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## WALLACE STEVENS AS A NATURALIST: A STUDY OF SELECTED POEMS FROM HARMONIUM

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**Abstract:**

*Wallace Stevens, since the publication of his first volume of poetry Harmonium in 1923, has always baffled the critics. As aloof a poet as he wanted himself to be and yet a successful insurance man of the mainstream of business culture-the combination itself is baffling. The criticism of his time was most often corrupted by the wonder or the annoyance at this not-so-agreeable dual role. Critics tried to fit this eccentric poet in various schools of poetry. Most of the later criticism was focused on what he himself called his 'reality-imagination' complex. The present paper is a humble attempt to locate the elements of naturalism in a few selected poems of Harmonium. The volume seems to be a queer composite of different styles and sensibilities-grand on one hand and humorous, dazzling, exotic, ironic and playful on the other.*

**Keywords:** Puritanism, transcendentalism, genteel, existence, essence, physiological processes, reality, imagination, idealism.

Either everything in man can be traced as a development from below, or something must come from above. There is no avoiding that dilemma; you must be either a naturalist or a supernaturalist (Eliot, Second Thoughts about Humanism, 393-403)

Stevens' poetry doesn't seem to have any claim to supernaturalism. Nor does he search for essences or abstractions, so what remains is naturalism. Naturalism as a literary movement gained momentum at the turn of the century and had the influence till the outbreak of World War I. Naturalist writers gave an objective expression to the existence. Stevens also, in his poems, seems to assert that the world we live in exists as such with or without our awareness of it. He goes after no morality issues. Essences like God, heaven, rebirth etc. mislead us, but they are part of our conscious content and we take them to be self-evident. Influences of Transcendentalism and Puritanism turned the Americans other-worldly. Such 'genteel' Americans were not fit to face the factual world. Stevens' poetry poses a challenge to these essences. There is nothing fair or foul. We deal with the world of concrete objects; we have to do business with a world that does not owe its being and its nature to our awareness of it. "In the Carolinas", "the lilacs wither" and "the butterflies flutter above the cabin." Realism is given a naturalistic and materialistic interpretation here. The poet says:

Already the new-born children interpret love  
In the voices of mothers (4).

The poet does not show any inclination for a better world than the one given to him. In the naturalistic strain, Stevens feels that the world itself is neither all beauty, nor all truth. Death, disease, poverty all are placed against pleasure and play. It's only that we prefer our sense of beauty or truth. But for him "poetry is not a personal matter." (903) Stevens accepts this world as it is, in all its beauty and ugliness. He asserts, "Poetry is a purging of the world's poverty and change and evil and death. It is a present perfecting, a satisfaction in the irremediable poverty of life." (906)

In the poem "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage", the sun is imagined as a female. For this nude woman, there is nothing so good as the sea and its weeds as these help her to cover her nudity. The language used in the poem is itself intended to hide the nudity of the woman. Stevens' naturalism again

comes to the fore in the next poem of *Harmonium*, “*The Plot Against the Giant*”, wherein a yokel comes maundering and the girls suggest their different ways to check him. The first girl suggests that she will check the giant by “diffusing the civilest odors out of geraniums and unsmelled flowers.”(5) The second girl proposes that she will shame the giant by sprinkling her clothes with colors. The third girl thinks of a different device that she will undo him altogether by whispering “heavenly labials in a world of gutturals.”(6) She chooses the device of religious utterances following her belief that some prayer will undo the giant and Stevens is critical of this particular attitude of going after the essences. The giant himself is not there, there are suppositions to encounter the terror. But the world of facts exists independently of our observations; it has its own terrible existence. In “*Domination of Black*”, the fallen leaves by the fire at night makes one remember the cry of the peacocks. The fallenness of the leaves and of the peacock tails, resemble each other; they are appearances of the same reality. Like Anita Desai's *Cry The Peacock*, the poet feels something terrible about the peacocks struggling for sexual satisfaction. It is a fight to the finish. The cry of the peacocks for sexual act is a part of the natural world, with no values attached to it. This world exists independent of the observer. The colors outside are reflected inside. The window in the room, like the window in the room of the head prostitute in *The Wasteland* facilitates the vision of both, the inside and the outside. In *The Wasteland*, Eliot makes us see through the window, the prostitution going on inside and the rape of Philomela outside. Here also, we have a window through which the color of the fallen leaves outside is reflected in the fire of the lamp inside. The peacocks outside tear each other's entrails in their sexual act bringing the darkness of death. The same darkness engulfs the inside of the room. The dying glory of the colors outside corresponds with the fire inside. Two divergent images of beauty and ugliness, life and death are correlated. Through these associated images, the mind is able to create a whole picture. This checks us from sticking to the hard reality and also our escape into the world of idealism. In “*The Ordinary Women*” the women suffering from dry cough move through the palace walls:

Then from their poverty they rose,  
From dry catarrhs, and to guitars  
They flitted  
Through the palace walls (8).

While doing so, they flung their monotony behind and experience every aspect of knowledge and aesthetics. But, being parted from the real existence, these turn dry and the women have to turn to reality again, to the existence to fill the life sap;

Then from their poverty they rose,  
From dry guitars, and to catarrhs  
They flitted  
Through the palace walls (9).

The material world and the world of ideals, both remain poor if dealt with for long. We have to allow ourselves a free play in both to escape the dryness and poverty lying therein. According to Stevens, we don't prefer things for they are good; they are good for they are preferred ones. The emphasis here is not on aesthetic as a sense of beauty rather aesthetic as perception. Stevens' aesthetic may be called naturalistic in the sense that unlike Berkeley, he doesn't believe human perception to be the ultimate. He does not claim that when we move away, things do not exist-*esse is percipi*. In “*Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*” Stevens conveys the idea that the life of imagination and mysticism is without substance, for;

The fops of fancy in their poems leave  
Memorabilia of the mystic spouts,  
Spontaneously watering their gritty soils (13).

The persona, as a worker of the soil knows “no magic trees, no balmy boughs, no silver-ruddy, gold vermilion fruits.”(13) He knows a tree to which birds come for shelter. The shelter remains where it was, even when the birds fly away. Like naturalists, Stevens shows that human beings can have but little control

over what happens. Rather various external and internal forces make the things happen to them. He looks at things not in terms of his own likes and dislikes. Pleasure is seen as a quality of the object not subjected to personal preferences. The observer cannot be a fop of fancy, rather he should see any object neutrally. While the lilies scudded fragrance around the two lovers sitting beside the pool of pink, a frog boomed from his belly “odious chords”. The two faces of reality are again brought together when “a blue pigeon... circles the blue sky”, and the white “flutters to the ground”. The persona now realizes that “fluttering things have so distinct a shade.”(14) Not all things are beautiful; it all depends on the glasses we wear. Things exist as they are, we are guided by our prejudices and biases, of which Stevens is here critical. In his prose piece, *Three Academic Pieces*, Stevens explains how in the process of creating poetry, nothing is left out of the perceptive field;

Take, for example, a beach extending as far as the eye can reach, bordered, on the one hand, by trees and, on the other, by the sea. The sky is cloudless and the sun is red. In what sense do the objects in this scene resemble each other? There is enough green in the sea to relate it to the palms. There is enough of the sky reflected in the water to create a resemblance, in some sense between them (113).

Nothing is dissociated in this field like Eliot's Tiresias in *The Wasteland*, who is one in all men and Women. In *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle*, the speaker mocks at the woman who finds it hard to accept the reality that she is growing old and ugly. She believes in a kind of transcendental world and wishes to be called “Mother of heaven, regina of the clouds”(10) and so on. The poet's naturalism is not beguiled by such beliefs and the fact is that she is growing aged. Critics touched this aspect but rarely. Most of Stevens' criticism is focused on what Stevens himself again and again talked about- his reality-imagination complex. Robert Rehder, in *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, observes that Stevens' world is a “total double-thing”, about reality-imagination complex. In the chapter “*My Reality-Imagination Complex*”, Rehder says; “There is a sense in which all of Stevens' poetry is about a single subject, and this is true of his work in a way that is not true of the poetry of Whitman, Yeats, Hardy, Eliot or Williams. His discovery of this subject- the relation between imagination and reality- was infinitely fruitful.” He even refers to “the obsessive, almost pathological quality of his interest.”(Rehder 133) Such views reflect the excessive enthusiasm of the critics to limit the scope of Stevens' work. Stevens' poetry is indeed a kind of critique of the human tendency to grab the essences without taking notice of the existences. He has no intention to provide any kind of providential plan of creation through his poetry. Rather his poetry simply attempts to interpret man's past in the light of his ideal development. While the transcendentalists like Emerson held the view that nature is essentially rational and is the guiding factor, Stevens is of the view that reason enters late in the process of evolution. Nature comes to us under the rich garb of sights and sounds. We are beguiled by the garb and start perceiving spirits in rivers and trees. The mechanical processes operating underneath are gradually analyzed through practical experiences. This enables us to strip off irrelevant qualities and we learn to prefer things to ideas.

The poet in “*The Snowman*” demands for the exclusion of any thought of human misery from the mind to “regard the frost and the boughs of the pine-trees crusted with snow.” The self has to be brought to nothing to behold “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.”(8) The snow-covered scene has nothingness in it, it's sterile but that is to be perceived without interference, without the inclusion of the misery which is a part of the psyche of the observer. It exists as it is with its nothingness. The process of the world has no moral intent; it moves on mechanical lines. Still, the poet tries to give a sense of form, a sense of beauty to this vulgar existence. Stevens' naturalism provides the run way for the poetic flight. The bodies that survive sustain themselves by feeding on other bodies. In this way they regain their internal balance, repair themselves and reproduce their distinctive patterns in the new bodies being produced from them. The poem “*Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs*”, brings out Stevens' naturalism in quite clear terms. The poet gives the image of rivers nosing like swines. Just as the swines eat

rubbish, the river eats its bank. It may be “not known” to the man “who erected this cabin, planted this field.” But the poet knows that bodies, organic or inorganic, are related to the rest of the world and interact through the powers of their own. Here he creates a psyche of rivers that suckle themselves;

As the swine-like rivers suckled themselves  
While they went seaward to the sea-mouths (62).

This world of nature, the world of eating and being eaten, must stay where it is because it cannot be denied. Nor the poet attempts to do that. “A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have,” (914) says Stevens in one of his adages. Hence our original experience is quite chaotic. Out of this chaos, we start learning to discern the predictable realm of nature; and here most of the poets, be it romantics or the transcendentalists are tempted to attribute the mystical and the uncommon. Stevens here advises to stick to the common instead of taking a flight as he says; “Reality is the object seen in its greatest common sense” (*Opus Posthumous* 178).

Stevens' theoretical position, in his reaction against what Lionel Trilling called “residual pieties” of Puritanism on the one hand and the urge of the transcendentalists to transcend on the other, is most probably backed by that of Santayana. Santayana himself was a severe critic of the American pieties and wished Christianity to align with paganism. Nietzsche also holds somewhat similar views. He favors the infusion of vitality in Christianity as the twin forces of Puritanism and Transcendentalism turned it too soft to bear the burden of life. Stevens' naturalism is a mean to infuse that vitality, but his poetry finally moves to the comprehensive idea of combining naturalism and transcendentalism. In the poem, “*Peter Quince at the Clavier*,” Stevens does not negate the possibility of sexual passion flamed up in the elders by watching the naked beauty of Susanna. The poem clearly brings out Stevens' sense of beauty, the roots of which lie in his naturalism but the flowering occurs in the world of ideals. The poet here offers the physiological and psychological explanation of why certain objects seem beautiful, while others do not and thus provides a naturalistic account of an aesthetic experience by pointing out its sexual basis. Beauty here lies in the feeling of pleasure felt in seeing an object. It's projected as a quality of the object and not just our reaction to it. The poem has almost become Keatsian in the hands of Stevens who makes it a sacrament of praise of Susanna. She is made alive from the jaws of death. Stevens shows that ideals and nature are not paradoxical; rather all ideals are natural in their origin and all nature is ideal in its possibilities. Everything in nature is determined by mechanical laws. The elders cannot escape feeling as they watched Susanna bathing. When she sensed it, she cried. She was charged with her emotions over her sense of shame. The response on both sides was mechanical. They were not provided with the freedom of choice; it was but natural, an effect following a cause. The poet himself is not immune to desire. As he watches the red-eyed elders feeling “the basses of their beings throb”, he himself is desiring his beloved, thinking of her blue-shadowed silk. Therefore, he does not present a critique of the act, nor does he blame the elders. The poet touches the keys as he wishes to touch the body of his beloved. The body generates the same music in the heart of the poet as the fingers generate the music upon the keys. Instead of being a mere sound, music is feeling then. It's similar to the strain that waked the passions in the elders by the beauty of Susanna. “The basses of their beings throb” to create feeling. The music that the poet's fingers play on the keys is harmonizing his body and spirit. The spirit is reduced to the idea of body reflecting a physiological process. Knowing, feeling and willing- all become one. Nothing is felt in the mind without being felt in the body. The music created by Susanna in the elders may be momentary but it's immortal in the flesh. Here, Stevens seems akin to Santayana's animal faith when he says;

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.  
So evenings die, in their green going,  
A wave interminably flowing.  
So gardens die, their meek breath scenting  
The cowl of winter, done repenting

So maidens die, to the auroral  
Celebration of a maiden's choral (74).

Stevens' criticism is directed against Puritans who make the avoidance of pleasure a virtue. Stevens follows Heraclitus' logos. Idealism, for him, is inherent in naturalism. Though evenings die, but in the eternal flux, nothing is lost. Old water gives place to the new. Thus we can conclude by saying that the poems contained in *Harmonium* are actually an attempt to harmonize his naturalism with his idealism and transcendentalism. Here the sinner and the saint enjoy equal rights. The moralistic and religious strains are rejected. The opposites, that seem to stay in a state of constant strife, are actually unified by virtue of their interdependence.

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