

THE HERO ON A PEDESTAL: READING WALLACE STEVENS IN AN INDIAN CLASSROOM

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*When a field is filled from end to end with sheep, a stag stands out. When a continent is filled from end to end with the compliant, we learn what heroism is. And alas for the society that requires heroes. — Cynthia Ozick, *Fame & Folly* (201).*

The statue may be dismissed, not without speaking of it again as a thing that at least makes us conscious of ourselves as we were, if not as we are. To that extent, it helps us to know ourselves. It helps us to know ourselves as we were and that helps us to know ourselves as we are. The statue is neither of the imagination nor of reality. — Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” (645).

For a large country with a putatively impressive demographic dividend, India regrets that it must still keep large numbers of young men and women out of its elite institutions of learning. As for the more privileged youth within India’s university systems, political compulsions of the real and unreal kind occasionally drive them to disrupt academic work, discontinue studies, and thus hamper their own career goals. Regrettably, they seldom see the evil hands that prod or push them to commit acts of self-destructive violence and mayhem.

One such agitation in an elite university in New Delhi recently began with protests against what the students felt was unreasonable hike in hostel fees.¹ Even those who saw such protests from a distance were quick to notice that the problems lay much deeper than unaffordable fees. The faculty and students were polarised as usual in matters of civic and cultural freedom, administrative restrictions concerning political groups and their free movement within campus during late hours, access to public space and university property, etc. The university administration tried to vitiate the atmosphere further by accusing the protesters of unlawful absenteeism and destruction of public

property. There were of course visible signs of relentless unrest when wall graffiti and banners openly exhorted students to stand united against their university's oppressive regime. Of course protests across the country followed in solidarity with the agitators in India's capital city.

What however struck us in Hyderabad as most coincidentally thought-provoking during this time was the news and social media discussion around the desecration of a Swami Vivekananda Statue on the campus of this premier institution of higher learning. Opposite the statue of Jawaharlal Nehru, on the right side of the university's administrative block, stood this as-yet-unveiled statue of Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1902). The Indians cherish Vivekananda's bravura performance of 1893 at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. While it was puzzling therefore why some students targeted this statue, the message scribbled on its pedestal was unmistakably directed at the central government's political party in power and the Vice-Chancellor.

A group of twenty-odd students and I used to meet those days twice a week for a course on American Poetry and Poetics. By a strange coincidence, we were reading Wallace Stevens's "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" and my students seemed particularly interested in Stevens pondering the *heroic* in his stanzas riddled with apparent contradictions. The question that came up repeatedly in our sessions was whether the national heroes were still inspiring figures for the young who spotted their weather-beaten statues on busy street-junctions, within public buildings; or their busts mounted on platforms in halls, garlanded and anointed by devotees. Does hero-worship go too far when the heroes of Indian politics and social reforms almost become sacralized idols and icons? If the public did not *see* them as saintly and sacral, and so commanding a huge following, defacing their statues would not become, or might not be seen as, sacrilegious or challenging their claim to an eminent public domain. Stevens, according to a majority of students,

seems to ask us not to be taken in by symbolic protestations and abstract formulations of the greatness of public figures. This granted, the class began to ask a series of difficult questions: *Are democratic protests justified in vandalizing public property, defacing or defiling public statues? What, in any case, are the agitating students protesting against: heroes and hero-worship in a democratic society? Or, are they interrogating the very legitimacy of those values that occlude conditions of struggle and the urgent need for reforms?*

Stevens' lines that the class found most puzzling yet pertinent to the protocols of student movements across the world belong to Stanza XII (the "it" here is the abstract figure/ the statue of the hero):

It is not an image. It is a feeling.

There is no image of the hero.

There is a feeling as definition.

How could there be an image, an outline,

A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?

The hero is a feeling, a man seen

As if the eye was an emotion,

As if in seeing we saw our feeling

In the object seen and saved that mystic

Against the sight, the penetrating,

Pure eye. Instead of allegory,

We have and are the man, capable

Of his brave quickenings, the human

Accelerations that seem inhuman.

(Stevens, 248–49)

The class could immediately agree that Stevens has come round to what would be most helpful in seeing ourselves *in a hero*, by far the most reasonable and democratic gesture and pose a statue adopts in public view. Hence his neat formulation: “We have and are the man.” If a paradox ever qualified as exemplary, we have it here, in Stevens. In a strict democratic view, the hero *grows* in stature proportionate to the way his statue *diminishes* in its affective power.

Strange as it struck me then, as it does even to this day, there was something the students seemed to have intuitively gathered what I had read about this poem in the pages of *Wallace Stevens Journal* some years ago. Stevens’ “Examination,” according to Rachel Galvin, “employs the rhetorical device of the *correctio*, a figure that provides redefinitions or emendations, such that the entire poem is structured by hesitations, interruptions, and revisions” (Galvin, 29). My students and I had never known *correctio* the same erudite way Galvin had invoked in her reading, but we were not very far from entertaining nearly contradictory ideas of the *heroic*, and in what postcolonial settings they would best figure within our renewed ideas of national order. It did not seem troublesome at all for the class therefore to read and re-read every line in Stanza XII with the understanding (we implicitly shared with Galvin) that “Stevens is less interested in making statements about reality ... than in showing the mind’s conversation with itself ...” (Galvin, 36). And we felt quite relieved that the Stevens poem allowed us that latitude in splendid ways. What indeed helped me put all this better perspective was what I have cited in my second epigraph from “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” My students could easily see how the statues we build and erect in public space accentuate the need for self-knowledge. *Examination* is what Stevens calls it, recalling the Socratic “unexamined life.” For, as he puts it later in the same essay, “we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence” (Stevens, 652).

While reading Stevens' "Examination," we had indeed reminded ourselves earlier (until, that is, the news of the New Delhi 'vandalism' reached us) of the similar *Rhodes Must Fall* agitation on the University of Cape Town campus in 2015. We were quick to notice some parallels between the South African student protestors and those on Indian campuses: the rapid mobilization of student forces across the two countries decrying all forms of discrimination in higher education; the insistent demand for institutional reform; and the urgent need to make university life and education affordable for the educationally and socially weaker students. That agreed, my class still seemed quite ready now to address such questions as the figure statues make in built-in environments, especially their ontological imposition as memorial objects in a postcolonial public space. We recalled incidentally that it was about six months ago that the Indian Prime Minister unveiled in Gujarat what was then touted to be the world's tallest (600 ft.) statue of Sardar Vallabhai Patel, another national leader of eminence.

Of course Swami Vivekananda in India is not the same class as Cecil Rhodes in South Africa. But still, do 'our' heroes remind us only of a glorious past of which all of us ought to be always proud, or only those seasons that bring back fond memories of well being and achievement? In other words, are they ever apt to fall from public grace on account of certain ideological appropriation by sectarian or nefarious politics? My students could very well see how embarrassing the Rhodes statute on the Cape Town campus now seemed to many students there. One student even read aloud to the class the following from "The Rhodes Must Fall Petition:" "The statue has great symbolic power; it glorifies a mass-murderer who exploited black labour and stole land from indigenous people. Its presence erases black history and is an act of violence against black students, workers and staff" (Marback, 2018). But what about the statue of Vivekananda on an Indian campus? Did the students who scribbled messages or daubed paint on it know what they were

doing? We were at a loss to see *what* made the liberal-spirited students of that university resort to something politically cussed as this. (The Students Union there quite appropriately denied having anything at all to do with this misdeed.) In what way would such acts of mindless protest square with that institution's mission of a public university fostering cultural pluralism?

That was where the lines from Stevens on the hero again seemed to suggest some plausible answers, however tentative. The class seemed to believe that the agitating New Delhi students did not *defile* the statue after all, if we were able to see what the poet was urging us to do. Vivekananda is still a hero of the masses. He will remain so, and be recognized as such, if only the Indian youth divested him of obscene aristocratic trappings. Stevens puts it this way: "Devise. Make him of mud, / For every day" (Stevens, 246). Why did the authorities think that only the *marmoreal* elegance of Vivekananda would appeal to students' *memory*? Again, while no one officially dares commit who funded this hugely expensive project, ordinary citizens are less certain how the authorities would fit Vivekananda into a neat historical narrative of Hindu nationalism.

At least for the sake of argument, I believe, my students had a point. I couldn't help recalling to them T. S. Eliot's famous observation in *Four Quartets* that "History may be servitude, / History may be freedom" (Eliot, 219). And that perhaps is also a reminder to all Indians who also pride themselves in English, a colonial legacy that still embarrasses them in their nationalistic moments but nevertheless takes them to a poet like Stevens and ideas of the heroic the world over. An Indian university, elitist and metropolitan by reasonable standards, has no money for decent academic infrastructure. While it has a skimpy grant for its central library, it has certainly been remiss in lavishing so much money on symbolic pride. The makers of statues ought to appreciate Stevens' exhortation to walk the earth as the Indian sages did. Nothing would demean this great visionary if his statue looked downright earthy and real-

sized. Stanza VII of the poem tells us why. It draws a neat distinction between a *classic* hero and a *bourgeois* hero, the latter answering to the democratic aspirations of the less fortunate and socio-economically marginalized like the Indian / Cape Town students:

[...] the classic hero

And the bourgeois, are different, much.

The classic changed. There have been many.

And there are many bourgeois heroes.

There are more heroes than marbles of them.

The marbles are pinchings of an idea,

Yet there is that idea behind the marbles,

The idea of things for public gardens,

Of men suited to public ferns

(Stevens, 246)

The less-privileged have a way of seeing things differently. Where, they ask, is the need to bring mythically exorbitant pressure on the viewers when they look at their hero? If Vivekananda's vision was meant in good faith to inspire generations of youth, his statue had better be of mud, a plain representation in bourgeois affordable material rather than in stunningly extravagant marble. The alleged defacement, so went the argument of the class, is a gesture of correction and modified acceptance by the agitators. As one student reminded us, Vivekananda was an aggressive and unassimilable a stranger when he arrived at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In 1893, he was anonymous and uninvited. That event in Chicago commemorated the quadricentennial anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America. How well Stevens' description of the democratic hero fits Vivekananda:

“This actor/ Is anonymous and cannot help it” (Stevens, 249). My class seemed quite pleased with itself in exonerating those who defaced or defiled the hero’s statue. They were only saluting *their* hero, making him adaptable and presentable, maybe plausible, to thousands of young minds for whom a hero is a *feeling* not a mere *image*. Let not all inspiring objects be idols in marble or gold. Nor do we further any noble cause by making too large ideological pedestals for too small statues of riders.

All of us left the discussion of the day wondering when the political classes in India will seek that knowledge of themselves Stevens wants to see in the makers of statues, or ever begin to see their hero as he preferred seeing *his*:

... his self, the self that embraces

The self of the hero, the solar single,
Man-sun, man-moon, man-earth, man-ocean,
Makes poems on the syllable *fa* or
Jumps from the clouds or, from his window,
Sees the petty gildings on February . . .
The man-sun being hero rejects that
False empire . . . These are the works and pastimes
Of the highest self: he studies the paper
On the wall, the lemons on the table.
This is his day. With nothing lost, he
Arrives at the man-man as he wanted.
This is his night and meditation.

(Stevens, 250)

If in the penultimate stanza of the poem, Stevens offers “a description of the hero as a figure of contemplative thought” as Patrick Redding suggests (42), perhaps I had had good enough grounds to still continue an elaborate discussion of the irony of defacing Vivekananda’s statue by Indian students. Again, although I was sure that the “Owl’s Clover” poems would certainly support Vivekananda’s spiritual messages to America of the late nineteenth century, and that my students would love to comment on their pronounced empathy with the working class, I decided to move on to other poets and poetry of the course. We were, as I recall, nearing the end-of-semester exams. I do recall however at least one student’s paper looking at the two other statues in “Owl’s Clover” to put Vivekananda beside the poet’s Old Woman and Mr. Burnshaw, both emblems of misconduct by the State that looks away, in culpable indifference and sheer apathy, from misery and destitution. Of course the poet’s politics squares with the philosopher’s in my student’s reading, and I couldn’t have asked for more by letting the class read more Stevens on the ‘heroic’ and public statues.²

In the essay “The Students Take Over” (1960), Kenneth Rexroth proposed that the student movements were better understood as “a great moral rejection, a kind of mass vomit” (Rexroth, 83). Students seem to have no better language than their graffiti and banners that holler their miserable conditions of existence. They are only trying to enlist their indifferent oppressor’s attention however crudely to the Thoreauvian “where they live and what they live for.” It may not all be about hike in fees here or dress codes on campus there, but something far more complicated, and things of greater import for our social conscience to address that worry most poor students as well as those the world over: in Hong Kong, France, Spain, and counties in the rest of South Asia and Latin America. “Everybody in the world knows that we are on the verge of extinction,” wrote Rexroth in the same old essay of 1960,

“and nobody does anything about it. The kids are fed up” (Rexroth, 83). And so are we who teach them how to cross physical borders and close asymmetrical gaps in the spread of cultural capital. One feels sad that the world has not been listening to its kids for such a long time.

Coupled with a presumptive ban on any open discussion of the ruling party’s policies, and the university authority’s absolute indifference, and intolerance towards alternative voices and radical thought, it is hardly our students’ fault that they feel like “victims without allies.” This last phrase is Cynthia Ozick’s. Like Stevens, she urged us to look at indifference as the worst form of evil in a civilized world, a world most common only when its common folks are common heroes. Among the sheep might be some “stag that stands out,” her metaphor for the hero in my first epigraph. Ozick once likened victims of social indifference to those “on their way to the chimneys, [for whom] there is hardly anything to choose between a thug with an uplifted truncheon and the decent citizen who will not lift up his eyes” (Ozick, 203). Perhaps that equals what Stevens pronounced as most detrimental to human thought: *poverty*, as he preferred to call it, of not living, by choice, in the physical world. And while living in the physical world, Stevens also insisted on one’s investment in some faith he would call *heroic*: “Unless we believe in the hero, what is there / To believe? (Stevens, 246), “a feeling/ In a feeling mass” (Stevens, 247). The statue imbroglio in New Delhi was perhaps easier for students to see now. Why erect statues for an *unfeeling* mass?³

Notes

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1 The reference is to an agitation that began in November 2019 at a central university of international prestige in New Delhi. The names and other identifiable clues had better remain undisclosed because my point is broader, and as such applicable to all higher educational institutions and their general administration.

2 My comments on the student's paper included a suggestion to compare some passages in Vivekananda's speeches in the US, especially his views on the mortality of material selves, embodied desire and romantic triumphalism, the eternally changing bodies and souls, transmigration and karma, etc. and then look at both poems, "The Old Woman and the Statue" and "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue." In both perhaps Stevens comes closer to *Advaita* (non-duality), especially in the opening lines of "Mr. Burnshaw" where the poet exempts the future from the thrice-repeated *dead*. We owe it to ourselves, despite the death-affirming statues that our future remains alive and well. That *Advaitic* thought is most becoming for students to remember when they see through the narrowly iconic or symbolic subterfuges in marble.

3 That last question did lead us to another contemplative lyric we read alongside Stevens': the poem Robert Hayden published on Frederick Douglass on the fiftieth anniversary of the older poet's death in *The Atlantic*. The eponymous poem ended with the following lines:

when it is more
than the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians:
this man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
where none is lonely, none hunted, alien,
this man, superb in love and logic, this man
shall be remembered. Oh, not with statues' rhetoric,
not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
but with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing. (Hayden)

But who can tell? The poet of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" who asked "Can all men, together, avenge/ One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?" (*CPP* 128) couldn't have helped nodding to Hayden in piteous assent.

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