

An Introduction to Reading Wallace Stevens as a Poet of the Human Spirit

By Dana Wilde

Wallace Stevens is one of the most perplexing of the major modern poets. His poetry, as even his most ardent admirers agree, is very difficult to follow, and his personal life cuts against the grain of commonplace beliefs about the lives of modern poets. Stevens was neither a bohemian, nor a drunk, nor a professor. In fact he was a successful insurance lawyer in Connecticut, and became a vice president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Socially he was elegant and polished, but he had few close friends and rarely accepted guests in his house. His business associates claimed they weren't aware that he wrote poetry, and were surprised when late in life he began to receive national awards and honors for his poetry.

Despite the conventional wisdom that poets write their most powerful, impassioned verse when they are young, Wallace Stevens' first book of poetry was published in 1923 when he was 44 years old. It was called *Harmonium*, and although at the time it was not a best-seller, it eventually became recognized, along with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), William Carlos Williams' *Spring and All* (1923) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), as one of the watershed books in modern literature.

The *Waste Land* and *Ulysses* are watershed works because they are the prime examples of modern literature's preoccupation with psychology. They seek to create through words the inner mental and emotional conditions of their characters and subjects. Language, in this sense, is a material for evoking or creating psychological conditions. These ideas about language and psychology differ from older, more

conventional ideas. Traditionally, poets were thought to be "describing" or "re-creating" scenes and experiences of their own. A poet "clothed" his or her perceptions in words, in imitation of his or her experience. In contrast, modern literature deliberately cast off the idea of imitation and insisted that any poem or story is an autonomous creation in itself: a creation of a human psychological condition. Since human psychological conditions are by nature complex and difficult to grasp, and since a poem or a story is made of words, then to be accurate, the words of a modern poem or story will in many cases be very difficult to read. *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land* and *Harmonium*, along with much other modern literature, present tangles of highly unconventional language intended to stand as things or entities of their own.

Harmonium's language and imagery are so unconventional that on first, even second and third reading, the poems seem to make no sense. Poetry lovers seeking straightforward emotional experiences through images of flowers or landscapes instead seem to encounter cement walls of peculiar words. Others, seeking moral truths or worldly wisdom, encounter perplexing combinations of words which seem to say nothing recognizable. Even Stevens' titles seem, at first glance, to be utterly unrelated to the images subsequently found in their poems. The words, although exquisitely structured for their sonic and rhythmic patterns as well as their novel effects, seem literally all but meaningless.

These difficulties in a way exemplify the general problems many readers have with modern poetry's emphasis on language. The

words themselves, in their strange, dense combinations, often seem downright impenetrable. But a further problem involves the emphasis on human psychology rather than the older emphasis on the human spirit. Psychology springs from a scientific, essentially un-moral frame of reference: there is no good or bad in psychology, only conditions, causes and effects. Spirituality (to use a word which might cause problems in this discussion) springs from a religious, moral frame of reference. Readers who come to modern literature expecting to be spiritually instructed or uplifted are quickly perplexed, even baffled by the psychological emphasis. Modern literature does not normally instruct or uplift; for better or worse, it creates. It assumes the existence of a human psyche, but not, in many cases, the existence of a human soul.

Wallace Stevens' poetry, because its language is difficult, seems to share these modern traits. One of the early academic criticisms of Stevens' poetry, in fact, came when Yvor Winters accused Stevens of being a poetic hedonist. Winters said that Stevens' "gaiety of language" involved merely unconventional, if clever, choices of words combined with unusual patterns of sound and rhythm. It was a sort of poetic materialism, in Winters' view, designed to produce only novelty and pleasure, with no redeeming moral or spiritual value.

Since Winters offered this opinion in the 1940s, the interpretation of Stevens' poetry has (for other reasons) centered on his use of language. In the "postmodern" age of literature and literary criticism (roughly, anything written after 1945), critics have explored Stevens' rhetorical structures and his philosophical occupation with how words – both others' and our own – shape our experience of the world.

Stevens' rhetoric and ideas about language are only part of the picture, however. Wallace Stevens, especially as revealed in his later writings, was a poet of the human spirit no less

than he was a poet of psychology. His poems are quintessentially modern in their unconventional use of language, but they are also deeply "spiritual" in their basic impulse and theme.

Stevens himself would be wary of applying the word "spiritual" because of its overuse and misuse by some people. But his poetry and essays revolve around, perhaps, three matters of primary significance for the human spirit: 1) the relation of human consciousness to reality; 2) the role language plays in shaping reality; and 3) the unknown elements that comprise, or generate, our experience as human beings. The first and third of these, at least, can be categorized as major "spiritual" concerns, and the second is revealed in Stevens as a major factor in all human experience.

Stevens from time to time uses the word "spirit" in his later writings, but draws back from speaking directly of God. Instead, he approaches spiritual matters from a more rationalistic viewpoint. This thoroughly modern rationalism, coupled with highly figurative imagery and eccentric language, all but obscures the spiritual preoccupations of his poetry. "Poetry must resist the intelligence almost successfully," reads one of Stevens' most often-quoted aphorisms. His spiritual concerns unfold from poetic answers to rational philosophical questions.

His central questions ask, not directly about God or soul, but about how human consciousness is related to the world. It seems clear in nearly all his poetry that for Stevens, consciousness does not merely occupy and observe a material universe, but actively participates in the creation of reality. In other words, the human imagination at least partly creates its own reality. It is an ordering force. To oversimplify somewhat, the external, material world is by itself merely chaos until a conscious imagination seizes it and puts it in a recognizable, meaningful order.

This general idea is at work in widely anthologized poems like "Anecdote of the Jar,"

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," and "The Idea of Order at Key West." In "Anecdote of the Jar" the first stanza tells us:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

(Collected Poems, p. 76)

Now on first glance these lines sound like meaningless doggerel. What's going on in Tennessee? Who cares if the jar was round? And most outrageously, how can a jar—a tiny thing compared to a hill—cause the wilderness (is a wilderness "slovenly"?) to surround the hill? How can a tiny, inert thing force an enormous thing to do anything?

The next two lines strain the poem's credibility even further:

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.

If we read just the simple, literal meaning of these lines, we see that the jar has somehow become a center for the wilderness, and thereby caused the wilderness to be no longer wild. The first line of the last stanza draws an apparently nonsensical conclusion: "It [the jar] took dominion everywhere." The literal meaning of this simple sentence is that the jar was in charge of everything. How could a jar do this?

The answer comes when we recognize that Stevens is describing a metaphorical answer to his persistent question: how is human consciousness related to reality? Stevens is saying something like this: A jar, the wilderness and the speaker of the poem are figures, or metaphors. The "wilderness" is a figure or metaphor for nature, or the world around us. By itself, the world is "slovenly," it has no order of its own. The "jar" is a figure or metaphor for a means of making the world seem orderly. In other words, to understand where we are, who we are, or even what is happening around us, we

need to identify some kind of order in the world. To find order, we make points of orientation; we single out locations which serve as markers. The jar is a metaphor for a marker, or further, for away of understanding the world. We place jars as points of orientation to make order in the wilderness.

Our points of orientation might spring from a scientific viewpoint, from a religious viewpoint, from a political viewpoint, or even from a poetic viewpoint. Accordingly, the "I" – the speaker of the poem – is a metaphor for the imagination which "places" the jar. When the imagination places a marker somewhere – even somewhere as remote and commonplace as Tennessee – then some kind of order appears, and suddenly the world, or "wilderness," can be understood: it is no longer wild.

"Anecdote of the Jar" is often reprinted because it is one of the plainest statements of Stevens' proposition that the imagination participates in creating our experience of reality. The "jars" that human beings place in the universe are very complex. A religious view or a scientific view is a highly complex "jar." In Stevens' lexicon, a complex view of reality, or a way of making meaning or understanding, is called a "fiction." For Stevens there are at least two general categories of "fictions": poetic and commonplace. Poetic fictions are powerful, bringing reality into sharp, intense, meaningful focus. Commonplace fictions are lame, tired, fuzzy, uncertain, even meaningless.

These two categories correspond, in some ways, to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea that the human mind generates acts of "Imagination" and acts of "Fancy." Coleridge says: "The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." In other words, the imagination is the transcendent creative force of the universe in play in the human mind. He goes on to say there is a less efficacious activity of the

mind: "FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites...the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association." (Chapter XIII, *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Coleridge*, p. 263).

In Stevens, acts of the "Imagination" are creative fictions which order the world and provide a sense of meaning. Coleridge's term "Fancy" describes Stevens' sense that the creative imagination fails when it utilizes whatever explanations it happens to be given. A consciousness which uses clichés, or worn, outmoded myths, or ready-made descriptions of reality, lacks meaningful experience. A poem like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" demonstrates how the imagination can turn even a simple image like a bird into many different and novel images, unlike what the "Fancy" would commonly accept and forget without really noticing. A true act of imagination can make a small bird diversely meaningful.

A poem like "The Idea of Order at Key West" offers a picture of the complexity and uncertainty of the relationship between the imagination's ordering power and the physical world. The speaker of the poem listens to a woman singing a song beside the sea. Her music seems obtained directly from the sounds and rhythms of the waves. The sea and the music seem identical yet separate. The sea is a figure of the chaotic natural world. The singer is a figure of human consciousness (or imagination) ordering and forming its perception of the chaotic world. The music itself is a figure of the experience, or the product (so to speak), of the mind forming order and meaning from the world.

For Stevens, each individual mind has the task of making its own meaning. It can create its own fictions, as does a singer, poet or artist, or it can use ready-made associations such as religious myths or social conventions. The danger of using ready-made explanations of the world is that they become stale, clichéd, even meaningless.

Our earlier mention of the word "spiritual" is an example of a word which has been used so often that its meaning becomes worn and commonplace; it is a ready-made idea, rather than an imaginative act.

This leads to the second important point about Stevens' writing: language plays an important role in shaping reality. In other words, the way we use words influences our imagination of the world. "It is a world of words to the end of it," Stevens says in his long, astonishing poem, "Description without Place." Any words, especially in poetry, are formulations of reality (like the singer's music in "The Idea of Order at Key West"). In a way, they are reality. The world will be the way we describe it to ourselves – but describe imaginatively, not fancifully. If we use fresh, accurate, forceful words, our reality will have freshness, force and meaning. If we use stale, worn, careless words, our reality will be accordingly stale and worn. Stevens' use of unconventional words and diction, therefore, was not simply hedonistic, and not merely "psychological," but was an effort to shape and create an actual inner reality.

Now remarks like these can lead in a very strange direction. They can lead us into close, grueling examinations of language, of how words fit together and what peculiar meanings they evoke. This is the stuff of much postmodern criticism. But it is a detour and a distraction from the real problem, as a scientific analysis of a joke would be a detour and a distraction from the joke's humor.

What, in Stevens, does the minute study of language distract us from? The answer is that it distracts us from the unknown elements in our experience as human beings. Language is important because it is an instrumental, concrete shaper of our reality. But more important is that reality, or experience, itself. Stevens often reveals a frustration with words because they frequently fail to express, or shape, exactly the experience he has had or intends to create. Although

tremendously powerful, words are also inadequate to the task, which is after all supremely important. For Stevens, something else is obviously at work.

In his lecture "The Irrational Element in Poetry," read at Harvard University in 1936, Stevens tried to clarify his sense that poetry is not merely a game of assembling words, but an effort to make real inner meaning. "What I have in mind," he says, "when I speak of the irrational element in poetry is the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs" (*Opus Posthumous*, p. 224). "What interests us," he continues, "is a particular process in the rational mind which we recognize as irrational in the sense that it takes place unaccountably" (225).

Contrary, in other words, to the dominant scientific view that the human mind is primarily rational, Stevens here acknowledges that something besides conscious human will operates in acts of imagination and creation. Whether it is inside or outside of the individual mind is uncertain, and in a way not even treated in this essay. But he pushes his propositions to a limit which is conveniently ignored by most of his more scientifically-minded, postmodern critics: he speaks of God and the spirit in a serious, if tentative, way. I will quote Stevens at length here, rather than try to summarize:

Why does one write poetry? I have already stated a number of reasons, among them these: because one is impelled to do so by a personal sensibility and also because one grows tired of the monotony of one's imagination, say, and sets out to find variety. In his discourse before the Academy, ten years ago or more, M. Bremond elucidated a mystical motive and made it clear that, in his opinion, one writes poetry to find God. I should like to consider this in conjunction with what might better be considered separately, and that is the question of

meaning in poetry.

(We should note that Stevens here indicates that the modern, rationalist view of reality separates the idea of God from the idea of meaning. Nietzsche, after all, had already said that God is dead. But Stevens, through speaking of poetry, subtly brings the ideas of God and meaning together again. These sentences imply that all meaning might not be material, despite the insistence of classical science.) The lecture continues:

M. Bremond proposed the identity of poetry and prayer, and ... eliminated reason as the essential element in poetry. Poetry in which the irrational element dominated was pure poetry ... All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply [a] looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. Or, simply, one writes poetry out of a delight in the harmonious and orderly. (*Opus Posthumous*, pp. 227-28)

A remarkable point is made in this passage. The consciousness which generates poetry (or, in a sense, meaningful reality) is linked in an irrational way to its surroundings by "a delight in the harmonious and orderly." Further, Stevens maintains his credibility in his skeptical rationalist age by keeping a decorous scientific distance from any direct assertion of God's existence. Yet he includes God in his point by circling in the Platonic logic that the Good is God, and that the Beautiful (or the supremely orderly and harmonious), too, is God. He is speaking

here by implication of the spiritual activity inherent in making poetry, which is also to say, making reality.

We should note some very pregnant words in this context. The title of Stevens' first book was *Harmonium*, a word derived from "harmony," and for along time he contemplated titling all his collected poems "The Whole of Harmonium." Together with his remarks about M. Bremond and the Platonic impulses that underlie writing poetry, these titles clearly indicate a poet who is as visionary, probably, as modern rationalism will allow.

This poet, in other words, has a deep, "irrational" sense that the entire world, through acts of the creative imagination, displays order and harmony. The central proposition of his poetry is that order and harmony occur in the human mind, as an act of creation.* The world is in a sense as harmonious and therefore whole, as the imagination which conceives it. This proposition, although it is cast in simultaneously rational and metaphoric (or poetic) terms, is in the end one of the fundamental tenets of the perennial philosophy. The universe is harmonious, whole, one. Its meaning, as far as we can tell, occurs in our own minds. As mystics from Parmenides through Buddha, Jesus, Dante, Swedenborg and Blake persistently inform us, we create our own heavens and hells.

Stevens' way of informing us comes in language and imagery so radically different from previous times that it is difficult to recognize exactly what he means. But throughout his poetry he speaks, like the mystics, primarily of the nature of our relationship with the universe. He continually circles back to the idea that we actively participate in what the world looks like and what it means. Although cast in modern terms, this idea is profoundly spiritual and moral.

Since he gives no evidence of any direct visionary experience, it's not possible to say Stevens is a "mystic" or a "contemplative" poet.

But he is a major figure in modern poetry because he synthesizes the concerns of the modern world—the emphasis on the human self as maker of meaning, the emphasis on scientific rationality, the emphasis on creating new forms to replace outmoded beliefs—with the perennial concerns of the human spirit. To find meaning, or the good—or by implication, God—we need to radically adjust our conception of reality. This takes powerful acts of individual imagination, and the possibilities are immense:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that
traverses

A dust, a force that traverses a shade.

(Collected Poems, p. 489)

These lines from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" echo distantly, in the same way that Coleridge says the imagination is a repetition of the eternal act of creation, the major mind at work: "A mighty wind swept over the surface of the waters," says the first book of Genesis. "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light; and God saw that the light was good." Contrary to all his appearances, to the difficulty of his verse, and to the preoccupied, distracted interpretations of contemporary critics, Wallace Stevens' poetry is a profoundly spiritual force. Anyone interested in the spiritual problems of modern humans must reckon with it.

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See also individual issues of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, published at Clarkson University, Potsdam, New York.

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Footnote

* This idea, incidentally, is born out in the findings of quantum physics, which imply (in the understanding of Werner Heisenberg) that reality occurs only when an event registers in the mind of an observer. Stevens was at least generally aware of such metaphysically disturbing implications of modern physics.