

**WALLACE STEVENS': POETRY OF EXISTENCE AND BEING**

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ABSTRACT

Among twentieth-century American poets, the profoundest yes was Wallace Stevens', and it was hard earned, as the lines quoted above indicate. His is a central achievement in twentieth-century American poetry. Though Wallace Stevens is unquestionably a modern poet grappling in his poetry with the issues which confronts the moderns, yet in several respects he is so close to the Romantics, especially the British Romantic poets that some critics have gone to the extent of calling him an heir of the Romantics. As Daniel Fuchs has observed, in the positive sense of the word 'Romantic', Stevens "is himself a romantic, himself a chauvinist of the self. It was the romantics who proclaimed their faith in the sustaining and ennobling power of the imagination and in the reality of the world. It was the romantics too who sought a oneness between man and the natural world, making knowledge something real rather than something certain".

Key words: Romantics, faith, world

INTRODUCTION

Stevens was always conscious of the gross insufficiency of language to render the true text of the personal experience into concrete form. Says Stevens: "What the eye beholds may be the text of life. It is, nevertheless, a text that we do not write." (NA, 76). Since there is no other way of rendering what the eye beholds into concrete expression, the only alternative left is to depend upon language and suggestively hint at it. In this context of suggestively hinting at the possible concreteness of personal experience, Keats influenced Stevens to a large extent during his *Harmonium* phase. In fact, he maintained a life-time rapport with the poetics of Keats. More often than not, he went diagonally opposite to the Keatsian manner of stylistic presentation as in his "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76) and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black-bird" (CP, 92). This is born out of his opposition to all forms of idealism, including the romantic idealism. Even then, the broad poetic beliefs of Keats are substantially taken into consideration as they strike a significant parallel along with the existential thinkers.

Stevens calls this immediate apprehension as reality, He says, "...reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it." (NA,25). Needless to say, that 'the life that is lived' refers to the immediately perceptible human feelings and emotions. In the context of Stevens' existential leanings a few more extracts from Keats's letters become important. Imagination, for

Keats, had always been drawn into the orbit of sensation and perception. He calls it the "Snail-horn perception of beauty". There is no wonder if man is capable of (his) being in certain clear and doubtless states of experience. But that could be possible when essence is placed before existence.

According to Carl Jaspers, existentialism is "... a philosophy which does not cognize objects but elucidates and makes actual the being of the thinker". This is what Stevens fulfills in his poetry; and, therefore, the earth, with all its taunting uncertainties, mysteries and doubts should be aesthetically sufficient for the purpose of his poetry, and should necessarily be sufficient for the purpose of human life on earth. Stevens' final stands in his "Sunday Morning" (CP, 69) are far too explicit to need a comment.

The entire *milieu* of our times is such that the personal sense of being-in-the world has no place in our lives. Man is totally lost to the world of others; and, therefore, he is lonely in himself and unfortunate. So, Stevens' stylistic alteration has no mean purpose. Moreover, his opposition to the Romanticism has its own relevance for his existential stands.

Stevens has nothing to do with the "external physical world". The "external physical world" speaks to him in a fundamental mode and compels the instincts to become the necessary forces in order to integrate it in themselves in their own makings or creations. At least as an abstract it has no relevance for his poetry.

In his *Harmonium* phase Stevens, many a time deplored the loss of this personal sense of existing in "instinctive integrations" in the context of our lives in our times. His "Sunday Morning" (CP, 66) is the best possible example. In his "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP, 64) he dramatically executes the very funeral of this personal sense of the so called "Snail-horn perception of Beauty", as the same "stiff and stubborn, man-locked set(s)" are responsible for her death. They are individually named, rather nick-named, and invited to attend on her funeral, and perform their appointed task with all their usual hilarity:

Call the roller of big cigars,
The muscular one, and bid him whip
In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
As they are used to wear, and let the boys
Bring flowers in last month's newspapers. (CP, 64)

The expressionistic symbolistic method is obvious. But more obvious than this is the immense fury and bursting anger in the grudging and nudging tonalities of the expression. The poet is the only concerned mourner. All others are such unconcerned lot that the poet is instantly provoked to expose them in crude and low Dickensian caricatures. The personal sense of being-in-the-world died in our times as a result of a concentrated historical process; and the process started some time after the Renaissance, most probably with the Elizabethians. Stevens gives them the sing of "roller(s) of big sigars". Incidentally, it may be pointed out here that tobacco was first introduced into the Western world by Sir Walter Raleigh when he presented, a sheef of tobacco leaves to Queen Elizabeth I, after his glorious and adventurous hunt after El

Dorado. The people after Renaissance revived the Greek and Latin philosophies of life and laid the plinth of our so called broached modern civilization. So, they are given the prerogative of being in charges in the kitchen at the funeral. The next batch consists of the neo-classicists. They are named as the wenchers, and it is everybody's "knowledge" that wenchers care least for their dress. They run on their show with borrowed dresses also, and often even without them. Had not the neo-classicists borrowed their everything from the Augustine Age? The next group consists of the romantic Revivalists and the Victorians. Their bringing "flowers in the last months" news papers" is obvious and needs no comment. Stevens' point is they were all grand imitators, and as a result of the direct application of their imitative enthusiasm to the social and cultural affairs-poetry and arts are not free, of course -- the personal sense of being-in-the-world died a natural death. Hence Stevens says "Let be finale of seem, / The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream". (CP, 64). According to the first great philosophers of ancient Greece water was the only element; and along with all other effects of the ancient Greeks, water too was nicely confectioned into "ice-cream"; and the people completely forgot about their elemental fears and concerns. "The emperor of ice-cream" (CP, 64) is quite so impotent that he could not elicit care and concern from his subjects. For them to be is only just a "finale of seem". "The necessary angel of earth" (CP, 496) having been put to death they have also lost all the fears of their beings. They are a mere shallow fun making broods. Otherwise, it could not have-be possible for them to make two world wars in a span of thirty years. The fallenness of the people and the contingent grievance of Stevens are sufficiently understandable. The second stanza further intensified the pathos. Says Stevens:

Take from the dresser of deal.
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
 On which she embroidered fantails once
 And spread it so as to cover her face.
 If her horny feet protrude, they come
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.
 Let the lamp affix its beam.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

(CP, 64)

She is quite so poor now that even the usual and customary coffin box could not be purchased for her; may, not even the glass knobbed one, leave aside the gold, silver and nickel knobbed ones. The only alternative left is to wrap her with "that sheet / On which she embroidered fan tails once". That may fall short of her grown up stature presently; but nothing else could be done. Even that has to be taken (purchased) from the "dresser of deal". The final doom of the personal sense of being-in-the-world occurred with the emergence of the capitalist business man, with his high deals and low deals in the market. It may appear surprising as to how her own "sheet" on which she fondly "embroidered fantails once" when she was a child, was required to be taken from the "dresser of deal". But for those -who can but a little bit of insight

into the business strategies of the modern world this should not be surprising. In spite of Stevens, with his heart burning funeral oration, who would care for her now? Even the last drops of oil in the lamp which was placed on her head side are getting burnt up and its beam is on the verge of being extinguished. Stevens' heart-rending imperative outcry "Let the lamp affix the beam", in spite of all your positivistically confected philosophies and science like "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" (CP, 64), finally sparks off the immense fury of his heart. The poem contains the Keatsian intensity and passion in its structure. Hence it attracted the utmost attention of the Stevens' critics. But all of them tried to give extended, interpretation in the symbolic, expressionistic and archetypal directions". But none of them tried to link the poem with Keatsian poetics, which automatically converges into the modern existential philosophy.

CONCLUSION

It is largely Stevens' insistence on the role of imagination that links him with the Romantics. But as noted above, Stevens denies any transcendent and supernatural power to imagination. Secondly, he combines imagination with reality, even quotidian reality, and would at times prefer to have a mind of winter rather than rely on Olympian imagination to escape the realities of the world. Thirdly, the order that imagination imposes on reality is, according to Stevens' belief, temporary, rather than permanent or transcendental. In "The Idea of Order at Key West", for example, the order imposed by the girl's music on the incoherent sound of the sea is an imaginative order, but there is nothing permanent or supernatural about it. This is also true of Stevens' theory of 'supreme fiction': it is to be a fiction, not a substitute for reality. Finally, Stevens is every inch a modern poet in his use of images, symbols and verse forms. Even when he takes resources to a traditional verse form, blank verse for example, he creates something new, as in "Sunday Morning", and "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman". Old forms are used to create an entirely different form, as in the case of "The House Was Quite and the World Was Calm" a new metrical form is attained out of the inveterate violation of the old. Thus, though Stevens may call himself a romantic in the extended and positive sense of the term, the fact remains that he is an important modern poet dealing with modernist problems.

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