

# Understanding Wallace Stevens

Growing up in Hartford, Connecticut, the writer Brendan Gill occasionally caught sight of an aloof, well-dressed insurance executive by the name of Wallace Stevens. "He marched," Gill later recalled, "like a tame bear through the streets of our city, but there was nothing tamed about him; he had chosen to imprison his fiercer self in a cage of upper-middle-class decorum as Frost had hidden himself inside a canny bumpkin." Stevens's "fiercer self" was busy writing poems—poems so intricate and demanding that critics were slow to recognize their worth. Here, Frank McConnell explains the poet and his work.

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*by Frank D. McConnell*

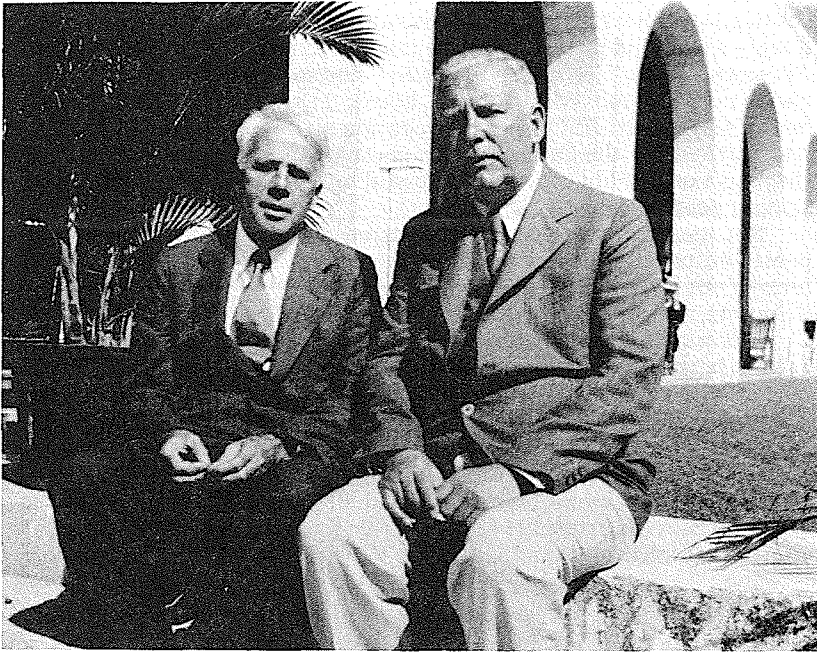
He lifted up, among the actuaries,  
a grandee crow. Ah ha he crowed good.  
That funny money-man.

Thus John Berryman, in *The Dream Songs*, begins his elegy for Wallace Stevens (1879–1955), certainly one of the most complex, and arguably one of the greatest, American poets.

Not that the laurel of "greatest" is a sure thing. Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams have all been granted that dubious distinction—the college English professor's favorite American writer. Until recently, Stevens was not even one of the major contenders. For most of this century, the distinction went to Eliot, and there is still little doubt that *The Waste Land* (1922) is this century's most influential poem in English. A profoundly personal utterance of despair, which was also read as the anthem of a whole generation wrecked and depleted by the First World War, *The Waste Land* is a masterpiece that has been echoed, quoted, or alluded to for 60 years. Its position is not merely secure: It is set in granite.

But "most influential" does not necessarily mean "best."

In a famous opinion, Eliot said that poetry is not the expression of an emotion but an escape from emotion. We can now see, though, that



*Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens at Key West, February 1940. The two Harvard classmates became cordial friends and polite literary rivals.*

his own best poetry violates that dictum: It is an exceptionally faithful expression of an emotional crisis and quest that would make ordinary men quail. Like Lord Byron (whose poetry he disliked), Eliot carried the—admittedly obscure—pageant of his bleeding heart around Europe. In doing so, he became the most romantic of modern poets, even while striving to be the most antiromantic of critics.

As for Wallace Stevens, he stayed home. He stayed home and wrote his odd, increasingly abstract escapes from emotion in what cannot be described as obscurity but must be described as the half-light of muted fame. He did so until near the end, when gradually full and earned celebrity overtook him. And since his death in 1955, he has emerged as perhaps *the* important American poet of his age. Some of our best critics, at least, have suggested this: J. Hillis Miller in *Poets of Reality* (1965), Helen Vendler in *On Extended Wings* (1969), and most recently, Harold Bloom in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977).

The idea of “best” is, to be sure, a vulgar and reductive concept in comparing artists. But the consensus is that Stevens, at least, may be one of the few American poets who could take his stand, in some sort of literary Last Judgment, beside the inimitable and inescapable figure of Whitman himself.

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Stevens really *did* stay home—and did so while becoming the most cosmopolitan of writers. His work is studded with enough allusions and foreign words and phrases to make it a fair competitor of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Yet he never visited Europe. Indeed, between 1932 and his death, he lived in a single house: 118 Westerly Terrace, Hartford, Connecticut. His preferred vacation spots were Mexico, Florida, and particularly the Caribbean: warm, harshly sunlit places, and also the places one would expect a successful businessman, rather than a visionary poet, to enjoy.

But then, he was a successful businessman as well as a visionary poet. The popular vision of the poet is of the holy madman burning himself out for the sake of his art: Vachel Lindsay, Hart Crane, Delmore Schwartz, and John Berryman all come to mind.

But surely it is important—and reassuring to aspiring poets—to note that the three central American poets of this century, far from being self-destructive neurotics, were all responsible, functional, and successful citizens. Eliot was, in his early years, a bank clerk, and later the director of Faber and Faber, a distinguished London publishing house; William Carlos Williams was a general practitioner in Paterson, New Jersey, who, by his own estimation, delivered more than 2,000 babies; and Stevens, from 1934 on, was vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.

#### Paying the Bills

"That funny money-man," Berryman calls Stevens in his elegy—though perhaps a little unfairly. Funny he certainly was. Who but a funny man would entitle a history of the evolution of human consciousness "The Comedian as the Letter C," or call a poem about death, decay, and regeneration "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating"?

He was also, without question, a money man. Peter Brazeau has recently compiled an invaluable collection of reminiscences of Stevens by his friends, fellow poets, and fellow workers. Entitled *Parts of a World* (1983), Brazeau's book shows, among other things, that Stevens took his executive duties with absolute seriousness, examining claim after claim rigorously and professionally. His desk was usually piled with towers of insurance-law textbooks. In fact, most of his colleagues at the Hartford remember him more for his assiduity as an investigator and executive than for his brilliance as a poet. The truth is, they never really understood the poetry.

And yet, the insurance man's career was, apparently, in service of the poetry. Stevens seems to have known, from his undergraduate

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days at Harvard, that poetry would be his vocation and his toy. But he was, from the beginning, a canny man, and knew that a career in the realm of the imagination was best supplemented by a career in the world that pays the bills.

So, upon graduating from Harvard in 1900, he worked briefly as a journalist for the *Tribune* in New York. Finding that neither to his liking nor to his sufficient emolument, he went to New York Law School, and between 1905 and 1907 drifted through three law firms. In 1908, he joined the New York branch of the American Bonding Company of Baltimore, thus entering the insurance business that was to be his calling (or avocation?) for the rest of his life. He married Elsie Kachel, whom he had known for years, in 1909, and their one child, Holly Bright Stevens, was born in 1924. He moved to Hartford, Connecticut, in 1932, never to live permanently anywhere else. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, the son of a successful attorney, Stevens spent his entire life, aside from vacations to his favorite tropical resorts, within an area smaller than that of France.

But if the businessman's life was to support the poet's, Stevens never let the poet in him interfere with the businessman. There is a famous story—probably apocryphal, like most good stories—about a relatively celebrated poet who had married the daughter of the owner of a large Midwestern conglomerate. In the late 1940s, this poet was visiting Hartford, and naturally wanted to meet the *other* famous businessman/poet. Stevens invited him to lunch at his club, along with some Hartford executives. The conversation was all about actuarial tables and tax laws until Stevens's frustrated guest finally ventured a question: "Wallace, I've always wanted to ask you something about your poem, 'Sunday Morning.'" A silence descended over the table, until Stevens frostily observed, "We don't discuss *those things here*."

Even if only legendary, the anecdote catches the paradoxical nature of the man. Not "schizophrenic" (as *Newsweek* recently described Stevens, in a review of Brazeau's book), but paradoxical. For he was a man who loved, reveled in, and comfortably inhabited paradox. No American poet in this century has been more the poet of joy, and none in this century has been more the architect of despair.

Let me quote Berryman's epitaph again: "He lifted up, among the actuaries, / a grandee crow." Stop there, for the moment. For Stevens *was* an actuary: that is, someone whose profession it is to calculate the probabilities of annihilation for a given subject, human or otherwise. A banker (Eliot, say) deals with money as if it were the supreme value—something, in other words, that you can bank on. And a doctor (Williams, say) deals with human life as something to be saved at any cost. But an actuary (Stevens, say) has to deal with arbitration between those two absolutes.

Now read Stevens's poem, "The Snow Man":

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

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And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

This may well be one of the most-anthologized pieces Stevens ever wrote. But who—or what—is the Snow Man? The interpretation that seems best suited to the poem is that the Snow Man is the poet himself, and that, therefore, the subject of the poem is the nature of poetry itself. To have a “mind of winter” and to “have been cold a long time” is to see the world dispassionately, to see it for the wintry landscape that Stevens believes it to be: a world of emptiness in which we are the only truly conscious participants. To see it that way is *not* “to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind”: Human suffering is not reflected in or sympathized with by nature, but is strictly *human* suffering.

#### Essential Lies

“The Snow Man,” in other words, is a very grim, very uncompromising little poem. It is the kind of poem that might have been written by a man possessed simultaneously by the rigid statistics of mortality and the lyric obsession with overcoming death. And it was.

One is reminded of another famous Stevens poem, “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” It is easy to read the poem a number of times without realizing that it is about the death of a wealthy lady, because that fact is never explicitly stated. The poem’s central meaning comes through clearly in the seemingly playful refrain: “The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.” Ice-cream (like a snow man) is a human confection, a human imposition upon nature not encouraged by nature herself. Picturesque, perhaps; delicious, perhaps; but subject to the Emperor of Ice-Cream, which is to say, bound to melt, fade, disappear.

For Stevens—and this is true throughout his long, productive career—the vision of the Snow Man is the only vision to which we are really entitled, the vision of a world without hope.

This is not to say that Stevens is a “philosophical” poet. But it is to say that, for him, poetry is a kind of pre-philosophy. Poetry is “the necessary angel of earth,” as he calls it elsewhere, and its function is to introduce us into the full glare and radiance of reality. William Carlos



*Winslow Homer's Key West (1903). Similar scenes from the coast of Florida provided settings for many of Wallace Stevens's poems.*

Williams, a kindred spirit to Stevens's particular kind of materialism, wrote in an important letter (to Marianne Moore) that all of his poetry came out of a moment "when I was about twenty—a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself."

Stevens is never this melodramatic nor this confessional, but we can speculate that the same sort of experience lies somewhere behind his own work. Writing is not a mere exercise in technique and rhetoric; it is a vital aspect of the interchange between the mind and the world outside, which seeks to kill the mind. At least this is what major poets such as Eliot, Williams, and Stevens can convince us of while the spell of the poem lasts, and it is not a paltry accomplishment.

"Poetry Is a Destructive Force," reads the title of another early Stevens poem. (His titles, by the way, are often as engaging as the poems they preface.) And the last stanza of the poem is an unforgettable parable about the intellectual adventure and the danger concealed beneath the notion of "fine art":

The lion sleeps in the sun.  
Its nose is on its paws.  
It can kill a man.

There is something quintessentially American about all this. Or perhaps it is quintessentially modern. (Gertrude Stein observed in 1909

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that America was *the* modern nation precisely because of the “abstract, disembodied” quality of its life.)

Peter Conn, in his book *The Divided Mind* (1983), argues that the American imagination is torn between a sense of the past—religious, mythic, resonant with interconnections—and a sense of the future—technological, scientific, fraught with the weight of infinite advance. Stevens, more perhaps than any poet of his century, is the registrar of that tension.

Eliot may have retreated—and retreated heroically—from the panic of modern life into an idealized, neo-Christian ideal. Williams may have delivered himself to a vision of the infinitely expansive and infinitely empty universe of what is to come. But Stevens remains the invaluable poet of the present moment, poised between nostalgia and expectation. “Great are the myths,” intones Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*: Great are the myths and mythologies of the past that have served to reconcile us to our condition, to our mortality. And in the noonday glare of our knowledge that they are simply myths, we reconstitute them as the essential lies by which we live.

Stevens remains truer to that Whitmanian insight than any poet of the 20th century, and, in doing so, remains truer to the modern tradition in poetry than any of his colleagues, brilliant as they are. Poetry is the “supreme fiction,” the myth that at the same time reconciles us to and estranges us from the world as we know it, things as they are. As such, poetry is the absolute, absolutely necessary underpinning of consciousness itself. As Stevens writes at the end of one of his finest poems, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is  
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room  
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,  
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

This great passage can be taken as an epigraph for all of Stevens’s work. But then, he is the kind of obsessive writer (Faulkner and Joyce also come to mind) for whom *any* passage is a virtual epigraph.

At any rate, this is the speech of the Snow Man. The war between the mind and the sky is the central conflict of Western philosophy since, at least, René Descartes in the 17th century—and probably, truth be known, since Plato. It is the warfare involved in, or necessitated by, our knowledge that we are not the universe we inhabit, and that we are not that universe because we are conscious of it. Consciousness, in other words, *is* the Fall, the exile from the Garden—and also the cure for that primal wound. As he says in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”:

The first idea was not our own. Adam  
In Eden was the father of Descartes

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And Eve made air the mirror of herself,  
 There was a muddy centre before we breathed.  
 There was a myth before the myth began,  
 Venerable and articulate and complete.

The "first idea," the myth before the myth began, is the reality of the world as *given* to us, the reality of the world, and of our mortality, in the cold equations that an actuary knows—or should know—better than anyone else. And the poet—by whom Stevens means all of us at our most alert—stands always in the sun, in the clear shadowless light of that harsh knowledge (and it is perhaps interesting here to recall his own fondness for sunlit, tropical climes). But the knowledge has a gift attached to it. For the poet, at his best, "patches the moon together"—that is, invents the gentler light of imagination, with his "Virgilian cadences." He invents a fiction, a myth, a poem, an *articulation* of the uncaring universe around us that will let us believe in its benevolence, even though, or just because, we do not believe in the articulation itself.

This sounds like a paradox, but actually it is not. "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself," says Whitman with lordly insouciance. And Stevens, expert in the contradictions of existence that Whitman explored, does not even bother to apologize for the

*"The man bent over his guitar, / A shearsman of sorts. The day was green." Thus opens Stevens's long, meditative poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Stevens, an admirer and collector of modern art, probably found inspiration for this poem in Pablo Picasso's painting, The Old Guitarist, (1903).*





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inescapable war between the mind and the sky. As he says in "Esthétique du Mal," "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur."

Now, to say that "the gaiety of language is our seigneur" is to say that only in our articulation of the world do we find anything like the Lord of the world. Stevens's great and enduring value as a poet is that he leads us into those deep and troubled waters, and that he forces us to realize that to read him is to learn to read, and think, all over again.

In one sense, his is the purest poetry of atheism ever written, and certainly the closest approach in English verse to a major philosophical problem of the 20th century. Why should there be something rather than nothing? That, says the great German philosopher Martin Heidegger, is the elementary question of metaphysics. And that, in one way or another throughout his long life in language, is Stevens's theme. It is also the theme, or the undercurrent, of most contemporary poetic, political, and epistemological thought.

### Angry at God

Why *should* there be something rather than nothing? Why should the world as it is, things as they are, be and be *there*? For the world as it is is a frightening place if we do not have recourse to the mythologies that reconcile us to its pain. Again we are confronted with the unwelcome wisdom of the actuary who knows that we die. "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination," writes Stevens in "Esthétique du Mal." For the death of Satan is also the death of God. Stevens, like the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, understood that absolute good and absolute evil have to exist together or cannot, either of them, exist at all. And Stevens also understood, along with the French thinker Voltaire, that if the universe did not give us a God, we would have to invent one for ourselves. Among the *Adagia* that Stevens added to throughout his life, the poet had much to say about God. "God is a postulate of the ego," he wrote. But if God were of man's own making, he was, without question, man's supreme creation: "Only a noble people evolve a noble God." And sometimes Stevens even sounded like the English visionary poet William Blake: "God is in me," Stevens mused, "or else is not at all (does not exist)."

Sigmund Freud, in *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), argues that religious belief of any kind is simply man's attempt to reconcile himself to his inevitable, ineluctable extinction. In doing so, Freud echoes what the fifth-century theologian Saint Augustine says about the use of religion in the first chapters of *The City of God*, and thereby establishes himself—he would, naturally, have been enraged at the idea—as one of the major religious thinkers of our age.

Indeed, Freud and Stevens are both proof that the most committed atheists can be the most serious and creative theologians. For their atheism can be a mask, or a veil, for a profound disappointment at the failure of the universe to give us an answer to existence. "Anybody who doesn't think the religious life is melancholy," a friend once said to me, "doesn't know much about the religious life."

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I never really understood the wisdom of that observation until I learned to read Wallace Stevens. For Stevens, throughout his career, is a deeply religious writer—which is to say a man very angry with God for not existing. In one of his earliest and most celebrated poems, “Sunday Morning,” he describes quite simply the decision of a lady not to go to church but to stay home and enjoy the pleasures of a leisurely day. “We live in an old chaos of the sun,” he writes in that poem, meaning that we *are* children of poverty and natives of “malheur.” But the gaiety of language—which is also, for this most intelligent of poets, the dance of intellect—can be enough to get us through. Counterposed to the idea of the “chaos of the sun” from that very early poem is the title, virtually a poem in itself, of one of his very last poems: “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination.”

If Stevens is the poet of death, of the actuary’s knowledge, he is also the poet of triumph, of the joy of the present moment that transcends and validates the inevitable descent into darkness which is the lot of us all. Scarcely a poet has written in the second half of the 20th century who has not been influenced by Wallace Stevens. And—perhaps more importantly—scarcely a philosopher or theologian has written during our era who has not echoed his anticipation of our final doom.

But, at the end, there is joy: the joy of language, of the play of intelligence, and of the simple pleasure of being in the world. Stevens, in fact, may be the century’s happiest poet, precisely *because* he immerses himself most deeply in the possibility of unhappiness. Stevens expressed that paradox best in the “Esthétique du Mal”:

One might have thought of sight, but who could think  
 Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?  
 Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,  
 But the dark italics it could not propound.  
 And out of what one sees and hears and out  
 Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
 So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
 As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
 With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
 Merely in living as and where we live.

Contained in these lines is the statement of a final triumph—that of the human mind, which, by constantly manufacturing meanings, transforms the world *out there* into “so many selves, so many sensuous worlds.” If this is the triumph of great poetry, it is one to which the work of Stevens may make lasting and legitimate claim.

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