

Wallace Stevens and German Idealism: Reply to Bly

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Robert Bly liked Stevens' early poems but not his later ones: "The late poems are as weak as is possible for a genius to write; what is worse, most of them have the white nightgown mentality" (76). The phrase "white nightgown" is from Stevens' "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (*Harmonium*); the wearers of white nightgowns are the cautious people who, secure in their houses, do not enjoy colour, those who do not "dream of baboons and periwinkles." The implication is that Stevens slipped into that blank mind-set, as he got older. Certainly Stevens disapproves of the white-nightgown mentality. Much of his early poetry is a sermon on the value of the beauty of this world. In "Sunday Morning," for instance, he asks of a white-nightgown wearer,

What is divinity if it can come
 Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
 Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
 In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
 In any balm or beauty of the earth,
 Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?

This is easy to comprehend: the details of the real world surpass abstract images of paradise: "And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?" The answer comes soon: of paradise Stevens writes,

Why set the pear upon those river-banks
 Or spice the shores with odors of the plum?

Alas, that they should wear our colors there,
 The silken weavings of our afternoons,
 And pick the strings of our insipid lutes!
 Death is the mother of beauty . . .

Here we have Stevens' characteristic aesthetics of ordinary human reality; as he says in "Adagia," "The ultimate value is reality" (912). It is possible to regard "Sunday Morning" as a sad and resigned affirmation that we have at most this world and its parochial values, that we cannot have paradise at all (cf. Gelpi 1993). But that is not my view of the poem.

Perception of colour and odour is more vital than dreams for Stevens. Thus we cannot take "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" as Bly seems to take it. It is not a straightforward condemnation of the white-nightgown mind-set, since the image with which it is contrasted is not simply admirable, since it is an image of dreams:

Only, here and there, an old sailor,
 Drunk and asleep in his boots,
 Catches tigers
 In red weather.

Drunk and asleep, the sailor does not perceive but only dreams; it is true that his travels have given him material for dreams that others may not have, but now he is sleeping, no longer awake to reality, which Stevens describes elsewhere as

The weight of primary noon,
 The A B C of being

 The ruddy temper, the hammer
 Of red and blue, the hard sound—
 Steel against intimation —the sharp flash,
 The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.

These are elements of reality that are more valuable than images that are

“half dead” or in “an obscure world / Of things that would never be quite expressed” (“The Motive for Metaphor,” *Transport to Summer*). If the sailor’s images have value, it is only because they derive from his experience of this world; that is to say, it is important that he is an old sailor, for it is only his travels in the real world that tie his dreams to real tigers in real weather, and thus give his dreams value at all. However, he too has now fallen from the highest state that we may achieve: that of observer of the “weight of primary noon, / The A B C of being.”

Thus Stevens could say in a late poem (“The Planet on the Table,” *The Rock*),

Ariel was glad that he had written his poems.
They were of a remembered time
Or of something seen that he had liked.

.....

His self and the sun were one
And his poems, although makings of his self,
Were no less makings of the sun.

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.

To see this wish to be poetic observer of the real world as a retreat from some early appreciation of otherworldly dreams is to fail to see the point of the early poems. The same desire to grasp reality is present in the early poem “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (*Harmonium*):

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

Another early poem, "Of the Surface of Things" (*Harmonium*), is especially interesting in this regard.

In my room, the world is beyond my understanding;
But when I walk I see that it consists of three of four hills and a cloud.

From my balcony, I survey the yellow air,
Reading where I have written,
"The spring is like a belle undressing."

The gold tree is blue.
The singer has pulled his cloak over his head.
The moon is in the folds of the cloak.

In the first stanza there is, first, simple doubt about reality, arising from failure to perceive things as they are (a failure that is represented by being in "my room"). This doubt is followed by a too-simple judgement as to the nature of reality, arising from a failure to reflect at all when confronted by overwhelming perceptual images (while "walking"). In the first line of the second stanza, the poet stands awkwardly between "room" and world: on "my balcony." But a poetic voice emerges with the figure of surveying the yellow air. Is the air really yellow? Or is this a metaphor? If a metaphor, what does it signify, what comparisons does it invite? The context provided by the first stanza, with its juxtaposition of radical scepticism and naive confidence, inclines us to such wonder: between worlds (as it were), what is it that we see? Good poetry is afoot; but soon it dies, in the trite simile of the lines that "I have written." (This line is dead poetry, for we scarcely care to ask, in response to the proposition that the spring somehow resembles a woman undressing, "How so?") Struggling to rediscover the poetic voice, the poet continues with another metaphor, but it is one that, standing alone, leaves us blank: to say flatly that a gold tree is blue, without any context that might render the paradox meaningful, is not enlightening. In the following line, however, the glimmer of significant truth is found; it is a truth about the poet:

he has, in his attempts to become poetic, lost sight of reality (“pulled his cloak over his head”). And then there is the haunting conclusion: “The moon is in the folds of the cloak.” That is to say, the moon itself (reality) is in the poem (the cloak). But it is hidden there (“in the folds”). The job of the poet is to uncover it. That is how I read this poem; generally speaking, I read Stevens’ poems, both his later ones and his earlier ones, as attempts to uncover reality.

Returning to “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” we see that it presents images in a relationship of thesis (white-nightgown wearers) and antithesis (drunken dreamers); consequently it points to the need for synthesis. This would not be clear were it not for two things to which Bly directs our attention in his article: (1) the facts of Stevens’ life as a sober businessman, and (2) the “path . . . into . . . intellectualist complexity, a criticism of dry reason from inside the palace of dry reason” that exists in Stevens’ later work. Bly denounces both of these elements of Stevens’ life and poetry, but in that he displays his failure to see Stevens’ point. Bly fails to understand not only the point of the later work, but also the point of the early poems; for the latter are not simple hymns to incomprehension, unreason, drunkenness and dreams. The realistic poet-businessman could never have simply admired the drunken dreams of the sailor; they were juxtaposed with the too-cautious, dull life of the white-nightgown wearer, not to set them up as an ideal in the contrast, but to unsettle.

Bly is delighted by the early poem “Metaphors of a Magnifico” (*Harmonium*). “How strange! . . . How beautiful!” he exclaims (72). The poem describes and re-describes twenty men crossing a bridge into a village: the problem at first is how to represent the fact that there are both similarities and differences among the men and their actions:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
 Into a village,
 Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,

Into twenty villages,
 Or one man
 Crossing a single bridge into a village.

The problem is then rejected as “old song / That will not declare itself.” The fact is rephrased, stripped of metaphor, but the new literal description (to the effect that $X = X$) too is rejected, on the same grounds. However, a “meaning” is found; it is a “meaning” comprising the vital details of the scene:

The boots of the men clump
 On the boards of the bridge.
 The first white wall of the village
 Rises through fruit-trees.

But the stanza continues, “Of what was it I was thinking? / So the meaning escapes.” The poem finishes with a two line stanza expressing the remaining fragments of the “meaning” that was thought to have been discerned in the fact: “The first white wall of the village.../ The fruit-trees...” Bly is delighted by this result; he calls the poem “a sort of guru poem.” Stevens, however, was not satisfied; he spent the rest of his life as a poet trying to reconcile the “receptive faculty of *sensibility*” with the “active faculty of *understanding*,” to use the Kantian terms for the essentially Kantian project (cf. Strawson 20).

Bly dislikes the German idealists, whom he describes as

creepy otherworldly types, worse than Pope Paul, academics who resembled gray jars, and who would ruin a whole state like Tennessee if put into it; people totally unable to merge into the place where they live –they could live in a valley for years and never become the valley. (73)

He makes a good point here: the idealists who understood Hegel did not think that merging with nature in the sense of losing oneself and becoming the valley was a correct synthesis; for the purpose was to become part of nature as *oneself*. The Hegelian synthesis was not to be a loss of self, in which the

principle of self-identity was abrogated; it was not supposed to erase distinctions and thus to create a “night in which all cows are black” (cf. Hegel 79). Stevens understood that. Bly does not. Consequently Bly sees Stevens’ struggle to understand the place of the jar as a gray jar, as abandoning the vision of synthesis with nature; Bly mistakenly sees Stevens’ Hegelian struggle as a retreat into the mind-set of white nightgowns.

The jar (“Anecdote of the Jar,” *Harmonium*) was “Like nothing else in Tennessee,” but that distinction is scarcely bad in itself, unless it is bad to be different, to be what you essentially are. Stevens appreciated the variety in nature, the distinctions between this and that, and also the distinction between “I” and “that.” Bly does not grasp the depth or the beauty of the latter distinction. My primary purpose is not to criticize Bly; it is to comment on the importance of this subject-object distinction if we are to understand Stevens’ later work. For his later poems are in the spirit of the Kantian struggle that was inherited by Hegel: to reconcile active subjective understanding in a natural world presented to receptive sensibility (to employ Kant’s terms again).

Bly, however, rails against “idealists” as he understands them, viz. as “shadow-haters” (as if idealism in the metaphysical sense were somehow tied up with idealism in a moral sense; 74). He writes:

By exclusive interest in “the truth,” they exile the shadow, or keep it exiled. . . . When Stevens takes his stand against all that, he takes a stand against perfect Paradises, against abstract churches, . . . (74)

The passage is interesting in several ways. First, “the truth,” which is presumably ultimate truth, comprises ordinary truths; certainly Stevens believed that; so did the German idealists after Hegel (who decidedly opposed Schelling’s image of the night in which all cows are black). Furthermore, if there is truth about “the shadow” of which Bly speaks, then “the truth”

encompasses it too; that is the second point. Thirdly, what is the shadow?

The term “shadow” is borrowed by Bly from Jung, who once, according to Booth (2), criticized his disciples for a “nit-picking discussion of the concept by protesting, ‘This is all nonsense! The shadow is simply the whole unconscious.’” Certainly the notion of the *whole unconscious* is an abstraction; in fact it is an abstraction of just the sort concerning which an anti-rationalist like Bly should presumably be skeptical. However, abstractions are not all bad (of course); I do not intend to discuss the merits of this one (viz. the *whole unconscious*), but it is odd for someone who embraces this abstraction to oppose the concept of reason. Perhaps there is in us something that we may profitably think of as the “unconscious,” but certainly there is in us a faculty of reason.

Bly, however, seems to want to reduce our *significant* mentation to the unconscious alone; in that he goes against the spirit of Stevens. Bly is like the farmer in Frost’s “New Hampshire,”

... who failing as a farmer
 Burned down his farmhouse for the fire insurance,
 And spent the proceeds on a telescope
 To satisfy a life-long curiosity
 About our place among the infinities.

Frost’s point, of course, is that we learn our place in the world (nature) by reflecting on what we really are. Stevens’ struggle to find our place included his attempt to represent, in poetry, the dialectical relations between our understanding and its objects. That was the essence of his attempt to understand *us* (possessors of dry reason as we essentially are). It is our nature to don white nightgowns occasionally, as it is the nature of a caterpillar to form a cocoon; neither we nor the caterpillar are thereby retreating from nature. On the contrary, we are simply being unabashedly what we are. Moralists may blame (or praise) us, but that is not a point of

metaphysics. As Bishop Butler wisely observed, "Everything is what it is and not another thing;" we are what we are: human, rational to a substantial degree, self-centred, and rather jar-like. To deliberately turn one's eyes from what we really are, in the attempt to comment on our being in the world, is counter-productive.

Bly conceives of "marriages" of darkness (77), but he does not contemplate marriages of dark and light. Stevens did: his poetry encompasses and synthesizes, with considerable success, even the forces of light. Thus he could live and work as a businessman as well as a poet, which is an achievement that Bly criticizes:

Wallace Stevens was not willing to change his way of life.... He kept the house fanatically clean, evidently slept in a separate bedroom for thirty or forty years, made his living through the statistical mentality, and kept his business life and poetry life separate.... (77)

My point is that *that* was perfectly consistent with the insights (or struggles) of his poetry: to distinguish between the distinct while trying to integrate them (without diminishing or losing anything real). His way of life was in harmony with this Hegelian conception of truth (the synthesis of antitheses).

Ad hominem, ironically Bly praises Tolstoy for wanting to free his serfs at the end of his life (thus stripping his family of the property that he had enjoyed when he could enjoy it). Bly comments (79), "He was willing to change his way of life that late!" Stevens, on the other hand, died as he lived, and lived as he wrote. A second irony is that Bly opposes the New Critics' assumption that "the author's life had no bearing whatever on the poem"; I say this is ironic because Bly fails to see Stevens' life as a text that bears on his poetry, in particular as a text that informs his later "dry" reason with new force. Stevens may have been a racist (man of his time as he was) and a snob, but in his profession, as in his poetry, there is *responsibility* to reality,

not a shirking of it. For Bly, however, it is praiseworthy to “live” one’s “shadow,” as Gauguin did (77), but not to live in the hard light of reason, as Stevens did. Bly quotes with approval from Rilke:

The man who cannot quietly close his eyes
certain that there is vision after vision
inside, simply waiting until nighttime
to rise all around him in the darkness —
he is an old man, it’s all over for him. (77)

It is an old question: Do we achieve knowledge by shutting our eyes or opening them? Bly and Rilke give one answer, Stevens another. “Who is right?” is another question, but Stevens should be read as a poet who struggled to keep his eyes open, not only on the world, but also on himself. Stevens believed (with Hegel) that visions that come in sleep are mere dreams.

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