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INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this book, except for the first, were originally delivered in 1982 as the Hodges Lectures at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. At the suggestion of Professor John Fisher, I took the occasion to think once again about Wallace Stevens. Though there are poets undeniably greater than Stevens, and poets whom I love as well, he is the poet whose poems I would have written had I been the poet he was. I would not have known it possible to have this peculiar standing with respect to a poet had I never come across Stevens' work. When I see Stevens misunderstood, as I believe he often is, I feel some obligation, in consequence, to present an alternative view; and these chapters are an attempt, through a glance at some of Stevens' shorter poems, to present the Stevens I know to the public eye, which still too often finds Stevens remote and distant from the common life. Perhaps one cannot be surprised at this: Stevens' self-presentation in poetry is not unlike his self-presentation in life.

The new "oral biography" of Stevens by Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered,* contains many tragicomic vignettes in which a friend or colleague of Stevens tries to read Stevens' poetry, only to retire baffled:

> Talking about his poetry, I said, "Mr. Stevens, I just can't understand your stuff. If I had to choose between you and Robert Service, I'd take Robert Service because I can understand Robert Service." He says, "Chawlie, it isn't necessary that you understand my poetry or any poetry. It's only necessary that the writer understand it. . . . I understand it; that's all that's necessary.[1]

To another acquaintance who asked him to explain a poem, Stevens said gnomically, "I don't think you'd understand this unless you wrote it."[2] Perhaps there is no better way of understanding Stevens than to imagine oneself writing the poem—to write it out as if it were an utterance of one's own. Eventually, as one writes the strange lines, it becomes clear why Stevens used to stay longest in the Klee galleries

in the Museum of Modern Art:[3] Klee's childlike outliness and sophisticated palette, his ironic humor and lyricism, share something with Stevens' poems. Klee would have understood Stevens' aphorism, "*All poetry is experimental poetry*" (*OP*, 161).[4]

If each poem is a new experiment, the ground on which it experiments is the past, both the past of the genre and the past of the *oeuvre*. I have given some examples here, for instance, of Stevens' reworking of Keats and of his re-using, over and over, his own image of the walker by the ocean. Nothing is more characteristic of Stevens than his restlessness ("It can never be satisfied, the mind, never"), unless it is his exquisiteness of response, a combination of receptivity and flinching that any reader of the poems soon learns to recognize. His perennial quick flush of vitality was as quickly followed by distaste; and that temperamental susceptibility gave him his fundamental donnée—the disappointments of desire:

> Although the romantic is referred to, most often, in a pejorative sense, this sense attaches, or should attach, not to the romantic in general but to some phase of the romantic that has become stale. Just as there is always a romantic that is potent, so there is always a romantic that is impotent. (*OP*, 180)

Though the conceptual bases of Stevens' poems have been ably set out, and Stevens' intellectual and poetic sources are gradually being enumerated, the task of conveying the poems as something other than a collection of ideas still remains incomplete. "One reads poetry with one's nerves," said Stevens, and he added, "To read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act" (*OP*, 162, 164). To render what the nerves register and to trace the experience of a Stevens poem would tax anyone's best powers. In simplifying the poems (as all exposition must, if only by its linear detail), I have tried not to falsify them. I have wanted to read Stevens as he wanted to be read, as "a revelation of nature" (*OP*, 164) even though that nature be projected onto another plane, the plane of language. If it seems elementary to talk of the elements of life or "nature" that these poems treat, I do so for a reason. To say that one poem is about being reprieved from dying, another about a home wake, another about being American, another about resisting suicidal despair, another about envying the amnesia of nature, is only to remind readers that Stevens' poems concern the general emotional experiences common to us all. Perhaps only a lyric poet could say baldly that life is "not

people and scene but thought and feeling" and could urge that we "step boldly into man's interior world" (*OP*, 170), but that interior world, our construct of the world and all the world we have, is one of great vividness and reality. It is also one that changes radically over time as we age, so that the task of registering it is an unending one.

And yet, even now, the distinguished critic John Bayley can refer to "the queer ghost world of Wallace Stevens."[5] If the solid object of realistic novels (Bloom's kidney is Bayley's example) had ever been the aim of lyric, one might take alarm. But the interior world of perception, emotion, and intellectual construction has always seemed, to lyric poets, the locus of reality. The volatility of the inner world is precisely the volatility of lyric. The stability of lyric, on the other hand, depends not on external objects but on the convergences and exigencies of achieved form. In the completed poem, motion is contained but remains motion. Summer's distillation, says Shakespeare of his sonnets, is "a liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass," and Stevens' version is that in the poem the world "will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (*Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, "It must Give Pleasure," X). Some theories of reading emphasize the formed crystal; others the revolving (or the deconstructing) motion; in every poem it is possible to find both. In writing his poems, Stevens felt vividly the persistent querying and "decreation" of the fictive; in looking at the poems after the fact he preferred to remember the radiant moment when he had succeeded in calling the world by name. Two months before he died, Stevens inscribed a copy of his *Collected Poems* to his daughter's young English professor:

> Dear Elias: When I speak of the poem, or often when I speak of the poem, in this book, I mean not merely a literary form, but the brightest and most harmonious concept, or order, of life; and the references should be read with that in mind.[6]

Some of the poems considered here bear out that success in finding an adequate form, fully mobile and fully fixed, for a moment of interior life.

I think, with others, that Stevens' powers increased with age. The fiction we construct of a poet's "development" must be, of its nature, one containing many gaps; but insofar as such a fiction underlies this book, it would tell the story of a poet who had, from young manhood, great depth of feeling, but who discovered only gradually a restricted set of formal counters adequate to feeling and knowledge.

Stevens was a poet continually reworking, with great originality, his materials, intent on a precision so exact that only a formula like "Three-four cornered fragrances / From five-six cornered leaves" could represent what his over-acute senses took in *(An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,* VIII). He fought off persistent tendencies to the sentimental, the grandiose, and the transcendent. He exhibits, like most poets, a gradual passage from an aesthetic of the beautiful to an aesthetic of the arranged, one that can include the dissonant and the darkened, even the black violets of death (*Metaphor as Degeneration*).

It has been objected that a criticism suggesting that poems spring from life is reductive, that to say that *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* is about Stevens' failed marriage is somehow injurious to the poem.[7] It seems to me normal to begin with the life-occasion as we deduce it from the poem; it is only an error when one ends there. To tether Stevens' poems to human feeling is at least to remove him from the "world of ghosts" where he is so often located, and to insist that he is a poet of more than epistemological questions alone.

Stevens' own explicit description of his project appears in the late poem *Local Objects,* unhappily omitted from *The Palm at the End of the Mind.* The poem is about objects in the world that are not domestic objects. Stevens was a man without a home; he made a home instead from the Elizabeth Park and the Connecticut River, those local objects. He had quarreled with his father when his father had objected to his choice of wife; he never saw his father again, and though he revisited his mother after his father's death, he had broken with his past in Reading, and remarked with regret on the dissociation he felt with the old life there.[8] Because the marriage had proved unhappy, he resigned himself to a future with no hope that things would improve in that *foyer* engendered by romance; in the poem, he uses that French word, with its suggestions of the domestic hearth, with bleak irony.

The local objects of Connecticut acted for Stevens as matrices in which, and through which, insights and integrations came, as he named and described these objects, over and over. He scarcely knew whether he did it to create them or to save them—all he knew was the persistence of the desire to contemplate them and write about them. The words chosen out of desire seemed to occur of themselves: and in

the process of seeing and describing, the things themselves, the local objects, became not things alone but moments as well. This transformation of a spatial object into a temporal event is for Stevens the axis on which poetry turns. The world presented itself to him in visual terms; and yet poetry turned the visual object into the temporal integration, into that musical score for experience that we call a poem. The temporal unfolding of the moment becomes in its turn itself an aesthetic object, he realized—it becomes the classic, the beautiful, as the temporal event in words is re-spatialized into the serene poetic object, "an absolute foyer beyond romance." In no poem is Stevens' human loneliness more nakedly revealed; at the same time, in no poem do we know more acutely the intense satisfaction he felt when desire found names for his local objects:

Local Objects

He knew that he was a spirit without a foyer
And that, in his knowledge, local objects become
More precious than the most precious objects of home:

The local objects of a world without a foyer,
Without a remembered past, a present past,
Or a present future, hoped for in present hope,

Objects not present as a matter of course
On the dark side of the heavens or the bright,
In that sphere with so few objects of its own.

Little existed for him but the few things
For which a fresh name always occurred, as if
He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing,

The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations
Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord,
Because he desired without knowing quite what,

That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.
These were that serene he had always been approaching
As toward an absolute foyer beyond romance. *(OP,* 111-12)

It must be remembered that before the poem put the local objects on paper, the page was blank. These objects were "not present as a matter of course," whether "on the dark side of the heavens or the bright," because they come into existence only insofar as they become, now, the virtual objects of language, though they were once the visual objects of sight. Stevens' deep attachment for his local world will I hope be more fully recognized as poems like *The River of*

Rivers in Connecticut and *The Hermitage at the Center* become better known. Of course his primary allegiance, like that of all poets, is to language and its possibilities.

In *Local Objects,* as in so many other poems, Stevens experiments with writing what might be called an algebraic statement into which each reader can substitute his own values for x and y (in this poem, one's own cause for a rupture with the past and one's own precious local objects). This sort of poetry was written before Stevens (notably by Dickinson) and has been written after him (especially by Ashbery). Stevens, and other such poets, presume that the experience under scrutiny is broad enough to be known to any reader; that any reader will have a renunciation by which to calibrate "Renunciation—is a piercing Virtue—" or a disappointment by which to ratify "The first year was like icing. / Then the cake started to show through" (Ashbery, *More Pleasant Adventures).*[9] Ashbery ironizes this algebraic generalization ("Heck, it's anybody's story, / A sentimental journey—'gonna take a sentimental journey' "), but that is his way of acknowledging his own origins in Dickinson and Stevens. To read these poets without a personal calibration, ratification, and substitution is to read them emptily.

Stevens presumes, then, that his deprivations and his desires are ours. In *Local Objects,* a poem written in old age, he recalls lines that he had written earlier, in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction:*

> From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
> That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
> And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.
>
> ("It Must Change," IV)

That was said elegiacally, in a dying fall. Now, although the counters are the same—loneliness and compensation—the emphasis has shifted to the value of the blazoned days. Stevens assumes that at some verge of life we all realize that we are spirits without a foyer in this world, and yet that some few things tether us to the world and give value to life—those objects for which a natural and fresh desire rises unbidden. This sentiment alone would not be interesting enough to maintain a poem; the poem needs the happening it enacts. In this happening, an estranged and impoverished sadness acquires by desire first a collection of objects, then a collection of names, then a recurrent refreshed motion of the spirit, a motion of wanting ("he

wanted to make them, [he wanted] to keep them . . . / Because he desired"), then a collection of events ("moments of the classic, the beautiful"), then a place worth living for, "that serene he had always been approaching / As towards an absolute foyer beyond romance." The spirit without a foyer, by a series of happenings during the course of the poem, gains an absolute, *if intermittent, foyer in desire* and the words chosen out of desire.[10] In following the poem, we are reminded of the possibility of that journey in ourselves, of the recurrence of desire even in the absence of the romantic, even in the absence of a secure place, whether in the past or in the present, in this world. Stevens' austerity of language perhaps keeps his work from being a poetry for everyone, but it is not poetry for, or about, a world of ghosts. It springs from fact, and the trajectory it traces is one Stevens himself described:

> We leave fact and come back to it, come back to what we wanted fact to be, not to what it was, not to what it has too often remained. The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact.
>
> (Prose statement on the poetry of war, *Palm*, 206)

In following Stevens' excursions from the facts of his life into the projections of desire, and his perpetually original accommodations of desire to fact, I have hoped to show both his poetry of the human condition and his poetry of the English language.

1. APOLLO'S HARSHER SONGS
"Desire without an object of desire"

"The words of Mercury," Armado says at the close of *Love's Labor's Lost,* "are harsh after the songs of Apollo." Apollo's songs, like those of Orpheus, are conventionally thought to be full "of linked sweetness long drawn out," but the criterion of sweetness or melodiousness has always been questioned by our greater poets. On the whole, Wallace Stevens is still considered one of the euphonious, "sweet," "aesthetic" poets, against whom the anthologies range our modern realists and ironists. There is some truth in the opposition, of course, or it would not have been made: *The Idea of Order at Key West* sounds different from *The Waste Land.* I choose here to enter Stevens' work by way of an interrogation of his harsher poems, those in which a brutality of thought or diction reveals feelings obscured by playfulness or obliqueness in his more decorative poems. I do this in part because I think the role of feeling in Stevens' poems has not yet been clarified. It is popularly believed that Stevens is a poet preoccupied by the relations between the imagination and reality, and there is good reason for the popular belief, since Stevens so often phrased his own preoccupation in those unrevealing words. The formula, properly understood, is not untrue; but we must ask what causes the imagination to be so painfully at odds with reality. The cause setting the two at odds is usually, in Stevens' case, passionate feeling, and not merely epistemological query.

One poem by which to enter this topic is *Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion* (1947); the title is itself unnerving as a violation of the axiom that a thing cannot be and not be in the same way at the same time:

> Oh, that this lashing wind was something more
> Than the spirit of Ludwig Richter . . .
>
> The rain is pouring down. It is July.
> There is lightning and the thickest thunder.

It is a spectacle. Scene 10 becomes 11,
In Series X, Act IV, et cetera.

People fall out of windows, trees tumble down,
Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old,

The air is full of children, statues, roofs
And snow. The theatre is spinning round,

Colliding with deaf-mute churches and optical trains.
The most massive sopranos are singing songs of scales.

And Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl,
Has lost the whole in which he was contained,

Knows desire without an object of desire,
All mind and violence and nothing felt.

He knows he has nothing more to think about,
Like the wind that lashes everything at once.[1]

The poem is composed of many reminiscences of former poems; it treats its subject with a mixture of comedy, irony, pathos, and brutality. I isolate Stevens' moments of brutality toward himself and his life because brutality, in Stevens (and in other poets as well), is usually a sign of extreme discomfort, misery, and self-hatred. Many of Stevens' poems—read from one angle, most of the best poems—spring from catastrophic disappointment, bitter solitude, or personal sadness. It is understandable that Stevens, a man of chilling reticence, should illustrate his suffering in its largest possible terms. That practice does not obscure the nature of the suffering, which concerns the collapse of early hopeful fantasies of love, companionship, success, and self-transformation. As self and beloved alike become, with greater or lesser velocity, the final dwarfs of themselves, and as social awareness diminishes dreams of self-transcendence, the poet sees dream, hope, love, and trust—those activities of the most august imagination—crippled, contradicted, dissolved, called into question, embittered. This history is the history of every intelligent and receptive human creature, as the illimitable claims on existence made by each one of us are checked, baffled, frustrated, and reproved—whether by our own subsequent perceptions of their impossible grandiosity, or by the accidents of fate and chance, or by our betrayal of others, or by old age and its failures of capacity. In spite of the severe impersonality of Stevens' style, in spite even of his (often transparent) personae, it is himself of whom he writes. He has been too little read as a poet of human misery.

The human problem—stated late but very baldly in *Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion*—is that its hero "Has lost the whole in which he was contained, / Knows desire without an object of desire, / All mind and violence and nothing felt." I do violence to these lines in detaching them from what precedes and follows them, but I do so for a reason. More often than not, the human pang in Stevens is secreted inconspicuously in the poem, instead of being announced in the title or in the opening lines. It is the usual, if mistaken, way of commentators to begin at the beginning and to take Stevens' metaphysical or epistemological prolegomena as the real subject of the poem, when in fact they are the late plural of the subject, whose early candor of desire reposes further down the page. And so I isolate what I take to be the psychological or human "beginning" of the poem, its point of origin in feeling, which, though it comes late in the poem, serves as the center from which the other lines radiate.

This center, which I have just quoted, tells us that the worst thing that can happen to a poet has happened to its hero: he has stopped having feelings. In Stevens' words, he is "all mind and violence and nothing felt." Since feeling—to use Wordsworthian terms—is the organizing principle of poetry (both narratively, insofar as poetry is a history of feeling, and structurally, insofar as poetry is a science or analysis of feeling), without feeling the world of the poet is a chaos. As we know, as the poet knows, the absence of feeling is itself—since the poet is still alive—a mask for feelings too powerful to make themselves felt: these manifest themselves in this poem as that paradoxical "desire without an object of desire," libido unfocused and therefore churning out in all directions—like a wind, as the last line of the poem says, "that lashes everything at once." Unfocused and chaotic libido does not provide a channel along which thought can move. Once there is an object of desire, the mind can exert all its familiar diversions—decoration, analysis, speculation, fantasy, drama, and so on. But with no beloved object, the mind is at loss; the hero of the poem has "lost the whole in which he was contained . . . / He knows he has nothing more to think about." The landscape is the objective correlative to this state of mind: "There is lightning and the thickest thunder."

The poem, as I have so far described it, ought to be a poem of *sturm und drang*, beset by the turbulent wind of desire, surrounded