

The Urbanity of Stevens



—Sylvia Salmi.

Wallace Stevens—"singer of suburban life."

By ELIZABETH GREEN

ONE of the fascinating questions about the life and work of Wallace Stevens concerns the connection between his successful business career, as vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, and his poems. At first glance it seems incredible that these particular poems, so continuously concerned with the imagination, so full of references to painting and sculpture and music, to faraway places and figures of fantasy, should have been written by a man who spent his days dealing with the intricacies of insurance law. But a closer reading of his work suggests that there is no essential paradox after all. Stevens is a man completely at home in his environment; he lives in modern city society without any impulse to overturn or to escape. He is, indeed, the singer of suburban life.

Partly because some of his well-known early poems picture the tropical luxuriance of Cuba or Florida or Mexico, relatively little attention has been paid to the fact that he habitually refers to the New England landscape in writing about the nature of reality. Still less noticed is the fact that he describes the kind of natural world enjoyed by the man who lives in a town or suburb—who has a lawn on which crickets sing and rabbits sit at dusk, a hedge of lilac and dogwood, a park nearby where he can watch the swans on the lake, and a summer vacation when he can go abroad or get to

the New Hampshire hills or the coast of Maine.

The man of imagination, the one who both sees and perceives, is frequently, in Stevens's poetry, sitting "here in his house and in his room, in his chair," and looking out a window.

It is someone walking rapidly in the street.

The reader by the window has finished his book.

And tells the hour by the lateness of the sounds.

The poet may be listening to the steps of the milkman or to the rain, as he sits beside

The window, close to the ramshackle spout in which
The rain falls with a ramshackle sound.

Lakes, which are "more reasonable than oceans," and parks figure largely in Stevens's landscapes. That magnificent group of marble horses which is the central symbol of "Owl's Clover" shows one kind of insight a city dweller can get by frequenting a park. Or he may catch a glimpse of truth on a family stroll.

He walked with his year-old boy on his shoulder.

The sun shone and the dog barked and the baby slept.

The abstract was suddenly there and gone again.

The Negroes were playing football in the park.

Might it have been the chance to alternate moderate exercise and rest, so suitable for a man at a desk all day, that made the lake a favorite symbol for Stevens? As he suggests in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," perhaps

The truth depends on a walk around a lake,

A composing as the body tires, a stop
To see hepatica. . . .

Stevens's poetry is full of references to birds. Even casual readers of modern verse are apt to remember the splendid image which concludes "Sunday Morning":

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.

Except for the bantams in pinewoods which have so fascinated anthologists and critics, nearly all the birds, swooping, chittering, silhouetted on a bare branch, are those familiar to anyone living in a town or suburb anywhere in the northeastern United States. Stevens delights in crows and blackbirds, sparrows and bluejays, robins and catbirds—the friendly creatures who have accommodated themselves to city life.

SIMILARLY he makes use of locusts, crickets, fireflies, rabbits, squirrels, cats. He sketches a fine suburban scene in order to offer ironic sympathy to the man (was he a business executive?) who, in the midst of the splendor of spring,

Sighed in the evening that he lived
Without ideas in a land without ideas.

To demonstrate the "shift in realities" which confronts the perceptive observer Stevens points out the window.

It was at the time, the place, of nougats.

There the dogwoods, the white ones and the pink ones,
Bloomed in sheets, as they bloom,
and the girl,
A pink girl took a white dog walking.

In writing of city life Stevens differs from most of the other major poets of the twentieth century. He does not make the city itself a central symbol

The Poet Who Lived with His Words

For Wallace Stevens

By Samuel French Morse

YOU loved the morning always, and its blue
Paraphernalia, grackles gold with dew
More gold than bronze, and purple on the phlox
In the high grass, rose-redness of the rocks
Streaked gray and yellow in a painter's light:
The air as clear as change composing sight
To your identity, the light seen through
To the pure words of it, imagined, true.

for moral decay and loss of faith, like Eliot's "Waste Land," nor does he see it as the milieu of the frustrated and lonely and helpless people who haunt Auden's bars and commuter trains. Stevens is perfectly aware of dirt and crowds and emptiness. In "The Common Life" he observes

The men have no shadows
And the women have only one
side.

He does not have to be told what lies
on the dump heap:

the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the
corset, the box
From Esthonia . . .

For Stevens the only way to truth and beauty is through the seeing eye and the perceiving mind, and they can be exercised on the dump as well as anywhere else. His Gerontion (in "The Man on the Dump," which should be read with Eliot's poem on "an old man in a dry month") sees the debris and "rejects the trash," feels the wind and finds it freshened with dew, "looks at the elephant-colorings of tires" and, "among mattresses of the dead,"

sits and beats an old tin can,
lard pail.
One beats and beats for that
which one believes.

The kind of city loneliness which Auden suggests so poignantly does not interest Stevens very much, perhaps because the man of imagination is essentially solitary. When he does deal with the theme, as in "Loneliness in Jersey City," he pictures a man in a hotel room (who may be about to return to his home) and sets his meter to the dance tune heard from the street far below.

My window is twenty-nine three
And plenty of window for me.
The steeples are empty and so are
the people,
There's nothing whatever to see
Except Polacks that pass in their
motors
And play concertinas all night.
They think that things are all
right.
Since the deer and the dachshund
are one.

Stevens is not indifferent to the consequences of poverty and misery among the masses. In "Owl's Clover" he contrasts the life of the early settlers of America with that of the workers of the 1930s.

Their destiny is just as much
machine
As death itself . . .

Writing after the Depression, he said in the first edition, published in 1936, "Only an agony of dreams can help,"

but in his revision of 1945 he had taken out even this mild reference, if such it was, to the possibility of social reform. It may have been poetic rather than political overtones that he wanted to eliminate: in any case, his conclusion is unmistakable in both versions. He rejects the ideology of Communists and all others who believe that this world can be made perfect or that salvation can be achieved except through the individual eye and mind.

Stevens sees a world

that moves from waste
To waste, out of the hopeless
waste of the past
Into a hopeful waste to come.

and knows that a revolution is just one more aspect of "the ever-never-changing same."

The future must bear within it
every past,
Not least the pasts destroyed,
magniloquent
Syllables, pewter on ebony, yet
still
A board for bishops' grapes, the
happy form
That revolution takes for connoisseurs: . . .

THE solution of the business executive for the evils of modern city life is a vacation. As Harvey Breit put it, Wallace Stevens "took his holidays in earnest—that is, literally fled into sight and sound and smell and color." The most obvious instance is the early poem "The Comedian as the Letter C," which is at least partly biographical. It describes the development of the imagination and philosophy of Crispin as he travels from "Bordeaux to Yucatan, Havana next, and then to Carolina," and finally settles in a cabin to bring up a family of daughters with curls. This "sally into gold and crimson forms" provided much of the imagery for his early poems and continued to furnish him symbols straight through his life.

Crispin knew
It was a flourishing tropic he re-
quired
For his refreshment. . . .

It is worth noting that the outcome of this adventure is Crispin's growing attachment to the soil where he has built his cabin and his perception that "For realist, what is is what should be."

The pleasures and intellectual excitements of being a tourist need not be confined to the tropics. To establish the reality of an ordinary evening in New Haven, Stevens recalls a typical American jaunt through Europe:

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome
after dark,
Sweden described, Salzburg with
shaded eyes
Or Paris in conversation at a cafe.

It is characteristic that his magnificent poetic analysis of the relations of perceptive man to a world full of evil, "Esthetique du Mal," opens with the line "He was at Naples writing letters home." Who better than a tourist, freshly stirred by perceptions of the nature of place and history not his own, well-fed and comfortable, thinking about the home he will be glad to return to shortly—who more ready to deal with the great philosophical problems?

A number of poems, particularly in the later volumes, have grown out of real or imagined vacations in New England—at Mt. Chocorua, at Pemaquid, on Monhegan Island—or out of a pilgrimage made to the ancestral home of the Stevens family in central Pennsylvania. The poem which Stevens himself called "Holiday in Reality,"—a title eminently suitable for his collected work—describes the provocative power of an exhibit of paintings of a foreign land and concludes with a characteristic bit of landscape:

The bud of the apple is desire, the
down-falling gold,
The catbird's gobble in the morn-
ing half-awake—

These are real only if I make them
so. Whistle
For me, grow green for me, and,
as you whistle and grow green,

Intangible arrows quiver and stick
in the skin
And I taste at the root of the
tongue the unreal of what is real.

Because Wallace Stevens himself could live happily in and make poetic use of the modern city and suburb it does not follow that he ignored or condoned the complacency of dwellers in suburbia. From first to last his poems call out to us all to look, to see, to become aware of the wonders flashing and glinting and whirling past us unheeded.

. . . Can we live on dry descrip-
tions,
Feel every thing starving except
the belly
And nourish ourselves on crumbs
of whimsy?

He objects both to the formulations of the lecturer who "hems the planet rose and haws it ripe, and red, and right," and to the inexact metaphors of the writer who speaks of "all sorts of flowers" instead of one real rose and is "happy in spring with the half colors of quarter-things." Over and over again he condemns the simplification of what is complex. One of his later lyrics deals with the poetry of X, obviously a man who makes everything simple and clear.

He lacks this venerable complication.
His poems are not of the second part of life.
They do not make the visible a little hard

No such accusation can be made against the poetry of Wallace Stevens. Even for the highly literate and sophisticated reader some of his sudden shifts of metaphor and intricate abstractions create initial difficulties. As Marianne Moore put it, "Interrupted soliloquy can amount to disrupted logic." But, although he makes no concessions to the limitations of the conventional suburban mind, he does assume that it is perfectly possible to

work in the city, cherish the house and garden at the end of the bus line, ignore the inconveniences and enjoy the advantages—art exhibits and concerts as well as public parks—and still be a man of intellect and imagination. His favorite metaphorical equivalents for "major man," the one who uses his imagination, belong to the romantic literature of the past; he sings of kings and captains and feudal lords, of minstrels and of clowns. These are the figures that fellow executives and suburban neighbors might also see as symbolizing more than ordinary power and beauty and might well find far more evocative than Whitman's Manhattan crowds or

Sandburg's hog-butchers. Indeed, as the complexities of his vocabulary and verse become more widely understood, both his imagery, compounded of the familiar and the consciously exotic and his passionate belief in the power of the individual man to see and understand may make a strong appeal to city-dwellers who now scarcely know his name. Certainly we owe some of the major poetry of the twentieth century to the fortunate circumstance that a man of imagination found an insurance office a point of vantage for looking at

things chalked
On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see.

A Praise of Good Poets in a Bad Age

To the Memory of Wallace Stevens

By John Ciardi

ANY MAN—GOD, if He had the money—
could rip the sagebrush back for terraced gardens
and tilt a pearlstone Hollywood between
the swimming pools and the Pacific.

Neon in the Potomac could do for a scripture
to midnight. And Coney Island
become an imagination to pass for splendor
in the high-noon of the yokel's gawk.

Lord, what we know of doing badly!
the nerve's reach for order gone huge,
eye-catching, and moneyed. How shall I say this right
who say "Lord" and mean something else?—

mean perhaps "most solving imagination."
"most luminous behaviour," "most. . ."
Something. A near-enough to sublimity. An inward
from which gods are imagined and become.

Something not Heaven nor Hell, but something.
The tongue is wrong in the mouth to say it, the words
soggy from the prayers of lace-curtain angels.
We lack a vocabulary for admiration.

And still a man could take a train to magnificence:
to Rutherford for Williams, to Hartford for Stevens,
to Cambridge for Frost—and not have it, and yet
have touched the most of it in one day's going.

How much higher in its own mind could the age stand
than these three have stood for it?
Now Stevens is dead from meaning-as-it-is,
and that day's ride to the age's best

longer by an absence as it goes shortened
by stone, imagined forests of stopped birds
and voices windborne from a midnight river,
an oarlock's birdcall from the gist of time.

Imagine any man at that train's windows
watching the world from this death and these lives,
hearing the carried voice of their alert—
what shall defend Newark from his arrival?

Harlem from his revulsion? South Station from his defeat?
Once in Connecticut from such a window
I saw three egrets statued in marsh-reaches
as if posed for the eyes of Egyptian lovers.

What a suave possibility they made of the sky!
But before the next-to-prayer in my heart could open
we broke the soot of Somewhere-on-the-Line
and my eye crashed like a flung egg on its walls.

Is it a symptom only or a source,
that permission of ugliness in American houses?
Arson could be a creed, and a vote for Nero
a vote for a compassionate corruption.

O my people, burn, burn back to grace!
. . . But a light blinked and the business fronts fell past us;
a religion of chromium an dplate glass windows
raising its monstrosities of golden junk

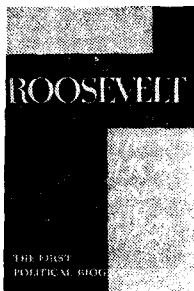
called the dead poet from his imaginings:
"Soit!" he chimed back from that pixie passion
that made his belltowers tinkle as they bonged.
"Waa-wallee-waa!", the whistle learned to say.

Nonsense. But nearing than the age to being.
It is no chin-thrust figure angel-high
the ardent man lifts from his ordering:
leave those grim doughboys to the yokel squares.

By bong and tinkle he dwarfed back the fronts
of the age's skew and sooty imagination.
Now he is dead; one gone of the three truest,
and poverty, drowned in money, cannot care.

Soit! To be a poet in an age of prose
is to hear more than the age is ready for.
Caroo, Caballero! the States lack word of cockles.
A bronze pear hanging is not news enough

now Congress has the language by the throat.
Let it strut for nothing. "Fat! Fat! Fat! Fat!"
When the age has found a memory near enough
his news from bronze, most houses will come down.



SR's Book of the Week:

"THE LION AND THE FOX"

Author: James MacGregor Burns

By LINDSAY ROGERS, professor of government at Columbia University.

WHAT qualities determine whether a biographer has succeeded or failed? Sir Harold Nicolson who, in his time, has done both, recently laid it down that a good biography must combine three principles: It "must be 'history,' in the sense that it must be accurate and depict a person in relation to his times. It must describe an 'individual,' with all the gradations of human character, and not merely present a type of virtue or vice. And it must be composed as a 'branch of literature,' in that it must be written in grammatical English and with an adequate feeling for style."

The brilliant biographer of Henry James is in agreement. Taking a text from Lytton Strachey—the biographical art is "the most delicate and humane of all the branches of

writing"—Leon Edel amplifies as follows: "... delicate because the biographer seeks to blow the breath of life into inert and fragmentary materials which survive an individual's passage on this earth. Humane because such a process ... speaks for man's awareness of himself, his world, his past." I have quoted in order to be able to say that judged by these high standards James MacGregor Burns's "Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox" (Harcourt, Brace, \$5.75), is a notable achievement.

The Squire of Hyde Park; the handsome State Senator and Assistant Secretary of the Navy; the polio victim; the New York Governor, and the President reelected three times, all spring to valiant life. Mr. Burns is an obviously enthusiastic biographer, but the enthusiasm is as much for his task as for his subject. It has made him ingenious in gathering honey and wormwood from widely scattered

places and has summoned eloquence for the telling of his tale. There is never an impression of scissors and paste, as is the case with so many political biographies.

In the Hyde Park Library there are recordings as well as manuscripts. Mr. Burns has had Roosevelt's speeches played back to him, so that recounting the responses of audiences and ad libbings he permits his younger readers to feel that they are hearing and older readers that they are rehearing the man himself. But one cannot say, as Macaulay once did of a biographer, that enthusiasm "has to a great extent perverted his judgment."

HENCE both the extreme idolaters and the bitter haters will probably be dissatisfied, but they should be able to agree on the appositeness of the subtitle taken from Machiavelli's "The Prince": a ruler "must imitate the fox and the lion, for the lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves." The fox recognizes traps and the lion frightens wolves. A prudent ruler should not wish to be only a lion; and "he ought not to keep faith when by so doing it would be against his interest, and when the reasons which made him bind himself no longer exist." It would be interesting to know whether Roosevelt ever pondered on this passage, to which Mr. Burns several times returns in analyzing decisions that seemed forthright and maneuvers that appeared devious. Certainly Roosevelt demonstrated that Disraeli was correct when he said that a great statesman must have two qualities: the first prudence and the second imprudence.

The details of the prudences and imprudences concern Mr. Burns only down to the coming of the war. He deals with the war period "synoptically"—in half a dozen pages. To do more on an adequate scale would have required years of work on another volume. Mr. Burns wanted to scoop Frank Freidel, who in the second of his many-volumed life has only reached the gubernatorial period. When Mr. Freidel several years ago published his first volume, which ended with the Assistant Secretaryship of the Navy, I ventured to hope that some day a biographer might start with his subject on the summit and then go back to the days of lesser eminence. Mr. Freidel is an excellent biographer, but he must be envious as he reads Mr. Burns's pages, on which I discuss one point of substance, pay a homage to method, and utter a protest.

During the summer of 1928 when Al Smith was making his hopeless

THE AUTHOR: During the early Forties, after graduation from Williams College (where he is now a professor of political science), James MacGregor Burns took off for the political wilds of Washington, D.C., to get a ringside look at government and politicians at work. With a socio-political biography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the back of his mind he avidly took notes on FDR's Administration while working as an assistant to a Congressman and later serving on the staff of the National War Labor Board. When World War II broke out Burns yielded his front-row seat in favor of a hitch with the Army in the Pacific theatre. Fortunately, he was able to satisfy his cacoethes for writing history on-the-spot by landing a berth as a war historian. From firsthand experience and Army records he produced "Okinawa: The Last Battle" (a collaboration) and "Guam: Operations of the 77th Division." These volumes and two other studies, "Congress on Trial" and "Government by the People" (with Jack W. Peltason), served as warm-ups for his larger objective, "Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox." Since the Mecca for any New Deal historian is the FDR Library at Hyde Park, Burns went there to dig through part of the 7,000 cubic feet of papers and records and the vast amount of printed material that includes 28,000 books alone. With so much material written on Roosevelt how can a historian hope to come up with fresh slants? Burns answers this by making capital out of heretofore bypassed records of conferences. "Included occasionally, for some unknown reason, in the file of press conferences at Hyde Park are transcripts of conferences that Roosevelt had with Senators, business groups, editors, church leaders, and others. This of course is marvelous stuff for biography because Roosevelt could speak fairly freely—much more freely than with reporters—and of course there is a great deal of off-the-record material in the press conferences proper." Burns also adds, "My book is the first on Roosevelt that makes use of transcripts of two emergency committees over which Roosevelt presided during the early crisis-years of the New Deal—the Executive Council and the National Emergency Council."



—Hans Namuth.

—SIEGFRIED MANDEL.