

From **Wallace Stevens Journal: 28, no. 2 (Fall 2004): 242-46**

**Stevens's *Collected Poems* in 2054**

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Like many readers of my generation, I first discovered Wallace Stevens during my highschool years in the anthologies we used as textbooks. All these seemed to include, as does, for example, Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair's *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, recently updated by Jahan Ramazani,<sup>1</sup> those key poems from *Harmonium* (1923): "Sunday Morning," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "Disillusionment of Ten O'clock," "Domination of Black," "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Later, I came to prefer to these sensuous lyrics, the austere, spare, more "profound" poems of *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*. Indeed, my first published essay was called "Irony in Wallace Stevens's *The Rock*" and appeared in *American Literature* in 1964.

Four decades later, paradoxically, it is Stevens's early lyric that once again strikes me as his most brilliant. I find myself drawn to the sheer gorgeousness of

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late  
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,  
And the green freedom of a cockatoo  
Upon a rung mingle to dissipate  
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice. (CP 66-67)

When I first read these lines from "Sunday Morning" (1915), I paid little attention to the poem's metaphysics: its contemplation of the relation between the transient and the eternal, the sensuous and the abstract, the natural and supernatural. No, what I found thrilling, and still do, is the way form *is* meaning in that opening line, where the blank verse rhythm is distorted so wholly that the sound is that of a long yawn-- "Complacencies of the peignoir"--with its five unstressed syllables between the two stressed ones. Then, too, this line subtly uses transferred epithet: the complacencies belonging not to the woman in question but to her "peignoir," and the sun seeming to adhere to the "chair," in which she sampled her "Coffee and oranges." And color imagery is striking: the brown and orange are now enhanced by "the green freedom of a cockatoo / Upon a rug." What a lovely way to spend Sunday morning, the "freedom" of the cockatoo, let out of its cage, seeming to be the lady in the peignoir's freedom as well. The lines, moreover, are phonemically charged, culminating in the alliteration of *h* and *sh* sounds and harsh spirants and fricatives of

"sacrifice." Stevens comes down heavily on that final word "sacrifice," for it is that "ancient sacrifice" of Christian rite that the poem's speaker is rejecting.

If the beginning of "Sunday Morning" is immediately enchanting so is the poem's ending, with its ambiguous "island solitude, unsponsored, free / of that wide water, inescapable," and its culmination in the pigeons circling "Downward to darkness, on extended wings." It's not that Stevens's poem says anything especially new about the finality of death or the false comforts of paradise—indeed, its tropes and motifs derive almost wholly from its Romantic forebears— but that its language and rhythm are so remarkable. The same is true, I think, of the poem that follows "Sunday Morning," in the new Norton: namely, "Peter Quince at the Clavier." To read this meditation on memory and desire in the context of its 1915 contemporaries—say, Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology* or Amy Lowell's "Patterns," or Robert Frost's "Oven Bird"—is to marvel at its sensuous immediacy:

Music is feeling then, not sound  
And thus it is that what I feel,  
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,  
Is music. (CP 90)

"Blue-shadowed" is the key word here, describing as it does not only the beloved's silk dress but the echo or shadow structure of the whole poem where music becomes feeling becomes memory narrative. And "Peter Quince" is also very much a poem of touch:

In the green water, clear and warm,  
Susanna lay.  
She searched  
The touch of springs,  
And found  
Concealed imaginings. . . .

The touch of springs," in this passage, leads straight to the "fitful tracing of a portal" in the poem's coda and then to the lines, "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings/ Of those white elders; but, escaping, / Left only Death's ironic scraping." Touch becomes less attractive as the poem moves to its conclusion, with its removal from the "real" world to one of musical/religious vocabulary:

Now, in its immortality, it plays

On the clear viol of her memory,  
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

In memory, sound replaces touch; the “constant sacrament of praise” seems to exact a toll.

What is to my mind the greatest poem in *Harmonium* is “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917). The sequence of thirteen haiku-like minimalist lyrics has received a good deal of attention but it never ceases to repay study. Consider, for starters, its particular dialectic of black /white, movement / stasis, presence/ absence, lyric /narrative, “I” / “he,” straight edge / circle:

Among twenty snowy mountains,  
The only moving thing  
Was the eye of the blackbird (CP 92)

Is this opening tercet, as is often claimed, inspired by Japanese brush painting? Not really, for there is no way to see or even visualize that tiny eye moving against the background of the twenty snowy mountains. What the proto-Surrealist opening asserts, accordingly, is that empiricism doesn’t work, that there can be no way to define actual perception. Indeed, the adjectives in –y--“twenty snowy”-- sound almost silly. And now look at section II

I was of three minds,  
Like a tree  
In which there are three blackbirds.

Again, this is not just a juxtaposition of the one and the many. A tree has no mind, but the comparison of poet to tree works here because “tree” rhymes with “three,” as if to say that sound repetition can itself yield analogies. And so it goes in section after section, none of them alike and yet all related by their concern for what Marcel Duchamp called the *infrathin*—the smallest possible differential between one image or object and another. As Stevens puts it in IX:

When the blackbird flew out of sight,  
It marked the edge  
Of one of many circles.

And in XII, the poet gives us a neatly stated non-sequitur:

The river is moving.  
The blackbird must be flying.

In the end (XIII), there is only the sadness of closure—closure now and to come for the “thing itself,” here seen as the blackbird:

It was evening all afternoon.  
It was snowing

And it was going to snow.  
The blackbird sat  
In the cedar-limbs.

It is the third line above that is so moving. After all the subtle shifts recorded in the poem, there is finally nothing left but finality. It is a perfect poetic moment.

The common wisdom in Stevens scholarship is that the *Harmonium* poems mark only a beginning for what is a profound poetic career in which the phenomenology of Being and Becoming plays the central role. Much has been made of such later long sequences as *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) as representing the height of Stevens's poetic career. Since I have raised questions about the success of *Notes* elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> I won't repeat myself here. But the ethos of *Notes* notwithstanding, my hunch is that fifty years from now, it will be the earlier poems in the *Collected* that will be read most enthusiastically. In their intensity and density, such poems as "Thirteen Ways" and "Earthy Anecdote," "Sunday Morning" and "Ploughing on Sunday" anticipate, not, as is sometimes argued, the dense metaphoric 1950s poetry of a James Merrill or a Robert Penn Warren, but the Minimalist / Conceptualist art of the sixties, where the Imagist thrust of a given poem is undercut by the curious silence that accompanies it. What happens after "The blackbird sat/ In the cedar-limbs"? Is the finality that of death? Does the scene become one of frozen immobility and cold pastoral? Stevens never tells us. In the *Harmonium* poems, his silences are nothing short of enchanting:

The white cock's tail  
Streams to the moon  
Water in the fields  
The wind pours down. (CP 20)

It merely is: the Snow Man's "nothing that is not there and the nothing that is."

My hunch is that the readers of 2055 will be drawn to the earlier lyric Stevens rather than Stevens the philosopher, Stevens the thinker, Stevens the negotiator between Self and World. There are, of course, great poems in every one of his volumes, but there are also blank patches as in the following stanza from "Chocorua to its Neighbor":

The cry is part. My solitaria  
Are the meditations of a central mind.  
I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound  
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice

That is my own voice speaking in my ear. (CP 298)

Such "soltaria," such "meditations of a central mind" come to have a chilly remoteness. They make me long for the complacencies of the peignoir and the green freedom of a cockatoo upon a rug. Or indeed for the following of the "Thirteen Ways":

Icicles filled the long window  
With barbaric glass.  
The shadow of the blackbird  
Crossed it, to and fro.

An ominous crossing, especially in the face of those "barbaric" icicles. In such moments—and there are many in the *Collected Poems*—Stevens's language casts the longest possible shadow.

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<sup>1</sup> See Jahan Ramazani, Richard Elmann, Robert O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, 3d ed., (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), Vol. 1, "Wallace Stevens," pp. 235-67.

<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "'Revolving in Crystal': The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in Albert Gelpi (ed.), *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 41-64.