# Resemblance among Wallace Stevens' blackbirds

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# RESEMBLANCE AMONG WALLACE STEVENS' BLACKBIRDS

One of Wallace Stevens' poetic and epistemological concerns was the problem of resemblance. In the following notes on parts of his "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird", this notion is utilized rather more broadly than rigourously. The analysis of a few poetic avatars of resemblance, however, notably in the use of the verb *to be* and in the use of inflection and word formation, helps to illuminate both the creative and the self-limiting implications of Stevens' early poetic practice. Ways of reading the blackbird's vitality lead to questions about the vitality of language.

Wallace Stevens came rather late in life to writing essays about the theory of poetry. When he did try this form of writing, he concerned himself with revitalizing such ancient concepts as reality, imagination, analogy and resemblance. "Resemblance" is the key notion in "Three Academic Pieces" where, in his usual style, he uses the term not as a precise technical term but as a broad unifying topic for developing his ideas on poetry. There is on the one hand, he writes, the natural world which is a network of resemblances. Things resemble each other because they are part of the same structure and share characteristics such as colour. On the other hand there is what Stevens calls "metaphor" (using the word itself "as a symbol", he says, where "metamorphosis" would be a better word), which is "the creation of resemblance by the imagination".[1] Among other possibilities, this resemblance can be one between a real or imaginary thing and what is evoked by it (music and what is evoked by it are his examples), or between two imagined things that share the same concept (e.g., God is good). Resemblance, in Stevens' both orthodox and heterodox senses, is what binds together elements in "the structure of reality" — including natural "reality" (thus, a part of the greater one) and the mind or "imagination". But there is a third partner in the greater reality. This, for Stevens, is poetry. Poetry plays a

privileged role because it gives us a more intense grasp on this tripartite reality by creating among differences bonds of unity which transcend reality itself. Poetry is a place for resemblance to be fruitful, and language, especially metaphorical language, is its means.

Poetic language as a means for making resemblance vital and fruitful becomes the explicit subject of much of Wallace Stevens' later poetry, that which is contemporary with the aphoristic *Adagia* (1930's and 1940's) and the essays on poetry (1940's primarily). Stevens' first collection of poetry, *Harmonium* (1923), is interesting, however, precisely because there he tricks his language into making it talk about itself and its own potential for life in tripartite "reality" — without saying that it is doing so.

## I

A poem is a pheasant. *(Adagia)*[2]

Contrary to what happens in philosophy, where it is necessary to distinguish between resemblance and identity, poetic resemblance can be embodied in identity or definition, as well, of course, as in other types of nominalization using the verb *to be* as a link. This is a typical Stevensian ruse. Often used in his *Adagia* for metaphorically defining poetry itself, the verb *to be* appears time and again and in its full range of usage in *Harmonium*,[3] although nominalization is most frequent here too. "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" ("The Emperor of Ice-Cream") or "I was myself the compass of that sea" ("Tea at the Palaz of Hoon") are formulae that exploit *to be* as a copula. Literally, the first might be considered as an assertion that the emperor of ice-cream can be identified as the only real emperor worthy of the name, the second as an affirmation that "I" played the role of the compass and could thus be identified with it. In the broadest sense, they both assert that A is equivalent to B and, inversely, that B is equivalent to A. Yet the metaphorical value in these clear-cut examples makes it obvious that the equivalence is not meant to delimit characteristics in absolute terms (A rhinoceros is a large pachydermatous quadruped, etc.), but rather to create *rapprochements* across or among categories. In one sense, it joins facts which are different in nature, or, as Wallace Stevens might have said, distant in "reality": magisterial commander with, say,

the ice-cream vendor, or self-sufficient sun god with the aqueous sea. In the disjoined *Adagia* and in many disparate and experimental early poems, the primary function of "definitions" or statements of identity is to affirm that it is appropriate to link two names together, and not, as realists have maintained, to assign the appropriate name to the thing. To go one step further, when such "definitions" appear in *Adagia* in terms like "A poem is a pheasant", they stress how crucial it is to find the appropriate predicate to define the subject — not merely within the "imagination" as Wallace Stevens would have said, but also within the confines of the linguistic formula itself. There the copula *to be* transforms factual or imaginative denomination into an act of creating relationships of linguistic proximity, a language-oriented form of "resemblance".[4]

## II

> Poetry is a pheasant disappearing into the brush. *(Adagia)*[5]

It is with a troubling and more varied sampling of usages of the verb *to be* that "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (1917)[6] opens. It provides us with a logical starting point for understanding something of the dynamics of this particular poem from *Harmonium*, and for refining our general observations suggested by the broad acceptation of "resemblance". (The underlining is mine.)

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
*Was* the eye of the blackbird.

II

I *was* of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there *are* three blackbirds.

III

The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds
It *was* a small part of the pantomime.

IV

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

The opening of this poem systematically and self-consciously demonstrates five different functions of the verb *to be*, including not only two different forms of nominalization (Stanzas I and III), but also the existential usage (an affirmation of "being" in Stanza II, line 3) and — perhaps — the attributive usage (II, 1, and IV with "one" considered as an adjective). This ostentatious display raises the issue of "being" and resemblance.

On the referential level, the first four stanzas taken *in toto* imply that the "Thirteen Ways" are thirteen different relationships. Being is not absolute but consists of relationships in space and time (mountains, trees, winter, autumn) and among parts and wholes defining each other. The blackbird is a symbolically potent object which is one dependent element in these relationships. It is also, among other things, bound by resemblance to another organizing principle which is the "eye", its own creative organ, which becomes "I" (in Stanza II) and also (by synecdoche in Stanza IV) "one". The chief attribute of "I" is that it is, like the mystery of the Christian Trinity, one in three and three in one; it creates unity and resemblance out of difference. Its chief property is its mind, the imagining analogue of the eye. But the mind is not only a means of scrutiny or a way of "Looking at" or considering things, it is also the object of scrutiny, perceived or seen by the (eye) "Looking". Thus the relationship between sense perception, the mind and the blackbird is a polyvalent one, Protean and ever-shifting. On the surface, one of the main "subjects" of this poem is the complex relationship between outside reality and the subjective perceiver, a relationship founded in resemblances between them and their avatars. Similarly, *Harmonium* offers, on a larger scale, differing perspectives on this problem, including that of the seemingly solipsistic Hoon in his "Palaz" and that of the sensualist in "O Florida, Venereal Soil". The collection, like the miniature "Thirteen Ways", consists of experimental treatments of that relationship, new treatments of an old epistemological problem that with the advent of William James' new perspective of Pragmatism had become a problem of the psychology of the subject.

Such a reading, however, ignores the ostentatiousness of the language of "being". Two almost random examples of the usage of *to be* can illustrate how kinds of being are both featured yet relativized by other possible ones, and are expanded from the referential to the metaphorical level of resemblance. The reader of this poem pauses at the end of each of the first three stanzas as she enters into the poem. At each pause there seems to be at least a tentative statement about the ontological existence of blackbird/s. In fact there is even one full affirmation of being or existence in II, in "[...] there are three blackbirds." The stated simile, "Like a tree", however, essentially points, in addition, to a metaphorical resemblance between two unlike things: "three minds" and "three blackbirds". Their resemblance may mean that division in unity is a principle of thought reflecting the nature of the world. This seems to be a precarious situation, for the blackbird's color of ill omen and the mystical number three may symbolize contrary potentials, fears and hopes. On another level, as a *sign*, the "blackbird" is relativized by the locative construction as well as by the simile, so that two different functions of the verb *to be* are operative. At the same time, both the existential and the locative functions immobilize the blackbirds in space in a way that is contrary to the hesitation implicit in the attribute, "of three minds". Thus the plural functions of *to be* in "there are three blackbirds" not only disrupt each other but also disrupt the resemblance within the stanza's structure of metaphorical reality. They vitalize it through a statement which illustrates the process of language. In the second example, in III, we find another relation expressed in a nominal sentence, but this one is over-expressed, expressed doubly, once in the partitive construction and again in the literal statement about the bird being "part" of a greater whole which is the "pantomime". But the blackbird with its ambiguous metaphorical sense is also a synecdoche[7] for imitation *(mime)* of all *(panto-)*. Thus it resembles the whole process (of the relation between mind and world, and poetry and world) while also being only a part of it.

Similarly to the leaves in "Domination of Black" or "The Snow Man", the blackbird ensures the life of the poem not because of the characteristics of the objectively or subjectively existing blackbird, or because of its resemblance to other real or imagined facts, but because of its linguistic relation of resemblance to the poetic context. In the creation of the new poetic reality, the crucial act is that of creating words or names to sur-

round the verb *to be*. When new words are brought together — made to resemble each other, in Wallace Stevens' terms — they affirm the duplicitous nature of the language itself in relation to the real and imagined worlds and to itself. Even the ontological, linking and attributive functions of that most simple and common of all English verbs become duplicitous. *To be* thus introduces disruption within resemblance as a vital principle of poetic language.

Like the "pheasant disappearing into the brush", then, the individual terms of the relationships are gathered into elusiveness and problematic distinction, not simple resemblance or equivalence. This happens even in the seemingly most stable, unified and whole stanza in the opening series — the fourth stanza which, on one level, states the unity of man, woman and omnipresent blackbird through a disappearance or merging of differences. This third illustration suggests a further nuance, however, which will subsequently require us to take a closer look at what one might mean by metaphor.

"A man and a woman / Are one" and "A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one" state a rapprochement. They claim wholeness and unity — of flesh, love, destiny, knowledge, mind — while they avoid stating any ontologically shared characteristics or common ground. Basically they establish resemblances in language itself. Among these resemblances we can detect a referential one between each subject and its attribute, a syntactical one between the two sentences, and a third logical though unstated — and syllogistically faulty — resemblance: a man and a woman *are* a man and a woman and a blackbird. This is not simply a logical or linguistic paradox. It is a new mystery by which the union of man and woman becomes something that resembles it in poetic form, but is more complete because it involves the blackbird. On this level, it is the sequence of the linguistic units themselves that engenders unity, according to the principles of language itself. But the word "blackbird" enrolled in its sentence disrupts and unbalances the whole. Again, it is the disruption of a "normal" function within the syntax of being that we are made to notice. But further, by adding itself to the clichéd metaphor about "a man and a woman", "a blackbird" ensures a more complex relation of resemblance and a second level of metaphor. It is a metaphor on a metaphor, or a metaphor about language and its ability to "be". The signifier or word "blackbird" is the source of the vital distinguishing strangeness that transforms language and

creates that new reality — poetry. It is in this sense an escape *from* the cliché by which the marriage metaphor procreates meaning, and *into* a dynamic process heightening the mystery of the Word. It becomes part of "the structure of reality" in its own right.

## III

> Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor. It is only *au pays de la métaphore qu'on est poète. (Adagia)*[8]

It is time to specify the sense of metaphor implicit in the above commentary. As for its linguistic constituants, we can say simply, along with Aristotle, that (taking metaphor as a trope of words and not as an act of persuasion) metaphors substitute or transpose one term for another to establish resemblance. In fact all the disturbed equivalences in the poems and *Adagia* quoted above are more or less directly metaphorical. Aristotle further claimed that the use of metaphor was "the token of genius. For the right use of metaphor means an eye for resemblances".[9] The moving "eye" of Stanza I is a means of creating not just strict metaphors but many types of resemblance. It begins with its own identity, where *e* equals *e* in "eye". But this becomes a synecdoche for the blackbird, the part that "resembles" because brought linguistically together with it. The blackbird itself then becomes a linguistic sign moving through the poem. It often acts like a symbol in that the "blackbird" invests the context with broad ranges of meaning about unity, division and the threat of annihilation. But further, like the fan in "Eventail de Mme Mallarmé", the blackbird is not only an "ordinary" sign plus a vague symbol; it is also a metaphor for language itself, with its own extraordinary capacity to move itself, move the creator and move the reader. It displaces other potential signs of language in place of which it is transposed. It is in this way that Stevens, while seeming to recognize our common Aristotelian heritage, moves beyond it, from the relation of language to the world to the relation of language in the structure of poetry.

Let's look at one other type of ruse Wallace Stevens exploits to these ends. If the first four of the "Thirteen Ways" exploit the verb *to be* as a "way" of foregrounding relationships and resem-

blance in the broad sense, the fifth stanza superficially foregrounds a simple, more recognizable form of metaphor in which there are one-for-one substitutes for things in the "real" world. But these simple metaphors, it will be seen, also engender metaphors on a second level, that of language. Stanza V can be meaningfully paired with Stanza VIII.

V

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

VIII

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

The salient feature of the metaphorical landscape of language here is the use it makes of the possibilities of Latinate vocabulary, both word formation and etymology. Stanza V's line-end prefixing, beginning with "prefer" (etymologically, "bring forward"), becomes self-conscious when "inflections" and "innuendoes" play with the potential of *in-* as "in" to indicate spatial relations like those that are primordial in the preceding Stanzas I-III; and it points forward to the further punning with *in-* as "non" and "within" ("inescapable" and "involved / In" and the sound / no / in Stanza VIII. The words "inflections" and "innuendoes" themselves are obviously foregrounded as simple, one-to-one metaphors for the whistling and the silence "after" (poetry and its resonance in the mind), rather than mere references to the modulations of the blackbird's song; but they are also enmeshed in a greater web of linguistic resemblances that suggest that on this level the affirmative and the negative contaminate each other's sense. The eye for resemblances, necessary for metaphor, cross-refers the resemblances and blurs the distinctions that are necessary for their relationship. The simple metaphor includes its own negation: *in-* becomes "know" / no /, and it is impossible to choose between "inflections" and "innuen-

does'' although they are properly placed one before and one ''after''. In terms of the second level of metaphor, the metaphor of language itself, the beauty of words derives from the duplicity of over-resemblance contained in and between ''prefer'' and ''after''.

At this juncture, we should see more precisely just what the semantic function of the simple metaphor in Stanza V is. The whistling is placed in a relationship of resemblance with ''inflections'' which we can take in the grammatical sense, meaning the terminations of words in declension and conjugation. Inflections in this sense constitute the ''bending'' of words without changing their basic denotation. Moreover, mining other possibilities in Stevens' etymological ore, we find that the inflection of the word ''inflection'' is (and does not mean) a fixed noun form created from a verb that has many, varying forms. The word ''whistling'' that is paired with it is similarly (though entirely Germanic) a multiformed verb reduced to a static noun form. These words are immutable in their context which is also fixed, ordered and measured. ''Innuendoes'', on the other hand, signifies ''signifying''. Its Latin inflection (the ablative of the gerund) implies not something that has become fixed and reified but a function, a means — a means of signifying in this case. The post-whistling moment, then, — with its implicit silence for both perceiver and bird — is the privileged time for the unfurling of meaning or sense. On the other hand, the linking of names or words in the poem demonstrates that what is pre-ferred is privileged only temporarily. The linear structure of language does not fix or stabilize effects in what comes ''after'' (one sense the semantic implications of ''innuendoes''). This time is neither fixed, nor ordered nor measured by relationships. Room is left in time beyond the poem, in the ''after'' when it is on its own. The knowing subject ''I'' is there in the poem as one organizer of preferences. But it can neither take full responsibility for the poem nor add to the poem after the fatal thirteenth stanza. It is perhaps here that the reader is invited to reread the network of duplicitous word formation and inflection referred to above and observe the double metaphorical level. Is this doubleness, then, a dynamic relationship between vital strangeness and mortal resemblance?

To the extent that the whole of Stanza V, like Stanza VIII, is also a metaphor for the act of ''knowing'' poetry, the ''subject'' of the stanza becomes the existence of the metaphor itself in time. Its relationship to Stanza VIII suggests that metaphorical lan-

guage may embody an ambiguous fatality. Stanza V brings "inflections" and "innuendoes" into dangerous proximity as second level metaphors. Not only is there a dilemma "involved" (indicated by the disjunctives, "Or" in V and "But" in VIII), but it may not be possible to "escape" metaphor — or poetry itself. That is, once the resemblances within the text become the very *materia poetica* of the poem, the poet runs the risk of merely turning the poem in upon itself, as though it constituted little more than an autarkical system of closed interrelationships.

IV

> The thing seen becomes the thing
> unseen. The opposite is, or seems to be,
> impossible. *(Adagia)*[10]

Finally, it is at the close of the poem that we meet the destiny of the blackbird as a sign in poetic language. In Stanza XIII the blackbird becomes ominously static while the day and the weather are moving. It is the blackbird's calm at the end of the poem.

XIII

> It was evening all afternoon.
> It was snowing
> And it was going to snow.
> The blackbird sat
> In the cedar-limbs.

This closing stanza refers us back to the static "snowy mountains" of the opening stanza while selecting the sedentariness of the bird instead of the movement of its eye as its chief characteristic. It reveals a continuity or cyclical pattern at work in the poem that requires constant re-involvement. The poem is not entirely circular, however, and not only because of the thematic differences. The ambiguous metaphor, "It was evening all afternoon", for example, makes dynamic use of the inflection "-ing". Echoing the "flying" and "moving" of Stanzas X and XII, "evening" hints at a continuous verbal action while nonetheless being fixed as a noun form. "And it was going to snow" similarly prolongs the action beyond the referential time of the poem, yet relates it back to the time of knowing by the persona of Stanzas

II, V and VIII. And — to cite a third example among the numerous possibilities — the past tense inflection of the triple "was", which is one in three and three in one like the fruitful second level metaphor in Stanza IV, seems to place a final if mysterious halt to the poem at the fatal moment it has reached. The inflection as a form insists upon its unbending fixity. Yet within this second level of metaphor in and about language, the verb is nonetheless put to three different uses so that its sense changes each time. On every level of resemblance, those of reference, metaphor and metaphor of language, the references or signs contain within them their own strangeness, which is the guarantee that resemblance can never be perfect because it is threatened by an inevitable alteration.

It would require a more complete study to achieve a firm grasp on how it is that metaphors become metaphors of the function of language, and what this transformation means philosophically about how language survives itself so that the reader's pleasure is an ever renewed one. But I hope it can be seen here that the creator's problem — Wallace Stevens' problem — is that once language has *been*, it is like the blackbird who can only be evoked by the fact that he "sat" in the trees that would enclose and preserve him as he was. Once it has left the imagination where simple metaphors are created, the poem relies on the potential of the resemblances contained in its own language to earn its second life. If it is to return into its own cyclical nature as a source of further fertility, it needs fresh materials or more propitious signs in order to engender not just resemblance, but the fertile duplicitousness stemming from difference in that resemblance and resemblance in difference. Despite the fact that the poem creates suspicion about its possible exhaustion and even death, Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" contains a density of vital duplicitousness unequaled by the work of any other modern poet. The forms of resemblance practiced by Stevens in this poem, in the nominal sentence and the invention of metaphor on a second level, survive precisely because they also embody their own sources of disturbance.

Beverly MAEDER

## NOTES

[1] Wallace Stevens, "Three Academic Pieces", I, in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, New York, Vintage Books, 1942-1951, p. 72.

[2] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, Samuel French Morse, ed., New York, Vintage Books, 1982, p. 168. Stevens' *Adagia* appear almost complete in this volume, pp. 157-180. Hereafter cited as *OP*.

[3] This and all further quotations from *Harmonium* are taken from Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1984. I have considered it unnecessary to give page references to short poems which are easily found by consulting the index of the book.

[4] For a listing of the ten traditional functions of predication, see Aristotle, *The Categories*, Chapter IV, and Benveniste's commentary on them in Emile Benveniste, "Catégories de pensée et catégories de langue" in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, I, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, Ch. VI, pp. 63-74. The multiplicity of usages and functions of the verb *to be* that we find in Greek, English and French may well be unique to Indo-European languages; this can at least be said of the use of the same verb to deal with both existential being and the identification of the subject. A look at the practice of other languages can sharpen our perception of our own. See, for example, A.C. Graham, " 'Being' in Classical Chinese", in John W. M. Verhaar, ed., *The Verb "Be" and its Synonyms*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1967, pp. 1-39.

[5] *OP*, p. 173.

[6] This poem, while being recognized as one of the poems in *Harmonium* that is worthy of acclaim, has in fact received very little critical attention. The only works I know of that make more than a passing remark about the poem are Susan Weston, *Wallace Stevens: An Introduction to the Poetry*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 20-24 and Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1969, pp. 75-79.

[7] Synecdoche is not usually considered as a trope of resemblance. It is appropriate to use the broad grouping here, however, because it takes into account the binding and unifying processes that Wallace Stevens associated with "resemblance" and that is the crux of my use of it in this article.

[8] *OP*, p. 179.

[9] Aristotle, *The Poetics*, W. Hamilton Fyfe, trans., rev. ed., London, Heinemann and Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1932, Chapter XXII, p. 91.

[10] *OP*, p. 167.

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