

Wallace Stevens: Hypotheses and Contradictions

The following extract is taken from the Warton Lecture in English Poetry, delivered by **Professor Helen Vendler** of Harvard University, on 17 May 2000.

Mrs Frida Mond requested that an annual lecture be given as a tribute to Thomas Warton, 'the first historian of English poetry, whose work not only led the way to the scientific study of English Literature, but also stimulated creative genius, and played no small part in the Romantic Revival'. The series was inaugurated in 1910.

Wallace Stevens' poems were written during the fifty years between his matriculation at Harvard and his death at seventy-five. His long life was relatively without incident: he was born, in Pennsylvania, of Pennsylvania Dutch – that is to say German – extraction in 1879; his father, Garrett Stevens, was a lawyer who wanted his sons to be lawyers and all three of them eventually obeyed him. Garrett Stevens was willing to send his brilliant son Wallace to Harvard, but would support him there for only three years, since one could enter law school after three years at the university. On his departure without a degree from Harvard, Stevens, disregarding his father's wishes, did not immediately enter law school, but became a newspaper reporter in New York. Discouraged by both the work and the salary, Stevens capitulated and went to New York University Law School, after which he had various disappointing short-term positions as a lawyer in New York. In 1916 he found a job as a surety lawyer with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Insurance Company of Connecticut, where he remained until he died in 1955.

In the first years of Stevens' employment at the Hartford his work was arduous, requiring frequent train travel across the United States to investigate insurance claims, and in those years Stevens wrote little poetry. Eventually, as he rose in the company, his life became less harried, and when he was 44, Knopf published his first book, *Harmonium*. Other volumes followed steadily, and in 1954, some months before Stevens' death from cancer, his *Collected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Since his death, his fame has grown steadily, but he remains, in the eyes of us all, a difficult poet, the one who wrote, in a collection of pensées to which he gave the Erasmusian title *Adagia*, that a poem 'must resist the intelligence almost successfully.'

At Harvard, Stevens had abandoned the Protestantism of his parents for the skeptical Lucretian naturalism of his acquaintance George Santayana. This philosophic materialism was buttressed by Stevens' intimate knowledge of the natural world: he was a great walker, often covering thirty miles in a single day in his youth. Spring warmed him into life; winter chilled him into despair. He became the most exquisite poet of seasonal change since Keats, by whom he was permanently influenced. Many of Stevens' early poems became intelligible to readers through their relation to Romantic verse: 'Sunday Morning', for instance, ends in homage to Keats's 'To Autumn'. Instead of Keats's agricultural and domestic landscape, populated by lambs, robins and swallows, Stevens' American scene offers mountains and an uncultivated wilderness, populated by deer, quail and pigeons. Keats's goddess of the season has vanished, and human beings exist in isolation:



Wallace Stevens as a student at Harvard, about 1900. This photograph is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

*Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink
Downward to darkness, on extended wings.*

[70]

As a young reader, I could move easily into such a poem; it was only a step from Keats to the Keatsian elements in Stevens. I had far more trouble in understanding why Stevens would write certain other poems, among them the one that opened *Harmonium* (and which is still the first piece one sees in the *Collected Poems*). I realised that this strategically placed poem, 'Earthy Anecdote', must be some sort of manifesto, but of what was it the proclamation? Like most conceptual art, this 1918 poem offers no elaboration of its stubbornly repeated plot – that of a daily contest between deer (fiercely charging straight ahead) and a mountain lion (named by its folk-appellation, 'firecat') that obtrudes itself into the path of the bucks:

'Earthy Anecdote'

*Every time the bucks went clattering
Over Oklahoma
A firecat bristled in the way.*

*Wherever they went,
They went clattering,
Until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the right,
Because of the firecat.*

*Or until they swerved
In a swift, circular line
To the left,
Because of the firecat.*

*The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.
Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.*

[3]

The firecat's only purpose in his waking hours is to make the bucks swerve. The game goes on all day, conceived and prolonged by the bright eyes of the firecat, coming to an end only when he sleeps. Had the firecat not 'bristled in the way' the bucks would have unswervingly clattered over the plain of Oklahoma in an unimpeded straight line. At least one way of reading this little parable is to see it as an enacting of the mind's response when it encounters new hypotheses and contradictions of these hypotheses. Once our faculties are set on an inertial straight path, they will not deviate unless blocked: and one can see the bucks as a form of uncreative life forced into creativity by the bright-eyed obstacle of intelligence. In Stevens, the obstacle that forces the swerve is dialectically self-created: *ifs* and *ors* and *buts*, with their bright-eyed queries, force the mind into alternative paths. I believe that this apparently trivial little poem revealed to Stevens, as he wrote it, how much his art depended on obstructions and the consequent swerves they provoked, and that he therefore gave it pride of place both in his first volume and his final collection of his poems.

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