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Wallace Stevens:
The Essayist Beyond the Poet
The Relations Between Reality and Imagination

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ABSTRACT

Wallace Stevens: The Essayist Beyond the Poet. The Relations Between Reality and Imagination

Wallace Stevens was a famous North-American poet from the first half of 20th century who did not only success within poetry but also as a literary scholar. Although he was better known as a poet, being that as it may, his essays became essential in order to understand the evolution of art since the 1950's. As a result, in this paper I will analyze Stevens's essays focusing on the relations of reality and imagination what he considered essential in order to understand poetry and the role of poet. Furthermore, I will discuss how his works influenced over the conception of art of the period and how he even changed the perception of Romanticism artist had at the moment. Finally, I will evaluate the criticism written about Stevens's works from the 1970's until nowadays so as to show the relevance of these works.

Key words: Stevens, Imagination, Reality, Relations, Abstraction, Supreme-Fiction.

Wallace Stevens: El Ensayista Después del Poeta. Las Relaciones entre Realidad e Imaginación

Wallace Stevens era un famoso poeta Norteamericano de la primera mitad del S. XX que no sólo triunfo en la poesía sino también como teórico literario. Aunque fue mayormente reconocido como poeta, siendo como fuere, sus ensayos se convirtieron en piezas esenciales a la hora de entender la evolución del arte desde la década de 1950. A raíz de esto, en este trabajo analizaré los ensayos de Stevens centrándome en las relaciones entre la realidad y la imaginación, las que él consideraba esenciales para entender la poesía y la función del poeta. Además, discutiré cómo sus trabajos influenciaron sobre la concepción del arte de la época y cómo cambió la percepción del Romanticismo que los artistas del momento tenían. Finalmente, evaluaré la crítica escrita sobre los trabajos de Stevens desde los años 1970 hasta nuestros días para así mostrar la relevancia de éstos.

Palabras clave: Stevens, Imaginación, Realidad, Relaciones, Abstracción, Ficción-Suprema.

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Introduction

The evolution of literature and in particular of poetry, during the 20th century was a shocking cultural event that changed the way of understanding the arts. Coming from a Realist period, the changes the world suffered in a few decades made the way of understanding the arts change as well. Artists rejected a realistic vision of the world because they did not want to depict a world full of hopelessness and isolation. Thus, Modernism took over Realism as the predominant artistic movement, becoming a new tendency which would become one on its own. Modernism has as an influence the French poetry and the Impressionist painters from the late 19th century, where abstraction was one of the main features. This way, abstraction was already a common topic in the arts once the 20th century started. However, during Modernism the analysis of Reality and Abstraction is going to become a canonical topic in essays and writings both from poets and painters. Among these authors, we can find the figure of Wallace Stevens, who became one of the most important scholars regarding the relations between Reality and Abstraction.

Wallace Stevens (Reading, PA, 1879 - Hartford, CT, 1955) was a North American Modernist poet, awarded with the Pulitzer Prize of Poetry who had a great influence over authors not only from his period of time but from the rest of the century. Stevens was an author to whom painting had an essential role in his understanding of art and subsequently in his career. Stevens spent a great period of time learning and investigating about the relationships between poetry and painting, which he considered and called as the French poet Charles Baudelaire did before the “sister arts”. Thus, his studies about abstraction, and the way he understood how the evolution the arts suffered in this period of time are two main points in order to comprehend his works. Regarding this idea, Wallace Stevens not only became an excellent Modernist poet, but also an extremely relevant essayist, critic and scholar, writing about the relations between Imagination and Reality in both poetry and painting. Attending to this point, and focusing on the idea of the relevance of painting and abstraction in his works, I want to present a close reading analysis of his five most important essays discussing the dichotomy Imagination/Reality. As I said above, Wallace Stevens was a fervent lover of painting, and even in the first decade of the century he met

Marcel Duchamp. All through his life, he showed a great interest towards the arts and knowing the works of painters such as Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Vassily Kandinsky or Piet Mondrian. As a result, he maintains an epistolary relationship with some of these artists where he discusses topics such as the painterly abstraction of the arts.

In relationship with this idea, I decided to write this paper as an extension of the investigation project that I am working on with the professor of the English Department, Dr. Santiago Rodríguez Guerrero-Stratchan, where I discuss the relationships between the poetry of Wallace Stevens and painting, how his poetry influenced over the Action Painters from The School of New York and how both artistic streams converge in the idea of American Transcendentalism.

Objectives

Subsequently, my purpose is to cover, Wallace Stevens's prose in order to acquire a complete vision of his literary production as a poet and a critic, understanding this way the figure of one of the most relevant writers in the 20th century. Thus, I will analyze some of his more relevant writings from "The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination" and the criticism written about his works by scholars such as Charles Altieri or Albert Gelpi among others:

- To study the relations between Reality and Imagination on the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words".
- To study the relations between Reality and Imagination on the essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet".
- To study the relations between Reality and Imagination on the essay "Imagination as Value".
- To study the relations between Reality and Imagination on the essay "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting".
- To analyze the criticism written by Charles Altieri, Edward Ragg, Milton J. Bates, or Albert Gelpi among others to show the relevance of Stevens's essays in the posterior decades.

State of Art

The relations between imagination and reality treated by Stevens in his essays are a topic that has been widely discussed since “The Necessary Angel” was published in 1951. Not only Stevens himself revisited the texts once and again in order to explain his perception of reality and imagination and the labor they developed within the artistic field of poetry, but many scholars analyzed his essays as well as his poetry in order to take his philosophy into action. On the other hand, I did not find any piece of criticism or any paper that ensembles the relations between the imagination and the reality described within Wallace Stevens’s essays and the works of the biggest scholars from different decades posterior to the poet. These scholars that I am referring to are Charles Altieri, Albert Gelpi, John N. Serio, Bart Eeckhout and Edward Ragg. As a matter of fact, the studies made by Altieri collected in his book “Painterly Abstraction in Modernist Poetry” (1989), or Gelpi’s “Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (1985), as well as Eeckhout & Ragg’s “Wallace Stevens Across the Atlantic” (2008) provide me with information to analyze Stevens’s works with a broader point of view. Subsequently, I will analyze these works of criticism as a way of relating visions of Wallace Stevens’s essays from different scholars and periods.

Methodology

I will proceed through a close reading approach and an analysis of texts and the literary reception and criticism of different authors and scholars. I believe it is important to analyze what Stevens expresses and how Altieri, Gelpi, and Ragg interpret it. It is necessary to know what is what they assume and what they leave out from Stevens’s essays.

Working Plan

In a first stage of the project I will study Wallace Steven’s essays compiled in his collection “The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination” through a close reading approach and see what ideas are basic to understand his perception of Reality and

Imagination. Thus, I will have a deep understanding of Stevens's concepts reflected in different essays and looked from different points of view. In a second stage, I will study the criticism written by Charles Altieri, Albert Gelpi and Eeckhout & Ragg among others in order to see how critics analyze Stevens's essays and perceptions of Reality and Imagination. Finally, in a third stage I will put together the impressions I will obtain and see what conclusions I can get to.

Analysis

In 1951, Wallace Stevens being already a worldwide well-known poet, published a book of essays that would change the perception of the relations between Reality and Imagination. This work, entitled “The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination” (Stevens, 1951), introduced a new whole vision in the world of literary criticism, and would settle down a different way of understanding the relations of Imagination and Reality in poetry. As Wallace Stevens explains in his introduction, one function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time (Stevens, 639). In these essays he would not make some criticism about poetry or other writings, but he would meditate about how these relations mentioned above would influence in his perception of poetry.

In his first essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, Stevens starts analyzing a text by Plato where a charioteer is described. This writing leads Stevens to analyze the reality behind the poetry, as he realizes what Plato depicts is unreal yet his imagination believes it as something realistic. However, Stevens assumes he cannot yield himself to this nonsense because we are not free to do it. For Stevens the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have (Stevens, 645). On a first stage, the imagination will put us in the place of this unreal figure, without thinking in a rational way. However, bit by bit imagination will lose its power and reality will take over the situation whilst imagination is adhering to unreality. Regarding Stevens’s ideas, we can see how there are degrees of imagination as well as there are degrees of reality. As a result, the comparison between imagination and reality through history is continuous. Coming from Plato to Cervantes’ Don Quixote and going through artists such as Verrocchio, the relations between imagination and reality in their different artistic works are essential for Stevens. For instance, in Verrocchio’s statue of Bartolommeo Colleoni “the apposition between the imagination and reality is too favorable to the imagination” (Stevens, 647), while Cervantes looked for a more balanced figure. Later on, reality will take over imagination. Another example that Stevens uses to illustrate these relations is the statue of General Jackson in

Washington's Lafayette Square, described as a work of fancy, which is understood by Coleridge this way:

Fancy is an activity of the mind which puts things together of choice, not the will, as a principle of the mind's being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself. Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed (Stevens, 648).

This work, being a work of fancy demonstrates how works, poetry included, do not have to have imagination nor reality included. Nevertheless, it is more common to find reality or imagination in a piece of work rather than fancy. As a matter of fact, Stevens proposes that the pressure of reality has become greater and greater with the pass of time. An example of this, is the evolution of the sound of words from one age to another which evolves from the conflicts within the connotative and the denotative forces in words which represent the relation between reality and imagination (Stevens 648). Whereas it is usually expressed that the tendency today is towards the connotative sense of words, the general movement in the arts, that is to say, in painting and in music, has been the other way (Stevens, 651). In these cases, it is obvious to say that the tendency is towards the imagination. According to Boileau's ideas cited by Stevens in this essay, the decline of religious beliefs since the beginning of 20th century leads humanity to confront the cruelty of reality which, in his opinion, humans would not endure. He concludes that men must venture at last into the hostile world, which can be called education to reality (Stevens, 651).

These ideas can be taken towards other aspects of the arts and use them to analyze, for example, the denotative and connotative aspects of language, which will also influence over the imagination. As it has been expressed above, whereas the language seems to tend towards the connotative, some other arts such as painting and music seem to tend towards the denotative. The effect of these arts is the effect of the imagination, as we can see for instance in abstract painting. However, and regarding poetry which is the field where Stevens focused his studies, the tendency towards the connotative cannot continue against the previously mentioned pressure of reality, making this pressure what controls poetry. This idea can be explained using a quote from Croce's Oxford lecture of 1933:

If poetry is intuition and expression, the fusion of sound and imagery, what is the material which takes on the form of sound and imagery? It is the whole man: the man who thinks and wills, and loves, and hates, who is strong and weak, sublime and pathetic, good and wicked; man in the exultation and agony of living; and together with the man, integral with him, it is all nature in its perpetual labour of evolution.... Poetry... is the triumph of contemplation.... Poetic genius chooses a strait path in which passion is calmed and calm is passionate (Stevens 652).

However, it was not only this what Stevens meant when he referred to the pressure of reality, as he expresses in his own words: “By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (Stevens, 654). This pressure is great enough to eliminate or create an old or a new vision of the imagination, what happens to be always attached to a new reality. However, it is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality, and the pressure this reality creates is the determining factor in the artistic character of an era both in society and individuals (Stevens, 656).

Attending to these ideas, the figure of the poet would be educated in a deep use of huge imaginations, beyond the experience of life in itself, where his activity as a poet will depend upon his capacity of abstraction, not only of himself but of reality placing it in his imagination. As it is expressed during the modernist period, and as the French philosopher Henri Bergson explains cited by Stevens, “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that I have just had” (Stevens, 658). The poet has his own meaning for reality, and for him, it is not that static object what happens to be poetry, but what actually happens in the scene because the reality is different for each one in each moment of history.

Up to this point, and having discussed the nature of poetry, and assuming it is an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals, it is understandable to discuss the role of the poet, beyond the limits of poetry. According to Stevens, there are no social or political obligations associated to poets, and the poet does not owe any kind of social obligation more than the moral values of the poet. Asserting that imagination and society are inseparable and that “the all-commanding subject-matter of poetry is life, the never-

ceasing source” (Stevens, 660), the social obligation of the poet that has been discussed in several occasions throughout history is the pressure of reality which the poet must resist. By doing this, and according to Stevens, the poet helps the people to live their lives opening a breach to escapism and finally everything like a firm grasp of reality is eliminated from the aesthetic field (Stevens, 661). Even though it can consider that escapism has a pejorative sense which applies to the idea of the poet being not attached to reality, being the imagination not adhere to reality as well, which Stevens regards as fundamental, it is acceptable to think that there is a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, and in view of Bergson’s ideas, each poet will conceive its own world depending on their own perception. Thus, “poetry is a revelation in words by means of the words” (Stevens, 663), based on imagination that gives to everything some kind of peculiarity known by Stevens as nobility. “This nobility is something out of time, which let us realize that in our present, in our reality, the past looks false and is, therefore, dead. Nobility is a force. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality” (Stevens, 665).

These ideas, from Bergson to Stevens’s conception of nobility, lead us to another of his essays “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” which starts with the analysis of poetry as an unofficial view of being. Yet, it should be taken for granted that as the nature of the truth changes, so the nature of poetry changes, perhaps for no more significant reason than that poets come and go (Stevens, 667). Nonetheless, if the objective of the poet is to find out what poetry truly means, it would not be enough to study poetry without comparing it to philosophy, since the beginning of times philosophy has tried to describe and understand what poetry truly means, and seeing the possible relationships that may be between both. As it is known, in philosophy, we try to approach truth through reason, but in poetry, we try to approach truth, as I have shown before, through imagination. According to tradition, if rational ideas are expected to satisfy the reason, imaginative ideas are expected to satisfy the imagination, therefore if we are skeptical of rational ideas or imaginative ideas it is because they do not satisfy our reason, nor our imagination respectively. According to Stevens, and following this line of thought, the poet, in order to fulfill himself, must

accomplish a poetry that satisfies both the reason and the imagination (Stevens, 668). Therefore, poetry could be considered the equal or even the superior of philosophy.

Notwithstanding, there is no definition of poetry, only approximations, and taking into account that poetry can be considered a process of the personality of the poet, this makes possible to exist as many approximations as poets are. On the other hand, Stevens reasons that if we consider poetry a result of the personality of the poet, in other words, as something personal, in a certain sense its value is trivial and it cannot be an equivalent to philosophy (Stevens 668).

Nevertheless, Stevens decides to analyze this individuality as an element in the creative process, influenced not only by the personality of the poet but also by those physical and mental factors that shapes him as an individual. Besides, it is assumed by Stevens that the incredible is not a part of poetic truth. On the contrary, what concerns us in poetry, as in everything else, is the belief of credible people in credible things. Poetic truth is the truth of credible things, not so much that it is actually so, as that it must be so. It is toward that alone that it is possible to the intelligence to move (Stevens, 675). Thus, we see how the creative process is based on the personality, reflected in the imagination, and the truth of credible things, or reality. This combination of both elements, this agreement, leads to a world of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights, where 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. The morality of the poet's radiant and productive atmosphere is the morality of the right sensation (Stevens, 679).

Up to this point, the question is what should the poet do in order to achieve this moment, in order to find the truth, what can be answered in the last part of this essay. Being in an agreement with Stevens, "the poet must create his unreal out of what is real" (Stevens, 679), in other words, the poet must move towards something credible within his imagination and personality. Identifying poetic truth as the truth of facts or reality, the poet must wonder in which level of true he must write his poems, what Stevens describes as:

I am myself a part of what is real and it is my own speech and the strength of it, this only, that I hear or ever shall. I am the truth, since I am part of what is real, but neither more nor less than those

around me. And I am imagination, in a leaden time and in a world that does not move for the weight of its own heaviness (Stevens 682).

This way, the poet will power to the full and at its height, meaning by this as part of what is real, to rely on his imagination, to make his imagination that of those who have none or little, and having elected to exercise his power to the full and at its height, and having identified his power as the power of the imagination, he may begin its exercise by studying it in exercise and proceed little by little, as he becomes his own master, to those violences which are the maturity of his desires (Stevens, 682-3). This way, and little by little, Stevens shows us how “the poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one’s thought has become an inseparable part of it” (Stevens, 684) to the same degree as poetry is the imagination of life. Therefore, and citing Stevens again:

When we say that the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another and when, by way of illustration, we cite, say, the blue sky, we can be sure that the thing cited is always something that, whether by thinking or feeling, has become a part of our vital experience of life, even though we are not aware of it. It is easy to suppose that few realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there - few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings (Stevens, 684).

This poet, this figure so-called the figure of the youth as virile poet, will be thinking of those facts of experience thought by all of us and will address to the inexplicable, the enigma and mask, defining himself as the truth, but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner I was guided in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours (Stevens, 685). Thus poetry becomes a metaphor composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet’s sense of the world, through the process of creation of his personality as he mediates and interjects the appearances of that sense.

Nonetheless, and quoting Stevens, “it does not seem possible to say of the imagination that it has a certain single characteristic which of itself gives it a certain single

value as, for example, good or evil” (Stevens, 724). Regarding this idea, in his essay “Imagination as Value”, this statement will be discussed and extrapolated to philosophy and the reason as well. In order to analyze this, we must understand imagination as the power of the mind over the possibilities of things; but if this constitutes a certain single characteristic, it is the source not of a certain single value but of as many values as reside in the possibilities of things (Stevens, 726). Going back to the origins of imagination as we know it nowadays, it was during the Romantic period when imagination reached its climax and acquired a certain kind of metaphysical value, therefore the true poem is not only the work of the individual artist, it is the work of art that is continuously perfecting itself. Thus, the imagination becomes one of the biggest human powers, or as Stevens defined it himself, “the imagination is the liberty of the mind” (Stevens, 727). However, Stevens does not agree with the Romantic vision and conceives it as a failure to make use of that liberty, for him, it is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling. It is a failure of the imagination precisely as sentimentality is a failure of feeling (Stevens, 728). In order to understand these concepts, we must see imagination as the only genius that leads the poet to the truth, lying in abstraction when is taken to the limit. Yet, Romantic’s imagination is incapable of abstraction, and that is why Stevens rejects it.

On the other hand, Stevens analyzes the Freudian perspective of imagination and comes to the point where he imagines Freud defending the idea that in the case there were not science, society only would have imagination, what could be interpreted as a science of illusions. This vision of the imagination as metaphysics is to think of it as a part of life – Stevens explains – and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice. We live in the mind (Stevens, 728). Some ways of demonstrating what this statement means are the following:

Imagine a discussion of the world between two people born blind, able to describe their images, so far as they have images, without the use of images derived from other people. It would not be our world that would be discussed. Still another illustration may help. a man in Paris does not imagine the same sort of thing that a native of Uganda imagines. If each could transmit his imagination to the other, [...] what words would the Parisian find to forestall his fate and what understanding would the Ugandan have of his incredible delirium? (Stevens, 729)

Regarding these ideas, we must assume that “if we live in the mind, we live in the imagination” (Stevens, 729), but what does this mean? As we have seen before, the reason stands between the imagination and the reality, and from here comes the struggle, which will continue to go on, and nowadays we are only attached to the extent of artifice within us and the question of its value. Notwithstanding, for Stevens, one wants to consider the imagination on its most momentous scale, which does not refer to the scale of poetry, nor of any form of literature or art, but in the scale of international politics and in particular of communism (Stevens, 730).

Here, we find a new vision within Stevens’s essays, tending to a more political and practical way. According to Stevens, communism is a phenomenon of imagination and its diffusion exhibits imagination on its most momentous scale (Stevens, 730). Nonetheless, the difference in here is that we can consider different types of imagination differentiated in nature. The one engaged by the materialism of communism and another engaged by the projects of idealism. It is not that the imagination is versatile but that there are different imaginations, Stevens clarifies. We use our imagination with respect to every person that we take notice just by making up our minds about them by a simple glance. Up to this point, we can evaluate imagination and see how it can be classified in different ways, always related to reality in a higher or lower state. On top of that, and in order to justify my ideas, we can see how Stevens explicates that the operation of the imagination in life is more significant than its operation in or in relation to works of art or perhaps I should have said, from the beginning, in arts and letters; second, that the imagination penetrates life; and finally, that its value as metaphysics is not the same as its value in arts and letters (Stevens, 733).

Subsequently, the continuous discussion of imagination and reality is a discussion for the purposes of arts and letters. In life, as Stevens expresses, what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we see it (Stevens, 733). This idea is essential in order to understand this struggle that I have mentioned before since the value of imagination in arts and letters is more aesthetic and well-defined than in life. For this reason, the poetic value is an intrinsic value. It is not the value of knowledge.

It is not the value of faith. It is the value of the imagination (Stevens, 734). In any case, if the imagination is the capacity by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of the god into the idea of man. As Stevens shows us, imagination creates images that are independent of their originals since nothing is more certain than that the imagination is agreeable to the imagination (Stevens, 736).

Coming to an end, the final point of this essay is the assumption of imagination, quoting Stevens's words, as "the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos" (Stevens, 737). Generally, we assume the imagination as abnormal per se, and this point of view was approached in the reference to the previously mentioned struggle between reason and imagination. Regarding this belief, and as Stevens points out "the disposition toward a point of view derogatory to the imagination is an aversion to the abnormal" (Stevens, 737), therefore it is normal for us to distinguish the imagination with those that reach its abnormality. The truth is that we are living in concepts of the imagination even before the reason has established them as Stevens remarks, and if this is true, then reason is simple the methodizer of the imagination (Stevens, 738). This way, we have to understand Stevens's writing by accepting this, which makes it easier to assume the remark that "in service of love and imagination nothing can be too lavish, too sublime or too festive" (Stevens, 738) hence, in order to solve the problems of those men that see the world by insisting on the misery and solitude, that do not see the value of the imagination, and that find their chief problems to be the problems of the normal, the only thing they need is everything that the imagination has to give.

In short, we have demonstrated that the relations between imagination and reality are ceaseless, and that since the Romantic period, where the imagination reached its highest level of expression throughout what is usually known as the Romantic expression of the self, the imagination has evolved towards new disciplines acquiring during this prolonged process certain values that help in the so-called struggle between reality and imagination that Stevens cites in all his essays. Without regard to our advances, we still have to focus on the topic that more worried Wallace Stevens by this time in relation with the imagination

and reality dichotomy. In order to analyze this topic, we will focus on “The relations Between Poetry and Painting”, the last essay from his book “The Necessary Angel”. This essay not only added more information to the relation between the imagination and the reality, but it changed the perception of these two arts and how they interact with each other within the intellectuals and artists of the period.

The relations between poetry and painting have been a question that has worried artists since the beginning of history. Coming already from the Ancient Greece we can see how both poetry and painting influenced over each other throughout the use of a rhetorical device known as ekphrasis in which one art tries to reflect and relate to another by making reference to its essence. Later on, these relations between arts have been a common topic in the development of poetry and painting becoming something essential in the origination of Romanticism. From this moment until our days, several authors both from painting and poetry have tried to understand and study the relations between the so-called sister arts. During 19th century, French poets focused on Abstraction and the relations between their poetry and Impressionist paintings. When Modernism arrived, these French authors and painters had a great influence over the new movement and poets like Wallace Stevens. For this reason it was common to hear these artists saying, as Stevens does in his essay that “the identity of poetry is revealed as between poetry in words and poetry in painting” (Stevens, 740). Regarding poetry from a Stevensian point of view, it can be found in all kinds of artistic expressions, from Shakespeare to Rembrandt, passing through the figures of Biblical women or the madonnas of all Europe. In other words, Stevens explains how “there is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything” (Stevens, 740). In a like manner, we find Baudelaire’s ideas when asserts that:

There exists an unascertained and fundamental aesthetic, or order, of which poetry and painting are manifestations, but of which, for that matter, sculpture or music or any other aesthetic realization would equally be a manifestation (Stevens, 740).

As it can be easily seen, this is a generalization, which is not the best argument in order to demonstrate any idea. However, it is well-known by every poet – Stevens explains – no poet can have failed to recognize how often a detail, a propos or remark, in respect to painting, applies also to poetry, and the truth is that there is a corpus of remarks in respect

to painting, most often the remarks of painters themselves, which are as significant to poets as to painters (Stevens, 741). This statement demonstrates us how there is a clear relation between painting and poetry, and therefore, we can suppose that it would be possible to study poetry throughout the study of painting or that one could become a poet after having become a painter, or carrying on in both disciplines at once as Stevens suggests in the initial lines of his writing.

Attending this idea of the double vision discipline, Stevens suggest that the subject might be regarded from two different points of view, the one of the individual who is mainly dedicated to painting, whether or not he is a painter; and the one of the individual who is mainly dedicated to poetry, whether or not he is a poet. On the first case, Stevens suggests that the selection of composition as a common denominator of poetry and painting is the selection of a technical characteristic by an individual whose center was painting. Poetry and painting alike create through composition (Stevens, 742-43). Regarding the second point of view, the one of the individual whose center is poetry, begins with a sense that the technical impregnates painting to such a level that the two are identified. According to Stevens, this statement should be considered untrue, since, if painting was purely technical, that conception of it would exclude the artist as a person (Stevens, 743), and the notion of sensibility would be disregarded. Nevertheless, we have explained before that this sensibility, is essential within the making process of poetry, therefore of painting as well. In addition to this, it is also commonly said that “the origins of poetry are to be found in the sensibility” (Stevens, 743), even though this statement can be denied and establish that the origin of, for example, an advantageous poem or painting is a result of exceptional concentration, showing us how the force within us that leads to this product is not the sensibility, or in other words, the feelings. In this case, it seems to be a certain ability that derives more from the imagination.

Coming up from the experiences lived in the reality, the mind keeps the memory that will be later reconstructed by the imagination, using these memories as material with which it does whatever it wills; as Stevens asserts “this is the typical function of the imagination which always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar” (Stevens,

744). Thus, the idea of inspiration can be substituted by an effort of the mind independent on the vicissitudes of the sensibility; as an example of this, Stevens mentions Shakespeare and his ability to write the greatest pieces of drama without depending on “the fortuities of inspiration” (Stevens, 744). To sum up, these two arts, poetry and painting, have in common an industrious element, which, when it is exercised, is “not only a labor but a consummation as well” (Stevens, 744).

Focusing on the idea of modern relations between poetry and painting, in order to contextualize the subject in a specific moment, it is accepted as a better idea to face the topic as a whole. Stevens believed that the supreme relation between poetry and painting in his period was between modern man and modern art, and was explained simply as this:

In an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith: the reigning prince. Consequently their interest in the imagination and its work is to be regarded not as a phase of humanism but as a vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains. [...] The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground, whatever it may be, the determination not to be confined, the recapture of excitement and intensity of interest, the enlargement of the spirit at every time, in every way, these are the unities, the relations to be summarized as paramount now (Stevens, 748).

Regarding this belief, the study of the imagination and the study of the reality come to appear momentous, essential for the development of the individual as it has been reflected in the previous quote. On Stevens’s time, the search for the supreme truth was a search in reality or through reality or even “a search for some supremely acceptable fiction” (Stevens, 749). Stevens, quoting Juan Gris, from some notes of one of his paintings, explains that “the world from which I extract the elements of reality is not visual but imaginative” (Stevens, 749).

In other words, this reality created, this new reality, is a modern reality, also considered by Stevens “the momentous world of poetry” also referred by Simone Weil as decreation (Stevens, 750). Modern reality is a reality of decreation attending to this regard,

and as it has been demonstrated, our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers, where the greatest truth we could hope to discover, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything (Stevens, 750). Thus, we have brought poetry and painting into relation as sources of our present conception of reality, fed by the impulse of imagination. As a result, we observe how the relation between poetry and painting is at the same time a relation between the reality and the imagination within themselves.

As I have mentioned before, "The Necessary Angel", the book of essays that Wallace Stevens published in 1951, revolved the conception of the relations between the imagination and the reality as we have seen. This book of essays was not another work to add to the prolific life of the writer, it really meant a change within the perception of the relations within art. Stevens's work influenced over the painting artists of the period, especially the last essay that I commented above, therefore, it is easy to understand that his essays had a great critical reception. One of the greatest works of criticism focused on the figure and writings of Wallace Stevens is the one produced by the scholar and critic Charles Altieri, who in 1989 published a book of essays entitled "Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry". In this piece of work, I am going to focus on the relevance of the essay "Why Stevens Must be Abstract", where Altieri establishes several reasons and arguments in order to reach a better understanding of Stevens's works focused on the abstraction and the relations of the reality and the imagination.

As we know, Wallace Stevens was a modernist poet very concerned with the idea of abstraction. For him, the idea of Modernist abstraction was relevant because it offered a new poetic content, a new vision of the real truth that he sought in his poetry. According to Charles Altieri, Modernist abstraction affords two principles that helped Stevens to develop his poetry:

The first principle consists in an ideal of a content for poetry that cannot be represented, because it is too concrete, too fundamental to universal processes for negotiating with the world, to appear as pictorial images within it. The poet can dream of rendering feelings, rather than images, and therefore can hope to compose a human presence that - quoting Stevens - "in being more than an exception becomes part of the commonal". If one were to ask how poets can achieve the innocence

or simplicity to maintain this “commonal” as anything more than a fiction, desperately and nakedly posing an illusory escape from the actual conditions of Modernity, there would be no direct way to respond [...]. There can, however, be a response in the form of a style, a way of simultaneously using and refusing the imperatives to generalization. Providing terms for that response becomes Modernism’s second contribution. Stevens realized that the abstraction he desired on the level of content might be possible without the traps of ideology, if he could adapt to poetry the testimonial, self-referential dimension of art explored in painting (Altieri, 322).

In this extract, we can observe how what Altieri is interpreting throughout Stevens’s concepts and words is that the abstraction desired by Modernism, and especially by Wallace Stevens came from reality, passing through the filter of imagination. By the 1940s Stevens realized that poetry must take on the qualities of an abstract art (Altieri, 323), and in order to achieve this, the increase of the use and value of the imagination was something imperative.

Stevens denies the play of the so-called social voices that Altieri cites in his essay mentioning Bruns argumentation just because this negation “creates the possibility of treating the imagination as considerably more than an epistemological issue” (Altieri, 326). As we pursue individual choices, we see how imagination becomes the basic force in positing and delineating values. Stevens, in Altieri’s opinion, did not devote much attention to the actual voices of other people. For him, what matters is not the fact, or even the shape, of otherness; what matters is how the individual disposes himself or herself to make the imagination of one’s own otherness significant (Altieri 326-7). Such beliefs, made Stevens write a work that gives direction to lives in a certain way. This hope, Altieri suggests, led Stevens to the discursive projects that occupied him through much of the 1940s (let me remind these were the previous years to the publication of his book of essays). If he was to be a philosophical poet, able to address society on levels deeper than political rhetorics allowed, he had to understand what resources the newest principles in the arts made available for him (Altieri 332). As we have seen before, painting afforded the clearest paradigm for self-reflexive and as a result, the abstract painters all had to write essays on their own work in order to indicate what forces were involved, but only the poet could make that reasoning part of what the poem proposed for the audience’s own reflexive

experience (Altieri, 333). In Stevens's first essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens explains how he sees the figure of the poet, as we have already seen, and shows the levels of abstraction that can be reached. Altieri refers to this extract, identifying four principles that Stevens attributes to the powers of abstraction in poetry:

First, abstraction is a means for poetry to make disclosures about the world, while setting itself against the pursuit of particular propositions that can be judged for their descriptive truth. Second, abstraction is a contrary of "truth", because it has force as a *process*, rather than as a statement. Indeed, it can resist the pressure of reality precisely because it can be opposed to all reification. Third, this process has claims both to be and to account for reality, because the process per se can be seen as occupying a particular site: that of the poem, where we, in effect, are confronted with a display of our own powers. [...] Finally, these exercises in abstraction have the important consequence of enabling us to display to ourselves human powers, and human relations to an environment, with an intensity that warrants our claiming a nobility for ourselves without an attendant rhetoric of alienation. In an abstract art, actions can take the form of self-explanatory performances, enabling the writing to overcome the tendency of the culture's more specific and concrete forms of self-representation to produce more parody than persuasion (Altieri, 334).

In other words, we can see how the pressure of reality is opposing or confronting all the arts in general and how what really matters is the power of imagination proclaiming something in our lives rooted deeply enough to take form despite the decline of particular beliefs.

This way, Altieri's arguments lead us to Albert Gelpi's book of essays entitled "Wallace Stevens: The Poetic of Modernism" where abstraction is discussed by several scholars. Within this group of intellectuals we can find Gelpi himself as well as a revision of the previous text by Altieri entitled in here "Why Stevens Must Be Abstract, or What a Poet Can Learn from Painting". In this text, Altieri focuses, as he did before, in the concept of abstraction within Stevens's work, and the effects it had within the revolution of Modernist poetry. However, this would be something irrelevant for our study, if Stevens would not define abstraction following upon his definition of the pressure of reality. As Altieri manifests by quoting Stevens "the pressure of reality leaves the imagination always at the end of an era". The imagination's desires to use first-person experience as a test for its idealizations keep it continuously vulnerable to demystification (Altieri, 87). Stevens tries to focus his writings on the powers of the mind, as a "self-conscious act of the

imagination turning to its own idealizing capacities” (Altieri, 88) thus fighting back the pressure of reality.

Despite most of Altieri’s essay focuses on the idea of painterly abstraction and how it influenced Stevens’s poetics, it is also true that he analyzes in a certain manner the relations between the reality and the imagination that Stevens discussed in his essays. Nevertheless, there are two essays in the book edited by Gelpi that need to be mentioned when regarding the critical approach to Stevens’s essays. These works were written by Gerald L. Bruns and Albert Gelpi himself.

Bruns, who was also mentioned by Altieri in his work, is the author of the essay “Stevens without Epistemology”, where he discusses, among other topics, how the mind links up with reality. However, Bruns wonders how it is changing the way of reading Stevens’s poetry, when the problem of the way the mind links up with reality is no longer relevant. He tries to clarify this question following the next line of argumentation:

There was a time when questions about nature, reality, or the world began to be reformulated as questions about the mind, consciousness, or imagination rather than as questions about god. This was the “epistemological turn” in western thinking when Mind or Spirit replaced Being as the “metaphysical centrum” of reality. Then there came a time when questions about mind or consciousness (and therefore questions also about reality) began to be reformulated as questions about language. This was the “linguistic turn” [...]. Finally, there came a time when questions about language (and also therefore questions about mind and reality) began to be reformulated as as questions about social practice, [...]: questions, in short, about how people get on with one another in particular human situations when they must get something done [...]. This was the “hermeneutical turn”, where hermeneutics means [...] philosophical hermeneutics and is concerned with the nature of understanding (Bruns, 24-5).

As it has been assumed by multitude of scholars, during the Modernist period epistemology was essential in order to understand this artistic and cultural stream because it is said that artists focused on the study of knowledge and perspective in order to find out the truth. However, this hermeneutical turn that Bruns exposes in his essay regarding the way the public should read Stevens’s works, make us realize that Stevens’s problem “is what to do about other people” (Bruns, 25). The problem with epistemology is that always

concerns relations to other people, and despite Stevens's poetry, as Bruns suggests, will always be a poetry of the spectator, in which the main thing is to see something or to construct something (Bruns, 26), the problem of his poetry is related to the mysterious power that voices have over us, in other words and quoting Stevens: "When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of someone else" (Bruns, 27). From my personal point of view, these words can be interpreted as the power of the imagination fighting back the pressure of reality which leads to the point where the outsider becomes part of the self, transgressing the limits of the mind and entering within the mind of the poet. This imaginative voice is what Stevens discussed in his essays, as we have previously explained, and it is what takes us to the essay written by Albert Gelpi, "Stevens and Williams: The Epistemology of Modernism".

In this essay, Gelpi discusses the perception of Romanticism that Stevens discussed in his essay "Imagination as Value". After assuming the same conceptions about imagination that Stevens has, what means that the imagination served an integrated function in a world divided and that the individual became the inspired locus for an intuitive perception of the spiritual forms and energies where the imagination was elevated into the sublime human faculty, through which it was possible to penetrate to the essential reality and transcendental interrelatedness of the objects of experience (Gelpi, 5). However, as it has been argued the function of the Modernist poet was redefine the function of the imagination, liberating it from epistemological premises and reclaiming its power in the face of psychological and social circumstances (Gelpi, 5). As we can appreciate, Gelpi assumes the same position that Stevens adopted some decades before and ends up his argumentation with Stevens's words talking about cubism when he says "modern reality is a reality of decreation" and quotes Braque when remarks: "the senses deform, the mind forms" (Gelpi, 7). Thus, it is clear that against a cruel reality the imagination becomes itself a powerful counterforce, therefore for Stevens the "truth" of poetry is a function of the poet's personality as Gelpi interprets from his writings already seen above (Gelpi, 7).

This cruel reality took place especially during the decade of the 1930s when society was being beaten by the economic and political uncertainties. As Edward Ragg suggests in

his essay “Picasso, Cézanne and Stevens’s Abstract Engagement” it was during these years when the poet’s faith in philosophical and Romantic idealism was challenged, by the thought that such forces were greater than the mind’s power to construct “reality”, that abstract conception might equal little more than solipsism (Ragg, 135). As we have remarked, abstraction for Stevens has evolved from the failure of the poet to stay attached to reality to a use of the imagination to distort reality and to finally signify, as Ragg brings up, “a positive creative process in which the idea of poetry inspires the creation of actual poems” (Ragg, 137). It is Stevens himself, who defends the idea of abstraction as “the balance between imagined things and real things” (Ragg, 137) which, furthermore, is a constant source of troubles for him. Nevertheless, the poet adopted abstraction in his writings progressively. In this manner, according to Ragg, some of his writings like “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” have been misinterpreted because both the “robust poet” and the “he” who speaks at the end of this essay are not abstracted in a pejorative sense but aim to re-establish fresh contact with “reality” through imaginative meditation (Ragg, 139). In other words, throughout Stevens’s works we can see how the imagination taken to what the poet himself calls “pure irreality” can only disguise its creations if it keeps in staying apart. As the poet adds:

I do not desire to exist apart from our works and the imagination does not desire to exist apart from our works... Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality (Ragg, 144).

As we can observe, the relations between the imagination and the reality arise once and again, not only in the poet’s writings, but in the critic as well, even though they try to focus in different aspects of Stevens’s works. So far, we have analyzed Steven’s essays and its relevance in different critical approaches from different decades since the early 1970s until the late 2000s. To conclude with the analysis of the criticism written about this interesting and widespread topic of discussion, I would like to examine critically “The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens”, edited by John N. Serio and published very recently, in 2007.

One of these essays is entitled “Stevens and the Supreme Fiction”, written by Milton J. Bates, where the author discusses whether or not it is possible to believe in a

fiction. In other words, is it possible to believe in something that has been made up by the imagination, and if so, can it be considered part of the reality? For Stevens, this ultimate level of the imagination that achieves to be completely believed, is what he calls “supreme fiction”, and as he explains his poetry explores “the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognized as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment” (Bates, 48). Moreover, according to Bates in the Wallace Stevens’s essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” the “you” of the invocation, previously discussed in the first part of this paper, is not a human being, however, but rather a supreme fiction endowed with personal qualities that seem at odds with its abstraction. Stevens presents the supreme fiction not as an object of intellectual speculation, but as a source of emotional fulfillment (Bates, 50). Thus, Bates let us observe how Stevens’s use of the imagination leads to the supreme fiction, the superb expression of imaginary production. As Coleridge did, Stevens creates a modern theory of creative imagination grounded in an idealist theory of perception. Going along with Bates, for Stevens to see the world and to write poetry are essentially the same fiction-making activity, arising from the same desire to overcome our estrangement from reality (Bates, 51). This way, Bates assumes that Stevens accepts the idea of the god of religion as a product of the poetic imagination because the will to believe persists after a particular object of belief loses its appeal, the imagination must create a credible alternative (Bates, 52). Moreover, Bates adds:

In theory, Stevens speculated, we might transfer belief from the object of belief to the source and believe in the “idea of pure poetry” or “essential imagination”. But he understood that most people find it easier to believe in something created by the imagination than in the imagination itself (Bates, 52).

However, since we cannot consider Stevens a member of that most people that he refers to, this line of thought took Stevens into a self-reflexive process that he called “decreation”. For Stevens, “Modern reality was a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers. Stevens also suggests that 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. Thus, Stevens implicitly equates man’s truth with God’s, reaching the summit of romantic fondness for comparing poetic and divine creation (Bates, 56). As a matter of fact, Stevens himself

compared in one of his writings the imagination to God, by saying that God and the imagination are one (Bates, 60). Finally, Bates concludes the essay trying to comprehend the evolution of Stevens's career by assuming the supreme fiction as his greatest creation. As he asserts:

It is as though the supreme fiction, having supplied Stevens with an encompassing vision of reality, gave him one last gift: the capacity to live without a supreme fiction. The final word of this final soliloquy (one of Stevens's poems) nicely calibrates his satisfaction in simply "being there together" with his muse. Insofar as we allow the poem's homely ambience to draw us in, we may find that for us, too, it is enough (Bates, 61).

As we have explained, the supreme fiction was a process of emotional fulfillment. That being so, we are led to the last essay that we are going to analyze, "Stevens and Romanticism" by Joseph Carroll. As we know, for Stevens, Romanticism is the highest form of imaginative fulfillment. However, we already have shown, and Carroll emphasizes on this idea as well, how Stevens did not agree completely with the idea of Romanticism established in the period, and, as a result, he decided that his own mission was to create a new Romanticism and thus to give new life to the imagination (Carroll, 88). Stevens was utterly concerned with the idea of finding a substitute for traditional religious belief, since the loss of religious faith was profoundly disturbing and disorienting for him (Carroll, 88), as the poet himself expresses: "My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people is the loss of belief in the short God in Whom we were all brought up to believe" (Carroll, 88). Stevens, nevertheless, always believed that the major poetic idea in the world was and always had been the idea of God; therefore, in Carroll's opinion, when he speaks of creating a new Romanticism, he means creating a poem equivalent to the idea of God, where the most important difference is the view of the epistemology of the modern world recognizing that all beliefs are imaginative conceptions, products of the imagination (Carroll, 89-90). For instance, Stevens himself explains:

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 (Carroll, 90).

For Carroll, pure poetry is the mode through which Stevens seeks to create a new Romanticism, and it is this mode that dominates his poetic ambitions and gives direction to

is development as a poet (Carroll, 93). In opposition to the concept of pure poetry, Carroll presents the idea of common poetry. For him, the poetry of common life is dualistic and pluralistic. It is dualistic because it presupposes a metaphysical dichotomy between the reality and the imagination. It is pluralistic in the sense that reality or the external world consists of parts that never united in a single, ultimate reality. On the other hand, pure poetry is transcendental and monistic. Within this mode, both the physical world and the individual human mind are contained within a pure principle. This principle is itself the ultimate reality, and it is essentially mental in character. It is a “mind of minds” that contains both the individual human mind and external reality (Carroll, 94).

As far as I am concerned, it is this pure poetry what has been previously discussed as supreme fiction, in which the relation between the reality and the imagination reaches its climax and by quoting Stevens “in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment” (Carroll, 101). Stevens achieved this fulfillment, and as a result, his new perception of Romanticism prevails in his work as an alive tradition.

Conclusions

Since the beginning of the analysis of the artistic and theoretical work of Wallace Stevens, we have observed that understanding the relations between the reality and the imagination is a must in order to completely comprehend the relevance of his work. After having read most of his published work, and having read in a critical way a certain part of the criticism that has been written on Stevens's works, I can assert that I have arrived to several conclusions.

To start with, one of the statements that Stevens continuously refers to is the tendency towards the imagination within all different artistic fields. This assumption is essential to understand his criticism and the effect of his work upon abstraction in the arts from the posterior decades to his writings. This tendency towards the imagination takes us to which is probably the most common idea within Stevensian criticism; I am talking about the pressure of reality which is how the events that take place in the life of the artist influence upon the development of his or her imagination. We have to take into account that Stevens lived through both World Wars and these events completely changed the perception of the world society, and subsequently, artists had at that moment. As a result, for Stevens the poet has no social role, except to resist the pressure of reality.

In relation to this idea, Stevens establishes the conception of nobility, which represents the imagination fighting back the pressure of reality. Therefore, nobility, as a characteristic of imagination and poetry, represents the virtue of the poet as creator of art non-dependent on the events of reality. This creation of poetry as a superior labor of the intellect, equals or even makes superior poetry to philosophy since poetry can satisfy the requirements both of reason and imagination, whereas philosophy can only satisfy the requirements of the reason. This value of imagination, as a result of the process of creation throughout the personality of the poet, gives this power recognition well deserved and not gained since the Romanticism.

Thus, we arrive to the following point that I have obtained as a conclusion. For Stevens, the Romantic period was the climax of the imagination, but at the same time

Romantic imagination is incapable of abstraction, something that Stevens rejects. Thus, Stevens creates a new idea of Romanticism, hence a new idea of poetry based on the force of imagination making of Romanticism a constant within his work as a result of being the solution of the troubles created by the pressure of reality throughout the process of abstraction. For Stevens, the real truth will become this way, the world as we perceive it and not as it is. Consequently, this idea of imagination drives to the relations between painting and poetry which are influenced by the relations between the reality and the imagination.

Eventually, I have to mention the evolution of the work of Wallace Stevens from his first poetical works until the arrival of what he called the supreme fiction and the epistemological relations within his works. It is this supreme fiction what can be considered the superb intellectual production of his career in which his use of the imagination as a force fighting back the pressure of reality describes in the best possible way how his theoretical writings were taken into practice. This supreme fiction, led Stevens to discuss the idea of a traditional god and see this concept as an interpretation of a poet of great virtue. For Stevens, the evolution in the use of the imagination took his writings to the next level where the imagination and God became one, reaching the complete independence of imagination from reality.

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