

LITERATURE

THE BLACK BIRD OF EDGAR ALLAN POE AND WALLACE STEVENS' THIRTEEN BLACKBIRDS

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ABSTRACT

Both Poe and Stevens perceived imagination as the ultimate faculty of the human mind. The paper attempts a detailed comparison of Poe's "The Raven" and Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" as an example of two different approaches to the relation between imagination and perception. In "The Raven", the romantic poet seeks a total disjunction between the real and the imagined world whereas the modernist poem presents a close interrelation between those two realms. According to Poe, the ultimate meaning should be sought beyond the physical world, out of time and space, beyond the gravitational pull of the common as only the autonomous product of the poetic imagination can be fully integral and coherent. Stevens, in turn, shows that the tangible real, the sensuous world with the multiplicity of perspectives it offers is the powerful substance for his imagination and a necessary element of his poetic landscape. The modernist poet "seeks nothing beyond reality, and within it everything." He finds an anchorage in the real and uses it as an advantage while Poe desperately tries to transcend the material and find the absolute Beauty in the self-contained aesthetic realm of his creations.

Both Poe and Stevens perceived the imagination as the ultimate faculty of the human mind capable of giving shape and meaning to the world's chaos. The present study attempts a detailed comparison of Poe's "The Raven" and Stevens' two companion poems "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and "Domination of Black" as two different approaches to the relation between imagination and reality. "The Raven" embodies Poe's search for a total disjunction between the real and the imagined world whereas Stevens' poems present a close interrelation between those two realms. Poe's work shows that the ultimate meaning should be sought beyond the physical world, out of time and space, while Stevens argues that the tangible real, the sensuous world with the multiplicity of perspectives it offers is the powerful substance for his imagination and a necessary element of his poetic landscape. The three poems chosen

for the analysis are brought together by similar imagery and subject matter and can serve as an illustration of the tensions between the poet, the imaginative construct and the real in the works of the romantic and modernist poet.

The opening lines of the "The Raven" and "Domination of Black" establish strikingly similar settings: in "The Raven" it is "the bleak December," "a dreary midnight," and a chamber lit by "dying ember";¹ in Stevens' work it is a windy autumn night and a room warmed by the fire. In the latter however, the inner-outer relation is more dynamic. While the student's abode is isolated from the world outside, Stevens' room is open for the contact with reality:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.

(CP, 8)

The interplay between the elements of the interior and the exterior is embodied by the movements of the fire whose flames repeat the colors of the leaves outside and dance in the room like the leaves borne by the winds. Once the correspondence between the leaves and flames is established, the observer's mind produces a chain of further associations or resemblances: the colors, the night, the fire, the leaves, the bushes coalesce to create a vision of the "total metaphor"² – the multi-colored tail of the peacock:

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind
In the twilight wind
They swept over the room
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.

(CP, 45)

However, just like in "The Raven", the mixture of the colors created by the imagination is threatened by the encroachment of the menacing outer darkness

¹ All the quotations from Poe's "The Raven" will come from the 1875 edition of *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, and will be hereafter marked as (W.) The quotations from Stevens' works will come from his *Collected Poems*, *Opus Posthumous*, and *Letters* and will be marked respectively as (CP), (OP), and (L.).

² Northrop Frye writes in "Realistic Oriole" that Stevens' poetry is "a world of total metaphor, where the poet's vision may be identified with anything it visualizes (Frye 1963: 173).

bringing fear, enhanced further by the cry of the birds; in the first case – the raven; in the latter – the peacocks. Poe explains the choice of the raven as the binding figure for the poem in his "Philosophy of Composition". Its color, intelligence, its associations with death, mystery, omen, occult knowledge – all serve to evoke certain mood and prepare the ground and atmosphere for the student's confrontation with the fact of irrevocability of death. The peacocks that "sweep over" Stevens' room are often used by the poet as the emblem of the imagination, but in "The Domination of Black" it is not the lavish colors of their tails that dominate but their "cry" and the "blackness" of their prophecies. Like the ravens' "nevermore", that cry is also ominous as it announces the oncoming night:

I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.

(CP, 9)

If we treat Stevens' room as the symbol of the mind, the cry of the peacocks becomes a warning against the domination of blackness – the pressures of reality deprived of the colors of the imagination:

I heard them cry – the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire.

(CP, 9)

The absence of color and light, the indefiniteness of shapes and contours as well as the lifelessness of the fallen leaves turn reality into a frightening vacuum, preparing it for the emptiness of the oncoming winter. The early winter serves as the compositional background for the introduction of another famous bird from Stevens' rich menagerie,³ namely, the blackbird of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". The blackbird is even closer to Poe's raven, as it shares with it not only its "grave and stern decorum" as well as the attention given to it by the

³ For example, the cockatoo from "Sunday Morning" that becomes one of the life's pleasures or the "comforts of the sun", or the ambiguous pigeons – the messengers of darkness and symbol of earthly transience from the same poem; the parakeet that serves as the figure of violent reality in "The Bird with the Coppery Keen Claws", the clawing cock replacing the romantic lark in "The Man with the Blue Guitar", and the ever recurring eagle – the symbol of the nobility of poetry and the transforming powers of the imagination in "Some Friends from Pascagoula". Eugene Paul Nassar in his study of the figures controlling Stevens' poetry observes that birds are for him real objects of the real world, but the flights of birds, their arcs, feathers, tails, their cries and songs, point to the imagination and its creative qualities. For further details, see Nassar (1965: 47-48).

speaker. The appearance of the birds has quite similar effects upon them; they disturb their peace and dig into their consciousness: raven's "fiery eyes" burn into the lover's "bosom's core" and intensify his sense of loss, while the movement of the blackbird's eye intrudes upon the speaker's mind to the extent that it is trebled: "I was of three minds, / Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds" (CP, 92). In both poems, the birds can be treated as the objects of knowledge but of different kind: the raven prophesies dark and forbidden wisdom beyond human powers; and as it is pointed out by Barton Levi St. Armand, it is the emissary of "the finality of not knowing and not being able to know";⁴ the blackbird, in turn, represents the knowledge coming from sensible experience, from the perception of external reality. This perception changes with the changes of the scene. When the landscape is moving:

It was evening all afternoon
It was snowing.

(CP, 95)

the blackbird is often the only stable point against the swirling chaos of the whiteness ("The blackbird sat / In the cedar limbs"), but when the blackbird moves in the poem, the background is motionless ("Among the twenty snowy mountains / The only moving thing / Was the eye of the blackbird"). But the bird can also be a moving thing in a moving world as it "whirls in the autumn winds", it is "whistling", its shadow crosses the room "to and fro", it flies "out of sight" only to return in the penultimate stanza with the movements of the running river:

The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

(CP, 94)

The room from which the speaker observes the bird is the mind; its walls marking the boundaries of perception and the window opening itself for seeing and knowing. The multiplicity of the ways of looking at a blackbird corresponds to the multiplicity of reality's phenomena and the fluctuating movements of the speaker's mind. The combined images of the river and flight suggest the open character of the poem, the recurrence of the blackbird does not limit its spatial capacity, quite on the contrary, its activity widens the imaginative horizon and invites the observer to delve into life and enjoy it fully.

It is not so with the raven that moves in "with many a flirt and flutter" but remains motionless throughout the poem:

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter,
In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore;
Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he;
But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door –
Perched upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door –
Perched, and sat, and nothing more.

(W, 4)

With its entrance, the speaker faces the need to interpret it, at first, literally as the lost bird seeking refuge in the stormy night; later figuratively; as the sign of Remembrance of his deceased lover. The space in the room imperceptibly changes as it becomes crowded with the bird's menacing presence ("Then methought the air grew denser, perfumed from an unseen censer / Swung by Seraphim whose foot-falls tinkled on the tufted floor"). The oppressive identity and negativity of the refrain increase the atmosphere of entrapment and immobility; the window and the door turn into impassable boundaries rather than openings-out, as the raven gradually nestles not only in the student's chamber, but even more powerfully so – in his soul:

Leave my loneliness unbroken! – quit the bust above my door!
Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!

(W, 5)

The bird becomes internalized; it plunges its beak in the student's heart and submerges him in the darkness of its shadow; aptly interpreted by St. Armand as "a metaphor for the buried or hidden of the self that is primal, primitive, and volatile, the very ground of animal being which remains as fascinating as it is dangerous to explore" (1976: 197-198). It is as if the bird released in the speaker a destructive potential of the repressed part of the self. What is more, the raven becomes that part; towards the end of the poem it ceases to exist as a separate entity, and turns into a nadir, the rock bottom of the student's disintegrating psyche. The final occurrence of "nevermore" literally and metaphorically closes the poem; refrain, designating a repeated line or phrase, here touches upon the "undercurrent" of its meaning, as refrain means also a burden, which in this case, "can be lifted nevermore".

Stevens' blackbird, in turn, appears as irreducible external fact. Its color and the blankness of the snowy mountains in the background represent the bareness of the raw reality. The essential vitality and ceaseless activity of nature finds its expression in the bird's flight:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,
It marked the edge
Of one of many circles.

⁴ The critic suggests that "The Raven" should be interpreted in relation to the emblematic and allegorical rather than symbolic tradition. Such interpretation would be commensurate with Poe's need of controlled and unified meaning and his desire to avoid the mystical excessiveness characteristic of transcendental symbolism (St. Armand 1976: 197).

The figure of the circle left by the flying blackbird forms an important link between the mind and reality. It is a figure that “rounds” the thirteen parts of the poem; and marks the circumference of Stevens’ palace of thought where reality and the imagination meet. The mind organizes the world in figures of order and the circle is the ultimate embodiment of the imaginative and ever creative “rounding” of the straight lines of reality. This “rounding” is reflected in the very structure of the poem. It begins like a pencil sketch displaying each element of the view as a clearly separate line:

Among twenty mountains
The only moving thing
Was the eye of a blackbird.

The subsequent twelve stanzas are the mind’s efforts to find meaning in the reality reduced to the simplest fact. The mind seeks help in metaphor that makes possible the unity of the distinct components of the earlier landscape:

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

(CP, 93)

With the blackbird becoming a part of the subjective experience and the internal order the metaphoric context “thickens” with each ensuing stanza and leads up to the symbolic circle with its great potential for inclusiveness and its shape suggesting enclosing and yearning for fulfillment. The figure opens the poem that gradually expands to encompass everything. The purity and simplicity of the circle stimulates the mind that characteristically operates through emblematic figuration and the image of the circle sets off infinite associative vibrations. Emerson in “Circles” argues that the circle is “the highest emblem in the cipher of the world”, (Emerson 1891: 301) and that the eye – the primary organ of perception embodies its generative powers: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end” (Emerson 1891: 301). Stevens seems equally fascinated with the metaphoric potential of the circle and its role as the source of a basic knowledge about the world. The indefinite “many” of the circles in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, indicates further that there is no one order that could satisfy the searching mind, but many orders or horizons of imaginative perception as shifting and flexible as the reality they are designed to control. The circles are thoughts of the imaginative man, the geography of the poet’s mind which is mapped by the shapes of “rhomboids / Cones, waving lines, ellipses” against the “Rationalists, wearing square hats” (CP, 75). Any piece of reality,

suggests Stevens, can be viewed in an infinite number of ways; the blackbird itself is perceived as the symbol of change, the “small part of nature’s pantomime” (CP, 94), transforming into the emblem of the bond between sexes, the symbol of life as well as the symbol of death, a metaphor for the eccentricity and the dynamic workings of the mind.

The multiple ways of looking contrasted with the minimalist scarcity of words and the simplicity of the images used by Stevens to paint the thirteen portraits of the blackbird serve double purpose in the poem: they point to the bareness of the world unadorned by the imagination and represent the poet’s need to order reality’s flux.

I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know, too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know.

The “noble accents” and “lucid, inescapable rhythms” stand for the richness and luring power of poetry which helps to order the knowledge of reality and dress it in the vivid colors of the imagination. The minimalist structure of the stanza intimates that life’s beauty can be discovered even in the simplest forms.

Poe’s “Raven”, when placed against the imagistic character of Stevens’ work, seems almost baroque. The numerous uses of emphasis, exclamations, repetitions, and the piling up of alliterating adjectives give the poem its confounding richness and “the air of the fantastic”. Despite its compositional lavishness, the poem nevertheless tells its story very successfully and equally well serves Poe’s poetic purpose. The careful precision and ingenuity of the design express a desire for control over the material of language and planning equal to that of the architect with a vision rather than a simple craft of a builder. The choice of the bird and setting, the growth of suspense in the narrative line of the poem, the menacing irrevocability of the refrain and strong sonorous sounds stress the importance of emotion and point to the mind’s irrational powers. The linear structure of the poem corresponds to the poet’s desire to frame the poem in a plot, to close it within the principles of compositional unity but it is also a deliberate device used for the creation of the required mood. The narrative movement is consciously directed from the recognizable reality of the student’s room towards the irrational and the uncontrollable nooks of his mind. The very relation between the speaker and the raven reflects the difficult task that Poe assigns to his own imagination – the establishing of the link between the conscious mind and the shadowy unknown. The task is tinged, however, by a realization that the mind cannot decipher the mysterious alphabet of the supernal realm for it exists beyond human consciousness and if one happens to get a

glimpse of the mystery, his psyche is bound to disintegrate just like the student's mind. Therefore, Poe's imagination to some extent remains trapped by the realization of its own limitations and a strong moth-like desire to break them.

Stevens' blackbird, in turn, points to the imaginative freedom, as it stands for the dizzying infinite life possible to consciousness. Immobility versus motion, the exterior versus interior, the varying tenses ("I know", "it was going to snow", "the bawds of euphony would cry", the river is moving") and moods (conjectural – "the blackbird must be flying", interrogative – "Why do you imagine golden bird?", indicative – "A man and a woman are one"); the changing self-reference ("I", "he", "man") indicating a shift from personal to impersonal experience and finally, the non-linear, non-narrative structure of the poem, the structure that constantly "radiates" from and toward the center of the observer's mind – all that proves how deliberately dynamic and multifaceted is Stevens' poetic world and how this dynamism is matched by the movements of his imagination always in "the act of finding". Guy Rotella notes that the style that chooses for the poem, is a style in which the orderliness of beginnings, middles, and ends is replaced by contemplative expansions and contractions; in which linear development is replaced by endless circlings of adjustment and re-adjustment; in which single narratives, patterns of imagery, metaphors, characters, or myths are replaced by prodigiously plural inventions; in which closure is replaced by open-endedness; and in which certitude and statement are replaced by an implicitly infinite state of indeterminate reconsideration. This produces the poetry of possible meanings rather than of meaning in the usual sense (Rotella 1991: 101).

Stevens' poem pulsates with its possible meanings thanks to the interplay of reality and the imagination. Perception and action, decreation and creation, decomposition and arrangement, patching and rounding, darkness and lightness, simplicity and multiplicity, knowledge and discovery – crisscross in the thirteen stanzas of the poem to give it its fluid and enigmatic character. In "The Raven", Poe sends both the imagination towards the edge of their capacity, to the upper limit of the conscious world where the knowledge accessible to the first faculty is discarded for the secondary imagination's desire to discover what is unknown and impossible. That desire, however, in Poe's work equals self-destruction, for mental powers never match the grandiosity of the sublime vision and lift up the weight of the wisdom that comes with it. So, while Stevens' blackbird frees our imaginative powers by taking on the colors of reality, Poe's Raven remains an impenetrable mystery, a closed border, and a dark shadow on the poet's mind.

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