



## Wallace Stevens' Affinities with Romantics

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Wallace Stevens, Romantics, Imagination, reality, modern poet

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### ABSTRACT

One of the significant modern American poet, Wallace Stevens was awarded both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award for his invaluable contribution towards literature. Stevens' poetry constantly brings out the tension between concrete reality and human imagination. Stevens' poetic oeuvre captures the dilemma of romanticism and modernism which makes this poet closer to Romantics like Wordsworth and Coleridge, yet at the same time maintaining acute modern sensibility in his work. The present paper attempts to bring an analysis of Wallace Stevens as a poet by drawing a comparison of him with Romantics through his poetic work.

"After the final no there comes a yes  
And on that yes the future world depends."

Stevens, "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard"

Among twentieth-century American poets, the profoundest 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" (Fuchs *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens*). Moreover, in his questioning of traditional beliefs and of modes of poetry, and in his love for nature and the emphasis on man as an individual, all Stevens is very close to the Romantics. Stevens himself did not have any objection to his being called a romantic, provided the word was used in a special sense which he defined in his comments on Miss Moore's poetry:

The Romantic in the pejorative sense merely connotes obsolescence, but that word has, or should have, another sense... [The] romantic in its other sense, meaning always the living and at the same time the imaginative, the youthful, the delicate and a variety of things which it is not necessary to try to particularize at the moment, constitutes the vital element in poetry.... It [romantic] means, now-a-days, an uncommon intelligence. It means in a time like our own of violent feelings equally violent feelings and the most skillful expression of the genuine. (Stevens *Opus Posthumous*)

But at the same time, Stevens had no use for what he called the obsolescence of the romantics. In his theory of imagination, he clearly wrote about the decadence of the romantics, especially in connection with their conception of imagination:

We must somehow cleanse the imagination of the romantic. We feel, without being particularly intelligent about it, that the imagination as metaphysics will survive logical positivism unscathed. At the same time, we feel, and with the sharpest possible intelligence, that it is not worthy to survive if it is to be identified with the romantic. The imagination is one of the great human powers. The romantic belittles it. The imagina-

tion is liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling. The imagination is the only genius. It is intrepid and eager and the extreme of its achievement lies in its abstraction. The achievement of the romantic, on the contrary, lies in minor wish-fulfillments and it is incapable of abstraction. (Stevens *The Necessary Angel*)

Stevens' relationship with the romantics is thus a strange love-hate relationship: he does not hesitate to be called a romantic if the word is used in the positive sense as he himself has defined it, but he is against facile philosophizing, sentimentality and the failure of the imagination (in the sense he uses this phrase in the quotation from *The Necessary Angel*) which often characterize romantic poets. But the similarities and differences between Stevens and the Romantics are more profound than what the above outline suggests.

### SIMILARITIES

**1. Imagination**— In all his poetry Stevens, like the romantics, lays great emphasis on the supremacy of the imagination over human reason. Imagination for him is a kind of belief, like all other beliefs. But whereas the imaginative constructs of religion and philosophy are suspect in his eyes, the world created by imagination is not. Even the supreme fiction in which he believes is a product of imagination, arrived at by an interaction of the imagination with reality. In his concept of imagination Stevens is quite close to Coleridge. For Coleridge, imagination is the power that allows the individual mind to achieve a synthesis which involves all the individual's resources of feeling and thought. Imagination, according to Coleridge, can be divided into two phases: First is the abstraction phase in which stimuli are withdrawn from nature into the personal individual. The second phase is that of symbol-making in which synthesis takes place between the universal and the particular elements. In "It Must Give Pleasure" of *Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction*, Stevens' insistence on the unity of the male and female principles is equivalent to the primary and the secondary aspects of imagination in Coleridge's theory. The main difference between Coleridge's concept of imagination and Stevens' is this: Coleridge tends to relate imagination to the supernatural, but Stevens refuses to do so. In his eyes, imagination is something this-worldly and has nothing to do with the supernatural. But the comparison between the theories is quite strong; for, as William Van O'Connor demonstrates, both Coleridge and Stevens oppose any dichotomy between imagination and the rationalist mind; both think of imagination as a way of establishing communion with nature; and both use light (of moon, and the stars) as symbols for the im-

agination.

2. **Description of and Interest in Nature**—One other remarkable feature that Stevens' poetry share with the Romantics' is the description of and interest in nature. Stevens' descriptions of natural scenes and of joy in nature often approximate Wordsworth's and his blank verse also reaches the same intensity. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," for example, Stevens gives a beautiful description of the scene near the sea-port:

The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Or, take the following extract from "The Sunday Morning":

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail  
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;  
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;  
And, in the isolation of the sky,  
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make  
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,  
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C" is similarly close to Wordsworth's "Recluse", and so is Stevens' "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction." Harold Bloom, commenting on "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" sees in Stevens a direct descendant of the romantics. According to Bloom, Stevens mixes the modes of quest romance and poetry of vision in order to describe a poet withdrawing himself from the world into fabricated fictions. For this reason, Bloom describes "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction" as not only 'purely romantic', but also 'the supreme achievement of post-Romanticism.' There is, however, one important difference between Wordsworth and Stevens: Though Stevens delights in nature as much as Wordsworth, he sees no immortal, transcendent power in it. His attitude is rather like the attitude of Coleridge who, in his "Dejection Ode" wrote:

Lady we receive, but what we give  
In our life alone doth Nature' live.

3. **Relation between Man and the World**—In yet another respect, Stevens is quite close to Wordsworth and other romantics: his belief in the interrelatedness of man and his universe. In the work of both poets, the universe containing and contained in the consciousness of the observer is perceived directly without any mediating figure between the poet and the visible concrete world. Both the poets turn to a merger to earth and imagination to provide the possibilities of creation that transcend the usual limits of time and space. Stevens, like Wordsworth, is usually concerned with the relationship of the perceiving mind to the external world of nature. In Stevens' "Credences of Summer" as much as in Wordsworth's "The Recluse," the mind and the external reality are interdependent. Stevens confronts the nineteenth-century problems of the mind's and the world's relationship. He believes in thought and the mind as the last refuge from reality, and reflects nineteenth-century values in his 'poetry of nostalgia' which expresses a desire for what he cannot have.

4. **The Romantic Rebel**—In this attitude towards traditional poetry and poetics, and ideas about man and nature, Stevens emerges as a kind of romantic rebel. He questions the supremacy of traditional beliefs and exhorts his readers to return to direct, personal experience. In poetic form too, he makes several innovations even as he incorporates Wordsworthian blank verse. In many of his poems which deal with his theory of poetry, Stevens grapples with the precise relation between poetry and

tradition on the one hand, and between poetry and the world, on the other. His insistence on a 'supreme fiction' does not ignore the premise that his too is a 'fiction', willingly believed in. In his definition of the romantic rebel—and he includes himself in this category—Stevens says that a romantic rebel is one who dwells in the ivory tower which nonetheless affords him a view of the public dump. But Stevens' romanticism is not a detached idealism; nor is his rebellion a sterile rejection. For being an agnostic rather than a transcendentalist, Stevens believes in the reality of this world and emphasizes the need for the interrelation between reality and imagination.

#### DISSIMILARITIES

Though Stevens' poetry has definite echoes of romantic poets, and his poetic theory, especially on the role of imagination, is also close to Coleridge's, there are also remarkable differences. Stevens himself is fully aware of these differences. That is why even as he speaks of the necessity of interaction between imagination and reality, he is also aware of the fact that the two are separate. In a poem, like "The Snow Man", for example, Stevens emphasizes the need to see the reality as it is, bare of all imaginative projections that the human mind is capable of bestowing upon a wintry landscape:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow....

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Similarly, in "Sunday Morning", and his even more iconoclastic "A High – Toned Old Christian Woman", Stevens emphasizes the need for discarding traditional constructs of human imagination. Reality according to Stevens, must be accepted along with its evil and suffering. This is his central concern in an important later poem, "Esthetique du mal". Secondly, Stevens does recognize the pressure of reality that may be so heavy on imagination that the latter may even cease to function. In "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad", which has been compared with Coleridge's "Dejection Ode", Stevens is overwhelmed by the unbearable burden of reality:

The time of year has grown indifferent.  
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow  
Are both alike in the routine I know.  
I am too dumbly in my being pent.  
The wind attendant on the solstices  
Blows on the shutters of the metropolises,  
Stirring no poet in his sleep, and tolls  
The grand ideas of the village.

Moreover, it is on this kind of harsh reality that imagination must work. Stevens never tries to retreat from to the imaginative world of the nightingale because the pressure of the world of 'fever and fret' is too strong to bear.

Again, if Stevens' poetry at times compares with Wordsworth's, there is also a basic difference which virtually nullifies the comparison. As James Baird writes, "The Prelude, taken singly, may have been demonstrative for Stevens. To record in poetry the structure of a mind is a supreme act. Yet the method of *The Prelude*, the building up (the Wordsworthian 'growth of mind') in Platonic progression, of reality transcending earlier reality, of absolute spiritual identity finally dismissing the synthesis of sense impression, is foreign to every objective of Stevens." (Braid *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*).

The same applies to his theory of imagination in relation to Coleridge's. Comparing and contrasting these two theorists of imagination, Braid writes, "Certainly the imagination known to Stevens establishes correspondences; it fuses the

data of senses; it compels the similar from the dissimilar; through synthesis it achieves a poetic reality. In the terminology of Stevens, this synthesis is the process of imagination at work upon things made ideas. It seems to me ill advised to cite these attributes of imagination as proof of Stevens' dependence upon, let us say, the *Biographia Literaria*.... If one must find influence at all, would not the aesthetics of Hegel have served Stevens equally well?"(Braid *The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the poetry of Wallace Stevens*)

### 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.

### REFERENCE

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