying the cycling element of nature. In general, Stevens' first volume "Harmonium" deserves a debate to be held on since its poems bear contradictory ideas. Some move around the idea that reality creates man, however the

Wallace Stevens: Reality Versus Imagination
Arwa Hussein Al-Douri

others reveal the idea that reality is created by man".(Lall,2006,P.6).

In 1936, Stevens published his second volume "ideas of Order" including poems that are darker and gloomier than those of the first volume. Most of the poems move around the themes of the aging and dying. In his poem "The Idea of Order at Key West"; one of the first verses in his volume, key west is the name of the American harbour. The speaker in the poem is accompanied by a friend and it happens they both meet a woman singing on the seashore. The whole poem is employed to describe the song and the speaker's reaction to the woman's singing:

The sea was not a mask. No more was she
The song and water were not medleyed sound
.....
But it was she and not the sea we heard.

The poem expresses the theme of the importance of art as a work of imagination to grasp reality. The song of the woman helps to bring order over the disorder of the surrounding noises of the waves and the seashore. Wallace Stevens, in this poem, intensifies his philosophical notion of the creative imagination which simply means the capability to create order out of the complete chaos in reality, strongly arguing that reality is, indeed, thought and feeling not people and scenes. The chaos of reality in this poem is portrayed as: "the meaningless plunging of water and the wind" but it is the song or this work of imagination that clears out the disorder: "It was her voice that made/ the sky acutest as its vanishing...".

“The Man With the Blue Guitar” which was published in 1937 with other poems, marks a break through in the poetic talent of Wallace Stevens. Harold Bloom describes this poem as “triumph over...literary anxieties” and adds that “with its completion Stevens renewed his poetic inspiration and vision” (Borroff edit., 1963, p.79). Stevens philosophically, interpretes poetry as having a synthetic nature of reality and imagination. He symbolizes the poet as the guitarist and the on-going imaginative process as the guitarist tune. People’s voice, on the other hand, symbolizes reality.

The blueness of the guitar suggests a sense of strangeness and of entire internal grief. The poem as a whole intensifies the theme that the guitarist (poet) is the creator of people’s dreams through his creative imagination:

Tom-tom, c’est moi. The blue guitar
And I are one. The orchestra
Fills the high hall with shuffling men
High as the hall. The whirling noise

Stevens supplies a note on this poem saying : “I want as a man of imagination to write poetry with all the power of a monster about whom I wrote this poem” (Quoted in Lall, 2006, p.134). This poem is also striking in its bright, clear , and tidy images. It is divided into thirty- three sections in which each one is a debate by its own, concentrating the theme of the ability of active imagination to make a transformation in actual reality and the subject is poetry itself as a work of art.

Poetry, according to Wallace Stevens, is the first and last of all subjects. It is the fulfilled wish of the mind and an inner desire that needs to be satisfied, and this satisfaction is

the attained through total description of the self. Reading the poetry of Wallace Stevens, one is better to remember that if there is no poetry, there is no reality at all. He states the fact that life as a whole can be transformed through the artistic work and this is the core of his poetic experience. Simon Crikely takes it that this is what is meant by art that is born of spirit and then reborn in being aesthetically regarded. It means that “Art is born twice”.(Critech,2005, p.20). In his poem “The man With the Blue Guitar” he writes:

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 are. Or so we say.

In 1942, Stevens published his third volume “Parts of a World” including some fine poems which address, in general, “the self- referential nature of poetry” (J. Hillis, p. 230). In these poems, Stevens presents a poetry that satisfies the mind, rendering the satisfaction that might ensue (ibid). In his poem “of Modern Poetry”, he insists on the metaphoric tradition of writing poetry, arguing that as life is changing, a poet cannot go on writing poetry according to the traditional modes of versification, or else he will be cut- off from the society. A modern poet must establish a contact with the people of his time employing imagination and reality together so that he will write poems “of the mind in the act of what will suffice” (Balbo, 1994, p.3)

Then the theatre was changed
To something else . Its past was a souvenir
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...

Metamorphosis, is a central aspect in Steven's poetry. It conveys the influence of the senses on mental perception. Everyone sees the reality in quite a different way from the others. M. Bernetta Quinn argues that the aspect of metamorphosis relates Stevens to the impressionistic school of painting; in the sense that a kinship is made clear by his habit of giving lyrics titles which might equally well apply to pictures.(Quinn,1955,p.82) In two of his two late poems "Metamorphosis" and "Woman looking at a vase of Flowers" Stevens brilliantly discusses the importance of perception. In the first poem he depicts the image of the natural decay in a grim way, experiencing feelings of fear, emptiness and bareness in Autumn. In the second poem the bouquet of flowers has a metaphoric nature. It becomes a thunder, a summer or sides of peaches in the eyes of the woman who is stirred by the powerful colour and shapes of the flowers and it conveys his understanding of the process of perception which denotes him as an impressionistic poet.

In 1947 and in 1950, Wallace Stevens published his last two volumes of poetry "Transport to Summer" and "The Auroras of Autumn", in which he concentrated more on the subject of reality versus imagination, deriving contradictory metaphorical images as blue and red, moon and sun, north and

south, winter and summer for reality and imagination. Lall asserts that the late poems lack the glamorous sensuousness of the poems of “Harmonium”, maintaining his belief in what he called “the essential gaudiness of poetry” (Lall, 2006, p.21)

The Complex of the Mismatched Horses

Wallace Stevens once wrote: “My reality- imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others” (quoted in Brogan, 2005, p.233). In fact the whole poetry of Stevens grows out of these words. He views imagination as an absolute power that enables the poet to employ reality to his own uses and in this context a poet lives on “the verge of his consciousness” (Wagner, Marie Borroff ed., 1963, p.71). The imagination that he tries to attain in his poetry is the liberty of the mind. He refuses to view imagination as having traditional religious, romantic or Freudian outlooks. His refusal to relate traditional religion to imagination does not mean that he was an apostate. He believes that religious belief must give way to the disciplined imagination and in this sense he believes that poetry and all types of arts can help to reinforce and comprehend religion better since God and imagination are one.

Romanticism, according to his viewpoint is unhelpful. It weakens the power of imagination and limitates the liberty of the mind. Wagner asserts that the main goal of Stevens in poetry is to identify the ideal life of imagination with the whole life of reality, and that the life of imagination is, all the time, transcending the life of reality. (ibid, p.73). In other words imagination is the reversed face of reality that is always lively, ideal and enormous.

According to the Freudian approach, the mental has the supremacy. Freud rejects the fact that imagination is an instrument of verifiability (Quin, 1955, p.51), since it cannot express reality literary. He calls for facing reality truly no matter grimly it might be. Stevens, on the other hand, thinks that reality can be faced truly only if it is faced imaginatively, and that the bare reality is valueless unless the imagination embroiders it with external values.

Wallace Stevens identifies the true nature of poetry and the role of a poet within a reference to Plato's description of the soul as "a chariot drawn across the heaven by a pair of mismatched horses, one of noble breed and the other is ignoble" (quoted in Lall, 2006, p.22). In the same sense, poetry is, like the soul, drawn by a team of mismatched horses and he uses nobility as a symbol of imagination and ignobility as a symbol of reality. Lall thinks that the poetry of Stevens has a quality of magic because of the reality-imagination complex. (Ibid., p.52) poetry, reality and imagination are three concepts of a circular relationship; in the sense that poetry is a means to attain reality and reality itself cannot be attained without imagination which has the ability to perceive the normal in the abnormal and to perceive chaos in order.

The imagination that Stevens tries to attain in his poetry is not simply the dreamy and escapist imagination of the romantic poets, but it is the powerful type of imagination which can create an order that is higher at some times than the created order of reality.

In his poem “Domination of Black”, Stevens creates a tension out of complexity of reality and the creative imagination that always transcends it. In the first stanza of the poem he associates the imagination with black images that he portrays:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.

There is a wavering between the images of the black open window and the image of the dark entangled outer leaves. The black colour in this poem symbolizes the blackness of reality. The image of fire and darkness inside the room correspond to the dark images outside creating an atmosphere of loneliness and fear.

In his poem “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”, Stevens embodies his poetic theory, asserting that ideal poetry must be abstract. The poem reveals Stevens’s admirable attitude to Aristotle’s defense of poetry who states that a poem is a secondary imitation of thought or a representative of thought. Frye confirms that Stevens concerned himself to study the processes that are part of what he means by “Supreme Fiction” in this long poem (Borror ed., 1963, p.162) : (poetry is the supreme fiction, madam./ Take the moral law and make a nave of it). Poetry is a process of conceptualizing reality by which he means “things as they are”, and the role of imagination or “the act of mind” is to transform powerfully the

bare reality into an awareness of reality by imposing consciousness on it. Imagination helps to free reality from the compulsions of ordinary life and to impose order on the chaotic attitude of “things as they are”. Harold Bloom describes “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction” as an ambitious attempt to relieve the imaginative poverty of his time.(Barroff, ed., 1936, p.90)

In one of his lectures, Wallace Stevens asserts that the poet is responsible to the imagination that is inseparable from society and in this sense a poet has a spiritual role in society since the poems that he presents are a satisfactory balance between reality and imagination. (Ibid.)

According to Stevens’ theory, imagination is based on reality, in the sense that whatever imagination creates, is mainly based on reality in one way or another; this means that we cannot imagine anything unless it has some existence in reality, though there might be some divergence between the imagined things and how they truly appear in reality. Stevens thinks that there is a very thin strand of hair between two types of imagination one of them that tends to go very far away from reality causing a poet to write a poetry of escape and ceases to be great since it is created out of valueless imagination.

In his theory, Stevens also differentiates between “the imagination of a poet and of an ordinary man” (Hillis, p.206). The first is more creative and powerful than the other, justifying that a poet is able to create things imaginatively that the ordinary man is not able to, though he can comprehend at many times the things that a poet creates in his imagination.

Harold Bloom who is one of the most respected interpreters of Stevens's work acknowledges his great contribution to the history of American literature though Bloom has demonstrated special expertise on Stevens's poems especially the longer ones because of the "obscurity and abstraction" of his poetry. (Southworth, 1950, p. 94). The ordinary reader of his poetry cannot understand his poems unless with the help of the scholars and critics because of the difficulty to follow the meaning that he has put in his poems. Stevens himself admits that a reader should not look for a simple meaning in a poem since his poems convey imaginative ambiguity or uncertainty. (Lall, 2006, p. 197). He believes that poetry in general has an imaginative meaning not a rational one and it can communicate its meaning only to those who have the necessary aptitude to understand such meanings. For Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens is "a vital part of the American mythology" (quoted in Hillis, 1966, p. 95)

Conclusion

As a modern poet, Wallace Stevens views the poem as an aesthetic object rather than a representation of a bare reality.

It appears that the poetic theory which Stevens enriched the world of modern poetry with, is mainly influenced by the influential philosophy of Transcendentalism that flourished in the 1800's and the Platonic concept transcendence that the higher reality exists beyond the ordinary comprehension and is known only through intuition and imagination.

Steven's theory, also, reveals his influence by the symbolic movement of the late 19th century which affirms that

the main role of poetry is to create impressions in the reader's mind, and the symbolists who sought symbols of the inner world of reality and beauty in the objective external world.

Bibliography

- Borroff, Marie, *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 1963, prentic-Hall, inc. The United States of America
- Brogan, Jacqueline vaught, *Wallace Stevens and the Apocalyptic Mode*, 2005, Iowa city: University of Of Iowa press.
- Critchley, Simon, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*, 2005, New York.
- Hillis, J. Miller, *Wallace Stevens: Poets of Reality; six twentieth century writers*, 1966, Cambridge, Harvard.
- Lall, Ramji, *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, Rama Brother India Pvt.ltd, 2006, New Delhi.
- Quinn, M. Bernetta *The Metaphoric Tradition in Modern Poetry*, 1955, Rutgers University press, New Burnswick
- Southworth, James G., *Some Modern American Poets*, 1950, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.