

Selecting Three Poems by Wallace Stevens: A Roundtable Discussion

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WHEN I THINK OF POETS such as Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, or W. B. Yeats, I have a fairly certain idea of the poems by which such a poet is likely to be anthologized and thus the poems on which that poet's reputation is most likely to be staked. In the case of Wallace Stevens, everyone expects to see "Sunday Morning" in such an anthology, and, almost inevitably, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream" and "Anecdote of the Jar" as well, but after that the choices have tended to be widely varied, and, at least in my opinion, sometimes strange. After studying for several years the reluctant reception of Stevens over the last half century in Great Britain, I have noted that his reputation seems to be based on hardly more than four poems, all early Stevens: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "The Snow Man," "Sunday Morning," and "The Idea of Order at Key West." These titles come up again and again in critical assessments. Few would argue with the merit of those four specimens, but what struck me about British critics and poets, with a few notable exceptions, was how they almost never displayed a wider knowledge of and pleasure in the "WHOLE OF HARMONIUM" (L 831).

All this led me to speculate about a small number of anthology pieces by Stevens that some of his critics who have been reading and writing about him for some time might offer if pressed to do so. With that idea in mind, I approached the president of the Wallace Stevens Society, John N. Serio, to ask if I could put together a panel to be called "Preferential Stevens" for the American Literature Association meeting in the spring of 2009. When he agreed, I proceeded to invite a small handful of Stevens critics of varied interests in and approaches to the poet's works to select

their three (and no more) anthology pieces and to give a ten-minute rationale during their part of the session. They readily agreed. Their names are familiar ones to interested readers of Stevens: Donald Blount, Jacqueline V. Brogan, Stephen Burt, Eleanor Cook, and Alan Filreis. (Their scholarship, of course, is by no means confined to Stevens.)

What surprised me was that only one selected "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West." In making their selections, the critics quite openly professed their admiration for the craft of the given poems and offered some of the cultural contexts surrounding them, but they did not hesitate to register a more personal and affective response as well. Still, I would not have predicted choices such as "Two Letters," "Lebensweisheitspielerei," "Debris of Life and Mind," "Analysis of a Theme," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," or the twentieth canto of "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

There tends to be an interesting tilt in favor of Stevens' late poems among the selections: "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," "Prologues To What Is Possible," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" (twice chosen), "The Plain Sense of Things." "Lebensweisheitspielerei" and "Two Letters," of course, are also late poems. (Incidentally, I would have included another late poem, "The World as Meditation," to my own list.)

As Burt says in his opening paragraph, Stevens' last poems possess "a style more personal, but less colorful, less immediately attractive to most undergraduates, than those of *Harmonium*, and less obviously attractive to the academy than those of Stevens' writings of the 1930s and early 1940s, which respond often to challenges that Stevens found in public events." He adds a telling remark: "The late writings look more like challenges to himself, poems about loneliness and consolation, about the failures of poetry to comfort, and about its qualified successes." I wonder if he does not put his finger on much of the power of those last poems.

Finally, the exercise here reminds us that, at least for these readers, Stevens is as various and unpredictable as he is inviting and pleasurable. Apparently, we have much to learn from listening to each other, as well as to the poet, when it comes to reading Wallace Stevens.

J. DONALD BLOUNT

IN A LETTER OF JANUARY 9, 1940, to Hi Simons, Wallace Stevens said: "We are physical beings in a physical world; the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities. The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind. There are many 'immediate' things in the world that we enjoy; a perfectly realized poem ought to be one of these things. . . . People ought to like poetry the way a child likes snow & they would if poets wrote it" (L 348–49). Three years later he expressed a similar sentiment in a letter to Louise Bechtel: "What a poet needs above everything else is acceptance. If he is not accepted, he is wasting time, so

far as his readers are concerned, although not so far as he himself is concerned" (L 433). Stevens hoped that people would "enjoy" his poems, and a basic requirement of the "supreme fiction" is that "It Must Give Pleasure." Yet it is safe to say that people in general (and a surprising number in academia) have never heard of Wallace Stevens, even when they know and use phrases from his works. If we are to keep his work alive into the future, we need to pick the poems that go into the anthologies with an eye to the pleasure that they give while conveying a reasonably accurate idea of his work as a whole.

Three poems that help achieve these goals are the 1948 "Large Red Man Reading," the 1915 "Sunday Morning," and the 1935 "The Idea of Order at Key West." "Large Red Man Reading" was one of three poems about which Stevens, two years before his death, told Renato Poggioli, his Italian translator: "I like very much" (L 778). It incorporates the pagan theology of "Sunday Morning" and the "ghostlier demarcations"¹ of "The Idea of Order at Key West," and it has something almost as attractive as snow or ice cream: ghosts. Thus an early reading of this accessible poem would introduce readers to his whole work in an attractive way.

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading. . . . (365)

These ghosts have learned through experience the failure of "'imperishable bliss'" (55) about which Stevens warns us in "Sunday Morning." These ghosts are refugees from that early, magisterial poem: "They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more" (365). (This breathtaking understatement seems to rewrite T. S. Eliot's famous understatement near the end of "Journey of the Magi": "it was (you may say) satisfactory" [100]). These ghosts are starved for pots, pans, tulips, the trivial touches of the actual world.

They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into
reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the
frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was
ugly

And laughed . . . (365)

The four most arresting words of the poem, "wept to step barefoot," should win over all readers who have in themselves a touch of the child. The phrase "into reality" can be put off for later reflection. The reference to "The out-

lines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: /*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines," should also be put on hold until time for further reflection, because at this moment a minor miracle happens. As the ghosts listened to this vast abstraction, these lines and phrases

Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had
lacked. (365)

The listeners, both those inside and those outside the poem, remain ghosts, but they have been, paradoxically (and Homerically), "blooded" by thought; they are, as Stevens himself was, "An abstraction blooded, as a man blooded by thought" (333). This combination of blood and mind or imagination was first proposed by Stevens in his abstract history of religious belief in "Sunday Morning":

[Jove] moved among us, as a muttering king,
Magnificent, would move among his hinds,
Until our blood, commingling, virginal,
With heaven, brought such requital to desire
The very hinds discerned it, in a star.
Shall our blood fail? Or shall it come to be
The blood of paradise? (54)

"Sunday Morning," arguably the most essential poem in the Stevens canon, is a serious and difficult undertaking, perhaps best experienced after the apparent simplicity of "Large Red Man Reading." Orthodox Sunday morning, dedicated to "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice" (53), becomes a time of death and the day itself a "wide water" of separation from the joys and sorrows of life, an actual death as opposed to the potential for death we live with always. Stevens rejects this death as the center of life, the end of life, the meaning of life, and he replaces this concept with its opposite, life in the center, in the midst of death. His audacious and oxymoronic proverb, "Death is the mother of beauty" (55), asserts a willed reality that privileges the actual world over the bare reality of our inevitable mortality. There are two deaths in "Sunday Morning," one absolute (masked by talk of "imperishable bliss" after this life) and one only potential (revealed by all of the details of this life of emotion and sensation). In the forty years that remained of his life, Stevens never tired of expressing his pagan preference. (See, for example, his 1928 declaration about "Sunday Morning": "The poem is simply an expression of paganism, although, of course, I did not think I was expressing paganism when I wrote it" [L 250].) Reading the much simpler and accessible "Large Red Man Reading" might prepare a reader to see more clearly the basic premise of this most canonical of Stevens' poems.

The third-most essential poem in the Stevens canon, "The Idea of Order at Key West," follows in the footsteps of "Sunday Morning." Its high seriousness about poetry is a religious seriousness. As Stevens says in one of his adages, "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (901). "The Idea of Order at Key West" in the Stevens world, in the book that took the place of a planet, is a profoundly religious poem, a poem of belief in a fiction. Its fifty-five lines, written when Stevens was fifty-five, prepare a reader for future summarizing and theorizing poems, even "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" and its radical but logical name for the first section: "It Must Be Abstract." Stevens, despite all of the posturing that led him to be called a dandy in early critical commentary on him, remained something of a prophet figure fulminating against the excesses of all forms of supernaturalism or idealism.

The sheer gorgeousness of the rhythm and sounds of "The Idea of Order at Key West" will always give it a high place in even the most casual acquaintance with Stevens' work, but it is the high seriousness of its theology of theory (its "*Poesis, poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines," one might say) that makes it Stevensian. Joseph Riddel stresses the seriousness of this poem by calling it "a modern answer to 'Dover Beach'" (120). Stevens is relentless in his search for spirit in this song, "uttered word by word," something the water cannot produce:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew
It was the spirit that we sought and knew
That we should ask this often as she sang. (105)

The water lacks spirit and the ability to speak words, and yet the "Blessed rage for order" is a "rage to order words of the sea, / Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred" (106). This apparent contradiction disappears as the final two lines present the real, invariable goal of Stevens' career: ordering words "of ourselves and of our origins, / In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" (106). This use of *ghost* is as serious as he can get; it contrasts with the physical reality of singing, its "demarcations and keener sounds." (The OED shows *ghostly* contrasting with *bodily* or *physical* for hundreds of years.) This ghost is what Stevens calls in one of his adages, "the spiritual in reality" (914), something close to the "supreme fiction," something close to the relationship between the imagination and blood.

The three poems I propose would provide a brief sample of Stevens' best work over the course of most of his career, and they fairly and accessibly represent Stevens' deepest concerns as a poet and as a thinker. "Sunday Morning" and "The Idea of Order at Key West" already represent him in most anthologies; "Large Red Man Reading," a simpler and lighter poem, can serve as an attractive suggestion of their basic ideas.

APPARENTLY GEORGE LENSING has a sadistic streak that no one knows about, for choosing the poems for this discussion—and being limited to only *three*—was agonizing. I had to give up many favorites such as “Anecdote of the Jar,” “Domination of Black,” “Sunday Morning,” “Of Modern Poetry”—and especially “The Idea of Order at Key West.” What I have reluctantly and really painfully concluded is that if all I could teach of Stevens were three poems, or if that is all I could put in an anthology (thereby possibly limiting what future readers might know of Stevens), I would choose three late poems: two from the closing section in *The Collected Poems* called *The Rock* and one from the *Opus Posthumous*.

The first poem I would choose is “Lebensweisheitspielerei”—which idiomatically means “the play of the joy of life.” I regard its larger thesis—that “Each person completely touches us / With what he is and as he is, / In the stale grandeur of annihilation” (430)—as a more mature and more nuanced version of his earlier statement in “Sunday Morning” that “Death is the mother of beauty” (55). Although that earlier poem may well have had some political and philosophical responses to “The Great War,” as James Longenbach has shown, “Lebensweisheitspielerei” has behind it the Great War, the Great Depression, World War II, the rise of new cartels—the whole surprisingly disillusionment of the twentieth century as well as Stevens’ own advancing age.

Here, “The proud and the strong / Have departed” (429)—as opposed to the many earlier poems of the “major man,” the proud man of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” the “noble rider,” even the “virile poet.” In this late poem, “Those that are left” in this “dwindled sphere” are “the unaccomplished,” but the “finally human” (429). In this poem, Stevens has abandoned his recourse to the “large and less human” (247) figure of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War,” among others, and, after concluding in “Esthétique du Mal” that “Pain is human” (277)—and after despairing in “Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit” that we are in fact losing our humanity—this late poem finds in the poverty of “autumnal space” (430), not the autumnal ripeness that satisfied the romantic Keats, but the empty place that makes intimacy, even meaning, possible, however brief, however temporary that may be.

The softly spoken, tenuous connection articulated in this poem leads me to my second choice, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.” Instead of the poverty of autumnal space, a small room becomes the place where intimacy and meaning become possible. As we “Light the first light of evening,” we “collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing,” and in that togetherness, or community, we create something that ignites a kind of communion, in which “being there together is enough” (444). Once again, it is because “we are poor” that we can imagine or ac-

knowledge "A light, a power, the miraculous influence" (444), however precarious or tentative that acknowledgement may be proffered.

This very well-known poem—John Ashbery's favorite poem, as I recall—opens for me the splendor of the final poem I have chosen: "Two Letters." Rarely discussed, it is a two-part poem, the first of which is called "*A Letter From*," written presumably by a male to a female, only to be followed by the second, "*A Letter To*," presumably (and finally) written by that female principal, so long desired and so fearfully withheld throughout Stevens' corpus, back to him.

The first letter opens with "Even if there had been a crescent moon" (468) and goes on to describe a celestial perfection of the heavens ("crystals' light"), only to conclude, "One would have wanted more—more—more—" (468–69). As opposed to the celestial poverty of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," this poem imagines the possibility of something close to embodied perfection, realized in the natural world, only to deflate that possibility with lines sounding much like those in the earlier "The Poems of Our Climate." There Stevens had written, "Still one would want more, one would need more, / More than a world of white and snowy scents," concluding, that because of our "never-resting mind," we recognize again that our temporal condition is our ironic consolation, that, as in "Sunday Morning," "The imperfect is our paradise" (179). But in this late poem, the "more" that is wanted, even in the face of near perfection seen for once in the natural world, is "Some true interior to which to return, / A home against one's self," in which one would be "Free from everything else, free above all from thought" (469). Stevens says that such a moment would be

like lighting a candle,
Like leaning on the table, shading one's eyes,
And hearing a tale one wanted intensely to hear,

As if we were all seated together again
And one of us spoke and all of us believed
What we heard and the light, though little, was enough.
(469)

There is a subtle shift here from "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" in what provides "enough," including references (through the "table") to many other earlier Stevens poems, and especially to the earlier "Of Modern Poetry." In contrast to the isolation of the actor on the stage, listening to himself, here that act is shifted once again to one of genuine community and communion.

But that is not the end. What follows this remarkable letter is another, of twelve brief lines, which seem to be, finally, the actual words of the female principal that troubled and animated much of the best, but also some-

times some of the most sexist, of Stevens' verse (and, perhaps, his essays as well). As opposed to the famous "sister of the Minotaur," somehow "still half-beast and somehow more than human" (675) in "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet," as opposed to the élite, the "woman with the hair of a pythoness" (661) of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," to whom Stevens says poetry should be addressed, as opposed to "the thing on his breast, / The hating woman" (388), or the counterpart, the idealized "Sister and mother and diviner love" (70), as opposed even to "Death is the mother of beauty," this female "wanted a holiday," a moment of communication "Not having to do with love":

She wanted a holiday
With someone to speak her dulcied native tongue,

In the shadows of a wood . . .
Shadows, woods . . . and the two of them in speech,

In a secrecy of words
Opened out within a secrecy of place,

Not having to do with love.
A land would hold her in its arms that day

Or something much like a land.
The circle would no longer be broken but closed.

The miles of distance away
From everything would end. It would all meet. (469)

The traditional domain of the female principal—"mother earth"—is shifted here and instead becomes a male place of masculine comfort and safety for a female presence that is recognized and finally heard. Such "reality" would ironically be a "holiday"—a holiday from male projections and distortions of the female (including actual mothers)—which in turn have distorted the male, even Stevens himself. This then is a poem that, with the previous two described, achieves a great summation of Stevens' entire poetic enterprise and culminates in one moment of completion, even transcendence.

STEPHEN BURT

ASKED TO CHOOSE THREE of Wallace Stevens' poems, I select "Debris of Life and Mind," "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." All are late poems; all represent a style more personal, but less colorful, less immediately attractive to most un-

dergraduates, than those of *Harmonium*, and less obviously attractive to the academy than those of Stevens' writings of the 1930s and early 1940s, which respond often to challenges that Stevens found in public events. The late writings look more like challenges to himself, poems about loneliness and consolation, about the failures of poetry to comfort, and about its qualified successes. All three of my selections become poems of loneliness, about a woman who may not respond, or may not say the right thing if she does. They are poems that seek (but may not find) companionship, and poems of maturity, if not poems of fatigue. All three use blank verse; one is a quasi-sonnet in seven couplets, another a longer set of couplets, the last in tercets. The poems give three ways to consider the loneliness that Stevens' starkest late style describes.

"Debris of Life and Mind" looks backward. Stevens looks to his past, discovers that he cannot reach it, and then looks almost desperately to a future in which he might look backward again. "There is so little that is close and warm. / It is as if we were never children" (295). Adulthood is cold and isolating in part because it makes childhood seem so far away, so unlike what we know now. (Stevens published the poem in 1945, when childhood may have seemed especially far away: the last of his siblings, Elizabeth, died in 1943.) Short sentences graph resignations and frustrated longings: the imperfective present tense of the self-contained opening lines, each a single decasyllabic sentence, implies that Stevens' distance from his own past, our distance from our own remembered intimacies, has no end and no relief.

Stevens shifts into the imperative mode: "Sit in the room." Does he speak to himself, or to another human being (his wife, for example), or to an imagined reader, or to the interior paramour named in other poems? Stevens plays in these sad, nearly desperate couplets with Keatsian contrasts among the advancing day, with its sunset and sunrise; the advancing year, in which spring becomes summer, and winter spring; and the advance of a life, in which change is never reversed. We cannot go back to the intimacies of childhood, nor to the brighter sunlight of an earlier day. We can do little about that inability except to stay up all night awaiting the sun, a "bright red woman," whose triumph over the horizon, in "violent golds" (296), takes up the longest sentence in the poem. We may imagine Elsie (known in youth for her beautiful hair) as the sun, imagined (but never present) when Stevens awakens; we may see the anticipated sun, the anticipated consolation, as any sort of companionship that might help us make sense of our own lives. But sunrise, when the beloved arrives, belongs only to an imagined future. The poem ends when Stevens turns back to the present and to the absent past. "Stay here. Speak of familiar things a while" (296). The request is a pun, and a desperate if not an impossible plea: the most "familiar" things come from the family we knew in childhood, and they are what Stevens has just said that "we" cannot have.

"Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" is a happier poem, and a stranger one too. It tries hard to look not forward nor backward but outward, to the surroundings that pleased Stevens first, if not most. Here, those surroundings are themselves remembered, parts of his native eastern Pennsylvania. Myrrh suggests the Song of Solomon and the magi who travel to Bethlehem, but this honored destination is also American, Neversink being at once Neversink Mountain, near Reading, Pennsylvania and (in Eleanor Cook's words) "a place of constancy (not one where hearts sink") (*Reader's Guide* 199). George Lensing (following Thomas Lombardi) has described the mountain's unusual, "feminine" (345), river bend. "Madonna" is also, Lensing notes, a hairstyle. The portmanteau words and puns in the opening lines flirt with readers and with the landscape, "as if a snood held a snack," Cook writes, "or as if snood were a past participle of which the present imperative form might be snack" (*Word-Play* 19).

This initially playful poem might be Stevens' night version of "To Autumn," as "Sunday Morning" was his daytime version (despite the "darkness" of its close). It is a poem of late life, of day becoming night, "the green bird of summer" (305) becoming the colors of fall. The lover at evening looks forward to the sunrise and the dew ("the fluid thing") of the following day. On that day—described in the longest sentence, the central six lines—Stevens, and his companion, and the mountain (which may be the companion) will be one day older. They already feel old—"not / The early constellations," not "the first / Illustrious intimations" (305), not the unselfconscious powers in "Credences of Summer." Yet the poem manages not to despair about age. Instead, Stevens keeps one eye on the landscape, on how the stars arrange themselves in the sky, on how dew looks ("tips of artifice" [305], as if a divinity had placed them there), on what kind of grass will eventually turn brown. It is a poem of what Edward O. Wilson calls "biophilia," an instinctively gratifying human "focus on life and lifelike processes," and of topophilia, companionship found in a place (1). It is a late, a belated hymn, and yet a hymn. The poem may end in awe or apprehension, as the "shadow of an external world"—the outer exigencies that threaten all paired and secluded lovers—may efface or disable or simply color the pleasures that "external world" (305) has for us.

I picked "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain" to emphasize its qualified hopes; in picking "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," I emphasize its doubts. That famous poem has given countless readers some consolation; indeed, Stevens seems to have wanted it to do so, calling it "an extremely good poem with which to wind up" (to place at the end of) his English *Selected Poems* (L 734). Yet its consolation (as often in late Stevens) is difficult, qualified, double-edged. If Stevens has written a poem of hope, it is hope of a tenuous, *faute de mieux*, if not counterfactual, kind.

Many good readers think otherwise. For Milton Bates it is a "credo [whose] effects are immediate and profoundly satisfying" (60). For Jacqueline Vaught Brogan the poem provides "the occasion . . . in which the

masculine and feminine principles are finally fully integrated," the triumphant ending to a struggle with gender roles (in effect, with sexism) throughout the earlier oeuvre (189). Barbara Fisher goes further: it is for her "the only poem in the [Stevens] canon that resolves in complete sufficiency" (86). Most exegeses imply, as B. J. Leggett says, "that Stevens is elevating the human imagination to the level of God" (49). Leggett finds, instead, a more conventional, religious affirmation. For him, "God is in fact the imaginer," so that the final tercets convey "the speaker's sense of being in touch with God" (49). Leggett ignores the element of loneliness, of marital disillusion, that comes with the man contemplating his candle alone. A draft, as Leggett notes, says, "How high that highest candle lights the world!" (L 701). Stevens removed "the world" as he revised.

The credo from notebooks, "God and the imagination are one" (914), receives dramatic context here. The sentence emerges from (lives within, is or is not consumed by) the flame of a candle alone at night. It would take a miracle for a man, or a paramour, to live happily here. Perhaps the imagination can provide one. The credo, the candle, the paramour, the poem thus carry sad overtones that ought not cancel, but should complement, the readings that focus so often on what Stevens, and Stevens' readers, have wanted to believe. "The realization of an ultimate good," as Joseph Carroll says, "depends on an act of will that barely escapes being cancelled by Stevens' recognition of its arbitrariness," though even Carroll finds, in the end, "a sense of transcendental plenitude" (310), rather than the pathos of a tenuous, flickering sufficiency.

We can see that pathos in the syntax. Stevens' long sentences aim not backward, into his own past, nor outward, into a landscape, but inward: the only paramour he can imagine, the only one who will listen to him, is the interior paramour, the substitute eros that an introspective psyche must fashion (cannot simply find) for itself. We have here the somewhat Paterian Stevens who makes his claims on behalf of the imagination, and (in the same phrases) on behalf of moment-to-moment experience, "being there together" (444) with one's own sense of the world; but we have, too, the poet whom Helen Vendler called "a despairing lover, blaming himself for the failure in love, blaming his wife . . . and finally, in *The Rock*, blaming only the biological necessity that brings men and women together" and that leaves them with phantoms instead (32).

It is "for small reason"—for the logically frail reason that we need to believe it, to live as if it were so—that we can think "The world imagined is the ultimate good." Such a belief is the "single shawl / Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor" (444). If we come to know, through the imagination, through imagined companionship, "an order, a whole," that order remains obscure. If we say "God and the imagination are one," if such a hypothesis is our "highest candle," it flares amid—and does not dispel—"the dark" (444). The "highest candle" is, moreover, an idea; it is not the sun, not a person, not any of the heroic or metaphysical goals that have

consoled other poets, that consoled Stevens in his other moods, nor the antimetaphysical, physical, Earthly experience toward which his earlier poems asked us to turn. The reader does not even become the book—he may have nothing to read (as Stevens himself, in his last years, sometimes preferred not to read). Even to stay up late with this “interior paramour” might be, for Stevens, an unattainable wish. He complained not long after he had written the poem, in more than one letter, that he often had to “go to bed after dinner and call it a day” (L 763).

“Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” thus looks back to “Debris of Life and Mind,” in which the poet imagined himself staying up till dawn. It uses, like the earlier poem, a “we” that might refer to the poet and the interior paramour, but that might also take in the poet and his readers, each of whom—like Matthew Arnold’s “mortal millions” in “To Marguerite: Continued”—remains in the deepest sense alone. A “final soliloquy” is by definition a last speech to oneself, an expression of loneliness, whether of the poet himself or of some other figure called the paramour. Stevens’ final soliloquy is an elegant demonstration that we need a kind of companionship we might never get, and cannot in any case keep. If we cannot have it outside ourselves to our satisfaction, we need to imagine it; we need to try. We “collect ourselves” (as you might collect yourself, get yourself together, after the shock of bad news) only within the “single shawl” of a hopeful or willful belief. We “feel the obscurity of an order” that sustains that belief, an order that may (since it has no metaphysical justification, no warrant outside the self) collapse at any time.

We should, indeed, cherish the poem’s concluding major chord. But we should also see how “being there together is enough,” at the end of a “soliloquy,” admits dramatic irony. It sounds like a man who must convince himself, who speaks through a delicate mask. If we set the poem beside the quiet delights of, say, “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” we should also set it beside “Debris of Life and Mind,” and even beside that earlier masterwork of blank verse about self-deception, loneliness, and unrequited love, Robert Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto,” which Stevens certainly knew, and which may also be a source for “As You Leave the Room”: “A common greyness silvers everything. . . . As if I saw alike my work and self / And all that I was born to be and do, / A twilight-piece.” Silver-gray, twilight: the color of the final soliloquy, too, until the room grows dark, and the color (no gold, “nothing of the sun”) of the second best, of artifice, of a conscious replacement for someone or something that nature will not provide.

But to end only with such a bleak comparison is to falsify Stevens’ tone. Instead, I return to the question of who speaks the poem. We have not a final soliloquy (a last speech to oneself) as if to the interior paramour, but a final soliloquy of her, written for her to speak to herself, a soliloquy whose only pronoun is “we,” and a speech that may end in a house made of air. Sharon Cameron, who also connects “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Par-

amour" to "Debris of Life and Mind," rightly emphasizes how conclusively Stevens' speaker remains alone: "he is not feeling loneliness," she says, but "solitude" (600). "Solitude," says Hannah Arendt, "is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-and-one" (185), into the gendered duo, poet and paramour, proposer and answerer, maintained at last—but maintained so precariously—here. A dramatic irony, even in this relatively happy poem, nonetheless emphasizes the fragility of the lines between silver and mere gray, between dwelling and mere confinement, between the solitary imaginer and the lonely man. We hear what Stevens imagines or wishes that the interior paramour might say, and—since she is he, or part of him, his "interior"—she speaks alone. In doing so, she makes the case, not for domestic companionship, but for "the world imagined"—a weak case, perhaps, with "small reason," a hard place to rest (as in "I rest my case"), and yet all he can give. Perhaps it is all we need.

ELEANOR COOK

YEARS AGO, WHEN I FIRST BEGAN to pay serious attention to Wallace Stevens' work, he sometimes made me impatient because he could appear unduly abstract. Now, I cannot trust myself to read some poems aloud in public, for fear I will burst into tears. That is why I did not quote more of "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" when I recently gave a paper. To be sure, bursting into tears is only a partial answer to abstraction. Nor is it a guarantee of a good poem. Quite the contrary. Sentimental writing can make us tearful more easily than great or good art.

But as it happens, "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" is a great poem indeed, and it is my first choice. I will mention only two reasons. First is the rhythm, that slowly building, pulsing, river rhythm that may be found in many water poems: "Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears" (Ben Jonson, "Slow, slow fresh fount"); "The unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" (Matthew Arnold, "To Marguerite: Continued"). Any rhythmic river poem recalls deep in our mind's ear other such river poems such as "Ol' Man River," even "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." And rhythm for me would always be a reason for a favorite Stevens poem: "Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse / Without a rider on a road at night. / The mind sits listening and hears it pass" (289), as Stevens writes in "The Pure Good of Theory." "Tinsel in February, tinsel in August. / There are things in a man besides his reason. / Come home, wind, he kept crying and crying" ("Pieces" [306]). Or the ragtime rhythm of "So WHAT said the OTHERS and the SUN WENT DOWN" ("Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" [225]; my emphasis). You can doubtless add other favorites.

Second and related is Stevens' use of an actual river, the Connecticut River, which is permeated by older, mythic rivers. The poem refers to the river Styx at the start—the river we cross at death as we journey to Ha-

des—that last river, like the river Jordan. The river Styx is memorable from classical tradition, say, Virgil on Aeneas' trip to the underworld. The river Jordan is memorable from Christian tradition, say, the African-American spiritual "Deep River," or the end of *Pilgrim's Progress*, part II, where the pilgrims cross the river, each in his or her own way. The final mysterious river "that flows nowhere, like a sea" (451) reverberates against T. S. Eliot's river circulation in "Dry Salvages," while also recalling Oceanus, the river surrounding the earth in classical cosmography, as depicted on Achilles' famous shield. Stevens drew a diagram of the shield in a college textbook, lettering in the name "Oceanus." Stevens, like W. B. Yeats, is one of the great poets of old age.

Though Stevens could make me impatient at the start, I always liked his sense of humor. So my second poem would be one that displays Stevens' often quirky and often mixed sense of humor. Senses of humor are notoriously individual. Rhythm appeals widely to human beings, but nobody can count on even a friend's sharing a sense of humor. Here are a few samples of the zany Stevens that I like a lot: "The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind, / If one may say so" ("Connoisseur of Chaos" [195]). "In Hydaspia, by Howzen / Lived a lady, Lady Lowzen" ("Oak Leaves Are Hands" [243]). "The cat hawks it / And the hawk cats it" ("Things of August" [418]). My samples are lines or phrases detached from their poems. For an entire poem, I would choose "Analysis of a Theme" for the sake of its last stanza:

We enjoy the ithy oonts and long-haired
Plomets, as the Herr Gott
Enjoys his comets. (305)

For the third poem, I would want something meaty, something that I am still chewing on, preferably a poem where Stevens meditates on his art, probably something in his familiar high style. "The Motive for Metaphor" would be a possible choice, but I have chosen another metaphor poem that is still under-read, "Prologues to What Is Possible." This is a poem that remains mysterious and so beckons to me, just as something beckons to the man in the boat. Here are a few scattered lines:

There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat
at sea,
A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright backs
of rowers. . . .

The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and be-
ing no longer heavy
Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin. . . .
(437)

Incidentally, the legend of St. James the Greater says he traveled to Spain on a stone boat, led by angels. I suspect that Stevens knew the legend, which also happens to lie behind a recent novel by José Saramago, *The Stone Raft*.

The metaphor stirred his fear. . . .

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been
loosed,
Snarling in him for discovery . . .

.....
A name and privilege over the ordinary of his common-
place—

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South. . . . (438–39)

I recently returned from an annual trip to watch the spring bird migration, when first things do come into northern trees. And yes, a scarlet tanager does add “the whole vocabulary of the South.” Stevens’ apparent abstractions can come suddenly alive in this way, as this magnificent poem about his art knows well.

ALAN FILREIS

OF LATE, THE WALLACE STEVENS I admire is anxiously stuck—stuck and yet writing about it. He is entangled in an idiom he had come to accept, and attempts, in the very words we read, to write his way into another. Or he is seeking to reformulate his argument in the process of making it. Or he believed he has come to the end of the imagination, beyond which is a poetics of blank wordlessness. Or he partly but insufficiently recognizes that the counterargument made against his poetics has made its way into the poem and gotten the better of him.

Stevens was remarkably smart about these predicaments, and he continued to escape them. Asked to commend just three poems, I have chosen a trio of such expressions of quandary and near-cessation: “Mozart, 1935,” the twentieth canto of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” and “The Plain Sense of Things.” In the third poem, a late one, the imagination re-emerges at precisely the point of its termination. Just as his poetic argument fails, in the second, and he ventures into pure sound, the sound begins to claim a responsiveness in such semantic evacuation. In the first poem, Stevens wonders who other than himself will be permitted to play the music of a time of suffering, even as he presents a contemporaneous instance. Infamous for his capacity to “dodge the apprehension of

severe pain in others," as Mark Halliday puts it in *Stevens and the Interpersonal*, Stevens nonetheless sought and slowly acquired methods for putting the pain of others in such a place that the poem can hardly look away even while the speaker is enacting some version of the dodge. This convergence, says Halliday, "produces not only fascination but also an instinctive . . . sense of imperiously required response" (14). It might be—or at any rate might be like—a function of desire, the anxiety modeled on erotic longing. Halliday contends this, as a means, in part, of finding a personal motive in Stevens for the simultaneous exploration of abnegation and responsiveness. "[T]he apprehension of suffering in others," Halliday writes, "is like sexual desire for another person—a . . . kind of importuning of the self which generated great anxiety in Stevens" (14). "Transforming is what art does," writes Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, but art that depicts the calamitous "is much criticized if it seems 'aesthetic'; that is, too much like art" (76).

Few Stevens poems convey as much fear of the personal poetic dead end as "Mozart, 1935," nor present as anxiously the risk of accusations of aestheticism in the face of crisis. Indeed, Halliday's quoted comments are to be found in his interpretation of that poem, where he argues that Stevens refuses to explore "this besieging pain" (107) felt by those assailing him from the streets of 1935, because he is more interested in "writing about the problem of writing about the street" (15). I do not disagree about the self-referentiality here but rather with Halliday's assumption that the more the poem obsesses over its own problem of representation the less responsive to others' pain it is. As Sontag suggests, art that regards the pain of others is rarely straightforward. Even works of direct-gaze documentary mode—perhaps especially them—can be assailed for daring to "transform[]" the atrocity conveyed. The involution is not so much a turning away as a necessary examination of aesthetic means.

"Mozart, 1935" is not an impersonal poem. Its imperatives ("be seated," "Play the present," "Be seated," "Be thou the voice" [107]) do seem to create in its words what Halliday calls an "imperiously required response" (14), but this language only manifests impersonality if the speaker and the pianist are deemed to be separated by a distance—of time or ideology. If the speaker and pianist agree that the artist ought ideally to be free to play whatever music he wants, regardless of the demands of the era, it might be that the speaker is hanging the pianist out to dry, giving him over to the riotous detractors. But I think not. This is a crisis poem, not a complaint, and it is about the poet's situation. If the speaker and the pianist are one, it becomes a poem of desperately refigured identity. If it is Stevens and not the dictatorial voice of the mid-1930s who demands (so of himself) that the voice be that "of angry fear, / The voice of besieging pain" (107), then the final "return to Mozart" (108) unironically holds the possibility of a Stevensian art admitting into the language of the poem itself the percussive sounds of stones thrown upon the roof—by the angry destitute mass, bear-

ing claims against aestheticism that Sontag aptly dismisses as inconsistent with any theory of documentary art bearing witness to pain. Go ahead and play, the poem says to the poet. "The divertimento" is Halliday's dodge. As a "lucid souvenir of the past," it is relevant to the pain of feeling one's art's irrelevance, until at the dead end of such thought a new path beckons, when "we may return to Mozart," now newly conscious of the age ("1935" when "the streets are full of cries") and of our own age ("we are old") (107–08).

Whatever other dangers to the continuation of his poetic project are signaled by the writing of "Mozart, 1935," the sounds of stones upon the roof do not finally become the sounds the poem makes when one reads it, nor is its line-by-line style any sort of threat to the wholeness of *Ideas of Order*. Its imperative is of a piece with "hear the poet's prayer" ("Sailing after Lunch" [99]). Its political rhetoric is, at moments, just as obvious as "Whoever founded / A state that was free, in the dead of winter, from mice?" ("Dance of the Macabre Mice" [101]). Its figuration of the street-smart detractors is constructed of *Harmonium*-style satire updated to the Depression and is only somewhat less ironic than

How does one stand
To behold the sublime,
To confront the mockers,
The mickey mockers
And plated pairs? ("The American Sublime" [106])

But *Owl's Clover* (1936) and *The Man with the Blue Guitar & Other Poems* (1937) succeeded *Ideas of Order* (1936), and once it became clear that the dense blank-verse satire of "Owl's Clover" was insufficient rejoinder, in itself, to real and imagined criticisms, "The Man with the Blue Guitar" sought in its relentless variations to give form as well as content to the detractors'—and thus to Stevens' own—concerns.

In the first nineteen cantos of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," an antithetical subject position—a voice decrying the manner of the poem—variously exchanges arguments with the speaker/poet-guitarist. After the first six cantos, the positions switch, merge, quote each other, swap, and role play, so that by the poem's middle it has become impossible to tell the power of the counterargument to affect the poem's outcome, which is nothing less than the ability, and the very right, to discern when in poetry "we [can] choose to play / The imagined pine, the imagined jay" (151). I respect those who contend that the turning point is in canto XXIII ("A few final solutions" [145]) or in canto XXII ("Poetry is the subject of the poem" [144]) and those who argue that the way out is found in the contemplation of Picasso's reconciliation of twentieth-century atrocity, dehumanization, social art, and modernism in canto XV: "Is this picture of Picasso's, this 'hoard / Of destructions,' a picture of ourselves, / Now, an image of our society?" (141). But even there the compelling problem is whether and

how a poem as a work of writing can sustain the posing of such questions. In all modernist poetry there is no better example of the politics of experimental form. The answer to the famous question, "Things as they are have been destroyed. / Have I?" will depend on the answer to this one: "Am I a man that is dead[?] . . . / Is my thought a memory, not alive?" (142).

Canto XX asks something of the same question—"What is there in life except one's ideas[?]" (144)—with a significant difference. It is here, I think, that the poem turns from back-and-forth counter-polemics about art and social responsibility to a mature poetics of (dis)belief that takes writing to the edge of noncommunication without the least bit relinquishing the human. It is Stevens at his most linguistically experimental. The long poem seems to grind to a halt, to retreat into nonsense, to babble with a radically minimal vocabulary, to make a few simple and non-resonant words talismanic, to exhaust the variational mode itself. "No poet," Helen Vendler writes of this canto, "could keep this up for long" (125).

What is there in life except one's ideas,
Good air, good friend, what is there in life?

Is it ideas that I believe?
Good air, my only friend, believe,

Believe would be a brother full
Of love, believe would be a friend,

Friendlier than my only friend,
Good air. Poor pale, poor pale guitar . . . (144)

Formally, this is the opposite of the turgid paragraph-like stanzas of "Owl's Clover," even though its dilemma is the same. What a paradoxical discovery: at "the utmost edge of intelligibility," as Vendler says, in a poem of almost pure sound ("The monotonous continuo of a strumming guitar" [124]), Stevens counterintuitively realizes the power of belief in ideas—ideas being that one human possession conventionally deemed dependent on semantic meaning. In one sense, the answer in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to the question, "Is it ideas that I believe?" is "No. This is a poem of pure song." In another profounder sense, the idea is the "good air" of the sound of the poem's words, and the one and only good friend is the guitar, the radical constraint or language rule of minimal vocabulary, "a challenge," Vendler writes, "resembling the tour de force of a single image with variations that he had carried out in looking at the blackbird or the sea surface full of clouds" (124). The poem that would seem to be in the political line is really a significant modernist next step, an inheritor of the most assiduously innovative early modernism of *Harmonium*: the impressionism-gone-awry of "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," the sound-

concreteness of ditties such as “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and “Depression Before Spring,” the cubism of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Composing this poem reminds the poet that one form of improvisation is constraint. The potential botch of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” subsumed by putative doubts about its directionless extemporized style, is rescued at the moment when in line 4 “believe” becomes an intransitive verb, and then, amazingly, a noun that brings forward the intransitive sense, non-attachment. “Good air, my only friend, believe.” Then: “Believe would be a brother full / Of love, believe would be a friend. . . .” Thus the potentially abortive self-pity of the final line—“Poor pale, poor pale guitar”—becomes a triumph of aspirational release.

Years later, “The Plain Sense of Things” grapples with verbal limitation imposed by another factor—age—in addition to the usual seasonal downturn, autumn into winter. It is a time of failed memory and linguistic infacility: “It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold” (428). Invention has become difficult. “It is as if / We had come to the end of the imagination” (428). Hints of rescue are here already, in the phrase “as if.” The greenhouse needs paint and the chimney tilts. The poem has the nostalgia and retrospective spirit of several other late poems (for instance: “Ariel was glad he had written his poems” [450]), but the analogy between the coming wintry domestic landscape and the “WHOLE OF HARMONIUM” (L 831), the overall Stevensian project, is nowhere more explicit than here. As Ezra Pound, near the end, decided *The Cantos* was a “botch” (qtd. in Wilhelm 342), so Stevens concludes that “A fantastic effort has failed.” “The great structure has become a minor house” (428).

Once again, linguistic infacility as a theme makes the poem’s language falter. Of course, the adjective finally selected to modify “cold” is “blank,” a dazzlingly good plain-sense choice, so already there are hints of the control alleged to have been lost. Does one need to have full imaginative powers to choose “blank” for “cold”? No. Perhaps the poet’s imagination is dead after all, despite the present poem.

Yet this blankness, this end-state, can constitute a poetics, and the end of the imagination is itself one of those things that the imagination alone has the power to imagine. It is not just “the great pond” on this declined estate that has “to be imagined,” but also “The plain sense of it” itself, “without reflections” (428). In the same way that canto XX of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” represents an advance from early modernism’s imposition of limits, “The Plain Sense of Things” takes Stevens an important step beyond the thoughtlessness-as-thought strategy of poems such as “The Snow Man” and “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters” and “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock.” The “inevitable knowledge” here is that the turning-point “Yet” (“Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” [428]) derives inexorably from failure, from breakdowns in the structure of the larger linguistic project, and from the human beauty of such incoherences.

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose*, 107. Further references to this source will be cited in the text with page number(s) only in parentheses.

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