

Imagination: Three Moments in the History of a Concept

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And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
– *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i: 14-17

It is my objective, within the small compass of this short paper, to examine three significant moments in the history of the concept of imagination as a creative faculty capable of making mental images and novel combinations, specifically in the field of poetry. The imaginary has its anchorage in the real, but it aspires to go much further than that – toward the transcendental and the ideal. Representative of the three moments in question are three major Symbolist poets: Arthur Rimbaud, a Frenchman of the late nineteenth century, and T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens, two Americans (Eliot became a British national in the year 1927) of the first half of the twentieth century. For the purpose of the present paper, I shall focus on a few poems by Rimbaud, Eliot, and Stevens with a view on illustrating their various perceptions of imagination and the distinctive ways they made use of it in their work.

Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91) gave up writing at the age of nineteen or twenty, but not before turning out a number of masterpieces in rapid succession. From the onset he was exceptionally precocious, possessed of an amazing command of words and exceptional powers of visualization. He caused such a furor both by his violent verse and wild living (White 2009). A continuator of the Baudelaire symbolic tradition and a forerunner of the Surrealists, he was a glaring example of the *poète maudit*¹ for he wrote poetry that constantly defeated conventional expectations and challenged the oppressiveness of traditional mores. His name became emblematic of the revolt of the modern artist against religion and society. Like Baudelaire and Flaubert, he wrote *pour épater le bourgeois*,² rejecting conventions of polite society in favor of primitivism and unbridled passion.

Rimbaud's work, which seemed at the time to be detached from all antecedents, was characterized by a bold unconventional use of language, a surprising juxtaposition of disparate elements, and a free association of apparently random images. It remains as riveting today as it was when it came out in the 1870s. It fascinated men as far apart as the Catholic Paul Claudel, the rationalist Ivor Winters, the apocalyptic Dylan Thomas, and the Marxist Edgell Rickword. It has been emulated by countless poets in different languages, sometimes with disastrous results

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as in the case of the American Hart Crane who committed suicide by jumping from a steamer in the Caribbean. The fact that Rimbaud's poetic career was so short and strange, cut off abruptly before he was twenty-one, only led to the growth of the Rimbaud legend. He remains, however, "the great proof of the authenticity of the Romantic dream and the general validity of the arbitrary symbols of the interior landscape" (Kermode 1966, 120).

Rimbaud's theory of imagination was expounded in two letters at seventeen. One, (13th May 1871), was addressed to Georges Izambard, Rimbaud's former teacher at school, and the other, two days later (15th May), to Paul Demeny, a friend (Rimbaud 2004, 236-240). The letters are vital to an understanding of his practice that I make no apology for the length of the citation:

I say that one must be a *visionary* – that one must make oneself a VISIONARY.

The poet makes himself a *visionary* through a long immense and reasoned *derangement of all the senses*. All forms of love, of suffering, of madness; he seeks himself, he exhausts all poisons in himself to keep only their quintessences ... The poet is a true stealer of fire. (qtd. in Wilson 1967, 215)

Later he wrote, "I habituated myself to simple hallucination: I would see quite honestly a mosque instead of a factory, a school of drummers composed of angels, calashes on the roads of the sky, a drawing room at the bottom of a lake" (qtd. in Wilson 1967, 216). The claims made for poetry here exceed anything to be found in Philip Sidney, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Shelley. A poet is no less than a Promethean figure, an alchemist concocting curious mixtures or a *vates* opening a window onto the unknown.

The programme laid down in Rimbaud's two letters was soon to materialize in the verse. As a good many Rimbaud scholars (including Arthur Symons, Clarks Chadwick Anthony Levi and Edmund White) have pointed out, the poet – right from the beginning – made a habit of wreaking havoc with logical connections and giving surprising twists to his metaphors. His imagery derived in large measure from late medieval alchemy and cabbala, in addition to travel literature and tales of adventure with a view to setting his imaginative vision in context. Peter Broome and Graham Chesters, authors of *The Appreciation of Modern French Poetry*, write:

Since Hugo French poetry has been concerned more with seeing than with thinking, and in general it has aimed at provoking an imaginative rather than an intellectual response. The poet's Imagination is his vital attribute, "la reine des faculties" as Baudelaire said a kind of sixth sense which commands and binds together all the others, or in Éluard's words "la mère du progres", the fertile force which brings change and novelty to reality. (1976, 39)

It was Rimbaud, more than any other French poet, who carried the Hugo and the Baudelaire tradition further and effected a revolution in consciousness. He built upon Hugo's fascination with the oriental, the exotic and the grotesque, and was inspired by Baudelaire's rebellion against convention, both social and poetic.

One important aspect of Rimbaud's verbal artistry to which Broome and Chesters (1976, 102-103) call the reader's attention is the play of synaesthesia, or the fusion of vision, scent and sound (Baudelaire's "Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent", in his "Correspondances"). In a close analysis of Rimbaud's "Les Effarés" ("The Astounded"), the critics highlight the way he taps the obscure source of energy within himself. "Les Effarés" contrasts the life of the poor and the rich. Social deprivation is represented by poor boys – street urchins – in the winter's snow, at the midnight hour, longingly gazing at a bakery and not able to taste of its warm and glowing bread. The poem is remarkable for its pictorial quality and combination of fancy and realism.

Jean-Paul Sartre (incidentally, author of monographs on *L'Imagination* 1936 and *L'Imaginaire* 1940) was, as is well-known, a staunch advocate of *engagement en littérature*. However, he absolved poets from the obligation of political commitment. Unlike prose writers who usually aim at some definite target, poets – as seen by Sartre – tend to regard words as ends in themselves and like to toy with them. If this is true of poets in general, it is doubly so in the case of Symbolists and Surrealists. Rimbaud, Mallarmé, and Rilke are obvious examples. In corroboration of his view, Sartre quotes the following lines from *Une saison en enfer*:

O saisons! O châteaux!
Quelle âme est sans défaut?

Sartre comments:

Nobody is questioned; nobody is questioning; the poet is absent. And the question involves no answer, or rather it is its own answer ... [Rimbaud] asked an absolute question. He conferred upon the beautiful word "âme" an interrogative existence. The interrogation has become a thing as the anguish of Tintoretto became a yellow sky. (2001, 10)

In the following paragraphs, I shall deal very briefly with three samples of Rimbaud's work.

Le Bateau Ivre (1871), written when he was only seventeen, is probably Rimbaud's most celebrated poem. Two hundred lines in four-line stanzas, it is a description of a nightmarish voyage, reminiscent in some respects of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." Like much of Rimbaud's work, it defies ultimate interpretation and parts of it are hard to decipher. Nevertheless, it is remarkable for its delirious imagery and – to adapt Dr. Johnson's description of Metaphysical Poetry

(*Lives of the Poets*) – the way it yokes the most heterogeneous ideas by violence together:

J'ai vu des archipels sidéraux ! et des îles
Dont les cieux délirants sont ouverts au vogueur :
– Est-ce en ces nuits sans fonds que tu dors et t'exiles,
Million d'oiseaux d'or, ô future Vigueur?
[I've seen archipelagos of stars; islands whose feverish
Skies are spread above the mariner – are these the boundless
Nights in which you sleep out exile in your million,
Golden birds, you prophets of our restitution?] (Rimbaud 2004, 92-93)

Noting that “the narrator is not the boat, but the child longing to voyage”, Edmund White writes:

Rimbaud's poem is a widely acknowledged masterpiece of subtle rhymes, but rhymes so relaxed they are almost undetectable, particularly under the assault of such shocking imagery and complex, sinuous syntax linked through a complexity of present and past participles and phrases placed in apposition to nouns. (2009, 70)

Influences that went into the making of the poem include, according to White, Baudelaire's *Le Voyage*, Jules Verne's *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, James Fenimore Cooper's *Redskins* novels, and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (White 2009, 66). One is put in mind of the countless influences, conscious and unconscious, that inspired Coleridge's “Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan.” Another critic, Charles Chadwick writes:

The function of the Image of the boat plunging rudderless through countless seas, dancing like a cork on the waves, encountering giant serpents and sea-monsters, icebergs and waterspouts, is to convey the intense excitement and almost delirious happiness Rimbaud had experienced during his brief spells of freedom. (1979, 18)

Les Illuminations (1873), edited by Paul Verlaine in 1886, is a dazzling series of prose poems. In an early piece, “The Borderline of Prose” (1917), T.S. Eliot suggests that the prose poetry of the 1890s “was probably based upon the works of a man much greater than any poet then living – and that is Arthur Rimbaud. Few people in England have heard of the *Illuminations* ... they are short prose pieces, as obscure as ‘Kubla Khan’ or ‘Christabel’, and of a similar inspiration” (1917). The poems comprise cityscapes and a seascape, devotions for the poet's sisters, memories of childhood, depictions of moods, a fairy tale, human types, natural description, and a poem carrying the name of a Shakespearean character, Bottom, of *A Midsummer*

Night's Dream. There are also poems on more “public” themes such as war and democracy. Here are a few lines from “Enfance” (“Childhood”):

Des fleurs magiques bourdonnaient. Les talus *le* berçaient. Des bêtes d’une élégance fabuleuse circulaient. Les nuées s’amassaient sur la haute mer faite d’une éternité de chaudes larmes.

[Magical flowers were humming. The turf slopes cradled *him*. Beasts of a fabulous elegance were circulating. Storm clouds were piling up on the rising sea made of an eternity of hot tears (John Ashbery)]. (Rimbaud 2011, 26-27)

Commenting on *Les Illuminations*, Anthony Levi states:

Les Illuminations is not a series of deft sketches like Baudelaire’s prose poems, and the individual pieces continue to contain elements of versification, especially assonance, alliteration and rhythmic effects, even when printed as prose, but they work by accumulating images, almost in lists, as to some extent ‘Le bateau ivre’ had done, though they pile them on more densely and without resorting to that poem’s complex syntax. (1992, 527-28)

Une Saison en enfer (1873) is another masterpiece akin in spirit to the work of Rimbaud’s near-contemporary Strindberg. It is a balance sheet of the poet’s life and a dialogue with the self, concluding with an “Adieu.” Rimbaud’s working title for it was “The Pagan Book” or “The Negro Book,” an indication of his hostility to Christianity, aversion to European civilization, and relationship with Paul Verlaine. Among the subtitles are “Mauvais Sang” (Bad Blood), “Nuit de l’enfer” (Night in Hell), “Delires I: vierge folle, l’époux inferral” (Delirium I: Foolish Virgin, Infant Groom), and “Delires II: Alchimie du verbe” (Delirium II: Alchemy of the Word). The poem is also interesting for the side light it sheds on Rimbaud’s imaginative vision and poetic techniques:

Je rêvais croisades, voyages de découvertes dont on n’a pa de relations, républiques sans histoires, guerres de religion étouffées, révolutions de meurs, déplacements de races et de continents: je croyais à tous les enchantments.

J’inventai la couleur des voyalles – A noir, E blanc, I rouge, Ô bleu, U vert. – Je réglai la forme et le mouvement de chaque consonne, et, avec des rythmes instinctifs, je me flattai d’inventer un verbe poétique accessible, un jour ou l’aure, à tous les sens. Je reservais la traduction.

[I dreamed of crusades, voyages of discovery that were never recorded, republics with no history, suppressed wars of religion, revolutions in

manners, a ferment of races and continents: I believed in each and every form of magic.

I invented colours for the vowels – *A* black, *B* white, *I* red, *O* blue, *U* green – I presided over the form and movement of every consonant and, making use of instinctive rhythms, I imagined I might invent a poetic language that would one day be accessible to all the senses. I would be the sole translator]. (Rimbaud 2004, 164-5)

I now wish to dwell on a second moment in the history of imagination. Its chief representative in Anglo-American poetry of the twentieth century is T. S. Eliot, especially in his early phase (1909-1917). T.S. Eliot scholars are generally in agreement that the three most important influences upon his work were Dante, the Metaphysical Poets, and the French Symbolists. A word about his debts to the latter may be in order here.

The year 1908 was a decisive watershed moment in Eliot's intellectual development for it was in December of that year that Eliot, a Harvard undergraduate aged twenty, came across Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899, rev. ed. 1908). The book introduced Eliot to French poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century and helped him work out the implications of Jules Laforgue, Arthur Rimbaud, Tristan Corbière, and others. It struck a sympathetic chord in him and fired his imagination. Above all, it opened his eyes to the possibilities of the "unpoetical" and helped him to evolve a style of his own. Eliot has recorded his debt to Symons' book in the following terms: "[I]f we can recall the time when we were ignorant of the French Symbolists, and met with *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, we remember that book as an introduction to wholly new feelings, as a revelation" (1983, 5). In a 1930 review of a book by Peter Quennell on Baudelaire and the Symbolists, Eliot wrote, "I myself owe Mr. Symons a great debt: but for having read his book, I should not, in the year 1908, have heard of Laforgue or Rimbaud; I should probably not have begun to read Verlaine; and but for reading Verlaine, I should not have heard of Corbière" (357). Additionally, in a lecture given at Johns Hopkins University in January 1933, Eliot stated, "I wonder whether, without the men I have mentioned – Baudelaire, Corbière, Verlaine, Laforgue, Mallarmé, Rimbaud – I should have been able to write poetry at all" (1993, 287). Two years later, in a letter to Michael Roberts, dated 20 August 1935, Eliot says that he had been "moved in the beginning by Baudelaire, Laforgue [and] Rimbaud" (Eliot 2017, 722).

A central theme of Eliot's Clark Lectures given at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1926, and posthumously published as *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry* (1993), is the affinities between the Italian poets of the *Trecento*, the Metaphysical Poets of the seventeenth century, and the French Symbolists. As Eliot sees it, those poets had this much in common: a unified sensibility that could fuse intellect and emotion, a free play of the imagination and a daring use of the conceit — which brings us to Eliot's view of the imaginative faculty and its application to his own verse.

A student of philosophy at Harvard, Oxford, and the Sorbonne and author of an academic dissertation on knowledge and experience in the philosophy of F. H. Bradley, Eliot was well-placed to handle the subject from an epistemological and psychological vantage point. He devotes a chapter in the Bradley dissertation to the distinction of “Real” and “Ideal” (Eliot 1964).

Eliot expresses dissatisfaction elsewhere with Coleridge’s well-known and oft-quoted definition of imagination in Chapter XIII of *Biographia Literaria*: “The primary Imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former” (Coleridge 2014, 205-206). This, according to Eliot: “amounts in practice to no more than the difference between good and bad poetry” (Eliot 1987, 77).

By way of illustrating Eliot’s use of imagination, I have chosen to discuss two early poems, rarely noted by Eliot’s critics and not included in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (Eliot 1970). The poems are entitled “First Debate between the Body and Soul,” and “Bacchus and Ariadne: 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul,” respectively. They occur in *Inventions of the March Hare*, a posthumous collection of Eliot’s verse 1909-1917, superlatively edited by Christopher Ricks. As indicated above, in the enormous literature on Eliot, the two poems in questions have received scant attention. This is understandable given the fact that they exist in manuscripts “in pencil, [are] hard to decipher, and there are doubtful readings” (Ricks’ note in Eliot 1996, 65). Now that they are made accessible to scholars and readers, an attempt will be made here to place them in the context of Eliot’s *oeuvre*.

The “First Debate” is dated January 1910. An alternative title “Reflections in a Square” was added and cancelled. As the title indicates, the poem is couched in the form of a contrapuntal debate, a form occasionally used by medieval writers of prose and verse and by the Metaphysical Poets (e.g. Andrew Marvell’s “A Dialogue between the Soul and Body”). The poem is a silent dialogue of spirit and matter, pointing up their antagonism. The situation is set forth in the opening line. The reader is presented with snapshots of an urban scene, a city square where “[t]he August wind is shambling down the street” soon to be followed by brooding on “A blind man who coughs and spits sputters / Stumbling among the alleys and the gutters (Eliot 1996, 64). Not for this spectator are the calm rural landscapes of Georgian and Edwardian poets. He pulls no punches in showing the squalor of the scene. The force of his revulsion is accentuated by the high incidence of alliteration: “spits sputters,” “pokes and prods,” “silent ... square,” “idea ... inanition,” “whine and wheeze,” and “supersubtle ... square.” A pervasive sense of moral disgust finds expression in such words as “spits,” “senile,” “vacant,” “turpitude,” “inanition,” “sluggish,” “dull,” “smudge,” “unpleasant,” and “shabby.” The poem progresses by association from stanza to stanza culminating in the quatrain refrain “The withered leaves / Of our sensations.” The dominant mood is one of gloom and desolation. It hangs over the poem’s fifty-one lines from beginning to end.

A common complaint against Eliot's verse when it first appeared in the early 1920s was its overriding concern with ugly aspects of life and deficiency of the beautiful. Of this Eliot himself was well-aware; he was determined to present his vision of modern life faithfully and uncompromisingly. Above all, he was keen on steering clear of the sentimental or mawkish. In a 1933 lecture on Matthew Arnold, Eliot said: "[T]he essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal: it is to be able to see beneath beauty and ugliness; to see the boredom, and the horror, and the glory" (1987, 106).

The word "Imaginations" crops up three times in the poem. It seems to carry pejorative implications as it, no doubt for the sake of greater emphasis, is made to rhyme with "Masturbations," "Poor relations," and "Defecations." First, we have:

Imaginations
Masturbations
The withered leaves
Of our sensations.

Then,
Imagination's
Poor relations
The withered leaves
Of our sensations.

And, a third time,
Imagination's
Defecations
The withered leaves
Of our sensations – (Eliot 1996, 64-65)

Ricks analyzes the word "Imaginations" as such:

[I]n the plural like this ... faintly French, but also Biblical and Shakespearean, where it is often dark. *Merry Wives of Windsor*, iv ii 138-9: "you must pray, and not follow the imaginations of your own heart". *Hamlet*, iii ii 81-2: "And my imaginations are as foul/ As Vulcan's smithy". *King Lear*, iv vi 283: "wrong imaginations". (Ricks' note in Eliot 1996, 233)

"Bacchus and Ariadne: 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul" is dated February 1911. It is inspired by Greek myth. Bacchus is another name of Dionysus, god of fertility and wine. Ariadne is the maid who helped Theseus to escape from the labyrinth of the Minotaur in Crete but was deserted by him. According to one version of the story, she was later found on the island of Naxos and married to Bacchus. It has been suggested by Robert Crawford that the poem was inspired by a 1514 Titian painting of Bacchus and Ariadne in the National Gallery that Eliot knew (Eliot 1996,

238). The poem does not follow a narrative thread, and is written from the perspective of a spectator, observing and commenting. The treatment is sober and austere, again shying away from any suggestion of sentimentality. The opening lines set the tone of the poem:

I saw their lives curl upward like a wave
And break.

The mood, dominantly bleak, is established by visual, aural and tactile tropes:

The drums of life were beating on their skulls
The floods of life were swaying in their brains

The word “imagination” does not occur but the whole poem is one (mainly visual) image appealing at once to the mind, eye, and ear. It is not, however, a finished poem; more of a fragment breaking off at line 22:

– I am sure it is like this
I am sure it is this
I am sure. (Eliot 1996, 68)

Eliot’s use of aposiopesis (break off in the middle of a sentence, leaving the sense unfinished) is suggestive of “strong emotion that makes the speaker unwilling or unable to continue,” an effect commonly produced by this literary device as defined by Baldick (2001, 17). In singling out these two poems for examination, I am not trying to make large claims for both or either. On purely literary grounds, they are rather unsatisfactory, and of little intrinsic value. Nevertheless, they are well worth reading and studying for a number of reasons. Their language and imagery look forward to mature Eliot and carry the seeds of his later development (it was soon after the composition of these poems that Eliot embarked on producing his first masterpiece “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 1910-1911). They are also representative of Eliot’s early poetic material and method trying to write a new kind of poetry and struggling to keep the danger of hackneyed habits of expression at bay. They also bear testimony to the superior quality of Eliot’s mind and deep philosophical study. Like the Metaphysical Poets and the French Symbolists, he was capable of blazing a trail and of forging luminous and memorable images in the smithy of his soul.

No less than the Francophile Eliot was Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) steeped in French culture and in the work of the Symbolists. A number of the more important poems carry French titles: “Le Monocle de mon Oncle,” “Esthétique du Mal,” “Cy est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursula, et des Unze Mille Vierges,” “Angelais Mort à Florence,” “Carnet de Voyage,” “Homunculus et La Belle Étoile,” and “Madame La Fleurie.” In a letter dated 22 November 1935, Stevens wrote, “Titles with me are, of

course, of the highest importance” (1966, 27). Gallicisms form a considerable part of his vocabulary. He was also influenced by Henry Bergson’s views on matter, memory, and time. Bergson’s influence was next only to that of the Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana whom Stevens met and befriended at Harvard and to whom he addressed the poem “To an Old Philosopher in Rome.”

More important than either, though, was Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose theory of imagination was of crucial importance to Stevens. One critic, Marius Bewley, goes so far as to say: “the Coleridgean imagination has become the theme of Stevens’ poetry as a whole in a way it never became the theme of Coleridge’s poetry as a whole” (1952, 184). Stevens’ theory of imagination is set forth in a lecture, “Imagination as Value” (1948), printed in the collection of essays *The Necessary Angel* (1951). The lecture bears witness to the affinity of Stevens’ thought to Coleridge’s. Many of the points he makes here could be traced back to Chapter XIV of *Biographia Literaria* (2014), where Coleridge maintains that imagination:

reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposites or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness; with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order. (213)

– and the *locus classicus* towards the end of the same Chapter: “[Images] become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant” (217-218). It would be no exaggeration to say that the whole of Stevens’ oeuvre is a hymn to imagination. It is the keyword and prime concern of his poetry. For it is a bridge between the physical and metaphysical, real and ideal, universal and particular.

Like Matthew Arnold in the second half of the nineteenth century, Stevens felt that only poetry was capable of providing the solace religion, now rendered obsolete, used to give man. He regarded the poet as a “vatic philosopher in the ancient Roman sense: a high priest of the imagination” (Parini 1994, 521). The six lectures that comprise *The Necessary Angel* are all concerned, in one way or another, with the relation between imagination and reality. As Frank Kermode puts it, Stevens “behaves as if poetry and the imagination are everything that is humanly important” (1968, 82). In assigning so important a place to imagination, Stevens was following in the footsteps of Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley: Blake who opposed the mechanism of Isaac Newton and the materialism of John Locke; Coleridge who described his own “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as “a work of such pure imagination,”³ and Shelley who in his “A Defence of Poetry” contended that “the great instrument of moral good is the imagination.”

The theory of imagination expounded in Stevens’s prose finds its full expression in the verse. It underscores the subtext of many of the poems and occurs in different

contexts. To take a few examples, we come across the word “imagination” and its derivatives in “Another Weeping Woman”:

The magnificent cause of being,
The imagination, the one reality
In this magical world

In “Peter Quince at the Clavier”:

She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.

In “Asides on the Oboe”:

Clandestine steps upon imagined stairs
Climb through the night.

And in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”:

We say God and the imagination are one.

Nonetheless, it is in the two long poems, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1936), and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942), that Stevens comes into his own as one of the great meditative poets of the English language, arguably on par with the Eliot of *Four Quartets*. He is now attempting something on a much grander scale than anything he had done before. The whole tone and tenor of the poems makes it plain that they are a product of a lifetime of thought and feeling. They are Stevens’ credo, a philosophical statement of his stance and a promulgation of a theory, closely argued and deeply felt, at once complex and delicate.

“The Man with the Blue Guitar” is a sequence of short couplets in XXXIII sections with four stresses to the line. The title is suggestive of Picasso who is mentioned in Sect. XV. The blue guitar is “an emblem of the imagination which ‘musicalises’ reality” (Kermode 1960, 39). In Sect. VII the sun stands for reality, the moon for imagination (Kermode 1960, 69). Kermode quotes L. L. Martz who sums up the characteristics of the poem in the following terms: “crisp common diction ... strict driving rhythm of the short couplets, subtly bound together by irregular rhymes and half-rhymes” (1960, 70). The poet’s technical mastery is evident throughout. Another Stevens critic, Lucy Beckett, describes Stevens’ lines as “dry,” and “pared to the very bone of accuracy” (1974, 38). She considers the poem “a dry exercise in aesthetics” (107), the writing “so economical that its density is impenetrable” (118). It eventually provides “a glimpse of the reconciliation

between the imagination and reality” (119). The situation presented in the poem is set out at the very beginning:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, “You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are”

The man replied, “Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.”

The lesson is obvious: Imagination, upheld by “the man,” is a transformative force that changes the shape of things. ‘They’ are the literal-minded (a majority) who expect art to be an exact replica of life. The point was well put by Al Alvarez (1972, 129-130): “Things as they are at their best a little frustrating, at their worst deadening and negative. But there is, he discovers, a moment at which they come truly alive: the moment at which they are caught in all their subtlety by the imagination.” The theory formulated in the poem is again a carry-on from the Romantic movement of the early nineteenth century. As Albert Gelpi puts it:

For Wordsworth and Coleridge, Blake and Shelley, Emerson and Whitman, the imagination was elevated from the image-making talent of the Neo-classicists into the sublime human faculty, one through which the perceiving subject penetrated to the essential reality and transcendental interrelatedness of the objects of experience. (1985, 5)

Even longer and more complex than “The Man with the Blue Guitar” is “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” The meaning of the title is explained by a line in an earlier Stevens poem, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”: “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.” The “Notes” (659 lines) takes the form of advice to an epebe (in ancient Greece, a young male citizen from 18 to 20 years of age) (Britannica). It comprises three sections with titles: “It Must be Abstract,” “It Must Change,” and “It Must Give Pleasure.” “It” is, of course, poetry. The form adopted is that of the tercet or 3-line stanzas. Unlike the austere “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” the style is exuberant and flamboyant, almost baroque in parts. Like much of Stevens’ work, “Notes” is different, but the difficulty is worth wrestling with.

The three injunctions to the addressee outline Stevens’ conception of the art of poetry. His is the closest thing in twentieth-century American verse to the ideal of *une poésie pure*, poetry with no ulterior or practical end in view. Along with Coleridge in the background, the ghost of Shelley haunts the poem as evidenced by allusions to “Ozymandias” and “The West Wind.” For all his exaltation of imagination, Stevens is not blind to the interdependency of the real and the imagined:

Two things of opposite nature seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real.

The poem concludes on a note of (qualified) triumph:

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real:
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

So high is the value Stevens sets upon imagination that he has been often under fire from critics, especially of Marxist persuasions, as an “escapist,” an “ivory tower” poet, and one who showed no interest in political or economic issues of the age. Proponents of this view regard Stevens’ poetry as a throwback to the Aesthetic movement of the 1890s. One such critic, Stanley Burnshaw, reviewed Stevens’ *Ideas of Order* in the leftist *The New Masses* in 1935 and castigated Stevens’ apparent indifference to what was going on in the world, calling him “a man who, having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance” (qtd. in Kermodé 1960, 63).

Whatever justice (or lack thereof) may be in such charges a number of considerations ought to be kept in mind. For all the high value Stevens set on imagination, reality kept breaking into his world; in fact, much of his poetry is an exploration of the dialectic of reality and imagination. Explicit political commitment was not part of Stevens’ poetic agenda. Rather, it ran counter to his principles. The writers under whose influence Stevens came were hardly likely to encourage producing the kind of verse Burnshaw and others of his ilk wanted Stevens to write. These writers were mostly of an aesthetic persuasion concerned primarily with matters of style and language. They included Keats, Pater (who maintained that all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music), the Pre-Raphaelites, decadent poets of the 1890s, Verlaine and the Symbolists, and the Imagists (English and American) who flourished in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

While showing a keen interest in, “the shaping spirit of imagination,” Rimbaud, Eliot, and Stevens adopted divergent stances. Rimbaud’s creative impulse was radical, anarchic, and iconoclastic. Eliot’s was sombre and bleak, rhyming “imagination” with “masturbations,” “defecations” and “withered leaves / Of sensations,” Stevens, by way of contrast, celebrated imagination as an ultimate value and regenerative force. The three poets, each in his own individual way, stand for three significant moments in the history of a lively, still ongoing debate.

Notes

¹ *Poète maudit* (French) ‘Accursed poets’ is the title of Paul Verlaine’s 1884 collection of essays on Mallarmé, Rimbaud and other French poets (Baldick 2001,196).

² *Épater le bourgeois* (French) means ‘To shock the (respectable) middle class citizens’ (Baldick 2001, 81). For Baudelaire and Flaubert’s rebellion against the bourgeoisie see Lois Hyslop, *Baudelaire: A Man of his Time* and Geoffrey Wall, *Flaubert: A Life* respectively.

³ Coleridge’s description, in "Table Talk", of his own poem is quoted in Robert Penn Warren’s *Selected Essays*, 199.

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