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AMERICAN MODERNISM AND WALLACE STEVENS'S POETRY

AMERİKAN MODERNİZMİ VE WALLACE STEVENS'İN ŞİİRİ

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Abstract

In the early years of the twentieth century, a remarkable critical and literary frenzy, which was caused by the discussions of many scholars, happened concerning either the nature of the modernist aesthetic or the definition of it. There were a lot of voices attempting to clarify what modernist aesthetic really was. One is supposed to keep in mind that the type of modernism in American Literature was not originally a whole new movement created by the American writers of the times. The starting point of modernism was Europe and the creators or the leading figures of the movement were the European artists. The struggles and efforts of all the writers were aimed to an answer of what the modern literary or poetic aesthetic should be like. The literary world of the age was in search of what the aesthetic modernism dealt with. In many ways, modernism and American modernism were simply a revolt and all about newness in art and literature. On the other hand, the position held by both theories and literature of Wallace Stevens is noteworthy in perceiving the ways how he informs an understanding of literary modernism. Stevens does not see poetry as something totally independent from the problems of history. He considers poetry as the equating power of the interdependence of imagination and reality. His entire work explores the interaction of reality and what man can make of it in his mind. His theories do not argue that the poet's task is just political or social. Stevens is a leading figure in modernism as he is one of the representatives of the neo-Romantic poetry of the twentieth century American Literature.

Keywords: Modernism, American Modernism, Theory, Wallace Stevens, Poetry

Öz

Yirminci yüz yılın ilk yıllarında çok sayıda bilim adamının tartışmalarından kaynaklanan dikkate değer bir eleştirel ve edebi taşkınlık yaşanıyordu ki bu coşkulu tartışmaların temel konusu ya modernist estetiğin doğası ya da bu estetiğin tanımı hakkındaydı. Gerçekte modernist estetik anlayışının ne olduğunu aydınlığa kavuşturmaya çalışan bir çok ses yükseliyordu. Akılda tutulması gereken şey, Amerikan Edebiyatında modernizmin türü, aslında o zamanlar Amerikalı yazarlar tarafından

yaratılan yepyeni bir hareket değildi. Modernizmin başlangıç noktası Avrupa'dır ve hareketin yaratıcıları ya da önde gelen figürleri Avrupalı sanatçılardır. Bütün yazarların mücadeleleri ve gayretleri modern edebiyat ya da şiir estetiğinin nasıl olması gerektiği konusunda bir cevabı amaçlamıştı. Çağın edebiyat dünyası, estetik modernizmin uğraştığı şeyleri araştırıyordu. Bir çok yönden modernizm ve Amerikan modernizmi aslında sadece bir başkaldırıydı ve genel olarak sanat ve edebiyatta yenilik demekti. Diğer taraftan, Wallace Stevens'in hem teorileriyle hem de edebiyatıyla koruduğu pozisyonu edebiyatta modernizmin ne olduğunu anlamamıza yardımcı olduğu için dikkate değerdir. Stevens, şiiri tarihin sorunlarından tamamen bağımsız bir şey olarak görmez. Şiiri hayal gücü ile gerçekliğin karşılıklı bağımlılığının eşitleyici gücü olarak değerlendirir. Tüm eserleri, gerçekliğin insanın aklında ne yapabileceği ile etkileşimini araştırır. Onun teorileri, şairin görevinin sadece siyasi veya toplumsal olduğunu iddia etmez. Stevens yirminci yüz yıl Amerikan Edebiyatında neo-Romantik şiirin temsilcilerinden biri olduğu için modernizm akımında önde gelen bir figürdür.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizm, Amerikan Modernizmi, Teori, Wallace Stevens, Şiir

It is equally as difficult to define the concept of modernism as a particular type of aesthetic representation as to determine the date when the modernist movement began to take place in the twentieth century American Literature. Discussions about the definition of modernist aesthetic vary from theorist to theorist as well as from one person to another depending on what they understand or feel about the very nature of this particular type of aesthetic of the twentieth century. One is supposed to keep in mind that the type of modernism in American Literature was not originally a whole new movement created by the American writers of the times. The starting point of modernism was Europe and the creators or the leading figures of the movement were the European artists. What really happened in the twentieth century American literary modernism were, then, attempts of several writers to establish their own modernist aesthetic to which they could embrace to independent from the so-called European type of modernism.

Both the literary theorists and the writers helped to create such a movement by their artistic and critical productions within the period of this kind of representation. In the early years of the twentieth century, a remarkable critical and literary frenzy, which was caused by the discussions of many scholars, happened concerning either the nature of

the modernist aesthetic or the definition of it. There were a lot of voices attempting to clarify what modernist aesthetic really was. They struggled with the modern aesthetic. There were several different kinds of ideas and theories related to the art of literature during the so-called period. First of all, as Bradbury and McFarlane put it, "It is the literature of technology. Modernism is the art of modernization" (1991:27). Each theorist was looking at the literary word and the notion of the literary works from different points of views in order to determine what aesthetic modernism really meant to them. The struggles and efforts of all the writers were aimed to an answer of what the modern literary or poetic aesthetic should be like. In many ways, the literary world of the age was in search of what the aesthetic modernism dealt with. It would not be a false judgment to say that there was no definition of modernism during the time all these theoretical ideas and activities took place. Nobody really knew and came to a conclusion what modern aesthetic exactly talked about. However, somehow or another the literary world during that time began to practice the modernist aesthetic for modernism became the dominant standpoint for writers and poets. "Modernism is a revolutionary movement. It is a movement that is international in character and scope shared by many art forms. Modernism is a major artistic

movement responding to the sense of social breakdown in the early twentieth century" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991: 28).

While the theorists and the writer-theorists were in an everlasting debate concerned with the nature of modernist aesthetic, they were also continuing to produce literature in one or another form. Maybe, the very fact that the writers of the age were already producing literature whether or not knowing what the modernist aesthetic really was provides the reader with some useful hints leading to form a definition of the concept of modernism. As it is already a known reality, modernism first began in Europe as an artistic movement with the publications of the artists' works of art. "Modernism is widely known as the most creative time in the history of humanity. It can be defined as a sharp line which separates the past and find new forms of expressions" (Tanrıtanır, 2016: 376). On the other hand, theorists and thinkers such as Baudelaire, Arnold and Nietzsche had also been discussing various concepts of art, criticism and the nature of literature in their writings and essays long before modernism came into being as an artistic movement. At this point, we come to realize that dependence on the preceding writers' ideas or conceptions emerges just like the American modernist writers depended on Europeans in adapting this aesthetic representation to their own works of art. Seeds of modernism are to be sought especially in these writers' critical essays and publications mentioned above. It does not necessarily mean that American theorists and writers were not able to create a modernist aesthetic of their own; otherwise there would not have been such a literary movement in the twentieth century American Literature which we are talking about. Furthermore, if Baudelaire is thought to be the father of modernism, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are to be the priests of modernist movement in the twentieth century American Lite-

ature.

There may not be a real clearly defined historical moment when modernism began or a certain definition of modernist aesthetic, but it already took its place in the history of literature and established itself under the name of "Modernism." This is unquestionable. However, the curious modernist reader may still feel uncertain to construe this particular type of aesthetic representation, for he or she too is perplexed by the variety of and differentiation between the literary works of art which the modernist aesthetic actually consists of. It seems that the problematic issue of defining modernism carries the solution within its own structure. The difficulty of such an undertaking may well serve as the basis of the starting point for our search of a definition of the modernist aesthetic. What, then, the curious reader is advised to do to find out his or her own answers as opposed to the question of the definition of modernism? The reader should start with the elements which constitute the difficulty in trying to find the definition of modernism. "Modernism is formalist, confusion, obscurity and deep in sense and for modernist writers, the plot is non-plot; in which it doesn't contain cause and effect" (Tanrıtanır, 2016: 377). As already stated above, the variety and sometimes huge differences between the literary works of the modernist writers help the reader to find an answer to the question of modernism. We may be very close to the definition of modernism if we think in terms of "variety of literary works," "apparent differences between the works" and "many poets, artists and writers." Modernism, then, may be the "synthesis" of all these "various, diverse, different" works of literary art of the "many poets, artists and writers." In many ways, modernism may be considered to be a reaction to the notions and understandings of the arts including the literature of the preceding ages. "The sustaining structures of hu-

man life are destroyed or shown up as falsehoods in modernism. Emphasis is placed on the fragmentation of experience. Modernism is an art of a rapidly modernizing world, a world of rapid industrial development, advanced technology, urbanization, secularization and mass forms of social life" (Bradbury & McFarlane, 1991: 50). The writers of the modernist age chose their own ways of form, subject, style and mode to write in the opposite direction of the preceding ages whether or not knowing that they were gradually establishing the modernist aesthetic.

Each of the writers and the theorists of the modernist movement developed their discussions around their points of views of understanding, writing, and treating literature which indeed eventually developed the concept of modernism as an aesthetic representation of the twentieth century. "The sheer excellence of the modernist writers, and the intensely doctrinal nature of their view of art, could not but establish a tradition of its own. This was a tradition of the new" (Hombberger, 1991: 159). The American writers of the modernist movement were somehow the representatives of modernism. An American modernism was created and led by the writers and poets during the so-called movement. All of these writers were the modernists as each of them had responded to their times by their own unique ways of writings. Each of them came up with new ideas, methods, styles, concepts and attitudes both towards literature and in producing literature. The task of the reader should be to analyze and synthesize all these elements in order to find a possible answer to the definition of modernism. Each of these modernists was writing in a way that both their styles and subject matters were almost totally different from each other. There was not really a proper name or term to call these writers or to position them in the same category for they differed from each other. They were modernists and they were called the modern American writers maybe because each of them went on their own ways. Each

of them was a unique artist and each of them was somehow or another modernist since they almost shared nothing in common. "The poetry, novel and literature they were producing were modern compared to the accumulated literature and art of their past. The conception of "newness" or "novelty" may determine the modernist aesthetic, too" (Hombberger, 1991: 151).

As one of the scholars claims, "Modernist literature is notable for what it omits. It advances without explanation and ends without resolution. In modernist literature, rhetoric is understated and ironic. Symbols and images abound, suggesting rather than asserting. A dynamic pattern exists beneath the surface. The concrete sensory images or details used are the direct conveyers of experience. Another important point is that a modernist literary work has the characteristics of directness, compression, and vividness. The language used is colloquial and slangy. Truth is arrived at by personal interaction with reality" (Hombberger, 1991: 155). The final attempt of the modernist reader in finding a proper answer to the question of the definition of modernism should be focused on the interrelations between and the synthesis of all the literary works produced during the modernist movement. Then, a final judgment about the definition of modernism may be reached. Modernism may be the diversity of the literary works which eventually leads to the synthesis of them that defines this particular type of aesthetic representation of the twentieth century.

Among the poets of the American modernist movement, the position held by both theories and literature of Wallace Stevens is noteworthy in perceiving the ways how he informs an understanding of literary modernism. Stevens is a leading figure in modernism as he is one of the representatives of the neo-Romantic poetry of the twentieth century American Literature. He is a significant poet of the age in the sense that his poetic understanding and practice brought and re-

surrected the Romantic literary tradition into the twentieth century American literary modernism. Stevens is not only a poet but also a respectable theorist for he created new theoretical ideas about the art of poetry. His masterpiece work "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction" is one of the many written on the art of poetry and it has its secure place as the monument of its author in the literary world.

According to Wallace Stevens, "a modern poet should deal with all the historical issues for these historical pressures make a tremendous impact on poetry" (Doggett, 1980: 75). Stevens does not see poetry as something totally independent from the problems of history. He considers poetry as the equating power of the interdependence of imagination and reality. His entire work explores the interaction of reality and what man can make of it in his mind. His theories do not argue that the poet's task is just political or social. The poet's aim is to make his imagination that of the reader. Stevens is a poet who truly believes that a poet helps others to live their lives. "The poet creates the "supreme fiction" which is accomplished at the point he and his imagination become one. The poet invades reality for it is understood by relationships" (Pack, 1958: 57).

Almost all of his poems deal with the exploration of reality and imagination to determine the perfect nature of poetry. Stevens introduced the "imagination-reality" theme into the literary modernism which actually occupied his creative life time. He argues that imagination can be a powerful force, even more powerful than reality. He reveals his idea about the concept of imagination in the following excellent lines taken from "Another Weeping Woman."

The magnificent cause of being,
The imagination, the one reality
In this imagined world. (Stevens,
1990: 25)

So, as it is also obvious from the abo-

ve lines, imagination becomes almost pure reality for Stevens. According to him, poetry is the supreme fusion of the creative imagination and objective reality. Stevens was considered to be a difficult poet from time to time because of the extreme technical and thematic complexity of his work. All kinds of difficulties caused by the poetry of Stevens are likely to disappear as soon as the reader is acquainted with the theoretical ideas of him. Then the reader enjoys the wonderful poetry of the poet.

In the opinion of Stevens, the poet's purpose is to interpret the external world of thought and feeling through imagination. "His poetry introduced a new voice, a refreshingly new idiom. Stevens's poetry includes all the complexities and contradictions of modern life which determines its aesthetic pattern. The poetry of Stevens deals with the present and common phase of reality. We see an abstract-concrete quality in his poetry" (McCann, 1995: 50). He tries to mirror reality and relies on imagination chiefly as it transforms reality and makes it available for perception. He believes that reality must be perceived through imagination. His poetry then, is centrally concerned with the search for reality, the reality of the flowing moment since it always changes as it is obvious in the lines of "An Ordinary Evening In New Haven":

The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.
The poet speaks the poem as it is
Not as it was. (Stevens, 1990: 465)

His poetry is the poetry of ideas, poetry of the inner workings of the mind.

For Stevens, reality consists of both the external reality (the world) and the mind. Imagination and the mind of the poet help comprehend reality by functioning as the transforming element of it. Like his idea of the changing reality, he deems perfection as something which never shows any newness or freshness therefore inhuman because of its

stability. Poetry is not only the vital element of life that helps people understand the world but it is also the supreme fiction which eases the intellectual strain of modern people. It is a great saviour; it gives moral support to people who cannot endure the bitter reality in the absence of some stable faith. Stevens reinforces his idea by stating, "The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give" (qtd in Doggett, 1980: 40).

Stevens's approach to the question of "imagination-reality" concept is sensitive and poetic. He perceives reality as it really is, not as it appears. Reality cannot be as it really is without the interruption of the power of imagination. Reality, which is easily available to perception, is not the real one, because it is hidden underneath the traditional associations. Imagination distorts reality and purges it out of all its taints. It goes through the same process and changes into something else as in "The Man With The Blue

Guitar":

Things as they are

Are changed upon the blue guitar.

(Stevens, 1990: 165)

Stevens's principal theme centers on imagination and its transfiguring role in life, then. Even though imagination and reality are two opposite things, Stevens's poetry aims to reconcile, and wants their happy intercourse. It is through the interaction of opposite things or opposite relationships to arrive at reality, as he clearly demonstrates in "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction":

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend

On one another, as a man depends

On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. (Stevens, 1990:

392)

Imagination transforms reality into something bearable and Stevens's poetry deals with the life, the form and function of imagination. "Like Coleridge, Stevens believes in the transforming power of imagination. Both of them write in reaction to the rationalist tradition of their times. In many ways, Stevens is a neo-Romantic poet, but unlike the English Romantics, he never uses the faculty of imagination to form completely an ideal world aloof from the real one. The main duty of imagination is to transform reality, for him" (Kravec, 1995: 166). And this is probably what makes Stevens a unique modernist neo-Romantic poet. He successfully protests the rationalist writers in one of his wonderful poems "Six Significant Landscapes" as follows:

Rationalists, wearing square hats,

Think, in square rooms,

Looking at the floor,

Looking at the ceiling. (Stevens, 1990:

75)

Imagination permits man a temporary escape from reality. It is larger than reason and mind because it includes the senses and our links with the world, it makes us think that, in Stevens's own words; "Life is not people and scene, but thought and feeling. The world is myself. Life is myself" (qtd in Doggett, 1980: 78). Imagination is more powerful than reason and intelligence, it challenges intelligence, thus

The poem must resist the intelligence

Almost successfully. (Stevens, 1990:

350).

as Stevens states in his poem "Man Carrying Thing." There is an abstraction of reality through imagination according to the theories of Stevens. Imagination is not only a way of creating but also a way of knowing. It takes us beyond the surface of things, the world and we feel able to know and understand better. Stevens embellishes his idea very well with the lines

In my room, the world is beyond my

understanding;

But when I walk I see that it consists
of three or four

hills and a cloud. (Stevens, 1990:
57).

from his poem "Of The Surface of
Things."

Imagination creates nothing that is not in the world. Stevens gives the example of light to clarify his point. He compares imagination to light and says that "like light it adds nothing except itself to reality. Imagination offers us an insight into things and enables us to see more clearly than before. Reality is both the things as they are and as they are perceived in the mind" (qtd in Kravec, 1995: 167). Stevens uses concrete, bold and fresh imagery in his poetry; he resorts to the technique of dramatic monologue together with reflective, meditative, colourful and gaudy style and creates a valuable poetry. His poetry is itself a search for poetry, poetry is the subject matter of his many poems as he also says

Poetry is the subject of the poem,
From this the poem issues and
To this returns. (Stevens, 1990: 176).
in "The Man With The Blue Guitar."

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