



THE AUTHOR: Wallace Stevens, a tall, heavy-set, crew-cut New Englander of seventy-five, who has packed enough into his life for two Wallace Stevenses, has been plagued for the last forty years or so with variations on the question: "How can a man be an insurance executive and a first-rate poet at the same time?" His replies have been consistently admirable. "I've always skipped answering that," he told a *New York Times* interviewer the other day. "I prefer to think I'm just a man, not a poet part time, businessman the rest." Back in March 1950, when he won the Bollingen Prize in Poetry awarded by Yale, he told a *Herald Tribune* reporter: "It gives a man character as a poet to have daily contact with a job. If I lived an academic life in a college I don't believe I'd have half the reason for writing. This has been a life of my own choice." Stevens, who was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, broke into insurance and poetry around World War I. He had turned in a handful of poetry to the *Harvard Advocate* while he was still an undergraduate, but he didn't catch on until Harriet Monroe published four of his poems in the 1914 wartime number of *Poetry*. He was practising law at that time in New York City. A couple of years later he joined the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and demonstrated that a good poet could make a good insurance man. By 1934 he was vice-president of the firm, a job he still occupies. He has written more insurance than poetry over the years, but he has nevertheless succeeded in producing more than half a dozen books. His "The Auroras of Autumn" won the National Book Award in Poetry in 1951. Stevens says he has written his best poems on his feet, strolling about, jotting down his ideas on scraps of paper stored in his pockets. His secretary then runs them through her typewriter, storing them away against the day her boss feels like running them through his typewriter. "Poetry," he says, "is my way of making the world palatable. It's the way of making one's experience, almost wholly inexplicable, acceptable." —BERNARD KALB.

VERSE

Actuary Among the Spondees

"The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens" (Alfred A. Knopf. 534 pp. \$7.50), brings between the covers of one volume most of the work of a distinguished American poet who is celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday.

By Gerard Previn Meyer

IN ONE of his lesser-quoted early poems, "Valley Candle," Wallace Stevens wrote almost wistfully, in what must certainly have been a rare mood,

My candle burned alone in an
immense valley.

Beams of the huge night con-
verged upon it . . .

Perhaps, in the isolation of the author of a first book sure to be neglected (and "Harmonium" was neglected; its first edition remaindered, its second delayed for eight years), Stevens was justified then in his trope. But today—with the issuance of a truly monumental "Collected Poems" limited not by lack of reader interest but by publisher's fiat to "twenty-five hundred numbered copies"—a different image seems requisite. Something, perhaps, like this:

The sound of words: the sound
of Wallace Stevens
taking soundings: the sound of
words that sire
the things they name, and in that
sound the voice
of the imagination: as if, upon a
cliff
in the prime wilderness, a figure
stood

—And, let us say, this chief of
the primordial
threw arrowed vocables at the
tumbled trees
of the valley wood, till all the
lurking silences
arrowed back, yes, arrowed out
their echoes

—This sachem of the imagina-
tion, this Stevens . . .

—but let us get back to prose and, especially on this occasion, leave poetry to one of the few, and true masters of the age!

The key to Wallace Stevens—what makes him, and his work, different—may be found in a now-famous letter he wrote to his friend Dr. Williams

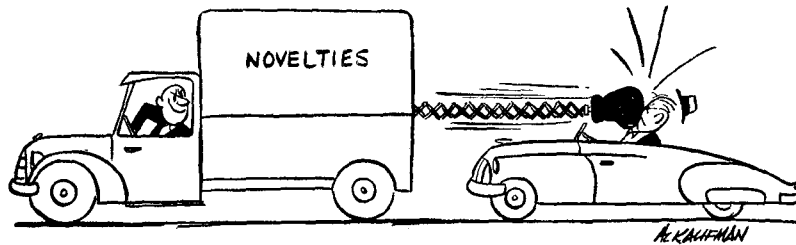
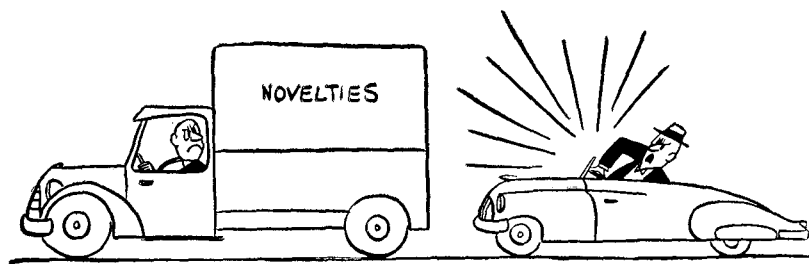
way back in 1917. (One may be forgiven for going back into the past on this reminiscent occasion.) Stevens set down in black and white what was to be his special line:

My idea is that in order to carry a thing to the extreme necessity to convey it one has to stick to it; . . . Given a fixed point of view, realistic, imagistic or what you will, everything adjusts itself to that point of view; and the process of adjustment is a world in flux, as it should be for a poet. But to fidget with points of view, realistic, imagistic, or ginnings and incessant new beginnings lead to sterility.

The world in flux, but the poet with "a fixed point of view" . . . is it the Pennsylvania Dutchman in him? At any rate, it is one of his singular triumphs that he has been able consistently from the very first to produce "infinite incantations" on very nearly a single theme. It places him in the select company of single-minded folk like Robert Frost (who, despite the many differences, shares this with Stevens: both are New Englanders by adoption)—Frost, with his "They would not find me changed from him they knew—/Only more sure of all I thought was true."

What Stevens knows today is what he knew yesterday: he has not added to his knowledge, which he had to start with; but he has added to his, and our, ways of knowledge ("poetry is a way of knowing") by developing in himself (and yet he had so much of this, too, right from the start!) the kind of virtuoso skill that the musician develops through years of playing variations—and developing in some of us at least, some degree of the virtuoso skill one must acquire in order to respond adequately to the music. Indeed, since he has had few expounders till recently (praise be!), and few articulate advocates, it would seem clear that the lion's share of the credit for developing his audience must go to Stevens himself—and not because he has beaten any





drums for himself, either, because he is (though an insurance man in *public* life) a shy, almost retiring personality. No; it is the cumulative impact of the successive volumes of poetry that now loom so large in this happily large collection: the poems in these books have done it themselves—in his own phrase, “by mere example opulently clear.”

In that fine essay with the wonderful title (most of Stevens's titles are wonderful), “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” the poet-essayist wrote of what he conceived the poet's function to be, the poet's duty or service to his readers (for though coteries have done somewhat to isolate him for their own, it is clear Stevens has not been writing all these years for the coteries). It “is to make his imagination theirs and . . . he fulfils himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others.”

WELL, the publication of these “Collected Poems” on or about his seventy-fifth birthday is surely a convincing sign that this poet, unlike some famous neglected artists and poets of the past, has lived to see “his imagination become the light in the minds of others.” Here today, and certainly not gone tomorrow, are nearly all the poems we have come to know in the separate volumes. Omitted only are less than a handful of short poems (one from the first edition of “*Harmonium*,” two from “*Parts of a World*”) and, perhaps not too surprisingly considering Stevens's aversion to the topical, the socio-political “*Owl's Clover*”—which last, however, at least one of his critics has called “his finest long poem and undoubtedly one of the best long poems in English published during

the first half of the twentieth century”! Characteristically, there is no explanation for the omissions; Stevens is one of the few major poets who has never bothered to discuss his own poems at any length. At occasional public readings, for example, he simply reads from his poetry and lets it go at that—which, of course, is as it should be. After all, poetry “*as is poetry*” not only means what it says: it means what it *is*, it exists only by and through the words it uses; to use other words about it would be to get away from it.

The “fixed point of view” . . . There sits Stevens, solid, seemingly immovable, before the moment should come to start his reading—like Shakespeare (“*Others abide our question. Thou art free./We ask and ask—Thou smilest and art still . . .*”), or like the jar in his own “*Anecdote of the Jar*,” the jar he “placed . . . in Tennessee”:

And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer
wild.

The jar was round upon the
ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere . . .

I am not suggesting a physical resemblance, between Mr. Stevens and the jar, although there is that too, perhaps! But the jar is certainly a symbol of a fixed point of view from which “*Ideas of Order*” (to borrow a Stevens title) radiate, to assemble disorderly “*Parts of a World*” (another title) into a new and eminently more satisfactory pattern than “the world in flux.”

This, of course, is Wallace Stevens's highest claim to our gratitude: that he renews in us over and over again, in seemingly endless and effortless variety, the conviction that, in spite of everything, there are “sanctions” for our existence. And, both explicitly and by rich exemplification, that poetry—this poetry especially—is one of the chief sanctions. This is so because the source of poetry, the imagination, has the power not to soar beyond the sight of actuality, but so to interact with actuality (which, very possibly, has no real existence until the interaction takes place—“*My hands, such sharp imagined things*”) so to interact, that a unique transformation takes place . . .

The way the earliest single light
in the evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of
nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals
its unexpected magnitudes.

IT IS the remarkable virtue of these poems that they reveal, at almost any page suddenly opened to, some apposite—and, at the same time, luminous—expression of their central theme.

The lines just quoted occur in the last section of the “*Collected Poems*”: this is a whole new group of poems, twenty-five in number, under the collective title of “*The Rock*” (another fixed point?). These in themselves would alone have justified a new publication; in the context, they represent something like a Special Dividend, as the book clubs would put it, for those readers who are certain to buy this volume, though it costs nearly as much as a ticket to the theatre, because they wish to see Stevens steadily and to see him whole: and, by looking through the special Stevens monocle, to see the world, however fragmented it “really” is, as whole too.

It is curious, by the way—and oddly fitting, considering the quotation with which this review began—that one of the poems in this last and latest section brings back the image of the candle. And in view of the span of years encompassed—who would be so brash as to say that Stevens at seventy-five shows any lessening of powers, or, in fact, any great degree of either that abstraction or that garrulity with which he has latterly been charged?

There was no fury in transcend-
ent forms.
But his actual candle blazed with
artifice . . .

The candle, you see, burns brighter
than ever.