

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume 33

Number 2

Fall 2009

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Word to Image: Wallace Stevens
Liudmila Grigoryeva-Semjatizkaja
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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Selecting Three Poems by Wallace Stevens: A Roundtable Discussion

GEORGE S. LENSING, J. DONALD BLOUNT
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GEORGE S. LENSING: INTRODUCTION

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

The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being 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.

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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 ar-

gument 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," or 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 manifests impersonality only 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, bearing 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.

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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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