

Commentary on Wallace Stevens' "Homunculus et la Belle Étoile"

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Abstract:

Exploring the relationship between imagination and human spirit, Wallace Stevens' poem "Homunculus et la Belle Étoile" employs the imagery of stars as the major metaphorical device to discuss the dynamic between scholars and imaginative power. Key metaphors and their implications are interpreted in this article to understand the scholar's engagement with imagination, a rich and beautiful entity, highlighting the importance of thought in recognizing its significance. The poem praises imagination as a source of creativity, emphasizing its connection to the real world and the pursuit of poetic truth.

Keywords: Wallace Stevens; "Homunculus et la Belle Étoile"; imagination; metaphor; scholar-poet

Homunculus et La Belle Etoile (Excerpts)

Wallace Stevens

In the sea, Biscayne, there prinks
The young emerald, evening star,
Good light for drunkards, poets, widows,
And ladies soon to be married.
This light conducts
The thoughts of drunkards, the feelings
Of widows and trembling ladies,
The movements of fishes.

How pleasant an existence it is
That this emerald charms philosophers,

Until they become thoughtlessly willing
To bathe their hearts in later moonlight,

Knowing that they can bring back thought
In the night that is still to be silent,
Reflecting this thing and that,
Before they sleep!

It is better that, as scholars,
They should think hard in the dark cuffs
Of voluminous cloaks,
And shave their heads and bodies.

It might well be that their mistress
Is no gaunt fugitive phantom.
She might, after all, be a wanton,
Abundantly beautiful, eager,

Fecund,
From whose being by starlight, on sea-coast,
The innermost good of their seeking
Might come in the simplest of speech.

It is a good light, then, for those
That know the ultimate Plato,
Tranquillizing with this jewel
The torments of confusion. (Stevens, 2001, pp. 30-31)

“Homunculus et la Belle Étoile” engages with Stevens’ characteristic exploration of the relationship between humanity and imagination. The poem presents a parable in which the

scholar-poets come to recognize and appreciate imaginative poetic language as the embodiment of their pursuits. The title is translated to “Little Man and the Beautiful Star” (the Latin “homunculus” and French “la belle étoile”). The star symbolizes the imagination of humanity, whose lives are insignificant in the grand scheme of the cosmos.

The poem offers several metaphors for the imagination, such as “la belle étoile”, “the evening star”, “young emerald”, “starlight”, and “good light”; it is as though the imaginative faculty of the mind has to have so many names to reflect the flourishing creativity inherent in it. Just as the evening star directs the swift movements of fish in the sea, imagination inspires drunkards, poets, widows, ladies, and the like to live with spontaneity and intuition. Among the “little men” are “scholars” who typically rely on reason, a force that confines their creativity like “dark cuffs”, until they come to recognize imagination as their “beautiful mistress”.

This metaphor of imagination as the scholars’ mistress introduces an ironic layer, suggesting a clandestine relationship between scholars and imagination—as if the scholars are officially wedded to reason but maintain a secret affair with their imagination, initially dismissed as a “fugitive phantom”. Yet, through “think[ing] hard”, the scholars become “thoughtless”. They then realize that the imagination is not a flimsy ghost but is as “abundantly beautiful” and “fecund” as the solid earth. Stevens asserts, “Imagination has no source except in reality and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality,” indicating that the imagined is not detached from the real (Stevens, 1966, p. 364).

The scholars respond freely to the imaginative force, understanding that to imagine does not exclude reason, “knowing that they can bring back thought.” Stevens further supports this idea in his prose: “one could do nothing in art by being reasonable. That has always seemed

wholly true to me. But it is also true that one can do nothing by being unreasonable ”(Stevens, 1966, pp. 306).

Eventually, the scholars become one with the poets, verbalizing their intellectual or artistic pursuit in poetic expression: “The innermost good of their seeking / Might come in the simplest of speech.” The distress and confusion of those who, in quest of philosophic truth, “know the ultimate Plato,” are pacified by the bright light of the evening star, which embodies the imagination that guides one towards poetic truth. In this way, this poem celebrates the imagination as a profound and passionate source of creativity, where the essence of the scholar-poet’s quest finds its existence through language.

References

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