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STEVENS' POETRY OF EXISTENCE AND BEING

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Stevens' Poetry of Existence and Being

Sulabh Sudhakar Verma

Research Scholar, Sainath University, Ranchi, Jharkhand

Abstract – Wallace Stevens (1879-1935) by the current critical reckoning is an outstanding poets' poet and his influence is unmistakable in the world of international English poetry both as a thinker and as an innovator. He has demonstrated in his work how a philosophical idea becomes transmuted into poetry. As Nabokov said, Wallace Stevens shows how poetry by itself becomes the highest form of truth. Wallace Stevens maintained a unique personal temper which can be compared to that of existential thinkers. In the poetry of Wallace Stevens the subject as a relation is stressed and the world's objectivity is left to itself intact almost in an existential context.

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INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens maintained a unique personal temper which can be compared to that of existential thinker. In the poetry of Wallace Stevens the subject as a relation is stressed and the world's objectivity is left to itself intact. Every poem of Stevens is a new search for the novelty of experience. In his "July Mountain" Stevens denounce both imagination and reality. In Stevens' poetry both the things usually stand for subjective and objective counters of the traditional philosophy, and upholds the human sense of 'being-in-the-world' as a project in relation.

In the case of human beings, no truth has any reality by itself. On the other hand it is always dependent upon the reality of the immediate relationship. The statement "when we climb the mountain" is significant. It is a statement, substantiating the relational aspect. The physiognomic features of "patches" and "pitches" of greenery, as perspectival forms of reality are the only probable objective facts. But those features have an expression and they speak in a fundamental mode and initiate human sensations into action. Sensations, according to the existentialists are not the properties of matter. They are not inherent in things. They are in the consciousness of the subject as cogito. In the context of this poem Harold Bloom states that "Truth... comes into existence in the gap between concept and percept".

POETRY OF EXISTENCE AND BEING

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"¹. 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's 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 sometime 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 sheaf 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 wenches, and it is everybody's "knowledge" that wenches 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" newspapers" 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-been possible for them to make two world wars in a span of thirty years. The fellness 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 positivistic ally 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"². But none of them tried to link the poem with Keatsian poetics, which automatically converges into the modern existential philosophy.

Despite all the resembling factors between Keats and Stevens, one belongs to the high romantic tradition and the other to the modern existential school. The

differences between the two are obvious. Keats, with all his exacting stands on behalf of his spirits total freedom, could not help himself without rendering his poetry and imagery conform to the stock traditions of Romanticism. With all his need for escape-for Keats hated all formalized "man-locked sets" (to use Stevens' phrase), (CP, 497) – the regions of escape are mere fantasy and dream structures, which stand as extended and heightened parallels to the so called "man-locked sets". His Urn had to be Grecian; his Nightingale had to be a natural bird, his Autumn had to maintain echoes of Thomson, and all had to be allegorical antes to death, which, of course, is the exact fundament from -which he sought an escape. To put it point blank, the spatial and temporal properties, which he shunned, in their turn became the chief guiding factors of his dream and fantasy states also. The transport is to parallel states; but these parallel states are critically relative and romantically exulting and elating. Stevens could overcome the difficulty by adopting a non-thetic texture to his symbolism. Therefore, he was not required to escape at all.

Moreover, after Shakespeare, Stevens is the only poet that had exploited the subtle variations in moods travel quicker than his imagery into the readers personal experience and make a sure ground for his imagery and all other poetic material to establish their comfortable habitation. "Avocation", says Stevens, "recognizes its material by foresight, before experience." (NA, 48). This evocation takes place in creeping the mood into the reader. Keats' "ode on a Grecian Urn"³ is so popular that its text need not be presented here. Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76) deserves a restatement:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,

And round it was, upon a hill.

It made the slovenly wilderness

Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,

And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground

And tall and of a port in air.

It took domain everywhere.

The jar was gray and bare.
 It did not give of bird or bush,
 Like nothing else in Tennessee.

(CP, 76)

This poem has often been compared and contrasted with Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by Stevens' critics⁴. Keats' "Urn" is "...still unravish'd bride of quietness, / ...fosterchild of silence and slow time,⁵ "with ravishment prospects and pet instinct sublimations permanently under postponement. Keats found it, or discovered it, or made an imaginative fabrication of it, and gave it archaic monumental status, by way of locating it in ancient Greece. But Stevens' "Jar", as asserted by him, is his own creation, ("I placed a jar in Tennessee"). Keats' "Jar" is a "sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme". Consequently he stuffs his "Jar" with innumerable static pictures; and they are all the emblems of Greek life and culture. In contrast, Stevens' "Jar" "Did not give of bird or bush, / like nothing else in Tennessee." Why it did not give anything understandable at all is the vexed question. The answer for it lies in the contingent progress or the metamorphosis of the mood in the poem, with its bearing upon the dramatic interactions of the "Jar" standing for form, and the "wilderness" standing for formlessness. Form or what Stevens elsewhere calls "man-locked set" comes into the "wilderness" of Tennessee as a warning of its death and annihilation. Therefore, the "wilderness" takes the due cognizance of the challenge and starts a life and death war with it. The ultimate victory obviously goes to "wilderness". But what all that is happening to that "I", which had so egotistically braved to put the "Jar" and caused the war, is of some philosophical interest. It was originally placed "upon a hill", a fit height for the type of ego of the poet. But the "slovenly wilderness" surround the hill first, then came up to it, and sprawled around. It went so high above it that the "Jar" which was originally placed upon a hill started appearing "round upon the ground". The height to which it grew is understandable when the hill started appearing at par with the ground. But where then is the poet himself now? He stands transported to the height of wilderness. There on such precarious heights he has no courage to acknowledge the wildness of the complacency indeed: It also gives momentary feel in his that his "Jar", took domain everywhere. But in a sudden moment of introspection he realizes that the jar of which he was greatly hopeful "did not give a bird or bush, / Like nothing else in Tennessee", a sure

suggestion that his "Jar" became one with the "wilderness".

Leaving aside the tenness of the wilderness (wilderness to the power of ten), the placement of the "Jar" in Tennessee brought an elemental and archetypally fundamental war between form and formlessness, thing and nothingness. This is the type of war that takes place in the being when the instinctive integrations create and capture things out of nothing, in their passion for understanding. This is the right type of war that the premordial human experience creates. If so, this war is never ending; and it should not be looked for its practical losses or gains. The war is all that matters; and there are no messages like "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", etc. If the "Jar" stands for self-affirmation, the wilderness represents the "non-being", which constantly threatens self-affirmation. But in this threatening there is no loss for the being. On the contrary, the "non-being" is courageously absorbed into the being. According to Paul Tillich, "The self-affirmation of being is stronger the more non-being it can take into itself."⁶ If so, "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 86) is one of the Stevens' humble attempts at absorbing the non-being into his self. This is the way that Stevens exploits Keatsian poetics and affirms his existential bearings.

It is worth recalling here that, for Stevens, "... the way of all mind is from romanticism to realism, to fatalism and then to indifferentism, unless the cycle recommences and the thing goes from indifferentism back to romanticism all over again". (WLS, 350). It is with this trait of indifferentism that Stevens becomes skeptically opposed and critically against all the romanticism, inducing that of Keats. That is the reason that he often adopts diagonally opposite stylistic forms to those of Keats. The stylistic oppositional variations that he so adopts are immensely original; and the use of non-thetic symbolism, found prominently in his "Thirteen ways of Looking at a Black-bird" (C), 92), and "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP, 76) and the like, saved him from Keatsian romantic solipsism and escapism. Stevens, thereby, establishes himself as a poet of this earth and the vicissitudes of the self as a being-in-the-world. From the poetical strongholds, that he captures from his own study of Keats, his poetry and his letters, automatically stems Stevens' "...poem of the mind in the act of finding / what will suffice ?" (CP, 239).

Naturalism rests on the assumptions of materialism and determinism⁷. By way of repudiating naturalism, existentialism distinguishes human reality from material reality. Human reality, however, maintains a living contact with the material reality with the help of personal experience and instinctive integrations. In the

absence of such personal experience through instinctive integrations, material reality is given the sign of 'nothing' by the existentialists. This 'nothing' as a potential opposite and ante of human reality always taunts the being of human reality to become existence. Existentialism, however, does not make it clear as to how being emerges as existence. But being is always finite, momentary, temporal and as such agitated and guilty. As has already been observed, Heidegger calls being "Dasein" (There-being), and refers to the guilty agitation as "angst" (dread or anxiety)⁸. This state of anxiety and dread is the necessary condition of being in the world. The poem of the mind of Stevens emerges out of this sort of "angst" of being-in-the-world. It exactly falls into "the act of finding /What will suffice.... /CP, 239). Heidegger, further states that "dread" is a rare occurrence⁹. Therefore, Stevens says that modern poetry had not always created the requisite novelty of experience i.e. it has not come to the level of existence. It simply repeated what was available as sets. He says :

...It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
(CP, 239)

Stevens is speaking here as a literary historian. Modern poetry for some time remained a drab imitation or gross repetition of what was already written. He is probably referring here to the decadent state of poetry in the Georgian era. True poetry started coming only after the change of the situation. There emerged a new awareness in man. It is for the first time that man started thinking in terms of understanding man, in the twentieth century.

The altered situation has no resemblance to the past at all. Finding no place to read the Emerson/Whitman transcendental imports here, Harold Bloom in haste declared this poem as "...inaccurate about past poetry and mistaken about itself"¹⁰. Probably war altered everything. The use of atomic weapons in the war changed not only war strategies, but everything else that concerns human life turned to un-namable "something else". He has to learn everything afresh. From this altered condition emerges the new awareness, and that new awareness brought new sensibility, which in its turn creates the need for man to

emerge as a being-in-the-world. Stevens once wrote to Elsie :

There is a perfect rout of character in every
man, every man is like an actor trunk full of
strange creatures, new & old. But an actor and his
trunk are two different things.

(WSL, 91)

Existentialism is the development of the experience from the point of view of an actor rather than from that of the spectator. But the spectator actor distinction is very difficult to define or explain, for the actor is at once the spectator also¹¹. "Existence precedes essence" is the chief tenet of existentialism common to all existentialists.

CONCLUSION

All the significant analogical and topological aspects of Stevens poetry reflects his profound leanings on the existential manner of thinking. His firm conviction that the "cruelty of reality" is a phenomenal provider of "limit situation" reveals Kierkegaardian influence through Jean Wahl. At the same time, his constant persuasion to cast off all the illusions, including the illusions of religion and God, brings him close to the atheistic existential thinkers like Nietzsche and Sartre. Except for a few casual statements of Stevens on Nietzsche, Bergson and Husserl, and his generous acknowledgements of his friendship and association with Jean Wahl, there are no direct evidences of any particular existential writer influencing Stevens. Wahl's own enthusiasm for Stevens' poetry— Wahl translated some of the poems of Stevens into French — is in itself a proof of the existential content of Stevens' poetry. By and large, if one reads Stevens poetry with a due consideration for his personal temper or temperament, one automatically finds the cumulative influence of all the great existential writers.

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