TROPIC AND SEMANTIC DISPLACEMENT AS MODERNIST COMPLEXITY IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY¹

Abstract

The American symbolist Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) is widely accepted as one of the most complicated poets of twentieth-century modernism. Due to his contribution to poetry through a genuinely innovative style that has inspired many, he has been recognized as one of the most notable and revered American poets. The present study aims to attempt a discussion on Stevens' poetics by focusing on a number of poems that exemplify its semantic and linguistic complexity in terms of symbolic structures, imagery, and other tropic qualities. It limits itself to a number of poems that apparently accommodate Stevens' favorite theme—the relationship between imagination and reality—and simultaneously reconstruct and deconstruct their own aesthetic delineations. Moreover, this study rests on the idea that Stevens' body of work is itself deconstructive and that poststructuralist philosophy and deconstructionist criticism may come to aid when one attempts to demonstrate how those semantic and linguistic complexities become the coinages of modernist poems in their attempt to present themselves as organic and coherent entities, organized around a unifying principle.

Keywords: Wallace Stevens, Modernist Poetry, Deconstruction, Symbolism, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller

WALLACE STEVENS’IN ŞİİRLERİNDE MODERNİST KARMAŞIKLIK OLARAK MECAZİ VE ANLAMSAL YERDEĞİŞİM

Öz

Amerikalı sembolist şair Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), yirminci yüzyıl modernizminin en karmaşık şairlerinden biri olarak kabul edilmektedir. Şiir sanatına olan katkıları bir yana, pek çok edebiyatçısı ilham veren, kendine özgü yeniilikçi bir tarzı olan ve en dikkate değer, saygı şairlerden biri olarak görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, Stevens’in belli başlı şiirlerini ele alarak, bu şiirlerdeki simgesel yapılarla, imagemelerde ve diğer söz sanatlarından görülen anlamsal ve dilsel karmaşıklıklar üzerinde bir tartışma yürütmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Stevens’in en sevdiği tema olan hayal ve gerçek arasındaki iliškiliyi ele alan ve aynı zamanda kendi estetik sınırlarını yeniden belirlemeleri ve sökmeleri bakımından anlamlı olan bazı şiirlerle sınırlıdır. Aynı zamanda bu çalışma, şairin yapısıküme yaklaşığı ve temelde kendilerini organik ve uyuşlu birer varlık olarak sınıma hedefleyen ve bütünleştirmi bir ilkenin etrafında örgütlenmeye çalışan modernist şiirlerin, bu anlamsal ve dilsel zorlukları temsil etmeleri noktasında, post-yapısalcı felsefenin ve yapısıkümçü eleştirinin yararladığı fikrine dayanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Wallace Stevens, Modernist Şiir, Yapısıkümçülük, Sembolizm, Jacques Derrida, J. Hillis Miller

¹ The content of the present study is the extension and more detailed elaboration of some ideas developed by the author through her participation in the Modernism and Postmodernism Studies Conference, 23-24 July, 2020. The abstract of the presentation, titled “The Image and the Symbol as Derridean ‘Différance’ in Poems by Wallace Stevens,” was published in the Book of Abstracts.

² Assist. Prof. Dr., Kırklareli University, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, niluferozgur@klu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-0650-8425
SCOPE, AIM AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As of the mid-nineteenth century, humanity has witnessed a transition from a knowledge of language that rests on empirical truths to an understanding of language that rests on symbolic truths. Modern theory of language has inevitably challenged the Aristotelian theory of poetry as a *mimesis*, as a mirror held toward external reality. Indeed, twentieth-century modernism marks a new era in which human language is perceived as a system of signs which accommodates a gradual move from mimetic to symbolic representation. This transition can be traced also in the ontological and epistemological problems of Western philosophy. The publications of philosophers and scholars like Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud, and many others, become the epitomes of modern discourse, which herald the destruction of grand narratives and conventional systems of knowledge. In the words of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, the beginning of the new century marks the *closure*, if not the end, of the metaphysics of presence (*Of Grammatology* 6). Terry Eagleton, moreover, has argued that human language had to witness this shift from mimetic to symbolic truth because “in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, language in Western Europe was felt to be in the throes of deep crisis” (140). Therefore, humanity had come to realize the existence of this ontological and linguistic crisis, and as a result, writing had to change; “it could no longer remain the instrument of a largely industrial and commercial society, it could no longer share the confident rationalist and empiricist trust of the mid-nineteenth century middle class that language did indeed hook itself onto the world” (Eagleton 140).

It is possible to assume, therefore, that as an artistic creation, the language of poetry is also predisposed to such linguistic and semantic crisis, especially with regard to its most indispensable components—imagery and prosody. Indeed, it is the power and capacity of poetry to expose how literal and figurative meanings fall prey to one another and to demonstrate the inexhaustible possibilities of reading a poem when the free play of signifiers is at work. Since it is of common knowledge that poetry employs a more compressed, condensed and figurative language; this fact in itself renders the language of poetry more obscure and more open to reinterpretation.

The tendency to experiment with language in innovative ways and to challenge the traditional poetic forms does not certainly begin with twentieth-century modernists. Victorian poets had already paved the way to modern aesthetics in unusually unconventional ways. Daniel Albright, for example, claims that in their inventiveness of
new stanza forms, in their transgressing the prosodic boundaries and exploring “of new sonorities of verse, the Victorians were unsurpassable—the Modernist poets began their careers in a world in which the Victorians had already broken all the rules and developed strange and idiosyncratic new rules” (24). Despite their “genteel conservativism,” Victorians bent the rules; they had a taste for prosody and dissonance, experimented with rhyme and free verse, employed rhyme as dissonance, had a desire to make sound conform to sense, rearranged meter to add musical quality (e.g. Hopkins) to their poems (Albright 24-31). Modernists, on the other hand, “overtly rejected traditional English meters, looking elsewhere for their meters: 1) Old English, 2) Greek and Latin, 3) Chinese and Japanese, 4) Pure intuition” (Albright 31). Moreover, modernists shared a tendency to “strip poetry of decorative elements, to simplify into strangeness” (33); they shared a dislike for the iamb (e.g. Pound), a tendency for reduction, for experimenting with punctuation, for the gnomic, abstract and the fragmentary; they actually disliked free verse (e.g. Eliot, Pound, Frost), enjoyed a sense of plurality, and, in short, they sought stability but not rigidity (Albright 31-40). Thus D. Albright situates the modernist form somewhere “between extreme systemlessness and radical resystematization; the poet manipulated forms but noncommittally” (40). In conclusion, it may be convenient perhaps to assume that Victorian poets had long started to revolutionize the aesthetics of poetry; however, it is modernist poetry that can be taken as a nod to post-modernist aesthetics which sought to destroy all kinds of metaphysical presuppositions.

Why modernist poetry should be considered as an experiment that pursues a unifying principle but simultaneously and paradoxically deconstructs its own language in its attempt to incorporate meaning is a complicated matter. Rainer Emig comes to aid while he argues that “modernist poems are not mimetic depictions, mirror images of an environment that determine their shape and not that of their material, language” (237). Nevertheless, they tend to “present themselves as coherent and complete, as works” (238). Terry Eagleton is perhaps in the same line with R. Emig as he acknowledges that the passage to the twentieth century evidences the fact that a “symbolic truth hovers between a subject it cannot define without endangering and a notion of transcendental Truth it requires as an orientation yet is unable to reach” (210). That is to say, modernist poems seek to organize themselves around a principle, a logos, but they partly fail to delineate the limits of signification, leaving behind an unsettled tension and semantic ambivalence. This also testifies to and parallels the transition of humanity (or, rather human language) from mimetic to symbolic truths.
One of the forerunners of deconstructionist criticism, J. Hillis Miller, who leads an elaborate discussion on the poetry of Wallace Stevens, argues likewise by referring to three theories of poetry in his book *The Linguistic Moment*. The first theory is the Aristotelian theory of poetry as imitation; it implies that poetry is “imitation, mimesis, analogy, copy. Truth is measured by the equivalence between the structure of words and the structure of nonlinguistic reality. Poetry is mirroring or matching at a distance” (5-6). Miller explains that “the poetry of imitation, of the *logos* captured in language, is at the same time the annihilation of the *logos* as the hidden one. Being vanishes, dispersed into its representation. The second theory of poetry is poetry as an *act*. It is “the act of the mind seeking revelation through the words and in the words. Poetry is a revelation in the visible and reasonable of that which as the base of reason cannot be faced or said directly” (7). The third theory of poetry is poetry as creation, not discovery (10). In this theory, “there is nothing outside the text. All meaning comes into existence with language and in the interplay of language” (Miller 10). In other words, meaning exists only in the poem, and this “meta-poetry” is “a poetry of grammar, in which what counts is the play of words among themselves. Words are repeated, grammatical forms change and alter, and the same word is verb, adjective, noun, in turn” (Miller 10). To sum up, poetry is an imitation, an act of revelation, and an act of creation. More or less, poetic traditions may tend to comply with any of these theories. On its own part, modernist poetry seeks to break away with all traditional forms that come before itself; however, paradoxically, it also tends to set its own rules, its own aesthetics. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that modernist poems are both mimetic and non-mimetic representations. They tend to organize themselves around a governing principle, but they do that without a recourse to a unified sense of self and to conventional metric, tropic and stanzaic forms.

In this line of thinking, it is possible to suggest that the poetics of the American symbolist Wallace Stevens represents a combination of Miller’s aforementioned theories of poetry in the sense that it presents itself as a challenge to mimetic representation. It is not a coincidence that critics and readers frequently allude to Wallace Stevens’ reputation as one of the most complex and philosophic poets of the age. Above all, faithful to the modernist spirit, his unique poetic voice manifests a sense of selfhood that is plural, distanced, and displaced. For example, the poet Elder Olson suggests that Stevens “assumes various persons” in his poems, “he sees, not individuals, but the collective man;” remains a “detached spectator, chiefly even of his own emotions; it is as spectator, not as
participant that he is moved when he is moved” (195). Furthermore, Olson suggests that much of his later poetry has been assessed by many as philosophical and difficult; however, it is neither philosophic nor difficult but rather personal (198). Stevens is seldom obscure, claims Olson, and “the real source of whatever difficulty there may be in his poetry lies in the fact that he is primarily a poet of images” (198). Stevens is simultaneously a poet of ideas, however, unlike ideas, images need not be coordinated and subordinated into propositions and arguments. This is likely to “puzzle the reader who expects signs of logical relation, and who seeks to turn the poem into rational meanings” (Olson 198).

In a similar line of thinking, the present study will attempt to develop an explanation about why Stevens is unanimously recognized as a difficult and complex poet by doing a close reading of a number of popular and less popular poems. This analysis rests on the assumption that his poetry is a reflection of the modernist tendency and the complexity of a self-deconstructive poet. It will mainly focus on some poems by Stevens that exemplify the relationship between imagination and reality—his favorite theme. These particular poems constitute an argumentative ground not only for the discussion of Stevens as a unique modernist poet but also as a poet who grapples with the problem of signifying. This, to some extent, implies that his poetry renders itself convenient for deconstructionist analysis because deconstruction p(op)oses strategies by which critical readings expose the linguistic and semantic breaches and ruptures characteristic of some modernist poems. In other words, Stevens’ poems echo the modernist linguistic crisis verbalized above by T. Eagleton and R. Emig, as they are both mimetic and non-mimetic constituents of poetic utterance.

Wallace Stevens’ Modernist Complexity

To illustrate one example of the mimetic and non-mimetic nature of Stevens’ poems, a look at “Of Modern Poetry” may enable the commencement of the discussion. The poem is an example of ontological demarcation because it poses a canonical and philosophical question in the opening part—“what will suffice” (2) (The Collected Poems 239). In other words, the poem launches its thematic, focal point at the very beginning. “What will suffice” becomes the poet’s quest for a unifying principle, a logos that will serve as the definition of the content and function of modern poetry. “What will suffice” is also the phonetic signifier that moves the poem onward, that creates aesthetic suspense in the poet’s attempt to come up with a new definition of poetry that satisfies the mind of the age; i.e., becomes “the poem of the act of the mind” (28). The whole poem is a series of tropes—
metaphors and similes that are sequenced to define what modern poetry should be like. The persona’s anxiety to denominate, to describe, to find a corresponding point of reference coincides with the modernist tendency to organize around a principle, to compose a synthetic whole. However, here “modern poetry” is forced, so to speak, to represent too many things, i.e., “what will suffice;” contains things that exist on so many different levels and verges of life; it “has to think about war,” (9) “of a man skating,/ a woman dancing, a woman/ Combing” (27-28). What follows is a series of similes, personifications, and compound structures that signify poetry becoming a variety of things—“an insatiable actor,” (12) “a metaphysician in the dark,” (20) “containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,” (23) “beyond which it has no will to rise” (24). Modern poetry is here the signifier of human imagination; it is accorded so many functions and objectives that the load of attributes overtakes the poem and to some extent creates tension in the face of all these multiple representations. The tension arising out of the narrator’s attempt to create similitude and condensation for multiple times causes some amount of linguistic and semantic dislocation. The poetic persona imagines that poetry cannot and will not “rise beyond the mind” although the poet will be like a metaphysician, a magician who will need to “satisfy” the mind as well as the senses. The impossibility to single out and finalize “what will suffice” is in fact an epitome of human imagination as abstraction. It cannot delineate its own limits, it cannot become the manifestation of absolutes but will continue to pursue the urge to create anew, “to construct a new stage” (11). Although the poem’s language appears to be largely mimetic in its use of clear tropic elements and metaphoric compounds, Stevens problematizes the semantic finitude of the poem with the use of multiple tropes and also by way of some utterances that connote ambiguity—phrases such as “changed to something else,” (6) and “an invisible audience” epitomize the necessity to construct a different stage for poetry, but at the same time they imply something unfinished, indefinite, and something to be performed intuitively. The poet will be “twanging an instrument in the dark;” i.e., in front of an invisible audience, and by reverting perhaps mainly to his own instincts. The repetitive use of an imperative utterance such as “it has to” in several lines is further intensified with the signifier “it must” in line 25 and finally compromised with “it may [emphasis added] be of a man skating” (25-26) at the closing part of the poem. The modern poet seeks to break away with former traditions; he does not want to “repeat what was” already “in the script” (3-4). However, the difficult task of finding what will suffice and satisfy something which will always be “something else,” proves to become indeed the all-too-challenging definition that the persona is
seeking. The narrator feels perhaps the inexhaustible possibilities for human quest, and the discursive and denotative ruptures that come with it.

This poem by Stevens also becomes a convenient example of how Miller identifies poetry as mimesis, as an act of revelation, and as creation. Stevens concretizes the search for the *logos* by poeticizing language, by employing multiple tropic elements that seek to denominate and define; however, the multitude of tropes that he uses in the poem bear witness to the impossibility of constructing absolute signifieds. In deconstructive terms, each figure of speech becomes a “différance” of the other tropes, employed to contribute to the poem’s semantic conclusiveness. Stevens’s poetry of the mind and the senses has to be continually redefined, to find correspondents, signifiers that manifest its function. Although the poem’s tropes intend to fulfil this function, they simultaneously transform into abstractions as they become also symbolic of the repetitive enactment of the poetic urge to define and redefine. The trope becomes an epitome of différance and deferred meaning in Derridean terms. Derrida uses the term “différance” to elicit the closure of metaphysical presuppositions and to point at the inaccessibility of the *logos*, the “deferral” and “difference” of the signified, which is also a “transcendental signified”:

Differance more properly refers to what in classical language would be called the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the play [jeu] of differences...Differance is neither a word nor a concept. In it, however, we shall see the juncture—rather than the summation—of what has been most decisively inscribed in the thought of---our "epoch": the difference of forces in Nietzsche, Saussure’s principle of semiological difference, differing as the possibility of [neurone] facilitation, impression and delayed effect in Freud, difference as the irreducibility of the trace of the other in Levinas, and the ontic-ontological difference in Heidegger. (“Differance” 130)

Derrida’s *différance*, therefore, is the possibility for communication through a play of differences. *Différance* is never an empirical or phonocentric concept which can identify an ultimate signified but more like an agent of the Nietzschean “play of signification” (*Writing and Difference* 351-371). Language is thus seen as self-referent because meanings cannot be exhausted in their totality and we are left only with the phonetic signifiers alone. As Derrida would have maintained, *différance* could stand for “the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction of all the
significations that have their source in that of the logos” (Of Grammatology 10).

It is possible to trace this assumption of Derrida in another poem by Wallace Stevens—“Anecdote of the Jar.” It exemplifies his favorite theme—the relationship between imagination and reality, the signifier and the signified. It employs a concrete image as its focal point—the jar—as a product of human imagination [“I placed a jar in Tennessee” (1)], fluctuating between mimetic and non-mimetic representation. Although it is largely written in free verse, the poem displays internal rhymes achieved by the repetition of similar sounds as in “ground, surround, around.” The alliterative tone of the poem intends to create coherence of sound, or perhaps to suggest the round-ness of the jar, to provide a closer look at the thing itself. This sense of coherence can be illusory, however. What coheres in terms of sound does not seem to cohere in terms of signifying. Frank Lentricchia, for example, argues that such poem could definitely place Wallace Stevens in opposition to formalists because “it will not cohere;” “the imposing jar is also a port” (haven? gate? but for whom?)” (10). It poses a question of tone, which cannot be avoided any longer (Lentricchia 11). Rinda West, on the other hand, suggests that the poem lays out “the essential problem” that is presented to us “by both our perceptual apparatus and our language: we can’t even perceive the world without imposing on it the categories of our brains; we certainly can’t speak of it without organizing it according to the patterns of our grammar” (130). Indeed, “Anecdote of the Jar” poses a problem of signification: that is why it is incoherent and dissonant. The juxtaposition of alliterative sounds creates not only internal rhyme for the otherwise unrhymed poem but also ambiguity. The verses are partially irregular and the use of broken language disrupts the process of building all-too-harmonious and coherent phonetic signifiers:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.
It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (*The Collected Poems* 76)

The image of the jar creates a dual relationship and opposition when it is placed in nature, i.e., wilderness. This metaphysical relationship becomes the focal philosophical point in the poem. The jar serves as an image that has to carry the burden of all signification and meaning-formation in the poem. Although the poem relies on a single tropic element, i.e., the jar, its invocations and associations are multiple; it may be taken to represent a variety of things—the human mind, imagination, modern technology, human civilization, industrialization, colonial expansion, the American frontier etc. These multiple possibilities and associations simultaneously disintegrate the ultimate suggestiveness of the main symbol in the poem. On one hand, the jar, as an image, enables the act of signification to become more concretized because it is a tangible and observable object; however, on the other hand, its repetitive combination with alliterative words (such as “around,” “surround”) creates a symbolic register that has to eventually disperse at the end of the poem. That is, the image moves from concrete to abstract signification and then dissolves into a cluster of meanings. It paradoxically creates an obscure entity which seems to “dominate everywhere” and yet fails to triumph as a fixed, stable signified. In other words, meaning-formation tends to disseminate under the evasiveness of this signified. The power struggle between the jar and nature is unfinished and deferred, yet to come, like Derrida’s *différance*. The dual relationship between imagination and reality is worked on subversively, and, therefore, deconstructed by the poem’s own linguistic and symbolic play. External reality is obscured, put under erasure because each power-element imposes its own reality on the other—the jar, causing nature to become “no longer wild” (6); and, nature, causing the jar to remain “grey and bare” (10). The jar is posed as the metaphysical opposite of nature, but the power struggle between the jar and “slovenly” nature, i.e. the relationship between imagination and reality transcends and obscures the binary demarcation. Since the jar which apparently “took dominion everywhere” (9) cannot “give off bird or bush” (11), it falls prey to its opponent—nature, like meaning falls prey to language. The signified is therefore, evacuated again, and we are left only with the phonetic signifiers. The poem ends with a sort of an obscure negation—“like nothing else in Tennessee” (12)—which either represents some kind of a balance between the symbolic
powers of the artificial object and organic nature, or epitomizes the dissemination of meaning at the backdrop of tropic displacement and symbolic collapse. This corresponds to the modernist crisis of representation which Terry Eagleton and Rainer Emig exemplify above and also to Miller’s claim that “any poet’s vocabulary is to some degree irreducibly idiosyncratic” (393). Therefore, “the vocabulary of a poet is not a gathering or a closed system, but a dispersal, scattering” (394).³

“Another Weeping Woman,” a poem about loss and grief, poses a semantic breach at some point in the otherwise clearly delineated dual oppositions—life and death, man and woman, imagination and reality, the pain of loss and the urge to exist. The color of death is black and dark, and it subordinates the rest of the tropic elements in the poem. The narrator is watching a woman from aside, who is grieving for the loss of her beloved one, as we infer from “with him for whom no phantasy moves” (11). The reality of grief is that it is inconsolable and “will not sweeten” (3):

Pour the unhappiness out
From your too bitter heart
Which grieving will not sweeten.

Poison grows in this dark.
It is in the water of tears
Its black blooms rise.

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

Leaves you
With him for whom no phantasy moves,
And you are pierced by a death. (The Collected Poems 25)

First of all, the poem invokes the impression that elements characteristic of modernist

³ While Miller makes an extensive discussion of a later poem by Stevens, “The Rock,” he acknowledges that the word “ground” in Stevens is a common word and it may be taken as “the solid earth we stand on, or ground as background upon which a figure appears, or the more “metaphysical” use of the term to mean foundation, basis, source, mind or consciousness, reason, measure” (1985, 392). Thus Miller highlights the complexity of the word and the denotative instability that ensues with it.
poems are at hand; the distanced and impersonal poetic self apparently observing and addressing a woman grieving, the lack of intersubjectivity between the poetic persona and his/her interlocutor; the broken language and rearrangement of syntax, the use of free verse and partly irregular lines that combine a number of juxtaposed images which pile up freely upon one another—unhappiness pouring, poison growing, tears shedding, black blooms rising. This juxtaposition of images is perhaps reminiscent of the aesthetics of imagists as well as of the so-called “objective correlative” of T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” This principle of Eliot can be understood as the urge to convey meanings and emotions not by stating them directly, but indirectly, by implementing or accommodating a set of concrete images instead (48). Stevens’ poem seems to rely on indirect rather than direct statement with the exception of the last line—“And you are pierced by death” (12), which still displays the use of a metaphoric substitute for death, possibly as Cupid’s mischief.

Secondly, Stevens repeatedly exploits here the conflict between imagination and reality; however, the punctuation and metrical patterns in the poem ambiguate the denotative quality of this dual relationship. “The magnificent cause of being” (7) connotes the urge to live against all odds, but it also seems to represent “the imagination” because it succeeds “the being” immediately in the following line. Moreover, imagination and reality seem to slide under each other, merge, and then incorporate their roles at the expense of creating suspense in the poem. Living is an illusory and fleeting experience in this physical world; death is real but “reality” must be also illusory and contingent of “this imagined world” (9). The denotation of meaning depends on the overlapping of illusion and reality; therefore, the reality in this imagined world must be perceived as an illusion within-an-illusion. Grief is real but living is an illusion. Meaning, therefore, partly disperses and disseminates, transcending the binary pattern with which it was initially delineated. The signifier overtakes the role of the signified and the poem intentionally subverts its own logic by partial semantic and tropic displacement.

According to Miller, the Aristotelian concept of poetry as imitation is “by no means absent in a ‘sophisticated modern poet’ like Stevens” (6). In poetry “the logos, as being or ground, comes into the open by way of the logos as words. The logos, as the hidden one, is revealed and expressed in the logos as the many, in differentiated form, in dramatic action or as trope” (7). However, Miller continues, Stevens’ poetry is also an act, “the act of the mind seeking a revelation through the words and in the words” (7). “It seems that what is most logical, the logos itself, ‘being’ in Stevens’ traditional name for it, turns into
the illogical and into non-being when the poet tries to face it directly” (8)\(^4\). In poetry “the red of reality is transformed in the blue of imagination” (Miller 9). These suggestions of Miller perfectly epitomize the mimetic and non-mimetic nature of Stevens’ aesthetics. The implication is that if we look for the *logos* in Stevens’ poetry, we have to continually rely on the self-referentiality of the words and the phonetic signifiers at work. It is not a closed circuit; however, denotation and signifying seem to fluctuate continually between symbolic and mimetic representation.

Indeed, not all poems by Wallace Stevens parallel the semantic subversiveness and complexity of meaning in the poems discussed above. Sometimes a poem’s tropic and linguistic arrangement leaves one with the impression that signifiers cohere with exactly those meanings that the poet intends to convey. “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” for instance, can be taken as an example of a coherent and mimetic representation of the external world. The narrator is again somewhat distanced and aloof, but at the same time sort of omniscient and omnipotent—there is an uncanny impression that the narrator is holding a camera, moving freely, ascending and descending, peeping into the rooms of the houses in a modern city where people are moving about, ghost-like, wearing white nightgowns (*The Collected Poems* 66). This cinematographic effect and the color symbolism in the poem [e.g. “or purple with green rings,” (4) “or green with yellow rings” (5)] do not seem to cause semantic and denotative displacement in the overall presentation of its theme, commonly accepted as a criticism of the American middle-class and its lack of imagination and ingenuity. The dual oppositions and contrasts at work [the imaginative individual (i.e., the drunken old sailor) vs. the boring and suffocating crowd; conformity vs. non-conformity; the exotic vs. the familiar etc.] are strengthened consistently and contribute to the overall thematic and denotative conclusiveness in the poem. Namely, the poem employs a mimetic language whereby the tropic elements and technical arrangement of the verses consistently contribute to the finalization of the central idea—a disillusionment about what could have been imagined and what appears to be real.

Nevertheless, Stevens’ poems more frequently come up as denotations of his modernist sensitivity and complexity, all the more decidedly challenging further our perception of what the poet intends to convey and how the poem inherently pursues this intention until the end. For example, a poem with a title like “Poetry is a Destructive Force”

\(^4\) Miller states that both imagination and reality are liable at any moment to turn into this nothing, what Stevens calls “the dominant blank, the unapproachable” (*Collected Poems*, 477; qtd. in Miller, 8).
comes as no surprise, and powerfully signals the outlet of tensions and breaches that undermine or threaten its semantic and denotative domain (The Collected Poems 192). “That’s what misery is,/ Nothing to have at heart,/ It is to have or nothing” (1-3) reads the opening part of the poem, hinting at some inexplicable feeling of sadness and emptiness. The effect is possibly achieved by the sheer reduction of language and by negation. It is like a wordplay, a doubling of the perspective, and is followed by “It is a thing to have,/ A lion, an ox in his breast,/ To feel it breathing there” (4-6). Stevens combines metaphoric compounds and similes [“He is like a man/ In the body of a violent beast” (10-11); “Its muscles are his own” (12); “the lion sleeps in the sun” (13)] which create an effect of approximation and distancing, condensation and dispersal simultaneously. The destructive power of poetry (or, writing) is apparently considered analogous to the savage awaiting of a brutal and ferocious beast whose “nose is on its paws” (14) and “It could kill a man” (15). The semantic complication in the poem partly arises out of the juxtaposition and compilation of multiple images (man, heart, dog, bear, lion, ox) and the shifting use of third person point of view and personal pronouns (“Corazon” “he,” “it”). Like the subject himself, the addressee or the interlocutor is also indefinite and ambiguous; the metaphoric and other tropic elements seem to become agents of gradual displacement and dislocation which results in semantic complexity. Despite the complex wording and sliding signifiers used in the poem, some interpreters clearly denominate the message that it tries to convey. According to the American poet and scholar Robert Pinsky, for example, “poetry breaks and devours comforting sentiments, soothing language, elevated humbug, wishful thinking. It re-imagines in language what we are used to” (“Poet’s Choice,” 2006). “Violence is figurative,” Pinsky states, “it menaces and devours not flesh and blood but cozy preconceptions” (“Poet’s Choice”). Indeed, poetry is all those things, a de-structive and re-constructive force, although the narrator never uses the signifier poetry throughout the verses except the title. This power of poetry is personified and anthropomorphized in the body and heart of man but its violence and menace are also incorporated in the body of the beast. The power to construct and destruct belongs to writing; and in the modern theory of language, writing is a violent and usurping act. Therefore, as in “Of Modern Poetry” discussed previously, poetry again becomes a “force” that seeks to delineate the margins of its logos; however, attached to multiple signifiers and tropes that transition between abstractions and denotations, it destabilizes and partly disavows its constructed mimetic representations.
CONCLUSION

Modernist poems challenge the ontological and epistemological assumptions about literature and poetry. In T.S. Eliot’s world, they seek a “tradition,” in Wallace Stevens’ world, they seek “what will suffice.” The sensibility of the modernist mode of expression disseminates and dissociates the mimetic nature of the language of poetry. From this vantage point, Stevens’ complex symbolism becomes an epitome of the modernist crisis of representation. Consequently, Stevens’ favorite choice of subject, i.e., the relationship between imagination and reality, the signifier and the signified, invokes the idea that like many other modernists, he grapples with problems of meaning by poeticizing and problematizing language. It is a common trait of modernist poets due to the fact that the new material does not cohere any longer with old forms—in an era of cultural and emotional exhaustion, symbolic structures tend to dissolve and language fails to fully reproduce a formula compatible with what one calls “mimetic reality.”

And in the words of J. Hillis Miller, at last, his poetry “constantly pulls the rug from under itself. It constantly deprives itself of that origin or ground with which it seems at the same time to provide itself” (4). His poetry is “the battleground among conflicting theories of poetry. The poet tries first one way and then another way in an endlessly renewed, endlessly frustrated, attempt to ‘get it right,’ to formulate once and for all an unequivocal definition of what poetry is and to provide an illustration of this definition” (Miller 5).

In conclusion, critical reading through the lenses of deconstruction may be not only helpful but also inevitable when one attempts to grapple with issues of language and meaning-formation. Poetry is an exercise and an experiment that both constructs and deconstructs its own material, manifested in the complexity of semiotics and the disparities and convulsions of figurative language. Modernism seeks to succeed in making a self-conscious break with its antecedents, boldly faces the historical cul-de-sac and rebels against grand narratives, materialism and the bourgeois complacency of conventional ideologies. Modernist poetry, on its own behalf, is a reaction against middle-class consciousness and the precepts of Romantic poetry, an attempt to accumulate and incorporate the changing cultural, philosophical and psychological needs of the individuals in Western democracies. Modernist literature is revolutionary in the sense that it repudiates conventional norms but is consistent in its contradictory persistence in establishing its own institutionalized literary norms, its own intellectual and scholarly pursuits and paradigms.
The American symbolist poet Wallace Stevens, therefore, who is considered as one of the most genuinely innovative poets of the twentieth century, comes as an outstanding example of these pursuits of literature. His poetry does not only testify to the modern sensitivities and tendencies shared by most of his contemporaries, but it is also a nod toward, a heraldry of the upcoming post-modernist age and a literature that is open to even freer modes of expression and flexibility of form. His poetry of the mind and the senses manifests the modern needs and literary norms of the age—a more dislocated and distanced self, reduction and economy of language, a combination of direct and indirect treatment of the thing, abstraction and deferral of meaning. His narrators are not passive or mute observers, they watch from distance but participate in the process of aesthetic recreation. There is a sense of poetic anxiety and tension in those poems by Stevens. As this study attempted to show, his poetry becomes an epitome of the quest for the logos, which is traceable and available only by poeticizing language, and by temporal transcending of the dual relationships that the tropic and figurative elements embody in the poem.

WORKS CITED


Lentricchia, Frank. “Anatomy of a Jar.” Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William


