

WALLACE STEVENS' "ON AN OLD HORN"

—AN EXPLICATION

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WALLACE STEVENS の「古い角笛」について

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The characteristic quality of a poem depends upon how much of his ideas the poet has left unsaid and in what way or form he has said what was left of them, or rather what his imagination taught him was necessary to say, in order to make his poem a creation with its own unique essence. What is always essential to him is that his poem be a living thing, vivacious, full of suggestions and possibilities, with a peculiarity of its own. In "On an Old Horn" the poet left out as much as he could, and what he said was represented in images, in a most wry, perverted form, so distorted and tortured that the result is a nightmarish version of the residue of his ideas....., almost a fanciful substitute for the poet's logical rationale. And yet behind all this we discern some deep-rooted solidity that moved the poet to create. We don't know whether or not it was intentionally that he made the poem "irrational." It may be out of the question,

for, as Stevens himself said, "the final authority is the poem itself." (LWS 390)

A maxim from Stevens' "Adagia" says: Poetry must be irrational. (OP 162) In his lecture delivered at Harvard, "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (OP 222), he pleads that "it does not follow that poetry that is irrational in origin is not communicable poetry." Then he asks: "When we find in poetry that which gives us a momentary existence on an exquisite plane, is it necessary to ask the meaning of the poem?" (OP 223) And yet we must say it is, so long as we want to know the poem better. We agree with Stevens when he said that "poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right," (OP 176) but we know also that this is a most arduous task.

"On an Old Horn" is one of the difficult poems by Stevens. He says that "we have no difficulty in recognizing poetry." (NA 45) True, we can recognize the good quality of

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Abbreviations of references cited:

CP *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1954)

OP *Opus Posthumous*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1957)

NA *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1942)

LWS *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Selected and Edited by Holly Stevens. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1966)

In the text the numbers following the abbreviations show the pages.

this particular poem. Still we want to go further and arrive at a level where we can enjoy it by getting on more intimate terms with it. Certainly the task needs "a cure of the mind" (OP 176), by which Stevens seems to mean that, instead of tackling with the matter in a way discursive reasoning and abstract systems usually require, we must "abandon the theory of poetry as organic and as necessarily dependent upon sensations..... [and adopt] a theory of poetic experience as an act of thinking, an act in which the poet, self-conscious and world-conscious,

draws his feeling into an objective world."¹

It is rather a queer poem, this "On an Old Horn," at least to those readers not used to Stevensian style. It is queer not only from the point of its subject matter but also in the fact that it has so far been given little critical interest. The poem is neglected even by the poet's daughter, the editor of *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. a representative selection of Stevens' poems, edited by her and published in 1971.

ON AN OLD HORN

I

The bird kept saying that birds had once been men,
Or were to be, animals with men's eyes,
Men fat as feathers, misers counting breaths,
Women of a melancholy one could sing.
Then the bird from his ruddy belly blew
A trumpet round the trees. Could one say that it was
A baby with the tail of a rat?

The stones

Were violet, yellow, purple, pink. The grass
Of the iris bore white blooms. The bird then boomed.
Could one say that he sang the colors in the stones,
False as the mind, instead of the fragrance, warm
With sun?

In the little of his voice, or the like,
Or less, he found a man, or more, against
Calamity, proclaimed himself, was proclaimed.

II

If the stars that move together as one, disband,
Flying like insects of fire in a cavern of night,
Pipperoo, pipperra, pipperrum... The rest is rot.

(CP 230)

It must not, however, be forgotten that Stevens himself confessed to one of his most intimate correspondents, Hi Simons, to whom he wrote so many open-hearted letters from 1937 through 1945: "I particularly like ["On an Old Horn"]." Why the unpopularity among the critical circles, we don't know. And yet the poet's special fondness for it and the long letter he wrote in response to Hi

Simons' inquiries about the poem will prove it unfair to leave the poem uncriticized.

Included in *Parts of a World* (1942), "On an Old Horn" is one of those poems produced just when Stevens had shaken himself free from the short period of comparative sterility (1927-1929) and was getting back into the full swing of his activities as a poet. For one thing, his life, half of which

¹ Merle E. Brown, *Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), P. 35.

was devoted to insurance business, was at long last stabilized. In 1932 he bought a home situated on a half-acre lot not far from Elizabeth Park in Hartford, Conn. There was the secure feeling of "home" which he had seldom experienced. In 1934 he was appointed vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co. Thus he was established both as a family man and an insurance man. Stability of life, "a happy and well-kept life" (LWS 669), was essential to Stevens as a poet.

The readers of "On an Old Horn" will be reminded of Stevens' other poems with various aspects of transformation or metamorphosis, in its broadest sense. For instance such "Metamorphosis" poems as the eleventh poem of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 170-71):

Slowly the ivy on the stone
Becomes the stones. Women become

The cities, children become the fields
And men in waves become the sea.

Or such "Equation" poems as the fourth poem of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (CP 93):

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

Then there are "Development" poems such as "Looking at a Vase of Flowers" (CP 246):

It was as if thunder took form upon
The piano, that time: the time when
the crude
And jealous grandeurs of sun and sky
Scattered themselves in the garden, like
The wind dissolving into birds,
The clouds becoming braided girls.....

Hoot, little owl within her how
High blue became particular
In the leaf and bud and how the red,
Flicked into pieces, points of air,
Became—how the central, essential red
Escaped its large abstraction, became,
First summer, then a lesser time,
Then the sides of peaches, of dusky

pears.

..... The crude and jealous formlessness
Became the form and the fragrance of
things
Without clairvoyance, close to her.

We may say that "On an Old Horn" is to be included in the same category of Stevens' poems cited above and that one of the principles on which the poem is based is the statement in "Three Academic Pieces" (NA 71): "one of the significant components of the structure of reality is the resemblance between things." The resemblances are not, however, those of the surface of things, but the fundamental unity existing in outward reality, a unity the mind imposes on all of its experiences. In other words the poem is an anecdotal representation of the mind's insight into the essence of things as they are. According to Stevens this seeing of resemblances is due to an activity that exists in the human mind to satisfy its own desire for resemblance and unity, and poetry is nothing but a satisfying of this desire.

What is of vital importance, however, is that "in the act of satisfying this desire for resemblance it [poetry] touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it." (NA 77) One of the purposes of poetry is to give insight into the rapport between subject and object, Imagination and Reality, the blue guitar and things as they are. What Stevens said in his seventy-third year of his life was what he started with and held to all his life: "We live in a world of the imagination. in which reality and contact with it are the greatest blessings." (LWS 753)

To inquire into the meanings of "On an Old Horn," the best help is what the poet himself said in answer to Hi Simons' inquiries about the poem (LWS 403):

Man sees reflections of himself
in nature. Suppose we start all over
again; we start as birds, say, and see
reflections of ourselves in man: perhaps
we were men once, or we may even

become men. This occasions a toot on the horn. Incidentally, while we are changing from birds to men some queer things are likely to happen. Bird babies become men babies, with some unexpected transitional features. Just why I happened to think of the tail of a rat instead of a beak or feathers, I don't know. Perhaps, as a bird's tailfeathers vanish, they look a bit like the tail of a rat.

As the change progresses, and as we begin to think the thoughts of men, there may be survivals of the thinking of our primitive state. This occasions another toot on the horn. But the things of which birds sing are probably subject to change, like the things of which men think, so that, whether bird or man, one has, after all, only one's own horn on which to toot, one's own synthesis on which to rely; one's own fortitude of spirit is the only "fester Burg"; without that fortitude one lives in chaos Suppose, now, we try the thing out, let the imagination create chaos by conceiving of it. The stars leave their places and move about aimlessly, like insects on a summer night. Now, a final toot on the horn. That is all that matters. The order of the spirit is the only music of the spheres: or, rather, the only music.

Stevens' explanation, "Suppose we start all over again; we start as birds, say, and see reflections of ourselves in man..." may be a little baffling to some readers. If we take the bird simply as a projection of the self a man throws on the surface of the external world, we could interpret the poem more easily. There are, in Stevens' poems, many characterizations of the self, says Doggett,² from the sparrow of 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' to blackbird, peacock, pigeon, red robin, crickets... "these are some versions of his idea of the particular existent self." Although it is doubtful if this way of

elucidation is not too much of a sweeping generalization, at least it is true that what is suggested above helps ease the way of understanding "On an Old Horn." But whether it really does without having some damaging effects on the appreciation of the poem is a question, for, as Stevens often said in his letters, explanation mars and even destroys poetry. If we follow Doggett's reasoning, we will be led into a way of explication in which the bird represents "a hypothetical self in the inner world or inner room of consciousness."³ Thus the poem will be reduced to an "inner discourse of a self with a projected other self."⁴

Nor is it construing "On an Old Horn" properly to consider the whole thing merely as an extended metaphor.....metaphor in its restricted sense, for Stevens considers metaphor and metamorphosis as almost interchangeable terms.(NA 72) For one thing there is, between "man" and "bird," no resemblances, nothing to connect each other, even partially. They are from the very first fundamentally disparate identities that cannot be reduced to what I. A. Richards termed the tenor(idea) and the vehicle (image). Between the two there can be no interaction necessary to provide the meaning through resemblances as well as differences. Only mythologically irrational accident, much more drastic than mere "mutation," a miracle that can happen only in nursery tales, can metamorphose one into the other.....one at the top of the evolutionary scale, the other far below. Thus whether or not we can enjoy the poem depends upon whether we can enter and stay at home in this world of fiction, a hypothetical world of quasi Darwinism. If we can, it is because we recognize in "On an Old Horn" something that can be called genuine poetry. What Stevens once said of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" (CP 64) will hold true of this

² Frank Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press. 1966), P. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, P. 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*

poem:

I dislike niggling, and like letting myself go. This poem ["The Emperor of Ice-Cream"] is an instance of letting myself go. Poems of this sort are the pleasantest on which to look back, because they seem to remain fresher than others.... (LWS 264)

"Freshness" is one essential quality of a genuine poem, as well as "spontaneity" and "fluidity" which Stevens prized much. (LWS 276) A good poem must also have "a peculiarity, as if it was the momentarily complete idiom of that which prompts it, even if that which prompts it is the vaguest emotion." (LWS 500) We can admit that in "On an Old Horn" there exist all of these essential qualities of good poetry which satisfy "the instinct of joy" (LWS 296) that everyone of us has. And Stevens believed, after the poem was completed, that "the thing [was] really there," for he said in the same letter about an Old Horn (LWS 403):

Sometimes, when I am writing a thing, it is complete in my mind; I write it in my own way and don't care what happens. I don't mean to say that I am deliberately obscure, but I do mean to say that, when the thing has been put down and is complete to my own way of thinking, I let it go. After all, if the thing is really there, the reader gets it.....

The poet starts the poem almost abruptly with the "bird" speaking a language we can

understand:

The bird kept saying that birds had
once been men,
Or were to be, animals with men's eyes,
Men fat as feathers, misers counting
breaths,
Women of a melancholy one could sing.

Apart from the articulating ability of the bird, some readers who are particular about the logical meaning would ask when the metamorphosis took place, or was going to take place. And where? In the distant world of primitive ages? or today or yesterday? Of course it is foolish to ask such questions: even the poet himself didn't know, nor was it necessary for him to know. What he had in mind was the world of timelessness; a world of thought, where time had no meaning whatever.

Then the bird from his ruddy belly
blew
A trumpet round the trees.

Stevens' explanation of "old horn" is clear enough. It is some intrinsic voice that everyone of us has, something that nobody can escape. It is the inevitable cry of the mind, when, confronting reality, it succeeds, "in its own measure," in discovering some kind or degree of order among the chaos. It may be something inherent in every living thing, inherited perhaps; something akin to Jung's "Collective Unconscious," but not exactly. For it is far more permeated, far more intimate and homely, something quotidian, not a subject of psychoanalysis.⁵

⁵ Of music Stevens said in his letter to his future wife: It is considered that music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory. I do not mean our personal Memory..... the memory of our twenty years and more..... but our inherited Memory, the Memory we have derived from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable, in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions and millions of men and women now dead, whose lives have insensibly passed into our own, and compose them. It is a Memory deep in the mind, without images, so vague that only the vagueness of Music, touching it subtly, vaguely awakens, until

"It remembers its abodes,
And murmurs as the ocean murmurs there."

Stevens, a man of healthy and morally robust vein, preferred to call it "one's own fortitude of spirit," and a fortified citadel ("fester Burg") in which alone we can enjoy true life. In these words he shows his liking of Biblical tone and the lingering influence of his ancestors' religious faith. But Stevens is not a superficial moralist but a poet of animistic inclination, for he goes on to say in the same letter:

Animals challenge with their voices ;
birds comfort themselves with their
voices, rely on their voices as chief en-
courager, etc. It follows that a lion roaring
in a desert and a boy whistling in the
dark are alike, playing old horns: an old
horn, perhaps the oldest horn.(LWS 404)

Thus we know that the "Oldest Horn" is something that precedes "our later anthropomorphic reasoning,"⁶ something that has its origin in "an old chaos of the sun." (CO 70) If we take a still broader view, we will find that it has some affinity with what Stevens called "the first idea":

The first idea was not our own. Adam
In Eden was the father of Descartes
And Eve made air the mirror of herself
.....

But the first idea was not to shape the
clouds
In imitation. The clouds preceded us.

There was a muddy centre before we
breathed.
There was a myth before the myth
began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.
(CP 383)

If we bring our focus much nearer, it would prove to be something more familiar, personal and practical:

Every poet's language is his own distinct tongue. He cannot speak the common language and continue to write poetry any more than he can think the common thought and continue to be a poet. (LWS 873)

Let Stevens' aphorism, "A man has no choice about his style" (OP 210), conclude our search after the meaning of "Old Horn," realizing that, like most of Stevens' poems, "On an Old Horn" is a very elastic poem capable of free expansion and contraction, containing as it does so many layers of meaning reverberating into each other and forming one music.

Another approach to "On an Old Horn" can be made by considering it as an instance of Stevens' habitual use of "biblical forms," to use Morris' term:

Stevens' use of biblical forms, symbols, and echoes is, like his search for a substitute for religion, a habit of mind. It evinces his desire, often difficult to tell from despair, to establish a poetic religion, one in which imagination replaces God as the prime mover.⁷

"Anecdote," one form of biblical style, together with "instance" and "example," is one of the most favorite devices with Stevens, as the titles of some of his poems show: "Earthy Anecdote" (CP 3), "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" (CP 51), "Anecdote of Canna" (CP 55), "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks"(CP 57), "Anecdote of the Jar" (CP 76), and "Anecdote of the Abnormal" (OP 23)

An anecdote is, according to Morris, "a simple, factual account of an episode inherently entertaining."⁸ But what is described in "On an Old Horn" is by no means "factual."

⁶ A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), P. 267.

⁷ Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), P. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, P. 23.

It is an amusing fiction, a sophisticated, plausible fabrication, that gives the poem a peculiarity and a singularity of its own. It has even a kind of joviality that comes from the almost tell-tale trick behind mock seriousness. A free play of imagination replacing the rigidity of orthodoxy is so exhilarating that readers can no more question the relevance, not only of the unexpected “a baby with the tail of a rat,” but of the whole fabric of the poem with its enigmatic mystification.

Nor is this a surrealist method. Stevens is well aware of “the essential fault of surrealism [which] invents without discovering.” (OP 177) Stevens’ aim was always “To discover,..... / Not to impose... /....To find the real,/To be stripped of every fiction except one,/The fiction of an absolute....” (CP 404)

It must also be noticed that anecdotal method is combined with an impressionistic one:

The stones
Were violet, yellow, purple, pink. The
grass
Of the iris bore white blooms.

Why not “red” (the color of reality) or “green” (the color of physical universe) or “blue” (the color of the imagination), we don’t know. Perhaps Stevens used those neutral tints to suggest the supposed misty happenings not very far from fairy tales in its fantasy.

Seen from still another standpoint of humanistic interpretation, the bird is something man was before he became truly man.... “the prehistory” or “pre-personae” (CP 522) of man. The poet asks:

Could one say that he sang the colors
in the stones,
False as the mind, instead of the fragrance, warm
With sun?

According to the poet, “the colors in the stones” are “false as the mind,” that is, they are colors seen by the mind impeded by immature mentality, while “the fragrance, warm/ With sun” is things as they are seen

with “an ignorant eye.” (CO 380) It is what the imagination perceives without least distortion. The answer to the question may be “yes,” but there remains hope that there will be time when the bird will have the eye of a man, when it *is* in actuality a man.

Thus the bird, or the would-be man could proclaim himself man only in the minor of his voice (“the little of his voice, or the like./ Or less”). This shows how difficult it is for man to live like man. It is only through the imagination that we can hope to live truly.

The second section of the poem which consists of three lines is an antithetical appendage and natural development of the first section..... a hypothetical world where absence of apperceptive unity of the imagination throws the constellations into chaotic disorder:

If the stars that move together as one,
disband,
Flying like insects of fire in a cavern
of night,.....

It is an interesting contrast to the starry sky of “Dominion of Black” (CO 8), where “the planets [are] gathered/ Like the leaves themselves/ Turning in the wind.”

Then there resounds another clear cry of the bird, this time deprived of its inherent spontaneity and articulated according to the pedagogic rules given from outside:

Pipperoo, pippera, piperum.....

and the poem is concluded with an ironic pun on Hamlet’s dying words: “The rest is silence.”

After enjoying the poem we cannot but feel that all is a fiction..... a supreme fiction. It is a proposition about life, about reality, about ourselves. And we feel obliged to agree with Stevens when he said that “the final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else.” (OP 163)

As I said before, Stevens disliked explanation because it only “destroys poetry.” In spite of all this “explanation” of mine, “On an Old Horn” keeps its existence, forever challenging us to enjoy it properly, and to

always bear in mind what Stevens once told
Hi Simons:

Obviously, it is not possible to tell one what one's own poems mean, or were intended to mean. On the other hand, it is not the simplest thing in the world to explain a poem. I thought of it this way this morning: 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. When I said recently that a poem was what was on the page, it seems to me now that I was wrong because that is explaining in terms of the man. But the thing and its double always go together. (LWS 354)