

The Idea of Disorder at Key West

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A WAR IS A military state of affairs," said Wallace Stevens on the eve of World War II, "not a literary one." That is not the remark of the retiring esthete but of the prudent citizen, and Stevens's response to Ezra Pound's conflations of military and literary affairs suggests why. In November 1945 Charles Norman (Pound's future biographer) asked Stevens to join Cummings, Williams, Matthiessen, Aiken and other writers in offering a statement. Stevens declined to make any public remarks about Pound, but in correspondence with Norman, he responded as the lawyer he was, marking careful discriminations in a case clouded with ambiguities: "There are a number of things that could well be said in his defense. . . . One such possibility is that the acts of propagandists should not entail the same consequences as the acts of a spy or informer because no one attaches really serious importance to propaganda." What may or may not constitute propaganda, Stevens recognized from his own experience with the American left, is difficult to determine; and the point at which propaganda becomes an act with real consequences is equally difficult to isolate, especially when the alleged propaganda takes the form of Pound's particular kind of ranting: "I don't believe that the law of treason should apply to chatter on the radio when it is recognizably chatter." Stevens would not commit himself to an opinion on Pound's guilt or innocence without more complete information on the relationship of his words and his actions. On the one hand, Stevens remained wary of a condemnation fueled by the cheapened patriotism of postwar élan; on the other, he was equally suspicious of any special pleading for a so-called poetic genius: "I repeat that the question of his distinction seems to me to be completely irrelevant. If his poetry is in point, then so are Tokyo Rose's singing and wise-cracking."

In July 1948 the *Pisan Cantos* were published, and the following February they were awarded the first annual Bollingen Prize for poetry by the Library of Congress. This would be the only Bollingen Prize awarded under the auspices of the Library; given the controversy Pound's work aroused, the government decided that poetry was too politically volatile for the Library to handle, and responsibility for the prize was remanded to an institution better equipped to deflect the attention: Yale University. Selecting the *Pisan Cantos* for the award, the Fellows in American Letters of the Library of Congress (Aiken, Auden, Louise Bogan, Eliot, Lowell, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, among others) knew they were asking for trouble, and they defended their choice in advance: "To permit other considerations than that of poetic achievement to sway the decision would destroy the significance of the award and would in principle deny the validity of that objective perception of value on which civilized society must rest." Stevens had earlier maintained that Pound's poetic distinction was irrelevant to questions concerning his political actions; using what Stevens might have called the Tokyo Rose defense, the fellows maintained that Pound's political actions were irrelevant to the judgment of his poetic distinction.

Their subsequent statements defending the prize marked the ultimate attenuation of the New Criticism into a vehicle for cold war quietism and retreat. A criticism that had been shaped by Burke, Empson, and Blackmur as a carefully modulated participant in a dialogue among varieties of politically minded criticism in the thirties (with Marxism on the one side and the New Humanism on the other) had settled into the apolitical formalism for which the New Criticism is most often remembered today. Faced with a text so extraordinarily blatant in its autobiographical and historical resonances as the *Pisan Cantos*, the fallacies intentional and affective could be maintained only by a blinded will. If such critical perspectives were to retain their power, and if future political controversies were not to infect the judgment of literary merit, then a text more suitable than Pound's was required. When the judges convened the

following year under the auspices of Yale University, the second Bollingen Prize was awarded to Wallace Stevens.

I think that several different versions of Stevens must compete for our attention when we look back to this moment in 1950. The poet who published *The Auroras of Autumn* in that year was as eager to avoid political controversy as the judges of the Bollingen Prize; but at other moments in his career, Stevens was sustained by political interests that have not been given much attention. When a story is told about Stevens's politics, the teller usually makes the late Stevens stand for the whole, describing an essentially indifferent poet who was once jostled into unwelcome awareness by the social upheavals of the thirties. In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" Stevens himself dated the fall into a political world much earlier—at the First World War—but his political awareness actually began in the final years of the nineteenth century. In his recent work on Stevens, Frank Lentricchia has emphasized the economic struggles in which the poet engaged during his early years in New York, and an even more suggestive indication of Stevens's desire for such engagement may be found in one of the last pieces he wrote before leaving Harvard. While Stevens was editing the *Harvard Advocate* in 1900, he attended a lecture by John Jay Chapman, literary critic and political radical, the author of *Emerson and Other Essays* and *Practical Agitation*. Fired by Chapman's words, Stevens wrote an editorial on "Political Interests," lamenting that Harvard's students had few opportunities "of becoming readily acquainted with political conditions" and calling for the creation of "some sort of Political Union for the free discussion of political principles."

Until the end of his life, Stevens rarely lost this interest, but his readers have been able to lose sight of it because he was so careful not to exaggerate the power of a poet's politics: to say that a war is not a literary affair is not to say that it does not concern literature. Stevens was afraid of exaggerating the social function of poetry because he thought poetry was important to a world that is always more than poetic: for Pound, in contrast, a war was a literary affair. Stevens's interest in poetic ambiguity and his concern with the

limitations of the social function of poetry are best understood as part of an effort to assert the historicity of poetry and the political power of poets. It is no coincidence that the major achievements of Stevens's career coincide with the major historical events of his lifetime—the Great Depression, and the two World Wars on either side.

The seductive wholeness of Stevens's oeuvre (which Stevens himself recognized by proposing "The Whole of Harmonium" as a title for his collected poems) has helped to obscure some of the historicity of individual poems. His use of the slogan "it must be abstract," for example, had a different emphasis in 1952 than in 1942. The esthetic it names was achieved under the stress of the Second World War, but when the stress slackened off, the esthetic was strong enough to perpetuate itself on its own terms. The phrase "Poetry is the subject of the poem," written in 1937 in "The Man With the Blue Guitar," may seem similar to the phrase "One poem proves another and the whole" from "A Primitive like an Orb" in 1948, but unlike the second, the first phrase was made in dialogue with historical conditions and with different ways of conceiving poetry's relationship to those conditions; it is not part of an attempt to build a world from poetry but to build poetry a place in the world. The second phrase was consistent with a cold war quietism that the Stevens of the fifties shared with the judges of the Bollingen Prize. As Stevens himself admitted in his late essay "Two or Three Ideas," "how easy it is suddenly to believe in the poem as one has never believed in it before" now that "at this very moment nothing but good seems to be returning." Throughout his later years, when he began to offer other temptingly totalizing phrases ("the theory of / Poetry is the theory of life" or "Life consists / Of propositions about life" or "It is a world of words to the end of it"), it became possible for his readers to shape his entire career into a misleadingly coherent whole, focusing all his work through the lens of the poetry of 1947–1954 instead of reading different phases of his career as different achievements, parts of a historical dialogue in which the interlocutors were continuously changing.

I want to focus on a particular moment of that historical dialogue which took place in the thirties. While it is often said that Stanley Burnshaw's Marxist review of *Ideas of Order* awakened Stevens to the decade's ideological and economic debates, the poems of that volume were actually products of Stevens's engagement with those debates. Consistent with the rising Popular Front strategy, Burnshaw did not review Stevens harshly; he presented the poet as a "middle-ground" writer who would benefit from a push toward the left. What finally bothered Burnshaw about Stevens was not that the poetry leaned to the right (Burnshaw took pains to show that in fact it did not) but that it was *ambiguous*: though he conceded that "uncertainties are unavoidable" in poetry, he lamented that "one can rarely speak surely of Stevens' ideas." But Stevens's ideas of ambiguity were not casually conceived. Like the early critical work of Kenneth Burke or R. P. Blackmur, those ideas were developed in the political climate of the thirties. The questions raised by Marxist esthetics were not simply applied for the first time to Stevens's poems in 1935; what Helen Vendler has called Stevens's poetry of "qualified assertions" developed in response to those questions. Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* was Stevens's *second* important encounter with the left in the thirties. The first came in 1931, and it shaped a decade of his achievement.

Troubled with his reading of "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," R. P. Blackmur took a moment away from his job at a Cambridge bookshop to write Stevens for advice on his now classic essay, "Examples of Wallace Stevens." Stevens read the pages in question and was struck by this sentence: "By associating ambiguities found in nature in a poem we reach a clarity, a kind of transfiguration even, whereby we learn *what* the ambiguity was." In a decade's time, that would become a kind of New Critical dogma, but in 1931 Blackmur was speaking Stevens's private language, and the poet told him so: "One of the essentials of poetry is ambiguity. I don't feel that I have touched the thing until I touch it in ambiguous form. . . . Ambiguity does not mean obfuscation. The clearest possible definition of things essentially ambiguous leaves ambiguity." This response

elated the young bookstore clerk, who wrote back, "I hadn't thought anyone, beyond a mere personal friend of mine, and vaguely myself, had ever considered ambiguity as the *explicit* virtue of poetry." Blackmur told Stevens of his excitement over Empson's recently published *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, and then he asked a question that brought their mutual interest in ambiguity closer to home.

Has it ever occurred to you that in this country Kenneth Burke is writing (in his treatises on rhetoric and eloquence) another face to the coin of ambiguity? It is precisely that consequence of his notions, I think, which made possible Granville Hicks' lame review of *Counter-Statement* in the N. R. [*New Republic*] recently. Hicks couldn't understand how Burke could profitably expect people to differ about fundamentals. Hicks failed to distinguish the fundamentals of the arts from the fundamentals of philosophy or what he calls philosophy. That is the natural failing of the "atmosphere of science impregnated mind": what we were all brought up on. It makes the twin notions of eloquence and ambiguity as precise instruments seem *nothing but* paradox.

As Blackmur sensed early on, Burke and Stevens were engaged in similar projects, and Hicks's misreading of Burke forecasts the terms in which Stevens's work of the thirties would be read. Hicks complained that Burke was interested only in eloquence and not in politics, that he valued a convoluted art of retreat rather than a directly communicative art engaged with contemporary chaos. As Blackmur sensed as well, this complaint ignores the essential thrust of *Counter-Statement*, which was (as Burke explained in his response to Hicks) to show how "a system of aesthetics subsumes a system of politics." "Far from confining myself to the choice which Mr. Hicks would force upon me," Burke continued, "I had thought that my approach enabled me to avoid precisely such academic choices." These remarks did not convince Hicks, who responded to Burke's objections by reiterating his belief that Burke was concerned exclusively with technique. Challenged to outline another method of judging the relationship of politics and art, Hicks could do no

better than trot out the ghost of Matthew Arnold: "The critic approaches a piece of literature as an interpretation of life." And in his influential *New Masses* essay "The Crisis in American Criticism," Hicks would insist again that "Burke's theory is really one more attempt to separate literature from life."

What troubled Hicks about Burke was what troubled Burnshaw about Stevens: ambiguity. Unwilling to say that any piece of language could speak univocally for any particular point of view, Burke summed up *Counter-Statement* as "a return to inconclusiveness." As Blackmur told Stevens, Hicks could see inconclusiveness or ambiguity as nothing but paradox—something that breaks down the communicative power of language and renders art irrelevant. But Burke felt that in as much as "art remains an 'inefficient' business" in the world of political struggle, its very strength becomes its being "primarily a process of disintegration, of making propaganda difficult, of fostering intellectual distrust." Hicks wanted to make propaganda easier, so he denied the political efficacy of ambiguity. Burke's point was that pressed for its politics, art conceived as intrinsically ambiguous "would observe the principle of democratic distrust (government through conflict of selfish interests) over against Fascist hopefulness (centralization of *benevolent* authority)."

Burke's thoughts became crucial for Blackmur's development as well as Stevens's. Blackmur's essay on "A Critic's Job of Work" echoes *Counter-Statement* in its cautious assessment of the dangers of certainty: "Thought is a beacon not a life-raft, and to confuse the functions is tragic. The tragic character of thought . . . is that it takes a rigid mold too soon." Later New Critical writing would descend into a dogmatism of its own, rejecting (at least in principle) any discussion of a poem's interaction with the world beyond the text. As Blackmur struggled to formulate his own principles in the early thirties (and as Edward Said's remarks on these principles have emphasized), almost none of that dogmatism appears. Like Burke's, Blackmur's work grew in response to a vulgar Marxist challenge, and unlike a later, doctrinaire New Critic, he was not offering a conservative alternative to that challenge but trying to present a

sophisticated account of how language is involved with the world outside the text. Blackmur maintained in "A Critic's Job of Work" that nothing "could be more exciting, nothing more vital, than a book by Hicks whose major theme hung on an honest, dramatic view of the class struggle—and there is indeed such a literature now emerging." But he accused Hicks of being "concerned with the separable content of literature, with what may be said without consideration of its specific setting and apparatus in a form." Because of his unwillingness to see how language necessarily complicated that drama, Hicks wrote only "a casuist's polemic" in which certain novels (and no poems) are included by the sole criterion of their subject matter.

Whatever the political position in question, Stevens feared the political ramifications of certainty as much as Blackmur or Burke did: that distrust of dogmatism runs like a refrain throughout his prose of the thirties. Against the typical "poet of ideas," Stevens proposed the poet who constantly "changes, and I hope, constantly grows." Asked by his publisher to supply a preface to his own poetry, Stevens resisted, reiterating that "there is nothing more tiresome than the doctrinal positiveness which one so often finds." But even as he resisted such fixity, Stevens also recognized that his faith in the power of ambiguity and change might be a "romantic evasion" of political responsibilities: "I dare say that the orderly relations of society as a whole have a poetic value, but the idea sounds like something for a choral society, or for Racine. It is hard to say what so vast an amplification would bring about. For my own part, I take such things for granted. Of course, this is merely one more romantic evasion in place of the thinking it out in which one ought to indulge."

To that objection Burke would have responded that poems are not the best place for such thinking, and given poetry's circumscribed power, what it does best is complicate and question our beliefs. While all art is political, said Burke in *Counter-Statement*, "one cannot advocate art as a cure for toothache without revealing the superiority of dentistry." When Malcolm Cowley questioned

Burke about his unwillingness to call himself what he seemed to Cowley to be (a communist), Burke replied: "I am not a joiner of societies, I am a literary man." That was not a popular position in the thirties, and like Stevens, Burke would pay for it. But both writers assumed that position with full knowledge of its strengths and its limitations.

Acutely conscious of those limitations, Stevens offered a decidedly unfashionable description of his work as "pure poetry" on the jacket for the 1936 edition of *Ideas of Order*:

We think of changes occurring today as economic changes, involving political and social changes. Such changes raise questions of political and social order. While it is inevitable that a poet should be concerned with such questions, this book, although it reflects them, is primarily concerned with ideas of order of a different nature. . . . The book is essentially a book of pure poetry. I believe that, in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society.

That statement would color many of the reviews *Ideas* received, but it is crucial to understand the precise way in which Stevens understood poetry to be "pure." Stevens owed his understanding of pure poetry less to Mallarmé than to Croce, for whom the Mallarméan concept of the term, which "excludes, or pretends to exclude, from poetry all the meaning of words," is paradoxically an "impure" conception of pure poetry: for Croce, the truly pure poem dwelt in a middle ground between the extremes of reference and music, between the life of the world and the life of the text. Consequently, although poetry always participates in economic and political change, its effect in that world is curtailed. "Poetry," wrote Croce in a passage Stevens marked in *The Defense of Poetry*, "far from gaining by being expanded over the whole world, loses its proper and distinctive character, and therewith its proper strength and efficacy." Croce continued: "In short, we must only look upon it as one among other paths leading to a single goal. Other paths lead there too: the paths of thought, of philosophy, of religion, of con-

science, of political action." When Stevens wrote in the jacket copy to *Ideas* that poetry by its nature approaches questions of social order in poetic terms, he was not isolating poetry from political action but being careful to discriminate between the two. Stevens's poems of order were (as he put it in the jacket statement) "confronting the elimination of established ideas" and exploring the uses of ambiguity—not (as later New Critics or some deconstructionists would have it) as the purely literary function of a text, but (as Burke would have it) as a function of the site where texts may—or may not—affect our lives.

Stevens wrote the jacket copy after he had written both *Ideas of Order* and "Owl's Clover." It should be read as one conclusion made possible by that body of work and not as a stable foundation on which the poems stand. In the ideas of order Stevens was writing into his poems of 1934–1935, he left the power of the ideas tenuous and their duration brief. "Table Talk" asserts the randomness of all our orders ("One likes what one happens to like"), and "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" presents a vista of order so vast that it seems anything but orderly: "The garden flew round with the angel, / The angel flew round with the clouds." That "things go round and again go round," Stevens admits, has "rather a classical sound," but that orderly music should not lull us into complacency or blind us to a world where things are not so orderly. In "A Room on a Garden" he is more explicit, asserting that "order is the end / Of everything." With a long tradition of literary gardens behind him, Stevens rejects "the law of hoes and rakes," welcoming an order that is not imposed but "perceived in windy quakes / And squalls." As for Marianne Moore, truth for Stevens is no formal thing, no Apollo Belvedere; against such stasis Stevens reiterates the necessity of permitting chance and variance into our all too orderly worlds: the gardener might "espy" the truth in the "lilies' stately-statued calm," but he might conduct his search more fruitfully "in this fret / Of lilies rusted, rotting, wet / With rain."

Other poems complicate this sense of the emptiness of old ideas of order with a sense of the difficulty of creating new ones—or

with a recognition of how a new order, as open to disorder as it might be, may be infected by the old. In "Lions in Sweden" Stevens abjures the quest for "sovereigns of the soul" yet recognizes that the soul rejecting those absolute values (whether, as Stevens's language implies, monetary, political, or purely theoretical in nature) is itself composed of those values and "hankers after sovereign images." In "Polo Ponies Practicing" Stevens points out that the mere reiteration of a cry against an established order (such as we get in "Gray Stones" and "Winter Bells") may become stultifying itself: "The constant cry against an old order, / An order constantly old, / Is itself old and stale." Repeated without conviction, even the impulse to rebel against authority becomes an orthodoxy. Similarly, in "Hieroglyphica," a minor poem that looks forward to "Parochial Theme," the opening poem of *Parts of a World*, Stevens satirizes the poet's detached and ineffectual calls for change.

Let wise men piece the world together with wisdom
Or poets with holy magic.
Hey-di-ho.

"Piece the world together, boys," Stevens would say in "Parochial Theme," "but not with your hands," emphasizing his distrust of poets whose "halloo, halloo, halloo" (their "descant of a self") drowns out the voices of "those whom the statues torture and keep down" even as those halloos offer a freshening of life.

Stevens draws a fine line in *Ideas of Order* between order and disorder, and he fears the stultifying suppressions of the former as he fears the anarchic energies of the latter. In the major poems of the volume he tries to describe the tenuous place of what he will come to call "sensible ecstasy," a place where ambiguities hover unresolved and the mind offers only tentative or self-canceling ways of ordering its world—a place where Granville Hicks would not permit Kenneth Burke to dwell. Stevens visited that place in "Stars at Tallapoosa," the poem in *Harmonium* that most anticipates "The Idea of Order at Key West," itself the poem in *Ideas* that delineates that place most clearly (which is to say, paradoxically, most ambigu-

ously). Both poems show us what Stevens called in the "Adagia" the "mind in the act of defending us against itself"—or what he noted in his commonplace book as "*littérature contre la littérature*"; but the two poems were written in radically different historical circumstances. The lesson of "The Idea of Order at Key West" may seem universal, but to suggest that Stevens's associations of his ideas of ambiguity with Key West and Ramon Fernandez were not casual, I'd like to consider what the historical circumstances of the poem's gestation might have been.

"The Idea of Order" was first published in October 1934 in a group of eight poems that also included "Lions in Sweden" and "Evening Without Angels." Stevens had been named vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company the previous February, and during that month he attended the premiere of Virgil Thomson's and Gertrude Steins's *Four Saints in Three Acts* at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. With its music of studied simplicity, its maddeningly repetitive text, cellophane stage set, and all-black cast, the opera seemed "delicate and joyous . . . all round" to Stevens, "an elaborate bit of perversity." Less enjoyable was the audience of Hoon-like esthetes: "There were, however, numerous asses of the first water in the audience. New York sent a train load of people of this sort to Hartford: people who walked round with cigarette holders a foot long, and so on. After all, if there is any place under the sun that needs debunking, it is the place where people of this sort come to and go to." As his "Polo Ponies Practicing" would suggest, Stevens felt that while the production of the opera flouted convention in every way, the audience simply repeated a conventional set of radical gestures. The gestures seemed especially irrelevant in Hartford during 1934, where (as Stevens explained), "because of the depression, there are so many burglars about that, instead of living in a neighborhood that is poorly lighted, the neighborhood is in reality brilliantly lighted."

Stevens attended the opera on 8 February, received his promotion on the fifteenth, and a few days later left for one of his annual business and pleasure trips to Key West. That place, which func-

tioned in Stevens's private mythology as an enclave both antiliterary and economically extravagant, might have seemed the perfect antidote to both the depressed conditions of Hartford and the pretensions of the New York esthetes. But it was neither. During previous visits to Florida Stevens had seen crowds of men out of work who roamed the streets and slept on the porches. When he returned in February 1934 there was not much order at Key West, and then not only due to the depression. Across the water a revolution was taking place in Cuba. Stevens described the American military presence to his wife.

Owing to the disturbed conditions in Cuba there have been warships in port here for a good many months. At the moment, the *Wyoming* is lying at anchor out near the Casa Marina. The men from this great vessel and from others that are in the basin at the Navy Yard come on shore in large numbers and from about four o'clock until all hours of the night they are walking up and down the streets. In Florida they have prohibition under the state laws. The result is that these men flock to ice-cream shops and drugstores and in general look like a lot of holiday-makers without any definite ideas of how to amuse themselves. Key West is extremely old-fashioned and primitive. The movie theatres are little bits of things. Well, last night it seemed as if the whole navy stood in the streets under our windows laughing and talking.

The "disturbed conditions in Cuba" dated back to McKinley and the Spanish American War, after which the island became a protectorate of the United States. In 1902 Cuba became a sovereign state, but the Platt Amendment to its constitution guaranteed the U.S. the right to intervene in its affairs. Those affairs were almost constantly troubled, and U.S. forces intervened several times, often at the instigation of revolutionary factions who needed leverage against the current regime. In September 1933, when the Cuban economy was on the verge of complete collapse, Fulgencio Batista led a takeover by the army, and the American ambassador called for U.S. troops to intervene. Roosevelt refused to do so, but twenty-