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THIS TRIVIAL TROPE REVEALS A WAY OF TRUTH: THE SELF-EFFACING TROPES OF WALLACE STEVENS’S “DOMINATION OF BLACK”¹

ABSTRACT: The Modernists’ notion of the firstness of vision that exposes the unfamiliar depths of the familiar is a troping that is inevitably figurative. The mutually deferred union of the worlds of perception and imagination makes them collapse into a self-conscious tropical unity in Modernist art. In Wallace Stevens tropes often self-consciously reflect the disjunctive function of both language and imagination. The tropes of Stevens emanate from the acceptance of words as words distant from their semantic ends. Imagination is to perceptual reality what tropological figuration is to imagination. Tropology in Stevens enfolds the desire for the life-worlds of becoming as the tropological juxtaposition of the contingent goes in correspondence with the process of individuation prior to the formation of the ‘I’.

KEYWORDS: cry, difference, imagination, perception, prefiguration, repetition, tropology

0. INTRODUCTION

The Modernist desire for a primal and unmediated vision took their poetic practice away from the traditional poetic devices of structuration and figuration. Formal experimentation sought to recover a form continuous with content and an expression transparent to experience. The search for a significant form was, however, tempered with a growing realization of the difficulty of reference. It is this dual, paradoxical vision that moves the Modernist texts in the direction of self-consciousness. The early works of Modernism are characterized by an optimism regarding the translation of intent into practice that soon fades into the resignation of those who are without hope, and out of this resignation emerges the attitudes definitive of Postmodernism. The representation of the aleatory and the

¹The first part of the title comes from Wallace Stevens’s poem “Le Monocle De Mon Oncle”: see Stevens 1954: 16.

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contingent takes language away from the customised practices and into the discovery of serendipitous spontaneity.

Abstinence from figurative language meant the investment of the so-called nonfigurative languages of direct statement with the added responsibility of coping with the density of poetic reference. Irony then becomes the most prevalent critical stance of statements, and plurisignification the most naturalized state of reference. The Modernist artist is caught in the paradox of realizing the impossibility of transcending the physical world of objects and phenomena while at the same time maintaining faith in art as the only valid mode of transcendence in modern times. This is what forces the Modernists to make a great show of providing the raw material for the imaginative tropological vision and of stopping just short of tropes.

0.1 Tropology and Imagination
All attempts for the primal vision will ineluctably end in prefiguration as it is the only way to avoid a fall headlong into utter chaos.\(^2\) Perception is not a transparency to the givenness of the world of phenomena or an encounter with the alterity that lies beyond the human but an extension of the human. It is this human extension that works positively as the difference that makes the perception itself. Imagination as a post-perceptual activity interrogates the human that makes a perception itself.\(^3\) Thus it is a repetition of the perception in the sense it is the human again that gives it its different identity. The artistic endeavour of the Modernists to break the crust of habit and perceive the transcendent or metaphysical will end in tropological figurations.\(^4\) Ankersmit in his essay “‘White’s New neo-Kantianism’: aesthetics, ethics, and politics” sees tropology as “‘something that “the mind brings” to (past) reality and that is not

\(^2\) Hayden White (1985) in *Tropics of discourse* says: “Tropic is the shadow from which all realistic discourse tries to flee. This flight, however, is futile; for tropics is the process by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively” (emphasis by the author); see White (p.2).

\(^3\) According to Deleuze (1968) it is difference that makes something in itself, and repetition is a repetition of the differences that constitute a thing. (p.28)

\(^4\) White (1985) says that discursive practices aim to “deconstruct a conceptualization of a given area of experience which has become hardened into a hypostasis that blocks fresh perception. . .”; (p.3).
part of the past itself” (Ankersmit, Domanska, & Kellner 2009: 37). Therefore the Modernists’ notion of the firstness of vision that exposes the unfamiliar depths of the familiar is a troping that is inevitably figurative.

Ankersmit sees White’s tropological analysis of historical writing as being analogous to Kant’s analysis of the beautiful in the third Critique. In the perception of beautiful objects, imagination functions to “achieve a synthesis of the manifold of sensible intuitions” (Ankersmit, Domanska, & Kellner 2009: 41). The indeterminate sensations, however, can never be subsumed under any particular concept, and so imagination leaves the faculties of the mind always referring to themselves, never getting sedimented to a particular concept of the object. Kant says:

If pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension . . . of the form of an object of intuition, apart from any reference it may have to a concept for the purpose of a definite cognition, this does not make the representation referable to the Object, but solely to the Subject. In such a case the pleasure can express nothing but the conformity of the Object to the cognitive faculties brought into play in the reflective judgement, and so far as they are in play, and hence merely a subjective formal finality of the Object. (1952: 30)

There are no transcendental concepts; but only metonymical correspondences with the things outside, and so there can be no hierarchical privileging of either imagination or perception.

The objects of perception and their imaginative re-figurations can never conjoin to form a transcendental meaning. Ankersmit puts it right:

There is no “closure” as contemporary literary theories would put it. What we have, instead, is a continuous shuttling back and forth between perception, and these always failing attempts at conceptualization, and the free play of our cognitive faculties in the process invites them to reveal all their strength and cognitive resources. Hence, the feeling of pleasure produced by our perception of the object.

(Ankersmit, Domanska, & Kellner 2009: 30)
The mutually deferred union of the worlds of perception and imagination makes them collapse into a self-conscious tropical unity in Modernist art. It is a unity that does not fuse their discrete identities because, as White (1985) observes, “troping is both a movement from one notion of the way things are related to another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise” (emphasis by the author) (p.2).

1. WALLACE STEVENS AND TROPOLOGY

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is the one Modernist who does not seem to have much compunction about using tropes, but whenever he does, it is noticeable that it is accompanied almost always by a wry, ironic self-consciousness. Very often in Stevens, tropes self-consciously reflect the disjunctive function of both language and imagination. Words evade direct signification as tropes enfold multiple layers of figuration. In Stevens tropology often leads to the acceptance of the non-referentiality of words as words become more and more estranged from their referents. Imagination is to perceptual reality what tropological figuration is to imagination. Therefore tropology and imagination can be seen as aspects of the desire for an “immanent life of imaging or simulation” (Colebrook 2002: 128). These life-worlds of becoming that come out of the tropological juxtaposition of the contingent can be seen in correspondence with the factors of individuation prior to the formation of ‘I’:5

[E]very individuating factor is already difference and difference of difference. It is constructed upon a fundamental disparity, and functions on the edges of that disparity as such. That is why these factors endlessly communicate with one another across fields of individuation, becoming enveloped in one another in a demesne which disrupts the matter of the Self as well as the form of the I. Individuation is mobile,

5Deleuze (1968) makes a distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Self’: “The I forms the properly psychic determination of species, while the Self forms the psychic organisation” (p.257).
strangely supple, fortuitous and endowed with fringes and margins; all because the intensities which contribute to it communicate with each other, envelop other intensities and are in turn enveloped. The individual is far from indivisible, never ceasing to divide and change its nature. (Deleuze 1968: 257)

The desire to capture the ‘firstness’ of prefiguration makes the Stevensian tropes self-consciously move back and forth between the prefigurative ‘depths’ and their tropological ‘surfaces’.

Imagination is the transfiguration of the real; it is trans-figuration; and tropes are the fulfilment of this transfiguration. More than enfolding something semantic the tropes of Stevens unfold the mere contingency of their elements, and it is this self-critical streak in Stevensian tropes that makes them self-effacing. At no point in his poems does Stevens surrender entirely to a completely gratuitous play of tropes. The poems, however, seem uncomfortable without the companionship of a self-effacing irony, and very often they recognize the inevitability of language’s slide towards the tropic. The effect of the self-consciousness of his poems is then to stagger the process of tropological vision, and thereby permit its close observation. It is this preoccupation with the process that makes Stevens’s poems more poems about the imagination than poems of the imagination, more poems about metaphor than metaphorical poems, more poems about poems than poems.\(^6\)

\(^6\)As a poet of Modernism Stevens’s tropes have often been seen as trying to construct an ego in control of the worlds of multiple possibilities that it conceives inclusive of itself. Altieri observes: “Stevens’ worlds are always possible worlds, worlds projected by the transcendental ego as it orients imagination in relation to what a scene offers. Therefore, various distancing techniques are called for. He needs abstraction and playfulness and irony and constant self-reflexivity in order to maintain the distinctive space where ego is a power and an index of possibilities for constructing life-worlds . . .”; see Altieri (2008: 66).
2. THE SELF-EFFACING TROPES OF “DOMINATION OF BLACK”

Though the poem was written in 1916 after much-celebrated poems like “Sunday morning” (1915) and “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1915), Harold Bloom considers “Domination of Black” as the “true starting point” of Stevens as a poet because, according to him, “the short lines [of the poem] carry the resonances of a master” (1980: 376). Eleanor Cook says that it is in this poem that we come to “the first ‘I’ in Stevens (1988: 43). I take this poem as a portal to the entire oeuvre of Stevens because this is the poem where the word ‘cry’ comes for the first time in his poetry—the word comes six times in this poem. The word comes altogether sixty-three times in Stevens in as many as twenty-nine poems. The peacocks of “Domination of Black” can do nothing at the domination of the night, but they can ‘cry’. Just like the neonatal, the cry here emanates from the intersection of the infiltrating alien sensations and the desires of the body. It is the undifferentiated sound of mind and body, not a sensation mediated by mind and language. The only way to come closer to the eternally deferred and indeterminate particular individual self is to go along with the sounds of language, and be proximate to the neonatal cry. In “An ordinary evening in New Haven,” a poem written in 1949, Stevens writes: “[t]he poem is the cry of its occasion.” (CP 473). It is at the instant of the prim tropological figuration [or “prefigurative move” as White would call it, (emphasis by the author) (1985: 1)] that a poem occurs, and the cry marks the mere contingency of the event.

The domination of the monochromatic in the title—which optically wipes out the possibilities of difference—forecloses the formation of subjects in relation to it. The rest of the text of the poem, therefore, seems to be a little frantic to gain access to a world of differences:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes

7 The interior setting of “Domination of Black” reminds one of the realms of the mind, the terrain of the ‘I’. The fireside is conventionally designated as a place of musing: “It is conventionally not only the center of a home but also a place where one remembers, a memory-place, a place for ghost stories and old romances”; see Cook (1988: 43).
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind. (CP 8)⁸

The burning fire in the backdrop of the night opens up the portal of differences, and the juxtaposition of the night and fire invests multiple syntheses between the dark and the light, leading to the intersections of subjectivity. The colours of the leaves repeat themselves and change in the room. The leaves change colours in accordance with the seasonal fluctuations in the intensity of sunlight and the climatic changes in the temperature. The burning hearths and the fallen leaves make the temperature autumnal, and the words “flame” and “loud,” in course of the text, mark the varying intensity of the glow of the fire: two sufficient reasons for the repetition of the change of colours in themselves, and the synthesis of the difference take the first simile of the poem: “Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind” (CP 8).⁹

It is not the things, but the abstract quality that is elicited from them—“the colors”—that turned in the mind.¹⁰ The personification of “the colors” denotes the semi-independent activity of perception. The poem begins

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⁸ All quotations of Stevens’s poems are from Wallace Stevens (1954), The collected poems of Wallace Stevens, Knopf, New York, abbreviated as CP throughout this paper.

⁹ In her reading of the poem Cook (1988) sketches the tropical turnings of the “turning” in the poem: it captures the changing of colours in a room lit by fire and of the leaves in autumn, all possible troping of leaves past and present, the various shades of rhetoric, “the turning of the leaves of a book,” “turnings over the end of the line as we read,” and the turning of the planets and the stars. She says that the recurring syntactic turnings are “emblematic of the entire poem, which keeps turning back retrospectively and revising itself, as it moves forward, repeating” (p.42).

¹⁰ Mazur, (2005) making a connection between the colour and the figurative use of language, says: “These lines address yet another repetition: that between ‘color’ and the object itself. The color of an object is what makes it visible. To color, means to cast an object in a vivid form, like that of figurative language. Here, repetition is what allows color to stand for the object itself. If we perform a syntactical reduction, ‘The colors…of the fallen leaves…turned in the room…like the leaves themselves.’ Repetition is shown to be intimately related to metaphor, indeed, it is a metaphor-making mechanism” (p.71).
with a description of the perceived scene without mentioning the perceiver, and so, as McGill (1990) observes, it “seems to tell a story about an act of perception, one rendered uncanny both by the nature of what is perceived and by the virtual elimination of the perceiver” (p.121). The absence of the perceiver may impart the very subjectivity itself to perception. The colours, “repeating themselves,” “turned” in the mind of the perceiver. The absence of the perceiver may impart the very subjectivity itself to perception. The colours, “repeating themselves,” “turned” in the mind of the perceiver. Repetition, the violation of uniqueness, is itself a turning. The internal activities of repetition and turning are compared to a natural scene.

The word “turned” brings the memory of another “turning” to mind: “Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind” (CP 8). The colours turned as “leaves themselves” turning in the wind. The leaves turn because of the wind, and the vehicle qualifies the tenor with the causation: it would be in the wind that the “colors” turned. Wind, a recurring trope in Stevens, could be a metaphor for the imagination. The simile from the exterior world, a natural activity, characterizes the imagination as a perpetual distortion of perceptual images. In *The necessary angel* Stevens (1942) describes the imagination as “the power of the mind over the possibilities of things,” and, truly, here it comes as an openness where objects lose their characteristic denominations and are transformed into a new form (p.136). Repetition here functions as a projection of the self whereby it inducts the objects into a quasi-solipsistic realm. Repetition, as a celebration of the self’s uniqueness, is eclipsed by the reversal function of the same simile. The analogy of repetition between natural processes and the processes of mind posits repetition as an independent force. According to OED the verb ‘turn’ can mean ‘change colour’ (of fruits, leaves etc), and according to Paul Ricoeur (2003) a trope is a “change or deviation affecting the meaning of a word” (p.49).

McMichael (1971) notes “[b]y a count, fourteen words in the poem are repeated and one word, ‘turn,’ appears in one form or another a total of nine times” (p.707). McMichael (1971) notes “[b]y a count, fourteen words in the poem are repeated and one word, ‘turn,’ appears in one form or another a total of nine times” (p.707).

It goes along with what Deleuze (1968) observes about the ‘possible’: “By ‘possible’ . . . do not mean any resemblance but that state of implicated or enveloped in its very heterogeneity with what envelops it” (p.260).

McGill (1990) argues that “the simile suggests that the force of repetition exceeds the perceiving mind: certainly the mind constructed by these repetitions cannot be said to contain them.” According to him replication here “seems to function as a powerful and disjunctive self-framing uncannily independent of the mind” (p.124).
is put into doubt, and it is posed as subservient to repetition. The
ambivalence of the simile leads to the ambiguity of an affirmative denial
(yes, but): “Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks / Came striding.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks” (CP 83). “Yes” might be an
affirmation of the displacement of self by the precedent simile, and then
the “but” would be a negation of it. The singularity and gravity of
“hemlocks” would keep intact the quasi-solipsistic realm of the
imagination.

“Yes” might be an affirmation of the preceding simile’s assertion of the
uniqueness of self, and then ‘but’ would be a censor on it. The self is
always conscious of the primal chaos that expands exclusive of the
ephemeral entity of the imaginative figuration. The colour of the hemlocks
does not turn; instead, they come “striding.” “Turning” and “striding”
form an opposition within the poem (equivalent to change and stasis)
that ultimately leads to the opposition between deciduous and evergreen
trees. The colour of the “heavy hemlocks” poses an ominous presence
that represents the problems that the imagination encounters in its zest
for similitude. The black is the result of the absorption of all light with
zero reflection, and it is, as McGill (1990) points out, “both the ground
and the annihilation of perception” (p.125). The “striding” blackness
metaphorically denotes the primal chaos which is impervious to
imaginative distortion.

At this juncture tropes find a chain of associations between the visual
and aural senses that sustain the poem. The tropes mark a correlation
between the cry of the peacocks and the colour of the hemlocks. The
activity of flames and leaves has the change of colours as a common
denominator. But the colour of the hemlocks and the cry of the peacocks
cannot be assimilated easily into a similar regime of similarity. However,
the words “hemlock” and “peacocks,” share a visual and aural rhyme:

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15 Observing the countermovement initiated by the “but,” McGill (1990) says that it
marks the “recapturing of authority” by the mind (p.125).

16 According to OED Hemlock (full name: hemlock fir) is a North American evergreen
tree. Its dark boughs in twilight can be an ample metaphor for the ‘Domination of Black.’
hemlock, peacock; hemlock, peacock. They are linked, on the other hand, purely through tropes. The word ‘striding,’ used to describe the strong presence of the colour of the hemlocks, reminds the reader of the word ‘strident,’ which could characterize the cry of the peacocks. The personification of the colour of the hemlocks, which is what leads to the characterization of it as coming ‘striding,’ is thus able to link the dissimilar (cry of peacocks).

The cry of peacocks in the middle of the second part of the poem marks the introduction of differences into a world of sameness:

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.
I heard them cry-the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves (CP 8-9).

The fire, leaves, and the tails of the peacocks are all suffused with the soft, gentle and harmonious colour of autumn twilight. The cry of the peacocks precipitates an irreducible difference. It is a new trope in a world of similes:

Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,

In her close reading of the poem Mazur (2005) says: “The ‘hemlocks’ / ‘peacocks’ repetition belong to the realm of language and is ungrounded in (and producing) the reality it seeks, producing an order which unsettles the—apparently independent—‘natural order of resemblances.’ According to her, the poem “both tries to ‘recover’ the reality it presents, and creates a reality of its own, witnessing the tension between these two tendencies” (p.66).
The cry upsets the whole sympathetic balance. A self-contained world, where all things are symbols of each other, is irreducibly solipsistic. The cry unsettles the established harmonies which have been possible because of the deliberate forgetting of the ‘other.’ The consciousness of the ‘otherness’ estranges the self from the objects, and the cry is the embodiment of the fear that emerges from this realization.

The consciousness of the ‘other’ marks the awareness of the distinction between external and internal reality. Tropes work in this realm of heterogeneity. Tropes bespeak a heterogeneity that outlives the facile homogeneity of a carefully selected set of objects and sensations. Stevens, arguing against an aesthetic that has no place for difference, proposes the dissimilarities as the starting point of tropes. It is the cry of peacocks that the tropes try hard to assimilate into the world of symbolic correspondences. The resistance to assimilation itself creates the necessity of tropes, and the cry of the peacocks decreates the linked similes that come in the first part of the poem.

Perceptual reality is always already a post-prefigural reality. Imagination can either build more on this prefiguration, or can undo the prefiguration altogether, and be conscious of the faculties of mind in the act of prefiguration. But all these can happen only in the realm of imagination, and that is why Stevens says; “Yet the absence of the imagination had / itself to be imagined” (CP 503). In “Someone puts a pineapple together”, he designates imagination as “man and his endless effigies” (Stevens 1942: 83). Every attempt at prefiguration ends, consciously or unconsciously, in making an ‘effigy’ of oneself. The ‘night’ at the first stanza of the poem supplies the minimalist backdrop which enables the mind/imagination to focus on the objects of memory without distraction. It is an enclosure exclusively of colours/tropes severed from their physical/semantic referents, and so, is vulnerable to the infiltration of the “heavy hemlocks,” or utter chaos (all-absorbing ‘black’ in the case of colours, and absolute meaninglessness in the case of tropes). It is at this moment that “the cry of the peacocks” comes to the mind. As I have

Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks? (CP 9)
mentioned elsewhere in this paper, for Stevens this is the moment of ‘poetry’: “The poem is the cry of its occasion” (CP 473).\textsuperscript{18}

The rhetorical questions of the second stanza negotiate the possibilities against which the “cry” or poetry happens. Syntactically there are two questions, but thematically there are three as the first two are clubbed together. The syntactical occlusion of the third one thematically illustrates the impossibility of the ‘cry’ or poetry to happen in relation to “the hemlocks.” We can have the hemlocks in their colour (“the color of the heavy hemlocks”), or in the sounds associated with it (“Loud as the hemlocks / Full of the cry of the peacocks?”), or in association/contrast with another (“Just as they [peacocks] flew from the boughs of the hemlocks”), but can never have in its definite isolation (“the hemlocks”). The ‘cry’ or poetry therefore happens in relation to the colours (“the twilight”), or the leaves (“against the leaves themselves”). Leaves have pure poetic connotations in Stevens’ world of words. For instance, in “The Rock” (1950), the title poem of Stevens’ last collection of the poems, leaves are poems that cover the rock, the self of sensations: “These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man” (CP 526). In “The plain sense of things” (1952), the ontological impermanence of poetic perceptions is troped as the seasonal fall of leaves: “After the leaves have fallen, we return / To a plain sense of things” (CP 502). Poetry is, therefore, the ‘cry’ that captures in tropes the movement between the pre-prefigurative and the post-prefigurative realms of experience.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18}Bloom (1980) says that the poem portrays the movement of the poet “from the mimesis of the fallen leaves to the expressive cry of the peacocks, a cry to which the cry of his own poem is joined” (p.404).

\textsuperscript{19}I have used the words ‘pre-prefigurative’ and ‘post-prefigurative’ based on the concept of “prefiguration” introduced by White: “prefiguration transforms the chaos-‘the manifold,’ as Kant would put it—of the past into a reality that can be mapped, investigated and discussed” (Ankersmit, Domanska & Kellner 2009: 42).
2. CONCLUSION

The last part of the poem replicates the room situation of the first part on a larger canvas. Instead of the fire we have the vast immensity of space:

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
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*)

Planets have no light of their own: they only reflect the light of the sun. It is the fire in the room which evokes the memory of the colour of the leaves in autumn. Thus it is the fire that gives colour to the leaves. The fire, like the sun, therefore, represents the activity of the imaginative figuration, which illuminates everything by its own light. The advancing night of opaqueness is pierced by the cry of the peacocks as tropes intrude into the worlds of the indeterminate. The cry can do nothing to the darkness, and tropes can do nothing to the world of the indeterminate, but still the peacocks can cry, or the poem can be. The imagination interrogates the perception and renegotiates in tropes the differences between the human and the nonhuman. These tropological juxtapositions of the human and the nonhuman go in correspondence with the factors of individuation prior to the primal vision or prefiguration. The ‘trivial’ trope thus takes a path that constantly bears on truth.
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