

Aesthetic Conception in the Poems of Wallace Stevens

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Abstract-

Wallace Stevens was a great modern American poet. His poetics is a fashionable contention of the times, where both artists and poets are considering the relationship between representations and reality. Yet through Stevens' admiration of several avant-garde movements, we witness his complex interplay between genres themselves. Rooted in the beginnings of Post-Impressionism, Paul Cézanne's struggle for "realisation" connected with Stevens' grappling of art and reality. This paper will explore how Stevens' interest in painting informed the development of a practice of poetry, as well as evolution of an aesthetic theory of poetics.

Key words:- Aesthetic, vorticism, cubism, collaging, homophone.

Introduction -The 20th century saw an intense fulfilment of Horace's adage *Ut pictura poesis*. Written in his *Ars Poetica*; the literal translation is, 'as is painting, so is poetry' (Rensselaer). A comment of aesthetic criticism, this phrase was extensively examined through art and poetic practice to determine a relationship between the two arts. The poetic Imagist movement for example, was led from Pound's experimentation with Chinese characters. As a combination of both the pictorial and textual, they served as a model for his technique called the 'Ideogrammic Method', which allowed poetry to deal with the abstract through concrete images. Pound's realisation of the physical quality of the page "insists on the autonomy of the text, on its integrity as an expressive form" (Bohn 67). In analogous thought, art movements such as Vorticism and Cubism stressed interplay between visual and literary arts. Artists like Picasso starting appropriating text into their paintings, by collaging found clippings of newspapers, poetry and mass-produced books (Davidson 13). Poets like E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams responded with intrigue to the methods in which artists created an overall construction while incorporating different media. Armed with a novel perspective of the potential of the page, poets experimented with similar processes of collage, appropriation and pastiche creating fragmented and discursive poetry. The visual composition of the page implied for the first time "a way of moving from one element of another without providing the usual rhetorical connectives" (Davidson 11). With much of his work rooted in concerns of the aesthetic, it is reasonable to assume that Stevens' follows the same mantra of *Ut pictura poesis* that his contemporaries did. Considering his close correspondent William Carlos Williams for example, had an equal interest in art and regularly frequented galleries, comparisons are easily drawn to Williams' occasional practice of ekphrasis. A type of poetry defined as "verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan 3). For instance, Williams' attempt to imitate the sixteenth-century masterpiece

created by Peter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. He uses the exact same title to emphasise a direct attempt at replication in words. Therefore, with an imitate glance at Stevens' work, frequently titles appear that stylistically would easily fit a work of art, usually a combination of a precise yet abstract figure, such as "The Men That Are Falling", "Two Figures in Dense Violet Light" or "Gray Room", raise an expectation for the same.

The poem "Study of Two Pears" references a tradition of still-life art, for example Van Gogh's *Still-Life with Pears* or Cézanne's *Trois Poires* are similarly titled. The opening line "*Opusculum paedagogum*" may alienate the reader and narrow the audience to a select readership who spoke and understood Latin, yet the translation of this phrase means "a little work for teaching purposes" (Cook 137). This is only the beginning of contradictions that underline Steven's typically ironic writing, where this line either denotes to the instruction to follow or, in its own construct of language, already inhibits those who might very well need, or want, to learn via this first obstruction. This effectively nonsensical beginning may be a satirical comment of Horace's theory in *Ars Poetica* that poetry should both delight and instruct. The title itself portrays the duality explored in the poem, between a physical and metaphysical relationship of representation; where the observer is asked to realise that the fruit in the painting "resemble nothing else" (4). It strikes as an intense visual pun, as wordplay on the homophone of a 'pair of pears' prepares for the double meaning of 'reality' and representation. While Stevens' positions the pears in a frame of objectivity, in that they are not metaphorical, not reminiscent of "viols, / nudes or bottles" (2-3), metaphysically this conflict with the representational nature of art. While he asserts that they are "Not flat surfaces / Having curved outlines" (9-10), this creates a complex relationship between the 'flat' two-dimensional pictorial which creates an illusion of three-dimensional 'curved' space. This is made more apparent through the knowledge that the objects are "modelled" through post-impressionist "bits of blue" (14) to form a leaf, for example, and that their "shadows/ [...] Are blobs on a green cloth" (21-2). Through this examination, while the pears may not be seen as "the observer wills" through the form of writing, the narration guides the reader to awareness of how such an image should and is observed – room for personal interpretation is removed.

However, while much of Stevens' work includes representations of art, it is not an exact attempt at ekphrasis. In fact, any resemblance to such an exercise of *Ut pictura poesis* is often used to draw attention to the process of representation itself, not only discarding mimesis of the image but in so far as to assert the presence of words and the whole range of practices involved between *seeing* the original and rendering a duplicate. To adapt Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis, as a step removed by a metaphysical attention, Stevens' work is the "practice of verbal presentation of the process of visual representation". Indeed, Stevens' ascribes a relationship between the practice of poetry and visual art, where the metaphysical problems of aesthetic representation could be explored:

To a large extent, the problems of poets are the problems of painters and poets must turn to the literature of painting for a discussion of their own problems

(Stevens, *Poets.org*)

Stylistically Stevens is seen to engage with these avant-garde movements. “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” for example, is often cited as having an affinity to Imagism or Cubism (Buttel 165). In thirteen segments, the poem is an exercise in perspectivism where in each section the blackbird “Is involved / in what [the speaker] knows” (33-4). Ranging in scale and attention, and changing between first, second and third narratives, the poem encapsulates a “euphony” found in this fractured world. The presence of the blackbird is charged with creating unity for the piece, despite being a “small part of the pantomime”. The potential theme of philosophical nominalism is expounded by section IV, “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one”. While the different coherent sections may be an example of *simultaneity* which concerns Cubism, this focus on unification has possible closer ties to the Imagist representation of a psychological complex in an “instant of time”, supported by Stevens’ own clarification of intent, where he remarks that the poem is not a “collection of epigrams or ideas but of sensations” (252). However, unlike the multi-faceted but *still* construct captured in Imagism, Stevens’ poem shows experience as a constant state of flux. The poem closes with the paradox of representing several moments of time within one space, which established securely by geographical parameters: “It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow”.

While “Thirteen Ways of Looking as a Blackbird” demonstrates Stevens’ experimenting with similar processes of trending art movements, it is atypical in its descriptive approach compared to his normative metaphysical concerns. For the most part, Stevens’ work is obsessed with an aesthetic problem, where art is seen as a “supreme manner of grappling reality” (Wells 7), and therefore an “important degree of his poetry is about poetry” itself (Wells 7). The notion that the poet harbours an almost “incestuous relation between the poet and his productions” which leaves Stevens to speak in “soliloquy with himself” (Wells 7) is “The Man with the Blue Guitar”. The poem imagines a conversation with the subject of Pablo Picasso’s painting *The Old Guitarist*, where an observer objects that the figure doesn’t play “things as they are”, he responds that “things as they are / Are changed upon the guitar”. Surreal, this reciprocal exercise challenges the relationship between art and reality, questioning the difference between imagination and how things are, “or as they have been conventionally perceived” (Costello 172). This philosophical thought, brought on by the surrendering of mimesis, is a meta-concept that René Magritte presents in *The Treachery of Images*. Under the depiction of a pipe is painted “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” meaning, “This is not a pipe.” The poem’s performance on the nature of modern art is underpinned by the description of Picasso’s work as a “hoard of destructions”. Wherein the various collage of material, represents the compositions success in unifying complex ideas of experience; a harmony born from the necessary disassembling of other works. The poem creates a challenge to the complex relationship between art and representation, where interplay between different genres of the arts only furthers these tensions. The concept is brought to a metaphysical peak, when David Hockney created a piece in 1976 titled *The Blue Guitar: Etchings by David Hockney Who Was Inspired by Wallace Stevens Who Was Inspired by Pablo Picasso*. Echoing through time, the dialogue between representations creates a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, where meaning is threatened with deconstruction.

Some critics have acknowledged a “conscious relationship to the romantic legacy” (Ayers 39) in Stevens’ work due to a focus on the primacy of imagination, where the viewer actively engages with the world. As Ayers reasons, this in-flux concept of perception rejects the “apparent objectivity of Imagism” (39). Yet specific to the form of poetry, and literature, is the ability to playfully examine the complexities of representation, between subject and object, where the syntax of words themselves create paradoxes. This attention to the presence of language avoids complete mimesis by demonstrating how the viewer forms the world. While both Stevens’s and Pound’s practice of poetry is aesthetically grounded, which involves the concern whether experience can be embodied in art or language, Pound’s poetics is based on the challenge of representing a precise instant. The principle of his theory is relayed in *A Retrospect*, where the Image “presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Pound 4). Unlike Stevens, this perceives an immediate transition between the material object and the subject’s perception; ignoring Stevens’s ideas of the active value of words in forming meaning. In contrast, Stevens’s poetics asserts not only that aesthetic experience is never complete, but that writing itself continues an open discourse, rejecting finality, and as part of the lens that we perceive the world *constitutes* it (Ayers 41). Stevens’ subverts Pound’s pre-linguistic concept of experience by refusing to adhere to a post-linguistic one. While he acknowledges that verbal representations are purposefully or inadvertently subjective, as literature is affected by the writer’s choice of language and syntax, he resists the potential to create a dichotomised theory of experience and therefore avoids “confirming” the other position by opposition (Derrida 41). The insistence that words are *immanent* within an experience, a collective and ongoing sensation of aesthetic perception and representation, subverts the Imagist distinction between subject and object and deconstructs “the binary oppositions of metaphysics” (Derrida 41).

An example of Steven’ keen awareness of the process of the aesthetic experience, in opposition to Imagism, is his “So-and-So Reclining on the Couch”. The distinctly American term ‘couch’, a hardened pronunciation from its French origin ‘couche’, subverts the poem’s thematic European influence, which Wells insists resembles “Matisse’s grace and Picasso’s vigour” (120). The purposeful contrast and ambiguity of the title wittingly draws attention to the artist’s process of abstraction. A trope of occidental fine-art, the choice of the nude for a subject explores the evolving developments in the process of painting. As historically the nude was “with few exceptions [...] a phenomenon of Western art” (Graves), the poem focuses on the verve of the *avant-garde* to break from traditional practice. Stevens’ demonstrates his awareness of these desires by guiding the reader through the abstract process of rendering an “anonymous” (5) model into a representational figure, where her identity is separate from the figurative potential of her body. Unlike Pound, the process is demonstrated, a breaking of mimesis that shows the nuances of experience. Escaping binaries, the poet observes three separate concepts, where the last is the unstable result of the others. Projection A describes the dual experience of the figure, which is both “this mechanism”, the motivation to paint and “this apparition”, the abstract form – the shell of the model. Projection B is the process between the object and the representation; “The suspension, as in solid space” of the artist’s hand for example is an “invisible gesture” if withdrawn

because it isn't recorded in paint. Lastly Projection C exists as "half who made her"; both the representation and the person, "the flux between / Between the thing as idea and / The idea as thing". The speaker validates the certainty of unrepresentative experience, where one "walks easily / The unpainted shore, accepts the world / As anything but sculpture". Once used, the artist cordially says goodbye and thanks to "Mrs. Pappadoplous" (27). While some critics argued that due to the use of her "very unusual name", 'So-and-So' "receives some validation as a human being instead of a subject" (O'Neale) this ignores the fact that 'Pappadoplous', while incorrectly gendered, is the most common Greek surname (NetworkMedia.com). Some critics assert that "by naming the figure, [Stevens] makes of it a real thing [...] rather than an artificial entity" (Lavery 122). To be able to make distinctions between material reality and a metaphysical state, the difference between 'Projection A' and 'Projection C', this conclusion seems essential. An algebraic solution. For this result to succeed the poem must abruptly end with the return to material reality of the model, and so "he makes of the painting (and the poem) a completed work [...] the demonstration is over" (Lavery 122). However, essentially the projection remains in flux, she is born in anonymity and leaves in it; Stevens creates the illusion of conclusion by giving her a name, yet it is so popular it is effectively meaningless in informing the individual's identity, the poem closes with an unsatisfactory and unsettling ending with this consideration.

The defined migratory states in "So-and-So Reclining on the Couch" as "things" or "ideas", references the Imagist aim to make the abstract into the concrete, and also the construct of an objective reality of aesthetic experience. It is a direct reference to William Carlos Williams' famous coined phrase in his influential poem "Paterson", "no ideas about in things". The last poem in Stevens' *Collected Poems* expounds the theory further, as if to test if it can hold up in practice to metaphysical scrutiny. Set in a winter's landscape, "Not Ideas About The Things But The Thing Itself" uses the conventionally Romantic metaphor of the arrival of spring. Thematically evocative of Thomas Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush" about the dawn of the modern era, a bird call signals the arrival of knowledge. Metaphysically, the poem deals with the dismissal of abstract romantic ideas by subverting the form, with the intension to discard "Ideas About The Thing" to arrive at a concrete object, "The Thing Itself". The speaker tries to understand where the bird's call is coming from, using empirical evidence to reach a conclusion. They mark the procession of the seasons by the sun's "panache" position above the snow, establishing the time. Relying on previous experience to conclude "It must have been outside". However, despite claims that "He knew that heard it" the poem questions the concept of objective knowledge. Ultimately, the call is "Still far away" and because of the subjective nature of memory, remembered experience is futile. This lack of resolution demonstrates Stevens' thinking that it is impossible to reconcile romantic interest in the human imagination with the proposed objectivity of Imagism. Even "knowledge" becomes subjective. While the poem clarified a concept of *seeing* "reality", against the title instructions it used a metaphor of the light from the "sun [...] coming" to break through the illusion of "sleep". While the voice asserts that the call of knowledge was not imagined in a dream. The imagery of the stagecraft "vast ventriloquism", constructs an idea that the form of the poem itself inhibits the concrete "Thing" and instead enshrouds perception in the abstract. Considering

particularly that the concept of the illusion, symbolised as sleep, is described as “faded papier mâché”. This furthers Stevens’ argument that getting to the concrete in poetry is unattainable, the page is a barrier between the subject and object – and presented as an exercise in philosophy so over-trodden that is suitably described as well-worn chewed-up paper.

The theoretical influence of this aesthetic problem, is wearisome for some. Towards the end of his life, Henri Matisse described an urgent need to overcome the weight of the question of representation:

I sense a need to be free of all [...] theoretical ideas, to express myself fully, beyond this fashionable distinction between the representational and the non-representational

(Essers 89)

What had started out to liberate genres, freeing the boundaries between poetry and art, had to some extent had stifled creativity. As a follower of Paul Cézanne, who he called “father to us all” alongside Picasso, Matisse spent his life also struggled with desire to “perception and composition, world and will” (Costello 170). While Matisse theorised an art practice of “Abstraction rooted in reality” (Essers 89), Stevens too compiled a poetics of ‘Supreme Fiction’ with a basis in the abstract. Drawing inspiration from Imagism, Canto I instructs “It Must Be Abstract”; art must be a symbolic representation and not a mimetic one (Vendler). Seemingly a resolution is found to an earlier work “Poetry Is a Destructive Force”, where poetry was symbolised as a man killer, in the fifth section of the canto there are “heroic children who time breeds / Against the first idea – to lash the lion”. Stevens’ definition of the abstract seems to fly against Pound’s but results in the same “explicit rendering”. Secondly, Canto II asserts “It Must Change”, this idea that art is transient has its beginning in “Thirteen Ways” and overcomes the rigidity of a fixed moment. The third instruction “It Must Give Pleasure” is a “post-Classical, post-Christian assertion” Vendler argues. In contrast to the element of Horatian platitude in “Study of Two Pears”, this assertion of art’s need to give pleasure, without instruction, transforms Stevens’ earlier work into a satire of artist’s concern with Greek art criticism, rather than deliberate reticence.

Conclusion-

In conclusion, throughout the 20th century the discussion and influence of avant-garde movements was dominant and inescapable. Modernism became synonymous with the experimentation of form. Wallace Stevens reacted with due interest to several Post-Impressionist movements, exploring the potential of Cubism and Fauvism while developing an aesthetic theory of poetics. To escape the metaphysical contradictions of linguistics, he formulated a non-mimetic symbolic principle of what art should be in “Notes on Supreme Fiction”. Yet it was the *how* that most captured his interest; a questioning process that resulted in a continually changing concept of art, which utilised the power of the imagination in pursuit of pleasure. However, despite the

fashion of shaping a practice of poetics, Stevens set himself apart from virtually every contemporary movement in poetry. His attention to content, and the question of poetry itself, presided over aspect of his poetry. Unlike the poetry of Williams Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, Stevens asserted his indifference to the poetic form: "I have never felt that form matters enough to be controlled by it" (MacLeoud 121). At the heart of his work is a joy for the complexity of language, where words shape meaning and raise rhetorical philosophical questions – enabling a discussion of the nuances of a concept. At times, romantic and abstract, Stevens stood against the crowd. His poetry was generated mainly by the *idea* and the *discussion* of art, which affected his concept of representation. The page as a material reality was of little interest. While Stevens never directly responded to a single work of art mimetically, his engagement with the genre resulted in an intense energy; colouring his poetry in rich visual language that he had picked up from the likes of Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse along the way. Though remaining textually grounded, these peppered symbols elevate his work beyond the dry potential of his metaphysical considerations, stimulating a reader's desire to unravel his complex philosophy and to experience the pleasure of his art.

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