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A Celebration for Wallace Stevens
A Celebration for WALLACE STEVENS

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A page from the score of "Ideas of Order," by Arthur Berger is reproduced on the inside of the back cover. The portrait on the cover was done by Inez Campo.
Notes on Contributors

CONRAD AIKEN has recently been in England. He is one of America's most distinguished men of letters.

ARTHUR BERGER teaches at Brandeis University. His music has commanded the attention of listeners and critics here and abroad.

LOUIS BERRONE is a Senior at Trinity College.

LOUISE BOGAN has just published her Collected Poems. She is as well known for her criticism as for her poetry.

JOHN MALCOLM BRINNIN is Director of the Poetry Center at the YMHA in New York, and a poet of considerable accomplishments in his own right.

INEZ CAMPO promises to achieve a notable reputation as an artist. She lives in Hartford.

MICHAEL CAMPO, who teaches in the Romance Language department at Trinity, is a specialist in modern Italian literature.

GUSTAVE COHEN is the great French Medievalist.

BABETTE DEUTSCH is a fine translator and critic as well as poet. Her most recent book is Animal, Vegetable, Mineral.

RICHARD EBERHART will teach at Wheaton next year, where he will occupy a new chair in the Humanities. His most recent book is Undercliff.

T. S. ELIOT needs no note.

WILLIAM EMPSON wrote his review originally for British readers, but his remarks are properly reprinted here. His poetry has recently begun to receive attention as serious as that given his criticism.

F. CUDWORTH FLINT teaches at Dartmouth. His criticism is as just as it is astute.

JOHN GRUEN lives in New York. Several of his song-cycles, including "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," have been recorded.

JERALD HATFIELD is a Junior at Trinity, a member of the Review board.

ALFRED A. KNOPF has been the publisher of Wallace Stevens since 1923.

ALFRED KREYMBORG helped shape the literary careers of many of the best experimental poets of the 'Teens, when he founded Others.

BRUCE MACDONALD, who did the illustrations in the text, is a Sophomore at Trinity.

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MARIANNE MOORE is about to make her mark in new fields, as the translator of the fables of La Fontaine.

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I. L. SALOMON now lives in New York, and is a contributor to the New Yorker, Poetry, the Saturday Review, and other magazines.

KARL SHAPIRO has recently returned to America from a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is editor of Poetry.

DONALD SUHTELAND, who teaches at the University of Colorado, is the author of an outstanding book on Gertrude Stein.

JOHN L. SWEENEY has charge of the Poetry Collection at the Lamont Library, Harvard University.

JULIAN SYMONS is a biographer and writer of first-rate thrillers, as well as poet and critic.

PETER VIERECK teaches at Mount Holyoke College, where he is historian and poet.

RICHARD Wilbur has just won the Prix de Rome for poetry. He leaves Harvard soon to teach at Wellesley.

Acknowledgments

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS are due to Inventario (Rome) for permission, to reprint "The Rock," by Wallace Stevens, which has never appeared in this country; to E. P. Dutton and Babette Deutsch, for permission to reprint "Letter to Wallace Stevens," from Animal, Vegetable, Mineral; to William Empson and The Listener, for permission to reprint the review of Selected Poems; to Peter Viereck and Contemporary Verse, for permission to reprint "Some Notes on Wallace Stevens"; and to the Times Literary Supplement (London), for permission to reprint excerpts from a review of Selected Poems.

THANKS to all the contributors cannot be measured, for their great generosity and co-operation in making this issue of the Trinity Review possible in the first place. To them the Editor for this issue and the members of the Board owe a great debt.
Two New Poems
by
Wallace Stevens

NOT IDEAS ABOUT THE THING
BUT THE THING ITSELF

At the earliest ending of winter,
In March, a scrawny cry from outside
Seemed like a sound in his mind.

He knew that he heard it,
A bird’s cry, at daylight or before,
In the early March wind.

The sun was rising at six,
No longer a battered panache above snow . .
It would have been outside.

It was not from the vast ventriloquism
Of sleep’s faded papier-maché . .
The sun was coming from outside.

That scrawny cry—It was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.
THE ROCK

I

Seventy Years Later

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.

Even our shadows, their shadows, no longer remain.
The lives these lived in the mind are at an end.
They never were . . The sounds of the guitar
Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken
Were not and are not. It is not to be believed.
The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod
And another in a fantastic consciousness,
In a queer assertion of humanity:

A theorem proposed between the two—
Two figures in a nature of the sun,
In the sun's design of its own happiness,

As if nothingness contained a métier,
A vital assumption, an impermanence
In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired

That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,

In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
A particular of being, that gross universe.
II

The Poem As Icon

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure
Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness.
And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,
And if we ate the incipient colorings
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground.
The fiction of the leaves is the icon
Of the poem, the figuration of blessedness,
And the icon is the man. The pearled chaplet
Of spring,
The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood,
Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock.
These leaves are the poem, the icon and the man.
These are a cure of the ground and of ourselves,
In the predicate that there is nothing else.
They bud and bloom and bear their fruit without change.
They are more than leaves that cover the barren rock.

They bud the whitest eye, the pallidest sprout,
New senses in the engenderings of sense,
The desire to be at the end of distances,
The body quickened and the mind in root.
They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love.
They bear their fruit so that the year is known,
As if its understanding was brown skin,
The honey in its pulp, the final found,
The plenty of the year and of the world.
In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock,
Of such mixed motion and such imagery
That its barrenness becomes a thousand things
And so exists no more. This is the cure
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves
His words are both the icon and the man.

III

Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn

The rock is the gray particular of man's life,
The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho,
The step to the bleaker depths of his descents.

The rock is the stern particular of the air,
The mirror of the planets, one by one,
But through man's eye, their silent rhapsodist,

Turquoise the rock, at odious evening bright
With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
The difficult rightness of half-risen day.

The rock is the habitation of the whole,
Its strength and measure, that which is near,

In a perspective that begins again
At B: the origin of the mango's rind.
It is the rock where tranquil must adduce
Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,

The starting point of the human and the end,
That in which space itself is contained, the gate
To the enclosure, day, the things illumined

By day, night and that which night illumines,
Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep.

—WALLACE STEVENS
REASONS FOR MUSIC
(For Wallace Stevens)

Why do we labor at the poem
Age after age—even an age like
This one, when the living rock
No longer lives and the cut stone perishes?
—Hölderlin’s question. Why be poet
Now when the meanings do not mean?
When the stone shape is shaped stone . . .
Dürftiger Zeit . . . time without inwardness . . .

Why lie upon our beds at night
Holding a mouthful of words, exhausted
Most by the absence of the adversary?

Why be poet? Why be man!
Far out in the uttermost Andes
Mortised enormous stones are piled.
What is a man? Who founds a poem
In the rubble of wild world . . . wilderness.

The acropolis of eternity that crumbles
Time and again is mine . . . my task.
The heart’s necessity compels me.
Man I am: poet must be.

The labor of order has no rest:
To impose on the confused, fortuitous
Flowing away of the world, Form,
Still, cool, clean, obdurate,
Lasting forever or at least
Lasting: a precarious monument
Promising immortality, for the wing
Moves and in the moving balances.

Why do we labor at the poem?
Out of the turbulence of the sea,
Flower by brittle flower, rises
The coral reef that calms the water;

The generations of the dying
Fix the sea’s dissolving salts
In stone, still trees, their branches immovable
Meaning the movement of the sea.

—ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

WHEN I received a letter from Mr. Morse inviting my cooperation in an issue of the Review in honour of the seventy-fifth birthday of Wallace Stevens, I replied at once to explain why I could do nothing that would be adequate to the occasion. I was at that moment engaged on a task which would take me through most of November. The contributors to the Review were allowed until February 2nd; but I could allow myself only until Christmas, having arranged to take a long voyage from which I should not be returning until March. Having given these explanations, I asked whether a paragraph, a sentence or a phrase might serve as a token, so that my name at least should not be absent from the chorus.

I write not only as an admirer, but with the special responsibility of a Director of the Firm who publish Wallace Stevens in England. I am not boasting of that: in fact I am rather ashamed of the fact that Stevens has not been published in London before. I had taken for granted that some other firm had published his work, and wondered at their incompetence in taking so little trouble to make the fact known: it was one of my fellow directors who first called my attention to the fact that Stevens, although his name and some of his poems were very well known to the elite who really know, had had no book to himself. Now, his reputation is beginning to spread to the people who don’t know. There is no compliment on my own work that gives me more pleasure than that of the man who says, “I didn’t know anything about this chap, but I picked up a volume of his the other day—and I found I liked it!” I have heard that said lately several times, about the book of Wallace Stevens.

If I was writing a critical article, I should have to try to explain why I like the poems of Wallace Stevens so much: and the explaining why is always what takes the time. But I am only writing in order to get my name into this Festschrift; and I hope that the Editor will see that my name is printed so that no one can miss it.

—T. S. ELIOT
WALLACE STEVENS

I'll never forget "Peter Quince at the Clav­
ier" nor the admonishment to some digi­nity wearing "a Caftan of tan" and "with henna hackles" to "halt". "I Placed a Jar in Tennessee" is a line with which I am as fa­miliar as with my own name. All these things which I learned from the poems of Wallace Stevens in the early 20's or before have become a part of my life. As distinct is the memory I have of my first trip to Hartford to pay him a visit. I had been to Vermont on a vacation and had my dog Bobby along. He was an intelli­gent dog and knew how to behave before strangers. Stevens had reserved quarters for us in a hotel. He spoke that night of having a friend who every Christmas made a point of sending him a present, from Paris, some candied violets! and what a kick he always got from it. Stevens is a big man and obviously intelli­gent. He was friendly but aloof and not in the least effeminate. Nor did he give ground under attack but continued to celebrate his own peculiar view of the world. There was always something forbiddingly formal about Stevens; that was perhaps his parental background.

If you knew him you couldn't help liking him howbeit with an admixture of awe for his ac­complishments, especially if you knew how he had fought his way from being news reporter on the New York Tribune, I think it was. Finding himself licked there and reversing his field he gave himself to his present position in the law.

He wanted to be a writer, perhaps a poet. It took a certain adroitness and perseverance to cling to that while changing face to become pro­ficient in something else. He, apparently, was not dismayed but took it as an occasion for sharpening his wits. His poetry has not suf­fered. He has made a success of both pro­fessions. After all, you cannot spend all your life writing, there come moments when you might as well be otherwise employed. It's brac­ing and returns the writer to his words with a rather sharper eye for detail.

What has Stevens accomplished with his life? Or better put, what has been his aim and how far has he succeeded in achieving it?

It's the infinite variety of resource in the phrasing of his poetic ideas that has kept Stev­ens alive for us the past thirty to forty years. It was there in the first poems and is still there in The Auroras of Autumn, one of his most recent books. There is a verbal quickness, a love for alliteration and other grace notes which are cleverly used to enhance the charm of what is being said, but what I refer to goes further than that. It is what undoubtedly has made him all his life a poet. It is the music of his lines, the overall music of his phrasing, that has been the thing that has kept Stevens peren­nially at the top of his game, always ready to carry it further. If it were not for that he could not have gone on.

Stevens has a quick mind and, as becomes a lawyer, it is full of verbal quiddities. His im­agination fills his poems with an infinite variety of birds and beasts, trees and flowers, lakes and seas with their presence and as like as not with their movements. His language is distin­guished by a superb choice of words, unusual words aptly used in a normal but never dull order. There is never an inversion of phrase but on the contrary a directness of every day speech, livened by wit. You feel that under­neath, a thought exists and if you are not alert it will trip you—as it leads to a rewarding conclusion.

Unlike prose, which means what it says, poetry is the music of words, it doesn't at all mean what it says and that is the reason for its rejection by a practical world. What it means is much more than can be spoken at least in prose just as music cannot be given an articulate meaning. The music of a poem transcends the words, always linked with them, surpasses them. The poems of Wallace Stevens show well this music. They show it on two levels, a playful fascination with the words, an affectionate ca­ressing of the horse's neck which is to be easily understood; followed by the surge that takes
hold of the man when the beast upon whose back he is mounted plunges with him into space.

This power did not come to Stevens at once. Looking at the poems he wrote thirty years ago, charming as they are, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" etc., Stevens reveals himself not the man he has become in such a book as The Auroras of Autumn where his stature as a major poet has reached the full. It is a mark of genius when an accomplished man can go on continually developing, continually improving his techniques as Stevens shows by his recent work.

Many long hours of application to the page have gone into this. A word has to be taken out and transposed. A redundant word first has to be detected in its redundancy and when a man's fascination with it has been cured, finally, he appears with an axe and cuts it off. This takes intelligence and above all, courage. Some never achieve that courage. But the man destined to be a major artist has to sacrifice many easy triumphs to emerge at his full stature. Stevens shows today that he has known these battles and has survived them.

Look alone at the inversion of phrases in his first book, Harmonium, and this is a work of major importance. It has all disappeared in the later years. A smoothness, a mastery of the line has taken its place. It is Stevens' devotion to the music of his measures that has brought this about. Patiently the artist has evolved until we feel that should he live to be a hundred it would be as with Hokusai a perspective of always increasing power over his materials until the last breath.

—WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

IN reading an author who has "made us a gift of truth," Proust says, we have "a friend without formalities. But if we put to him questions that he cannot answer, we ask for answers that would not instruct us. . . . All he can do is give us desires . . . by making us contemplate beauty, . . . the mirage that constitutes a vision." ¹

These observations apply, for me, to Wallace Stevens, who "wears a deliberately commonplace costume," studies "the interior of a parasol," and by various tactful feints, provides us with a "place in which it would be pleasant to spend a holiday." Amid grandeurs the more spectacular for not being grandiose, he conjures up for the reader, harmonies special to himself —scenes and sounds that are communicated by only a very great musician.

¹Proust: "Days of Reading" in Essays on Language and Literature, ed. by J. L. Hevesi (Allan Wingate).

—MARIANNE MOORE
PREMONITION
(To Wallace Stevens)

Men who consult watches instead of the sun
Because they're close enough to tell the time
Quickly and exactly are aware
Minutes are swifter than hours and seconds tick
Faster than air inhaled from breath to breath.
What makes them tick at all, our beating hearts,
Is first of all necessity and then
The dread of death. And often one may see
Premonition glancing over one shoulder
Lest Death grow bold and bolder as he nears
Growing time with the time for men to ebb.
Thus one might say our shadow’s a true friend
Who watches webs so consciously they end
Even as they begin. And so with Time
And all human beings that have to rhyme.

AN EARLY IMPRESSION OF WALLACE STEVENS

WHEN Samuel French Morse invited me to contribute to the Wallace Stevens issue of the Review he stated that I had played some part “in shaping the early career of the poet and was generous to him as an editor in the days of Others.” This note gave me the cue for going over passages I wrote about my old friend in the autobiography Troubadour (1925), and my survey of American poetry, Our Singing Strength (1929). These volumes, with their intimate character, could give a better impression of the period, and of the place of Stevens in my life, than anything I might write today. Furthermore, the old days of Others, along with such pioneer ventures as Poetry and The Little Review, had a romantic air and general vitality typical of the American renascence as a whole. Going over that ground once more, even in brief, should provide younger poets and readers with reflections on a past before their time. And how the art of a man in his 75th year continues to grow and embrace larger views and spheres.

As a foreword to the above volumes, one should sketch in a few lines regarding the little magazine Others, with emphasis on the economic sphere. The remarkably varied young men and young women contributed their poems not as a group but as individuals. Sustained interest and support had to be raised through yearly subscribers. While such angels never rose to more than 300 their faith paid the printer, Mr. Liberty, via the happy editor, at the rate of $23 per issue. This dauntless fellow, a philosophic anarchist from abroad, had fallen in love with his adopted land and changed his name accordingly. And would travel all the way from Bronx Borough to Manhattan to gather and set up the next sheaf of manuscripts. No two resembled each other in shape for those were the days of free verse exclusively. After the dark little man delivered his bundle of bound yellow copies, the editor addressed 300 envelopes himself. The date of the first issue was July 1915 and “the little yellow dog,” as it was laughingly dubbed, ran for four years, on and off, and had the honor of being anthologized by publishers in 1916, 1917, 1919. The rest of the Others story may be found in Troubadour, which is still in print.

Our Singing Strength, no longer in print, can only be consulted in libraries. The large volume, with all its ambitious labors, came out on the same day as the Wall Street Crash: October 29, 1929. Metropolitan jokers, naturally, blamed the book for the crash, not vice versa. Yet the survey survived the first effects long enough for good reviews and many good readers. After twenty-five years I now opened a book I hadn’t read since the page-proof stage, to find further signs of Wallace Stevens. I was somewhat embarrassed by the occasional intrusion of the editor via the first person singular instead of the completely objective view required by standards, old or new, in criticism. This would never do today; yet reading on I discovered that when the script moved from the
personal to the impersonal, it was truly rounded. And would show what one poet thought of another at the beginning of their respective careers.

The first reference to Stevens in Troubadour opens with a paragraph about a new Greenwich Village magazine entitled Rogue, edited by the sophisticated Allen and Louise Norton, circa 1915. The year before, Krimmie, via the Brothers Boni, had edited monthly paper books devoted to one author or to a group of authors bound together. It was thus the first Imagist anthology (Des Imagistes), under Ezra Pound’s editorship, was unveiled in the U. S. A. Krimmie’s first Mushrooms had already poked a few heads through his tough native soil, New York.

He received an unexpected note from Allen Norton which was fingered and thumbed with pleasure. It was the first time an editor had asked him to send in some poems and the first time an editor offered to pay. Norton accepted the group Krimmie submitted, enclosed a handsome check and invited him to meet some of the other contributors. Taking it for granted that the Nortons must be aristocratic, he attired himself in his Sunday suit, sponged and pressed for the occasion.

Of the poems he had read in Rogue, he was most impressed by an exquisite lyric called Tea, by Wallace Stevens:

- When the elephant’s-ear in the park
- Shrivelled in frost,
- And the leaves on the paths
- Ran like rats,
- Your lamp-light fell
- On shining pillows,
- Of sea-shades and sky-shades,
- Like umbrellas in Java.

This original poem was riddled so often by columnists, along with things by Krimmie, that he felt a fellowship with the author and hoped to meet him most of all at the Nortons. He visualized a slender, ethereal being, shy and sensitive. The man he was introduced to was shy and sensitive, but so broad-shouldered and burly that Krimmie was overawed. He tried to refer to Tea, but the tall man waved a deprecating hand and muttered something that sounded like “Jesus.” Norton drew Krimmie aside and explained: “Cornering Wallace about his own work isn’t done.” He thanked his host and vowed never to address the giant about his own work again, nor anything else for that matter.

However, after the founding of Others in Grantwood, New Jersey, and Krimmie’s removal to a small Village flat, he was bound to meet Stevens now and then. Especially when Wallace came down from Hartford, Connecticut (where he practised law and never mentioned poetry), to be with the so-called Others group for a quiet evening or invited Krimmie to luncheon at some café. So slight was Krimmie alongside Wallace that the latter was fond of guiding him across crowded thoroughfares to protect him against the traffic. On one of these walks, the big fellow stuffed an envelope into the editorial pocket with the hasty proviso: “I must ask you not to breathe a word of this. Print it if you like it, send it back if you don’t.” It was the manuscript, in minute handwriting, of the now famous “Peter Quince at the Clavier.”

In the course of time, Wallace Stevens contributed some thirty poems to Others or to Others anthologies, and most of these are so highly regarded today that they should be listed for the sake of the record and to show how far the poet advanced before his first collected volume appeared: “Peter Quince at the Clavier”; “The Silver Plough-Boy”; “Six Significant Landscapes”; “The Florist Wears Knee-Breeches”; “Tattoo”; “Song”; “Inscription for a Monument”; “ Bowl”; “Domination of Black”; “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate”; “Valley Candle”; “Gray Room”; “Explanation”; “Theory”; “Cy Est Pourtraite Madame Ste Ursule Et Les Unze Mille Vierges”; “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”; “The Plot Against the Giant”; “The Wind Shifts”; “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”; “Le Monocle De Mon Oncle”; “Pecksniffiana (7 Numbers)”; “The Paltry...
Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage”.

Leaving Troubadour for Our Singing Strength, I refer to a chapter headed Originals and Eccentrics. Here, in consecutive order, one finds the late Maxwell Bodenheim just before Wallace Stevens. And one brings in “Bogie”, as he was fondly named, not by way of recalling his recent murder, or the poet he was and still is, but because in the survey comparisons and differences are drawn which lead to these intimate pages:

In Wallace Stevens, we come to another esthete, the hedonist par excellence of modern poetry. If he has written poetry for its own sake it is not because, like Bodenheim, he hates life and embraces an escapist philosophy. No one enjoys life more and makes a richer festival of his pleasure. Unlike the eccentric Max and like Marianne Moore, the Hartford lawyer is contemptuous of worldly popularity. For a number of years his poems appeared in Rogue, Poetry, Others, The Little Review, but not until 1923 did his volume Harmonium emerge. He was then in his forty-fourth year. For years his friends had urged him to publish a book, and Stevens, bored with being the sole poet who had refused to publish one, permitted Carl Van Vechten to cajole Alfred A. Knopf into printing Harmonium. Comparatively few copies were sold; the rest were remaindered. The volume contains the whole of Stevens’s lifework so far with the exception of the exquisite plays: Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise and Carlos Among the Candles. Formerly, it was impossible to get him to publish a book; now it seems impossible to get him to publish a poem. Write him, wire him, or visit him, one receives the same answer: He has written nothing for years. One reverts to the reading of duller poets and waits in vain for the man in Connecticut to scratch off another perfect etching. But what notes these are! They are among the perfect notes in any literature: perfect in sensation, color and sound, versification, whether in old or new forms; perfect in language, the relation of phrase to phrase, vowel to vowel, consonant to consonant. Emotion has achieved its thought, thought its system, system its poetry: A poetry now clear, now vague, as clear and vague as life. Behind veils there is always a meaning, though the poet employs subtlety for veiling the mean-
ing as well. No one hates the obvious more. No one knows better than he that all these things have been felt and thought and known before. One can only improvise on material used over and over, and improvise for oneself alone. Here is no question of pleasing anybody. No question of pleasing even the ego. The man is a little weary of insurance cases, clients and courts, opposing lawyers and judges. He decides on a short vacation, not among friends and not among Parisians, but among the Carolinas, or better still down in Ponce de Leon’s Florida. In between delectable meals and wines, one gets rid of the itch of thinking. If some editorial friend is idiotic enough to demand these notes, let him have them, and the less said the better. But enough of such nonsense, no more nonsense henceforth.

As with Marianne Moore, it is unfair to quote parts of Stevens’ poems. They are complete from the first to the last syllable. As a composer of titles, Stevens has no equal in this country. I have quoted the titles of the plays. And, as an example of double meaning, refer to “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” who is Death, or “The Worms at Heaven’s Gate.” “Domination of Black” develops its theme through beautifully varied repetition,—a method Sandburg owes to Stevens and has acknowledged. “The Snow Man,” employing the same musical device, unfolds the suggestion that man’s mind should wear snow properly to evaluate winter and death, since he who is “nothing himself” beholds “nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.” “Le Monocle De Mon Oncle,” a series of twelve poems in eleven lines each, is a marvelous group of love poems—though love is barely mentioned—singing the “faith of forty” against decay. The language is magnificent, orotund, Elizabethan.

Is it for nothing, then, that old Chinese Sat tittivating by their mountain pools Or in the Yangtsse studied out their beards? I shall not play the flat historic scale. You know how Utamaro’s beauties sought The end of love in their all-speaking braids.

You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath. Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain That not one curl in nature has survived? Why, without pity on these studious ghosts, Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

The whole series is in the grand manner. If I have read this group once, I have read it many times and found more and more in the reading. To the yearning national question, Where is our next national poet to come from, I always feel like responding: Out of Wallace Stevens, if Stevens would let him come. But the exasperating fellow sticks to his laws and lawyers. It is not that the banality of existence is too much for him. He has done magic things with banalities, tuned them to high enjoyments.

If this man wrote a poem about Main Street, that universal locale, without losing its identity, would become transformed into the only Nirvana worth sighing for. It is what he does to things that makes them memorable. Simply by being himself, and viewing them through his temperament, gorgeous poems evolve. He may be fantastic and grotesque on the surface, a lover of nonsense and alliterative games; but a deep imagination directs his observation, his reality. Here is an early lyric. The human described in the poem is not Wallace Stevens. But the last line is:

This is how the wind shifts:
Like the thoughts of an old human,
Who still thinks eagerly
And despairingly.
The wind shifts like this:
Like a human without illusions,
Who still feels irrational things within her.
The wind shifts like this:
Like humans approaching proudly,
Like humans approaching angrily.
This is how the wind shifts:
Like a human, heavy and heavy,
Who does not care.

In the thirty years that have passed since the publication of *Harmonium*, I have fallen out of direct touch with Wallace Stevens, yet have watched the growth of his art and recent growth...
of his fame through various prizes and awards he should have received long ago. And, for the past ten years, I have divorced myself from editorial activities to steep my life and creative labors in comparative isolation. What was my delight one day to learn that old Wallace, with his disdain for public appearances, would receive the annual Gold Medal award of the Poetry Society of America. Another poet would appear on the same program: the gifted young lyricist, Richard Wilbur. Keen was my anticipation at seeing Wallace again after so many years and the ironies that would ensue if he actually came to New York to face an audience. In the old Others days, at our warm gatherings, one had to read his manuscripts aloud for him while he muttered imprecations in the background. As I entered the charming Sherry Hotel via the cocktail lounge, I heard my name called by a booming voice. There was Stevens looking heartily well and eyeing the way I limped with the aid of an old cane. In bed for the first time in my life, I dragged myself to the meeting with a nasty little sacroiliac. This caused Wallace to chant: “Sit down, have a drink with us. And the next time I see you I hope to see you on crutches.”

The slender Richard Wilbur was abashed by such conduct on the part of his elders. But my time, I vowed, would arrive after Wallace mounted the dais to receive the medal. Would he rise and speak in acknowledgment, even go so far as to read aloud? In the best of humor, apparently, and blooming with benevolence, he arose to make his brief speech, and to read, to read aloud.

From where I was sitting, I could hardly hear a word, and presently heard neighbors complaining—“Louder, please!” He read a short paper on poetry: a beautiful piece I had read in some magazine. And then drew forth two short poems he sailed through like a dose of salts and then sat down. The chairman of the occasion, A. M. Sullivan, hearing applause around the room, asked for an encore but that encore was silent. The honored responded: “No, thank God, that’s all!” As I threaded my way through gathering admirers, Wallace pushed his way toward me and enquired: “They tell me they couldn’t hear me, Alfred. Did you hear me?”

“No, I didn’t have to. I know all your poems by heart!”

And, since Wallace Stevens in his former letters to me always signed himself Truly yours, I sign myself herewith,

Truly yours,

ALFRED KREYMBORG

Of course Wallace Stevens has always been one of my heroes, in some ways my favorite hero, and as early as 1920 (in the London Mercury), I tried to give him an assist on those inhospitable shores. As, many years later, i.e., 1944, I attempted in vain to persuade the publishers of my anthology to let me include the whole of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” which is in my opinion a vastly misunderstood and underrated poem. My critical left hand has got a little rusty, since I quit reviewing some eight years ago, and no longer hits the keys. Just let me say that I still think Wallace Stevens is our master magician of meaning, that nobody is so deserving of such a celebration, and to wish you all well for this happy occasion.

—CONRAD AIKEN
IDEAS OF ORDER

After hearing my woodwind quartet early in 1952 at the inaugural concert of the Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble Dimitri Mitropoulos commissioned me to write a one movement work for him to present with the Philharmonic-Symphony Society. I was occupied with a commission for a chamber work and did not begin Ideas of Order until mid-Summer, completing it in November.

The title reflects a devotion to the American poet, Wallace Stevens, which dates back to my days as a graduate student in music at Harvard in the mid-1930's. It was around the time that his second book, Ideas of Order, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. Since my work for Mitropoulos was neither program music nor in any standard form I sought a neutral name like Composition and thought of almost everything that is common to all music, including an 'order of tones,' when I remembered Stevens. In his Ideas of Order poet and musician are identified in their quest for ordered arrangement within the realm of imagination as a mode of relief, if only momentary, from our daily involvement with experience. I am not sure I follow Stevens all the way into his world of imagined reality. But I sympathize with the motives he attributes to 'Requiring an order beyond speech'—an order not to be confused with political order which is its exact antithesis. Moreover, I have a special attachment to his Ideas of Order since it figured prominently in the days when I was shaping an attitude towards art.

There is, then, nothing more literal in the connection between the poems and my music than the assumption that as a musician my aim is to order tones. I have done so in this case through permutations of three notes that serve not as a motif but as guide-posts for choice of melodic lines and harmonies. Only the results are of consequence to the listener. For the expert who wants to know how the music is made, this is not the place to demonstrate in detail the manner in which three notes, by changing their succession or register in terms of two fixed intervals (whole step and minor third), engender other intervals for use in shaping the total work. It is enough to say that exploring these permutations yields a form that lies somewhere between variations and the pre-Bach canzona or ricercar, without the contrapuntal conventions of these early instrumental patterns.

Though I started with fragments that vaguely suggested ballet to me, I cannot be sure I ended up with a dance piece, for this was not my aim. These suggestions, if still evident, were no more than a point of departure.

—ARTHUR BERGER
DISILLUSIONMENT AT ELEVEN O’CLOCK

The children say the world will end like bursts of bubble gum and blue balloons and booms of cannonades and auto exhausts at circuses on summer afternoons.

The children say the world will end like flashes of rockets spread against the sky and flares of Roman candles the night wears like Joseph’s gaudy-colored coat.

The world’s a nickel holiday for little girls and little boys, where play is thought and thought is play and both are yanks on the buffalo’s beard, where people are tigers and tigers are people and both are paint on an Indian’s nose.

Old Sitting-Bull, the cigar store scholar, stamped in wood, and fitted in a collar, says the world will end like inferences drawn from the given facts; like the effects of pre-determined cause.

The world is world is world is world for grown-up men and women, where play is play and thought is thought and both the quests for an eagle’s feather, where people are people and tigers are tigers and red is red and weather weather, where all goes down when sun goes down.

—LOUIS BERRONE

HARMONIUM AND THE AMERICAN SCENE

William Van O’Connor, in his study of Wallace Stevens, *The Shaping Spirit* (1950), states that Stevens’ first collection of poems, *Harmonium*, published in September, 1923, sold one hundred copies. It is pleasant to know that the copy of *Harmonium* I bought, a few days after its publication, in the Old Corner Book-Store in Boston (a small label in the front still proclaims its origin) was included in the minuscule sale. I remember clearly the enthusiasm with which the purchase was made, and the pleasure I anticipated as I took the brightly colored book from its wrapper,—for now I could re-read the poems I knew, and discover many that were unfamiliar.

The format of the book was charming, in the early Knopf manner; the board covers, printed in an angled pattern of blue, yellow and red, gave off a kind of harlequin dazzle. A chaste paper label, with typographical ornaments in dark red, decorated the dark-blue cloth spine. The list of acknowledgments was a list of the best “little magazines” of the time; and Mr. Stevens gave special due to *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*.

*Poetry* had done a good deal to bring Stevens’ talent into notice. Harriet Monroe had awarded him, in 1916, a prize for his verse-play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, and, in 1920, the Levinson prize. O’Connor says that Stevens published about one hundred poems between 1914 and 1923. *Harmonium* gathered together seventy-four poems, some, like “The Comedian as the Letter C”, hitherto unpublished. The list of titles, to a young reader in 1923, was itself richly exciting. Stevens’ use of the “impressionist” title can be linked, perhaps, with Debussy’s practice in the field of music. And how right these titles are and how provocative they have remained: “Invective Against Swans”, “Domination of Black”, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”, “Fabliau of Florida”, “Hymn for a
Watermelon Pavilion”, “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman”, “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.”

Stevens was forty-four in 1923, and “the modern movement” in poetry written in English can be said to have established itself, at that time, with some authority and firmness. We have only to consider that Pound had been available in British editions since 1909, and in scattered American editions since 1910; that The Waste Land had come out in The Dial the preceding year; that Yeats had made the complete shift to his later manner in Responsibilities (1914), and that, in America, the reputations of Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams were already established. One remarkable fact concerning Harmonium is its lack of derivation from any British, Irish or American contemporary. Stevens’ manner bore touches of Imagist procedures, it is true; but his major indebtedness (if one can use so strong a word) was to the French Symbolists. He had caught the musical line of Mallarme’s frequently tortuous syntax. He had taken over a few figures from Verlaine’s commedia dell’arte; and he had learned from Laforgue certain tricks of ironic briskness, as well as the Laforguian habit of contrast and even reversal of mood, tone and attack, within a single poem. He could set formal language over against colloquial speech and break up solemnity by means of brilliant use of the ordinary and quotidian. But there was more than transposed Symbolism in Harmonium. Stevens’ most interesting and valuable feat, discernible in this collection, was his power to apply imaginative means to recalcitrant American material. In a period still colored by “a desolate provincialism”, in a country just emerging from the gimcrack aesthetics of an insecurely based materialist culture, Stevens was able to attach a thrilling verbal music to certain aspects of America that had never before attracted such treatment. He was the first to present with wit and elegance the American tropics and sub-tropics; to review the charm of “the South” without any hint of romanticism; to use American geographical terms without any touch of sentiment-cal “regionalism”. The names of states ring out with full power and charm—Oklahoma, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Connecticut, Florida (a locale from which Stevens was to distil so much); the names of the towns—Key West, Tallapoosa; of rivers—“the Arkansaw”; of mountains—the Appalachians. The American tropics spill forth their abundance of flora and fauna (for the alligator and the parakeets are not missed); the Hurricane sweeps the sea; the red cockerel and the blackbird fly beside “a watermelon pavilion”. And the ugly “prose” of the land is not neglected: people and places—“the dreadful sundry of this world”; the lamp-lit Negro (or is it poor-white?) wake; backwoods sparseness and poverty; “signboards [whimpering] on cold nights”; “the crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence”. A continual tension is set up between American facts and Stevens’ fantasy—a fantasy almost always rising from the nature of the material, and hardly ever superimposed.

Looking back, with the now battered and faded copy of Harmonium in hand, one sees how Stevens’ early poems fall into their true and strikingly close relationship to an American background—a fact that is often overlooked, and, although the American tropics seem chiefly to attract the poet’s imagination, a handful of Northern vignettes closes the circle and rounds out the vision:

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing  
And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.  
This is the essence of a New England winter, along with:

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;  
And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,
Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing
that is.
Surely, one of the chief of those "who brought
the Muse to this country."
—Louise Bogan

TWELVE OR THIRTEEN WAYS OF
LOOKING AT WALLACE STEVENS

It is, peut-être, an eye abstract of pomp
And resignation. A scrumptious syllable—
Katchoo!—divining what is sensible.

It holds the loftiest idea of swans—
Not hissing esses, dank feathers in a pool—
But the idea, utter swan, immiscible.

On a day nauseous with grackles and rabbits
Just so one had seen it. It had not seen one.
The contretemps was no catastrophe.

Pipkin the fond man, gazing, thinks,
"My eye, if it is mine, can kindle it."
His ignorance is magnified, rhapsodic.

And yet for him, insipid acolyte,
The moonlight has a mild ta ta, tsk-tsk, tutu.
He will exist in that beneficence.

To promise everything, and so it does,
To allocate niente, and so it does,
Is but one of many illustrations of divinity.

What is one eye among so many eyes?
A. Jocundus, purple in his grapes.
B. The sternest monitor of metaphor.

The eye, ai-yi, goes round the world,
The world, ai-yi, goes round the eye—
The waltz of the babies of Omaha.

It is, peut-être, une impasse des deux anges,
The one borne downward, cherry-ripe,
The one toward heaven. Pure. Gruff.

—John Malcolm Brinnin
MATTINO DOMENICALE

The first translation of any considerable body of Wallace Stevens' poetry (only scattering single examples have heretofore appeared in foreign periodicals) appeared this year; the language, Italian. Analysis of Stevens' techniques has so usually centered on affinities with Mallarmé and his successors that one might expect France to provide his likeliest public abroad. In fact, it is fitting that the first major translation should be into Italian. Stevens' affinity with Italian artistic genius is real and the Italians will note it both in what he is and in what he says. As a defender of "il uomo estetico", the artist, the giver of new dimensions to reality he is recognizably of the Italian spirit; and as an intellectual poet he is close to Italy's own tradition of poetry which began with intellectual poets like Guinizelli, Cavalcanti, Dante. Stevens' deep concern for the imaginative activity, moreover, bears resemblance to that in Italian esthetic thought. In advocating that the poetic order is as potentially significant as the philosophical order he draws particularly near to the Italians. It was Croce who profoundly and articulately theorized on the conviction that intuitive knowledge possesses equal dignity with logical knowledge. And it was another Italian, Giambattista Vico, who first gave serious attention to the question. Italians then are apt to be receptive to Stevens for the dominance of imagination in Stevens himself and as a theme in his poetry. He, in turn, we know, has appreciated the role of imagination in the Italians. In his "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (in which he recognizes Croce twice and Vico once) he says, "The tradition of Italy is the tradition of the imagination".

Renato Poggioli, the translator, who is Professor of Comparative Literature at Harvard, has made a judicious selection of Stevens' verse. He and the poet are both soberly aware of the problems of translation as indicated in their correspondence (contained in the volume) relating to such problems. How does one successfully translate "Chequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed"? Stevens asks. As a matter of fact, the poet easily dissuades Poggioli from translating "The Comedian as the Letter C".

 Needless to say, translation from one poetic idiom to another is always difficult. When the first idiom is that of Wallace Stevens: elegant, sophisticated, musical in the extreme, and the second is the highly refined one of the Italians, the task becomes doubly difficult. Poggioli has proved equal to the task. What he has done is all one can ask of a translator: he has engaged the poetic imagination of the foreign reader. He has been faithful to Stevens and to the traditions of Italian poetry. (Stevens himself feels that he has "carried the poem over into Italian.") In order to reach the Italian ear Poggioli uses predominantly the traditional hendecasyllabic line. And through it at times he succeeds remarkably in giving to his translation an authentic musical quality of its own:

Dice: "Mi piace quando agili uccelli
Prima del volo provano con dolci
Domande la realtà dei campi in bruma:
Ma quando son partiti, se non tornano
I loro campi, allora il paradiso
Dov'è?" Antro non v'è di profezia,
Nè remota chimera della tomba,
Eliso d'oro o isola sonora
Ove dian loro le anime rifugio,
Nè trasognato Sud, nè aerea palma
Sopra i clivi del cielo, che perduri
Come il verde d'aprile . . . (Sunday Morning, IV)

(1) She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
Before they fly, test the reality
Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
Return no more, where, then, is paradise?"

There is not any haunt of prophecy,
Nor any old chimera of the grave,
Neither the golden underground, nor isle
Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
As April's green endures . . .)

Poggioli’s edition is valuable for Italian and English reader alike inasmuch as its notes include extracts from Stevens’ correspondence in English. These contain comments of exceptional exegetical value and probably represent the only document yet published offering the poet’s own explications. Take, for example, his remarks on the line “That I may reduce the monster to Myself . . .” (The Man with the Blue Guitar, XIX): “The monster-nature, which I desire to reduce: master, subjugate, acquire complete control over and use freely for my own purpose, as poet. I want, as a poet, to be that in nature, which constitutes nature’s very self. I want to be nature in the form of a man, with all the resources of nature: I want to be the lion in the lute; and then, when I am, I want to face my parent and be his true poet. I want to face nature the way two lions face one another—the lion in the lute facing the lion locked in stone. I want as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man’s imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality.” Not all of Stevens’ remarks are as lucid but he warily suggests, “You will understand that in converting a poem written and thought out in the peculiar figurations of poetry, into plain English, one’s explanations are bound to call for a certain amount of toleration.” The translator adds, “I gladly pass on to the reader this advice for prudence and discretion.”

In his introduction Poggioli observes that the metaphysic of Stevens is the “apotheosis of matter and of the concrete world” and adds, “The cosmic sense of Wallace Stevens is not common or literary paganism. Like Leonardo, or if preferred, like Cezanne, he is seeking not the soul of the world but the magical and mythical powers (virtù) of nature: not its entelechy, but its organism. The real for him is a substance which becomes form, in which essence is identified with existence and life is the only law.”

The translator also provides a biographical sketch of the poet and a brief historical account of his work accompanied by a short selected bibliography. Among his notes is a translated commentary on “Sunday Morning” taken from an article by J. V. Cunningham in Poetry December, 1949. Besides the whole of The Man with the Blue Guitar selections are included from Harmonium (“Infanta Marina,” “Domination of Black,” “The Snow Man,” “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock,” “Sunday Morning,” “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”); from Ideas of Order (“The Sun this March” inaccurately listed as from Parts of a World); and from Transport to Summer (“The House was Quiet and the World was Calm,” “Credences of Summer”). Also included is an original poem especially offered for Poggioli’s edition entitled “The River of Rivers in Connecticut”. It has as its point of departure our own Connecticut River (a departure from “things-as-they-are”) the physical identity of which is soon nullified and sublimated through the poet’s imaginative exercise.

The river is
Not to be seen beneath the appearances
That tell of it. The steeple at Farmington
Stands glistening and Haddam shines and sways.
(We learn elsewhere in the notes that “Haddam” is a favorite word with Stevens because of its Yankee sound.)

The river is
The Third commonness with light and air,
. . . an unnamed flowing,
Space-filled, reflecting the seasons, the folklore
Of each of the senses; . . . The river that flows nowhere, like a sea.

—Michael Campo
LETTER TO WALLACE STEVENS

A man who looks at New Haven, with autumn ruddy
As never before, blue as never before,
Dawning on body and mind, you talk to yourself
Of auroras: we are allowed to overhear.
The core of it all is autumn—harvest in kind:
The senses admiring the delicious drench
Of light, of color, of texture, taste, and sound,
Fruit, flower, sail in the sun, a woman’s hand,
Her voice, slight and abounding instruments.
Quench these, there’s more: the mind, this instant holding
The manifold remembered, the intended
Huge imaginings. Now. Here. And next year or tomorrow
Where? The core of it is autumn, winter’s dawn.

But no fear of the pathetic leave-takings
Known to branches above New Haven streets,
Nor the rude soliloquy on beaches smitten
By an easterly wind. Say, heavy, heavy,
Hangs over your head, as in the children’s game.
The forfeit is heavy, but your talk is light.

Thirty-five years we have known your tinkat-
tonk,
Azay and rub-a-dub. This is not new
But it is not the same. Your lunar blue,
Spangled with ambiguities, your roses
And crow’s feathers are viewed under a cloud
And yet they shine in the eye. Now when you speak

Of dirt and dilapidation it is at once
As one of a crowd and as a man alone.
But you are not solemn with Necessity,
The goddess as step-mother. You invite her in,
Into a room shining with mirrors, large,
Windowed to entertain the sun and moon.
She looks at herself in your mirrors, you at her.
You talk to her like a philosopher.

But the eschatology, the entelechies
Are framed in your little language, with musica
And Gemütlichkeit, accent aigu ou grave.
You are no less a sensualist for being
A voluptuary of the mind. But whether you hum,
Or drum on the table, or try to sum it all up
In words, French, German, Spanish, and your own
Inventions, it is the pulse of autumn beating
Under it that we hear. You make us see
More than the golden boughs and the sky, cold,
And blue as flame, to the smell of burning trash.
You mention ferns and we suppose a pun
Upon die Ferne, the famed for being far.
For you fern-green, leaf-green, ice-green, are equal.

For you in the night, off in the arctic, rosy
As your bouquet, Aurora borealis
Glow for the giant’s table. Put These images aside. Let us say simply
That a good poet in an evil time
Speaks of the beginning of the end.
He speaks of autumn, that’s the dawn of dying.

He speaks of the fact, the event, the thing and the thought,
Trying to hold what’s final in his mind.
Thanks, Wallace Stevens, for what you say,
And the way you say it and sing it, grave and gay.
Whether the early morning makes you brave
Or the colors of autumn delight you, clearly you have
The courage of your ignorance. Your speech
Reveals an irreverent joy to which death is irrelevant. You give us the fiction and
The festive real. They dance against the sky, Blue, burning, of your New Haven autumn,
And we salute them, crying good-bye, good-bye.

—BABETTE DEUTSCH
Ce m'est un honneur et une joie de rendre un hommage solennel d'admiration et d'affection au beau poète Wallace STEVENS, le Valéry américain.

—GUSTAVE COHEN

TWO POEMS
(For Wallace Stevens)

Closing Off the View

The truth was always his own will.
A red-crested Cascade
Could catch the infallible.
It was beyond him still.

Even a revealed Olympic
Leaping in the surreal
Could harbor its water animals.
It was a blue-cool plinth.

Baker has its own solidity,
Lofty, flat, and emphatic
At the top; only tricky miles
Away, by land or sea.

While feminine-fashioned Mt. Rainier,
A palisaded Paradise,
Almost comes from another world
To entice you here.

He saw them as he wished to see them.
Whenever there was a world offense
He effected Closing Off the View,
Primordial recompense.

He could not, in other words, pretend
To a knowledge not himself,
Dazzled by decades by appearances,
Centered in his senses.

He willed to paint the world one way;
When the world intruded
With lofty peak, or noisome slough,
He exercised Closing Off the View.

The Meaning of Indian Summer

Like a mind that is inevitable,
Like time that has got over being time,
Like something long forgotten in the past,
The meaning of the Indian Summer
Contains a purity of peerless air
Performing without motion meaning without sound.

It is not elsewhere while it is here.
Incised upon the landscape, gold and serene,
Come the hours of monumental harmony,
A time before man and after man,
A blood-lit aperture and print of knowing
Where trees have spirits and the leaves are holy
books.

It is this time of all times of the year,
That Indian Summer days of perfect clarity
And weight, when the mind is like this world.
There is a constancy in the light of day,
There is a large restraint appearing to the eye.
If ever, it is now when wholeness holds the soul.

—RICHARD EBERHART
Dear Mr. Morse:

Thank you for your letter asking me to join the Wallace Stevens celebration number. I'm afraid I won't have time to go into it properly and write as he deserves.

As for using my little review in the Listener, that might have a certain curiosity-value if you added a note saying this was a review in the B. B. C. magazine for the first volume of him to be published in England, with the date. I feel it wouldn't gain me, or British readiness to appreciate in general, any credit in America, but what of that? You should certainly have it if you want it. Yours truly, William Empson

This selection made by Mr. Wallace Stevens from his poetry ought certainly to be welcomed in England; he has been highly admired in America for thirty years, and it is time he was better known here. There is one unfortunate feature of his style which ought to be noticed, what he calls 'beau linguist' perhaps (page 106), as in the line 'I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo' (page 128). Walt Whitman also liked throwing in foreign words, to the effect 'Comes the dawn, cam­
erados; pre-sophisticate your tief toilettes', but Henry James, having more actual foreign contacts, said it was rather a pity Whitman knew all those bits of foreign languages. It is not offensive in Whitman once you realise that he is trying to be all-inclusively democratic; a reader is supposed to feel personally welcomed, in the new dawn, when he meets a bit of his quaint.. old mother-tongue, though it is out of date because American English is somehow taking over the whole world. But other writers, English as well as American of course, have taken a very different attitude to Europe and felt themselves raw by contrast to it; then the suggestion becomes, 'Just look at our Wallace, bandying the flashing bon-mot with the foreign lady of title; doesn't he seem at home?' It was also a fault of Oscar Wilde to be startlingly at home in high society, and Mr. Wallace Stevens, very well-to-do it appears, and growing up in the hey-day of Oscar Wilde, was perhaps more influenced by him than by Whitman. But then again, though one can pick on examples which seem definitely mistaken, it is obviously a good thing for a poet to be aware of foreign languages; maybe the English-speakers are no longer learning them enough.

Actually there isn't a great deal of this foreign language trick in his poetry, but there is a lot of something rather like it; an idea that it is enough entertainment for the reader to see the poet trying on a new fancy dress. There is also a good deal of philosophising, which the reader dare not say he has quite understood, but the main point of it, and indeed the reason why it is hard to follow, seems to be an idea that a person like this doesn't really need to philosophise. One need not object to this attitude in principle, in fact it can make good poetry, but it comes to feel very airless. One can't help wishing he had found more to say, if only because he could evidently say it.

He is not however such a narrow poet as these remarks might suggest; the elegant pungency of the nature-descriptions (birds especially) is invigorating, and the fine poem 'Dry Loaf', with the line:

Regard the hovels of those that live in this land,

is after all more unselfcentered than most poets nowadays care to be. He is also a master of what is perhaps needed most for poetry in English, a long delicate rhythm based on straight singing lines. The long poem 'Sunday Morning' has this all through, and ends with a splendid example of it:

Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail Whistle about us their spontaneous cries; Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness; And, in the isolation of the sky, At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make Ambiguous undulations as they sink, Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

—WILLIAM EMPSON
WHETHER OF BRONZE OR GLASS

PRETTY much everyone agrees that Wallace Stevens in his poetry has been predominantly occupied with an area of concern which may be represented by three questions: What is the nature of reality? How can man best know this reality? What is the function of imagination in this knowing? About Mr. Stevens’ answers to these questions observers are less in agreement. Indeed, Mr. Stevens’ poems may severally be cited in support of differing answers. Yet the kind of data which customarily initiates his poems is evident enough. Whether by aesthetic penchant, or because it seems a suitable stratagem for a poet who could commence as empiricist, Mr. Stevens educes his speculations from images, characteristically visually bright and arresting, frequently even exotic. To discover what, on balance, his doctrine is, or (since happily he is still among us) is tending to become, we are not restricted, then, to weighing statement against statement. An alternative procedure invites us: to follow from context to context some one of his favorite images—the sun, moonlight, flowers, fruit, reflections and refractions in water—to see whither it may lead.

Paradoxically, within the scanty space here available I wish to comment on one of Mr. Stevens’ ampest images. Perhaps I should say “tribe of ampest images,” for though the outlines remain fairly constant, the material used to fill out the image varies considerably—from bronze to marble to glass to nothingness. This is the image of the “total” or “major man,” “head / And, of human realizings, rugged roy. . . .”

This image rises above the horizon of Mr. Stevens’ poetry later than do many smaller items, and its first appearance might seem casual. In “The Man With the Blue Guitar” the first-person of the poem remarks

I sing a hero’s head, large eye
And bearded bronze, but not a man.

Perhaps this setting for the image is an example of poetic foresight, and therefore far from casual. For in this poem written before 1937 Mr. Stevens invests the image with a metaphorical significance which precluded a theme explored with considerable fullness in the collection Parts of a World, of date 1942. By that time, Mr. Stevens, no less than other poets, was confronted with the challenge to his art posed by the man who falls in war: what has the poet to say to the man who perhaps stands between him and a bullet? However, Mr. Stevens felt he could explore heroism best without clinging to bronze, which is vulnerable to verdigris and parody, and therefore announced that “There is no image of the hero.” The image was not discarded, but was employed in another role.

This role, too, is announced in the earlier collection—in the poem “Sombre Figuration” in the Blue Guitar volume. Here Mr. Stevens discusses “the man below” who does not think, but “Imagines and it is true, as if he thought / By imagining,” and who “was born within us as a second self, / A self of parents who have never died.” Hardly an image, to be sure; quite evidently, some sort of personalized Jungian racial archetype, the carrier of the insights, the wisdom we draw we know not whence. But this “man below” is source of a kind of emanation, a “sprawling portent” which “high up in heaven” “moves, / As if it bears all darkness in its bulk,” and “Broods in tense meditation, constantly.”

This is “the form / Of a generation that does not know itself”; but

The portent may itself be memory;
And memory may itself be time to come
And must be, when the portent, changed,
takes on
A mask up-gathered brilliantly from the dirt,
And memory’s lord is the lord of prophecy
And steps forth, priestly in severity,
Yet lord, a mask of flame, the darkest form
A wandering orb upon a path grown clear.

This is the “dark-blue king, un roi tonnerre” of Parts of a World; and in the Transport to Sum-
mer volume it receives a magnificent expansion, both of setting and of emotional resonance, in the poem "Chocorua to Its Neighbor":

Last night at the end of night his starry head,
Like the head of fate, looked out in darkness, part
Thereof and part desire and part the sense
Of what men are. The collective being....

The fact that Mr. Stevens, in attempting to present visually this shape that brooded by night on the top of Mount Chocorua, suggests that

He was a shell of dark blue glass, or ice,
Or air collected in a deep essay,
Or light embodied....

connects with repeated allusions to this "megalfrere" in such sort as this:

The impossible possible philosophers' man,
The man who has had the time to think enough,
The central man, the human globe, responsive
As a mirror with a voice, a man of glass,
Who in a million diamonds sums us up.

Professor Wylie Sypher has referred to Mr. Stevens' "dread of the glass man—the rational man." Possibly Mr. Stevens has manifested such a dislike, but this cannot be the whole story. For the lines just quoted are followed immediately by the further lines

He is the transparency of the place in which
He is and in his poems we find peace.
And elsewhere we are told of

The pensive man.... He sees that eagle float
For which the intricate Alps are a single nest.

It seems to me that what glass connotes for Mr. Stevens is not brittleness, fragility, so much as the capacity to transmit, refract, and reflect light. Glass is a metaphor for the perception of reality, with whatever investitures of splendor (the refractions) the imagination confers.

For glass, or substances comparable to glass, are connected in Mr. Stevens' world with centrality:

Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
At the centre of a diamond.

Here we approach the impulse which, presumably, has embodied itself in Mr. Stevens' image of the giant man, whether of bronze, or of glass, or "of nothingness... ever changing, living in change." This is the impulse toward centrality. Any art, any philosophy, which sets out from concrete particulars runs the risk of winding up with nothing but particulars on its hands—at best, in some arrangement without guarantee of significance; at worst, in a mere muddle. Another way of putting it is that a journey from the specific to the relative is hardly worth the cost of a ticket. The need for centrality persists, whatever Mr. Stevens' verdict on reality turns out to be. If reality consists of things which we see as they are, we need to see a sufficient number of them to sustain a conviction that our experience has been reliably representative. If things seem what they are because of our ways of seeing, we need to arrive at some assurance that our ways of seeing are not vitiated by our individual peculiarities. Somewhere, we need a central point of reference, of amalgamation, even, in cantankerous times, of arbitration. A philosophy without such a node of centrality will fly apart; a poetic without such a node will run about in crazy asymmetries. It is this ideal and goal of participation in a just and magnanimous vision,

A vis, a principle or, it may be,
The meditation of a principle,
Or else an inherent order active to be
Itself, a nature to its natives all
Beneficence, a repose, utmost repose

that Mr. Stevens oftenest symbolizes by mythological dimensions: it must be

A giant, on the horizon, glistening.

—F. CUDWORTH FLINT
THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING AT A BLACKBIRD: A SONG-CYCLE

Wallace Stevens’ poems have consistently created an atmosphere which never fails to refresh the eye and the ear. It is little wonder that many composers are attracted to his work for musical setting. They are struck immediately by his richly wrought sounds, the many physical details, certain strange gestures which strongly tempt them to translate these into unifying musical motifs and thus hope to reveal the poet’s deeper themes.

When I first began work on “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”, I felt superfluous in the presence of a poem which, being so strongly “musical” in itself, hardly needed to be set to music, (in fact, might lose by it). This consideration made my work the more hazardous. Above all, I did not wish to make the text a spring-board for lyrical expression nor make it an inert framework from which to hang vocal ornaments, since I knew that the result would so easily become a poem slavishly transliterated into melodic line. What I wanted was to elicit effortlessly in musical and not literary terms the meaningful qualities of the poem as an entity.

Since I attempt to set modern poets to music and since it is the poem almost more than the music which I wish to bring to the fore, I try wholly to identify myself with the poet's personality and vision. After all, should not the poems that have inspired us in the first place receive the careful attention of the composer as well as the listener? Too often words become the skeleton for a musical idea. During the performance of a song recital, the listener must pay equal attention to the singer's vocal accomplishments, the quality and melodic structure of the songs he sings, and to the manner of interpretation as well as to the words that the composer chose to set. Unhappily, the words are often least considered. It is fortunate if the singer’s diction is of such caliber that the words of the poem come across clearly at first hearing. This, I believe, is too seldom accomplished.

If a song is to be clearly understood, the composer must respect the technical aspects of song writing. Vowels and consonants must musically be placed so that each word receives its fullest clarity of sound as well as of meaning. High notes must receive words that contain vowels which are easily sung at high range, for, if this is not done, the singer will not successfully impart the poetry at hand.

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" presented a special problem in that there are thirteen short poems which comprise one poetic unit, not unsimilar to a musical "Theme-and-Variations" idea. Thus I already had before me the challenging prospect of using the blackbird as my major theme and the blackbird’s many settings as my variations. Nevertheless, I chose not to adhere to this "Theme-and-Variations" sequence. The thought of it somehow constrained me. My wish was to follow the blackbird to its everchanging destinations and let it, as it were, guide me. Whether in flight or "sitting in the cedar-limbs", it was the blackbird or merely its shadow that aroused my fancy.

It seemed to me that Mr. Stevens saw his blackbird thirteen times and recorded his amazingly beautiful impressions very spontaneously. When I first read the poem I was left with a sense both of flight and repose—a multitude of brilliant colors strayed behind each impression for it appeared to me that the blackbird had many strange inward colors—black being only its magnificent outer surface. In putting music to these strong impressions, my idea was to add a certain vocal emotionalism to an already felt experience. I wished the singer to convey a sense of mystery and impending doom; I wanted him to feel the presence of the blackbird and I did not wish him fully to comprehend the meaning of this presence. He was merely to impart in strong, clear vocal lines thirteen aspects of one deeply felt emotion. He was, so to speak, to "sing out" these aspects and to do this as though he could not help himself.

I venture to add that it was in this spirit...
that I composed my cycle—as though I could not help myself. Each word of Mr. Stevens’ poem elicited a spontaneous musical idea and, indeed, the cycle took a very short time to complete. Somehow, a seldom felt harmony existed between the poem and its destined musical setting. It was as though the blackbird had momentarily bewitched me and transported me into its own evocative realm. Dare I hope that it was the same realm that Mr. Stevens visited? If so, consider my cycle successful, for then, I feel that I have communicated in musical terms the poet’s intention.

—JOHN GRUEN

MORE ABOUT LEGEND

MEN of letters, some of them prominent, and visiting firemen with gilt edged introductions have stormed his Hartford fortress in vain—or to their deep regret.” Thus has the literary world painted the legend of Wallace Stevens. Will Vance wrote these lines as part of his article called “Wallace Stevens: Man Off the Street,” for the Saturday Review of Literature. We suspect however that if Mr. Vance had tried storming the fortress himself, he might have formed a slightly different opinion of the at-least-by-now famous Hartford poet.

William Van O'Connor, in his The Shaping Spirit, has traced the growth of this phenomenon which he calls “Stevens as Legend.” Stevens’ friends and reviewers have taken seemingly great delight in separating the personality of the poet from the poems, almost as though they were confronted with a literary sort of Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde. Perhaps this tendency is a natural one in view of the vast chasm which stands between the world of the insurance executive and that of the poet, at least in the minds of most people. However, in Mr. Stevens’ estimation the chasm does not seem to be so wide, if he would allow that any separation exists at all. Life quotes him as saying, “Daily contact with other work gives a man character as a poet.” The citation which accompanied his honorary degree from Columbia in 1952 reads: “One of the few men of our time who has been outstanding in his ability to unite the two worlds of imagination and fact.”

Mr. Stevens’ would-be-biographers accuse him of stopping with “I was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, October 2, 1879.” Perhaps ones does detect a certain reticence when he mentions his friends and family. Partly his reticence may be due to a high regard for personality and friendship. He related backing out of a recent dinner given in honor of Robert Frost’s eightieth birthday, a man whom he had met in later years after discovering that they had been classmates at Harvard. “I didn’t accept because the invitation said the banquet was being held for Mr. Frost’s ‘old friends.’ I like Mr. Frost, as everyone else does, but by no stretch of the imagination could I call myself one of his old friends. If I had gone, his real ‘old friends’ would have recognized that and resented my pose.”

His appreciation of the privacy of others is a natural product of his own personal modesty and obvious distaste for publicity; the second factor behind his reticence. He shows a genuine reluctance to accept applause, and would be one of the last persons to feign an aura of mystery just to build a legend about his name. “Many people have accused me of British reserve. If a person isn’t one of the back-slapping variety people immediately jump to the opposite conclusion.” His efforts to avoid publicity have nothing to do with any dislike for people, but may be readily attributed to a conservative modesty that is anything but a pose. “People wonder why I seem to be like that. You might say that I am like the young man who went out for his first day of football. By the end of the practice he had been knocked about quite a bit, and when his friends came up to ask him whether he was planning to come out the next day, he said no. His friends asked
why, and the young man replied, 'I just wasn't brought up that way.'"

Mr. Stevens described the way he had been brought up. "My father was quite a good egg; agreeable, active. He was of Holland Dutch descent, and his father and his grandfather had been farmers. We were all great readers, and the old man used to delight in retiring to the room called the library on a Sunday afternoon to read a five or six-hundred page novel. The library was no real institution, you understand; just a room with some books where you could go and be quiet. My mother just kept house and ran the family. When I was younger I always used to think that I got my practical side from my father, and my imagination from my mother. I decided to be a lawyer the same way I decided to be a Presbyterian; the same way I decided to be a Democrat. My father was a lawyer, a Presbyterian, and a Democrat. It seems that now I have ceased to be all of those things."

"We had a good deal of poetry in the library. You might say we were more bookish than the average." Charles Henri Ford relates, "Stevens said he had a high-school friend with whom he talked about poetry. The friend used to recite poetry as they were walking 'through the woods—very loud. Very clear.'" Mr. Stevens admits, "I suppose I wrote some poetry of an elementary sort in my younger days, but nothing that has any significance. When I was at Harvard I used to write an occasional poem for the Advocate and often sign some fictitious name. You see, I was the editor of the magazine, and often one had to furnish much of the material himself. When I got to New York I was not yet serious about poetry. I got a job on the Herald Tribune through letters of recommendation, but soon discovered that I was no reporter. After that I wrote occasionally. It was not until ten or fifteen years later when some friends of mine came down from Cambridge that I became interested again. After that, I began all over. I don't write much any more—nature takes care of that. One's sensibility doesn't stay put. One naturally slows up."

Mr. Stevens at seventy-four is a dignified figure behind his executive desk. His imposing height and strong facial lines seem to melt away with the charm of his kind eyes and short hair, and the warmth of his deep but gentle voice. When asked about his daily routine, Mr. Stevens replied, "I do what anyone else does—nothing extraordinary." From 8:15 until 4:30 he sits behind a well-ordered desk piled high with insurance claims. He begins the day with his mail. "My business mail is like an endless chain; however, I don't mind if I can work at it in a leisurely way. Hardly a day goes by," he said, pointing to a pile of his personal mail, "when I fail to receive something about poetry. The big envelope at the bottom is a thesis which a man has sent me to read and comment on. Of course in general I don't read as much as I used to, but I do as much as possible."

Mr. Stevens rarely bothers to eat lunch; usually only once during the week. He prefers to stay in and read the New York paper. He thrives on what would seem to most a sparse diet—a light breakfast, seldom any lunch, and perhaps as little as a pudding for dinner. His favorite Sunday meal consists of celery and shrimp: on Sundays no cooking is done in the household. In New York he occasionally dines at the Black Angus. "That is the only place where I really go." His routine consists of a little reading before eight o'clock dinner, a leisurely preparation for bed with four kinds of eye medicine as part of the ritual, and an early rising at five-thirty or six. "I love to go to bed while it is still light outdoors as I did when I was a child."

He likes to write mentally while he takes his frequent walks; and as he thinks, his statement begins to take shape. He pulls out a small sheet of paper which is always ready in his coat pocket and scribbles down a note or two in his characteristically microscopic handwriting. When he arrives at the office he hands his notes to the stenographer to be typed, or he dic-
tates them if he feels they are illegible. He is truly the "man off the street" when he writes his poetry. "I was always very fond of walking. Nowadays I walk from my home over to Asylum Avenue every morning, where someone usually picks me up on his way to work. When I was in New York I used to walk up and down town. I could walk from City Hall up the right side of Broadway against crowds and get to Grace Church in as little as seventeen and a half minutes."

Mr. Stevens says, "It is very difficult to talk about poetry. People seem to think of poetry the way they talk about it on the radio." He told about hearing a radio critic review William Carlos Williams' latest work. The critic said, "I have a book to give away. It costs three dollars, and I shall be glad to send it to anyone who can assure me that he has a genuine interest in poetry like this." Mr. Stevens told how the critic quoted some part of the book out of context, and how he went on to criticize Mr. Williams because he did not communicate. "The quotation could not have been intelligible to people even if they had put it up in neon lights," Mr. Stevens said; "however, it depends really upon what Williams wanted to communicate, and to whom. He knows what he wants to do and is expert in doing it and in doing it exactly. He has devoted his life with the greatest persistence and intelligence to the devising of new forms. Actually, communication takes place on many levels. It can be like representation in painting, but it need not. Apparently Williams did not communicate with that particular critic. The pity is that the point of view of the radio critic is shared by so many other people."

"Really good poetry is the result of concentration, which is produced by an intensity of feeling for the subject of the poem." In his introduction to The Necessary Angel Mr. Stevens says, "One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time. Ordinarily he will disclose what he finds in his own poetry by way of the poetry itself." He says, "Nature shaped my sensibility." Thus we have the picture of the intermittent poet; one who writes when the world excites his imagination. "You might say that one turns things over in one's mind. I say things turn themselves over in the mind." Carl Sandburg once asked him why he chose to write poetry, and he replied with an illustration which Mr. Sandburg used in a lecture. "It's like the little boy whose mother told him to stop sneezing. He replied, 'I'm not sneezing; it's sneezing me!'" Nature has caught Mr. Stevens by the imagination and has done a lot of poetry making.

Perhaps Mr. Stevens' fortress is not so formidable as Mr. Vance described it. Perhaps there is less mystery about the man than is popularly believed. Perhaps the world of his poetic mind is not so unlike the world which surrounds the desk of an insurance company's vice-president. We will not actively contest such a possibility; however, we wish to agree with Mr. O'Connor's The Shaping Spirit:

We find it necessary, as Stevens himself well knows, to create legends. A man or an experience that has become a legend lives in our minds in luminous significance. Mere facts, delimited and carefully divorced from feeling, destroy not merely our feeling about them but their significance; they become fixed and dead. A legend grows that we may isolate special qualities. It has its origin and its best reason for being in our need for perceiving the exact identity, in Stevens' own words, 'the precise line and look,' of the man or experience that engages our imaginations. We enjoy the special qualities and we try to grasp their significance. Stevens the man and the poet became a legend because in him the complex pattern of alienation found a personification.

—JERALD E. HATFIELD
... The truth is that while I have always been Wallace Stevens's publisher and have the highest regard for him both as a poet, a friend and an author on our list, I know him very slightly. No American we have ever published has been so retiring or has let us see so little of him....

—ALFRED A. KNOPF

AU LE PLUS GRAND INTERPRETEUR
WALLACE STEVENS

The poets are dead and poetry knows it,
Poetry is dead and the poets don't know it;
Who's not in the tomb and very well knows it,
He hasn't collected his insurance yet,
Is that shaping spirit long ago levitated
To sing the mystique of the crowded.
Grant seventy-five parasols like colorful birds!
OH WEAVE THE GARLAND AROUND
HIS HEAD,
THE SINGING WREATH DESERVED.

—GENE MAGNER

AGENDA: A NOTE ON SOME UNCOLLECTED POEMS

T would be absurd, more than a little patronizing, to treat so hale a poet as Wallace Stevens as a classic. His earliest work may have great interest for readers and critics, but the poet himself is likely to see it in quite another light. Like T. S. Eliot, Stevens has seen his undergraduate verse exhumed from the pages of the Harvard Advocate. Of these pieces, he has written, "Some of one's early things give one the creeps." The shock of finding these pieces so painstakingly rescued from oblivion must have been a little disconcerting, although nothing to regret, for the poet can leave such matters to the scholar. Some of the later uncollected work, however, has more than merely bibliographical and historical interest. The one-act play, "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise," requires no apology. "Carlos among the Candles," characteristically gay in its self-enveloping scepticism, is everywhere touched with "the essential gaudiness of poetry." For anyone interested in the meditative dramatic form (not quite the "dramatic monologue," not quite pure reflection) that Stevens has made his own, an acquaintance with these two pieces is certainly useful. The same may be said of some of the poems. With a poet such as Stevens, furthermore, the whole career is of interest.

A poet's reasons for omitting certain pieces from his collected work are essentially private, and ought to remain so. If Stevens had been uncritical in selecting the poems he has included in his books, questions of a different kind might be in order. Since this has not been the case, one may legitimately set forth a few pieces Stevens has never collected, with an eye to discovering their particular merits and limitations.

Of thirty-odd such poems published between 1914 and 1923, when the first edition of Harmonium appeared, half a dozen claim close scrutiny. "The Indigo Glass in the Grass" is one of these:
Which is real—
This bottle of indigo glass in the grass,
Or the bench with the pot of geraniums, the
stained mattress and the washed overalls drying in the sun?
Which of these truly contains the world?
Neither one, nor the two together.
The poem strips Stevens' manner to its bare bones. A suddenly sharp and precise perception of details is presented in a context that is as much an insulation against sentimentality as it is an affirmation of the ultimate goodness of "a few things for themselves" seen in a valid perspective. The poem is no more than a fragment. It is almost sententious in its nonchalance. Even so, it sticks in the mind.

Like the catalogue of objects in "O Florida, Venereal Soil," the brightly colored impoverished items presented at a single stroke are part of the "dreadful sundry of this world." They have significance in direct proportion to one's sense of the absurdity and the ultimate coherence of experience. Although the details are not made up into any real pattern, they illustrate a way of looking at things. All views of the world are partial, Stevens suggests, even though the world is what one sees. As a self-conscious lesson in selection of detail, "The Indigo Glass in the Grass" plays fast and loose with paradox; it illustrates a conviction expressed somewhat later that "Not all objects are equal."

"Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces" is more in the manner of the tersely sceptical, precisely colored dramatic meditations Stevens presents in a whole series of poems, of which "The Doctor of Geneva" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" are typical. Starting with a passage from a letter written by a young French soldier killed in World War I, the poem develops in a surprising way:

Si tu voyais la securite des petits animaux des bois—souris, mulots! L'autre jour, dans notre abri de feuillage, je suivais les evolutions de ces petites bêtes. Elles étaient jolies comme une estampe japonaise, avec l'intérieur de leurs oreilles rose comme un coquillage.

From this observation the poem expands into a mental landscape:

Here I keep thinking of the Primitives—
The sensitive and conscientious schemes
Of mountain pallors ebbing into air;
And I remember sharp Japonica—
The driving rain, the willows in the rain,
The birds that wait out rain in willow trees.
Although life seems a goblin mummery,
These images return and are increased,
As for a child in an oblivion:
Even by mice—these scamper and are still.
They cock small ears, more glistening and pale
Than fragile volutes in a rose sea-shell.

Without the epigraph, the poem would be a little ungrateful in its allusiveness. The epigraph, however, is an artificial device that seems to reveal more than it actually reveals. The total effect is a little miscellaneous. The details—especially the first stanza—are better than the whole. An element of arbitrariness in the selection of the details remains unresolved. Unlike the juxtapositions of objects in "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," the associations here do not create their own momentum.

Stevens has, furthermore, admitted to a strong distaste for "miscellany." How skillfully he has achieved a solidity of purpose in his work can be demonstrated by an examination of any or all of his books. This very fact certainly explains the suppression not only of "The Indigo Glass in the Grass" and "Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces," but also of a good many other poems. His early "war" poems, including the four brief "Phases" with which he made his professional debut in 1914, have a good deal of Stevens in them, but for the most part they would have diluted the special quality of Harmonium. The same may be said of several amusing satirical pieces and small
jokes. Of the ten pieces gathered together under the general title of "Primordia," for example, Stevens salvaged "In the Carolinas," "Indian River," and "To the Roaring Wind," that wonderful tailpiece to Harmonium. Reading the rejects over, one is immensely impressed by the astuteness with which Stevens has regarded his own work.

It is natural that as a poet continues to deepen—if the depth is real—his work should become more certain. Stevens excluded a fair number of poems from Ideas of Order, eight or so from some forty-odd available pieces. Poems such as "Good Man, Bad Woman" and "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" are loose refractions of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." They looked backward rather than toward the "tune beyond us, yet ourselves," of the later poems. The satirical poems, such as "The Drum-Majors in the Labor Day Parade" and "What They Call Red Cherry Pie," are amusing enough but a little slick. Yet, ephemeral as they are in comparison with the bigger poems, they could have been written only by Stevens.

There remain a few pieces of a different kind. Like "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," most of these have all the earmarks of preliminary studies for later poems. For the ordinary reader such poems have their own genuine merits; they are divertimenti. Now and then one discovers a poem such as "Agenda" among the discards:

Whipped creams and the Blue Danube,  
The lin-lan-lone of Babson,  
And yet the damned thing doesn't come right.

TO THE POET

Then, when you are naked,  
With nothing left to give,  
The rapists all take pity  
And let you live.

—HERBERT PARK

A poem can be made to serve many ends, even an imperfect poem like "Agenda." Sometimes a nearly perfect poem, such as "Sailing to Byzantium," can be used to show the whole drift of a poet's work. With Stevens, however, the constant unfolding of new aspects of things and new insights into reality has been an ever-increasing delight. No one poem can be made to stand for the rest. Something new is always occurring. Even in the poems that Stevens has rejected there are perceptions that one does not willingly give up, as "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," "Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces," and "Agenda" show. The poems in Harmonium already seem indestructible. In time the later poems will be so, even though it sometimes seems that "the damned thing doesn't come right." It does, in spite of us. What is most miraculous is that the rightness continues to deepen.—SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE

Boston should be in the keys  
Painting the saints among palms.  
Charleston should be New York.  
And what a good thing it would be  
If Shasta roared up in Nassau,  
Cooling the sugary air.

Perhaps if the orchestras stood on their heads  
And dancers danced ballets on top of their beds—  
We haven't tried that.

Those early centuries were full  
Of very haphazard people and things,  
The whole of them turning black;  
Yet in trees round the College of Heralds,  
No doubt, the well-tuned birds are singing,  
Slowly and sweetly.

A poem can be made to serve many ends, even an imperfect poem like "Agenda." Sometimes a nearly perfect poem, such as "Sailing to Byzantium," can be used to show the whole drift of a poet's work. With Stevens, however, the constant unfolding of new aspects of things and new insights into reality has been an ever-increasing delight. No one poem can be made to stand for the rest. Something new is always occurring. Even in the poems that Stevens has rejected there are perceptions that one does not willingly give up, as "The Indigo Glass in the Grass," "Comme Dieu Dispense de Graces," and "Agenda" show. The poems in Harmonium already seem indestructible. In time the later poems will be so, even though it sometimes seems that "the damned thing doesn't come right." It does, in spite of us. What is most miraculous is that the rightness continues to deepen.—SAMUEL FRENCH MORSE

Then, when you are naked,  
With nothing left to give,  
The rapists all take pity  
And let you live.
THE TRINITY REVIEW

THE fifty or sixty refugee scholars and artists gathered under the trees at Pontigny en Amerique listened intently as the quiet speaker talked about things for which they cared the most—of those artistic and spiritual values which they were trying to preserve in the midst of confusion and exile.

Then the discussion began, passed beyond all linguistic barriers, and continued on into the night. Meanwhile the speaker had unobtrusively slipped away. A car waiting at the college gate had whisked him from Parnassus to the Hartford world of affairs only an hour distant.

The visiting thinkers gaped in amazement.

WALLACE STEVENS AND "OLD HIGGS"

THERE is a good deal to remind one of Wallace Stevens in the last volume of Santayana's memoirs. The souvenir is by suggestion, however, and not by direct reference. Santayana, for example, talks about his friend, the private tutor, "who showed me all the possible walks about Oxford," when Santayana began to visit "My Host the World." Then, later, "Old Higgs's days were . . .

over, yet invisibly he often guided my steps; and I may say that I have never seen so many lovely views as through his eyes, because he would not only point them out to me in the first instance, but would find some just epithet to describe them." In some ways, Santayana seems to have been Stevens's "Old Higgs", teaching him to view the world through words and then to realize it through them. "My imagination," Santayana said, "had framed a highly poetic, humanistic, supernaturalistic picture of the universe. I felt that it was fiction; but I said impulsively: 'If that fiction isn't the truth revealed, truth can never be revealed to the human heart.'" Poems are versions, Stevens has constantly mused, of the supreme fiction; "a recent imagining of reality."

Santayana speaks of the landscapes he found when he walked with another friend, Wedd, in Northumberland: "It is the thought of those Roman roads and fortifications, rather than the sight of them, that remains with me. The North is formless; it has spirit in it, wind, but no images that beg to be retained, sculptured, immortalized. Let the North, I say, digest its barren tempests; let it send only its young men, the raw material of genius, for the South to instruct, to enamour, and to mature." Was Stevens sent out this way, to Yucatan, to Key West? Somehow he arrived early enough in the South for its instruction, its amour; but he has not stayed there, and since leaving Santayana behind (where?), it has been, with the South behind him, though not forgotten, to discover maturely the "images that beg to be retained", in the spirit and the wind and the elm trees of a North that is not formless to those truly of fictive powers.

Is there a way of looking at these two men as somehow linked in a tradition of the imagination and the goals of a philosophical poetry, in regarding realms of reality? When I spoke of these relationships to a colleague, I was told that a section of a dissertation in philosophy, at Yale, had been devoted by its author, C. Roland Wagner, to these points. I hope that it can be published; a study of the ramifications should be
significant. Certainly, however, Santayana must have flavored the Harvard of Stevens's time, and the taste seems to have been retained even in Hartford. If Emerson can be said to have set Whitman boiling, by a point of view, then perhaps Santayana may have done the same for Stevens, though one is tempted to refer to it as a rage. Stevens, at any rate, has succeeded in the fictions that Santayana could postulate better than he could create.

Wallace Stevens has followed the seasons and the climates; he has had his spring and summer, and is now at seventy-five in late autumn. He has been to Florida and remembers the lemon trees ("Kennst du das Land?"), but he has kept his winter residence in the North. Unlike the aging business man who attempts to reorder the seasons, to drink the South always, a Ponce de Léon on pension, and unlike the aging poets who try to maintain the spring holidays of the flesh in unchanging lyrics, Wallace Stevens has accepted aging and has made ways of looking at its revelations. If not unique in the company of modern poets, he is uncommon among them.

Words and epithets blossom for Wallace Stevens into the world he sees; they comprise his reality and are the dark-colored stones he orders for the supreme city of man; they celebrate the marriage of man and his environment. Stevens is one of the true makers whom we like to praise, one of the constant rebuilders and welders, working through the pondering power of the imagination. The poems are his pay-and-a-half for overtime, donated charitably by him at the expense of his retirement fund. He has, with sense, believed in the poem as few poets in our time have done, believed in the poem as a thing in itself, but not isolated, not pure. And if he seems to have written the same poem many times—"x" ways of looking—he has shown not only that what is interesting in art is the way in which a poem is said, but that by saying it many ways in many seasons he has always contrived something new.

—NORMAN HOLMES PEARSON

WALLACE STEVENS AND SOME FRENCH POETS

Ach, Mutter,
This old, black dress,
I have been embroidering
French flowers on it.

—"Explanation"

NINETEENTH-century thinking about the role of the imagination begins with a *credo quia impossibile*—that artistic imagination can abolish the distinction between subject and object, perceiver and perceived. We would, today, be much less convinced of the artistic fruitfulness of such a doctrine, much more aware of its intellectual untenability, without that tendency to turn aesthetic conjecture into poetic problem which has always characterized the French. Wallace Stevens' speculation concerning the imaginative faculty is firmly of the present century; yet it would be impossible to consider it apart from earlier thought on the same subject. If Stevens' claims for the imagination are never excessive unless, ill-advisedly, we seek to detach thought from verse and verse from poem, that is because his thought, in the passage toward poetry, undergoes a kind of transformation that we can find in a number of French writers. His well-tempered poetry does not admit identifications of the imagination with one thing after another without, in the end, arriving at a total truth quite different from any detachable statement. And this way of mixing categorical, programmatic statements in with sound art Stevens shares with writers of a race in which the life of forms is abundant enough, apparently, to stand it—one thinks immediately of Baudelaire.

The most obvious common ground between Stevens and French poets, however, is not with any particular one of them. Again and again Stevens' inevitable word turns out to be wholly French or barely Englished. "Cantilene" and
“douceur” within a few lines of each other in "The Comedian as the Letter C" are only a trifle more Gallic than "gasconade" and "verd" in the same poem. French words by the score in Harmonium and only less numerous in later volumes, the admirable lines which are lines of French, not only in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" but also in "A Thought Revolved," the French titles, the flowers called by their French names—these are all indications of the extent to which Stevens has assimilated the modern classic language. (Occasionally the Gallicism is a little too much: "One is not a duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage." And I do not understand the use of "fabliau" in "Fabliau of Florida.") And the compounding of so much French with more muscular native vocables contributes largely to making his diction the wonderfully fresh thing it is. English is always being rediscovered in the poetry of Stevens, and one of its richest components, naturally, is French. That linguistic curiosity common to all important modern poets, that penetration toward "les couches du langage" which sends Valéry to the Latin and Saint-John Perse to the Dravidian root, takes—and need take—Stevens no further than that linguistic moment when a figurative old black dress began to acquire figurative embroideries.

It seems clear enough that Stevens, like other poets of his time, began toward the end of the French continuum and worked backward. No one writing in English gave such early and compelling evidence of rewarding contact with Mallarmé. As surely as the three poems by Mallarmé, "Infanta Marina" is "un éventail" and requires comparison with the poems in which Mallarmé proceeded from slight gesture to broad implication:

Partaking of the sea,
And of the evening,
As they flowed around
And uttered their subsiding sound.

The time, as in "Autre Eventail de Mademoiselle Mallarmé," is a twilight in which plume readily turns to wing forcing the horizon back, in which image leads fluidly to analogous and further-reaching image. The success is in proportion to the progression from the event chosen for its insignificance according to the standards of the rationalists—a rankly trivial event, to adapt Stevens' language—to the situation of creature before sea and evening which even rationalists can understand. It is a matter of distance covered.

From their scrupulous beginnings within chosen boundaries, their long elaboration of a set of tested attitudes, to their later posing of problems of cognition, there are real resemblances between Mallarmé and Stevens. Many of the themes on which Stevens achieved such fine nuances in Harmonium Mallarmé would have recognized at once: they are subjects which the best French writers of his century had rendered familiar. The mediocrity of the quotidian, the boundlessness of ennui, the limitations of the bourgeois, the less marked limitations of the bourgeoise (for it is often the ordinary women who aspire to a better state), the relentlessness and ungovernableness of the life force, the possibility of redemption in art. These ideas were parts of the world with which Mallarmé began, a world in which it was possible to oscillate between Idea and Phenomena in much the same way as Stevens between his Imagination and Reality. Mallarmé would not have assimilated to imagination so many of the other faculties of the mind, however. Nor would he (or very good positivists, for that matter) have termed "real" those phenomena to which he attached all the importance which Stevens ascribes to his Reality.

Relationships between Stevens and Mallarmé having been so fully and so well explored by Hi
Simons (Modern Philology, 1946, 235-259)—textual parallels, similar color symbolism, especially in meanings of "azur" and "blue," and the Idealistic enlargement on the qualities of the Absent, the desire to

Bring down from nowhere nothing's wax-like blooms

"The Statue at the World's End")

meanings made

("The Greenest Continent")—it is probably more useful to note certain differences between the two poets. "Azur" is a far more stable term for Mallarmé than "blue" for Stevens. Mallarmé was surer of what it was he was not sure of. The unattainable perfected absolute was not even there—yet it was the theoretical point of convergence of all his lines of effort. The color "blue," on the other hand, which assumes its characteristic meanings only in Stevens' later work, after the appearance of many cracks in the univers bien fait which lay behind Harmonium, has as many meanings as Stevens' Imagination. It is the subjective end of new wholes, and there are so many new wholes, so many new kinds of objects to be apprehended in ways more various than the poet acknowledges or the poems at first reveal. Stevens becomes less and less of an Idealist and more and more of a Realist on whom objects impinge at the several levels. If it were not for the parallel development of Yeats and some other Symbolists one might begin to wonder how important the Absent ever was for him. The later Stevens is besieged by, and vividly registers, so many presences.

Certainly he learned a great deal about the uses of ellipsis from Mallarmé and the Symbolists generally, about the poem that demands activity from the reader and the Word that leads the way to the idea, as about the interchangeability of sense data and the poem that seeks to establish community with the other arts, notably music—about the whole art of modern poetry which he would not have cultivated with such skill and devotion without the example of those great artificers. That cult of eighteenth-century style which is so clear in Harmonium was almost certainly nurtured by Verlaine, it being doubtful that Stevens would have found it in a few isolated English aesthetes a bit later or in the Goncourts a little earlier—and something, I think, would have been necessary to convince the early Stevens that eighteenth-century art pertained to the world of the modern. Though Verlaine has been dubbed a "backward poet" by one of Stevens' most forward critics, I feel sure that Stevens himself would never have made that mistake—for Verlaine's transparency is, of course, no more of a drawback than Mallarmé's difficulty. Indeed, confronted by certain melodic innovations in Harmonium and by the fins détails of certain stylized landscapes one can think only of Verlaine. There is no imitation of Verlaine; but during the long preparation of Stevens' first volume one great singer undoubtedly recognized another.

Here and there in Verlaine, but particularly in Laforgue, Stevens must have encountered the figure of the artist as clown. The importance of this identification is to be gauged from the nature of Crispin in what remains Stevens' best sustained poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C." It was Le Sage in his Crispin rival de son maître who first gave Crispin some prominence. The play itself is not particularly well known, nor does it deserve to be, and though Regnard's Légataire Universel of the following year also has a Crispin and is better, the fact that Stevens went back to the very early years of the eighteenth century for his comic personage is more evidence that his knowledge of French literature is not confined to the areas that happen to be most in view at a given time. What Stevens wanted was a good name for a Romantic ironist, a willful fellow who would puncture all the balloons that Stevens would send up painted with his gaudiest language. He wanted, in short, a Pierrot, but he took care not to call him by that or any other of the
Laforguian names. . . . This is typical of Stevens, but then we are always being impressed by his knowledge of French literature: by the way his Doctor from Geneva feels the Pacific swell of Racine and Bossuet; by the unfading colors of that delicate medieval legend, "Cy Est Pour­tracte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges." And which of our critics—to shift as brusquely from one epoch to another as Stevens himself does—has taken note of Toulet? Paul-Jean Toulet, who died a few years ago, is decidedly a contemporary writer, rather like Stevens himself in some ways, combining with a painter's capacity for rendering the visible a sudden, measured music. Stevens has compressed the essential quality of his verse and the probable future of the world into a terse "de­cor­ation":

Serve the rouged fruits in early snow. They resemble a page of Toulet Read in the ruins of a new society, Furtively, by candle, out of need. —"Like Decorations for a Nigger Cemetery"

That parachute with which Stevens is careful to equip himself on longer flights has several ironic devices on which Laforgue placed his seal or patent: portentous inflation of language, especially in "The Comedian"; the title with protective coloration, such as "Lunar Para­phrase"; treatment of the imaginative faculty as moon-imagery. Only in the verse of Laforgue, before Harmonium, is the sun so clearly made to stand for what is obtuse, geometrical; only in Laforgue's and Stevens' verse is the moon so definitely equated with the esprit de finesse. It is worthy of note that the presence of Laforgue is felt much later in Stevens' verse than in Eliot's. I cannot read "Academic Dis­course at Havana," with its clear horn-call of Romantic nostalgia, and particularly its se­quences of imagery arising out of

Life is an old casino in a park, without realizing once more the profoundly similar position of these two poets as critics—heavily engaged—of the Romantic movement. If there is one image above all others charac­teristic of Laforgue's poetry, it is precisely that of existence compared to the abandoned casino.

Since Baudelaire there has been no more Baudelairian line than that in the first section of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds":

C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme, and those other French lines, one to each sec­tion, on which all the forces of each part come to bear, have much of the same quality. When I say "Baudelairian" I am thinking of certain poems—"L'Invitation au Voyage": as poem and as poem in prose, "La Vie Antérieure," "Chant d'Automne II"—whether written in alexan­drines or not, in which Baudelaire built up in all richness of color a glowing seventeenth­century vision. But I also mean, more gen­erally, that Stevens and Baudelaire have in common a way of pausing in the argument of the poem to develop, to round out an image—and the notion of "rounding out," often ex­pressed by "arrondir" or one of its derivatives, has special importance in Stevens' verse. As for Baudelaire, whatever the depth of the "abyss that with him moved," whatever the cracks in his firmament, he could always pause for the rhetorical duplication and reduplication of his original image. The "tone" of Baudelaire de­rives mainly from the contrast between the orna­mental islets of descriptive imagery and tense, spare, predicative language nearby. Stevens has much less "tone" in this sense, especially in his earlier work. But his skill in develop­ing the single image rivals Baudelaire's own, and may well have been enhanced by study of the poet of whom he reveals such critical under­standing in "Sea Surface."

As one of the important poets who have arisen out of the modern conviction—which was Baudelaire's—that the means of apprehension are similar in all the arts, and extend beyond the arts into other domains, Stevens has long regarded painters, especially French painters, as particular confrères. At one time we had to draw our own conclusions from his still lives,
his attention to masses, his studies in a given color. As his poetry has become more and more an aesthetic meditation, however, he has become more explicit and let us see clearly what we might only have surmised, that he can conceive an age in terms of "the gods of Boucher," in terms of Picasso's "hoard of destructions." His essay on "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" tells us more about the bond between Poussin and Racine, between the world of Juan Gris and that of post-Baudelairean poets. This peculiarly modern view of the interrelation of the arts, and of poetry and painting in particular, enables us to accept the note on Raoul Dufy, published last year, as the revealing document that it is. There was a time when Dufy was taken to be a merely decorative artist—and such he was if to decorate is to delight in the forms and iridescent colors of a world. But Dufy, whose skill with colors, particularly the color green, was such that it was natural that he should exult in it, deliberately subdued his colors as he went on, and no one who has studied his last murals, the immediate subject of Stevens' note, can doubt that along with the toning-down of colors came a new robustness of forms, a new depth—that in a very important sense his last work was his best.

—WARREN RAMSEY

HARTFORD POET
(Essence of an Encounter)

Desire for the apogee of sun
is in this light; the pyramidal larch
gathers to its yellowing linear leaves
the flash of brightness given by sun and air.

The brown pagoda in Elizabeth Park
is a mandarin in harsh habiliments
of dry sharp thorns and twisted briers towering
over rose arches where no roses are.

It is not yet noon; day vaults to solar height;
the autumnal atmosphere is shifting from
warm to cool to warm in tried responses.
Slow up, said Wallace Stevens, look at the larch.

The way the light encrusted the gold glints
shut out the logic of the busy world
a traffic-jam away, where none had time
to note the season's affluence in foliage.

On Westerly Terrace an old neighbor died,
making him visible to eternity;
a voice in me cried stop before a church
as we drove on; a voice beside me spoke
of fruit, G. Fox, insurance, and the bleak
meanings of poetry. I: meanings in words
unmake a poem's sense; a poem lives
in newness, is unique as any "I" who is.

He: configuration is the thing that counts,
mine as against just anyone's notation;
I've come to terms with no one but myself,
and so I hear a purer water-music
someone will overhear. There was accord
between the light in us and light in day;
my hometown glittered in the man I spoke to;
my hometown his, a business life's adoption.

He knew this city, took full being from it,
no less than from that panoramic larch,
its boughs sun-sinewed with fecund nodes of
fire,
than from the things we talked of into town.

Speech stilled us to accomplished silences,
and when I left him at the fruiterer's,
an old-timer's place as modern as old age,
on Front Street affronting by its architecture,
the keen clean sound of him was in my head,
the opulence of sun a coronal
for the rock crystal brilliance of his mind,
deft as the captured concept in a poem.

—I. L. SALOMON
I am sorry I did not have more time to write a tribute to Wallace Stevens from my own point of view, but I do want to join with the other writers in praising his great mastery of poetry and in honoring his books.

—KARL SHAPIRO

AN OBSERVATION ON WALLACE STEVENS IN CONNECTION WITH SUPREME FICTIONS

The interest of the legend of Wallace Stevens owes something to what seems the paradox of his having been an insurance lawyer and a poet at once. The paradox can be taken as simply amusing, or, more heavily, as an instance of the Poet’s martyrdom to the business culture of America, or again, with hostility, as plain enough evidence that Mr. Stevens early sold out the high and dangerous calling of Poet for a mess of Connecticut comfort. In each case his success as an insurance lawyer is understood to vitiate his success as a poet, however neon a color or sharp an astringency it may give his legend. But I suspect there is and has been a much deeper game going on, and that it is given away in his definition of poetry as “the supreme fiction.”

Any poetry relies, if not on the authority, at least on the companionship of some other articulation of chaos than its own, and Wallace Stevens has written his poetry in the congenial company of at least five other fictions which are in their kinds supreme. These are namely: Law, Money, Music (of the “fictive” sort), Metaphysics, and Civilization—this last in the sense of refined connoisseurship and full consciousness. One might call these fictions subvarieties of poetry or hybrid poetries or cousins to poetry, depending on how large one makes poetry or how restricted, but they are evidently related to poetry taken as a supreme fiction and to each other. Wallace Stevens has said of such poetry that “it must be abtract . . . it must change . . . it must give pleasure” and the five companion fictions named above do eminently fulfill these conditions, if not for everybody, certainly for the enlightened practitioners seeing them from the inside as it were.

One minor beauty of this company is that it relegates to secondary or even fainter importance the less supreme, more preliminary, and less consciously fictitious fictions which have most guided contemporary poetry. The Anthropology, Tradition, and Religion, of T. S. Eliot scarcely get into Wallace Stevens’ act even as scenery, whatever else he may owe to Eliot. Politics, Science, Psychology, and the parade of Isms which guided so much of the poetry of the late twenties, the thirties, and the forties, sometimes intrude for a moment, but the long head of Mr. Stevens seems never to have let him invest in them at all heavily. He has had to think in lifetimes. He has usually known a bad risk at first glance, though I think he took some losses on Imagism in his early days.

But the real marvel of his work is that, while he has tuned his Harmonium or Blue Guitar to a key common to the five other fictions—to their bright and dry elegance of rationality, their high and wide relevance, their intricacy, finesse, and limited sonority in particular—he still plays strictly in his own idiom. A “paltry nude”, “the difficultist rigor”, and “a stiff and noxious place”—for quick examples—are within his instrument so tuned but belong to his idiom; and the same is true of his syntax, his metric, his colors and all the elements of his form as well as his locutions. In this way he has been neither a martyr nor a traitor but a champion, a poet of sufficient force to convert what seemed the least poetic and least personal materials and methods of our time to the service of his personal poetry. Of the other fictions, music and civilization might seem more amenable than law, money, or metaphysics, but they are not:
their being more convivial at first brush tempts poetry the more wickedly away from its autonomy. But the poetry of Wallace Stevens has not been seduced—to the contrary it has seduced the other fictions, and its rakish vein has always been of its essence.

How the future will treat his poetry is properly the future’s business, but for the future I put my money on a bigger and better Byron-ism, and even the Byronism of Byron—that “pilgrim of eternity”—would find the worldly, rakish, and metaphysical poetry of Wallace Stevens nothing if not companionable. And in the meantime, for the present, it is also admirable, affording not only delight but astonishment over the particular perfections, distinctions, and chromatics that belong to it only.

—Donald Sutherland

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THE STEVENS ATHENAEUM

Everything visible adheres to the invisible—the audible to the inaudible—the perceptible to the imperceptible. Perhaps the thinkable to the inconceivable. Imaginative power is the wondrous sense which can replace all senses and which is so much subject to our own volition.

Novalis

(Translated by Peter Selz)

ATHENE is surely the right presiding deity for this collection. Remember her words to Odysseus. “You are so civilized, so intelligent, so self-possessed.” She liked these qualities in her favorite and she would find them in the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Also she would enjoy the transformations and jocund shifts which his magical passes realize. “Realize” is a good word to start from in a tour of this gallery of words. Start from that center and move out along the paths which are provided. It is important to recall that in this gallery the eccentric is the base of design.

Don’t check your walking-stick. Occasionally you’ll want to lean on it meditatively. Frequently you’ll enjoy keeping time with it, tapping out the tune. Here there’s no fear of vandalism. These substances (and their circumstances) can’t be harmed. Those thought-scapes over there for example. They are strictly intangible to walking-sticks.

Eye and idea are part and parcel of “realize.” The sometimes impersonalized “I” comes into it too, as the very singular “one.”

It was when the trees were leafless first in November
And their blackness became apparent, that one first
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design.
Call it “eye-dea.” This handy mnemonic will remind you to be silent. Stop, look and listen. Behave like a connoisseur if you wish but don’t behave like a savant. Above all don’t ask questions of what you see. Here the questions are asked on your behalf by a better questioner.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

Not, mind you, “become as little children”, nor “let him become a fool that he may be wise.” Those counsels are relevant but they point in another direction. The “ignorant eye” here is nearer to the extinguished eye of a noble man; the eye of Oedipus for example. Indeed even the half-god Polyphemus acquired insight and greater clarity of vision after he had been privately and painfully informed by “Noman”. And it was, of course, Teiresias, the blind seer and son of the nymph Charklo, who saw Phoebus Apollo most clearly. (Callimachus helps us here. “The story is not mine, but told by others. Girls! there was one nymph of old in Thebes whom Athene loved much, more than all her companions, the mother she was of Teiresias, and she was never apart from her.”) Teiresias knew the difference between seeming and being and he became quite understandably huffy when Oedipus jeered at his ignorance. But here and now,
Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named
There was a project for the sun and is.
There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

It is toward such unnameable being that "realize" does its service in this gallery.

Today we shall visit only the classical section but it should be noticed that the classical is pervasive on these premises just as it is pervasive in the truest abstract painting; as in Picasso’s for example. And like Picasso’s these abstractions are re-presentational, substantial and circumstantial. We know that in preclassical times there were Cycladic statuettes of the female figure shaped like small violins. To our eye they suggest abstractions of harmony from which perhaps the form of the fiddle was eventually evolved, and even the form of the guitar.

It was not, by the way, when Oedipus was answering the Sphinx with facts but when he became fictive through the question "Who am I?" that he began to realize himself and discover the truth. His questions led to insight and eventually to heroization and to the poetry of Sophocles. In this gallery we are constantly reminded of another Greek enquirer whose questions led to insight, heroization of a sort and eventually to the poetry of Diotima. The reminders of Plato’s aristocratical appreciation of Socrates are peripatetic in this gallery.

But, make no mistake! This gallery is one man’s "sense of the world"; one man’s realization through the imagination.

As you leave these premises, these very various premises, do not look for the usual official niche. Do not expect to see a reverential and owl-ridden, "antiquated and rustic" bust of Athene. Here and now you will feel and know only the presence (there are no graven plaques) of the words "rendez-vous" and "realize"—and a snatch of soliloquent song.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,
Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one.
How high that highest candle lights the dark . . .

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

—JOHN L. SWEENEY

STEVEINS IN ENGLAND

What is the general view of Wallace Stevens’s work in England? A short answer would be that there is no view of Stevens’s work in England: short but not quite accurate, for during the last year a volume of his poems has been published by Faber (but why did they have to wait so long for publication?), and his work has been rather deviously approached by way of a curious middle page article in the Times Literary Supplement. It remains true, however, that Stevens is held in no such esteem here as that accorded to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound; it is doubtful if he has even the small band of devoted admirers possessed by John Crowe Ransom and Conrad Aiken.

In these exceptional circumstances, then, there may be some mild interest in recalling my own small part in publishing Stevens’s verse in England during the thirties, when he was almost wholly unknown here. In an early issue of a little magazine named Twentieth Century Verse I published two new poems Stevens sent me; I think this must have been the first work of his to find print in an English magazine for quite
a long time. Shortly afterwards a sizeable extract from *The Man With The Blue Guitar* appeared in the magazine; and an issue or two later there was an article on the book by Samuel French Morse, who is editing this present tribute to Stevens's work. I wish I could say that these exceptional measures (they may not sound exceptional, but it is very rare indeed for an English magazine to review at length a book, like *The Man With The Blue Guitar*, which has not been published in this country) had some effect. "I hope your article will do something towards making Stevens known here", I wrote optimistically to Morse; but I doubt if it won more than half a dozen new readers for Stevens in this country.

A few months later there was published a special American number of *Twentieth Century Verse*; and a glance at the names of possible and desirable contributors energetically discussed by Symons and Morse (who had now become American editor) prompts some disturbing or comic reflections. About Stevens, I am pleased to say, we were firm, both of us were very firm; but it proved difficult indeed to reconcile our differences over some of the other poets to be included or excluded. At one point I made a little list which, as I said to Morse, "perhaps you won't like"; and I can think of few more things more infuriating than the receipt of this list of names under the headings of "YES!" and "NO!", with just a few names in between—unless it was the envelopes Morse sent me, stuffed full with the indigestible work of poets whom he warmly recommended. Where now are some of the poets I insisted on rejecting, to Morse's gallantly-concealed distress? David Schubert and Elder Olson, Guthrie and Hudeburg, where are they now? Where, worse yet, are one or two of the poets I insisted on including, to Morse's greater and almost-evident distress?

All this has little to do with Stevens; except that by contrast to our doubts about almost everybody else we were so very firm, so admirably firm, about Stevens. We thought at one time of featuring one American poet particularly in the number—and then gave up the idea because of a feeling that other poets might not appreciate it. But Morse was in no doubt about who it should be. "As for featuring an American, it should be Stevens . . . he seems to me just about top man, and I am still surprised at the oblivion which covers him here, let alone in England." All this was in 1938, a long time ago.

A couple of years later I wrote an essay on Stevens for an English magazine: a piece which perhaps did not please him very much if he saw it, but which indicates an English attitude towards his work which would seem to many people still valid. Beyond or behind or outside the technical skill, which should make us all bow admiring heads, what really exists, I asked, in the way of a philosophy or an attitude to life? It was an American critic who suggested a comparison between the work of Stevens and of James Branch Cabell (a writer certainly not at this moment overestimated in his own country); and to many readers here that comparison would seem to have more relevance than, I imagine, most of the contributors to this special Stevens number would allow. To let irreverence go free, it seems at times almost as if Stevens were parodying himself like a poetic Philo Vance who is forever flickin' the ash from his hand-made Regie. "His work does not contain an objective view of life, nor does it express a philosophy of life", I wrote. "It gives instead an objective view of Mr. Stevens in various attitudes . . . There is not one of Stevens' more important poems which does not have for its explicit or implied subject the poet and his poetry, rather than a consideration of man as a social animal."

But not even an English view must end with such ungracious or ungrateful words. I am ready to bow the head, more than that, to go down on bended knee, in homage to the beautiful structure of Stevens's poems and the elegance and grace of his writing; and if a young poet were looking for a model (as almost all
young poets unconsciously always are) he might gain much more, and with much less chance of harm, from Stevens than from Eliot or Pound. He is the most charming and accomplished of poets; and it is only the solemn scholasticism of some of his American admirers (dare I say?) that makes one question so sharply the accomplishment and the charm.

—JULIAN SYMONS

SOME NOTES ON WALLACE STEVENS

THE semantic experiments of Wallace Stevens are always exciting. It becomes a sort of gymnastics for the critical faculty of the reader to discover how many new connotations the imagination of Stevens can get out of a given denotation. This is because Stevens (to quote F. O. Matthiessen) is "absorbed with the differences between the observed thing and what the imagination can make of it... between the stark actual and the release given by soft shadows and oblique half-tones."

Like a public speaker from some specialized occupation, so the writer of "oblique half-tones" requires a master of ceremonies to introduce him to his public. As Henry James has required already, so Stevens will require the work of many an esthetic theorist and analyst to educate his public of the future. Supplementing the old dichotomy of the "readers' poet" and the "poets' poet," it is possible to coin for Stevens a third category, that of the "critics' poet."

The universities will have their joy explaining him long after the more popular poets are deservedly forgotten.

His book, Transport to Summer, appeared in 1947 at the same time as a reissue of his magnificent first book of 1923, Harmonium (both published by Knopf, N. Y.). Almost the only part of the newer book worthy of being placed alongside the book of 1923 is "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—and perhaps parts of "Esthétique du Mal." But it is precisely these two poems that have already been published (by Cummington Press) and are merely reprinted in Transport. The rest of Transport was new, and this was what we had particularly looked forward to, and this was what was particularly disappointing. It was unrewarding not because it was "bad"—it isn't—but because it was trivial. Every great poet, if he has the zest to experiment, will at times be "bad." Or will seem to be so to the myopia of contemporary critics until the future rebukes them. But to have been brilliantly trivial, to have repeated mechanically the effects that were once achieved vividly, this was what disturbed Stevens's sincerest admirers.

Earlier than the "blue guitar" symbol, the most interesting of Stevens's parables to "tease us into thought" is his jar-in-Tennessee (from the poem "Anecdote of the Jar," included in Harmonium). His poetry of 1947 is summed up by his own description of that jar:

The jar was round upon the ground...
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush.

The meaning of the jar's triumph ("it took dominion everywhere") is anti-artifice and pronature according to the interpretation given the poem by Yvor Winters in Anatomy of Nonsense (reissued by the Swallow Press as part of In Defense of Reason, 1947). Earlier, other critics (Howard Baker in The Southern Review of autumn 1935, and Stanley Chase in his essay "Dionysus in Dismay") had suggested a directly opposite interpretation: pro-art, anti-nature. But is there not a third possibility, that of ironic neutrality between art and nature? If so, then perhaps in this particular poem the poet is viewing with Olympian detachment and Janus-faced malice the taming of a wilderness that is too "slovenly" by a creative process that is too "gray":

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
In any event, Stevens's own artifacts, his own Tennessee jars, are never of the natural, spontaneous, effusive school of poetry but are the product of the most conscious, deliberate craftsmanship. Whatever lip service he may pay to nature in theory (even assuming that he was wholly (pre-wilderness and anti-jar), in his own practice Stevens fortunately leaves all folksy primitivism to the ghost of Rousseau.

Fortunately and yet, beyond a certain point, unfortunately. In each of his successive works after *Harmonium* (Ideas of Order 1936, *The Man with the Blue Guitar* 1937, *Parts of a World* 1942), the jars become increasingly polished, competently but mechanically, and in color an increasingly opaque "gray." In *Transport* the point is reached where we have endless polish and almost no jar. "But if we have such another victory," said Pyrrhus, "we are undone." One more such Pyrrhic victory over adjectives (over his own tools) by Wallace Stevens, and he will have no more language left with which to write. Picture an eidolon of gold so over-refined that it vanishes into glittering air, leaving as a poem only disembodied cerebrum, out space and out of time, brooding through eternity on nothing but its own being. Mallarmé, who spoke of being less interested in the words of a poem than in the blank spaces between them, would have approved.

—Peter Viereck

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**MIND**

Mind in its purest play is like some bat
That beats about in caverns all alone,
Contriving by a kind of senseless wit
Not to conclude against a wall of stone.

It has no need to falter or explore;
Darkly it knows what obstacles are there,
And so may weave and flitter, dip and soar
In perfect courses through the blackest air.

And has this simile a like perfection?
The mind is like a bat. Precisely. Save
That in the very happiest intellection
A graceful error may correct the cave.

—Richard Wilbur

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**THE POETRY OF WALLACE STEVENS**

If the dead are to be questioned, the living may in fairness expect to have their works taken seriously. A poet who has spent a lifetime trying his best to say what he thinks deserves to have his thoughts regarded. To compliment Mr. Stevens, as one must, on the devotion he has given to his writing, so obvious in that insouciant grace which may deceive anyone who has never attempted it, is no more than politeness. To say further that he loves words for their sound and "colour," as every good poet should do, is but to prolong talk of the weather. Let it be taken for granted that Mr. Stevens is the best poet writing in America, and one of the best poets now writing in English. But these superlatives must be qualified: most often Mr. Stevens's excellence is of statement rather than idea, of sound rather than sense. It is as
a "singer" that he is outstanding. His initial gift may not have been so great as that of others; but how tirelessly he perfected it, with what care he made certain that the notes were pure and truly placed. If Mr. Stevens has for long been a poets' poet, it is just because so often he triumphantly brings off the apparently impossible, says something so remarkably well that criticism stops for a moment, breathless:

You know how Utamaro's beauties sought
The end of love in their all-speaking braids.
You know the mountainous coiffures of Bath.
Alas! Have all the barbers lived in vain
That not one curl in nature has survived?
Why, without pity on the studious ghosts,
Do you come dripping in your hair from sleep?

It would be pleasant to continue the hunt for other ways of praising work so greatly liked, but something more is owing to a master. That sort of praise, what does it mean in the end? There is no insolence in considering this openly: Mr. Stevens's poems are concerned with himself—his life, and what it may be worth. Like most puzzled people he gives half of his heart first to one conclusion and then to the other. At moments he tells himself that ours is a dog's life: "Darkness, nothingness of human after-death." But there are other moments in which resolute gloom is lightened by strange uncovenanted gleams. "Where do I begin and end?" . . . "A dream (to call it a dream) in which I can believe" . . . "What am I to believe?" . . . "He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest In a permanent realization." . . . Those are the stanchions; the high-wire is strung between; on it Mr. Stevens tries to balance himself with a very bright parasol: "Poetry Exceeding must take the place Of empty heaven and its hymns. . . ." Engaged in such a testing work, is the aerialist to be blamed for clutching the jade handle hard, even for blinking at the taut coloured paper so as to make it look parachute silk?

Thus portrayed, Mr. Stevens's position may not seem dignified, but neither is the similar position of the many for whom he is so remarkable a prototype. Their parasols may be inscribed "Gloria mundi" or, more splendidly, "Omnia vincit Amor," but the wavering movement from uncertainty to uncertainty is the same. It might seem, then, that this subjective, exquisite poetry, inclining easily to the frivolous, the recherché, the chic, but then as suddenly tending towards the ominous, the superstitious, the mystic wonderland of religious terms divorced from religion, would find a wide and appreciative audience in England to-day. But even with the best will in the world towards the confused sentiments of Mr. Stevens's work, the average man is going to find that—charmingly stated or not—confusion differs from order, and that these poems, if full of meaning, leave much of their meaning merely noted. Why this should be so, why "things as they are" should often be celebrated in terms of such obscurity that the careful reader's head hums with possible misunderstandings, brings us back to look more intently at the figure on the high-wire. But before we can do this properly, we need to realize that we have an advantage over the intermittent idealist we are trying to bring into focus. We are convinced that Mr. Stevens is real, that he exists. Here is his book to prove it. But it must be understood that such evidence may not be acceptable to its author. "What is there in life except one's ideas" . . . "The first idea is an imagined thing" . . . "If it should be that reality exists In the mind" . . . How can Mr. Stevens be sure that this volume of 143 pages, bound in purple cloth, is not just a figment of his imagination? Book may be unreal, high-wire of life may be unreal, aerialist himself may be unreal. And should we call reassuringly from our 12s. 6d. seats: "We know you exist, there you are," dare he believe us? Perhaps we too, like the poems we are examining, have no existence outside his mind.

Needless to say, Mr. Stevens is not convinced by his own doubts; he only plays with idealism: "He held the world upon his nose And this-a-way he gave a fling"—just as any of us might
do alone on the high-wire, bored and yet alarmed. But the rules of play can encroach on life. If there is perhaps no one else, only the poet jotting down notes toward his supreme fiction—the belief he hopes to embrace without believing—what does it matter if the poems that result have the hidden significance of shopping lists? The poor imaginary reader can decipher them as he pleases. In the end, however, this obscurity is of most disservice to Mr. Stevens himself. Concealed behind a private philosophical language whose meaning varies with his moods, he can colloquize without danger—even from himself—of a criticism which might be unimpressed by flights of fancy disguised as logical thoughts. But this self-defeating security—for Mr. Stevens wants the truth—lulls the besieged mind into imagining that the same comfortable avoidance of unpleasant encounters accompanies a sortie into plain speech. For example, in a later poem he says: "The captain and his men Are one and the sailor and the sea are one." That may be an effective conclusion to a secret argument in favour of believing that contradiction does not exist, that everything is everything else, but does it happen to be true? How many captains have reason to believe that they are numerically one with their crews? How many poets would want to have their publishers tuck the royalty cheque inside the office copy of their Selected Poems?

A poet is forced to have a philosophy—even if it be the prevalent one of having no philosophy at all. But he is confusing himself, and exasperating his reader, when he lets the expression dictate the idea, so that he thinks what he says rather than says what he thinks. The cause of much of this imprecision may be found in the tools of the poet, which happen also to be traps for the philosopher. Those two brief words "like" and "as," how subtly they move from seeming into being. At times the sea may look like the sky upside down: dive an aeroplane through it, and you learn the difference. It helps neither the contemporary poet nor his puzzled, plodding readers to overlook the fact that a great deal of hermetic writing is the result of a refusal on his part to think before he speaks. Most often this is not caused by laziness but by disquiet. At the back of many minds is the suspicion that some easy acceptances and rejections would not stand judgment. It takes courage to drag them out and look them over. After all, if values are seen to be false, they will have to be replaced, and that may mean a change of life. Better not to think about it. And so poems continue to be written about angels by poets who are not sure if angels exist.

Yet seen differently, such "religious" writing testifies to a realized want in life. If Mr. Stevens, for instance, found the idolization of poetry—that uncaring abstraction whom no one can love—or the deification of his own imagination ("We say God and the imagination are one") sufficient; if these arbitrary "feelings" disguised as "thoughts" were satisfactory, there would be no cause for the anguished perplexity which shows through the arcane expression of so many of his poems. Over and over, back and forth, the restless pursuit of "Order" continues. One would have to be heartless not to be moved by the growing seriousness with which appearances are questioned—so much so that the poems lose much of that surface glitter which they earlier had, as though the poet could no longer bother with the phrasing, so necessary is it for him to find the statement—even if rough and ready—true. And it is just because Mr. Stevens is concerned with something important for all of us—who we are, and why, and where we are going—that his work has a seriousness and dignity far beyond that of most contemporary writers.

The Times Literary Supplement (London); No. 2,681, Friday, June 19, 1953, p. 397. A review of Selected Poems; Faber & Faber, 12s. 6d. (1953)
IDEAS OF ORDER

Ben moderato e cantabile (4, 8, 16) (1-1 sempre)

by Arno Berger

1952