

# The Course of a Particular

*A Cry For Meaning*

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*Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,  
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.  
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.*

*The leaves cry...One holds off and merely hears the cry.  
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.  
And though one says that one is part of everything,*

*There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;  
And being part is an exertion that declines:  
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.*

*The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,  
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.  
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,*

*In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more  
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing  
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.*

-Wallace Stevens' "The Course of a Particular"  
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A line from one of Wallace Stevens' most well known poems, "The Auroras of Autumn," reads: "There is no play./ Or, the persons act one merely by being here." This existential rewriting of William Shakespeare's famous declaration "all the world's a stage, and we are but players in it"

exemplifies literary critic Harold Bloom's analysis of Stevens' fulfillment of "the unique enterprise of a specifically American poetry."<sup>1</sup> Whereas Shakespeare's pithy statement suggests a world existing in and of itself in which human beings act according to a pre-written script, Stevens' lines, according to Bloom, expose "the essential solipsism of our Native Strain." One finds this isolationist theme manifested in many ways at the core of Stevens' poetry: through themes, rhymes, images, etc. Stevens' manipulation of language is so skilled that, in the case of his poem "The Course of a Particular," the very language itself encapsulates the unique sense of aloneness and isolation in American poetry. However, a careful analysis of the language in "Course" reveals the simultaneous existence of an almost contradictory tendency. Though the language is isolated and cold, the words that Stevens uses are self-consciously interdependent. Language naturally functions in relation to itself – words gain meaning through context – yet in Stevens' poems *all* of the words are dependent upon the words around them for their meaning. One could even say that Stevens' poetry deconstructs itself as it is developing, for as his poems unfold, the meaning of words modulates constantly, doubling back upon itself before rushing ahead anew. Thus as linguistic interdependence confronts an independently solipsistic mindset, we are forced to expand Bloom's characterization: if Stevens' poetry is uniquely American, there must be another essential component to our "native strain."

In order to access the point of tension between individualistic isolation and interdependence, it is necessary to engage in a careful analysis of the poem's language and development. Stevens' use of the present tense in "Course" calls immediate attention to the temporal status of the poem: "Today the leaves cry." The "Today" that begins the poem signifies that the final meaning (or lack thereof) which the speaker hopes to reach has not yet been discovered. It is thus appropriate that the poem's second line negates what we are offered in the first: "Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less. It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow" (2-3). "Yet" disrupts the descriptive action of the first line – the poem wants both to be and to become. In other words, "yet" expresses the tension in the poem between content, in-the-moment existence (being, what winter *is*), and a perpetual striving towards (becoming: what winter will - or is hoping to - be). The poem refuses to rest in the moment of winter that it has created, becoming instead "a little less." Also in these lines, the speaker hints at a tension between absence and presence:

if winter is the ultimate season of “nothingness,” then what does it mean for this “nothingness” to become “a little less”? Paradoxically, this doubling of negation and loss generates a move towards presence. A “nothingness” decreasing (or lessening) even a “little” bit necessarily entails a movement towards something-ness, towards presence. Consequently, the “full”-ness of the third line is no longer replete with its proper meaning. In a reflection of the earlier paradox, the coldness of this line (the “icy shades and shapen snow”) dissolves the meaning of “full” into the lack and death of winter thereby opening a dark chasm of meaning. Thus from the moment of today to the slightly “less” winter, into the cold fullness, it is clear that Stevens never allows his poem to settle into meaning. Such a technique ensures the validity of the poem as an encapsulated experience, one that the reader can experience alongside the speaker. At the end of the third line, we are still in the moment of the poem, “yet” it is so far from the moment in which we began.

In sharp contrast to the interdependent relationship of the poet’s words, the experience portrayed in the poem is nuanced with a coldness that continually effects a distance, returning us to Bloom’s solipsistic characterization. Much of the diction resists any warm, visceral reaction, as if forbidding the reader to attach him or herself to one meaning or another. Clearly, the season evoked is cold and inhospitable, for it is “full of icy shades and shapen snow.” The reader is drawn into the world of the subject, “one” who “holds off and merely hears the cry.” This holding “off” distances the reader from the cry; and since the poem constitutes itself through this cry, the holding off also distances the reader from the poem. “One” (the reader? the speaker? someone else?) is not allowed to participate in the cry – we/he/she/it are relegated to the act of “merely” hearing. It is a cry “concerning someone else,” not “one.” Within these lines, an odd hierarchical ordering of the senses is evident as well. The speaker’s reductive “merely” peremptorily dismisses “one[’s]” attempt to participate aurally in the cry of the leaves. This dismissal indicates that the speaker expects a deeper, more active level of participation from “one.” Here, then, exists yet another paradox: the poem’s diction insists upon distance, yet the flow of the language demands engagement.

As its paradoxes intensify, the poem reaches its central and climactic stanza in which (both literally and figuratively) there is a “conflict” and a “resistance”: “And though one says that one is part of everything, / There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved” (7-8). This conflict can

be read in part as a dispute with one of Stevens' American predecessors, Walt Whitman, the famous American poet of totality and universality. Whereas the English romantics strove to demonstrate their oneness with nature, Whitman simply assumes such a stance: "To me all the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow, / All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means."<sup>2</sup> Argues Stevens, a speech act is not enough: "though one *says* that one is part of everything there *is* a conflict" (my italics). Too often, poets posit words as a substitution for action, believing that the simple act of saying is enough. The mastery and control that Stevens exudes through his diction forcefully refutes this Whitmanesque claim: "*There* is a conflict, *there* is a resistance," he declares (my italics). Oddly enough, within this moment of conflict (which is merely representative of the agitative experience of the poem) there exists a calm and complete assertion: "One feels the life of that which gives life as it is" (9). The line does not seek anything or demand anything; it allows itself simply to be "as it is." This act of giving and affirming life comes as a surprise against "icy shades and shapen snow." There are no demands; it is simply a quiet observation.

The poem's middle stanza contains a plethora of words so lacking in qualification that the words' meanings become empty and hollow. "There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved; / And being part is an exertion that declines; / One feels the life of that which gives life as it is" (7-9). "Conflict" and "resistance," both words expressing assertive oppositions, are strengthened in their presumption by the declarative "there is" that precedes each. The almost violent sensation evoked by these words is modified in the following line by "exertion" which indicates an internal individual effort rather than an external struggle. However, the diction's urgency is constantly truncated by Stevens' refusal to satisfy the propositions within his language. The conflict and resistance are "involved," but in what? "Part" would imply the existence of a whole, in which "being" can partake; yet no whole is presented. And the "exertion" "declines," but to where, and into what? The only choice that we have as readers is to refer all of these words back to the "everything" that one would claim to be part of. Remaining true to his style, the referent that Stevens offers is the most ambiguous word of the poem. "Everything" is a generality too vague to be defined, and consequently mimics the "nothingness" of the first stanza.

Stevens' prolific use of pronouns further complicates the meaning of

the poem and enhances the play between nothing and everything. Pronouns serve to designate an already known object without naming it. However, Stevens' use of pronouns does not restrict itself to such rules. Rather, he uses pronouns as though they were nouns with definitive meaning attached. "*It is still full of icy shades...*" "*It is a busy cry...*" "...that which gives life as *it is...*" "*It is not a cry of divine attention...*" "*It is the cry of leaves...*" "...in the thing / *Itself...*" (1, 5, 9, 10, 12, 14-15; my italics). In every situation in which a pronoun is used, the pronoun has the ability to mean something different. However, "it" refers essentially to the same noun throughout the poem (the cry). Such layering of ambiguity upon certainty echoes the inability of the poem to decide whether it is one of being or becoming.

Another means through which the speaker ensures distance between the reader and his poem is through the modulation of the meaning of the poem created by words with ambiguous literal meaning. A primary example of this is "cry," first seen in the opening line of the poem: "Today the leaves cry" (1). A cry is a spontaneous expression of emotion; it can signify happiness, surprise, pain, grief, terror, sadness, etc. The intensity implied by the word "cry" is consistent throughout these emotions, suggesting the importance of the visceral nature of this reaction. Literally, of course, the "cry" of the leaves occurs because they are "hanging on branches swept by wind" -- it is the rustle of leaves against one another. Although this sound has been referred to as the "*cry of the leaves*" (my italics) for purposes of exploring the meaning of "cry," such an analysis ignores the active construction of the phrase: "The leaves cry." The leaves are performing a definitive action; they are not simply producing a sound under the agency of another. We might expect a reason for the leaves' action to follow, yet the poem that springs from this line refuses the fulfilling act of justification, emptying out instead into an absence of reason.

Furthermore, the versatile "cry" embodies the tension and indecision within the poem. Stevens' poetry is self-conscious; he is highly aware of poetry as a constructive act. Against this very non-oral/aural genre, the "cry" stands out as if it were an actual utterance. The cry is a verbal evocation of a liminal state between feeling and meaning. It indicates a sound that is inarticulate and a sense that is incoherent: the *feeling* behind the cry drives the noise towards meaning. Symbolic of an American poet's struggle to create a place for himself in a new world, the meaning functions as a limit that the cry is forever approaching and is

unable to reach.

What, then, is the speaker's obsession with the leaves and their cry? Appropriately, considering the poem's general indecision, the significance of leaves' "cry" develops within the space of what they are not and what they are lacking. "The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention, / Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry. / It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves" (10-12). After several negations, the poet is finally able to say what the cry is: "It is the cry of leaves that *do not* transcend themselves." Although this line is offered as a declarative, even this qualification is that which the leaves are not. "It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves." The negating quality of this statement generates more questions than answers. Do the leaves cry *because* they do not transcend themselves? Are the leaves able to transcend themselves? Is this simply the cry that leaves which cannot transcend themselves are forced to make? And what would it mean for leaves *to* transcend themselves? Transcendence is the act of passing beyond or above, becoming independent of, exceeding. If the leaves were to reach a state of transcendence they would become independent of themselves and have no need for themselves. However, they do not, and probably cannot, transcend themselves; they, like the poem, and like America, need and seek meaning.

Despite a need for meaning, the poem's consistent generation of significance from within negation suggests a fear of, and a flight from, meaning. The final sentence is a layering of negative upon negative: "It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves, / In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more / Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing / Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all" (12-15). "Do not," "absence," "without," "no one," – the speaker insists upon the leaves' inability to be, to accept "life as it is." However, the diction of lack in these final lines proves to be more full than it would have seemed. "Absence" implies that there once was presence – it is more than just "nothingness." "Without meaning more" suggests that some level of meaning does exist. Finally, "no one" is not an exclusive negative. The space between "no" and "one" is of resounding importance; it does not negate presence entirely, merely the presence of a specific "one." Rather than foreclosing existence, the poem's ending allows the cry's meaning to resonate for all.

The cry is the space in which language and meaning meet. Its re-

ality and actuality cannot be denied, but the “meaning” that resonates from it exists in an ever-interpretive condition. By admitting its own limitations, however, the poem achieves a far greater meaning and significance. Meaning must always be subject to reinterpretation, for it is in this way that it remains true to life. Consequently, Stevens’ refusal to control the meaning of his poem directly exposes what Bloom refers to as “the essential solipsism of our native strain.” Much of the poem’s “fear of meaning” can be read as a refusal to depend upon other entities for significance. However, the solipsistic shell of the poem is, as has been seen, intrinsically connected to the cry, to the conflict at the poem’s center, a cry that has the potential concern “no one” and “no one” in the same moment. Within this cry, then, we find the nuance that necessarily expands Bloom’s characterization: as the cry perpetually defines and redefines itself in the liminal space of the poem, it demonstrates that “the course of a particular” poem, and of a particular life, is to exclude neither being or becoming, neither significance or solipsism, but rather to embrace both.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, ed. And intro by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Whitman, Walt. “Song of Myself.” *Leaves of Grass*. Ed. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett. New York: Norton and Company, 1973. p. 47, 404-405.