

Epiphanies

Among the Poems of Wallace Stevens.

A lecture delivered in St. Chad's Chapel, Durham University 24/2/
(For reasons of copyright I have omitted the texts of most of the quoted poems. References to their sources can be found in the notes at the end.)

As everyone here no doubt knows, the word epiphany means generally a manifestation or showing forth of a supernatural or divine reality. Epiphany with an upper case E refers specifically to the Christian Festival held January 6th commemorating in the Western Church the manifestation of Christ to the Magi. Used metaphorically, and especially in connection with the poems I want to read with you this evening, the word with a small e can be stretched to express that feeling of personal exaltation that is sometimes evoked by a certain kind of poem. There are, of course, many kinds of poem, and who would want to limit their scope or variety? But for some years now I have kept a record, a sort of diary in my mind, of poems I think of as epiphanies, poems that have struck me with the force of revelations. I suppose these poems must be termed influential, since I probably would not have written poems myself without their example, but their influence has not been obvious to me; that is to say, I don't believe I've been tempted to imitate them – or at least not for a long time. Instead, they have given me patterns of sounds and rhythms in words that have somehow got into my ears like echoes. Naturally, my tastes have changed over the years. On the whole, though, I have returned again and again to the poets I might call seed poets– from John Donne, George Herbert and the seventeenth-century divines through to Blake and Yeats and on to the Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop whose poetry I have trumpeted in this chapel in

previous years. What I'd like to do this evening in the fifty or so minutes at my disposal is to read with you several poems by a major twentieth-century American, Wallace Stevens. All the poems you'll find on your hand out sheets are among those I revere as epiphanies. This is why none of them are what unquestioning admirers of Stevens might consider typical. Let me say now that I am not an admirer of all or even most of his poems. A few famous ones, such as 'The Comedian as the Letter C' and 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', prized and praised for their ornate, aesthetically fanciful language, in parts amuse me but eventually bore me; while his long, philosophical poems on the nature of reality and imagination (all essentially about how in poetry imagination recreates reality) once they have been taken to pieces and put together again as rational arguments, annoy me – not least because Stevens argues at the same time that rationality has no place in poetry. But for all his high-spirited verbosity, self-contradiction and too facile generalisations, Stevens was, I believe, a great poet. I also want to suggest that Stevens at his most serious and inspired, can be said to honour, while suitably modifying, T.S. Eliot's historically based Tradition of poetry in the English language. This is the kind of poetry I found myself describing (or defending) last year in an article for a reference book of contemporary poets. Here is the relevant passage.

A poem succeeds when form and subject matter perfectly coalesce, when form is not sacrificed to meaning or meaning squeezed uncomfortably into pre-set forms. Every poem that lasts is more than its subject; each is a work of art in which the elements of life and language, different though they are, have undergone, like a chemical reaction, a transformation in the poet's mind into something "rich and strange." ¹

We are not talking here of what poems *say* but of what poems *are*, of what I take Stevens to have meant by a passage in his essay, 'The Noble

Rider and the Sound of Words' which opens the discursive prose of his book *The Necessary Angel* (1942):

Above everything else, poetry is words; and words, above everything else, are in poetry sounds... A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words.²

Also relevant to his theory of the complementary roles reality and imagination play in poetry (reality is bearable only as the poet's imagination transmutes it into art) he launches towards the end of the same essay into a defence – unfashionable in his day as in ours – of the word nobility:

The imagination gives to everything it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility...I mean the nobility which is our spiritual height and depth...For the sensitive poet... nothing is more difficult than affirmations of nobility and yet there is nothing that he requires of himself more persistently, since in them... are to be found those sanctions that are the reasons for his being and for that occasional ecstasy, or ecstatic freedom of the mind, which is his special privilege.³

Since there is probably no word more unacceptable to today's popular poets than the word 'nobility' (unless it is 'elitist') I think we must try to forget that Stevens has been pigeonholed as a 'modernist' and consider that he was an American poet whose temperament, like Walt Whitman's and Emerson's, was in everything but the doctrines of religion, religious. In the absence of belief, Stevens' tireless explorations of western philosophy, convinced him that civilization in the twentieth century could no longer seriously credit the existence of God. This is how Stevens explained and justified poetry to his friend, Henry Church, who in 1940 tried and failed to set up a Chair of Poetry for him at Princeton.

The major poetic idea in the world is and always has been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary...The *knowledge* of poetry is a part of philosophy,

and a part of science; [but] the *import* of poetry is the import of the spirit. The figures of the essential poets should be spiritual figures. [my italics]⁴

So Stevens, in his passion to rethink the theory of poetry, came all out for spirituality in his essential poets (and that paragraph is only one instance out of many similar declarations). In and throughout all his writing he summoned words – the more extravagant and imaginative, the better – to replace the idea of God with the idea of a supreme fiction, a verbal creation of the imagination powerful enough to have the effect of a spiritual revelation or epiphany. Such an epiphany, for Stevens, was a revelation of nobility, such as would distinguish a god if gods were any longer possible.

I should add that it's easy to fault Stevens' generalisations here as elsewhere. If indeed the idea of God dominated the poetry of the past, surely the poetry of nature and of secular love rivalled it. Neither does it seem to me evident that the modern imagination today is moving away from God; on the contrary, religion, especially fundamentalist religion, has become a source of such bitter and murderous sectarian violence in the Middle East as has not been seen in the West since the 15th, 16th, 17th centuries. On a brighter note, three recent novels by Marilynne Robinson set in Gilead, a small town Iowa, at a time when Stevens was at his acme as a poet, serve as convincing evidence that, at least in America, the Bible is as central to as many people's lives and beliefs as it ever was. But never mind what Stevens claimed in his sometimes fascinating, sometimes infuriating polemics; let's look at two or three of his poems after a word or two about Stevens himself.

Wallace Stevens was born into a prosperous lawyer's family in Reading, Pennsylvania, as long ago as 1879. Educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he matured to live through some of the twentieth-century's most discomfiting ills and anxieties: the Depression, the great

drought in the American west, mass unemployment and starvation, the ascension to power of Hitler and Stalin, the Holocaust, the horrors of World War II into which the United States was catapulted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, followed by that giant step forward in mankind's capacity to kill brought about by the atomic bomb. It is easy to guess, even after a few glances at Stevens' poetry, that the violent disequilibrium of his time encouraged his essentially romantic, joy-seeking, truth-loving passion for salvation through art and poetry to disengage from the murderous turmoil of ideological politics and, in his "rage for order", concern himself with ideas about how imagination might convert the uncontrollable realities of life into art. Contemporary with Pound, Eliot and the major modernists, he avoided a literary milieu both in academia and in New York and led a double life as a successful businessman in Hartford, Connecticut. By day he went to work in a suit and tie as an executive of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. By night he retired to his study to indulge his ideas and write his poetry. Apart from yearly vacations in Florida, he travelled only in his mind. Though he read voluminously in French, German and the classics, he never ventured abroad. He never even strayed from the East Coast of the United States. When he died aged seventy-five in 1955, he had won a Pulitzer Prize and two National Book Awards and was acknowledged as a major influence in American letters. Today our populist and personality oriented literary world has turned the elitist ideas of the modernists out of doors. Though Stevens is still a name, his poetry is not generally beloved, which is why I want to look at these particular poems this evening.

I have said that, apart from his philosophical objections to believing in God, Stevens was a religious poet in the Anglo-American tradition. By this I mean that his relationship with the idea he called a supreme fiction was not

exclusively abstract or even philosophical. It could be intimate in much the same way George Herbert's was intimate with his "dear angry Lord."

Compare the tone and language of Stevens' introduction to 'Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction' with Herbert's famous and beloved dialogue, 'Love'. Here is Stevens:

And for what except for you, so I feel love?
 Do I press the extremist book of the wisest man
 Close to me, hidden in me, day and night?
 In the uncertain light of single certain truth
 Equal in living changingness to the light
 In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
 For a moment in the central of our being,
 The vivid transporence that you bring is peace.⁵

And here, Herbert:

Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

'A guest' I answered, 'worthy to be here.'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
 'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.'
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

'Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
 'And know you not,' says Love, 'who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'
 'You must sit down' says love, 'and taste my meat.'
 So I did sit and eat.⁶

Separated by four hundred years and speaking out from different countries, historical periods and beliefs, the writers of these poems shared a language, a tone of voice – modest, even humble – yet secure in the common dignity (nobility) of their personalities. Stevens himself proffered in *The Necessary Angel* a possible definition of poetry: "Poetry is a process of the personality of the poet." By which he did not mean "that it involves the poet as subject" but that the writing of poetry "is the element, the force, that keeps poetry a living thing, the modernizing and ever-modern influence."⁷ The differences between these two poems seem to me chiefly differences of 1) form: Herbert is a master of rhymed pentameter in a regulated pattern whereas Stevens writes here in traditional blank verse; and 2) reliance upon truths of faith that in Herbert's case are never in doubt, whereas Stevens allows contradictions to give his ambiguous faith the breath of life he called reality. "In the *uncertain* light of single *certain* truth / Equal in living *changingness* to the light" recalls the paintings by Cezanne and Paul Klee Stevens so admired. Herbert, of course, would never have given voice to his doubts, although it could be that he sometimes wrote poems to conquer them.

Those eight lines introducing 'Notes for a Supreme Fiction' should look familiar. Stevens wanted to prepare his reader for embarkation on a long philosophical poem, and these lines are an invocation to his muse. Note that his iambic pentameter is rather stricter than Milton's opening lines of *Paradise Lost*, which so arrestingly wrench that great poem open. They are even more orderly than the first line of Herbert's 'Love'. Compare the smooth flow of "And for what except for you do I feel love?" with the violent eruption of "Of **man's first** disobedience and the **fruit**/ Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste/ brought death into our world..." and so forth, and then with the relaxed pattern of stresses stretched over ten

syllables in "Love bade me welcome:(breath) yet my soul drew back..."

Iambic pentameter is a wonderfully flexible meter, as Shakespeare and Milton discovered.

Stevens, a master of rhythms, chose to surprise us in those opening iambs by directly addressing a 'what' and not a 'whom'. A muse? An angel? Both for Stevens stood for the imaginative power of the human mind, source of that supreme fiction, which Stevens believed to be as close as we ever get to any transcendent truth. Whatever 'what' is in this poem, it is above all things desirable and necessary, a condition of the human spirit that admits of a perfect receptivity known to saints, mystics and poets (as indeed to George Herbert) as the happiest condition of consciousness – which is why Stevens' iambic rhythm remains unruffled. The 'what' in the first line later becomes a 'you' and finally a 'we' as perfect love between the poet and the spirit of poetry is consummated in perfect peace. I am reminded of Seamus Heaney's 'The Harvest Bow' and the quotation at the end, "*The end of art is peace.*"⁷

The main body of the poem 'Notes for a Supreme Fiction' is too long to treat with less than a week or two in hand. Suffice it to say that it undertakes to strip both religion and art down to a first element – "the idea of the sun", which for Stevens was the origin of nature, mankind and the idea of God, which now must serve as the original source of a nameless 'nobility' of mind. "The death of one god is the death of all... But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named. / There was a project for the sun and is...The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be/ In the difficulty of what it is to be."⁸

Well, I confess I'm rather fond of all this finding words to say there are no words for God. I can't believe that Stevens wasn't enjoying himself, playing with ideas. It will profit us more to look at 'Sunday Morning', one of

his first published poems dating from the time of World War I, when Stevens was still under the spell of the Romantics. Compare the sounds and rhythms of this poem (we don't have time to consider more than the first and last stanzas) with the language of Wordsworth's Immortality Ode to see how Stevens argues just the opposite case – i.e. that there is no such thing as personal immortality; we must content ourselves with the glories of the earth. (Here I read aloud the first and final stanzas of 'Sunday Morning'.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
 The holy hush of ancient sacrifice...

We live in an old chaos of the sun,
 Or old dependency of day and night...
 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.⁹

'Sunday Morning' seems to me now, as it did when I met it as a student, one of the most beautiful-sounding, rich, musical and, in Steven's word, "noble" expressions of spiritual *unfaith* in the canon. It sits there calmly near the centre of American literature, together with passages from Thoreau's *Walden* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, challenging the nervous lines of Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality'. To me, 'Sunday Morning' is more convincing. For a comparable epiphany in Wordsworth's canon, turn to his sonnet 'Upon Westminster Bridge' in which the revelation is achieved without strain.

As it happened, 'Sunday Morning', beautiful as it is, was a one-off. It was too lush, too romantic both in subject and style, for Stevens to want to repeat the performance. He needed a contemporary language to explore contemporary ideas and evolve a style that answered the demands of the new wave in the arts that followed the First World War. The poems for which he is today either adored or ignored 'make it new' with a vengeance, mixing ebullient philosophy with spectacular word play – their titles often as intriguing as the poems they head: 'The Snow Man', 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle', 'Anecdote of the Jar', 'Peter Quince at the Clavier', 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', 'Esthetique du Mal'. No one could claim that any of these were written in the tradition of Herbert or Wordsworth or even Yeats. Nevertheless, I contend that when Wallace Stevens forgot to play with words as an artist plays with paints and colours, when he stopped theorizing in the abstract and listened to the poets singing in his ears, he returned to the lyric harmony that had seduced him into poetry in the first place. He called first published book *Harmonium*. Towards the end of his life, he proposed calling his *Collected Poems*, *The Whole of Harmonium*.

This is why I want, as a gesture towards Stevens as the figure of a "noble" American poet, to turn to a poem of his that I think bears more of his true *inscape* (Father Hopkins' word) than 'Sunday Morning'. I first warmed to this poem when I heard Adrienne Rich read it on the radio about forty years ago. I knew Adrienne Rich slightly at Harvard in the early nineteen-seventies. One evening I turned on the radio by chance and heard her introduce a poem she said she would never tire of; I listened, spellbound, to 'The House was Quiet and the World was Calm'.

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book...¹⁰

(Here I read aloud the entire poem.)

What can we say about such a poem to describe or explain its distinction? Several things. To begin with, we notice that it avoids the embarrassment of a first person narrator; neither author nor persona takes an active part in it. This, I should add, is Stevens' normal practice; so rarely does he take part personally in his own poems that when he does - as in the Introduction to 'Notes for a Supreme Fiction' - we are taken aback. Note that in 'Sunday Morning' the central persona is a woman - a persona of Stevens himself, or perhaps of a sensitive, intelligent woman Stevens knew. It hardly matters. 'The House was Quiet...' in contrast, opens with a set of verbs in the passive mood. The reader at the centre is acted upon: the house *was* quiet, the world *was* calm, the words *were* spoken. Not until the sixth line, after the word 'Except', does the reader act (still in the past tense) by leaning above the page, willing him self to become "the scholar to whom the book is true." The word "true" alerts us to an impending mystery brought about by the calm of the summer night, which allows for an encounter with perfection: "it is like a perfection of thought." We then return to the image of the house, "quiet because it had to be. / The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind," before the line, "The access of perfection to the page", brings the book back into the picture. And now the reader, the book, the house and the calm world, like the many-way fusion of dots in a pointillist painting, seem to be enveloped by a unity of being -Stevens' truth. We have already encountered

truth in those lines prefacing 'Notes for a Supreme Fiction': "In the uncertain light of single certain truth/ Equal in living changingness to the light."

To my mind, both poems represent in the simplest language moments of epiphany far more mysterious than any feelings we normally put into words. Yet the poem makes the experience feel as familiar as miraculous: "The truth in a calm world/ in which there is no other meaning, itself/ is calm, itself is summer and night, itself/ is the reader leaning late and reading there." The revelation at the end, you'll notice, is still received in the passive mood, though now in the present tense, a tense that also implies limitless duration.

To me, as to Adrienne Rich, 'The House was Quiet and the World was Calm' is Wallace Stevens at his most moving. It illustrates, too, his theory of reality and imagination (the dominant idea behind all his poetry) better, I think, than the philosophising stanzas of long poems such as 'Notes for a Supreme Fiction' and 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' and more convincingly than poems like 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', which apes the techniques of Picasso, Klee and other painters Stevens admired.

A few more examples will help fill out this personal and incomplete overview of Stevens' epiphanies. Among the most mysterious and beautiful poems in *The Rock*, Stevens' last, unfinished book, is 'The World as Meditation', which again summons the spirit of poetry; here is Penelope meditating on the return of Ulysses. Or is it spring meditating on the return of the sun?

(Here I read aloud the whole of *The World as Meditation*)¹¹

Here, once again, a woman – let's call her the poet's soul – apprehends the coming of the spirit of poetry, the necessary angel, in the heroic rising of the

sun. Some absolute yet intimate relationship between artist and life itself fuels the continual meditation that underlies his or her unceasing endeavour to create. The poem celebrates the marriage of the artist with the earth and its seasons as they endlessly revolve in the changing yet unchanging light of the sun. I suspect for Stevens, as for George Enesco, meditation was a form of continual secular prayer.

If we haven't run out of time, let me draw your attention to an early poem and then to two late ones in which Stevens comments on his life's work. Each of his books can be understood as movements in a single composition, a symphony of sorts in which themes continually recur. One recurring theme is that nothing material exists for us humans but the world we live in, our ordinary idea of reality – the ever-changing reality, in short, of conditions we have to accept. 'Death of a Soldier' is an example of such acceptance. It's an early poem, a kind of Stoic epitaph written during the First World War.

(Here I read aloud 'The Death of a Soldier'.)¹²

Completing and continually revising Stevens' idea of reality, is his idea of the imagination. As we might expect, for him, imagination meant the artist's imagination, particularly the poet's. The imagination's shaping of reality is indeed Stevens' principal theme, the harmonic continuum that underlies all his work. The artist's imagination, then, opposes and "presses against" reality to create in the mind of the poet-seer, or the religious mystic, visions of beautiful and unattainable perfection. This vision of perfection, or truth, is all Stevens desired of heaven. You can see how this idea relates to all the poems we have read this evening, as it does to this next one called 'Of Mere Being', which depicts a state of transcendence or "vivid transparence" that

eludes reality's seductive worldly offerings – power, say, or fame – by uniting the artist with the "central of his being"; a state of simplicity Stevens refers to in this poem, as "mere being".

(Here I read aloud 'Of Mere Being.)¹³

Of course, there is far more to say about the poems of Wallace Stevens than I have been able to touch on this evening. But I hope you will have caught a glimpse of the profound poet behind the facade of ornamental fancy work in which he hid himself much of the time. Here is his own assessment of his work as a brief participator in the life of the planet.

(Here I read aloud 'The Planet on the Table')¹⁴

Notes

1. CENCAGE LEARNING: Gale Project, *Contemporary Authors*, Vol.363, ed. Mike Tyrkus (Farmington Hills, Michigan, 2015) forthcoming.
2. Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, 1951) pb, 32.
3. Ibid. 33–34.
4. Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980) xv.
5. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959) 380.
6. George Herbert, 'Love' in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1950*, ed. Helen Gardner (London: Oxford University Press, 1972) 262.
7. Seamus Heaney, *Fieldwork* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979) 58.
8. Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, op.cit. 380.
9. Ibid. 66-70.

10. Ibid. 358

11. Ibid. 520.

12. Ibid. 97.

13. Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, op.cit. 117.

14. Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, op.cit. 532.