

Jordan Forsyth

English 150

Dr. Tim Herron

April 30, 2007

Wallace Stevens' Lyrical Imagination

The tradition of lyric poetry is in many ways a chronicle of the human quest for transcendence, connection, and selfhood in a mutable and often indeterminate existence. While the quest itself is a constant fixture in the lyric tradition, the nature of the “sublime” after which the poet quests widely varies. In the poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” Wallace Stevens explores the potentially sublime quality of the poetic act itself. Although many traditional and Romantic lyrics feature a speaker questing for subjective integration with an external entity, Stevens prefers to examine how that which is external impresses itself on the imagination and creates a natural vision that supplants one’s egoistic identity. Whereas John Milton presents two diametrically opposed approaches to questing for the sublime in “Il Penseroso” and “L’Allegro,” Stevens subverts both the quest for divinity and the search for external pleasure by suggesting that the terminus of both modes of searching for the sublime is in the mind itself. When compared with traditional lyrics such as Milton’s, one can see how Stevens’ poetic conception of the sublime is a radical departure which locates the experience of the sublime firmly within the human imagination and presents the poetic act itself as transcendent.

Stevens’ poem begins with the speaker reflecting on a woman he saw singing near the ocean, asserting that “She sang beyond the genius of the sea” (1), a statement which

immediately establishes a discontinuity between the human and the natural. Although the speaker clearly perceives some quality of “genius” in the sea, he nonetheless stresses the fact that the song of the woman is projected on an entirely different plane than that of the sea. Conversely, in Milton’s “L’Allegro” the speaker is dedicated to the elision of all difference and otherness, which is reflected in his deep desire “To hear the Lark begin his flight, / And singing startle the dull night” (41-42). In this instance the Lark’s song not only pleases the speaker, but also communicates with the entire expanse of night itself, acting as a mediator between the speaker’s emotional state and the initially hostile world around him. For Stevens, the song of the wandering woman has the opposite effect in that it only confirms the otherness of his surroundings and the alterity of the speaker’s own fragile imaginings. To reinforce this point, the ocean is subsequently compared to a “body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves” (3-4). Such a description appears to connect the natural with the human, but the designation of the sea as being “wholly” corporeal with “empty sleeves” emphasizes the purely superficial nature of any affinities between a conscious observer and the mute expanse of the sea. While humans may wander along the shores of the ocean, any attempt at a proverbial “handshake” leaves us clasping sleeves animated only by the wind.

Stevens begins the second stanza by further exploring the relationship between the woman and the sea, as the speaker boldly asserts that “The sea was not a mask. No more was she” (8). Stevens here suggests that the natural, objective qualities of both the woman and the sea do not hide any underlying mutual spirituality, and that their natural otherness in relation to the speaker is their only true bond. In this sense, the sea itself is the naked face of the Other, an Other which must be engaged on its own terms, just like

the woman's song. It is perhaps revealing to note that in Milton's "L'Allegro" the speaker, while envisioning his perfect sublime, imagines "revelry / With mask, and antique Pageantry" (177-178). This desire for artifice and extravagance speaks of a need to be passively overwhelmed by external pleasure, whereas Stevens firmly suggests that one must actively attempt to engage with the unobscured otherness of one's personal vision. The speaker follows his mention of the absence of "masks" with the observation that "the song and the water were not medleyed sound / Even if what she sang was what she heard, / Since what she sang was uttered word by word" (9-11). Here Stevens reinforces the idea that all aspects of the visionary scene must be taken on their own terms, even when it is tempting to ascribe a murky totality to adjacent entities. Although the woman's song may very well be coloured by her subjective experience of the ocean, if the woman has truly "heard" the water it must retain a quality of otherness, even in its mediated human expression.

After reflecting on the natural context and quality of the woman's song, the speaker abruptly asks "Whose spirit is this?" and then suggests that this question was asked because "It was the spirit that we sought and knew / That we should ask this often as she sang" (18-20). The fact that the speaker continually tries to understand the spirit animating the song suggests that he is not content to merely impose a static value on the song itself, but rather feels that understanding its origins will allow him to fully appreciate its otherness. In the fourth and longest stanza, the speaker of the poem suggests that if the queried after spirit of the scene was only the "dark voice of the sea" (21), or "the outer voice of sky" (23), then it would have been worthless. He suggests that if the human quality of the song was truly reflected in such natural entities it "would have

been deep air, / The heaving speech of air, a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone” (25-27). Such allusions to the “heaving speech of air,” suggest a nebulous and weighty silence rather than an essentially human order constructed “word by word.” As an interesting contrast, in Milton’s “Il Penseroso” the ascetic speaker fantasizes about being awoken from a dream by “sweet musick breath / Above, about, or underneath, / Sent by som spirit to mortals good” (151-152). The imagery evoked by the phrase “sweet musick breath,” is quite similar to that of “the heaving speech of air,” and yet Stevens’ crucial choice of the word “heaving” suggests an inertia and oppressive weight entirely absent from Milton’s conception. The speaker of “Il Penseroso” welcomes the atmospheric music as a divine gift, whereas Stevens’ speaker is acutely aware of the danger in identifying any natural phenomenon as being commensurable with human emotion or song. Rather, one must allow the natural to impose itself upon one’s consciousness in all its otherness, and only then can one begin to construct the totality of the visionary scene.

Despite the speaker’s initial fascination with the woman’s song, the music does not in and of itself contain the sublime quality of the scene. The speaker suggests that the true sublimity of the scene was “more even than her voice, and ours, among / the meaningless plungings of the water and the wind” (29-30). It is perhaps a crucial detail that the conglomerate of voices are framed amidst a “meaningless” natural spread, as this reinforces the fact that the voices are imbued with the otherness of the natural. While elaborating on the “meaningless” natural context, the speaker describes “Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons” (31-32), a choice of imagery which perfectly complements the theme of the poem. The idea of “theatrical” distance

suggests that there is a dramatic element to the landscape, and that the very otherness of the natural provides a stage upon which the imagination can grapple with often insoluble conflicts. For Stevens the natural itself is a sufficient and necessary stage for human imaginings, and it is this attitude which ultimately subverts the dualist nature of Milton's two lyrics. While "Il Penseroso" begins with the speaker proclaiming "Hence vain and deluding joys" (1), the speaker of "L'Allegro" denounces "vain melancholy" (1), reinforcing Milton's fundamentally dualistic conception of the lyrical quest. For Stevens the imagination need not be dominated by select emotions, but can instead transcend such normative statements in the pursuit of a monistic vision in which both "melancholy" and "deluding joys" bow before all that is inhuman and natural. The description of the shadowy horizons as being "bronze," with all this adjective's metallic associations, suggests that the shadows emanate from the mind of the speaker, and represent an otherness which has been incorporated into the imagination and expressed with its foreign quality intact. Indeed, in his poem "Of Mere Being" Stevens speaks of "the bronze decor" (3), at the far reaches of the human imagination, suggesting that the limits of thought are profoundly human and artistic, and that they are forged internally rather than through a reliance on external or divine elements. In this sense Stevens' choice of language and imagery hint at one of the poem's most startling revelations, that it is the language itself which constructs an experience of sublimity even while describing elements of the vision which cannot themselves be considered transcendent or sublime.

Finally turning his attention away from the total spread of his vision and back to the singing woman, the speaker observes that "when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (38-40). This

observation does not imply that her song overcomes the otherness of the sea, but rather that this otherness is conveyed in a human context, and suddenly becomes a product of the imagination, a part of a creative totality. The idea that “there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made” (42-43), reinforces how, for Stevens, the imagination is capable of not only perceiving reality, but arranging it in such a manner so as to create a distinct world full of strange and unique wonders. It is only through one’s own “song” that one constructs reality, so any fascination with external music thought to be reflective of one’s own nature or desires is ultimately misguided. When the speaker of “Il Penseroso” comes before an organ and pleads to be dissolved “into extasies” (165), and given supernatural powers by the music, he is asking for the impossible. It is only the poet’s own words and imagery which can construct and approach such vaunted heights. For Stevens, to plead for the presence of an external Creator is to neglect one’s own role as just such a creator.

After he finishes contemplating the singer and her song, the speaker directly addresses someone named Ramon Fernandez, signaling a dramatic shift in the tone and perspective of the poem. The speaker abruptly asks his associate “why the glassy lights, / The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there, / As the night descended, tilting in the air, / Mastered the night and portioned out the sea” (46-49). It is perhaps significant that the speaker is observing the interplay between the external objects of the sea and the lights, rather than looking at natural elements as analogues for internal emotions like the speakers in “Il Penseroso” and “L’ Allegro.” The swaying lights serve as an explication of the human imagination itself, as their passive interaction with the sea creates a new reality in which the night is “mastered” and the sea “portioned out.” When the speaker

describes the swaying lights as “arranging, deepening, enchanting night” (51), it becomes clear that this is exactly what the poet’s words themselves are doing. The speaker makes no attempt to project human emotion onto what he is seeing, or to attribute divine qualities to the night, but rather to deepen the mystery and “enchanting” qualities of the scene by arranging its components in a highly subjective manner. The speaker’s thoughts are like lights swaying on the shifting water, illuminating specific parts of a natural vision which has impressed itself upon his consciousness in all its alterity.

After examining this harbour scene the speaker’s observations conclude in a lyrical “song” of sorts, declaring his imaginative capacity as forcefully as the woman’s song declared the power of her own creativity. The speaker’s rather apocalyptic references to the “Blessed rage for order” (52), and the “maker’s rage to order words of the sea” (53), hints at the intensity required for one to arrive at a monistic vision of transcendence, as this sublime must come out of one’s own imaginative constructs rather than any external source. The words of the sea are “words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred” (54), the key word here being “of,” which signifies the role of otherness in the formation of autonomous speech. The words and thoughts of the speaker are composed of the objects to which they refer, and are therefore imbued with a certain quality of otherness. Stevens then proceeds to describe these words as being “of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (55-56). While words may reproduce the external world in a “ghostlier” or less tangible format, the “keenness” of their sound speaks to the autonomous and piercing otherness they take on as soon as they are uttered. Words are “keener” and “ghostlier” than ourselves in that they embrace a

totality which is simultaneously internal and alien, molding natural reality at the same time as they respond to it.

Throughout “The Idea of Order at Key West” Stevens explores how the human imagination is capable of creating order out of the vast expanse of the natural. It is ultimately the words of the poet themselves that trace the form of the sublime Other, creating a vision in which the lyrical quest is fundamentally internal. It is only after the speaker of the poem allows the full weight of the scene to impress itself on his consciousness that he can order the “words of the sea.” To locate a single, animating “spirit” as being responsible for one’s vision undervalues the imagination’s role in shaping the scene; it is precisely in the subjective process of searching for transcendence and unity that one finds the sublime. For Stevens transcendence does not exist in an external divinity or the integration of subjective experience with a natural continuity, but rather in one’s personal, wholly monistic natural vision.

Works Cited

- Milton, John. "Il Penseroso." *Samson Agonistes and Shorter Poems*. Ed. A.E. Baker. Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1987. 15-20.
- Milton, John. "L'Allegro." *Samson Agonistes and Shorter Poems*. Ed. A.E. Baker. Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1987. 10-14.
- Stevens, Wallace. "The Idea of Order at Key West." *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1997. 105-106.
- Stevens, Wallace. "Of Mere Being." *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1997. 476.