

How to Teach Wallace Stevens' "Tea" in a Spatial Way

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Abstract: Wallace Stevens' Early Poems Are Considered Less Reflective Than Intuitive Than the Later Ones. in Teaching the Poem, the Emphasis Should Be Laid on the Fact That Stevens' Early Poems Are Actually Intuitive Yet Meditative, Imaginative Yet Imaginary. by Reading Stevens' Poem "Tea" in a Spatial Way, Analyzing the Spatial Patterns in Which His Non-Romantic Imagination Serves as the Medium of the Multiple Spaces, It Will Occur to the Students That the Harmony Stevens Constructed is Precariously Sustained by the Colonial Exploitation Which Imprisons the Poet and Might Throw Him into Greater Perplexity.

1. Introduction

Among the Eighty-Five Poems in the Collection, "Tea" May Be the Shortest Both in Stanzas and Title in Which the Well Known American Poet Wallace Stevens Tried to Find an Emotionally Satisfying Unity out of the Chaos and Perplexity of the World, But it's a Typical of Stevens' Early Style, Witty, Rococo, Seeking Balance between the Internal and External World. Before Elaborating on the Poem, the Teacher Would Better Read the Poem, Getting the Verse and Rhythm Across the Class,

When the Elephant's-Ear in the Park
Shrivelled in frost,
And the leaves on the paths
Ran like rats,
Your lamp-light fell
On shining pillows,
Of sea-shades and sky-shades
Like umbrellas in Java.

With that the teacher should lecture that regarded as one of the kind among his peers, Stevens availed himself of the power of imagination by seeking the singularity of balance in between sky and mind; somber and light. Peter Conn, in his book *The Divided Mind* (1983), argued that the American imagination is torn between a sense of the past: religious, mythic, resonant with interconnections; and a sense of the future: technological, scientific, fraught with the weight of infinite advance. Stevens, more perhaps than any poet of his century, is the registrar of that tension (McConnell, 1984: 166). Stevens' poems consistently feature imagination and fantasy. Nevertheless, compared with the later poems which are considered highly subtle, complex, and philosophic works that problematize the living world, Stevens' early poems, given the contemporary circumstance, are thought to be primarily aesthetic and aloof to the burning reality. In addition, his response to life was less reflective than intuitive, leaving a dichotomy between imagination and reality. However, this paper argues that the seeds of the later works are rooted in *Harmonium*. By applying Gabriel Zoran's theory of space into "Tea", it can be inferred that Stevens' early works are intuitive yet meditative; imaginative yet imaginary.

2. "Tea": Carrier of the Topographic Space

According to Zoran's spatial theory, the topographic structure is space at its highest level of reconstruction, perceived as self-existent and independent of the temporal structure of the world and sequential arrangement of the text. Unlike topographical maps in reality, this map can structure

space on the basis of ontological principles as well, It is difficult to define beforehand all the different possibilities of patterns in the topographical world, for these are not dependent on the logic of the verbal text (Zoran, 1984:316). “Tea” exemplifies Zoran’s theory in that it consists of both the space in reality like park, path; as well as the space in the textually reconstructed world like sea, sky, Java. In the light of the common sense, the two \ spaces seem to be brought together out of nowhere. But seen from the spatial perspective, it should come as no surprise at all because “unlike topographical maps in reality, this map can structure space on the basis of ontological principles as well, It is difficult to define beforehand all the different possibilities of patterns in the topographical world, for these are not dependent on the logic of the verbal text” (ibid: 317). On the other hand, the reconstructed space has a lot to do with the writer: “The possibilities open to the writer are dependent on his personal outlook, tradition, culture, individual qualities, etc” (ibid: 317). However, it needs to be stressed that Stevens did not mean to rely the reality on the unrealistic reconstructed “world”. Rather, he meant to indicate the readers that a drink of tea may help us release, temporarily though, from the reality. In this case, tea serves as the carrier of the topographic space which rapidly flows with the consciousness of the poet, registering his uncertainty and perplexity toward the materialistically demoralizing and alienating contemporary world.

3. Imagination: Medium of the Chronotopos

Stevens realized true human nobility lies in suffering, endurance, and bearing and that “things are not what they seem.” “I feel... as if I had discovered for myself why life is called noble, and why people set a value on it, abstractly” (Stevens, 1977: 174) . In spite of this, Stevens' response to an unfriendly world apparently bounded by the chaos and turmoil was not that of the “exiles.” He did not choose to flee from the reality, but maintain the pose which the world of affairs had provided him in law and the insurance business, and in fantasy he created a world more hospitable beautiful, and more emotionally satisfying. Unlike his peers who either turned to the imagism and resorted to the European cultural heritage, as T.S. Eliot did; or insisted on establishing the American cultural trait like Ezra Pound. Stevens blurred the temporal-spatial difference and tried to help the contemporary readers regain the nobility from which they had been isolated since the end of the 19th century. He did it in a chonotopic way in which imagination functions as the medium that bridge the multiple spaces. In his essay “Imagination as Value”, Stevens quoted Cassirer on the romantic theory of the imagination, which claimed that “poetic imagination is the only clue to reality “and that “the true poem is not the work of the artist; it is the universe.” But Stevens wishes, “to cleanse the imagination of the romantic,” because “the romantic is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling,” and he goes on to make it clear that a non-romantic imagination might claim from “ reason “ a power to describe the normal, which reason exclusively arrogates to itself (Stevens, 1965:136-141) .

Zoran holds that the chronotopic structure has to do with the movement and the action of the narrative. One may generalize and state that there are certain objects in space which are characterized by their capacity for movement and others which remain at rest...movement and rest are relative terms; rest is the state of being bound to a given spatial context, while movement is the ability to cut oneself off from spatial context and to switch over to different contexts (Zoran, 1984:318). The poem “Tea” was inspired in the park which is known as the symbol of restiveness. However, in the eyes of the poet, since the park is part of the “whole”, it is no longer somewhere one can find the inner peace given the degenerating reality. Just like Zoran stated, “Chronotopic structure of space does not mean an occasional movement on a neutral scene, but rather a conception of the entire space in terms of a field of powers” (ibid:319). In the poem, the falling leaves that “shiverlled in frost” and “ran like rat” stand for the harsh reality. In fact, what “shiverlled” and “ran” are not the leaves, but the poet’s mind in which the tea waves like “the shining pillows, of sea-shades and sky-shades” and shipped the poet’s mind to Java. Knowing he was unable to change the reality, the poet sought to treat imagination as the spatio-temporal tunnel which blurs the temporal-spatial difference and provide a poetic haven to help the readers escape from the park and switch over to cruise along with the poet’s imagination into the lamp-light like

sea and sky, sitting under the umbrella in Java. In this way, the poet managed to create a utopia for the readers who are well informed of the utopian poetic tour, though, tend to understand that the poet did not mean to escape from the reality, but to create a haven in the poem to function as the extension of the existing world in which we live, “a world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it...that...gives to life the supreme fiction which enables us to withstand the unlovely and to perceive...the opposite of chaos in chaos” (Stevens, 1947:126) .

4. Language and Linearity

The following analysis will be given based on the textual structure of the spatial theory. It needs to be emphasized that the structure under discussion is not that of the text itself as a verbal medium, nor that of its linguistic materials, but rather an organization of the reconstructed world. There are patterns of organization imposed on the reconstructed world which are not natural to it, neither as space nor as space time, but are rather forced onto it because of its being signified in a verbal text. These patterns of organization have to do with three aspects of the verbal text: the essential selectivity of language; the temporal continuum; and the point of view (Zoran, 1984: 319-320).

1) The Selectivity of Language

The fact that language cannot express all aspects of space results in a certain measure of selectivity. Stevens prefers words from the primitive or exotic origin, though, it's not a hallmark of this poem. In “Tea”, the words are actually selected on purpose. The cold, serene, and meditative words of the former lines form a sharp contrast with the warm, refreshing, and intuitive ones of the latter, which are apt to comply with the he reader's reading experience and arouse their concussion. On the other hand, it's odd that the very title “Tea” is absent from the poem. While in fact, it is subtly embodied by the *fabula* of the poem in which “elephant's-ear in the park” serves as the symbol of tea, and the shining sea implies the waving water in the teapot. The umbrellas of Java signify the leisure and pleasure of tea drinking. Together they eventually enliven the title and Stevens' conception of the “whole” out of the beginning chaos. In this way, Stevens' meditation on language leads him away from his organic paradigm of earth and toward the human city of history (as in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”), a city that remains alive not as a multiple unity but as an ever-problematic multiplicity rooted in the doubleness of language itself. What matters for the mundane world is not the innocent “becoming” of unlimited affirmation but rather the limited affirmations and negations of a problematic “world.”

2) The Linearity of the Text

The linearity of the text has to do with the recognition of the principle of the temporal continuum of language, and the necessity of structuring information about space in a temporal continuum. The linearity overlaps with but is not restricted by the chronotopic order. It may be based on the topographic level or rely on the similar category, functional relationships, or scales of various kind, etc (ibid: 321). Like many of the contemporary poems featuring the modernism ascetic, this poem was also not composed lineally, whether it is examined in terms of the topographic, or the spatial order. The geographic space changes from the park to the sky; from the sea to Java. The swerve from one space into another is sudden and unpredicted, leaving narrative gaps among the stanzas for the readers to fill in. According to Zoran, The reader is much more demanding about the filling in of gaps on the narrative plane than he is about the filling in of gaps in space (ibid: 320). it turns out to the reader that the gap is unified by tea as a whole. The absence of the title from the stanza is another gap, but it is actually the very absence that helps to trigger the reader's imagination into a vast space. Unlike the tradition linear way that is structured in time, the disjunctive spaces in the poem are juxtaposed, achieving a realistic yet transcendental effect which enables the readers to meditate on the confusions and perplexity the contemporary people, and also the delicacy of the poet.

5. Conclusion

By applying Gabriel Zoran's theory of space into the teaching of “Tea”, it can be referred that in

his early works, Stevens attempted to create a poetic space to serve as an extension of that world and valorize the readers to withstand the unlovely and to perceive the opposite of chaos in chaos. However, on one hand, the materializing tendency of the contemporary world was irreversible. On the other hand, Stevens was not aware that the harmonious space he'd been pursuing was constructed on the basis of colonial exploitation. Therefore, it should come as no surprise at all that the spaces created in Stevens' later poetry is irreducibly double or plural, a scene viewed through the bifurcated optics of the poet-philosopher, which suggests that he had realized his earlier limitation. As a result, he stopped curing the problematic world and turned to problematize the living world, a turn from modernism to post-modernism. Taught in this way, the literature meaning and aesthetic value of *Tea can then be better explored*.

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