“In a Single Man Contained”: Wallace Stevens as an Autobiographical Poet

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> Autobiography is that literary genre and psychological occasion which permits the writer to produce a work which, in some fashion, allows the experience of the world he has simultaneously discovered and inhabited to live on.
>
> Barrett Mandel, “'Basting the Image with a Certain Liquor': Death in Autobiography” (180)

> This is nothing until in a single man contained,
> Nothing until this named thing nameless is
> And is destroyed.
>
> Wallace Stevens, “The Auroras of Autumn” (359)

> Artistic creation is a struggle with the angel, in which the creator is the more certain of being vanquished since the opponent is still himself. He wrestles with his shadow, certain only of never laying hold of it.
>
> Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” (48)

Most critics agree that Wallace Stevens was the least personal of poets. Did not Stevens himself insist, in one of his enigmatic “Adagia,” that “Poetry is not personal” and rebuff all his correspondents’ attempts to inquire into the autobiographical dimensions of his often inscrutable poetry? Perhaps it shouldn’t surprise that Stevens was largely silent about the private. In the PBS *Voices and Visions* video a colleague at the Hartford, after all, recalled “If it wasn’t for his personal life,” Stevens was “a happy man”—a wonderfully insightful understatement echoed as well by many in Peter Brazeau’s oral biography *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered.* No one at the Hartford, where Stevens was a vice-president, not even colleagues he worked with for decades, remembered ever getting past the front door of Stevens’ Westerly Terrace house. Stevens’ readers are likewise denied access; indeed, we seldom feel we have even made it to the doorstep.

And yet the more familiar a careful reader becomes with his fantastically demanding work, the more he or she attains more-than-minimal fluency in that strange tongue called “Stevens,” the more his poetry comes to seem a revelation of the poet, the more it appears to be, if not autobiography, at least autobiographical. Focusing particularly on Stevens’ poignant final poetry, with its “portrait of the artist as an old man”—to borrow Leon Edel’s inversion of Joyce—I will attempt to “out” the autobiographical Stevens. But first we would do well to revisit the largely misunderstood form known as autobiography in order to establish some basics.

(1) Autobiography is not necessarily prose, nor does it even have a readily identifiable form. Paul John Eakin has concluded (citing Elizabeth Bruss) that “even the most superficial acquaintance with the diversity of works customarily received as autobiographies should lead us to recognize that 'there is no intrinsically autobiographical form'" (20). Certainly, then, the autobiographical impulse may take the form of poetry, as James Olney, autobiography’s foremost American scholar, demonstrates in his exhaustive examination of *Four Quartets* (*Metaphors of Self* 260-316). Indeed, poetry may have an intrinsic bond with autobiography. The great French scholar of the genre Georges Gusdorf quotes Renan (commenting on Goethe’s *Dichtung and Wahrheit*): "What one says of oneself is always poetry. . . .

One writes of such things in order to transmit to others the world view that one carries in oneself" (42).

(2) Autobiography is not biography. As Edwin Muir once insisted in a superb specimen of the genre, the artist who resorts to autobiography is obligated to convey both the "story" and the "fable": the facts—birth, education, marriage, children, career, etc.—of one's life, and the myth—the underlying symbolic significance, as he or she understands or imagines it. Autobiography, after all, would seem to be, according to Gusdorf, the product of an "involution of consciousness" (32). "If autobiographical texts do not tell us as much about the autobiographer's past history as earlier students of the genre wished to believe," writes Eakin, "they may nevertheless have a good deal to tell us about the autobiographer in the moment of his engagement in the act of composition" (22).

(3) Autobiography is a fictional mode. With Chateaubriand's *Voyage en Amerique* in mind, Gusdorf concludes that even when outright fictions appear in an autobiography, "there is a truth affirmed beyond the fraudulent itinerary and chronology, a truth of the man, images of himself and of the world, reveries of a man of genius, who, for his own enchantment and that of his readers, realizes himself in the unreal" (43). "'To create and in creating to be created,' the fine formula of Lequier," Gusdorf insists, "ought to be the motto of autobiography" (44)

(4) Autobiography is much more pervasive than we have yet acknowledged. Olney, Gusdorf's American champion and heir, has long contemplated the possibility that "to argue not only that autobiography exists but that it alone exists—that all writing that aspires to be literature is autobiography and nothing else" ("Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" 4). (Such all-inconclusiveness echoes Nietzsche, as quoted by Olney: "Little by little it has become clear to me that every great philosophy has been the confession of its maker, as it were his involuntary and unconscious autobiography" ["Autobiography" 5].)

Though autobiography may well be the least literary of writing, Olney reminds, it can also be "the most rarified and self-conscious of literary performances." Olney has Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* and Barthes' *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* in mind as his prime examples ("Autobiography and the Cultural Moment" 4), but he might well have considered the performance art of Wallace Stevens.

It has always been tempting, as no less a critic than Helen Vendler acknowledges, to read works like "The Comedian as the Letter C"—the tale of a plebian poet whose mind is blown by the ocean, becomes a radically renewed poet, marries and has children, and loses his muse to the quotidian—as an at least partially autobiographical meditation on the career of Wallace Stevens himself, a poet in college who would not publish his first book of poems, *Harmonium*—a book that contains "Comedian"—until he was 44 and whose next book, *Ideas of Order,* would not appear for another twelve years, a period in which his only daughter Elsie was born and a child, at least, made it in the front door.

And we can well imagine that the occasional "I's" that punctuate his early poetry, for example these lines from "Six Significant Landscapes"—

> I measure myself
> Against a tall tree.
> I find that I am much taller,
> For I reach right up to the sun,
> With my eye;
> And I reach to the shore of the sea
> With my ear.

Nevertheless, I dislike
The way the ants crawl
In and out of my shadow. (59)

—are spoken from Stevens' heart and are not merely the vocalizations of one of his many *dramatis personae*.

When it is in second person that he speaks, for example in "Tattoo"—

The light is like a spider.
It crawls over the water.
It crawls over the edges of the snow.
It crawls under your eyelids
And spreads its webs there—
Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes
Are fastened
To the flesh and bones of you
As to rafters or grass.

There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow. (64)

—we certainly can believe that such a meditation on perception is a loosely-disguised personal phenomenology if not a distanced memory.

And we suspect that many of Stevens' third person mini-narratives are part of a long tradition in autobiographical writing (a tradition that includes Julius Caesar, Henry Adams, and Norman Mailer). Is it not possible that it was Stevens himself who "rode over Connecticut / In a glass coach," pierced with fear that he could no longer distinguish "The shadow of his equipage" from blackbirds (76)?

Are we not encouraged as well to imagine Stevens himself seated by the small lake in Elizabeth Park near his Hartford home having mystical experiences with swans—recognizing the fictional nature of all things—that would make even Mary Oliver proud:

A bench was his catalepsy, Theatre
Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.

The west wind was the music, the motion, the force
To which the swans curveted, a will to change,
A will to make iris frettings on the blank. (343)

But we cannot know for sure.

Are we not invited to surmise that "The Latest Freed Man" is, if not Stevens' himself, his doppelganger?

> Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
> The latest freed man rose at six and sat
> On the edge of his bed. He said,
> "I suppose there is
> A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
> Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
> Which is enough: the moment's rain and sea,
> The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen),
> Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape. Of him
> And of his works, I am sure. He bathes in the mist
> Like a man without a doctrine. The light he gives—
> It is how he gives his light. It is how he shines,
> Rising upon the doctors in their beds
> And on their beds. . . ."
>
> And so the freed man said.
> It was how the sun came shining into his room:
> To be without a description of to be,
> For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
> To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
> With its organic boomings, to be changed
> From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
> To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
> Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun.
> Whether it comes directly or from the sun.
> It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
> 'It was being without description, being an ox.
> It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
> The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
> That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
> It was everything being more real, himself
> At the centre of reality, seeing it.
> It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself.
>
> The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
> *Qui fait fi des joliesse banales* [who doesn't give a hoot about banalities], the chairs. (187)

Captured between sleeping and waking, struggling with change and sameness, wrestling with the sun and light, tangled up in blue, anxious to shed all doctrine and all description, rejecting the banal—the "latest freed man" dwells in Stevens' primal scene if not his actual skin.

Sometimes, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," he playfully comes forth, like the playwright at drama's end before the curtain, mock-acknowledging, in first-person, his first-person-ness:

> Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar
> And I are one. (140)

But reservations follow—the doubts of one who "wrestles with his shadow, certain only of never laying hold of it"—and what Stevens gives with one hand, he takes away with the other.

Harold Bloom (in both his *Poems of Our Climate* and the *Voices and Visions* video) finds that astonishing moment in "Auroras of Autumn" when the poet confronts the Northern Lights as his imaginative adversary one of the most self-revelatory moments in the entire Stevens' corpus, and Bloom is correct that it is indeed incendiary. "This [the Aurora Borealis] is nothing," the poet boasts, "until in a single man contained,"

> Nothing until this named thing nameless is
> And is destroyed.

But his metaphysics are mere braggadocio. Stevens fails in his effort to match with his imagination his "major weather" rival

> He opens the door of his house
>
> On flames. The scholar of one candle sees
> An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame
> Of everything he is. And he feels afraid. (359)

Stevens is, of course, this "scholar of one candle." The fear he describes is his.

I do not mean to suggest that any of the forgoing examples qualify Stevens as the Bloomian "father poet" of confessional verse from Lowell to Sexton and Plath. The aging Stevens, however, the poet as an old man, becomes, nevertheless, much more the poet with a life, a real life, and not just a metaphysical one.

In "Questions are Remarks," for example, we discover, to our great surprise, Stevens-the-grandfather recalling a tender moment with actual Holly's actual boy, Peter, in an actual backyard.

> In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why.
> The sun aches and ails and then returns halloo
> Upon the horizon amid adult enfantillages.
>
> Its fire fails to pierce the vision that beholds it,
> Fails to destroy the antique acceptances
> Except that the grandson sees it as it is,
>
> Peter the voyant, who says "Mother, what is that"—
> The object that rises with so much rhetoric.
> But not for him. His question is complete.
>
> It is the question of what he is capable.
> It is the extreme, the expert aetat. 2.
> He will never ride the red horse she describes.
>
> His question is complete because it contains
> His utmost statement. It is his own array,
> His own pageant and procession and display,
>
> As far as nothingness permits . . . Hear him.
> He does not say, "Mother, my mother, who are you,"
> The way the drowsy, infant, old men do. (394-95)

In its wonder before the wonder of children, "Questions" is clearly a poem in the Romantic tradition, but it is not, finally, a poem about youth. All of Stevens' obsessions are here, and like many poems in *Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock*, its involution returns to Stevens himself, a poet who got a very late start and has begun to wonder about his legacy.

"We can count on our fingers the few artists who surpassed themselves when old," writes Leon Edel in "Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man." With Rembrandt's late self-portraits in mind, he notes "The artist as an old man knows that life will not offer him any better chance. There is only one, and his art has been that chance." Old man Stevens will write much more from himself about himself, but he cannot distinguish himself from his art: autobiography and ars poetica are one. The awful (in the original sense of the word) final poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins show him wrestling with the Heraclitian fire of nature and hoping against hope for "the comforts of the resurrection." The final poems of Wallace Stevens show him seeking one last time to find a way to make the imagined and the real one.

In "The Plain Sense of Things," we are told

> After the leaves have fallen, we return
> To a plain sense of things. It is as if
> We had come to an end of the imagination. . . . (428)

As in the fabulous paintings of Chagall, architecture and imagination have become one; the house in which he lives and the world of poetry, the "supreme fiction," he has invented have metaphorically fused:

> The great structure has become a minor house.
> No turban walks across the lessened floors.
>
> The greenhouse never so badly needed paint.
> The chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side.

Stevens contemplates defeat; rot threatens:

> A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition
> In a repetitiousness of men and flies.

But imagination has not been defeated, for "the absence of the imagination," he realizes in a quintessentially Stevens oment, "had / Itself to be imagined" (428)

In "Long and Sluggish Lines," the dialectic continues in a winter landscape in which Stevens seeks to come to grips with "the pre-history of February" only to realize, in a poetic "ecology of mind," that "The life of the poem in the mind has not yet begun" (443). His life project will go on without him.

In the final poems Stevens even begins to burlesque the poems he has come to be known for. In "The Planet on the Table," a poem inspired by the publication of his *Collected Poems* (1954), ventriloquizing sympathetically for a great imaginative creation of Shakespeare's final years, he admits

> Ariel was glad he had written his poems.
> They were of a remembered time
> Or of something seen that he liked. (450)

In "As You Leave the Room," he doubts the efficacy of what he has done—considers, for a moment at least, the possibility that he has been a mere skeleton, but then concludes

> That poem about the pineapple, the one
> About the mind as never satisfied,
>
> The one about the credible hero, the one
> About summer, are not what skeletons think about. (597-98)

"A Quiet Normal Life" finds him convinced that his legacy will not be in

> In anything that he constructed, so frail,
> So barely lit, so shadowed over and naught,
>
> As, for example, a world in which, like snow,
> He became an inhabitant, obedient
> To gallant notions on the part of cold. (443)

No longer prepared to be a mere "Snow Man," he is ready to inhabit the real world.

In "The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"—a poem the late James Merrill describes as his personal "23rd Psalm" (*Wallace Stevens: Man Made Out of Words*)—the front door opens wide. In the living room we find the poet and his wife Elsie, the couple who supposedly endured a terrible marriage, on the couch together.

> Light the first light of evening, as in a room
> In which we rest and, for small reason, think
> The world imagined is the ultimate good.
>
> This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
> It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
> Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:
>
> Within a single thing, a single shawl
> Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth
> A light, a power, the miraculous influence.
>
> Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
> We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
> A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous,
>
> Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
> We say God and the imagination are one . . .
> How high that highest candle lights the dark.
>
> Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
> We make a dwelling in the evening air,
> In which being there together is enough. (444)

If marriage is, in Denis de Rougemont's moving final words in *Love in the Western World*, a "fidelity maintained in the Name of what does not change as we change," "The Final Soliloquy" is a testimony of Stevens' faith. There was no need for him to convert to Christianity on his death bed (as has often been rumored). Stevens had

always already believed, faithfully, in the imagination, "that which arranged the rendezvous."

"The autobiographer," Barrett Mandel writes in "'Basting the Image with a Certain Liquor': Death in Autobiography," "writes his life so that when at last he is engulfed by the superior and relentless forces of non-being something of his self, however pitiful a remnant, will float on untouched" (177). Staring at "the planet on the table," Stevens, who would die one year later, concludes that

> His self and the sun were one
> And his poems, although makings of his sell
> Were no less makings of the sun.
>
> It was not important that they survive.
> What mattered was that they should bear
> Some lineament or character,
>
> Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
> In the poverty of their words,
> Of the planet of which they were part. (450)

In "The World as Meditation" Stevens had imagined his Penelope, so vigilant for her Ulysses that she mistakes the day itself for him, in an endless deferral, with the help of "a planet's encouragement," "never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near" (442). Stevens' autobiographical poetry brought him finally home, ending the imagination's odyssey, at least the odyssey "in one man contained."

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