

COLERIDGEAN IMAGINATION
IN
THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS

Dissertation

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SYLVIA SOBHY FAM

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Prof. ABDALLAH A. METWALLY

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P R E F A C E

Preface

This study is an attempt to highlight the similarities and differences between Coleridge's and Stevens' theories of the imagination. The choice of the topic rested on the specific importance of S.T. Coleridge (1772-1834), the father of the modern theory of the imagination, to Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) who devoted his life to the inquiry of the relationship between imagination and reality. On reading the works of Stevens, I was struck by the resemblance between his opinions and those expressed by Coleridge concerning the imagination, both primary and secondary. My conviction was confirmed when I learned that a great number of prominent critics, such as Yvor Winters, Northrop Frye, Harold Bloom and William Van O'Connor, have taken notice of this affinity. Going through the MLA Bibliography and Dissertation Abstracts International, I found out that in spite of the widely acknowledged indebtedness of Stevens to Coleridge, no comprehensive comparative study of the two poets was carried out. Hoping to contribute this comparative study to the wide range of Stevensesan criticism, I started my research.

This study is greatly indebted to Margaret Peterson's book Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition. It is worth noting, however, that Peterson devotes only partial attention to the comparison between Coleridge and Stevens. Besides, she excludes the poetry of Stevens from her research on account of its difficulty and ambiguity.

The approach to Stevens' works adopted in this thesis is not chronological since, as Stevens himself explains in his letters, the whole body of his verse can be regarded as one grand poem whose parts elucidate one another. Some critics, such as Louis Martz, argue that at a certain stage of Stevens' career, there occurred a drastic change in his opinions. However, as J.H. Miller observes, and as it is illustrated in chapter two of the thesis, Stevens' work is characterized by perpetual oscillation between the two great poles of reality and imagination, and, as he himself points out, the tired mind never rested on a solid ground, but kept vacillating to and fro from beginning to end.

The dates supplied in the thesis are those given by Holly Stevens in the collection of her father's poems which she entitled The Palm at the End of the Mind (New York: Vintage, 1972), and by Samuel French Morse in the appendix to Opus Posthumous. The few poems which appear in the Collected Poems but are not included in Holly's or Morse's editions are dated according to the first publication of the volume of poems in which they first appeared.

The first chapter of the thesis is an exposition of the major critical opinions concerning Stevens. A quick glimpse of the different schools and writers that Stevens was compared to is given. The chapter also includes a quick survey of the opinions of the numerous critics who acknowledged the influence of Coleridge on Stevens, but did not devote due attention to the study of the affinities between the two poets. The comparison between Stevens and other writers is almost confined to the introductory chapter, since the rest of the thesis is devoted to the study of Coleridge and Stevens.

Chapter two is a study of Coleridge's definition of the primary imagination as the agent of human perception, and its

counterpart in Stevens' theory and practice. The necessary philosophical background is given, with special reference to Kant. The active role of the imagination in the process of perception, and the consequences of the subjectivity of the mental representation of nature are explained and analyzed in the prose and poetry of both Coleridge and Stevens.

Similarity does not mean identity. Therefore, chapter three is devoted to the study of the major difference between the two poets in the issue of religious belief. Coleridge believed that the primary imagination is an incarnation of the divine, creative *Logos* in the mind of man, and that the secondary imagination is an echo of this divine faculty. Stevens reversed the order of this hierarchy, placing the secondary imagination on the top of the ladder, claiming that the gods were originally creations of the poetic imagination. Special reference is made to William James and George Santayana as two of the major influences on Stevens in this matter.

Chapter four gives an analysis of the style and imagery of both poets, relating them to their theories of the imagination. The employment of light and colour, especially the light of the moon as a symbol of the imagination, is illustrated. The image of the dome, as another symbol of the imagination used by both poets, is also studied. The chapter also shows how the similarities and differences between the two poets are reflected in their poetic structures and imagery.

Finally, the conclusion is a general assessment of the main arguments of the research.

List of Abbreviations

1. Works by Coleridge:

- B.L. Biographia Literaria. Ed. J. Shawcross,
in 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907.
- C.L. The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor
Coleridge. Ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, in 6 vols.
Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- C.N. The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge.
Ed. Kathleen Coburn, in 6 vols.
London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957.
- F. The Friend. Ed. Barbara E. Rooke,
in 2 vols., 1969.
- L.S. Lay Sermons. Ed. R.J. White, 1972.
- Poems The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel
Taylor Coleridge, Ed. E.H. Coleridge, in
2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912.

2. Works by Stevens:

- C.P. The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens.
Ed. Alfred A. Knopf. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf, 1950.
- Letters Letters of Wallace Stevens. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.
- N.A. The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and
the Imagination. New York: Alfred A. Knopf
- O.P. Opus Posthumous. Ed. with an introduction
by Samuel F. Morse. New York: Alfred A.
Knopf.

CHAPTER ONE

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The "Enigma": An Introduction to Wallace Stevens

"The poem must resist the intelligence.
Almost successfully."
(Wallace Stevens, "Man Carrying Thing" 1946)

"This is a poetry of the most lavish variety and the most profound unity, of the most baffling obscurity and the most immediate power." (Borroff 1963, 1)

"... its last two lines [Stevens' poem: 'To the One of Fictive Music'] are among the most beautiful in Stevens, and I do not know what they mean."
(Kermode 1960, 44)

"When intellectual subtlety appears in poetry, it appears for a reason, and if a greater effort is required to understand it, that effort will be rewarded by a greater amount of meaning."
(Taupin 1985, 8)

With Wallace Stevens, "we are in the presence of an enigma." These are the words of one of Stevens' earliest critics, namely, Alfred Kreymborg, in his book Our Singing Strength (1929, 501). Indeed, Stevens' poetry, with its difficulty and obscurity, has occasioned so many diverse interpretations that "no one familiar with the literature on Stevens can fail to be unsettled by the range of interpretation his poetry has elicited" (Peterson 1983, 89). Some critics dismissed Stevens as a dandy, while others crowned him as a major American poet. Some judged him as a mere lover of nonsense, playing with the music of words, while others found meaning in every word he said. He was labelled metaphysical, neoclassical, symbolist, imagist, Elizabethan, deconstructionalist, surrealist, romantic and modern. Echoes of poets from different and sometimes discordant schools, ages and nationalities were found in his poetry. Different critics from various camps interpreted Stevens in totally different ways, claiming that they were the sole connoisseurs of the secrets of this obscure and elusive poet. The purpose of this chapter is to give a quick glance at some of these divergent interpretations of Stevens, highlighting the specific importance of Coleridge to Stevens, proving that the relationship between these two poets deserves more critical attention than it has hitherto received.

Commenting on Stevens' first volume of poems, Harmonium (1923), Gorham Munson, who epitomizes the early reception of this volume, describes Stevens as a "dandy." In his article "The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens" included in The Achievement of Wallace Stevens, Munson says: "Until the advent of Wallace Stevens, American literature has lacked a dandy" (in Brown and Haller eds. 1962, 41). The most striking things about Stevens' poetry, according to Munson, are its correctness and elegance. He values Stevens only as an excellent craftsman. Munson explains that against the attacks of confusion that menaced all modern poets, Stevens drew the arms of wit,