Wallace Stevens

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I

Even as a young poet, Wallace Stevens spoke of poetry as something given as well as made. "I am full of bright threads," he wrote in his journal for July 24, 1899, referring, it would seem, to unbidden elements: sudden phrases, floating images, floating thoughts. Then, with a wish that he could bring his conscious will to bear upon what chance brought to mind, he added, "if I could only gather them together" (L, 30). Ten years later, with a similar sense of a distinction between the will of the artist and what was within him but not controlled by him, he looked for the creative source—"looked into myself and found everything covered up" (L, 120). By the time he was writing "The Comedian as the Letter C," he had begun to conceive of two origins for poetry—the "wakefulness" that is the conscious, shaping intelligence and the "meditating sleep" that is unconscious inventiveness:
That wakefulness or meditating sleep,
In which the sulky strophes willingly
Bore up, in time, the somnolent, deep songs. \((CP, 33)\)

In his maturity and during the period of close examination of his poems and his motives (in the 1930s), Stevens began to wonder if there were a truly volitional factor in creativity. “Perhaps there is no such thing as free will in poetry,” he surmised \((L, 319)\). When he remembered his own experience of writing a poem, he found it difficult to tell what was planned and what was fortuitous. Choice was an act that seemed to be essentially intentional, yet the discrimination, the taste that during composition became his style, could be considered an event that happened within him, below reason and will. “When we speak of fluctuations of taste, we are speaking of evidences of the operation of the irrational” \((OP, 229)\). And later he said, “A man has no choice about his style” \((OP, 210)\). If the poet writes what he likes, and what he likes is determined by his individuality, is all this only an accident of the course of things?

It cannot matter at all.
Happens to like is one
Of the ways things happen to fall. \((OP, 40)\)

About the time these lines from “Table Talk” were written, Stevens’ letters indicated an interest in determinism. “A most attractive idea to me,” he wrote in 1935, “is the idea that we are all the merest biological mechanisms” \((L, 294)\). And when he considered “whether a poem about a natural object is roused by the natural object or whether the natural object is clothed with its poetic characteristics by the poet,” he decided that he shared the point of view of the boy who, when told to stop sneezing, replied, “I am not sneezing; it’s sneezing me” \((L, 302)\). Yet, concurrently, when he wrote “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens was the conscious artist, he said, who accomplished his intent with pains-
taking care. "This is contrary to my usual experience, which is to allow a thing to fill me up and then express it in the most slap-dash way" (L, 316).

The year before (1936) he had gathered his ideas about the voluntary and involuntary aspects of creative work into a lecture, "The Irrational Element in Poetry." According to the lecture, selection of a subject is made as much by chance as by choice; development occurs that could not have been planned; fluctuations of taste or of interest subvert the intent of the poet. The rational is the predictable, the willed; the irrational is the fortuitous, the unbidden. As an example, Stevens described an experience of hearing one night a cat walking over the crust of snow beneath his window: "The faintness and strangeness of the sound made on me one of those impressions which one so often seizes as pretexts for poetry" (OP, 217). This impression was unpredictable, he concluded, and therefore the source of feeling in the poem, if one were written, would be irrational.

The irrational in Stevens' view is whatever is involuntary, like the force of circumstance, the compulsion of inevitability. The innate character of the poet, for instance, determines the character of his poetry, and the nature of his thought and feeling of the moment forms the poem he is writing. The deterministic bias of Stevens' thinking becomes evident with this notion of the inevitability of a poem's course of development. "If each of us," he says, "is a biological mechanism, each poet is a poetic mechanism." As preface to this extreme position, he tells how he happened to write "The Old Woman and the Statue" and maintains that the poem "has an automatic aspect in the sense that it is what I wanted it to be without knowing before it was written what I wanted it to be, even though I knew before it was written what I wanted to do" (OP, 219–20).

This memory of writing a poem and finding what he could not have expected resembles the symbolic reading of the book of
unfolding experience in “Phosphor Reading by His Own Light”:

It is difficult to read. The page is dark.
Yet he knows what it is that he expects.

Look, realist, not knowing what you expect. (CP, 267)

To anticipate, and to find one’s anticipation surprised as well as fulfilled, is part of the experience of writing, just as it is of reading. By his own account, Stevens, when writing a poem, had at times a feeling of reading it in a book. “Often when I am writing poetry,” he says in a letter to Barbara Church, “I have in mind an image of reading a page of a large book: I mean the large page of a book. What I read is what I like” (L, 642). Not only did he write what he liked as though already given in a book, but the form, the rhythm, the sound were also come upon as though in “an unwritten rhetoric that is always changing and to which the poet must always be turning. That is the book in which he learns that the desire for literature is the desire for life” (OP, 226–27). The book the poet reads subliminally is thus the book of emerging language and, simultaneously, the book of an emerging flow of consciousness. The flow of consciousness is revealed as though read by the subjective principle:

The thinker as reader reads what has been written.
He wears the words he reads to look upon
Within his being. (CP, 492)

II

When he was writing his last few poems, Stevens mentioned “the feelings, the great source of poetry” (L, 842). Apparently he usually wrote with ardor, for he told Hi Simons that “poetry is a passion, not a habit” (L, 364). Stevens’ emotional involvement in composition is disclosed by repeated references to the working
poet’s intensity of feeling. In “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” he describes that intensity as “the moment of exaltation” (NA, 53) and, again, as the “exhilaration that appears to be inseparable from genuine poetic activity” (NA, 58). While writing a poem, the poet knows “the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone” (NA, 58). The experience of the poet, he says, is no less than that of the mystic. Under the influence of “aspiration and inspiration,” a poet may reach an elevation of feeling that liberates his creative faculties. “In this state of elevation we feel perfectly adapted to the idea that moves and l’oiseau qui chante” (NA, 51).

“L’oiseau qui chante,” like the singing bird of the English romantic poets, seems to be an image of a spontaneous creative act. The image began to accumulate connotations of this kind as early as “Meditation Celestial & Terrestrial,” where bird songs celebrate the return of the creative season of the human spirit. In the poem, reason and will are identified with winter and its “narrow sky” of limited human possibility, as compared to warblings of birds associated with the exuberance and fecundity of summer, the drunken or irrational mother:

But what are radiant reason and radiant will
To warblings early in the hilarious trees
Of summer, the drunken mother?

(CP, 124)

The singing bird as an image of unconscious creativity is implied by the warblings that come to the poet of “Esthétique du Mal,” II. As he lies on a balcony, he hears in the night the sounds of a bird, and these sounds begin to form into a poem on his intuition of that “mal,” that essential fault touching everything:

... Warblings became
Too dark, too far, too much the accents of
Afflicted sleep, too much the syllables
That would form themselves, in time, and communicate
The intelligence of his despair, express
What meditation never quite achieved. (CP, 314)

The darkness, the remoteness, the sounds of the troubled sleep
used to characterize birdsong indicate that the warblings sym­
bolize a creative impulse of the unconscious. When the warblings
become syllables and the syllables arrange themselves into lan­
guage that expresses “what meditation never quite achieved,”
the involuntary creative powers are at work. The poem that comes
to the poet in this way, while he is under the influence of night
and the moon (symbols, respectively, of the unconscious and the
creative imagination), is “a kind of elegy he found in space.”
Night and the moon, the poem reveals, are free of the poet, evade
his mind as the involuntary imagination always evades conscious
meditation.

The moon is a singing bird in “God is Good. It is a Beautiful
Night” and symbolizes the creative imagination. The moon is ad­
dressed as “brown bird,” and its song is the light falling from its
fiery wings. High above the individual poet—“the head and zither/
On the ground”—it is apart from time and human process, like
Keats’ immortal bird, and thus seems to stand for the creative
imagination of all poets. By the light of this moon that is also the
song of the brown bird, the poet creates his poem: “In your
light, the head is speaking. It reads the book” (CP, 285). Again,
writing a poem is like reading a book.

“The Creations of Sound” is another celebration of impromptu
invention. Just as song issues spontaneously from the bird, the
poetry that is sound issues from the walls, the ceiling, and in the
last stanza from the floor, to suggest a source other than the con­
scious will of the poet:

So that it came to him of its own,
Without understanding, out of the wall
The Voice, the Book, the Hidden Well

Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom
That was their element.  

(CP, 310)

The praise of spontaneous creativity in “The Creations of Sound” reflects the poet’s pleasure in improvisation. The freedom that is the element in which spontaneity exists is a condition of receptivity “without understanding.” The words, the sounds that come to the poet of their own or out of the wall or ceiling are judged intuitively—“chosen quickly,” according to the poem. “You have somehow to know the sound that is the exact sound; and you do in fact know, without knowing how,” Stevens says of the intuitive judgment of the poet. And then he adds that “what is true of sounds is true of everything: the feeling for words, without regard to their sound, for example” (OP, 226).

Stevens had a predilection for ready and fluent creativity and preferred the poems that came to him easily: “I almost always dislike anything that I do that doesn’t fly in the window” (L, 505). Even the great long poems were written with incredible swiftness, considering the short span of time he could spare for them from his daily life of work. In fact, it was easier for him to keep the momentum of a long poem than to begin over and over with brief ones. In a long poem, “one goes ahead pretty much as one talks, as one thing leads to another” (L, 648). Creative work that continues on like talk must be, in some measure, improvisation. Whether largely improvised or carefully wrought, it is amazing that “Esthétique du Mal” was conceived, composed, and completed in six weeks—and all this accomplished outside of long business hours. No wonder, Stevens says of his poems, “these come very easy or not at all” (L, 594).

1. In 1913, Stevens said of his poems, “It’s a deuce of a job (for me) to do them” (L, 180). This was a time before he had achieved the mastery of style that enabled him to write with comparative ease. While he was still working
III

Improvisation seems to be the work of involuntary creative faculties, for it appears in language that is unbidden and unexpected. Emerging from the unknown, the improvised is suddenly part of the known. In “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” Stevens says the unknown is to the known as the irrational is to the rational. The remark suggests that he is thinking of the unconscious and the consciousness, especially since he refers to the surrealists (OP, 227-28). His statement that the unknown is both the source of what is known and part of the dynamics of the known conforms to his notion that the unconscious “is the beginning and end of the conscious” (L, 373). Stevens illustrates his conception of the known and the unknown by an image of light and dark, which also seems to be a visual idea of the conscious as a bright foreground of the dark unconscious: “The rational mind, dealing with the known, expects to find it glistening in a familiar ether. What it really finds is the unknown always behind and beyond the known, giving it the appearance, at best, of chiaroscuro” (OP, 228).

As early as 1909, Stevens spoke of the unconscious as the unknown in a fanciful letter on the idea of music. Chords of music, Stevens speculated, “vibrate on more than the ‘sensual ear’—vibrate on the unknown.” For the unknown, Stevens seems to have had in mind at this time a subliminal racial memory: “It is considered that music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory. I do not mean our personal Memory—the memory of our twenty years and more—but our inherited Memory, the

on “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” he said that the poems of that series were often a task for him. “Apparently, only the ones over which I take a great deal of trouble come through finally. This is contrary to my usual experience” (L, 316). Later he said that two poems of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,”—“Not to be realized” and the poem on the blue woman—were difficult to do (L, 434, 463). However, the entire “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” was written in four months.
Memory we have derived from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable, in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions and millions of men and women now dead, whose lives have insensibly passed into our own, and compose them.—It is a Memory deep in the mind, without images" (L, 136). He added that this idea of an “infinite extension of personality” had always been a part of his thinking (L, 136).

Many years later, this “extension of personality” becomes the “subman” of “Sombre Figuration,” the unconscious presented as another self lying below the conscious self, a child of the antiquity of man who retains in his darkness the collective experience of humanity:

A self of parents who have never died,
    Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips.  

The subman, like “the extension of personality” in the letter of 1909, lives in obscure memories:

Inhabitant, in less than shape, of shapes
    That are dissembled in vague memory.  

And also, like the unconscious collective memory of that letter, the subman lets us hear music with a subliminal ear, so that we are an audience for “instruments discerned/In the beat of the blood.” A Stevens letter explaining this poem revives the concept of a collective unconscious memory set forth thirty-one years earlier: “The future must bear within it every past, not least the pasts that have become submerged in the sub-conscious, things in the experience of races” (L, 373).

Collective experience takes the form of a flight of images like a storm of leaves through the mind of the subman. These images, the poem says in its conclusion, are “emblemata” or “thoughts by descent” from the past. The flow of emblemata in the uncon-
scious suggests the idea of archetypal imagery. An echo of this notion of "thoughts by descent" appears ten years later in "Sketch of the Ultimate Politician":

There is a storm much like the crying of the wind,
Words that come out of us like words within,
That have rankled for many lives and made no sound.

(CP, 336)

Images that are emblemata and thoughts by descent appear again as the symbolic shapes made by "a vast people old in meditation" in a poem with the ironic title, "A Completely New Set of Objects." The poem begins with the concept of a flow or river ("a Schuylkill") from the unconscious, deep within the body ("in mid-earth") bearing the emblemata, the symbols of a collective human memory:

Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human
Makers without knowing, or intending, uses. (CP, 352)

This poem, read with the letter of 1909 at hand, is evidence of the long consistency in the work of Stevens of such concepts as this one of a collective unconscious memory. The flotillas of emerging unconsciousness are borne up from antiquity like canoes paddled by "figures verdant with time’s buried verdure.” And the shapes, the archetypes, brought in these flotillas “were the exactest shaping/Of a vast people old in meditation.” This line suggests

2. Samuel French Morse found that this poem was “written about the annual festival on the Schuylkill River ‘down which paraded canoes and boats lighted at night with candel Chinese lanterns,’ which he remembered from his boyhood.” See Morse, Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life (New York: Pegasus, 1970), p. 205. Appropriate to a biographical study, this comment on the poem is a valuable indication of the source of the imagery rather an explication of the poem. The poem, however, can be read in symbolic as well as biographical terms.
the idea of the collective memory that “we have derived,” as the 1909 letter says, “from those who lived before us in our own race, and in other races, illimitable.” And “the figures verdant with time’s buried verdure” resemble shadowy forms, as in the letter on the unconscious memory: “the flitting forms that are its shadowy substance.” In the poem, these figures carry with them into the present the symbolic shapes made in ages past:

Carrying such shapes, of such alleviation,
That the beholder knew their subtle purpose.  

The alleviating shapes, the archetypes, assume traditional form and significance in “Things of August,” VIII. Here there is no mention of a buried racial memory, yet it is “the sense of the archaic” that evokes figures like that of “the archaic form/Of a woman with a cloud on her shoulder” or other outlines of common human experience: “the wanderer,/The father, the ancestor, the bearded peer”:

The forgetful color of the autumn day
Was full of these archaic forms, giants
Of sense, evoking one thing in many men.  

Among these images of universal significance, “giants/Of sense,” the male and female archetypes appear to be related to innate feelings about the twofold nature of mind. The mythological form of consciousness in the poetry of Stevens is the bearded face, and its dark unknown base, the unconsciousness of man and nature, is seen as the female figure. Accordingly, day and sun are usually associated with the male figure and night and moon with the female figure. In some poems, the female archetype is patently identified with the creative impulse. “The Candle a Saint,” for instance, is a celebration of the creative unconscious personified by Nox, the goddess from whom, in one version of the cosmogenic myth, all things have their origin. Nox, or night, is characterized as
green in this poem, to indicate the fecundity of the unconscious. “Green kindled and apparelled,” night rises above the human individual, for whom she is the source of inspiration and intuition as “the abstract, the archaic queen” (CP, 223).

Symbolic description of consciousness and the unconscious as day and night is part of Stevens’ fund of recurring imagery. “Night is the nature of man’s interior world,” Stevens says of the unconscious in “A Word with José Rodríguez-Feo.” The poem concludes with a version of the day-night symbolism, implying that consciousness of reality has its genesis in the unconscious. The point of the poem is, Stevens says, that “although the grotesque has taken possession of the sub-conscious, this is not because there is any particular relationship between the two things” (L, 489). The grotesque is what we see:

... It is
Not apparition but appearance, part
Of that simplified geography, in which
The sun comes up like news from Africa. (CP, 334)

The sun rising from Africa and from night is an image of what has just become known to consciousness—its news, rising from the vast subcontinent of the unconscious. Africa was conceived as the unknown and the unconscious long before by Jean-Paul Richter: “The unconscious is really the largest realm in our own minds, and just on account of this unconsciousness the inner Africa, whose unknown boundaries may extend far away.”

IV

The word imagination is used in many senses in the essays and

letters of Stevens. For instance, there is an explicatory letter on “Sombre Figuration” that presents two diverse notions of the word: “In another note I said that the imagination partakes of the conscious. Here it is treated as an activity of the sub-conscious: the imagination is the sub-conscious” (L, 373). Stevens has in mind here, it seems, two kinds of imagination: the voluntary, which “partakes of the conscious,” and the involuntary, which is an activity of the sub-conscious. Eight years later, in a well-known passage from “Effects of Analogy,” Stevens described ideas of the creative faculty that carry further the earlier notion of the dual nature of the imagination. “The poet is constantly concerned with two theories,” he says, and goes on to describe the way each one deals with the problem of the poet’s grasp of reality. One of these theories holds that the poet practices his art “in the very center of consciousness” (NA, 115). When concerned with this theory, Stevens identifies creativity with the intelligence and maintains that the poet works by means of his conscious will. “The poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind,” Stevens says in another essay, but he is still influenced by this notion of the creative imagination (NA, 165).

The other of the two theories considers that the poet’s imagination “is not wholly his own but that it may be part of a much larger, much more potent imagination.” The idea that it is “not wholly his own” and thus is involuntary, that it has a source larger than consciousness, indicates that the more potent imagination is an activity of the unconscious.4 It is the poet’s business,

4. In accord with this notion of “a much larger, much more potent imagination” is the statement in the letter on “Sombre Figuration” that “the conscious is a lesser thing than the sub-conscious” (L, 373). In another letter in explication of a poem, Stevens says “the imagination creates nothing. In short, the subconscious creates nothing” (L, 465). What he means is that it (the imagination or the subconscious) creates nothing except what is derived from reality.
Stevens continues, to try to get at this kind of imagination. To do so, he must live or try to live “on the verge of consciousness.”

“The verge of consciousness” is also the edge of the unconscious. In the seventh poem of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Stevens designates the edge of the unconscious as “the edge of sleep.” Sometimes the edge of the unconscious induces a state of creative facility, the poem explains:

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which
We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep. (CP, 386)

That Stevens had two theories of the creative imagination, one that it was conscious and purposeful, the other that it was unconscious and involuntary, was typical of his mode of thinking. Usually, concepts in Stevens’ mind grew binately. His predilection for antithesis can be seen in many poems—“New England Verses,” for instance. “Two things of opposite natures seem to depend,” he says, “on one another.” The germinating idea of this poem from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” can be found in a letter to Hi Simons written a little more than a year and a half earlier: “When I was a boy I used to think that things progressed by contrasts, that there was a law of contrasts. But this was building the world out of blocks. Afterwards I came to think more of the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. Thus, the various faculties of the mind co-exist and interact, and there is as much delight in this mere co-existence as a man and a woman find in each other’s company” (L, 368). Two of the things of opposite nature that coexist and interact within his own person—that is, two “faculties of the mind”—are the two kinds of imagination that find as much delight in their coexistence “as a man and a woman find in each other’s company”: 
Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self,
Sister and solace, brother and delight.  

If in these lines Stevens makes his customary assignment of female and male roles for the two selves of one person, the anima figure of “sister and solace” would represent the unconscious and “brother and delight” the consciousness. 

The idea of two selves in one person occurs in a number of poems. For instance, there is the “I” as the rational, conscious self of “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks,” and there is Berserk, the irrational, the unconscious, who resembles a consciousness in his subtle activity but lives in the somnolence of the natural world—“As if awake/In the midst of sleep” (CP, 58). Another example of personification of the consciousness and the unconscious is in “The Virgin Carrying a Lantern” (CP, 71). The virgin is the consciousness fulfilling its conventional roles by the light of its intelligence, its lantern. This amusing poem pretends to take the point of view of the social conventions. “There are no bears among the roses,” the poem begins, seeing instead of an animal the hidden libido among the flowers of sentiment. It is, the poem continues, a Negress, a dark figure representing the unconscious, who supposes, in the ironic statement of the poem, “Things false and wrong/About the lantern of the beauty.” But the unconscious is a realist and knows the subliminal erotic life beneath the pieties and traditional obligations of the roles taken by the consciousness:

The pity that her pious egress
Should fill the vigil of a negress
With heat so strong!  

In “The Hand as a Being,” two selves within one person (the consciousness and the unconscious) are cast as lover and beloved
to symbolize the latent erotic idea of creativity. The "naked, nameless dame" (the creative unconscious) holds up her hand, symbol of the creative act, to give the man "too conscious of too many things at once" the composure of one released from personal absorption, from the concerns of consciousness:

Her hand composed him like a hand appeared,
    Of an impersonal gesture, a stranger's hand.  \( (CP, 271) \)

The idea that the creative act is the work of a stranger's hand, of a second self from whom arises the language that is given, the poem that is read in the unconscious before it is written by the intelligence: this is one of the themes of "The Creations of Sound."

If writing a poem is like reading a book—"the large page of a book," as he says in the letter of 1949 to Barbara Church—the words that come to the poet must be those given on that large page. According to "The Creations of Sound," it is better to think that the poem is independent of ego consciousness:

Better without an author, without a poet,
    Or having a separate author, a different poet,
    An accretion from ourselves, intelligent
    Beyond intelligence, an artificial man

At a distance, a secondary expositor,
    A being of sound, whom one does not approach
    Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect. \( (CP, 310-11) \)

In "The Creations of Sound," Stevens is concerned almost entirely with the theory of the involuntary imagination. Many contradictory statements of his about the source of poetry can be considered as emanating from a bias for one or the other conception of the nature of creativity, as when he wrote Latimer that "writing poetry is a conscious activity. While poems may very well occur,
they had very much better be caused” (L, 274). The final stanza of “The Creations of Sound” denies the validity of this kind of exclusion of involuntary creativity:

We do not say ourselves like that in poems.
We say ourselves in syllables that rise
From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.  


The essay that seems to substantiate this view is “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”; there Stevens says that “if one questions the dogma that the origins of poetry are to be found in the sensibility and if one says that a fortunate poem or a fortunate painting is a synthesis of exceptional concentration (that degree of concentration that has a lucidity of its own, in which we see clearly what we want to do and do it instantly and perfectly), we find that the operative force within us does not, in fact, seem to be the sensibility, that is to say, the feelings” (NA, 164). But Stevens adds that “I have spoken of questioning, not of denying.” As Stevens goes on to describe it, the “operative force within us” seems to be distinguishable from conscious will. Of the work of this “constructive faculty” with experience, he says that “what it really does is to use it as material with which it does whatever it wills.” Here the “it” that wills seems to be other than the “I” that wills.

The spontaneous imagination of unbidden creative acts that Stevens associates with night or unconscious creativity should not be confused with his derogation of “the false imagination” in the essay “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet.” There, in his usual role of skeptic, he belittles mystical ideas of the imagination—“the false conception of the imagination as some incalculable vates within us, unhappy Rodomontade” (NA, 61). To destroy “the false conception of the imagination,” one’s philosophy must be naturalism, with its firm commitment to the reality about us, to the belief “that the visible is the equivalent of the invisible.”
And when dominated by his deterministic bias, he could deny that poems are ever caused and assert that they only occur: "There is more than the romantic in the statement that the true work of art, whatever it may be, is not the work of the individual artist. It is time and it is place, as these perfect themselves" (NA, 139–40).