

WALLACE STEVENS' INTERIOR PARAMOUR AS THE SPIRIT OF PLACE AND THE SOURCE OF THE SACRED

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Stevens' Interior Paramour is simultaneously the spirit of place and the source of the sacred. A spirit of which place? The promised land no less.

The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour opens with the word "Light." As the first word it has the stature of the revelatory Logos which illumines the promised land as "The world imagined," and that world, in itself, is the *ne plus ultra*, "the ultimate good."

In the major religions, the highest hope is divine bliss in an eternal life after death. However, for the secular humanist, the highest hope is found in the value placed on earthly life. Stevens' highest concept of life is summed up in the line: "The world imagined is the ultimate good." Because he does not believe in life after death, "the heaven of Europe is empty" (OP 63), the yearning for paradise is satisfied by the "instinct for earth" which when experienced in its mystical wholeness effects self-realisation comparable to the Eastern *tat tvam asi*, "That Thou Art":

The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:
The instinct for earth, for New Haven, for his room,
The gay tournemonde as of a single world
In which he is and as and is are one. (CP 476)

For Stevens, heaven is sensually earthbound, and it is a concept first perceived by the mind: "The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven, were, as it happened, one" (OP 176). And having conceived heaven finds it in the simplest things and commonplaces:

Was heaven where you thought? It must be there.
It must be where you think it is, in the light
On bed clothes, in an apple on a plate. (CP 217)

The spiritual ideal that heaven symbolises and the earth are made of the same stuff. Stevens says, "The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every

paradise." (NA 77) The first stanza of Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour gathers the images of light, thought and good into a kind of supra-intelligence which is the basis for enlightenment.

The union of the outer, "the world" and the inner, "good" is the "intensest rendezvous". It is also the union with the Beloved, or in other words, the Interior Paramour, which is the imagination personified, and through this intensest rendezvous the experience of enlightenment takes place in which all indifferences are transformed

into one thing:
Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a
Warmth
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

The image of light is applied to the shawl. Garments, metaphorically, characterise the creative aspect of the imagination in the form of poetry and its mediator, language. The shawl has, on these grounds, a connection to the idea of pure poetry as a supreme fiction, the mediating revelatory power of the mystery of reality behind the words. Stevens states, "God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry"(OP 167).

The shawl is, at another level of interpretation, the all-enveloping, transformative power of compassion, the mantle of the Madonna, which protectively shelters humanity. The shawl, woven from poetry, is wrapped tightly, like a loving embrace, to give us security, comfort and consolation "since we are poor." The root experience of poetry is the poet's own preverbal feelings and intuitions; primarily the lofty sensibilities of love and compassion – the joyous, human response to the beauty of life and the profound humane response to the cry of mortality:

Profound poetry of the poor and of the dead,
As in the last drop of the deepest blood,
As it fall from the heart and lies there to be seen, (CP 509)

The lofty role of the imagination in Stevens' aesthetic, humanistic creed manifests as a "vital self-assertion" (NA 171) and the "precious portent of our powers" (NA 175). The poet, "having identified his power as the power of the imagination" (NA 63), identifies on behalf of everyone the potentiality present in human nature:

The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything." (NA 175)

Stevens goes on to say: "Poets and painters alike today make that assumption and this is what gives them the validity and serious dignity that become them as among those that seek wisdom, seek understanding" (NA 175). As Daiches points out, for Stevens: "The truth of poetry, as distinct from that of philosophy and theology, is self-authenticating." Stevens recognised that the power of the imagination lies partly in that it is the sole repository of our sense of the world and the source of that sense as well as of the entire world of experience. He concurs with the painter Juan Gris, who states: "The world from which I extract the elements of reality is not visual but imaginative" (NA 173). Accordingly, Stevens posits the locus of religious feeling in the imagination: "A poem is a restricted creation of the imagination. The gods are the creation of the imagination at its utmost" (OP 215). Thus it is understandable that the imagination is conceived in such spiritual terms as "A light, a power, the miraculous influence." (CP 524)

As the shawl transforms from warmth to light, from light to power, its miraculous influence reflects precisely a simultaneous inner transformation. The imagination becomes the vehicle by which a new mode of existence becomes accessible – the mystical here and now:

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
That which arranged the rendezvous. (CP 524)

When there is a true awareness of the here and now, the empirical ego is dissolved in forgetfulness. In the dissolution, the harmony of life is not thought but felt "Within its vital boundary, in the mind." (CP 524)

The order, the whole and the knowledge can be understood as being contained within the mind. This view is much in line with Wittgenstein's "idea that solipsism, when it is unravelled, coincides with pure realism: 'I am my world'. The self is not to be found anywhere in the world of experience because it is the source of that experience - but it is not outside the world either: "rather, it is a limit of the world". And yet, while the mind may be itself a limit, its inner universe, nonetheless, has the spatial magnitude of "the incalculable expanse of the imagination" (OP 243). The imagination or Interior Paramour is "the power over the mind that lies in the mind itself," and as such becomes our own personal spiritual seat of authority, of grace and the place of apotheosis:

We say God and the imagination are one . . .
How high that highest candle lights the dark. (CP524)

The utterance that "God and the imagination are one" is the peak of the mystical experience. At this moment, the subject-object dualism has ceased and there is a complete unification of reality and the imagination. That this identification is total, Stevens makes clear:

Proposita: 1. God and the imagination are one. 2. The thing imagined is the imager.
The second equals the thing imagined and the imager are one. Hence I suppose the imager is God. (OP 178)

The mystical identification with the Divinity appears in Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity:

In truth who knows God becomes god.
(*Mundaka Upanishad*)

I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,
And lo, I was the All-living - only God I saw.
(Baba Kubi of Shiraz)

But within the body, the shrine of thy sensations, seek in the impersonal for the "Eternal Man", and having sought him out, look inward: thou art Buddha.
(From the *Tibetan Book of the Golden Precepts*)

[B]reaking through guarantees to me that God and I are one.

(Meister Eckhart)

Granted that God and imagination are one, that they are indivisible, then it follows the imagination possesses the same creative power with which it had credited a deity. Stevens gives credit where he believes credit is due: it is not an external supernatural God who spiritualises the universe, but the human imagination that is the source of the sacred:

These trees and their argentines, their dark-spiced
branches,
Grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic dust . . .
These are real only if I make them so. (CP 313)

The total identification of God and the imagination is more readily accommodated when God is considered to be a creation of the imagination. As the creative matrix of God, the imagination is, in Stevens' view, greater than God, perhaps akin to the distinction Eckhart draws between God and the Godhead. Stevens writes:

The idea of God is a thing of the imagination. We no longer think that God was, but was imagined. The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of the things of the imagination. (LWS 369)

The essential imagination is the Interior Paramour.

Thus far, in *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*, the imagination has been a shawl, a light, a power, a knowledge, God, and, finally, it appears as "the highest candle." Again, the imagination is associated with the image of light though not as illuminative as the sun which encompasses the earth and space. And yet, as Stevens declares elsewhere:

A candle is enough to light the world.
It makes it clear. Even at noon
It glistens in essential dark.
At night, it lights the fruit and wine,
The book and bread, things as they are. (CP 172)

The power to light the world is the outcome of a mature self-reliance that comes from the internalisation of "holiness and divine reality" or in Stevens' words:

With all his attributes no god but man
Of men whose heaven is in themselves, (CP 186)

Keeping in mind that the highest candle and the Interior Paramour are one, that they share the same nature, then the highest candle burns with love, a passion for life. Eckhart's description of the source of enlightened love has the same images: "Then the soul must burst into light with all her power. Out of this power, out of this light springs the flame of love." And similarly, John of the Cross says that in the union with the Spouse the soul is enkindled with "the living flame of love." Love is the transformative power, the heart of the spiritual impulse and as its nature is divine it is sufficient unto itself: "And shines, perhaps, for the beauty of shining" (OP 131). And so,

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough. (CP 524)

The poem follows the shift in consciousness "from small reason" to love and contentment. The shift is coincident with the change of place at the beginning and at the end of the poem: the change from the room that contains the private, meditative self to a new dimension of consciousness, one that is abstract and universal, that creates the place of love; a "dwelling in the evening air".

To live in the imagination qualified by love, to live with the Interior Paramour, Stevens concludes, is enough. The simple statement "is enough" is concentrated with meanings of vital significance. It suggests a satisfied sense of purpose not only in oneself but in everything. Satisfaction is found in the realisation that all events and all things are in themselves self-sufficient or as Wittgenstein remarks: "Not how the world is, is the mystical, but that it is." The mystical world is not a different or separate world to the

world of everyday experience. It is the same everyday world as the Buddhist aphorism reminds us:

Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.
After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

Neither is it transformed or changed in any way. It is we who are transformed, we see the world differently.

The art of conversion is poetry. And high poetry is a mystical act of grace in which the ordinary moment becomes the mystic instant which is enough. This state of peace is a place of peace. When our intelligence becomes visionary and courageous in scope, so that, intent on reality, it draws confidently on the power of the imagination to come to peace with uncompromising nature and human fallibility and calls it all good, then we become the source of the sacred. Stevens' poetic spirit is resolutely affirmative assuring us of a meaningful and creative place in the total scheme of existence. Words like "here," "now" and "enough" have mystical resonances that centre the truth of experience within creation. This, in itself, has long inspired in the human heart an upsurge of wonder and joy that is wholly religious: Here is the place. This is it! This life is the mystery and fulfilment we seek and "enough" also means we possess everything we need to get on with life. We can say wholeheartedly: "Let it be, Let it be" (Ps. 72:26). And the very utterance is a genuine act of love. In Christian theology, Christ is love and Christ is peace. Christ-consciousness, therefore, is not only a love-consciousness but a state of peace. Profound peace is mystical.

The heart of Stevens' credo is that we are what we love and we are life. Love is the light of the mind shining and radiating within; it is the spirit of place, of reality, of "things as they are" and it is the source of the sacred: the blessing and the rapture of being fully present and alive.