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Elements of Post – Modernism in Wallace Stevens with Special Reference to ‘Peter Quince at Clavier’



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Research Paper :

For poetry makes nothing happen: It survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper
-W.H. Auden

Introduction

The poetic career of Wallace Stevens emphatically denies Auden's view that the territory of poetry is alien to executives. Stevens's life as a successful insurance executive did not tarnish his poetic talents. On the other hand, it ensured the growth and development of his creative faculties. Though he entered rather late into the arena of poetry, he left indelible marks as a poet. His first volume *Harmonium* (1923) was published when he was almost forty-five. "His writing of poetry developed very slowly and as decidedly secondary to his ordinary, successful life in the world of insurance tables and investments".¹ Though Stevens lived much before the advent of post-modernism, his poetry is essentially post-modernistic in its spirit and essence. Marie Boroff captures this spirit thus:

"This is a poetry of the most lavish variety and the most profound unity, of the most baffling obscurity and the most immediate power...They are built of every sort of language from the most common monosyllables to an arcane verbiage".²

This multi- dimensional mode of expression undermines the spatial-temporal equations of human order and creates a fresh reality that marginalizes and even obliterates the mundane reality.

Post-modernism in Stevens

The poetry of Stevens is essentially post-modern as it refuses to be tied down to a single teleological meaning. The fine frenzy of the poet unfolding transempirical truths enveloped in mystical experience becomes an unreal myth in the poetic endeavour of Stevens. The sanctity and extra terrestrial dimension attached to poetic experience

becomes a “calculated risk” for Stevens. Poetic experience thus becomes the down to earth business of recording what the “eye” can testify. The testimony of the eye may vary from person to person as it is dependent largely on the perceptive analysis of the receiving subject. The mutation of spatial-temporal dimension further enhances the multiplicity of meaning and the plurality of perception.

“For Stevens, truth is identified with one's own experience, and experience with one's own state of consciousness at a given time. Experience does, of course, stem in part, from a world external to and independent of the self but this world cannot be known as something apart from one's present awareness of it, it must remain forever the sum of perception and appearance”.³

Even the early poems of Stevens testify that poetic experience for him is a matter of relative certainty open to innumerable strands of possible variations.

The labels of post-modernism like intertextuality and deconstruction encompass within itself multiplicity of meanings. Stevens believed that all poetry is culture specific. Since culture is a super-structure imposed on man it has a corrupting influence on his thinking pattern. In this sense language is a system of signs operating within a particular system or culture. “It is a system or structure where any individual element is meaningless outside the confines of that structure”.⁴ If so, it is better to rely on one's eyes and consequently the sensory experience. Stevens says “what our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one's meditation on the text and the disclosures of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality”.⁵ This bespeaks Steven's faith in a system of signs (semiotics) that employs a better degree of certitude than the conventional system of language which is culture specific. In his bid to mar the cultural configuration, Stevens uses known fictional characters in his poems. In the dynamics of poetic narrative, these fictional elements transcend the periphery of fiction by shedding their

specific cultural configurations and enter into the realm of metafiction where distinctions and clear-cut definitions become inconsequential. The strain of post-modernism in Stevens is fully manifested in the short poem "Proverbs".

The poet makes silk dresses out of worms
After one has abandoned a belief in God,
Poetry is the essence which takes its place as life's redemption.
All poetry is experimental poetry
One reads poetry with one's nerves
A poet looks at the world as man looks at a woman.
Aristotle is a skeleton
Thought tends to collect in pools.
Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully
One cannot spend one's time in being modern
When there are so many more important things to be.

The poet's relation to poetry depends on a variety of factors. The various alternatives that present themselves before a poet are ad infinitum. One cannot think of a definite and immutable pattern of relationship. What comes into play is a set of objects that constitute a sort of functional similarity in identical circumstances. Thus with regard to any activity one can never arrive at a definite conclusion with certitude. Thus "each moment of perception must be preserved in its uniqueness, and the poet must, ideally, move no further from that moment than the carefully selected set of words that allow him to make a verbal record".⁶ The total design achieved by a particular arrangement of words in a poem, is a conglomeration and not a single unity expressing a definite idea. On the other hand, it is open to numerous literary echoes and multiple reading possibilities or plurality of meaning.

The tendencies of post-modernism are very dominant in the poetry of Stevens. This is evident even from the titles of his poems.

“They are peopled by a host of characters, many nameless, others having such fictional, historical or fabricated names such as Peter Quince, Lady Lowzen, St. Ursula, Sister Ulalia, Redwood Roamer, Professor Eucalyptus, Mrs. Pappadopoulos, Nanzia Nuzio, Ulysses, Ercole, Liadoff, The Canon Aspirin”.⁷

A detailed analysis of “Peter Quince at Clavier(1923) is undertaken here to show that elements of post-modernism are actively present in Steven’s poetry even from the very inception of his poetic activity. The analysis employs post-modern strategies like intertextuality, deconstruction, metafiction and semiotics.

The title of the poem is directly indebted to Shakespeare’s play “Midsummer Night’s Dream. Peter Quince is a clownish carpenter in this play who stages a mock-tragic play within the play. The whole poem is built upon the Biblical episode of Susanna, a virtuous woman. The poem has 65 lines which is divided into four sections. The first and the last sections of the poem portray the philosophic musings of the poet. The subject of the poem is suggested only in a vague manner and no specific mention of the theme is made, instead a general philosophy is exposed as a prelude. The second and the third sections deal with the story of Susanna in vividly realized details of an impressionistic painting. The Bible presents Susanna as a virtuous married woman trapped by two lustful elders. These elders, prompted by their lust hide in her garden and spy on her as she bathes. They make false accusations against her when she refuses to submit to them. When she cries out, the servants come running and find her with the elders. Everything ends well when Prophet Daniel cross-examines the elders and proves them liars.

Intertextual Dimensions

Since the poem is a faithful reproduction of Susanna’s story and the title is a direct borrowing from Shakespeare, the intertextuality is obvious and clear. Though there is no connection between these two

fictional characters they carry out a vital function in the poem. Both these characters resurrecting from fictional history become poetic reality sharing the common bond of music. This bond successfully obliterates their historic specificity and invests them with a fresh identity based on music that is central to the newly formed poem as Robert Buttel says:

“In “Peter Quince,” with its precise emphasis of meaning and emotion supported by variations in rhythm and sound, Stevens created a remarkable example of his musical imagism...What might have been mere programme music, mere effect, as it so often is in Fletcher’s symphonies, is turned in “Peter Quince” into a musical architecture which organically serves the whole thematic and emotional conception.”⁸

The second and third stanzas of the poem are a virtual musical reproduction, like a concerto movement or a progressive symphony based on the Biblical episode. The focus of perception is shifted thoroughly so as to eclipse the original intention of the text yet retaining the descriptive details of the original version. This in turn lends the poem a semblance of certitude and faithfulness to the original text. But, in the whirling currents of narrative progress the poem acquires divergent significations releasing simultaneously fresh levels meaning totally alien to the original text. “A primary aspect of metamorphosis in Stevens is the effect of the senses on extra-mental reality. No one sees quite the same rose as anyone else does; there is in fact, a semantics of perception, wherein sense is like a flow of meaning with no speech”.⁹ The adoption of the Biblical text in toto including minor details does not debilitate the aim of the poet. Instead it gives rise to a fresh set of significations that enhance the merit of the artistic product.

In the original Biblical story the endeavour was to highlight Susanna’s virtue, the triumph of truth and finally to uphold the wisdom and good sense of the prophet Daniel. While keeping intact the original details,

the poem through its peculiar set of significations uncovers a meaning totally alien to the original Biblical text. The poem, in essence, is basically concerned with the structure of music. The abundant use of musical notations in the poem makes it a virtual exposition of the effect of music on man. It is this freshness of perception that makes the poem an experience wholly different from the experience which the familiar Biblical episode of Susanna fails to provide.

Deconstructive Analysis

Anyone who reads the story of Susanna in the Bible would agree that the story amplifies the ultimate triumph of truth. It also shows God's providence in the life of a truthful and virtuous woman and drives home the idea that in life what matters is the beauty of the mind and not the physical beauty which is evanescent, which withers with the passage of time. The book thoroughly condemns the lustful elders who coveted Susanna. Rightfully, the wise judge punishes them for conspiring against a virtuous woman. We may also agree that they were bewitched by the beauty of Susanna and their concupiscent flesh could not resist the promptings of their blood.

The undisputed reading given above may be subjected to a deconstructive analysis. The Biblical episode essentially condemns the lust of the elders as the root cause of all trouble. Stevens doesn't see the strain waked in the elders as something undesirable at all. On the other hand, he sees it to be immortal music prompted by the visible shape that beauty has taken in the person of Susanna. In the moment of perception all else becomes unreal except the bewitching beauty of Susanna:

Of a green evening, clear and warm,
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders, watching, felt

The basses of their beings throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

The musical strain waked in the elders is in fact the best and true declaration of their nature. It is the finest and lasting musical note that can be created in a human being. The poet underlines this by declaring that the prosaic and scheming elders began to feel their blood "pulse pizzicati of Hosanna". The significance of Hosanna is vital in the understanding of the poem. The Biblical reference of Hosanna signifies the triumphant entry of Christ into the holy city of Jerusalem. Christ who is God himself in human shape was publicly acknowledged by all to be the Son of God on that day. All this while Christ had been trying hard to impress upon the people that he was the Son of God but he couldn't convince it to them till that day. On the day of Hosanna people acknowledged publicly that Christ was the Son of God. Just as the real identity of Christ was publicly accepted on Hosanna, the elders too understood their real selves when they spied on bathing Susanna. It had the delicate (Pizzicati) strain of "Hosanna"- the joy of the discovery of the real self and consequently the feeling of fulfilment. Like the fate of Christ, the elders also came to disgrace and death for being true to themselves. Just as Christ died with the fore-knowledge of his resurrection, the elders too underwent their punishment with the fresh awareness of a lasting joy which their existing system could never imbibe in them:

Beauty is momentary in the mind --
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.
The body dies; the body's beauty lives.
So evenings die, in their green going,
A wave, interminably flowing.

The shame and disgrace of Susanna wrought by the elders transformed themselves into an interminable flow like the music of the wind. Though this music of Susanna became the scraping of death for the elders, they had experienced it as a Hosanna of discovery in the garden. The disgrace that Susanna suffered in the garden in turn became an immortal music that constantly rang in her memory like a "sacrament of praise". Hence the episode in the garden gave rise to a series of epiphany that opened up new vistas of existence eclipsing the undesirability of the act of spying.

Metafictional Elements

To speak of a poem as having a definite moral goal is unsustainable in modern context. The fictional characters Peter Quince and Susanna are part of a system that leaves traces of moral significance in a work of art. The transmigration of these divergent characters into the common soil of 20th century is a conscious attempt to belie any such purpose. These fictional characters resurrecting in a different cultural configuration partially or fully with their already acquired signification cannot be a limiting factor in their present role. This is because "the life of imagination is forever transcending the reality from which it obtains its life, forever composing and constantly outliving an ideal that is not quite life".¹⁰ The undermining of the moral implication in Susanna into a sublimation of the music at the clavier of Peter Quince is significant in a variety of ways. In the poetic process, these fictional characters rise from the margins of fiction and move into the realm of metafiction by thwarting the linear order of time and space. Mary B. Arensberg upholds this view. She says: "The myth of the dream is the Apocryphal story of Susanna and the Elders, the wife accused by two church elders of unchastity, probably because she had repelled their advance. Daniel exposed their treachery, and as a result, she was vindicated, and they were put to death. The retelling of the myth occupies the central portion of the text, over which is superimposed a musical

structure that empties into the famous coda. As in a dream, time and space are eclipsed, and as the poem moves back and forth in time, the two events of the poem (Quince at the clavier and Susanna and the elders in the garden) seem to occur simultaneously. When reading "Peter Quince," we enter into the landscape of the dream where the artificial limits of linearity, history, and time are erased".¹¹

Throughout the poem one may notice minute adherence to the details of the original text. Yet there is embellishment of the details with a set of objects that create nuances completely alien to the original text. It makes the fictional elements transform themselves into independent units with newly acquired identities. The pouncing of the elders is described in a metafictional vein as opposed to the detailed narration resorted to in the original text.

A breath upon her hand
Muted the night.
She turned --
A cymbal crashed,
Amid roaring horns.

The poetic narration so overwhelms the fictional realm with references from music that the entire episode transforms itself into an exploding orchestra incessantly flowing into a metafictional reality that is totally alien to the Biblical text. Such a narrative technique lifts the entire poem into a super-imposed reality that has nothing to do with the text or design of the original episode. This constant apocalypse of physical details into the surrealistic regions of consciousness runs throughout. The newly created situation of the text keeps the semblance of the original, yet it is completely alien in its dynamics of existence.

Semiotic Implication

The semiotics of music dominates the poem from its title to the very last line. Every single line in the poem invariably mentions some aspects of music. Even the title of the poem is associated with the musical

instrument clavier. The semiotics of music so dominates the poem that in the opening stanza alone the word music repeated four times.

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make **music**, so the self-same sounds
On my spirit make a **music**, too.
Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,
Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is **music**. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna;

The semiotics of music takes precedence over the narrative content of Susanna's story. This in turn takes the details of narration into a vortex of musical terminology and the whole story is masked through the use of apparently evasive strategies. This does not entail any suppression or subversion of details, on the other hand, the structural fabric of the poem is so arranged as to produce and develop the semiotics of music in a progressive manner. The historicity of details in the poetic discourse gets grounded in the incessant flow of significations that enhance the semiotic content of the text.

The theme of the poem is obviously far removed from the realm of music. Yet it is full of references from music. The abundance of reference related to music heightens the semiotic intention of the poetic discourse. For instance, the desire of the red-eyed elders is spoken of as "the basses of their beings throb in witching chords". The musical terms lavishly employed for the purpose of narration makes the text a virtual exposition of the semiotics of music. This is further amplified by the continuous references to musical instruments that aid the pace and progress of the discourse. It also drives home the essential dynamics of music on which the poetic fabric is built up. Thus musical instruments like clavier, cymbal, horn and tambourines find repeated

references in the texture and design of the poetic structure. The semiotics of music is further elaborated by a long list of terminology commonly employed in music such as refrain, strain, bass, chord, pulse, pizzicati, choral, strings and keys. In essence, the entire fabric of the poem forms itself into the symphony of a sonata. Each Image in the poem invariably touches upon some aspects of music. Hence, the whole structure of the poem gradually becomes a progressive realization of the semiotics of music.

Conclusion

The analysis of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" using the parameters of post-modern critical theories like intertextuality, deconstruction, metafiction and semiotics reveals that though Wallace Stevens lived much before the advent of post-modernism, his poetry is post-modern in spirit and essence. The multiple reading possibilities of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' is just one case in point. Hence, it is very apt to label him as a post- modern poet.

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