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# KING'S

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# Theological Review

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## THE PEACH PIE AND THE CUSTARD:

Two versions of Poetry in the poems of Wallace Stevens.

HAMISH F. G. SWANSTON

It is a temptation, when he is reading the poems of Wallace Stevens, for a Professor of Theology to concentrate attention on those moments in Stevens' work at which some reference is made to the activities of christian theologians, to Scotus, for example, in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, or Aquinas in *Les Plus Belles Pages*. There must, however, be something a little special about a pleading that in these poems, the franciscan is more significant than the fertile grass, or the dominican than the milkman. It would, certainly, be possible to indicate the relevance of thomistic discussion of analogical predication to what Stevens intends by his talk of the interaction and inter-relation of reality and imagination. But, at the very moment when he most professedly enters upon this matter, Stevens is quick to remark that 'theology after breakfast sticks to the eye'.

No more acceptable to him of a morning than the theses of the subtle theologians are the beliefs of the generality of christians. He finds nothing at all attractive in 'an over-human god' who, having 'made himself a man', is not distinguishable from ourselves 'when we cry because we suffer'. Stevens is, if sympathetic at all to christians, sympathetic to those who toll 'the old Lutheran bells at home' and those who place 'the marguerite and coquelicot' upon the altar. He feels more comfortable yet with those who discern that the bells and the flowers reach beyond christian confines. 'Each sexton has his sect. The bells have none'. When she comes from the chapel to make 'an offering in the grass' the truant nun is a lover more attractive to the Lord of the garden than when she was in choir:

He felt a subtle quiver  
That was not heavenly love,  
Or pity.

Stevens' rejection of established christian forms is, perhaps, most forcibly expressed in that fine poem *Ploughing on Sunday*. The reader is brought by the insistent rhythms of revolt from the respectabilities of New England religion to a celebration of animal and elemental vitality:

Remus, blow your horn!  
I'm ploughing on Sunday,  
Ploughing North America.  
Blow your horn!

Tum-ti-tum,  
Ti-tum-tum-tum!  
The turkey-cock's tail  
Spreads to the sun.

Stevens' early poems are replete with such mocks in magnificent measure of Regina of the clouds, the rising Venus, the God of the sausage-makers, and the faint, memorial gesturings of the Triton; these prepare for the delighted announcement of *Notes towards a Supreme Fiction* that 'Phoebus is dead' and the enlarging perception:

The death of one god is the death of all.

It was, he remarked, 'one of the great human experiences to see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds'. At

the dissolving of the gods men had to create for themselves 'a style of bearing themselves in reality'. He had some hope that such a new style might be invented in the United States, in the Carolinas, where 'new-born children interpret love'; in Connecticut, where there had never been 'a time when mythology was possible'; and in Oklahoma, where among the clattering bucks and the bristling firecat, the farmers' daughters had reached back to the earliest forms of fertility cult:

In Oklahoma  
Bonnie and Josie  
Dressed in calico  
Danced around a stump.  
They cried,  
"Ohoyaho,  
Ohoo" . . .  
Celebrating the marriage  
Of flesh and air.

He was, throughout his career, to resort to such primitive cries; they signify Stevens' conceit that the poet's verse could do in our society the job of the sacred ceremonies among our ancestors:

The melon should have apposite ritual,  
Performed in verd apparel, and the peach,  
When its black branches came to bud, belle day,  
Should have an incantation.

The poet is to be acknowledged as the performer of that apposite ritual, the singer of that incantation, the celebrant of the marriages of the elements. Stevens entertains pretensions of Jungian magnificence. He expresses them in the several religious languages of our culture.

Those who celebrate the presence of their god are likely to provide, in the place, the gesture, the language of their rite, paradigms for others' announcement of the divine among us. This is certainly what is going on at the transference of liturgical language to the *Genesis* and *Ezekiel* meditations upon Creation and Fall, the *Exodus* narrative of Redemption, and the *Apocalypse* dream of Judgment. And Stevens was ready to make such transferences. Though his references to the images of the hebrew and christian traditions are rather fewer than is usual among educated men of his generation, being limited almost to the well-known stories of Adam and Lazarus, of Susanna and the Elders, he did make energetic employment of the *Exodus* narrative in several places. There is a powerful transference of liturgical use at the ceremony of *Tea at the Palaz of Hoon*.

Descending in the purple vestment of the old liturgy, the poet comes forward as the Aaron of a new order. He chants a versicle:

What was the ointment sprinkled on my bread?  
What were the hymns that buzzed beside my ears?

The question is as confident as the demand of the half-choir at the Jerusalem festival:

Who is this king of glory?

The versicle receives as confident a response:

Out of my mind the golden ointment rained,  
And my ears made the blowing hymns they heard.

He has shifted out of the sacerdotal character into the divine. Such a response to the versicle must appal 'a high-

toned old christian woman', but it is for the poet a release into self-knowledge. The appropriation of the divine language has enabled him to be a creating god:

and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

The poet is now in a position to declare poetry to be 'the supreme fiction' in the primary sense of the supreme act of making. 'I believe', Stevens wrote in 1904 to the girl he was to marry, 'that with a bucket of sand and a wishing lamp, I could create a world in half a second that would make this one look like a hunk of mud'. I do not think that Stevens really supposed he needed either bucket or lamp. The poet is not the sorcerer's apprentice, he is not the sorcerer, he is the maker.

This is a claim most clearly articulated in *The Idea of Order at Key West*, published in *Alcegis* in October 1934. At the end of a hot Greyhound 'bus ride from Miami along the island highway, Key West seems now not much more than a straggle of waterfront bars, but in 1922, when Stevens first went there to settle a case for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, of which he later became vice-president, it appeared 'one of the choicest places I have ever been to'. And in the midst of what he called twenty years 'bumming around' the place, he made his most powerful statement of the poet as the creating god.

The girl, striding 'among the meaningless plungings of water and the wind', makes a world as every god makes a world, out of chaos:

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing,  
She measured to the hour its solitude,  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker.

She is, like the divinity of Blakes's iconography, the geometer of space, 'fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles', and, like most gods, happily solipsist:

there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing made.

Stevens suggests that, at their hearing of her song, others may live within the singer's world. An order was being established for them as she 'mastered the night and portioned out the seas'. Stevens has most evidently taken over a language of world-making that reaches back from the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel to the first verses of *Genesis*. As he wrote in a letter from Florida in 1935, it is 'God who seems a nuisance from the point of Key West', while the poet's rage for order is 'blessed':

The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

In this exultant poem Stevens invites other women and men to go through the portals the poet opens and enter upon the world his imagination has made.

Stevens may seem to be saying something of a sort with

Coleridge's remark about Imagination as 'a dim Analogue of Creation, not all that we can *believe* but all that we can *conceive* of creation'. He did not himself rejoice in Coleridgean reference. He thought Coleridge's writings generally to 'have so little in them that one feels to be contemporary, living', and he particularly insisted that 'my reality-imagination complex is entirely my own even though I see it in others'. Coleridge would at any rate have understood what Stevens meant by that disclaimer, and it is best here to advance Stevens' sense of imagination and its world in his own terms.

There are those whose words, as he said in his 1948 Bergen lecture at Yale on 'Effects of Analogy' 'have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence'. Stevens would be one of those. That lecture, delivered when Stevens was in his seventieth year, and the New York lecture three years later on 'The Relations between Poetry and Painting' in which he stated most clearly, 'in an age in which disbelief is so profoundly prevalent or, if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief', his sense that 'poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost', lead into his happy announcement that 'our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers'. But Stevens could not always enjoy such confidence in himself and his creative power.

'If a fellow takes Peach Pie', Garrett Barcalow Stevens had written to his second son at Harvard in 1898, 'he often wishes he had chosen the Custard'. Stevens' reconsideration of the poet's creating power is articulated most famously in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*.

The poet is this time the old man of Picasso's disturbing picture, the shearsman of sorts bent over his guitar. The exuberant young singer at Key West had been heard at a respectful distance. The guitarist is confronted by familiar critics proposing a confident aesthetic which comes near to parodying Stevens' earlier assertions:

Exceeding music must take the place  
Of empty heaven and its hymns

The shearsman is, at the start, as confident as the earlier figures of the poet. He replies in a forthright rhythm and rhyme scheme. But this soon declines into the admission:

I cannot bring a world quite round  
Although I patch it as I can.

A fitful attempt to assert a surrealist world collapses at the uninhabitable language of

sun's green,  
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks,

and the shearsman has to acknowledge that he is native in a world he has not made. At this abandoning of the claim to be the maker of a world, Stevens is compelled to offer a new account of the poem.

The account he offers is couched in liturgical terms: the poem is

like a missal found  
In the mud.

The figure of a service-book declares the poem to have had, before the poet came across it, a place in an already existing

order, but it is not in that liturgical world that Stevens immediately interests himself. He first considers what it means for a poem to be found. That is the theme of his *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. This sequence is largely concerned with the appropriate watchfulness of the poet. He is the note-maker among those who think themselves the rational assessors of the rational order they inhabit. He had already understood it to be his poet's privilege that he should appreciate the workings of creativity, and recognize that the supreme fiction of the world is a work of imagination. He was not to be persuaded into talk of *mens creatrix*:

It could not be a mind, the wave  
In which the watery grasses grow.

In these *Notes* he allows himself some ferocious scope in the denunciation of those persons of energetic intellect who build capitols and set up lines of statues in their corridors, elevating men who were cleverer than the most literate owl and the most erudite of elephants. Against them Stevens proclaims the patient truth:

to impose is not  
To discover. To discover an order as of  
A season, to discover summer and know it,  
To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,  
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,  
It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible.

In hope of that possibility being realised Stevens revised his figure of the poet.

He had in the days of his confidence likened the poet to a youth, a lover with phosphorescent hair, who overtook Mrs Alfred Uruguay on the road and proved himself the 'figure of capable imagination'. His later imagination presents the poet rather as the woman waiting for her lover, 'at daylight or before', and, as she combs her hair, meditating upon her incomplete existence. The woman of *Debris of Life and Mind*, who is the first fully-imagined figure of this poetic, speaks 'thoughtfully the words of a line', acknowledging to herself that she is 'not quite able to sing'. She entirely lacks the commanding energy of the woman who strode along the beach at Key West. But to her occurs the wondrous discovery that 'things sing themselves'.

Stevens' account of the occurrence of 'discovery' prompts a reference to that discussion of 'inspiration' initiated by F.D. Maurice, sometime Professor of English Literature at King's College, London, and then, until deprived for a remark about hell, Professor of Theology. Maurice esteemed it Coleridge's greatest distinction that he had made the 'discovery', or had been vouchsafed the 'revelation' that there was a 'keynote to the harmony of all creation'. He took Coleridge's case to be paradigmatic for all true 'discoveries', Hutcheson and the discovery of a Moral Sense, for Faraday and Owen and Darwin and the discoveries of Natural Science. None of these great men would ever say that he had found what he had first hidden. Each would allow that he had been shewn a truth. 'Discovery and revelation are, it strikes me, more nearly synonymous words than any which we can find in our language'. As with 'the discovery of a fixed star, or of any geological or mathematical principle', so, Maurice went on, with the making of a work of literature. Christians, like numbers of

other religionists, are accustomed to talking of certain writings as 'communicating revelation', as 'given by God', as 'inspired'. Maurice enlarged the category of such writings:

to say that inspiration is confined to the writers of the Bible is formally and directly to contradict those writers; to determine in what measures they or any other men have possessed inspiration, is to tell Him who breathes where He listeth how *we* suppose He must breathe or ought to breathe.

Maurice attended to the poet as 'the great interpreter of nature's mysteries' who has received a divine revelation in the act of making a human discovery. He took it that poets knew themselves to be such seers. He managed his thesis by reference to 'the singers of the old world asking some divine power to inspire them', and his argument might be extended from Lucretius through Milton's invocation at the start of *Paradise Regained* as far as Wordsworth's celebration of the 'Presences' who presided over his education. It might, perhaps, touch upon A.E. Housman's remarking that he had to be a little out of sorts before he could compose a poem. And it might seem relevant to Stevens' talk of 'the mysterious spirit of nature' in Central Park.

That was a youthful experience, and, anyway, the spirit 'slipped away'; but the figure of the waiting woman does give him a language in which he can speak of those things that others include in doctrines of 'inspiration'.

In a complex poem, *The World as Meditation*, Penelope wakes on Ithaca with a sense of someone coming. The poem begins with a question to which there is no simple answer:

Is it Ulysses that approaches from the east,  
The interminable adventurer?

Possibly.

Someone is moving  
On the horizon.

All she can do is to compose a self in readiness for whomsoever may be coming. She has no assurance that anyone will arrive. The language of 'approach' and 'coming' in this poem is checked by that of 'interminable' and 'constantly'. The reader may, and Stevens was well aware of this and meant to check it, import an homeric resolution, bringing Ulysses home to his faithful wife; Stevens simply supplies her with the framework of an advent litany:

She would talk a little to herself as she combed  
her hair,  
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,  
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly  
so near.

But that name which she repeats is not entirely fit. The opening question is answered complexedly:

It was Ulysses and it was not.

'Ulysses' is the name she uses. This particular name cannot suit the requirements of the rest of us as we make our call for a comer. But it comes, too, near to being a parallel of the line in *A Primitive like an Orb* about 'the essential poem':

It is and it  
Is not, and therefore is.

In *The World as Meditation* Stevens supplies us with a

language at once as expressive of being and more imaginatively controlled. The savage presence awakening the world in which Penelope waits, the approach from the east, the enlivening warmth of morning, indicate the Stevens is willing that whatever influence encourages his discoveries should be figured by the sun. The witness of this poem is consistent with that of his wider enterprise. At the reverberation of 'Ti-tum-tum-tum', the turkey-cock's tail had spread to the sun as the source of animal vitality; on a green day the shearsman had observed 'it is the sun that shares our works'; and in old age the poet delighted to acknowledge that

his poems, although makings of himself  
Were no less makings of the sun.

With those resonances of warmth, energy, and creativity, there goes, quite generally among men, one of divinity. The sun is often a god. And this, too, Stevens seems near to accepting. He declares in an obituary *Note* that "Phoebus" was 'a name for something that never could be named', insisting that

The sun  
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be.

A theologian might wish to connect this hint of essence and existence with that revelation on *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* when lights shone

Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush;

the literary critic, not having such an interest in the peculiar tale of Moses, may concentrate attention on the way in which Stevens' use of the figure of the sun makes a difference in his account of the coming of a poem. This is most easily remarked in the *Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour*. The sun has come full course in this poem: it is evening, the day has been collected, the lover has kept his *rendezvous* with the woman. They are together within

a warmth,  
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

The introduction of 'light' to a sequence which echoes his earlier celebrations of the sun, indicates a development in Stevens' appreciation of how things are. The movement in the poem is from an opening insistence on 'light' through 'reason', 'think', 'thought', and 'knowledge' to 'mind'. Stevens now recognizes 'an order' as 'a knowledge'. In this he must appear to be settling into a language familiar in our culture. The line which hymns that knowledge,

How high that highest candle lights the dark,

does indeed owe much to both *The Merchant of Venice* and the Johannine *Logos* texts. And there is much in our tradition akin to Stevens' talk in this poem of our inhabiting a world made 'out of this same light, out of the central mind'. But it is Stevens' peculiarity among us to halt before such talk is well begun. He does not think it profitable to enquire into the act of mind. As he had been wholly suspicious of the philosopher as 'the lunatic of one idea', and had hoped that 'one day at the Sorbonne' they would come to appreciate 'the fiction that results from feeling', so at this naming of 'mind' he withdraws from the discussion. He has his own version of Wittgensteinian silence.

In that silence, in deliberate confrontation with several kinds of theologian, Stevens forgoes all exercise of speculative intellect. There is, he asserts, 'the essential poem at the centre of things', but he does not, after this first line of *A*

*Primitive like an Orb*, proceed to anything paralleling the structures of theodicy:

We do not prove the existence of the poem.  
It is something seen and known in lesser poems.

He resorts to what may be thought a fideist contemplation:

One poem proves another and the whole,  
For the clairvoyant men that need no proof:  
The lover, the believer and the poet.

These in 'the joy of language' may 'celebrate the central poem'. Their celebration is of that reunion personally desired in *The World as Meditation* and personally enjoyed in *The Final Soliloquy*, but in this poem, which has, too, its talk of 'her mirror and her look', brought to universal, almost indeed to a pan-poetic, fulfilment:

It is  
As if the central poem became the world,  
And the world the central poem, each one the  
mate  
Of the other.

So that breakfast theology is displaced by 'trumpeting seraphs in the eye'.

Stevens never goes further than the language of imagination escorts him. The desire to go further has been, certainly, usual among theologians. The consideration of sense perception and intellectual apprehension which engages Aquinas in *Prima Pars* of *Summa Theologica* and Scotus' discussion of the relation of the image to intelligible species in the *Ordinatio* are relevant witnesses here. But such efforts to go further than the imagination allows occur only because, in Stevens' terms, the theologians have not engaged enough in the appropriate meditation. This is what he means by theology sticking to the eye. The theologians have not seen the wonder of the poem which is, and here Stevens skilfully employs the scholastic language, 'part of the *res* itself'.

If there are troublesome persons who would still ask him questions as if he had command of some analogue of creation, Stevens is likely to take some hint from the poet's wondering mediation upon the poems discovered to him, and suggest that we, like Penelope, are sustained within 'an inhuman meditation'. Accepting a phrase from Georges Eresco, he will even term that larger meditation 'an essential exercise' of composition. And will reconsider his earlier poems as occurring within that meditation, allowing in *A Primitive like an Orb* that 'the central poem' is

The poem of the composition of the whole,  
The composition of blue sea and of green,  
Of blue light and of green, as lesser poems.

The hints here of Key West and the shearsman are plain as Stevens now finds his way to the composition of his entire enterprise within some large 'meditation of a principle'.

He will even on *An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*, compose, 'as part of the never-ending meditation', a sequence that runs from the language of an 'imagining of reality', through those of 'a new resemblance of the sun' and of 'a larger poem' to something very like the renewal of the Oklahoma celebration in 'a mythological form'. He can, in his new appreciation of what is going on in such ceremonies, allow the celebration of 'the hero of midnight' on 'a hill of stones', and of 'ancientest saint ablaze with ancientest truth'.

But with such allowances he places the insistent refusal to indulge in speculation concerning the definition of being. He will not entertain thoughts of a thorough searching of reality. This refusal is precisely expressed in a rejection of that aaronic image which he had once made his best. He will have nothing to do now with

the hierophant Omega

Of dense investiture,

and those who appoint themselves 'the choice custodians' of things as they are.

So if, at the last, he is presented with the question in determinedly theological terms, he must, 'in the presence of such chapels and such schools', simply return again the poet's only answer:

We say God and the imagination are one.

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