

Wallace Stevens and the Crisis of Reality: A Study of *The Comedian As The Letter C*

أزمة الواقع في شعر والاس ستيفنز: دراسة لقصيدة

" The Comedian as the Letter C "

د. مدرس عماد إبراهيم داود

كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية

الخلاصة

لاشك أن ((والاس ستيفنز)) هو أحد أهم شعراء أمريكا المحدثين الذين أنتجوا نظريات نقدية حول كتابة الشعر الحديث وموضوعاته . وتميزت قصائد والاس ستيفنز بمنهج تجريبي لغوي وشعري إذ لم يكن الشاعر هاويا ، بل كان واعيا تماما لمنهجه . وقد احتوت عناوين قصائده وكذلك ما بين سطور كتاباته النق دية إرثاً واضحاً لذلك المنهج التجريبي والتتظير الشعري . وكما هو الحال بالنسبة لكثير من الأدباء، كان لشاعرنا ستيفنز أزمة خاصة تلخصت في الواقع الذي أراد مواجهته من أجل تحييد أثره وتحويله إلى حقيقة ايجابية يمكن التعايش معها . يحاول البحث الحالي تقصي تلك الأزمة في إحدى أطول قصائد والاس ستيفنز ، وهي قصيدة " *The Comedian As the Letter C* " ، إذ ينطلق كريستين وهو أشبه بالبطل الملحمي في رحلة أخلاقية من عالم قديم إلى آخر جديد . حيث تبدو كل المشاهد الاجتماعية والثقافية لذلك البطل عدوانية ومخيفة . وبهم كريستين في مواجهتها وتحويلها إلى مشاهد ايجابية ضمن الواقع الحتمي . وهنا يتحد الشاعر بالبطل لانجاز تلك المهمة . تنقسم الدراسة إلى ثلاثة أجزاء وخاتمة إذ يوضح الجزء الأول طبيعة الأزمة المتمثلة بالواقع الأمريكي والذي يريد كل من الشاعر وبطله مواجهته . أما الجزء الثاني فيحدد آليات معينة يجب على كل شاعر جيد الاستعانة بها لمواجهة تلك الأزمة . ويسلط الجزء الثالث الضوء على موضوعة الذات الأسطورية التي يحاول الشاعر صنعها لبطله لاحتواء الواقع المتأزم . وتلخص الخاتمة ما توصل إليه البحث .

Abstract

Wallace Steven (1879-1955) is one of America's major poets of the 20th century who perfected critical theories about modern poetry writing and its subjects. Steven's style is distinctive as modern in its revelation of both linguistic and poetic experimentations. This did not come to the poet as a side dish to writing modern poetry, but he was fully aware of what he was doing. His theories concerning modern poetry are found everywhere in the titles, on the printed pages as well as in between the lines of his critical heritage. Like almost all men of letters, Wallace Steven has his own view of a crisis which he has to confront daily. That is reality which he tries his best to neutralize for his own sake.

The present paper explores through Stevens' lengthy poem, *The Comedian As the Letter C*, the phases of this crisis and the ways the poet follows to deal with it in order to unravel its complexity. The epic-hero-like protagonist of the poem, Crispin, sets out in a moral journey from presumably an old world in search of a new one. Throughout the journey, the socio-cultural scenes of the poem appear antagonistic to Crispin who decides

in return to convert them into a better reality. At this stage, both poet and protagonist merge in the task of confronting reality.

The present paper is divided into three parts and a conclusion: part I introduces and pinpoints the nature of the crisis which Wallace Stevens finds embodied in harsh and intolerant American reality; Part II attempts to uncover how Stevens holds both poetic imagination and language to be of the most important tools that a good poet should use to fight away the nonchalance of reality; Part III sheds light on the poet's creation of a mythical self through which he wishes to contain the diverse reality in order to re-adjust that self to it. The conclusion sums up the findings of the paper.

Wallace Stevens and the Crisis of Reality: A Study of *The Comedian As The Letter C*

Part I: Introduction

Like history, literature is the product of crises; social, political, ideological and other crises. Almost every man of letters has to deal with one or more crises necessarily of his own interest and concern. Some share the same or similar crisis—for instance, the Romantics, war poets etc. However, still there are poets who cannot be just lumped up as sharing the same or similar crisis. Wallace Stevens is one of those poets who have a distinctive line of literature and literary discourse. The individuality of Stevens' crisis lies in his early bitter detection that the exuberant American spirit has disappeared from the cultural as well as the psychological metanarrative which Americans have built for themselves over history.

The very sense of alienation and detachment which Walt Whitman volunteers to fight away in his poetry proves itself an imperative omen for later generations of poets. Whitman introduces himself as an advocate for a democratic multicultural initiative; a fact which orients his poetry for publicity rather than privacy. The "grass" which intimately and indistinctively mingles with human bodies, be they males or females, gains with Stevens a much melancholic meaning since contemporary America has to be redefined for its capacity as a country for all Americans alike. What are nowadays known as characteristic features of modernist poetry are almost what Wallace Stevens has stressed before. The alienating reality, the detachment of the poet, addressing an elite audience and the attempts through language to renovate reality for livable objectives have been Steven's major materials.

A Pennsylvanian citizen and lawyer, Wallace Stevens conceives America as a "Godless" world where the poet has to reconsider his\her place in it. As necessarily "myth-makers"¹, poets tend to work out a form of

livable reality out of the gathering mess of the present. This pessimistic view with a brilliant hope to reintroduce a much spiritual reality echoes Williams Carlos Williams' dictum that a religious sphere for life can be "imagined... therefore it is so".² Here comes the poet's role to bridge the gap left by the absence of religious belief. Poetic imagination, or the "extensive scope" (L.345)***, in Steven's words, can supply the "satisfaction of belief".³

The poetry produced as a remedy for squalid reality should not be nihilistic or agnostic. It should be one with a responsible moral message to help man readjust himself to reality through humanity as presumably an acceptable myth; a very close pattern to accepted religions. The poet is the first person to try this option if he/she thinks of re-producing and re-marketing this new image of reality to his public. The poet, for Stevens, is a that who—aided by his imagination—should look at reality in an "ignorant" man's eye and try to rediscover it.⁴

Steven's poetry is often lined with the preceding Romantic and symbolist poets of America due to its emphasis on the redemptive power of imagination. However, a critic like Joseph N. Riddel prefers to approach Stevens' poetry in terms of what he describes as "American roots".⁵ Riddel's view is better applicable to Stevens' philosophy inasmuch as it provides the basis for the poet's strategic orientation to re-accept America as reality and look for its best roots. Stevens' poetry—represented in the present paper by The Comedian As the Letter C—can be held as a critique to America's socio-cultural life and the ways a poet should follow to redefine it for further personal negotiations.

As a "Quest Romance"⁶, the poem introduces Crispin, the protagonist, presumably as the persona of the poet himself. Therefore Crispin's observations—since they are Stevens' too—may at first glance substantiate the "fear that art might be deeply antithetical to life..."⁷ However, this antagonistic recognition of reality is needed to trigger the conflict within Crispin in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of that very reality which he abhors.

Part II: Language and Imagination: Two Agents for one mission

Poets have the authority to deconstruct reality in the way towards refashioning it. This is Stevens' view of poetic language and imagination which in the hands of a good poet play an empowering innovative weapon. To achieve this objective, Stevens experiments in word sounds and in graphic, prosodic and figurative language inwrought with grammatical and lexical innovations. Besides, Stevens has a special interest for music and the tonal variations of it; a fact which makes itself obvious in the choice of *Harmonium* as a title for his first collection of poems. Language for Stevens

is " an exclusive interior reality, a private space". ⁸ Stevens' philosophy of poetic language is revealed in his *The Necessary Angel*: " words", he writes " are not only our thoughts, but the thoughts of other men and women".⁹ By admitting that "words" as well as the thoughts linked to them are not one single man's property, necessarily authorize the linguistic mesh which Stevens rehearses in his poetry. He proves that language can have a wide range of improvisational possibilities that can surprise our auditory habits and stop us for a while to reconsider what is being said. Stevens' words are therefore often wrapped with " unexpected connotations" ¹⁰ in Robert E. Spiller's view and are " screeching with confusion" in Stanly Burnshaw's description.¹¹

The pragmatics of the utterance, not the utterance standing in itself, is what may provide the medium of expression we generally associate with human language. Hence, words should be as immediate and mobile as thoughts themselves. The failure of language to express man's deepest and immediate existential questions and aspirations is a real divide between the poet and his reality. Stevens is aware of this threatening challenge:

Here was the veritable ding and sich, at last
Crispin confronting it, a vocable thing,
But with a speech belched out of hoary darks
Noway resembling his, a visible thing,
And excepting negligible Triton, free
From the unavoidable shadow of himself
That lay elsewhere around him. Severance
Was clear. The last distortion of the romance
Forsook the insatiable egotist. The sea
Severs not only lands but also selves.
Here was no help before reality. (Ll. 69-67)

The crisis of language underlined by Crispin's speechlessness above is what makes " severance" between man and reality " clear".

Like most of the later modernists, Stevens experimented in what language may provide for a poet with larger-than-life objectives. Rejecting linguistic norms and restraints and doing harm to language, so to speak, provides freshness and newness to language and simultaneously to the reality it tries to reveal. Nonetheless Stevens' project to introduce a form of livable reality through poetic language is constantly intimidated by another fact that the language of poetry cannot always " ... evade/ In poems of plums, the strict austerity/ Of one *vast, subjugating, final* tone" (Italics

mine. Ll. 82-83). That is the tone of reality which Crispin is set to murder and create.

Beside language, Stevens considers imagination as another tool to address reality. Poetry, a cognitive activity as it is, is for Stevens, an "interdependence" between imagination and reality.¹² Poetry is not a by-product of reality nor it should be a documentary of its historical events. Stevens' rejection of Whitman's "all accepting poetic mind"¹³ as a degenerate mind echoing a degenerate world underlines his stress on a scrupulous poetic imagination to *murder and create*—and not to embrace reality indistinctively. The type of imagination which Stevens prefers is that which should provide the poet with an air of detachment; "Crispin[the poet] at sea[reality]/ Created, in his day, a touch of doubt" (Ll. 6-7). This doubt or poetic detachment comes from Crispin's view that reality is a "land of snakes" (L. 110) which "made him intricate/... difficult and strange"(Ll. 112-13)

Stevens' views concerning poetic imagination and its role for poets are voiced in his prose essays, *The Necessary Angel* as well as in his lengthy poems—*Notes towards a Supreme Fiction* and *The Comedian As the Letter C*. There, the reader meets Steven's recurrent references to the "supreme fiction", the "guitar" and the "moonlight" as standing for poetic imagination; the purity and solidity of the "crystal" as representing the eternity of poetry.; and the "sun" as referring to reality.

In his reluctance to address reality outlined in its social, economic, cultural and political contexts, Stevens opts to unleash his imaginative powers to deconstruct and recreate that reality in his own terms. However, such an idiosyncratically created image of reality cannot go beyond the printed pages of his poems since it is no more than an image made by the tricks of the "supreme fiction". The crisis of evading and avoiding reality continues. The Poet, through Crispin's dilemma, admits and laments this breakdown of imagination. He "dramatizes the mind in its speculative acts"¹⁴ that in return create illusive realities out of

... monotonous babbling in our dreams
That makes them our dependent heirs, the heirs
Of dreamers... and not
The coming fantasies of better birth. (Ll.371-74)

Crispin's powerlessness in the face of alienating reality forces him to maneuver the power of imagination, the godsend tool to all good poets. From Part III of the poem, "Approaching Carolina" to the last part of it, "

And Daughters wit Curls”, the poet tries the options of readjusting his hero to imaginary realities of his own devising: “ The book of moonlight is not written yet/ Nor half begun...” (Ll. 186-87) marks Stevens’ strong faith in what the power of imagination may reveal. Therefore, he warns us, “ Leave room.../ For the legendary moonlight that once burned/ In Crispin’s mind... .” (Ll. 194-96).

Yet, the end of this argument betrays the fact that Crispin’s blind trust in the power of imagination-- “ the moonlight”-- is not more than an uncertain exploration of its possibilities which may as well be of no help in the face of cruel reality. Hence, the ongoing conflict keeps sojourning within the boundaries of “ A fluctuation between sun and moon”(L. 234), i.e. between reality and poetry, or between the blind will to subjugate the poet, and the poetic aspiration to recreate reality. Will the moonlight be able to turn reality into a Coleridgean floating dome or a Yeatsian Byzantium? Stevens answers the question in a temporal relief marred with a clear sense of defeat:

Perhaps the Arctic moonlight really gave
The liaison, the blissful liaison,
Between himself and his environment,
Which was, and is, chief motive, first delight,
For him, and not for him alone. It seemed
Elusive, faint, more mist than moon, perverse,

... ..

The moonlight was an evasion, ... (Italics mine.Ll.220-31)

The last line of the excerpt above clearly refers to an unspeakable breakdown in the poet's tool, imagination, to defeat reality.

Part III: Poetic and Mythical Self against Reality

The Comedian As the Letter C dramatizes the guises of the self and its aspirations to suggest and create reality out of mere illusions. Man, in Crispin's view—the epic hero of the poem—“ is the intelligence of his soil ” (L. 1): i.e. man is the master of his own environment. Man can have his own look of what and how reality should be molded. Crispin’s augmented self is represented by his claiming of a wide map which is at the same time geographical and moral extending “ To the dusk of a whistling south below the south”(L.329) where “ The man in Georgia waking among pines/ Should be pine-spokesman” (L.331-32) with Crispin as the “ Progenitor of such extensive scope” (L.345).

The voyage which Crispin triggers is not a literal one as much as it is a revelation of the ways thinking is formed inside Crispin’s mind as a quester-

hero. The poem, for this reason, is a manifesto for the power of thinking inside the mind of a thinking creature, Crispin. The experiences which Crispin receives through the eye—the gate to all primary knowledge—develop his self and enlarge its aspirations and myth; “Crispin beheld and Crispin was made new” (L.80). What counts in all Crispin’s quest is not only the external scenes or pressures of reality but also the inscrutability of the human self which Crispin wants to identify. Though Crispin realizes very early in his quest that he is merely a "skinny sailor" (L.28) in a Triton-controlled sea of vicissitudes and volatility, yet he keeps his beliefs concerning “the mythology of self” (L. 20).

Juxtaposing Crispin, the skinny sailor with Triton—son of the Greek Sea god Poseidon—imposes a disheartening effect on Crispin's project to fight reality; he feels "washed away by magnitude" (L.32). Mighty Triton himself has melted in the crucible of reality and "... nothing left of him,/ Except in faint, memorial gesturings,/ That were like arms and shoulders in the waves" (Ll. 45-46). Triton's final destiny is a precursor to T.S. Eliot's Prufrock who admits the transfiguring power of reality which turns him into "a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent sea" (The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock, Ll.74-75).

Crispin's romantic view of himself as a mythical sole rider to the sea of reality immediately collapses when he discovers the illusive nature of the self and its incapacity for heroic deeds:

What is one man among so many men?
What are so many men in such a world?
Can one man think one thing and think it long?
Can one man be one thing and be it long? (Italics mine.Ll.432-35)

The last line is a striking foreshadowing of Lacanian postmodern psychoanalytical views of the self as always representing another.¹⁵

Crispin’s self illusions cannot immunize him against the factual presence of reality which he has to accept as "What is is what should be"(L.438). The sea storm which Crispin faces allegorizes the his cognitive change or new awareness as a quester-hero. Hence he has to consider difficult options; either to keep up to his idealism or accept reality even though “without a positive content”¹⁶. This regressive step of concession marks an additional challenge to Crispin's early aggrandized self with which he presumes to confront reality:

Crispin, merest minuscule in the gates,

Dejected his manner to the turbulence.
 The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,
 The dead brine melted in him like a dew
 Of winter, until *nothing of himself*
Remained, except some starker, barer self
In a starker, barer world... (Italics mine. Ll.56-63)

Instead of acting as an epic hero with a larger-than-life dream, Crispin ends up as a mere “aspiring clown”(L.370), another striking precursor to T.S. Eliot’s Prufrock’s designation of himself as a mere “fool” in a great Shakespearean play. The total breakdown of Crispin’s former mythical self takes place when, in the last part of the poem—“And Daughters with Curls”—he accepts marriage to the “clay”(L.499). He becomes no longer distinct from other men, a Whitmanian fact which he is presumably set to fight away on behalf of his creator, Wallace Stevens. God created us from the clay which Wilfred Owen regrets to have had lost its innocence and cosmic brotherhood in his famous poem “Futility”—“Was it for this the clay grew tall?”. Crispin’s stress on the significance of the clay also invites us to go back to the opening lines of *The Comedian As the Letter C* where man “is the intelligence of his soil”.

The significance of the last part of *The Comedian as the Letter C* lies in its cyclical movement which ends up in a stress on the human bonds as the central function of poetry, imagination and poetic self. These should jointly work to perfect this theme as the only possible option left for poets to accept reality as it is. Crispin readjusts himself to this form of reality which he finds truer and much practical in its poeticism than any other imaginary reality:

The return to social nature,

 Involved him in midwifery so dense.

 True daughters both of Crispin and his clay. (L,l. 489,491,499)

It is interesting that Crispin's end suggests that of Oedipus Rex whom Stevens mentions several times in the poem as standing for law and logic. The state of inactivity as old fathers being tended by young devoted daughters is obvious in both Crispin's and Oedipus' careers. The end of Crispin's poeticism as a "profitless", tasteless "philosopher" (Ll. 560-63) and as "Fickle and fumbling" (L. 564) voyager echoes the end of Oedipus' royal grandeur and fame.

Conclusion

The Comedian As the Letter C explores with intricate style the depth of the poet's crisis as it manifests itself in his attempts to decipher the complexity of contemporary American scene. The poet faces the temptations of poetic imagination and the potentials he musters to recreate reality in a better form. However, these potentials prove more than once to be inconsistent and illusive. Crispin, Stevens' persona, tastes the bitter failure as he condemns imagination in the face of an indomitably dehumanizing, a-social and a-cultural reality. The squalid matter-of-fact contemporary American scene has become negatively "vast, subjugating, final" (L.83).

The inconsistency of Crispin's poetic tools is evident in the poem whose lines harbour both the highly serious and eloquent side by side with the most burlesque and ironic. The extravagant verbosity and baffling changes of mood become a characteristic feature to the poem as a whole. The various narrative atmosphere of the poem betrays the protagonist's inability to understand the magnificent influence of reality on him. Caught between archaic words, unfinished romance, violence and a resistance to lead linear historicism, *The Comedian As the Letter C* mimics, as it seems, epic poetry, yet without a real epic hero. The pressing revisions of priorities in the quester's (Crispin's) moral journey rob him of the epic significance expected of him as a quester-hero.

Instead of perfecting and achieving his dreams of changing reality, Crispin walks on his dreams as mere fictions of a falsely augmented self. As the poem approaches its end, we realize how Crispin bitterly washes his hands of his aspirations to unravel the mystery of reality ; he develops instead a less mythical self antithetical to the one he promises his readers at the onset of the poem. As a married man, fixed to one single ground, Crispin ends his epic in bathos. He confesses his inability to look the Medusa-reality in the eyes. The unattainability of Crispin's project to neutralize the sway of reality is Wallace Steven's itself, impersonated in the protagonist's character.

The Comedian As the Letter C is a manifesto-like poem underlining the failure of poetry, poetic imagination and poetic self to create a reality other than the one we daily live. The positive point regarding this crisis is displayed in the last part of the poem where Crispin as a married man accepts—in a maneuver of psychological re-adjustment—the very reality he vows to fight at the beginning of his journey (the moral and ideological one). In this respect, the crisis of reality does not totally end. It is instead

brought to a neutral level of consciousness through man's need to reconsider the human bonds that should not be denied their positive role in reality.

Notes

** All quotations from and references to *The Comedian As The Letter C* are taken from Wallace Stevens. Harmonium. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1923., followed parenthetically by line(s) number(s).

¹ Marie Borroff, *Wallace Stevens* (New Jersey; Princeton-Hall, Inc., 1963), Pp. 32-7.

² Michael Hamberger, *The Truth of Poetry: Tensions in Modernist Poetry Since Baudelaire* (London; Anvil Press Poetry Ltd., 1996), P.33. Cf., Marie Borroff above, P. 2 where the writer claims that “ revealed religion” is rejected by Stevens.

³ Marie Borroff, *Wallace Stevens* p. 32.

⁴ R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth Century Poetry in English* (London; Macmillan, 1999), Pp. 26-7.

⁵ qtd in Marie Borroff, *Wallace Stevens* p. 30.

⁶ Harold Bloom, “ The Internalization of Quest-Romance” in ed., Harold Bloom, *Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism* (N.Y. WW Norton, 1970), p. 5.

⁷ Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton; Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), p. 204.

⁸ Stefan Holander, *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language* (New York; Routledge, 2008), p. 4.

⁹ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (London; Faber and Faber, 1942), p. 32.

¹⁰ Robert. E. Spiller, *Literary History of the United States* (New York; the Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 1354.

¹¹ Stanly Burnshaw, “ Turmoil in the Middle Ground” in ed., Charles Doyle, *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* (London; Routledge, 1985), p. 139.

¹² Ibid., p. 27.

¹³ Stefan Holander *Wallace Stevens and the Realities of Poetic Language*, p. 28.

¹⁴ R. P. Draper, *An Introduction to Twentieth Century Poetry in English*, p. 26.

¹⁵ for further details of Lacan's psychoanalytical views, see Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in Contemporary West* (Berkley; University of California Press, 1990), p. 18.

¹⁶ Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens*, (Philadelphia; J.B. Lippincott, 1962), p. 98.

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