

Wallace Stevens' Response to Emanuel Kant's Theory of Art: Reading and Misreading the Master



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ملخص

يتناول هذا المقال شعر والاس ستيفنس، في إبراز كيفية انحرافه عن نظرية علم الجمال لكانت. وبالفعل فقد قام ستيفنس بقراءة ضالة لنظرية معلمه كانت ليؤسس نظريته الخاصة في علم الجمال. ويوافق ستيفنس كانت في موقفه الداعي إلى أن الجمال مرتبط بمفهوم الخيال. غير أنه يعارض مفهوم عالمية الفن لكانت ويقترح مفهوم موضوعية الفن بدل ذلك. إذا كان كانت يرى أن الفن هو مفهوم عالمي شامل لأن كل البشر يشتركون في حس فني واحد، فإن ستيفنس يقترح موضوعية الفن الذي يركز على الواقع. ومن جانب آخر يوافق ستيفنس ما ذهب إليه كانت في أن للشاعر دور علماني، لكنه يخالفه في تبنيه لمفهوم الشعر الخالص أو الشعر للشعر. ويرى ستيفنس أن للشعر دور في ملأ الفراغ الروحي الذي يسببه الابتعاد عن المعتقدات الدينية التقليدية التي تركز على مبادئ ميتافيزيقية ولاهوتية.

Introduction

Wallace Stevens is one of the most read and discussed American modernist poets. Many critics have very often discussed Stevens's impersonal theory of poetry as a response to the romantic subjective aesthetics upholding excessive effusion of emotions. Stevens's insistence on the adherence of poetry to the physical world to attain a high level of objectivity has also been discussed as a rejection of the allusive method that Eliot offers for the same reason of

protecting art from subjectivity. Stevens's secular poetry is also studied as a refutation of Eliot's appeal to the medieval traditions as a way to cultural health. However, to our knowledge, no comparative study has been made so far between Stevens and Emanuel Kant. In fact, Stevens turns to Kant to formulate his secular objective poetry. This article shows how Stevens's poetry performs a clinamen in relation to Kant's theory of art. Stevens shares Kant's view for an objective poetry based on the imagination, but he swerves away

when he offers an objective art instead of Kant's universality of art. For Stevens, the objectivity of poetry is conditioned by its adherence to reality. Stevens also misreads his master when he attributes a spiritual but a secular role to the poet, a role that Kant denies.

Review of the literature

With the publication of Frank Kermode's *Wallace Stevens* in "Writers and Critics Series," Stevens's poetry has received a laudatory reaction which has launched its popularity. Since then, Stevens has become one of the most read and discussed American poets and much criticism has been published on his poetry. Book-length studies have been written on Stevens's poetry including those by such universally famous critics as Eleanor Cook, Robert Buttel, Bart Eeckout, Alan Filreis, Barbara M. Fisher, Thomas C. Gray, Frank Kermode, David M. LaGuardia, George S. Lensing, Frank Lentricchia, A. Walton Litz, James Longenbach, Marjorie Perloff, Joseph N. Riddel, and last but far from least, John N. Serio.

Marjorie Perloff, Leon Surette and Edna Rosenthal compared

Stevens with other American poets as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Other critics discussed the relation of Stevens with non English speaking poets. Michel Benamou and Robert Greer Cohn showed the connection of Stevens with the French Symbolists as Charles Baudelaire and Stephan Mallarme. Irene Ramalho Santos invested the affinities between Stevens and the Portuguese poet Ramos Rosa while Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero examined the influence of Stevens on the Spanish poet José Ángel Valente.

Interdisciplinary critics interested in bringing together visual arts and poetry have discussed Stevens's poetry in relation to painting. Michel Benamou, Bonnie Costello and Judith Rinde Sheridan examined the tenets of cubism, surrealism, and futurism in his poetry. Other critics discussed Stevens's poetry in relation to philosophy. Krzysztof Ziarek revisited the shadow of Martin Heidegger in the poet's late work. Bobby J. Leggett discussed the extent to which Nietzsche pervades Stevens's early work. Rob Wallace examined Stevens's improvisational poetics in relation to the philosophy of William James.

Issue and Methodology

This short review of literature shows that despite the great deal of discussion and despite the interdisciplinary approach to Stevens's poetry, no study, to my knowledge, has discussed Stevens's response to Emanuel Kant. This article rests on the assumption that much of Stevens's poetry attempts to modify Kant's arguments on "subjective universality" of beauty, the essence of poetry and its place in society. To examine the nature of Kant's influence on Stevens, I shall operate from Harold Bloom's theory of influence. According to Bloom, a strong poet learns to appreciate poetry through the irresistible work of precursors. To make his new voice, a strong poet misreads precursors. Yet, he cannot escape the awareness that his imaginative vision is born out of the very achievements of the past poets. The defensive mechanism the belated poet uses against his precursor is "poetic misreading or misprision"¹ which is a process through which he sublimates his precursor's influence: "poetic influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, - always

proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, as an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation."²

Bloom identifies six distortive processes through which a belated poet operates in reading his precursor. He calls them revisionary ratios and means them to represent the developmental stage of the ephebe. This article takes its methodological bearings from Bloom's first ratio that he calls *clinamen*. According to him, *clinamen* is "poetic misreading or misprision" in which there is an implication that "the precursor poet went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction the new poem moves."³

Results and Discussion

Stevens is a modernist poet, and modernism grows out of its immediately preceding movement of romanticism. Yet, the modernists rejected many of its tenets. One of these tenets was the belief in the priestly function of the poet. Much of the romantic aesthetics was an attempt to make poetry a substitute for religion. Shelley once claimed that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of mankind."⁴

The other romantic tenet that the modernists rejected was the exaggerated emphasis that the romantics placed on the self. Aware of man's alienation from his world and rather than striving to face this alienation, the romantics turned to their own self and offered a purely imagined nature as a refuge against reality. However, the denial of reality forced the romantics to create a solipsistic world which many of their poems celebrate. One of them is Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as A Cloud" which places more value on the solipsistic world over reality. When the speaker was in nature, gazing at the real daffodils which "stretched in never-ending line,"⁵ he hardly thought "what wealth the show to [him] brought"⁶ though he recognizes that he was happy "in such a jocund company"⁷ of the daffodil. It was later when he was at home lying on his couch away from nature that the imaginative daffodils "flash upon that inward eye"⁸ and fulfill the psychological vacancy of his self. Now his heart "dances with the [imaginative] daffodils."⁹

However, with the development of social theories in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many modernists start-

ed to question the validity of the romantic reliance on the self. Darwin, Marx, and Freud had revealed the weakness of the self. Darwin's conception of evolution and heredity situated humanity as no more than the latest product of "the very process of natural selection,"¹⁰ a conception which dissolved the boundaries between human and animal leading to the belief that "man is derived from some lower animal form."¹¹ Marxian material determinism argued that it is not the consciousness of men but their social existence that determines their consciousness. Marx believed that the "mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life."¹² Freud's theory of the unconscious revealed that "the powers motivating men and women are mainly and normally unconscious."¹³ Freud believed that man is driven by the same basic instincts as animals. This tendency can be seen in the sexual and aggressive behaviours. He also believed that man often struggles against the society that stresses the control of these impulses.

Influenced by Darwin's Marx's and Freud's arguments asserting the weakness of the self, many

modernists started to reject the romantic subjective method that consists of a retreat into the solipsistic world of the self created by the poet's imagination. The modernists also reacted against the priestly role the romantics attributed to the poet. However, these reactions against these two romantic tenets varied from one modernist to another. For example, Eliot suggested an impersonal objective mode of expression that denies the centrality of the personality of the artist. In this context, Eliot argued that "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."¹⁴ Instead of expressing emotions of strictly personal significance, the poet has to transform what is personal into something of universal significance: "the poet has not a personality to express but a particular medium, which is only a medium and not a personality, in which impressions and experience combine in a peculiar and unexpected ways."¹⁵

Too much emphasis, indeed, upon the personality and the individuality of the poet can prevent the artist from recognizing the order and unity provided by tradition. Thus, the artist must continue

to acquire the sense of tradition throughout his career by allowing his poetic sensibility to be shaped and modified by the past. For Eliot, the best and the most individual part of a poet's work is that which shows the continual influence of the writers of the past: "Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice, we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual part of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously."¹⁶

To better understand Eliot's theory, it is profitable to examine the following passage from his "The Wasteland":

**While I was fishing in the
dull canal
On a winter evening round
behind the gashouse
Musing upon the king my
brother's wreck
And on the king my father's
death before him.
White bodies naked on the
low damp ground
And bones cast in a little low
dry garret,
Rattled by the rat's foot only,
year to year.
But at my back from time to
time I hear
The sound of horns and mo-**

**tors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in
the spring.
O the moon shone bright on
Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda
water
Et, O ces voix d'enfants,
chantant dans la coupole!
Twit twittwit
So rudely forc'd.
Tereu.¹⁷**

This passage is about the poet's discomfort with the loss of spirituality, moral emptiness and sexual desire and his hope for an end to this desire that may allow renewal and spiritual rebirth. To express his discomfort and his hope objectively with no authorial intrusion, the poet uses many allusions and references to the literature of the past. The sordid life of Sweeney, Mrs. Porter and her daughter is reinforced by an indirect allusion from Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress." Marvell's poem is essentially a seduction poem, where the poet attempts to convince his "coy mistress" to have sex with him. His main argument is that life is short and time is running out.

This passage also illustrates well Eliot's objectivity in finding

some kind of spiritual rebirth through the quenching of desire. This objectivity is achieved by the poet's use of many references to the literature of the past. The first reference is about the man fishing in the river. In doing so, he recalls "the king my brother's wreck" in the water. This line is an allusion to Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* and suggests the possibility of drowning. Metaphorically drowning means "death by water"¹⁸ which might suggest a certain kind of spiritual renewal. Further references to the possibility of rebirth are the washing of the feet as an act of purification suggested by the "feet in soda water" and the presence of the Fisher King in the quotation from Verlaine which refers to a Wagnerian opera about the search for the Grail. With these various scenes, Eliot suggests objectively the possibility of modern salvation in modern era.

Eliot also denied the priestly functions of the poet upheld by the romantics. Against the romantic attempt to make art into a religion, Eliot suggested art that support religion. For him, the role of the poet is to search for a transcendent truth that can only be found in God. It is an experience that can point him towards a greater reality:

**There are only hints and
guesses,
Hints followed by guesses;
and the rest
Is prayer, observance, disci-
pline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the
gift half understood, is Incarna-
tion.¹⁹**

It is, therefore, through “Incarnation” that poetry is worked towards a greater spiritual end.

Eliot was not the only modernist who attempted to objectify poetry, but his reliance on literary tradition to reach such objectivity was rejected by many other modernists. One of them was Wallace Stevens who, like Eliot, attempted to rid poetry from the romantic subjectivity, but his method was very different. Stevens offered the physical world rather than literary tradition urged by Eliot as a way to achieve an impersonal objectivity for poetry. Stevens was also against Eliot's use of art to support Christianity and the romantic divine role of poetry as a substitute for traditional religion. Instead, he suggested poetry stripped of any divine meaning as a secular replacement of Christianity.

To develop his objective and

secular theory of poetry, Stevens turned to Kant's theory of art. In fact, Stevens was much attracted to Kant's ideas of subjective universality and the secular role of the artist. However, far from being a slavish follower of the master, Stevens's poetry takes the form of an intertextual response to Kant presenting arguments to support that idea of the objectivity of art instead of Kant's universality of art. Against Kant's notion of the purposeless purpose of art, Stevens attributes a secular but a spiritual role to the poet

According to Kant beauty is subjective but has universal validity. It is subjective because it has nothing to do with the object per se and does not rest on any concept. Thus, beauty “must have a subjective principle, and one which determines what pleases or displeases, by means of feeling only and not through concepts, but yet with universal validity.”²⁰ The beautiful is also universally valid because it is approved by all people with the same cognitive capacities. Kant says that “in all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful we tolerate no one else being of a different opinion, and yet we do not rest our judgement upon concepts, but

only on our feeling. Accordingly we introduce this underlying feeling not as a private feeling, but as a common one."²¹

Stevens also believes the beauty does not depend on concepts and the mind which is a point of creative power must become a blank mind free of conception to match up perfectly with reality. This blank mind is compared to a listener

**who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, be-
holds
Nothing that is not there and
the nothing that is.²²**

The listener sees the winter scene reduced to an absolute fact which is stripped of all concepts. This abstraction is an attempt to see the world again with an innocent eye. In the opening lines of "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," the speaker exhorts the ephebe, a student of poetry, to become ignorant and to see the world in a new way:

**You must become an igno-
rant man again
And see the sun again with
an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea
of it.²³**

Stevens also shares Kant's idea

that beauty is "the free play of our cognitive faculties"²⁴ or the free play of imagination and understanding. As poetry functions in the physical world and is mainly concerned with physical (not metaphysical) objects, Stevens asserts the importance of reason in the making of poetry. However, he attributes the most important role in this process to the other mental faculty which is the imagination. In fact, reason that is a non-distorting mirror to the outside world proves to be very confining to the poet who should rely on both his imagination and reason as two necessary mental faculties that enable him to transform reality into an infinite variety of imagined realities. For Stevens, "the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination. . . . Thus poetry, which we have been thinking of as at least the equal of philosophy, may be its superior."²⁵

On the other hand, the poetic world of Stevens is beyond the world of reason:

**It is the mundo of the imagi-
nation in which the imaginative
man delights and not the gaunt
world of reason. The pleasure
is the pleasure of powers that
create a truth that cannot be**

arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation.²⁶

Stevens's rejection of rigid, emotionless, cold rationalism is discussed in the last stanza of "Six Significant Landscapes." The rigidly "square" and "rationalists" dress, and live, and think in ways that are intellectually and personally confining:

**Rationalists, wearing square hats,
Think, in square rooms,
Looking at the floor,
Looking at the ceiling.
They confine themselves
To right-angled triangles.²⁷**

The rationalists confine themselves to the clear-cut and the indisputable. There is the repetitive sharp squareness of the rationalists' existence, along with the limitations on their field of vision. Consequently, they lack imagination and joy in their lives.

The poem goes further suggesting that rationalists, if they tried other, less "squared" ways of being, again represented analogously by curved, less sharp, and softer geometric figures such as "rhomboids," "cones," "waving lines" and "ellipses," would "wear

sombreros," the hats of dance, joy and mirth:

**If they tried rhomboids,
Cones, waving lines, ellipses
As, for example, the ellipse
of the half-moon
Rationalists would wear
sombreros.²⁸**

If Stevens shares Kant's epistemological idea that the imagination is the main source of pleasure, he opposes Kant's argument that beauty has universal validity because it is based on mental faculties shared by all people. Kant's argument denies that a poet, for example, has a mental faculty that makes his perception of an object different from that of a scientist or a philosopher. Stevens speaks of the poet's special sensibility that enables him to create poetry: "A poet writes poetry because he is a poet; and he is not a poet because he is a poet but because of his personal sensibility."²⁹ In the process of making poetry, reality undergoes a change when perceived by the senses: "Our sense of these things changes as they change, / Not as in metaphor, but in our sense."³⁰

Opposing Kant's argument that beauty is universal because every person possesses the conditions

of free play of the imagination and understanding, Stevens, instead, presents beauty as objective. For him beauty, to be universal, should not be free but something that depends on the physical external world. According to Stevens, poetry begins in the field in which it works: reality. By reality, Stevens means "absolute fact."³¹ He qualifies his description of "absolute fact" as destitute of any imaginative aspect. However, "the more destitute it [reality] becomes the more it begins to be precious."³² Therefore, reality beyond the imagination is the data with which the imagination works. Thus the imagination has no source except from reality. The poem "The Ordinary Woman" emphasizes that the imagination symbolized by "the guitars" springs from reality or, as Stevens calls it, "poverty": "Then from poverty they rose, / From dry catarrhs, and the guitars."³³

Reality is thus the starting point for any activity of the mind. Stevens says, "The real is only the base. But it is the base."³⁴ This is why "the imagination loses its vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real."³⁵ The second section of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" affirms that the imagination loses its solidity when the

imagined object does not belong to the physical world. This section supposes the "houses" to have no reality except as they are "composed of ourselves" in the mind. Since the houses seem to exist only in the operations of the mind, they would be without substance, "impalpable" and "transparent" in that they consist of no visible actual effects in which they are perceived:

**Suppose these houses are
composed of ourselves,
So that they become an im-
palpable town, full of
Impalpable bell, transparen-
cies of sound,
Sounding in transparent
dwellings of the self,
Impalpable habitations that
seem to move
In the movement of the co-
lors of the mind.³⁶**

The objects of sight, the "far-fire flowing" and those of sound, "the bells" would come together in fluid and vague images of themselves.

Yet the role of the poet is not to reflect bare reality, but to transform it through his imagination. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," the listeners complain to the artist

about the “blue guitar” which does not represent the “green reality” as it is. The player explains to them that he can only produce a version of reality through the imaginative contractions:

**The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
They said, “You have a blue guitar
You do not play things as they are.”
The man replied “Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”³⁷**

Kant makes a distinction between the beautiful, the good and the pleasurable. The beautiful is free of all ends; it is the “purposiveness without a purpose.”³⁸ The good seeks beauty as a means to some higher end while the pleasurable seeks some gratification from the object:

The agreeable, the beautiful, and the good thus denote three different relations of representations to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, as a feeling in respect of which we distinguish different objects or modes of representation. Also, the corresponding expressions which

indicate our satisfaction in them are different. The agreeable is what gratifies us; the beautiful what simply pleases us; the good what is esteemed (approved), i.e. that on which we set an objectiveworth.³⁹

However, Kant's view of art has received much criticism as it strips art of two of its inalienable qualities of pleasure and goodness. Kant's theory does not consider that many people are attracted to art for the pleasure it provides them, and without pleasure they may lose interest in it. On the other hand, denying the good in art implies denying the social role of the artist and may make him at odds with what happens around him. To cure Kant's theory from its weaknesses, Stevens formulates a theory that blurs the distinction between the beautiful, the pleasurable and the good, that is to say, a theory that suggests the good and the pleasure in the beautiful.

Stevens believes that “The world imagined is the ultimate good,”⁴⁰ but the poet, to be able to make of his poetry a source of goodness, should free himself from social or political obligations:

Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor

is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their leaders to and fro. I think that the function is to make his imagination become the light in the minds of other. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives.⁴¹

Thus, Stevens rejects the requirement that the poet must write from a social view rather than from within his own imagination, by suggesting that the poet may have as his subject the community and other people by virtue of something internal to the poet. In this context Stevens says:

The genuine artist is never 'true to life'. He sees what is real but not as we are normally aware of it. We do not go storming through life like actors in a play. Art is never real life. The poet sees with a poignancy and penetration that is altogether unique. What matters is that the poet must be true to his art and not 'true to life', whether his art is simple or complex, violent or subdued.⁴²

With no political or social obligations, poetry may have another role which is more spiritual. In the modern godless age, Stevens offers poetry as a substitute for religion. The decline of spirituality produces a need for something else

that can make human life meaningful. Stevens attempts through his poetry to offer a secular comfort to this loss of spirituality from which modern man suffers: "In an age of disbelief, it is for the poet to supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style."⁴³

Thus, Wallace Stevens occupies something of a post-religious moment, a moment without any divine aspects:

**There was neither voice nor
crested image,
No chorister, nor priest.
There was
Only the great height of the
rock.**⁴⁴

Thus, the world is without the religious presence of the "chorister" or the "priest." In so doing, Stevens prevents Christianity from actually entering the scene in order to suggest a spiritless world. The decline of spirituality, however, does not upset him for he believes that secular poetry may be an alternative to traditional religions.

In the opening lines of Stevens's "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the title character is directly addressed by an unidentified narrator, who proposes poetry, the "supreme fiction," as a substitute for religion. The narrator informs her that if she devotes her-

self to Christianity by taking the “the moral law” and practicing the Christian worship in “the nave” of the church, the heaven she will go is only a “haunted heaven”:

**POETRY is the supreme
fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and
make a nave of it
And from the nave build
haunted heaven.⁴⁵**

The above lines reflect Stevens's desire to substitute poetry for religion as a means to reinvigorate people's sense of the world as their home.

In addition to goodness, Stevens requires that poetry should be a source of pleasure, a quality that Kant denies. In fact, it is this quality of pleasure attracting people to poetry that helps them inhabit the world. The pleasure referred to is not the traditional religious joy. It is rather the marriage between reality and the imagination which transforms the godless, chaotic and ugly bare reality into an ordered, embellished and vivid imagined reality.

Through the poet's imagination, pleasure may extend to include such states as vividness, order and warmth. In “The Apostrophe to Vincentine,” the static

object is not only endowed with vitality but also emotion and the ability to speak. The poem begins with the poets imagining Vincentine as small, nude “nameless”⁴⁶ creature. In the second stanza, through the speaker's imagination, the sculpture Vincentine becomes more life-like, progressively gains a name, warmth, and becomes a clean girl in a white green dress: “As warm, as clean / Your dress was green, Was white green / Green Vincentine.”⁴⁷ Later, she is able to express her feelings using her “voluble”⁴⁸ voices “in a group of human other.”⁴⁹ Thus, in Stevens's earthly paradise the poet's imagination which has transformed Vincentine from the lean “white animal”⁵⁰ to “heavenly Vincentine”⁵¹ can also metamorphose the “monotonous earth”⁵² into spheres without limits.

In “Anecdote of the Jar,” Stevens uses the jar as a symbol of the human mind ordering nature. The poet “placed a jar in Tennessee”⁵³ in the middle of “slovenly wilderness”⁵⁴ that lacked, shape, purpose and order. The jar that “took dominion everywhere”⁵⁵ imposed its own roundness on wilderness and became “no longer wild.”⁵⁶

For Stevens, the pleasure of

the poetry can be extended to include warmth and light. Poetry offers protection in a world which is dark, cold and indifferent. The imagination as "Single shawl"⁵⁷ and a "candle" brings solace to the speaker. "Single shawl" around himself protects him against the cold, and the candle light illuminates not only his room but also the whole dark world: "that highest candle lights the dark"⁵⁸ The poet, who at first suffers from alienation as he and the world "forget each other,"⁵⁹ feel now at home in the "dwelling."⁶⁰

Conclusion

This article has discussed Stevens's response to Kant's theory of art. It has shown that Stevens shares many of Kant's epistemological ideas particularly the imagination as the main source from which beauty springs. However, Stevens rejects Kant's view that limits the role of the poet to making beauty and denies the social role of poetry. For Stevens, the poet, the maker of beauty should also fill the spiritual vacuum caused by the loss of belief through his poetry as a source of beauty, goodness, and

pleasure.



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