JOHN N. SERIO

Introduction

The poetry of Wallace Stevens presents a paradox. On one hand, those who know and love his poetry consider him one of America's finest poets. Some critics have singled out particular poems such as "Sunday Morning" and "The Snow Man" as among the best ever written.[1] Enthusiasts enjoy his comic spirit and delight in the freshness of his unusual subjects – placing a jar in Tennessee, eating ice cream at a funeral, dancing around a dead stump. They marvel at the way his musical lines dazzle one into affirming what is undeniably illogical – "Music is feeling, then, not sound," and "Beauty is momentary in the mind . . . / But in the flesh it is immortal" (72–75). They are moved by his expressions of loss, alienation, and despair. But more than this, they see Stevens as a major poet because he addresses major themes: the relationship between the world and the mind, the beauty of planet Earth as an end in itself, poetry (or art in general) as an affirmation of life, the problem of belief in a secular age, the need for creating a sense of nobility in a crass and violent world. They regard Stevens as a great poet because he infuses these subjects with authentic feeling, so that each becomes "An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought" (333).

On the other hand, most people have never heard of Wallace Stevens. Among those who have, many find his work intimidating and "too difficult" to comprehend. Stevens himself is in part responsible for his lack of a wide readership. Reticent by nature, he was not a self-promoter as were some of his contemporaries such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Robert Frost. Although late in life Stevens did accept a number of accolades, he was uncomfortable at the ceremonies and escaped them as quickly and with as little notice as possible. He cringed at opportunities for publicity, declining both *Life* and *The New Yorker* when they wished to run profiles on him.[2] When he received the Bollingen Prize in Poetry, he curtly declined to be interviewed by a local newspaper reporter. The front-page article in the Hartford *Courant*, carrying a three-year-old photograph of him, noted that he had nothing to say except "hurry."[3]

However much Stevens may have shunned it, popular awareness plays a role in general acceptance, especially if a writer is challenging. Such recognition provides the reader with a completely different frame of reference, a completely different set of assumptions from which to begin. Public reaction to the complex fiction of William Faulkner is a case in point. Recently, the American television program host, Oprah Winfrey, selected three novels by Faulkner for Oprah's Book Club – *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Light in August*. Calling the endeavor "A Summer of Faulkner," she offered guides on how to approach his fiction on her book club website, among them "How to Read Faulkner," "The Stream of Consciousness," and "Breaking Literary Rules." There were also helpful tips for readers: "Be Patient," "Be Willing to Re-Read," and "Make the Story Your Own."[4] One familiar with Faulkner's style cannot help but smile at these. But more pertinent is a remark by Ulf Linde, a longtime member of the body that awards Nobel Prizes in literature. He commented that Stevens "was one of the big misses of the Academy . . . and now it is, of course, too late."[5] One can only conjecture about the general public's attitude toward, and assumptions about, Stevens had he, like Faulkner, won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Perhaps we could have had a "Summer of Stevens."

There is no doubt that Stevens is hard to understand. But is this unusual? With the exception of Frost (and even he cautioned that he was "not undesigning"[6]), who among Stevens' contemporaries – Pound, Eliot, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams – is easy? Eliot's famous observation on modern poetry remains apt. It "must be *difficult*" because the "variety and complexity" of modern society, "playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning."[7] Stevens is no exception. The task at hand, then, is not to dismiss him for being too difficult, but rather to learn how to read him.

How should one approach Stevens' poetry? As with any poet, the first step is to enjoy him, to take pleasure in Stevens' exquisite language, subtle rhythms, arresting images, surprise effects, and distinctive sounds. We have become a little too insistent about meaning in poetry, as if a poem were no more than a vehicle for ideas. We should be mindful of Stevens' observation that "A poem need not have a meaning and like most things in nature often does not have" (914). We should also heed his impassioned advice on how to read a poem: "In poetry, you must love the words, the ideas and images and rhythms with all your capacity to love anything at all" (902). Why? So that we can participate in the process of the poem and share, experientially, in the alteration of feeling, perception, and sense of self that the poem

makes possible. The vital center of poetry for Stevens is metamorphosis, the poet's ability "to reconstruct us by his transformations" (670). The poet fulfills himself, says Stevens, "as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others" (660–61).

The second step in approaching Stevens' poetry is to concede that he, like Proteus, is slippery. He will not be fixed. If there is a common thread throughout his work, it is that reality and our response to it are in constant flux. We must learn to live with multiple perspectives (not just thirteen but innumerable ways to look at a blackbird); be at home with multiple truths (there is no such thing as "The the" [186]); and accept uncertainty, contradiction, even chaos, as central to existence. His poems run the gamut from dejection to joy, from doubt to belief, from negation to affirmation. In some poems, "The Snow Man," for example, the speaker is overwhelmed by an overpowering, intractable reality – "the nothing that is" (8). In others, such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" or "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," the speaker absorbs reality with an imagination that subsumes all – "I was the world . . . and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself" (51). One might say these instances represent the poles of Stevens' notorious "reality-imagination complex" (*L* 792), but they do not yield a dialectic, as if there were a synthesis or resolution to the continual process of adjustment. Rather, they constitute discrete moments in a never-ending cycle in the poet's (and in our) response to reality. Change is the essence of poetry for Stevens because change is the essence of life.

There are certain occasions, however – precious, indeed ecstatic ones – when what is felt and what is thought are one with what is perceived. These moments are hard-earned prizes in Stevens' poetry – validated by the recognition of the other moods – and constitute for him an ideal. As he says in one of his essays, "There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live" (662). That is why the poet is such an important figure for Stevens, for "he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it" and "he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (662). As readers, we share in the feeling of enlightenment achieved in these poems through the imagination's agreement with reality, evoking what Stevens might term a poetic truth or a truth beyond reason. As he says in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," on the occasion of catching a fresh perception of the sunrise or the sea clearing or the moon hanging in the heavens, "These are not things transformed. / Yet we are shaken by them as if they were" (345).

The third step, and perhaps the key adjustment readers must make when approaching Stevens, is to acknowledge that his poems are not about a subject so much as they are about the poetry of the subject, about the way

the subject develops through language. The distinction between these two concepts – the subject of the poetry and the poetry of the subject – is crucial, and it is the primary reason for Stevens' legendary difficulty. Although he strikes one as a poet born and not made, as a poetic genius "just blazing away in line after line,"[8] Stevens aimed to compose poems that captured the essence or inner life of the experience. "Although [these poems] are simple to read, when they're done," he confessed to his wife, "it's a deuce of a job (for me) to do them" (*L* 180). In Stevens' view, there is a tension in all poetry between the subject and the poetry of the subject. For the poet for whom the "subject [is] paramount," he observes, "the subject is constant and the development orderly." However, if it is the poetry of the subject that is foremost, "the true subject is not constant nor its development orderly" (785). This explains Stevens' style – the unexpected shifts in syntax that defy logic, the provisional statements whose open-endedness teases, the rhetoric of denial that paradoxically affirms. To invoke Eliot, this may very well be Stevens' method of dislocating language into meaning.

But what exactly is the poetry of the subject that makes Stevens' writing unique and makes Stevens a great poet? It is his belief that the theory of poetry is the theory of life, "that the structure of poetry and the structure of reality are one" (692). This is a grand concept and, if acknowledged, it makes poetry one of the most lofty of human enterprises. More than other poets, Stevens pointedly declares that everything we believe is a fiction, that reality is an invention of the mind. This explains the outrageously abstract beginnings of so many poems: "Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world" (329; "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction"); "The eye's plain version is a thing apart" (397; "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"); "It is possible that to seem – it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is" (296; "Description Without Place"). This stance does not turn Stevens into a solipsist, nor does it imply a denial of reality, which Stevens explicitly affirms as the "ding an sich" (23), or "the Thing Itself" (451). But it is to grant that all we can know of the outer world is our interpretation of it and that the construction of this interpretation is a poetic act. As Stevens observes in "Adagia," "Things seen are things as seen" (902).

All this is easy enough to understand when one considers the realm of cultural values. Today, as always, people around the globe fight and die for their social, political, and religious beliefs – in other words, for their culture's sense of reality. But this notion is also true of our understanding of the physical world, which has been subject to dynamic paradigm shifts over time – so much so, in fact, that the unquestioned truth of one era becomes the laughable error of the next. Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld

elegantly summarize this argument in their book *The Evolution of Physics*: "Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world."[9]

Einstein and Infeld offer an analogy to elucidate this idea. They suggest that our attempt to understand reality is similar to that of a person trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. The individual may account for everything seen and heard, may even create a picture of the inner workings of the watch that fits perfectly with all that is observed; "but he has no way of opening the case. . . . [H]e may never be quite sure his picture is the only one which could explain his observations. He will never be able to compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility or the meaning of such a comparison" (33). This concept is at the heart of many of Stevens' poems, for, like the romantics before him, he is conscious of how much our response to the world actually constructs it.

"The Dove in the Belly" illustrates this perfectly. A frequently overlooked poem, it contains some of the most sensuous evocations of the beauty of nature in all of Stevens. "How is it," he asks, "that / The rivers shine and hold their mirrors up," or that "the wooden trees stand up / And live and heap their panniers of green . . . ?" "Why," he wants to know, "should / These mountains being high be, also, bright, / Fetched up with snow that never falls to earth?" (318). Reading lines such as these, we are reminded of Stevens' observation that "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (730), a clear indication, no doubt, of one of his own goals. But Stevens' poem is not as simple as it might appear. First, it uses interrogative sentences rather than declarative ones, thus questioning if not subverting all that is expressed. Second, it is framed by the recognition that "The whole of appearance is a toy" (318) and that any splendor or value in the outer world depends on a response from the inner world, from an imagination imbued with feeling – from "the dove in the belly." As Stevens says in one of his essays:

> It is easy to suppose that few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there – few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. (684)

How, then, do we redeem Stevens from charges of abstraction and solipsism? The answer resides in acknowledging what Stevens achieves with his thinking, his use of figurative language and sound, and his radical rhetorical

patterns. In effect, he creates new linguistic structures that attain integrity. Like Emerson before him, Stevens valorizes perception over conception, moments of genuineness and authenticity that, in a world of constant change, lie beyond, or, one might say, above, reason. In the process, what is evoked, tellingly, if only momentarily, is a credible belief in a fiction that discloses reality. Although it may be "False flick, false form," it is, nevertheless, "falseness close to kin" (333). Einstein and Infeld describe a similar process as the scientist's knowledge increases and his picture of reality encompasses a wider range of perceptions. Then, they state, the scientist may also come to "believe in the existence of the ideal limit of knowledge and that it is approached by the human mind. He may call this ideal limit the objective truth" (33). Stevens' "intimidating thesis" (681), as he emphasizes it, is that "the truth that we experience when we are in agreement with reality is the truth of fact" (680).

The essays in this collection, although stemming from different perspectives, elaborate on these and other aspects of Stevens' work. Beginning with a brief biography, they chart his poetic growth through four major decades and then isolate various influences, qualities, and themes central to his poetry. Some discuss Stevens' personal and intellectual development, noting the heritage of nineteenth-century concepts and values. Others present Stevens' engagement with the revolutionary ideas in art, science, and politics of the first half of the twentieth century. A number focus on unique characteristics of his style and voice or explain complexities in his aesthetic theory. Several unravel the knotty problem of belief in a secular age or offer corrective readings more in line with historical context than earlier interpretations. Although the book refracts Stevens into many parts, it serves as a prism to enable us to see what might otherwise be hidden. What emerges from these essays is a full-color portrait of one of the world's great poets.

NOTES

1. Yvor Winters called "Sunday Morning" "the greatest American poem of the twentieth century and . . . certainly one of the greatest contemplative poems in English" (*In Defense of Reason* [Denver: Swallow, 1947]), 433; more recently, Jay Keyser, in a broadcast on National Public Radio, declared "The Snow Man" to be "the best short poem in the English language bar none" ("All Things Considered," NPR [November 29, 2005]).
2. See Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered; An Oral Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), 47, 56.
3. "Wallace Stevens, Hartford Poet, Awarded $1000 Prize for Contributions to Poetry," Hartford *Courant* (March 28, 1950): 1.
4. See http://www.oprah.com/obc_classic/featbook/asof/booksbooks_main.jhtml and http://www.oprah.com/obc_classic/featbook/asof/books/books_tips_01.jhtml.

5. Quoted by Einar Perman, "News and Comments," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 20.2 (1996): 252.
6. Robert Frost, *Selected Letters of Robert Frost*, ed. Lawrance Thompson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 84.
7. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Essays: 1917–1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1932), 248.
8. Christian Wiman, "Position Paper: Wallace Stevens," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 28.2 (2004): 240.
9. Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics: The Growth of Ideas from Early Concepts to Relativity and Quanta* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), 33.

1

JOAN RICHARDSON

Wallace Stevens: a likeness

His soil is man's intelligence

The countryside around Reading, Pennsylvania, remains today a preserve of the pastoral. A visitor can walk within a half-hour from where Wallace Stevens was born, a handsome three-story brick row house still standing at 323 North Fifth Street, into a dun-colored landscape, patterned by well-tended farms set amid rolling hills and low gray mountains. Amish in their traditional dress, driving horse-drawn carriages, still pass more than occasionally on the narrow roads and lanes outside of the city. Stevens walked again and again into this landscape, from early childhood into young manhood. During summers when he was a boy, he – together with his four siblings and cousins – spent time in the nearby countryside around Ephrata, around Ivyland, and visited his grandparents' farm in Feasterville, where his father had been born. He fished for bass in the same creek, the Perkiomen, where his father had, and played in the same fields, searching for arrowheads and other traces of the native tribes who inhabited this part of western Pennsylvania well into the nineteenth century. "I look back to that farm and the people who lived in it the way American literature used to look back to English literature" (*L* 732), Stevens wrote in a letter to Thornton Wilder, another who celebrated the earthy, local habitations so quickly vanishing in twentieth-century America. Stevens' sense of this past remained alive, up-pouring images he would shape into memorializing lines: "The wood-doves are singing along the Perkiomen. / The bass lie deep, still afraid of the Indians" (310); "From a Schuylkill in mid-earth there came emerging / Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them / Shadows of friends, of those he knew" (307). The rivers and rock of this particular landscape became the ground of the poet's "fluent mundo" (351) in which he found "a cure beyond forgetfulness" (446).

Who is my father in this world, in this house, at the spirit's base?

Margaretha Catharine Zeller Stevens (known as Kate) gave birth to her second son, Wallace, on October 2, 1879, at home. Reading and the surrounding area were suffering drought and a yellow fever epidemic, but neither directly affected the household of Kate and her husband, Garrett Barcalow Stevens, though both had been understandably concerned. The couple, both now thirty-one, had married three years earlier; their first child, Garrett Barcalow, Jr., was born just over a year later, in December 1877. Kate would bear three more children who would grow into maturity in the house on North Fifth Street: John Bergen (b. 1880), Elizabeth (b. 1885), and Mary Katharine (b. 1889). Garrett, Sr., was a respected citizen, successfully practicing law and active in the local politics of the bustling, newly industrialized city. Kate, who before her marriage had been a schoolteacher in Reading, devoted herself to family and community, translating her experience and values into important practical lessons for her children in how to live, what to do. The couple shared the same good Puritan values of industry, thrift, and sobriety that characterized the lives of their forebears, the original Protestant settlers of the area around Reading. The strong religious attachments of these individuals continued to dominate the lives of their children and grandchildren. Garrett and Kate Stevens also shared an active appreciation of literature, presenting each other and their children with volumes of poetry, essays, and novels as gifts to fill times of leisure. As Stevens once recalled, "At home, our house was rather a curious place, with all of us in different parts of it, reading" (*SP* 4).

Stevens' mother, whose ancestry was French and German (the original "Selliers" had been changed to "Zeller"), chose as the first school for Stevens one that included both French and German in its curriculum. Stevens' observation in "Adagia" that "French and English constitute a single language" (914), then, is more than a historical reminder of one of the consequences of the Norman Conquest. The migration of families across the great ocean on their errand in search of religious freedom was one of the worlds held in the words of the languages they brought with them: "luminous / Sequences, thought of among spheres," as Stevens describes it in "The Bed of Old John Zeller," "as if one's grandfather lay / In one's heart and wished as he had always wished" (287).

Stevens' ambiguous relationship with religion also had family roots. Stevens' father was to loosen his ties to religion as he left the farm in Feasterville and educated himself first to become a schoolteacher and later a lawyer in Reading; his mother remained an active member of Reading's First Presbyterian Church throughout her life. She included daily religious

practice in the habits of her children. She sent them to parochial elementary schools and to Sunday-school classes; sang hymns with the family as she accompanied herself on the piano on Sunday evenings; and read Bible stories to them at bedtime. Stevens in adolescence participated in the sacred service as an altar boy and, moving toward manhood, sang hymns himself, "soprano and, later, alto" (*L* 126), as he noted, for two years in the choir of Reading's Christ Cathedral. These experiences would remain at the core of his being. Later in life, Stevens used for his bookplates the keystone inscription of the Trinity Tulpehocken Church (near Myerstown, Pennsylvania) that his ancestor, George Zeller, had joined in dedicating: "WER GOTT BERTRAUT HAT WOL ERBAUT [Who trusts in God has built well]. G. Z. 1772." Stevens noted to the printer who was to copy the inscription, "On my mother's side I am Pennsylvania Dutch and this stone was given to the church by a member of her family" (*L* 541). Yet, writing a few years later to Bernard Heringman, who had asked for an explanation of his religion while writing a dissertation on Stevens, the poet replied, "I dismiss your question by saying that I am a dried-up Presbyterian, and let it go at that because my activities are not religious" (*L* 792). The seeming disjunction between his statement of filial identification with his mother's religious background to be emblematized on his bookplates and the clipped description of his withered religious attachment encapsulates the complicated harmony of what Stevens in the same letter to Heringman referred to as his "reality-imagination complex" (*L* 792). This complex was rooted in "the up and down between two elements" (28) he had already begun to perceive while still a young man, moving, as he recorded in his journal, between the imagination, which he felt he had gotten from his mother, and reason, his "practical side," from his father (*SP* 8).

By the time he left for Harvard in the fall of 1897, the strands of what he had absorbed from his mother and father combined with what he had learned on his own to shape his intention "to be a writer" (*L* 13). In spite of a period of falling back because of "too many nights out" (*SP* 10) and another resulting from illness, he had successfully completed the rigorous classical curriculum (including both Latin and Greek) at Reading Boys' High School, worked on the editorial staff of the school's first newspaper, and won prizes for his oratorical skills. Garrett Stevens, himself a prime example of the American self-made man, had urged each of his sons to do well, "just a little slicker" than the "other fellow" (*L* 24), even when the "other fellow" was a brother. The competition Garrett, Jr., Wallace, and John exercised among one another ensured their graduating at the top of their classes and, as a result, Stevens was accepted by Harvard College. Although formally belonging to the class of 1901, he enrolled in a special,