

Wallace Stevens's "Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds": Poeticizing the Imperfect?

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Abstract

Contradictions and paradoxes are characteristic features of Wallace Stevens's poetry; these traits prompt judgments of him as a "difficult" poet and of his poems as all but approachable. Among other things, this difficulty in approaching Stevens's poems may stem from the meta-poetic dimension of poems such as "Of Modern Poetry", "The Poems of our Climate", "The Man with the Blue Guitar", and so on. And yet, Stevens remains one of America's most remarkable poets, tackling themes pertaining to identity, loss, estrangement, hope, despair and, above all, the intractable paradoxes that inform national life in the United States. In this sense, his poetry presents a recognizable pattern of pairings of real vs. imaginary, reality vs. poetry, history versus art, consciousness of fact versus imagination, and poetry as synonymous with individual freedom versus politics as possibly evolving into a totalitarian system. The issue of the tension between politics and poetry, between an imperfect, bitter reality and a delightful poetic release seems to be a core component of his poetic output.

The objective in this paper is to chart the course of this tension, assess the antagonistic pulls of consciousness and imagination, perfection and imperfection that take place within what Stevens describes as "the never-resting mind". This is primarily achieved through a reading of "The Poems of our Climate".

Key Words: poetry, politics, imagination, reality, imperfection, restless mind

Poetry and the Actual World in Wallace Stevens's Aesthetic Imagination

*It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice.*
—Wallace Stevens, “Of Modern Poetry”

The relationship between literature and politics has traditionally been a troubled one. Some would argue that literature is political no matter how personal or even visceral it might read, while others firmly believe that literature should not be political; when it becomes so, it ceases to be literature. In “Literature and Politics”, John D. Lindberg (1968) offers an answer to the question of whether literature and politics can possibly cross paths without having literature reduced to a second-hand artistic expression, holding that “the relationship between literature and politics is a multilane freeway with traffic flowing freely in both directions” (p. 163). In this sense, literature is, by no means, a mere rehash of political, social, and economic discourses; otherwise, the writer would overlook artistic expression *per se* and would instead indulge in producing pseudo-literary works. For his part, Juan Goytisolo (1999) rightly observes that “Politics . . . lends its coloration to art, and the writer, willy-nilly, becomes spokesman for the forces that struggle in silence against the oppression of a social class or the monopoly of an ideology that has been turned into dogma” (p. 38). He appositely adds that, “once it is published, [literature] is a social fact and as such, fulfills a political function” (p. 38).

Alain Robbe-Grillet, by contrast, argues that “writers are not necessarily political brains. . . . The writer can’t know what end he’s serving. Literature isn’t a means he’s to place at the service of some Cause” (qtd. in Goytisolo, p. 38). In a similar vein, Robin Peel (2004) aligns himself with poet Robert Graves’s view that public life, with all its organizations, institutions, and bureaucracies is “[the enemy] of creativity [that should be] avoided by any poet wishing to preserve their artistic integrity” – an observation that is the basis of many a definition of “pure art”(p. 16). However, as I have suggested earlier, Graves’s and Peel’s contention is challenged when it comes to understanding the poetry of Wallace Stevens, notably the social and political realities that both motivate and shape his writings. Michael Dowdy (2007) more appropriately maintains that “poetic form is wrongly considered as a yoke that must be rejected if one is to write a politically engaged verse” (p. 16) – a statement that suggests that political purpose may reside in all forms of poetic expression. Probably, too, no other statement dovetails with the political vein in Stevens’s poetry than Kenneth Burke’s (1969), in which he posits that, “whenever you find a doctrine of ‘nonpolitical’ aesthetics affirmed with fervour, look for its politics” (p. 28).

In “The Irrational Element in Poetry”, Wallace Stevens (1979) stresses this interconnectedness between poetry and politics, arguing that:

There can be no thought of escape. We are preoccupied with events, even when we do not observe them closely. We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as in politics. If politics is nearer to each of us because of the pressure of the contemporaneous, poetry, in its way, is no less so and for the same reason. (p. 55)

In this regard, Wallace Stevens preferred to write poetry that speaks to people's contemporary concerns, refusing to be placed at "the edge" or to hanker after a transcendent reality that would displace him out of the centre, as he once put it in one of his letters to Simons (1966):

I began to feel that I was on the edge: that I wanted to get to the center: that I was isolated, and that I wanted to share the common life... People say that I live in a world of my own: that sort of thing. Instead of seeking therefore for a "relentless contact", I have been interested in what might be described as an attempt to achieve the normal, the central. (p. 352)

Nevertheless, far from piling on the agony, poetry – according to Stevens – is saturated with a capacity to alleviate the dire conditions endured by people and to disentangle them from life's inconsistencies. Stevens felt the urge to deal with those realities because he increasingly felt their pressure upon him and upon the world as a whole, and only through poetry could he find release from the stultifying social, economic and political circumstances of an anxiety-ridden world. He realized that such bitter reality had, indeed, taken a heavy toll upon art and culture. He observes, again, in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (1979):

The subject that I had in mind was the effect of the depression on the interest in art.... If I dropped into a gallery I found that I had no interest in what I saw. The air was charged with anxieties and tensions... I wanted to deal with exactly such a subject and I chose that as a bit of reality, actuality, the contemporaneous... I wanted to apply my own sensibility to something perfectly matter-of-fact. (p. 50)

Poetic truth, Stevens contends, should never be divorced from factual truth; that is to say, it should always chime in with reality. In this respect, Stevens contends that "the great poems of heaven and earth have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (1951, p. 142). That is exactly the prerogative of a poet in time of disorder. Furthermore, stressing the significance of art, he eloquently argues that "the world about us would be desolate except for the world within us" – the world of our imagination, "the inward eye", to borrow Wordsworth's phrase from "Daffodils" (p. 169). Put simply, it is art and poetry in particular that endow life with meaning, despite the odds.

Poetry, according to Stevens, helps people clear up the mist of imperfection and, at other times, helps them appreciate imperfection itself, recognizing its benefits. Poetry makes people see things just as they are, marred with imperfection, and allows them to see them anew, under new lights and from auspicious vantage points. It invests the chaotic world one lives in with some order that is, paradoxically enough, teeming with antagonistic harmonies. In *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Stevens holds that poetry is "a process of arranging, deepening and enchanting", of leavening reality, no matter how leaden that reality might get (1967, p. 98). He adds: "We find an order in things. This is not an order that is given, but one that we give it. Poetry reorders the order that we find in things. It gives us back things exactly as they are, but beyond us, 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves,'" (p. 133) referring here to the audience's response to the "man with the blue guitar" when he says: "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar" (CP, p. 165).

A sort of an antagonistic harmony that helps reconcile all the contradictions and paradoxes prevalent in post-war America characterizes much of Stevens's poetry. In another letter to Simons, one in which he includes a commentary of the Statue poems, the poet writes "what this poem is concerned about is adaptation to change" (1966, p. 366). He describes this change

as “a process of passing from hopeless waste to hopeful waste. This is not pessimism”. He explains that “The world is completely waste, but it is a waste always full of *portentous lustres*” (emphasis added, p. 367). And in a way, through his poetry, he tries to show people how to live contentedly with inadequacy.

As regards poetry and politics and their somewhat shadowy relationship, Stevens hails ambiguity as a positive artistic and political value. According to him, ambiguity fosters flexibility and promotes change. Whether in politics or in poetry, he contends that “the search for a tranquil belief” must never cease since the world is anything but tranquil. He writes:

If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end,
 The future might stop emerging out of the past,
 Out of what is full of us; yet the search
 And the future emerging out of us seem to be one. (*CP*, p. 151)

What is more, the intermingling between poetry and politics seems to be “a constant desire”, as he tells Barbara Church in 1966:

The close approach to reality has always been the supreme difficulty of any art: the communication of actuality, as [poetics?], has been not only impossible, but has never appeared to be worthwhile because it loses identity as the event passes. Nothing in the world is deader than yesterday’s political (or realistic) poetry. Nevertheless the desire to combine the two things, poetry and reality, is a constant desire. (p. 760)

It follows then that the turmoil fomented by both the war and the depression greatly informs Stevens’s poetic style in the sense that it becomes replete with contradictions and conjectures. Just as nothing is settled in time of war, nothing seems to be final in his poetry. Stevens asserts in a 1966 letter to Bernard Heringman that “[he has] no wish to arrive at a conclusion” (p. 710). He avers that incessant new beginnings are sterile, and that conclusions are, as it were, lethal since they thwart any attempt at change. In “The plain Sense of Things”, he goes so far as to say that even “the absence of the imagination had/ Itself to be imagined” (*CP*, p. 502).

Ambiguities, then, should hover unresolved; and the mind should offer fresh ways of ordering the world through creation, destruction and recreation. The same holds for the war, which is “a mode / Of destroying, as the mind destroys”, as he puts it in his poem “Man and Bottle” (*CP*, p. 239). Interestingly, in a 1966 letter to Samuel French Morse, he claims: “Some people know exactly what they think. I am afraid that I am not one of those people. The same thing keeps active in my mind and rarely becomes fixed. This is true about politics as about poetry. But I suppose that it is really true about everything” (p. 641).

Throughout his artistic career, Stevens has endeavoured to place the power of poetry, the extraordinary, at the service of the recovery of life, of the ordinary. In “The Well-Dressed Man with a Beard”, he comes to the conclusion that “it can never be satisfied, the mind, never”, which further enhances Stevens’s paramount concern with the real (*CP*, p. 247). Commenting on “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War”, Stevens (1990) states that:

In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination. And consciousness of an immense war is a consciousness of fact. ... The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and

endless struggle with fact. It goes on everywhere, even in the periods that we call peace. But in war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming. (p. 165)

In the light of this statement, I will also try to examine the workings of real life on poetry and to explore what Stevens's has probably meant by saying, in “The Poems of our Climate”, that “the imperfect is our paradise” (*CP*, p. 193).

“The Imperfect is so Hot in us”: Bitter Realities and the Promise of Poetry

In compelling lines from “The Poems of our Climate”, Stevens (1971) states that:

The imperfect is our paradise.
 Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
 Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
 Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds. (*CP*, p. 194)

The imperfect, here, could be one’s ordinary life, coupled with all the residual bitterness incurred by the war and the attendant economic depression experienced during Stevens’s time. To find paradise while standing on the rubble of lives destroyed and lives yet to be snuffed out by the atrocities of the war is what poetry – Stevens’s in particular – strives to achieve. Poetry provides an aesthetic release from the world’s imperfections, and it behoves one’s imagination to address these problems. As he avers in *The Necessary Angel* (1951):

It is the vista a man sees, seated in the public garden of his native town, near by some effigy of a figure celebrated in the normal world, as he considers that the chief problems of any artist, as of any man, are the problems of the normal and that he needs, in order to solve them, everything that the imagination has to give. (p. 156)

Reading the last lines of “The Poems of our Climate” against the above statement, we might infer that the poem’s “flawed words and stubborn sounds” are clear reflection of the ordinary that governs our lives. And probing even more into the poem, we can easily discern the aforementioned contradiction that characterizes many of Stevens’s poems. In fact, in this poem, Stevens eloquently creates a “perfect” image of poetry, and almost instantly, expresses his desire to get rid of it, believing that it is poetry that ceases both to please and to satisfy. Along these lines, we can say that this poem is built upon the dichotomy between perfection and idealism versus imperfection and incompleteness.

To put it simply, in the first part of the poem, Stevens presents the reader with a perfect, flawless, simple and simplified image of “pink and white carnations” submerged in “clear water” inside “a brilliant bowl” (*CP* 193). Taking into account the meta-poetic aspect of this particular poem, the carnations can be perceived as allegorical representations of perfect, “pure” poems – that is to say, poems that provide the readers with little short of ideal images of beauty and the ensuing peace of mind. Such clean and cleansing image, as it were, is made even purer by the light inside the room, reflecting the “newly-fallen snow” (*CP*, p. 193). Again, “the newly-fallen snow” and the “snowy air” endow this “beautiful” tableau with an even fresher outlook and more vigorous feel. All these elements contribute to the creation of a

“simplified day”, the speaker says, which takes one away from the ennui of every day life – an idea that runs through the following lines:

The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there. (*CP*, p. 193)

In this first part of the poem, Stevens manages to create a tangible, almost flesh-like image of a sort of poetry that “strip[s] one of one’s torments, conceal[s]/ The evilly compounded, vital I,/ And [makes] it fresh in a world of white” (*CP*, p. 193). To the reader’s surprise (and probably to his reassurance, for someone who is accustomed with Stevens’s style and the paradox that governs his poetics), Stevens soon qualifies his statement about the beauty inherent in such simplicity and perfection, saying that “one would want more, one would need more,/ More than a world of white and snowy scents” (*CP*, p. 194).

This image, Stevens adds, fails to accommodate the “never-resting mind” (*CP*, p. 194). Perfect and ideal as it might seem, it fails to satisfy, for the mind “would want to escape, come back/ To what had been so long composed” (*CP*, p. 194). If we extend this metaphor to poems and readers, we can infer Stevens’s insinuation that readers would desire to find more than a la-la land, as it were, in poetry. Readers would desire poetry that speaks to the imperfection within which they live and that shows them, paradoxically but intriguingly enough, the merits of such imperfection – a point on which I shall dwell with more details later in my analysis.

If we go back to the porcelain containing the white and pink carnations, it is very intriguing to note that the speaker repeats the word “cold” twice while describing that porcelain. The “snowy-air”, once agreeable and soothing, now confers to the scene a cold atmosphere – one that is almost freezing. The “restless” mind, according to Stevens, could not endure such frozen state, neither could it put up with this “complete simplicity”, on such a “simplified day” (*CP*, p. 193). This “world of white”, no matter how “fresh” it gets, is not gratifying any more (*CP*, p. 193). The repetition of “more”, three times in the last lines of the second stanza, further reinforces the mind’s ardent desire for more than this naked world and, by association, this blank poetry. And should we pay closer attention to the different sound devices deployed in this first stanza, we may find a pertinent correspondence between musicality and the general mood conveyed by such a “perfect” tableau. The alliterative /b/ in “brilliant” and “bowl;” the alliterative /k/ in “cold” and “cold;” and the consonant /k/ in “pink” and “carnation” – all these plosive sounds compound the harshness of such a lifeless, almost bleak image even more.

The “never-resting mind” finds this image too perfect and too spiritless to bear. Stevens accounts for this attitude by stating that “the imperfect is so hot is us”, which runs counter to the cold porcelain that he describes in the first stanza. The imperfect is so vivid and fervent inside us that our mind would ultimately shy away from this cold perfection regardless of the beauty inherent in it. Most importantly, Stevens concludes his poem by putting forth a verbal and an auditory imagery that lies in sharp contrast to the visual imagery dominating especially the first part of the poem. Delight, he contends, does not lie in those perfect and ideal images that some poems impart, but rather resides in those “flawed words and stubborn sounds” that both speak to and echo the world’s imperfection and, almost magically, make the reader content with it (*CP*, p. 194).

Therefore, in its restlessness, the mind “would want to escape, come back/ To what had been long composed”, says the speaker, which points out to the mind’s constant desire to recapture the past and its perpetual longing for a more promising future (*CP*, p. 194). This idea leads me to my final comment on the implications as well as undertows of the word “imperfect”. My own understanding of Stevens’s “imperfect” here is the lack of completion and want of finality, which conveys man’s hankering after a perfect world, albeit with the knowledge that such a world will always remain unattainable. This is probably what Stevens means by saying that “the imperfect is so hot in us” (*CP*, p. 194). To put it simply, the imperfection that characterizes our lives is what makes us, actually, live our lives. And this is what makes life, despite its bitterness, paradise-like. Being submerged in imperfection, in the world’s flaws, is what motivates our search for perfection and what invests life with meaning. This is exactly what makes ordinary, imperfect life so paradisiacal.

“The Poems of Our Climate”, Stevens proposes, should never shun imperfection but rather fully embrace it. They should contribute to the search for conclusions without necessarily providing them. And in so doing, yes, they truly poeticize the imperfect.

Conclusion

Nothing can better conclude the present paper than the following statement where Wallace Stevens defines poetry:

It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (1951, p. 36)

Stevens’s poetry presents, indeed, the mind as restless, always “in the act of finding/ What will suffice” (*CP*, p. 239), what will satisfy. And this satisfaction may be “of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing” (*CP*, p. 240). In the eyes of Stevens, poetry could and should actually be as simple as that, and not as frigid and perfect as the “pink and white carnations” in “clear water in a brilliant bowl” (*CP*, p. 193).

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