NOT IDEAS ABOUT THE THING BUT THE THING ITSELF

-WALLACE STEVENS

At the earliest ending of winter,

In March, a scrawny cry from outside

Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,

A bird's cry at daylight or before,

In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,

No longer a battered panache above snow . . .

It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism

Of sleep's faded papier mâché . . .

The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—it was

A chorister whose c preceded the choir.

It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,

Still far away. It was like

A new knowledge of reality.

References

On a common, happy, late-winter drawn experience: the first cry of a newly arrived bird, which heralds the start of the eventual loud chorus of spring birdsong at daybreak. The six mostly unrhymed tercets have unusually short lines; “outside” appears as an end-word three times, an emphasis positioning notes also the use of sibiliants and hard ‘c’ sounds. The technique works to provide strongly affirmative, clear poem.

TITLE: cf. “Part of the res itself and not about it” (OE xii); prepositions are important throughout the poem.

“seemed like a sound in his mind”: a common phenomenon when waking from sleep.

“Ventriloquism” : the art of projecting one’s voice without moving the lips so that it appears to come from another source, such as a dummy.

“papier mâché” : torn up paper and other materials mixed with the paste or glue used to create, when the mass is dried, a surprisingly durable sculpted object.

“panache” : see OED or Webster on two meaning; note etymology (Lat. penna, “feather”), and also the connection with knightly splendour, as in Stevens’s various Dons, who are often associated with the sun.

“A chorister whose c preceded the choir”: recalling and surpassing the sound effects of “The Comedian as the Letter C”: pun on “pre-c-ded”, as if the act of preceding included the letter c, to which the choir of birds will be tuning, as modern orchestra tunes to A above middle C.

“part of the colossal sun”: in nature, dependent like all life on earth upon the sun; as if singing a hymn of and with the earlier- rising sun; as if rewriting Milton’s morning hymn (PL V.153 - 208).

“like/ A new knowledge of reality”: a simple simile that captures this common, joyful experience, and a powerful closing sentence to Stevens’s Collected Poems .

SUMMARY

STANZA 1&2

The opening lines of the poem have oxymoron on the phrase “earliest ending”. The poet means that winter is ending early in March and he hears “a scrawny cry from outside”. In the next line he contradicts himself stating that the sound “seemed” to come from inside his mind. From the very beginning there is outset of outside vs. Inside. Inside stands for imagination and outside stands for reality.

The “he” in the poem is just waking up, the sun is rising. The poet further states that “he knew that he heard” the sound- the cry of bird. The word “knew” seems to make the reader pause and really contemplate in the nature of sound, whether it came from the outside or from his mind. We are not entirely convinced again when he say that he heard it at daylight or before it like he himself wasn’t sure of the time. There is repetition of the month of March in the ending line of 2nd stanza .

STANZA 3&4

The sun is rising at six in the morning, presenting an image of newness and opportunity. The month of March of is when the winter is ending and the warmth of sun is welcoming and gives a sense of hope... “It is no longer a battered panache above snow”; it is no longer like a hazy glow obscuring its warmth and light from world”. The ending line of 3rd stanza again brings us back to the perplexing dichotomy of inside-outside when the poet writes that the sun would have been “outside” it is not “battered panache” or a “sleep’s faded papier mâché”. The use of word “ventriloquism” gives it a distinct mysticism, that is, whatever the poet is describing seems to be a hazy picture as if he himself is unsure whether the images comes from his mind or from reality. The sun could mean ideas and thoughts germinating inside the mind of a person.

The sun which the poet mentions is not a dream. Sun is not an image formed or sculpted from the delusional dream after sleeping. At first, he’s not able to distinguish reality from the elements of imagination, so he can’t tell whether the bird’s cry or sunlight is real or are simply part of his lingering dream. Repetition of the word “outside” could mean that it was not a figment of his imagination but reality.

STANZA 5&6

The poet again brings the image of “The scrawny cry” in the last section of the poem; we are reminded that the sound of bird is omnipresent in the poem. The bird is described as a “chorister” whose cry precedes the cries of all other birds in the early morning. The poet chose chord C, a major chord, to describe the sound of choir. The bird’s cry which precedes other’s cry could mean aversion to conformity; one who is in step with group but slightly out of step. The “chorister” is the messenger of seasonal change, its song indicates coming of spring. It is a metaphor for the change in state of mind when it becomes aware of the perception of things from ideas to reality.

The image of bird cawing fits right with the image of the rising “colossal sun”. The sound becomes one with the rising sun in the morning, as if the choir of birds are singing hymns in praise of the nature. The bird is surrounded by “colossal sun” with its “choral rings”. The phrase “choral rings” represents the unity of sun and scrawny cry; the sun is said to be extremely large surrounded by choral ring and the bird is surrounded by the sun. It is a balance of yin and yan where both the sun and bird are basking in each other’s glow.

The gradual approach of certainty in the poet’s voice unfolds and climaxes in the lines “It was part of the colossal sun” but declines to a wistful “still far away”. The poem closes with the balanced claim “It was like/ A new knowledge of reality”. This poem is about the importance of parts. Every ideas or detail which seems “far away”, “from outside” or “sound in his mind” contributes to the greater picture of the thing itself and this is the “new knowledge”. The thing itself- unlike ideas about the thing- comes from outside and stands on it's own.

THEMES

1. REALITY VS ILLUSION

The title, “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself” suggests to the reader that this poem examines the concept of reality vs. illusion. Throughout this poem the author struggles to discover reality among the products of his imagination. For example, the author toys with the idea that the bird call he heard was imagined by his restless mind. He knows he has heard the call before on such a morning however, he cannot determine if the call of the bird is a real thing or only an illusion of circumstance. This idea of shadows and illusions versus life’s true forms is a similar theme among Plato’s Republic. The title itself reminded me immediately of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. In this allegory Socrates struggles to convey to his listeners that most people are like prisoners chained to the confines of a cave and forced to watch the world’s actions through the shadows reflected on the cave wall. Without ever knowing the truth of the world above, the prisoners will believe that the shadows are real living forms. The character in this poem is similar to the prisoners since he cannot distinguish between what is real and what is only an illusion within his mind. According to the allegory, the prisoners can become enlightened if they are released from the cave and allowed to climb into the light of the world above. Like the character within Wallace’s poem, the climb from illusion to reality is a slow difficult process however, once adjusted to the world’s true forms they will be able to see the sun, the object which sheds light on all truth. Similarly, Wallace employs the sun in his poem as it rises in the sky to shed light across the land. It symbolizes the truth and reality of the world both in Wallace’s poem and Plato’s Cave Allegory. As a result, I believe that Wallace employs the poem to demonstrate a real life situation examining the ideas in Plato’s Republic. Everyday we are forced to distinguish between life’s true forms and those which are only shadows on the cave wall. Wallace recognizes the importance and significance of Plato’s ideas and in doing so challenges his readers to further explore the depths of our minds for sources of truth. Through this quest for truth we can follow in Plato’s footsteps to achieve absolute knowledge.

1. PERCEPTION OF THINGS

This poem is about the distinction between reality, and our interpretation of that reality, based on what we perceive with our senses. When the poet wakes up; the sun is rising, and he hears a cry from outside. He gradually becomes aware of the world around him—the world beyond his sleeping one—by considering and reconsidering the sound of the bird’s cry, and the light of the sun. At first, he’s not able to clearly distinguish reality from the elements of his imagination, so he can’t tell whether the bird’s cry and the sunlight are real or are simply a lingering part of his dream. But he soon comes to discover (or rediscover) the immensity of the outside world and the line that separates it from the comfort of his own mind. This realization is “like / a new knowledge of reality”.

Ultimately, however, Stevens believed that the only truth in reality comes from our perception of that reality. “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” is the last poem in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens. Stevens leaves us with, as Weston says, “the courage to accept the possibility that our every definition of reality is a regulative and saving fiction”. Stevens addresses the interaction between reality and the mind in many of his poems, but perhaps never with such eloquence and encompassment as in this poem.

1. NATURE IN THE POEM

Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself is the final poem in the Collected Poems and brings the conclusion to the seasonal motif. The poem marks the time of the approaching morn ,especially the march morning of vernal equinox that heralds the first season of the year. The “scrawny cry ”is the first cry of the bird in the “earliest ending of winter” is like a new-born baby, that announces the coming of spring. Throughout the poem, the poet uses the image of “scrawny cry” and “sun” to put forth his ideas. The bird or “Chorister” is the harbinger of new season. A bird singing in early morning of March surrounded by the halo of rising sun presents an image describing the beauty of nature.

SOUNDS IN THE POEM

The interpretation of this poem has to do with our perception of reality; the subject of the poem hears a cry outside his window and becomes aware of the outside world gradually, by considering and reconsidering the sound. Likewise, the word “outside” is repeated three times throughout the poem, allowing the reader to experience it over and over, just like the man in the poem is experiencing the bird’s cry. This repetition mimics and reinforces the effect of the bird’s cry on the man, creating that same effect for the reader.

Another strong example of Stevens’ sound work connecting to meaning of this poem occurs in lines 2 and 13: “scrawny cry.” Without the adjective “scrawny,” this cry Stevens is describing could really refer to any type of loud noise—a baby crying, for example. But the “aw” sound of “scrawny,” combined with the c of “cry” (and also the c in “scrawny” itself), evoke a cawing sort of noise, like a crow or a raven. Indeed, in the second stanza, we learn that the cry the man hears is a “bird’s cry” (line 5). Thus, Stevens’ deliberate word choice—and the sound of that word—lends itself nicely to the poem’s meaning.

POET’S THEORY

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. He studied writing at Harvard University for a time as a young man, but was forced to withdraw for financial reasons without receiving a degree. He then decided to pursue a career in journalism as a reporter for the New York Evening Post, before enrolling in the New York School of Law. In 1908, he accepted a position with an insurance firm, the American Bonding Company. He soon resumed writing poetry, striking an unconventional—but effective—balance between his career and his creative pursuits. In 1909, he married Elsie Kachel, who gave birth to their only daughter, Holly, in 1924. Relative to some writers, Stevens launched his writing career rather late; nearly all of his published work was written in his 40s and beyond. Stevens died of cancer at age 75 on August 2, 1955.

Perhaps a product of his late-blooming career, Stevens was rather self-assured in his writing. He expects his readers to be familiar with his body of work and leaves it to us to make connections between the thoughts and beliefs expressed in his various poems. Schwarz writes: “More than any other major figure, Stevens restructured our concept of what it means to read. He requires from his readers acrobatics of attention and insists that we read him not only linearly but back and forth”. Similarly, Frankenberg explains that “he does not present fully rounded descriptions, but salient details by which we may summon up the whole. We take part in the poems by a selective rehearsal of our own experience”. We are able, and expected, to read the poem through the lens of our personal experience, and to participate actively in the shaping of the poem.

Stevens also has no qualms with articulating conflicting ideas and, in fact, some of his poems would seem to be in direct disagreement with each other. Stevens didn’t view this as an inconsistency, however, but rather as a way of getting at the “truth” of the world. This stems from a commitment to his philosophical ideas and his desire to express these ideas through the medium of poetry. Stevens did not view poetry and philosophy as diametrically opposed forces—the former emotional and the latter intellectual (Frankenberg 218). Arguably more than another poet of his time, he saw poetry and philosophy each as a means of digging deeper into the other.

In other words, Stevens didn’t use poetry simply to preach his philosophical beliefs, but as a medium for exploring these beliefs, as well. Frankenberg writes that “[Stevens’ poems] are his examinations of himself and the world through the medium of poetry, through the very machinery of his own poems” (226). Stevens often uses his poems as a means of detailing, with as much precision as possible, an object, thought, feeling or idea as a means of drawing closer to that object, thought, feeling or idea. His poems were, therefore, meditative in the sense that they were poems “of the mind, in the very act of finding”.

This commitment to pure accuracy, in a way, brings out the significance of the objects and thoughts he describes. As Frankenberg states, “Stevens’ genius in dealing with ideas is his ability to reproduce their sensations. This is an extension by reversal of his ability, through uncanny mimicry, to make ideas of sensations”. In depicting these perceptions of the world through words, Stevens is merely attempting to recreate them as accurately as possible, without layering them with any particular symbolism or interpretation. He does not force “meaning” into these depictions, but rather presents them to the reader as conceptions worth examining, in and of themselves.

This relates to some of the most important philosophical ideas with which Stevens was grappling: the relationship between imagination and reality, the concept of pure truth vs. the idea that everything is experienced through filters of perception, and the role of the imagination in creating the world around us. These are issues that Stevens struggled with in many of his poems, including the four I chose to focus on in this paper.

Thus, according to Frankenberg, “Stevens’ poetry is principally concerned with a two-way relationship between the beholder and the thing beheld. This relationship is both active and passive at once; an alternating current”. This is, on its own, fascinating. But the way in which he renders this relationship is the focus on my study.

All poets must pay some mind to sound in their poetry, as sound is what separates poetry from prose (just as language is what separates poetry from music). But I would argue that Stevens uses sound more deliberately than most, and in deeper connection to his subject matter. Indeed, Schwarz writes that “Stevens has a wonderful ear for the sounds of life for music and for individual speech; when reading his poems we need to hear internal rhymes, iterations, stresses, and phonic relationships. The phonics may either reinforce or be in disjunction with the actual words”. This is why studying sound in Stevens’ poetry is so important.