The Influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

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Abstract

The Influence of Friedrich Nietzsche on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

By Samira al-Khawaldeh

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This study is an attempt to present a new perspective of Wallace Stevens’ poetry, relating it to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. The relationship between Stevens’ poetry and poetical thought and Nietzsche’s philosophy is traced and interpreted according to Harold Bloom’s theory of ‘misprision’. The first common feature revealed through this examination is the ‘perspectivist’ view and philosophy of life both writers hold. This denotes that ‘truth’ is not an independent entity with an objective existence, but it is a personal way of envisioning the world – a way governed by the individual’s time and locality.

Thorough examination of how this philosophy has been applied in Stevens’ poetry results in the discernment of a number of characteristics, such as defamiliarization, contradiction in thought and attitude, the dialectic between the poet’s mind and the external world, the juxtaposition between reality and the imagination (leading to the discussion of the concept of the thing-in-itself and the philosophy of ‘As-if’) and the idea of ‘eternal recurrence’. The investigation of these characteristics demonstrates a degree of resemblance between Stevens’ poetical thought and Nietzsche’s philosophy.

The thesis explores in detail the understanding both writers hold of art and poetry, the position of poetry, its definition, its function and the possible role it can play in society and life in general. It reaches the conclusion that their understanding is quite similar: both believe that poetry (representing art) plays a major role in modern times. It cannot be a tool for socio-political change, but it acts as a creative power fit to answer ontological questions. It should provide spiritual satisfaction, as a replacement for the vanishing religious belief. Both poet and philosopher realize and emphasize the disappearance of the concept of godhead in the west, and both try to rescue the human spirit from getting lost.

The introduction to this study deals with the theory of influence. The first chapter discusses the shared characteristics of Stevens and Nietzsche, while the second chapter concentrates on their philosophy of art and poetry. The conclusion is a summary and a reflection on the subject.
### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>BGE</td>
<td><em>Beyond Good and Evil</em></td>
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<td>BT</td>
<td><em>Birth of Tragedy</em></td>
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<td>CP</td>
<td><em>Wallace Stevens’ Collected Poetry and Prose</em></td>
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<td>EH</td>
<td><em>Ecce Homo</em></td>
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<td>Genealogy</td>
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<td>GS</td>
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<td>OP</td>
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<td>TI</td>
<td><em>Twilight of the Idols</em></td>
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<td>U</td>
<td><em>Expeditions of an Untimely Man</em></td>
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<td>WP</td>
<td><em>Will to Power</em></td>
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<td>Zarathustra</td>
<td><em>Thus Spake Zarathustra</em></td>
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Introduction

After more than four decades of New Criticism and Formalism and their aversion towards the discussion of intertextual relations in literary studies, and after the “death of the author” announced by the Structuralists, there comes Harold Bloom to share in the mind’s effort to overcome what he describes as “this impasse” (Bloom, 1973, 12). He offers his theory of poetry by way of a description of poetic influence, “or the story of intra-poetic relationships.” This alternative theory can be summarized as a theory of antithesis (which he ironically refers to Nietzsche), and of Oedipal envy and sometimes lethal struggle (which he refers to Freud) (ibid., 8). Thus, Bloom has heralded the “return” of the author (Wright, 135), rejecting all modes of recent interpretation “because they dehumanize poetry and criticism” (Leitch, 296), and defending “the value of individual poetic ‘voice’ and genius against his Derridean colleagues (Hartman, de Man, Hillis Miller) at Yale. His hope is that he may snatch from the jaws of a deconstructive criticism, which he in some ways respects, a Romantic humanism which will reinstate author, intention and the power of the imagination” (Eagleton, 159).

Other recent studies follow suit, though not as radically as Bloom. Examples relevant to our present subject are Gelpi’s book, Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism (1985), which is divided into two sections: Stevens in context and Stevens as context. Secondly, Carlos Baker in his The Echoing Green: Romanticism, Modernism, and the
Phenomena of Transference in Poetry (1964) discusses the influence of the English Romantics on some modern poets including Stevens. And, a third example, a more relevant article that touches directly on our present study, appeared in The Wallace Stevens Journal by B. J. Leggett entitled “The Apollonian and Dionysian in ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’” (1990), in which the writer discusses the influence of Nietzsche’s theory of art on Stevens’ poem.

There is also Sanford Schwartz’ valuable study in his book, The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot & Early Twentieth-Century Thought, in which he explores the affiliations between Modernist poetics, represented by Pound and Eliot, and contemporaneous developments in philosophy, represented by three philosophers: Nietzsche, Bergson and Bradley. As the author says, “[It] situates[s] an important literary movement in its intellectual context” (Schwartz, 4). He does not include Stevens for matters of convenience; he says that “with certain adjustments this study could have included these poets [Stevens, Yeats and Williams], and it was in part the decision to sacrifice breadth of coverage for depth of exploration that led to their exclusion” (ibid., 10).

Robert Buttel's Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium (1967) touches upon certain influences on Stevens’ early poetry. As the title indicates, it deals with Stevens’ first collection of poems, to the exclusion of the majority of his poetry. Yet Nietzsche is not counted among those influences and so is never mentioned. Other writers, in fact most of them, avoid venturing into the field of influence; Lucy Beckett, in her book Wallace Stevens discusses Stevens’ work in general with frequent (though almost casual) comparisons between him and other
poets, such as the English Romantics without touching on the theme of influence. She says:

The young Stevens was perhaps closer in spirit to Keats than to any other poet of the past. Whether or not he was conscious of the affinity, it had nothing to do with influence. These two young men were simply alike, in their high spirits and seriousness, in their independence and impatience of eyewash, and in their delight in the particular, the real, the sensuous detail of the actual world (Beckett, 6).

A more recent work by B. J. Leggett entitled *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction* (1987) attempts to convince the reader that certain books, found in Stevens’ library, are the sources for the images and ideas presented in Stevens’ poetry and lectures. The books are I. A. Richards’ *Coleridge on Imagination*, Charles Mauron’s *Aesthetics and Psychology*, H. P. Adams’ *The Life and Writings of Giambattista Vico* and Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*. The present study, however, is aware of Stevens’ quotations from such works. Those from Mouron are actually cited in the second chapter of this study, but any presence of their ideas in his writings cannot be compared in any way to the nature and scope of resemblance between Stevens and Nietzsche.

Harold Bloom, on the other hand, confines his concern to “the poet in a poet, or the aboriginal poetic self”, although, at the same time, he admits that strong poets are subject to influences not poetical (Bloom, 1973, 11). The question remains whether the same tools of investigation may still be utilized when dealing with such non-poetical influences. Consequently, a secondary aim of the present study is to test the validity of these tools, or the lack of it as may be the case. But the prior
assumption which this work seeks to prove is the influence of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, and whether this can be adequately studied using Bloom’s methodology. In traditional studies of influence, this problem does not arise: influence may occur within or across genre lines. There is influence upon the writer as a man, whether from a literary or nonliterary figure; it will usually be upon content, rather than directly upon genre and style, upon Weltanschauung rather than upon artistic form (Shaw, 93). Sanford Schwartz, on the other hand, takes it for granted that philosophy and poetry at the turn of the twentieth century drew closer together as the traditional opposition between conceptual and imaginative processes began to dissolve (Schwartz, 100).

The decision to take a positive response to this question is encouraged by an important factor: the dual nature of both precursor and latecomer. Nietzsche is a philosopher with strong aesthetic interests and an obvious option of a poetic style. He is also a “master of German prose, an artist with words, a fertile inventor of ringing phrases and memorable aphorisms” (Danto, 386). His early influential work The Birth of Tragedy can be easily classified as a literary study. Thus Spake Zarathustra is a poetical title for a philosophical work enwrapped in the guise of poetry. He himself describes it as a “poetical work” (Kemal, 2). His use of poetic diction, of “dithyrambs,” is referred to his “attempts to crack the grip of linguistic habits and to the incapacity of ordinary language to house his own visions” (Danto, 389). The following is just one example demonstrating the nature of such style: Nietzsche’s wise man, Zarathustra, says, “Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a very ocean to be able to receive a polluted stream without becoming
H. L. Victoria, 1886 preface to *The Birth of Tragedy* thus confirms the “irreducibly dual nature of his thought” (*ibid.*, 2). He is simultaneously an artist and a philosopher, and according to the theory he proposes in that introduction, a Dionysian and an Apollonian. Some critics even say that this “stylish” quality is behind why it took him so long to be taught in university philosophy courses and why “he remains at some remove from the discipline centre” (Lucy, 123).

Kemal underscores the duality of Nietzsche’s art:

> Unlike most philosophers, in fact, Nietzsche enjoyed a uniquely dual relationship to art. He not only theorized about aesthetics, but also harbored artistic aspirations that were buoyed (and occasionally matched) by his native talents. While he is known today to artists primarily for his original contributions to the study of tragedy and music, he also enjoyed a modest reputation as a poet and composer (Kemal, 1).

This dual nature may partially explain his ongoing role in shaping the contemporary dialectic on the relation between philosophy and art. Richard Rorty thinks that Nietzsche and his heir Foucault were each a philosopher “who claimed a poet’s privileges.” One of these privileges is the attitude of “What has universal validity to do with *me*?” Philosophers, on the other hand, are supposed to have the rationality to exhibit such validity (Rorty, 198).
Alternately, Stevens is a poet with philosophical inclinations and a considerable emphasis on intellectual themes. What is sometimes considered as his major work bears the title “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” which may not seem, at first look, a poetical title for a poem; rather, a tentative abstract exploration of fiction and reality – a strikingly philosophical subject. Several of his other poems follow suit: e.g., “Theory,” “A Thought Revolved,” “Forces, the Will and the Weather,” “The Pure Good of Theory” among others. His imagination is always working under strict intellectual control. And it is always playing the game of philosophy, without using its terms (Beach, 212). This makes him “not the mystic but the philosopher” (Deutsch, 241).

The proposition that Nietzsche has exerted an influence on Stevens worthy of examination, in any ratio of those set by Bloom, is suggested as a result of two things: first, Nietzsche’s overwhelming influence, during his life and after his death in 1900, on the intellectual and literary scene in the West – an influence recognized and expounded by almost every scholar of modern Western thought in the broader sense. Those influenced by him range from Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre to Thomas Mann, Nikos Kazantzakes, and Maurice Blanchot; while among philosophers one finds Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida (Scott, 153). A radical and a sceptic by nature, Nietzsche has either provoked opposition or exerted influence on modernist literature, literary criticism and thought in general. “Whether we accept it or not, the announcement made in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* of the destruction of God has become an integral part of our modern experience; it is the air we breathe” (Borroff, 99). This assessment is held in consensus, and it seems to be the first idea to draw
attention to when Nietzsche’s impact is studied. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality* (1966) and while discussing Stevens’ poetry, states: “If the disappearance of God is presupposed by much Victorian poetry, the death of God is the starting point for many twentieth-century writers” (Miller, 2). He takes it for granted that Nietzsche’s philosophy stands alone as one of the milestones in the development of modern thought. Commenting on one of Stevens’ poems, Miller says,

What has caused this collapse of man’s happy world . . . ?
The answer to this question could be historical, an appeal to the world-destroying events which led to the appearance of a relativistic sense of the past in the eighteenth century, to Nietzsche’s ‘Got is tot’ in the nineteenth, and to the currents of nihilism in our own day” (*ibid.*, 220).

This cry is the cause of “the spiritual desolation in Europe” as seen by Sartre (Cassedy, 81); and as early as 1897, this impact is recognized in Wilhelm Dilthey’s statement: “Nietzsche has indeed really spoken the fearsome word of the times” (Ermarth, 85).

According to some scholars, Nietzsche’s influence on the Anglo-American tradition is greater than is ordinarily assumed (Schwartz, 8). One of the favourite ideas in the 1987 best-seller by Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind*, a sweeping indictment of higher education in the United States of America, is that “the ugly moral wasteland of the contemporary American university has its origin in German thought, starting with Nietzsche in the nineteenth century” (Cassedy, 14). Nietzsche’s impact must be explained by the fact that he turned European culture back upon itself and called its deepest values into question (*ibid.*, 85). J. P. Stern considers Nietzsche, together with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud as the ones who exerted the greatest influence on the
twentieth century: The influence of their speculative thinking touches on every aspect of our experience; had they not lived, the life of modern Europe would be different. “All three were knowers who would be doers – savants with a taste for reform and concrete change, thinkers who, for a time at least, turned ideologists” (Stern, 44).

Besides, Nietzsche stands as a philosopher of special relevance to postmodernist thought and art, and is recognized by many as the precursor of the movement. In particular, the ethical and epistemological relativism of the postmodern world, its scepticism about the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsehood, finds its prototype in Nietzsche’s radically nihilistic thought (Hawkes, 155).

Terry Eagleton, after summarizing the traits of postmodernity as the end of the grand narratives of modernity – narratives of truth, reason, science, progress and universal emancipation, concludes:

Truth is the product of interpretation, facts are constructs of discourse, objectivity is just whatever questionable interpretation of things has currently seized power, and the human subject is as much a fiction as the reality he or she contemplates, a diffuse, self-divided entity without any fixed nature or essence. In all of this, postmodernity is a kind of extended footnote to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who anticipated almost every one of these [twentieth-century] positions in nineteenth-century Europe (Eagleton, 201). (Italics added)

Stevens’ poetry, on the other hand, though chronologically prior to postmodernism, still displays many of its characteristics, which qualifies him too as another of its precursors or prototypes. This relationship is best described by Michael Davidson: He believes that Stevens moves beyond the spatial text of high Modernism into a “more speculative,
temporarily generative text whose end is not literary history but existential disclosure.” The postmodern poem is philosophical; its subject is momentary, wandering interrogation. It is an “endlessly elaborating poem,” as Stevens puts it, “able to work out the fullest implications of its subject by constantly exposing itself to change” (Davidson, 146).

The second factor behind the proposition of Nietzsche’s influence is the many themes, ideas and the unique and special point of view shared by both writers; a fact recognized by several critics such as Bloom himself, Hillis Miller and others. This recognition appears in citations at different points in this study. But some examples may be given here: Bloom, for instance, says, “Stevens is the heir of several traditions” (Bloom, 197A, 53) clearly counting Nietzsche among the names of those who constitute what he calls “the philosophical anteriorty of the will in Stevens.” The other names on his list are philosophers such as William James, Bergson, Schopenhauer and Emerson. Among the poets thought to have influenced Stevens are Paul Valéry, Jules Laforgue and the French Symbolists in general, but those in turn are known to have been deeply penetrated by Nietzsche thought (McCormic, 145; Bloom, 197B, 279).

Hillis Miller as well refers several of Stevens’ ideas to Nietzsche; e.g., he thinks that Stevens resolutely carries out Nietzsche’s injunction that man the survivor of God should experiment tirelessly with new truths, new representations, new life forms (Miller, 225). There is also Ralph J. Mills, who believes that from Harmonium on, Stevens frequently treats supernatural religions with irony or otherwise indicates his distrust
of them - sometimes setting as his frame of reference a world not unlike Nietzsche’s one of eternal recurrence, as we discover in poems such as “Description without Place,” where the philosopher is briefly mentioned (Boroff, 98).

Among the important themes and concepts common to both writers are the interaction between imagination and reality, between abstraction and sensation, freedom and tradition, the ideas of chaos and creativity, eternal recurrence and others – normally basic issues in philosophy, but also featuring prominently in Stevens’ poetics. As a matter of fact, these issues become the central part of his poetic thought, with the following variations: the relationship between art and nature, reality and imagination, truth and fiction, appearance and reality. There is also the question of the end of traditional religion and metaphysics in general, and the installment of art as their substitution. Besides, both men envisioned the world in terms of perspectivism, which means that ‘reality’ is invented by the mind.

However, it is not only the themes that are shared, it is also the way of treatment. Whether the attention Stevens has paid to these issues - parallel to Nietzsche’s – whether his approach in tackling them and the attitude he displays throughout this are brought about by influence or merely matters of zeitgeist, is a matter for discussion. This is what the present study investigates, laying emphasis on those issues, approaches and attitudes that show resemblance between the two figures.

Zeitgeist as explained by K. K. Ruthven, means a ‘spirit of the age,’ immanent in all the most characteristic phenomena of any era. He quotes Shelley’s idea that writers cannot escape from this common
influence, although in the end each is the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded (Ruthven, 131). J. T. Shaw, in addition, explains in his essay, “Literary Indebtedness and Comparative Literary Studies,” how particular and usually foreign authors, such as Voltaire, Byron, or Tolstoy may leave a non-literary effect (in thought, action, or even dress) upon a whole society. This becomes part of the social consciousness available for new writers in this society who may then embody it in literature (Shaw, 87). He then adds that a definite source may be determined when there are sufficient exclusive parallels (ibid., 90). This wide non-literary effect Shaw talks about is similar to Nietzsche’s effect as seen by a leading philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer asserts that “an entire generation of thinkers and artists in early twentieth-century Europe found in Nietzsche’s writings their entry into the ideas and images that incited their creative work” (Scot, 153).

Shelley’s opinion however, is very close to Harold Bloom’s theory, because it shows the deterministic external element on one hand and the prevailing will of the poet on the other. Essentially, Bloom’s theory of ‘misprision’ implies more than influence – it implies family resemblance and the latecomer as an Oedipus unwittingly in quest for his throne. Influence becomes not a matter of choice and preferment, but a destined blood relationship between the ephebe and his precursor that must end, in the case of strong poets, in surpassing and overcoming.

The following is a summary of Bloom’s theory based on Vincent B. Leitch’s account in Deconstructive Criticism. Bloom elaborates a six-phase psychology of poetic origins and growth. The young post-


الملخص
تأثر فريدريك نيبش في شعر والاس ستيفنز

إعداد
سميرة ذيب فياض الخوادرة

المشرف
الأساتذة الدكتور توفيق يوسف

قامت الباحثة في هذه الدراسة بمحاولة لتقدم شعر والاس ستيفنز من منظور جديد وذلك بإيجاد صلة بين وين فلسفة فريدريك نيبش. وقد تم خلالها تبع هذه الصلة وتفسيرها وفقًا لنظريات هارولد بلووم التي تسمى "الترحيب". ووظر من خلال الدراسة أن الدراسة الأولى المشتركة بين الأدب والفلسفة هي فلسفة "الترحيبية" في تناولها للأدب والحياة، وهي تعني أن الخلفية ليست لها كيان مستقل ذو وجود موضوعي. إنها هي طريقة فردية في رؤية العالم - رؤية حكماً يمكنها التفرد وذاته.

وقد توصلت الباحثة من خلال التقصي الدقيق للفلسفة التي ظهرت بها هذه الفلسفة في شعر ستيفنز إلى الكشف عن عدة خصائص في شعره مثل التعبير، والتنافض في الفكرة والوقف، وجدلية العلاقة بين عقل الشاعر والمعلم العلمي، والمساندات بين الواقع والخيال (والذي يقود إلى مناقشة مفهوم "الشيء في ذاته" وفلسفة "كمال لوكان"). وفكرة "الرجوع الأبدى". وقد أظهرت دراسة هذه الخصائص درجة لا يستهان بها من التشابه ما بين فكر ستيفنز الشعرى وفلسفة نيبش.

كما تناول البحث بالتفصيل نظرة كل من الكاتبين إلى النفس والشعر: موقع الشعر في الحياة، وتعريفه، وبيان المدور الذي يمكن أن يقوم به في المجتمع. والنتيجة التي تم الوصول إليها هي التشابه أيضاً في وجهات النظر هذه: فكل منهما يعتقد أن الشعر (معنا لللفن) في العصر الحديث له دور رئيسي مرتبط به. لا يمكن للشعر أن يصبح أداة للتغيير الاجتماعي، لكنه يشكل قوة إبداعية قادرة على الإجابة على الأسئلة المتعلقة بقضايا الوجود.

وينبغي أن يكون قادراً على منح الرسالة الروحية كبداية للاعتماد الديني. كما كان الاثنان، الشاعر والفلسفة، يدركان أن مفهوم الألوهرية قد استهدى أو أوشك على