

Wallace Stevens: The Man and the Poet

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I

My fundamental assumption, particularly in the case of Wallace Stevens, is that poetry and life are inseparable, the former deeply and inescapably rooted in the latter. And it must also be assumed that what Stevens said about poetry or about his own poems is necessarily based on his own ideas or sense of life, on the very way of living he adopted. It is almost impossible not to equate his poetry and his life, or his poetry and his theory of poetry. In "Adagia," a collection of his aphoristic words, Stevens says, "The theory of poetry is the theory of life."¹ Indeed there we find frequent mentions to the same effect: "I have no life except in poetry,"² or "A poem should be part of one's sense of life."³ Apart from Stevens' characteristic fondness for aphoristic sayings (which is indeed one important element of his poems) and some diffidence on the part of readers in taking the literal meanings of these sayings at the face value, on the supposition that there might be some other meanings, or something much vaguer than meanings, hidden behind the words, still we are obliged to conclude, as a starting point of our reasoning, that the kind of poetry Stevens' is a natural growth out of the kind of man he was. Since no biography of Stevens yet exists, we must admit, as Samuel French Morse says some readers do, that none is necessary because "poems are the life, or all of the life that matters."⁴ Morse also states that "he [Wallace Stevens] would have liked the poems to stand as his true biography."⁵ Here we encounter the fundamental problem—perhaps one which is so difficult that it will not be solved forever and certainly one which need not be—of whether or not Wallace Stevens the man and Wallace Stevens the poet are identical.

Leaving this eternal problem behind, we had better try to see what Stevens' idea of poetry is. Is it the literal meanings of the poems? No. Stevens tells his friend Hi Simons in a letter: Obviously it is not possible to tell what one's own poems mean, or were intended to mean.⁶ Moreover, "a poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have."⁷ Of course we must reserve for the readers the liberty of detecting mean-

1 *Opus Posthumous by Wallace Stevens*, edited, with an Introduction, by Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), p.178 Hereafter abbreviated as OP 178

2 OP 175

3 OP 164

4 Samuel French Morse, *Wallace Stevens: Life as Poetry* (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p.vii.

5 Ibid. p.22

6 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p.354. Hereafter abbreviated as LWS 354

7 OP 177

ings in poems and enjoying them. The readers are also free to experience and enjoy the kind of feelings the poems excite in them.

A poem really is, according to Stevens, all these things combined. He says in the same letter to Hi Simons, “. . . a poem is like a man walking on the bank of a river, whose shadow is reflected in the water. If you explain a poem, you are quite likely to do it either in terms of the man, or in terms of the shadow, but you have to explain it in terms of the whole. . . the thing and its double always go together.”⁸ But it is also true that meanings and feelings, or even attitudes one takes toward a poem—all these exist in, or originate from, the words a poet uses and the way these words are arranged. “A poem is poetry expressed in words,”⁹ says Stevens. “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the power of the idea within the poem of the words.”¹⁰ “The poem of the *idea*,” the poem indwelling in the idea is, to Stevens, the central idea of poetry, for “Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms.”¹¹

But we discover much more significant meaning in the words of Stevens that “poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right.”¹² Here we see emphasis on the relationship between life and poetry and suggestions not only about what a poet is but also what he should do. Stevens is a poet in whom there exists latently and tacitly a strong ethical attitude of a human being who is trying to find meaning in the life in this world. This attitude was indispensable to him to live his own life to the full measure, which was his ultimate aim in life.

Now in order to live his own life to the full measure, it was necessary for him first of all to be himself, and no other than himself. Even as early as in the middle of his twenties, he wrote to his fiancée:

I grow infinitely weary of accepting things, of taking things for granted and so on.
I sicken of patterns, and trite symbols, and conventions and the lack of thought.¹³

These words of his youthful days agree with what he said in the last year of his life to his correspondent, a young Korean student:

While you are free to challenge the idea that the poets of antiquity in the East were not the same rollicking characters as the poets of antiquity in the West, I am no less free to reply that those in the East were so often lonely horsemen, hermits beside the water falls, passengers on moonlit roads and men whose hearts were hollow, while those in the West were flirtatious young men that stood outside of the post office and picked up girls, sailors, tourists, and professors at Friburg. Enfin, I refuse to take seriously the idea that living in a bamboo grove increases one's heft. If I lived in one for a week, I should be all elbows and knees at the end of that time. Anyhow, a man whose life is devoted to the study of poetry is as fully a specialist as a man whose life is spent in an effort to find a way of changing sea water into champagne.¹⁴

8 LWS 354

9 OP 163

10 OP 174

11 OP 159

12 OP 176

13 LWS 79

14 LWS 873

What Stevens disliked most was being bound by conventional ideas and devoid of free thinking. To him even the idea of God came under the category of conventions. He said in another letter to Elsie Moll:

I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that, and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odor of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man.¹⁵

These words, together with what Stevens said in his Journal, "...there is nothing good in the world except physical wellbeing. All the rest is philosophical compromise,"¹⁶ may suggest that he was, at least in his younger days, a naturalistic materialist, which, however, he never was in the true sense of the words. He was truly religious, so we may say, in not being "religious" in the usually understood sense of the word. "We live in the mind,"¹⁷ he said. He believed that "imagination is the power of the mind over the possibilities of things."¹⁸

On the other hand Stevens disliked anything that was morbid, unsound and unhealthy, anything that has a smack of immorality. "Poetry is a health."¹⁹ To him Munch, the Norwegian expressionist, was a "repulsive painter."²⁰ Stevens declined to speak at a memorial meeting for Dylan Thomas, who was to him "an utterly improvident person, [who] spent what little money he made without regard to his responsibilities."²¹ Stevens never despised monetary considerations. He served an insurance company well beyond the retiring age of seventy, just to continue his routine at his office. "Money is a kind of poetry,"²² he said. He was an independent individual, mentally as well as physically, who maintained a noble, even, stoic, mien till his death. He never gave a thought to others' influence on him, or his own on others. "I am not conscious of having been influenced by anybody and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously."²³ He also said, "Eliot and I are dead opposites."²⁴ To him, "poetry is not a literary activity; it is a vital activity."²⁵ The following passage from "Connecticut" which he wrote for the Voice of America toward the end of his life indicates most adequately the ultimate character of the poet:

The thrift and frugality of the Connecticut Yankee were necessary to live in the Colony, and still are. They were imposed on him by the character of the natural world in which he came to live, which has not changed. And now, after three centuries or more of this tradition, the people of the state are proud of it. They are proud of the

15 LWS 96

16 LWS 82

17 *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* by Wallace Stevens (New York:Vantage Books), p.140. Hereafter abbreviated as NA 140.

18 NA 136

19 OP 176

20 LWS 688

21 LWS 802

22 OP 165

23 LWS 813

24 LWS 677

25 LWS 815

kind of strength of character which they have derived from this necessity, proud of the intelligent ingenuity with which they faced their many hardships—and with which they rose to the high general level of intelligence and dignified style of living that is now so characteristic of them.²⁶

Near the end of the same essay, Stevens speaks of going back to Connecticut as “a return to an origin,”²⁷ for it is “a question of coming home to the American self in the sort of place in which it was found.”²⁸ Stevens realized, not necessarily in Platonic or Emersonian way of thinking, that there must be something firm and stable at the base of our own lives and everything that surrounds us, for “we live in the tradition which is the true mythology of the region and we breathe in with every breath the joy of having ourselves been created by what has been endured and mastered in the past.”²⁹

Who is my father in this world in this home,
At the spirit's base?

My father's father, his father's father, his—
Shadows like winds

Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,
At the head of the past.³⁰

So sings Stevens in the second poem of his last book of poems, “The Rock.” Stevens and Robert Frost were in the same tradition of America, the one “ploughing on Sunday/ Ploughing North America,”³¹ the other listening to his “long scythe whispering to the ground.”³²

II

During his early groping years Stevens was assiduously trying to find his own style, though, as Morse says, “[it] was easy, during these years, for readers to confuse him with the Imagists and the Greenwich Village ‘exquisites.’”³³ He was also suspected of being a dilettante on the ground that he “had no cause to support, no regional allegiance, no intention of making a career of letters.”³⁴ Sometimes his poems were labeled dandyism. To all these criticisms he gave no ear. He made himself isolated from the literary world and was satisfied with working alone, always content to holding to his own. All the time he was serious enough, but not too much. He was not dissatisfied with being a weekend poet, or a

26 OP 294-95

27 OP 296

28 Ibid.

29 OP 295

30 *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), p.501.

Hereafter abbreviated as CP 501.

31 CP 20

32 *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1951), p.37

33 Morse, p.85

34 Ibid.

holiday poet, concentrating a large part of the daytime in business, only giving time to poetry-making after leaving his office. There were occasions when he went on business trips, which he liked very much and which seemed to provide hints and suggestions to his poems. Always indifferent to what the critical world said of him, he was groping his way to what seemed to him genuine.

On the way, however, he looked many things: odd, comic, eccentric, high-spirited, snobbish, ironical, fastidious, original, burlesque, improvisational, detached, on the one hand inclined to *carpe diem*, on the other serious and humorless, sometimes deliberately expository, sententiously introducing abstract ideas with philosophical implications, sometimes lyrical, deeply meditative. A result is that even "The Snow Man,"³⁵ a poem considered a tour de force representing Stevens' most successful pithy meditation about man's place in reality, "has something of the quality of a serious and elaborate hoax."³⁶ But hoax or not hoax, his poems continue to fascinate the readers, for one of the elements that underlie Stevens' poems was what Stevens said of his "Emperor of Ice-Cream": "the essential gaudiness of poetry."³⁷ On another occasion Stevens said that "poetry is the gaiety(joy) of language."³⁸ Or we remember what Arthur Davson Ficke wrote to Miss Monroe about "Sunday Morning": "Such restraint! Such delicate dignity! And such ambiguity!"³⁹ Stevens' poems never failed to have in greater or lesser degree some qualities that made them genuine.

III

The world of *Harmonium* is that of "the concrete, sensory, sun-drenched poetry."⁴⁰ It is "an Edenic world, . . . with direct appeal to the senses,"⁴¹ evoking "the lushness of this earth."⁴² But this is not the whole story. As Riddel well sums up, we can see *Harmonium* as a "*rade mecum* for the later work." Riddel continues:

There are, for example, poems almost exclusively of the imagination, and oppositely, poems exalting the sensuous world (a geopoetical America, a virgin land of imagination) which in its vitality (and vulgarity) overwhelms the imagination or defies it. On the other hand, the major poems are reflective, meditations upon the meaning of the self's isolation in reality, upon time and transience. Or they are dramatic, presenting the intercourse between mind and world in all its comic variety. In the largest sense, these are poems about poetry, about the poet in search of how far he can go in re-creating the world in feelings and words, and how much he is held by reality to the world as it is. They are poems of a sensitive, alienated self, the poet as outsider seeking to be an insider, trying heroically to find his way through the world rather than beyond it.⁴³

35 CP 9

36 Morse, p.118

37 LWS 263

38 OP 174

39 Quoted by Morse in *Wallace Stevens: Life as Poetry*, p.73

40 R.A.Blessing, *Wallace Stevens' "Whole Harmonium"* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1975), p.5

41 *Ibid.*, pp.8-9

42 *Ibid.*, p.9

43 J.N.Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p.57

A close examination of the poems included in *Harmonium* will reveal that they contain the most important trends which constitute Stevens' later poems. We will find, for example, in "The Course of a Particular,"⁴⁴ one of the later poems published in 1951, the same heroic venture at achieving confirmation of sense data that is found in his much anthologized early poem "The Snow Man." The quasi-metaphysical quest for reality expressed with almost scanty vocabulary, in a well-knit, rather enigmatic paradox is in the later poem mellowed into more intricate and powerful speculative process, with its more matured style, nourished by thirty years of poetic growth:

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 some one 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.

While "The Snow Man" is a very happy result of almost miraculous sleight of hand with the minimum of words, the later poem is more convincingly framed with liberal exhaustiveness. It leaves out nothing that is important; everything that is necessary to elucidate the poet's intention is there in the fullness of articulation.

The poem is about the "final finding of the ear,"⁴⁵ when it confronts the crying of the leaves ("a Particular") in the winter scene. As one listens one becomes aware that it is an inhuman cry which "concerns no one at all." It is the cry of the Thing Itself which exists beyond the "ear"—an indifferent, alien otherness, just as the "scrawny cry" of a bird "at the earliest ending of winter, in March"⁴⁶ was. And yet the leaves "do not transcend themselves." They are just leaves fluttering there—just as man is man, as man does not, cannot, transcend himself. Unable to transcend himself, the poet too must face his own reality, his own fate, and finally be himself.

44 OP 96

45 In CP "ear" was printed "air," but I should like to follow the original printing and also the emendation adopted in Holly Stevens, ed., *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p.367

46 CP 534

The same sudden appearance of purely pictorial sense data that occur after the dialectical speculation which forms the first half of "Metaphor of a Magnifico"⁴⁷ will be found again, in its more varied and dramatic style, in one of the last poems, "Long and Sluggish Lines:"⁴⁸

It makes so little difference, at so much more
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.

Wood-smoke rises through trees, is caught in an upper flow
Of air and whirled away. But it has been often so.

The trees have a look as if they bore sad names
And kept saying over and over one same, same thing,

In a kind of uproar, because an opposite, a contradiction
Has enraged them and made them want to talk it down.

What opposite? Could it be that yellow patch, the side
Of a house, that makes one think the house is laughing;

Or these—escent—issant pre-personae: first fly,
A comic infanta among the tragic drapings,

Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,
The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?

. . . Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

You were not born yet when the trees were crystal
Nor are you now, in this wakefulness inside a sleep.

In "Metaphor of a Magnifico," the first half of the poem is composed of what looks like a process of dialectical speculation going on in the mind of the Magnifico: "Twenty men crossing a bridge,/Into a village,/Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,/Into twenty villages,/Or one man/Crossing a single bridge into a village." Here the Magnifico arrests himself to reflect on his own reasoning and tries to solve the epistemological problem by seeing the scene from another angle only in vain: "Twenty men crossing a bridge,/Into a village,/Are/Twenty men crossing a bridge/Into a village."—logically true, but a tautology that does not lead to the kind of meaning he is trying to reach. Just at this moment of tragic dilemma, the comical philosopher, awakened by the clumping of the men's boots on the boards of the bridge, suddenly finds himself confronting an outward world not uncomfortably independent of his inner world of meditation:

The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit-trees.

The poem, which concerns the impossibility of attaining absolute knowledge with any finality, thus ends with the Magnifico at a loss how to construe the relation between his internal

47 CP 19

48 CP 522

world and outward reality.

This is an example of a great many poems of Stevens born out of banality, things quotidian, or out of imaginative or pictorial images that happened to come his way, just as "On an Old Horn"⁴⁹ was. The bird which "kept saying that birds had once been men" and the Magnifico watching "twenty men crossing a bridge" are both "instances"—as Stevens says in "Theory"⁵⁰: "These are merely instances." Instances of what? Of things that "do not transcend themselves/In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more/Than they are in the final finding of the ear."

In "Metaphor of a Magnifico" we note that almost no passage of time is involved. The Magnifico's meditation, important to him (and perhaps to the poet) as it may be, takes only a few moments to flash through his brain. But at the back of "Long and Sluggish Lines" lie the whole long years of the poet's life—the poet now more than seventy years old.

It makes so little difference, at so much more
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.

Then the poet watches "the wood-smoke" rise through the trees, which then is "caught in an upper flow /Of air and whirled away." But the trees which "keep saying over and over one same, same thing," leads the poet's attention, first, to "that yellow patch, the side /Of a house," then, to "these—escent—issant pre-personae,"—the first "fly," "forsythia" and "magnolia," those strange, fanciful creatures of the earliest spring. These are all things in the process of constant flux and mutation, things of today and aeons distant. The poet, suddenly losing himself in the never-ending flow of nature, calls to himself, desperately trying to recover his stand:

. . . Wanderer, this is the pre-history of February.
The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun.

You were not born yet when the trees were crystal
Nor are you now, in this wakefulness inside a sleep.

He confronts eternity, time before his birth and time that may follow for ever the present moment. But the present moment itself moves on perpetually, leading the poet and his poem to where he cannot know. And yet in the face of inevitable endlessness and impossibility of attaining finality in a world continually passing away—"a theatre floating through the clouds,"⁵¹ there is still an "ease of mind," or, what may appear to be an abandonment, as that which one feels when one rides through waves in a boat "built of stone that had lost their weight."⁵² Who knows, however, if this is not an ironical bluff, "a gentle kind of violence which he employed to protect himself from the violence, the voracious violence, of his own mind?"⁵³

49 CP 230

50 CP 86

51 CP 416

52 CP 515

53 R.H. Pearce, "Wallace Stevens: The Last Lesson of the Master," *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. R.H. Pearce and J.H. Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), pp.130-31

IV

In his later poems Stevens was not averse to giving his lines some human touches, even the moods of "tired puzzlement, amused but peaceful resignation."⁵⁴ The first section of "The Rock"⁵⁵ is an example:

It is an illusion that we were ever alive,
Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves
By our own motions in a freedom of air.

Regard the freedom of seventy years ago.
It is no longer air. The houses still stand,
Though they are rigid in rigid emptiness.

After all those years and all those poems, a vague feeling of futility and ineffectuality (in spite of those Honors and Awards) must have suggested itself even for a moment—for who can boast, however great his success, of his triumphs at the end of his life, provided he is a man capable of self-examination and of seeing what human beings have been doing so far? Stevens must have wondered, at some intimate moment, if a continuing dialogue alone, however muted, however akin to inward monologue, between the self and reality can sustain himself and the world he lives in, for

It is hard to hear the north wind again,
And watch the treetops, as they sway.⁵⁶

The best he could do was to watch the treetops

sway, deeply and loudly, in an effort,
So much less than feeling, so much less than speech,

Saying and saying, the way things say
On the level of that which is not yet knowledge:

A revelation not yet intended.⁵⁷

Thus it comes about that each poem of Stevens is an aspiration for fulfillment of a poet's ultimate commitment: To realize what a man is, and how he lives. Each is a proposition about life, a supreme fiction, a thrust at the "final form."⁵⁸ He is forever in pursuit of that rare chance when he can make a break-through to the center of reality, only to find that the center attained was still short of the real center beyond it, and so on and on. The poems themselves are simply the means of getting beyond themselves. As Pearce says, "The poem, the creative act, must be made continually to point beyond itself to the

54 Pearce, p.386

55 CP 525

56 OP 115

57 Ibid.

58 CP 488

problems of belief which its existence raises.”⁵⁹ Thus “the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else.”⁶⁰ Stevens himself said in the last year of his life when he was offered National Book Award for his *Collected Poems* :

Now, at seventy-five, as I look back on the little that I have done and as I turn the pages of my own poems gathered together in a single volume, I have no choice except to paraphrase the old verse that says that it is not what I am, but what I aspired to be that comforts me. It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize.⁶¹

But it must not be forgotten that until the end of his life Stevens was spiritually robust enough to engage in logical analysis, or what he called “abstract” process, in “a language which is as often abstract and nativist as it is richly concrete and exotic.”⁶² He did not at the same time forget the importance of enjoying life, for he was not a poet like the legendary wizard of the East living in the mountains, “a hermit sitting beside water falls.” Always with a daintiness and fastidiousness of feeling, Stevens retained true enjoyment of day-to-day life, “a happy and well-kept life,”⁶³ and his willingness “to get as close to the ordinary, the commonplace and the ugly as it is possible for a poet to get.”⁶⁴ Stevens’ ideal world was this earth we are living on, as it was to the “ghosts” in “Large Red Man Reading”:⁶⁵

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality . . .

Isaacs’ description of an ideal poet will be as true of Stevens as of any other poets :

. . . the poet’s prime justification for being in this world is his endeavour to master it, to struggle until he has subdued it, until he has reshaped its incoherences and tensions, other people’s shapes and forces, perhaps even God (the rival creator)’s shapes, with his own coherences and harmonies.⁶⁶

59 R. H. Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p.380

60 OP 163

61 OP 246

62 Pearce, *The Continuity*, p.391

63 LWS 669

64 LWS 636

65 CP 423

66 J. Isaacs, *The Background of Modern Poetry, delivered in the B. B. C. Third Programme* (London: G. Bell and Sons Ltd, 1951), p.89