

Wallace Stevens' Emancipated Individual:

A World of One's Own

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HONR 1016

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April 18, 2018

The works of Wallace Stevens comprise an ode to the imagination and an extraordinary rebellion against the doctrinarian's idealism. Responding to Nietzsche's resounding declaration that "God is dead," Stevens abandons the decadence of rational truth. He finds divinity instead in sensual perception, from the taste of a simple fruit to the astounding beauty of the American landscape. For Stevens, perceptions build edifices of concepts, and these edifices compose the individual's subjective reality. To emancipate the soul from suffocating traditions, Stevens wrests control of perception from the past and hands it to the individual. Stevens reality is sensual, self-created and self-sustained; his world is one of subjective perception, built by and for himself. His very poetry is the transformative principle by which perception is molded into intelligible order, a new divinity by and for the interior mind. Stevens' emancipated individual is a master of aesthetic imagination, one who forgoes distant, conditional promises to create a world for her own fulfilment. I will examine the emancipated individual first in the negative sense, determining that which the individual is emancipated from, and then in the positive sense, elucidating the purpose for which the individual is emancipated.

Stevens' emancipation is not from the oppression of men or governments, but from hopelessness and a life devoid of meaning. Facing the relentless atmosphere of necessity as a New York journalist and a businessman, acknowledges the nihilism engendered by economics and contemporary capitalism. In his poetry, Stevens searches for a solution to humanity's malaise, taking note as philosophers and scholars expose the severe limitations of religion. "Sunday Morning" is heavy with the weight of failed traditions. Visceral language questions the efficacy of "ancient sacrifice," the displacement of pleasure to some distant, unearthly

recompense.¹ The contemplative narrator, shirking communion, gives voice to doubts so often left unspoken: “And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?”² Stevens fears the eternity of heaven, the finality of life after death. What if we arrive having never truly lived, carrying with us the regrets of our deathbeds? In “Large Red Man Reading,” ghosts returned to Earth beg for sensation; “they were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality...”³

Faced with the immense uncertainty of death, Stevens celebrates life by rejecting society’s arbitrary taxonomy of experience. Consciously mortal, he finds meaning in finitude: “Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her, / Alone, shall come fulfillment to our dreams.”⁴ Even in the most wonderful of eternal paradises, he finds no beauty. Only with transience do the trees bear fruit; only in season do flowers bloom. “Is there no change of death in paradise?”⁵ Embracing mortality, Stevens builds his reality with the nature around him: “wet roads,” “forest blooms,” “passions of rain, or moods in falling snow,” “all pleasures and all pains...”⁶ He adores the image of the sun, a primal force of nature, the symbol of his new worship.⁷ Joyfully, he abandons the search for objective ideals, declaring that the “Latest Freed Man” has “escaped from truth.”⁸ Without a fixed epistemology or an alien world of forms, the temporary is born

¹ Wallace Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 42.

² *Ibid.*, 43.

³ Wallace Stevens, “Large Red Man Reading,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 233.

⁴ Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁸ Wallace Stevens, “The Latest Freed Man,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 120.

anew in the human consciousness. “On the Road Home” describes the joy of perception that greets two rebels against singular idealism, two students of the particular:⁹

It was when I said,
 There is no such thing as the truth,
 That the grapes seemed fatter.
 The fox ran out of his hole.”

The emancipated individual chooses to believe in sensation, not cold abstractions. Stevens’ appreciation of nature is non-conforming, resisting artificial human categorization; it is “the freshness of the oak leaves, not so much that they were oak leaves, as the way they looked.”¹⁰ He lives just before the seemingly inexorable point at which the gubbinial individual must drain his senses of color and squash them into the rusty metal casting of his being; he strives “to be without a description of to be.”¹¹

The emancipated individual is free from absolute truth and rigid schema, but for what purpose is she emancipated? Appreciation of nature and change is merely a formulation of her greater purpose: the self-creation of her reality. Once she lifts the chains of dead classifications and reclaims her perceptions, “God and the imagination are one.” Life is no longer alienated; “divinity must live within herself.”¹² Though Christian theologians may find the eternal within the interior mind, their eternal is not of this world and worse, not of the self. Stevens does not depart from the empirical in his introspection; instead, he remains intimately linked to sensual

⁹ Wallace Stevens, “On the Road Home,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 119.

¹⁰ Stevens, “The Latest Freed Man,” 120.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Wallace Stevens, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 295; Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” 42.

experience, wielding the imagination as a tool to shape his perceptions of the world. The “Large Red Man Reading” bleeds onto the “blue tabulae” of his experience until the tabulae are purple, and he laughs.¹³ Stevens finds immense power in the interaction of mind and sensation; the rejection of dogma turns ant into ox, but he does not seek dominion over nature.¹⁴ Instead, he finds wonder in the strangeness of his perceptions, communing with his perceptions as an equal partner in the design of his experience, imagination and perceptions ebbing and flowing together as one liberated intellect: “I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself / And there I found myself more truly and more strange.”¹⁵

This tryst of mind and nature births the poet, who bends the schema of language, art, and human expression to the task of self-creation. In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the poet is a singer by the sea, and in her song it is clear that reality is the poet’s and the poet’s alone:¹⁶

She was the single artificer of the world
 In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
 Whatever self it had, became the self
 That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
 As we beheld her striding there alone,
 Knew that there never was a world for her
 Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

¹³ Stevens, “Large Red Man Reading,” 233.

¹⁴ Stevens, “The Latest Freed Man,” 120.

¹⁵ Wallace Stevens, “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 40.

¹⁶ Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in *Wallace Stevens: Selected Poems*, ed. John Serio (New York: Knopf, 2009), 75.

The singer creates her own demarcations that enhance sensation into a world of beauty, “fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.”¹⁷ As a poet, Stevens does not forget that his own transformative principle, language, is a construct itself; he imagines that his words, when animated by the creative force of the emancipated mind, “took on color, took on shape, and the size of things as they are / And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.”¹⁸ Stevens’ own poetry blends, melds and pivots the natural rhythm of language, a new schema rebuilt from the old to make imagination manifest.

The poet, the liberated mind, the emancipated individual, the earthly divine – Stevens’ vision is of an emancipated individual free from schematic oppression, holding the reins of her own existence. Neither an unthinking conformist nor an ascetic priest who persecutes the self, she is a contented whole, encapsulating and embodying her reality. Such a oneness of being is both an epistemological and a philosophical feat; emancipation of the sort Stevens imagines is the epitome of the good life and the pinnacle of self-mastery, freely available within every soul:¹⁹

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 intensestq rendezvous,

It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,

Out of all indifferences, into one thing...

For the emancipated individual, focused into one singular will, normal conventions are a playground; she scales each edifice tether-free, tearing down and rearranging as she wills, flying

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Stevens, “Large Red Man Reading,” 233.

¹⁹ Stevens, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” 295.

fearlessly through empty air. Stevens' body of work dares us to leap with her: "... 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."²⁰

²⁰ Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour, 16-18.

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