

Wallace Stevens's "Necessary Angel of Earth" at Work in Three Paintings

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Preparing to deliver his famous dictum that "all art constantly aspires to the condition of music" (106), Walter Pater claimed that "each art may be observed to pass into the condition of some other art" (105). For Pater, it was a perfect unity of form and subject matter that makes music the highest art, and it was a compatibility of the matter in a given work with the form of a different genre that permits a blurring of the boundaries between them. The nature of this blurring has generated much critical commentary over the years, providing a helpful window onto the nature of art of individual works.

The illumination literature has received from these studies has derived in part from the ability of language to make explicit the reference of one art to another. The ease with which language draws pictures, among other painterly functions, has formed between painting and poetry an especially bountiful kinship. At the same time, critic Fred Moramarco has discussed the way poems can meditate on paintings, making them new and extending their meaning (27-35). One poet whose work draws in many ways on the art of painting and who is, thus, frequently mentioned in studies of the two arts together is Wallace Stevens. In an essay on teaching Wallace Stevens, Charles Doyle talks about "the attempt by Stevens to emulate in words the methods of French impressionist painting" (193). Later in his essay, Doyle discusses Stevens's use of "painting as a metaphor to explore the distinction between things-as-they-are and any observer's perception of them" (200). Doyle lets this aspect of Stevens and the poet's mention of Franz Hals in 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' lead into a discussion of technique in the work of that artist and, finally, to comment on "how Stevens uses painting to wonderful effect in an endeavor to provide both color and objective distance for his energizing dialectic between 'things as they as they are' and 'the supreme fiction' (203). Glen MacLeod mentions a related theme in a similar context in his study of Stevens's influence on contemporary artists. Talking of similarities between the poet and artist Fairfield Porter, he writes

Both Porter and Stevens sought, in their art, to get in touch with 'reality.' This is not easily done. In order to see reality at all, the artist must strip himself bare of all rational or imaginative preconceptions, so that he will not 'impose' them on what he sees. (145)

Clearly Stevens enacts between poetry and painting the artistic symbiosis that Pater describes. In fact, he addresses the question head on in the essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" (*Necessary* 159-176).

In fact, the theme in Stevens's work that Doyle and MacLeod mention—that of the tension between reality as it exists in itself and what the mind makes of it—can tell us a great deal about both Pater's symbiosis and the individual paintings and poems engaged in it. When used as a perspective on those works, the theme, which is central to Stevens's *oeuvre* as a whole, delivers insights that we do not gain from either direct critical treatments of relations between the arts or Stevens's own essay on the subject. His poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" explores two issues raised by the theme, how we know what we know of reality and to what degree our perceptions distort reality. The poem was written in response to a still life painted in 1945 or '46 by French artist Pierre Tal Coat, a picture Stevens purchased sight unseen in 1949 that turned out to match well the workings of his mind as a poet (Filreis 346-363). According to art historian Michel Ragon, Tal Coat's pictures belong to a tradition of abstract paintings that, rather than constituting "an expression in themselves, without its being possible to assimilate them to any figurative recollection whatsoever, ... sometimes drew from the subject, later transposing their landscapes in a sort of naturalist symbolism." Painters in this tradition had in common a "shared concern for the transposition of naturalist elements" (Ragon 73). These painters, in other words, took as a starting point the world we recognize as our own. Furthermore, the middle 1940's produced in Tal Coat's career paintings more representational than his abstract "studies of movement" (as Stevens's art agent called them) of the late 40's that Stevens could have purchased but did not (qtd. in Filreis 359). It is as though in his acquisition the poet was not willing to sever all connection with the world of concrete things. In the Tal Coat still life, there are both a fundamental reality and an imaginative rendition of it; thus, it offered Stevens a context in which his artistic concerns could be at home.

Stevens wrote "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" within two weeks after he had received the painting from France (Filreis 354), foregrounding in its explorations the relationship between the immediate world and what one makes of it. In the poem, an angel tells the countrymen who surround it, "I am the necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, you see earth again. / Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set..." The angel brings us back to reality on its own terms, independent of what we have made of it. Yet, the angel is ephemeral. It is hard to stay fixed on reality in its own terms:

...Am I not,

Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man

Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am
gone ?

Not only is it hard to clear our heads of our imaginings about reality, but in this poem, reality, by virtue of its own nature, is apparelled or adorned. It is a figment of the mind, an apparition, and as such, fulfils our need for a meaning to life by conveying presence or even drama. Just as the bare land in "The Snow Man" contains "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," Stevens's necessary angel helps us hear the "tragic drone" of earth.

Rise liquidity in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said

By repetitions of a half-meanings. Am I not,
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment...

Embodying a nothing that is present is like embodying a half-meaning or like existing in lingerings rather than in things themselves. Stevens's famous snow man is incomplete in itself, and thus encourages the listener in the snow to find beauty in the empty winter scene; by the same token, Tal Coat's abstractions need a viewer to infer the physical realities they grew from and represent. His ephemeral necessary angel must be surrounded by the earthy Paysans whose perceptions it enhances in order to be perceived and, thus, to exist at all. The insubstantial nature of the necessary angel of earth contrasts ironically with the earthy nature of the imagining countrymen who distort earth, because, being necessary to each other, they partake of each other's natures. "I am one of you," the angel tells the Paysans. World and mind make a whole together. As Stevens would put it, though tentatively, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," published in the same year, "Real and unreal are two in one..." (349).

The acquisition process that brought Tal Coat's painting into Stevens's hands and immediately preceded the writing of "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" brings out another aspect of the poem that enacts this symbiosis between world and mind. Scholar Alan Filreis, an editor of Stevens's letters, has studied the correspondence between Stevens and Paule Vidal, the French art agent through whom Stevens purchased the painting. To begin with, Vidal sent from France to Hartford, Connecticut verbal descriptions of several paintings that she thought Stevens might like to buy. Next she sent sketches outlining the basic shapes in two of the Tal Coats she had described verbally. From these sketches, Stevens made his choice, basing his decision on the relations between objects that were all Vidal's sketch could convey, not on the nature of the objects themselves. Filreis argues convincingly that as a result, even when the painting itself arrived, Stevens thought of it as a study in

relationship; he thought of it, that is, as an abstract study. Thus, for Filreis, the poem studies the relations between the angel and the Paysans rather than these figures in themselves. They partake of each other's natures, existing only in relation to each other.

Later in his essay, Filreis discusses how it was that bowls and vases became angels and Paysans. He quotes Stevens's letter which explains to Vidal that he has changed the name of the painting to *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* ... (Filreis 363): "the angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it" (qtd. in Filreis 363). To explain the transformation, Filreis uses Stevens's correspondence with Irish poet and close friend Thomas McGreevy. While waiting for the arrival of the Tal Coat, Stevens got a letter from McGreevy in which he describes both a visit to his country home in Ireland and a doctor's recent prognosis following a minor operation; in the letter, he makes of himself a figure that is half substance, half ephemera. Furthermore, as a tribute to the recipient of the letter, McGreevy shares with him the roles of visitor-poet and resident-poet in the hometown. That is, in his letter, both poets are both visiting angel and Paysan. McGreevy's whimsical playfulness appears in Stevens's poem as a state in which, as Filreis puts it, "the very source of substance depicted is defined by its unwillingness to hold shape and solidity, or remain true to form" (368).

Filreis's invaluable illumination of the poem shows the way it transforms the illusory world conjured by the painting in terms of the circumstances which surrounded the painting in the real world. In its bifocal view, the poem brings together on one plane the world of illusion and the world of reality. Like the angels and Paysans which partake of each other's natures, the Tal Coat painting as evocation of bottles and bowls, and the Tal Coat painting as commercial product make one thing that enacts the interrelatedness of mind and world so central to Stevens's thought.

Stevens' ideas find echoes throughout the world of art, since even representational paintings involve some distance between an a priori reality and the artist's rendition of it. As we have seen, the poetic blending of the illusory world conjured by a painting and the world in which the painting exists as an art object is one manifestation of those ideas. What is more, some poems which adopt this strategy bring out the distance between the two worlds in the process of crossing it, as if something flexible in the nature of language is able to distinguish mind from world even as it defines them in each other's terms. British poet Walter de la Mare explores this tension in his poem "A Portrait" (1938), a response to two portraits of the Infanta (Princess) Margarita, daughter of King Philip IV of Spain. As does Stevens's poem de la Mare's responds not only to illusions created by paint but also to circumstances surrounding paint which is simply a malleable substance.

Approximately six and eight years after Margarita's birth on July 12, 1651, court artist Diego de Velazquez (b. 1599) painted two portraits of the child so that her cousin Leopold, to whom she was betrothed when she was born, could watch her as she grew (Brown 222). According to his biographer Jonathan Brown,

the issue at the centre of Velazquez' art...concerns his reevaluation of the importance of nature and the classical ideal of beauty for the process of artistic beauty... his great strength was his powerful approximation to the appearance of nature. (viii)

Velazquez violated ancient standards of beauty in order, as Shakespeare put it, to hold the mirror up to nature. That is, he favored reality over what man would make of it. His portraits of the Infanta feature detailed presentations of elegant, rich fabrics and convincing likenesses to each other and to portraits of the child's father.

Yet, when Walter de la Mare wrote his poem "A Portrait" in response to them, his focus was on real world circumstances that are missing from the portraits. As Brown tells us, little is known about Velazquez the man or his inner life (viii-ix). Furthermore, the Infanta is arranged so stiffly in her formal portraits that there is little sign of her inner nature either. De la Mare's poem expands on the paintings with biographical details that trigger imaginings about Margarita, ironically portraying her more fully and more accurately. The poet begins with details from the portraits, but six lines into the poem, he is imagining that Margarita is watching him. He calls her an eight-year old, taking her out of the ritualistic adult pose of the portraits, focusing on the child who is missing in the painting. He comments on "The ghost of her father in her placid stare./ Darkness beyond." Concentrating on what is absent in the painting, on nothing that is not there and the nothing that is, he fills the absence with his own inventions.

A moment she and I
Engage in some abstruse small colloquy —
On time, art, beauty, life, mortality!
But of one secret not a hint creeps out —
What grave Velasquez talked to her about;
And from that shadow not a clapper cries
Where now the fowler weaves his subtleties.

His imaginary interaction with the eight-year-old brings up the conversation between elusive painter and elusive child that must have taken place during her sitting. At the point, the web of agreements between the adults of the child's life, her father, her painter, and her future father-in-law and/or husband suddenly emerges from the shadows of the painting (and, yes, she is painted against a dark background in both paintings). De la Mare helps us to see the adult arrangements that have resulted in the stiff pose of the painting, that have snared her and her future as a fowler traps his prey. A later version of the poem (1946) ends with the lines

Darkness beyond; bold lettering overhead:
 LINFANTE, MARGUERITE, there I read;
 And wondered—tongue-tied mite, and shy no doubt —
 What grave Velazquez talked to her about.

The poet's gesture toward what is missing in the painting is made more emphatic in the later version. The bold lettering reiterates the effect of the stiff pose and the entrapping title of Princess. But in the same line, the poem softens into retrospection: "I read;/ And wondered." The poem then gives us a characterization of the child that the painting can only, unintentionally, imply: "tongue-tied mite, and shy, no doubt," the "no doubt" heightening our sense that the speaker is simply musing, feeling no need to stay with what he knows to be true. At the same time, moving the mention of grave Velazquez to the poem's last line emphasizes its pun: what grave did Velazquez talk to her about ... her dress? her station? her future marriage? her portrait? The poem permits us to extrapolate along with the poet as we will.

The poet's extrapolations lie not only in his imaginings but even in the factual listing with which he begins, where he combines details from two portraits of the child painted roughly two years apart. In the end, the poem's title brings us back to Stevens. De la Mare has written his own portrait of two portraits. We are several times removed from the reality behind it. Still, the questions he asks move us toward it even as they point to its absence. De la Mare's Margarite wears the detailed and heavy garments of Velazquez's painting. Yet, like Stevens's snow man and his necessary angel of earth, she is

... an apparition apparelled in
 Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
 Of [her] shoulder and quickly, too quickly, [She is] Gone [.]

Stevens's symbiosis between world and mind obtains as much in Margarita as in his own necessary angel of earth. In Stevens's poem, the circumstances that shaped its narrative are not discernible. It took a scholar familiar with the poet's letters to illuminate the poem with those circumstances, suggesting that for Stevens, the appeal of abstraction was stronger than it was for de la Mare. To a poet for whom the power of the mind compensated for an absent God, a poem based on spatial relationships would have little need to reveal its sources in the concrete world.

De la Mare, on the other hand, hints more overtly at the circumstances behind his portrait that help to shape it. Perhaps it is because he is championing their victim, not just portraying her. The relationships he explores—social rather than spatial—have a tremendous impact on the child they entangle and a moral dimension that would make abstracting from them an extension of their unfairness. Nonetheless, for both poets, the necessary angel of earth, whether as epistemological or as moral agent, is at work in their art, simultaneously

ephemeral and concrete, conflating contradictory worlds. In poems about paintings, the necessary angel of earth operates at several removes from his earthly subject, using this distance to discover it, as Stevens said in another poem, "more truly and more strange" ("Tea" 355).

Theorists on the relationship between painting and poetry speak to these readings. Bonnie Costello writes specifically about Stevens, focusing on his use of painterly qualities in poetry to escape the discursiveness and rhetoricity of language in his poetry. Painting, for Stevens, touched into his own "yearning for the conditions of immanence, unity, presentness, and the incarnation of imagination in materiality" (69). Associating metaphor with the literary qualities she feels Stevens was fleeing, Costello sees the poet as attempting to create in his poetry a replacement for metaphor by fusing "the visible and the invisible in a most uncompromising fashion. His name for that fusion is the figure" (79). She later elaborates on "the figure": "The objectification of a reimagining without the evasions of metaphor, without rhetoricity, is the *figure*, the primary condition of painting." The figure appeals for Stevens to "presymbolic sensation rooted in unconscious emotion; direct unity of sensation and imagination" (80). Costello addresses the poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" as a failure to create such a figure because, iconographic in nature, it invites interpretive discourse, and she includes Stevens's poems about beholders of paintings in that failure, since their freedom from rhetorical statement remains hypothetical and discursiveness remains in them a dominant mode (77). Thus, it is likely that she would include de la Mare's poem in the failure as well.

Still, much in Costello's definitions applies to Stevens's angel as we have considered him here. Certainly he fuses visible and invisible, and, embodying an abstract principle about relationship (an aspect of mind) in a dramatic presence who speaks in the poem and carries a sort of immanence in the day-to-day lives of the Paysans, he represents "the incarnation of imagination in materiality" (69). Certainly he is well-unified by the principle informing him, even if his unity is that of the icon. Furthermore, we might challenge Costello on the strictness with which she seeks to separate the Stevensian figure from any discursiveness. Pater agrees with her that art "is thus always striving to be independent of the mere intelligence, to become a matter of pure perception" (108). However, his sense of

ideal examples of poetry and painting [are] those in which the constituent elements of the composition are . . . welded together [so as to] present on single effect to the 'imaginative reason,' that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol. (108-109).

If we soften Costello's stance a bit with Pater's idea that poems and paintings

inevitably contain elements of intellect, she seems to speak quite well for both Stevens's angel and de la Mare's *Margarite* as painterly figures.

Werner Senn, in an essay addressing contemporary poems on paintings, emphasizes not the similarity between poems and paintings, but their difference, finding in painting a silence that poetry can "speak." He focuses on the problem of

striking otherness of the painter's art, and of the consequent need for poetic strategies of a particular nature to render adequately and persuasively in words the experience of the permeating silence and stillness of the painting. (182).

Senn takes the title of his essay from another by Howard Nemerov in which that poet says that both poets and painters "want to reach the silence behind the language, the silence within the language." Poems about paintings, says Nemerov, speak not about the paintings themselves but about "the silence of the paintings; and where the poet was lucky his poem will speak the silence of the painting" (qtd. in Senn 182). Language here contains or masks silence, but it also breaks it, but obstacle to and agent of expression. Language is necessary to transcend itself. Paintings are similarly ironic in their simultaneous silence and potential eloquence. However, the important point here is that for Nemerov and Senn, poems about paintings speak what the paintings suggest but do not say. Certainly de la Mare's poem is well described by this theory, and Stevens's angel gives "watery words" to the "tragic drone" of earth, an incomprehensible sound if not a silence. Furthermore, the angel in speaking expresses the silent abstract relationships in the *Tal Coat* painting that gave rise to the dramatic figures of Stevens's poem. The meanings of these paintings are clearly extended and expressed by the poems that address them. There are theories in place that describe what we learn by seeing these poems in light of Stevens's tension between world and mind. Furthermore, in speaking what is silent or latent in the background of each painting and in achieving a painterly "figure," both poems strengthen Pater's claim that the arts aspire to each other's conditions.

But it is in an aspect of Stevens's ideas not yet mentioned here that his tension takes us beyond these theories: the possibility that seeing reality as it is in itself will empower us to experience it as we would have it be, as a product, that is, of our imagination. Glen MacLeod touches into this aspect of Stevens when he discusses why both the poet and artist Fairfield Porter strove to see reality stripped of imaginative adornment for a reason: they

avidly sought such clarity not as an end in itself, but because its could serve as a firm foundation to support a loftier, more spiritual vision. Their shared aesthetic goal was to capture the miraculous occurrences in everyday

life, the serendipitous moments when the ordinary suddenly takes on extraordinary significance. (145)

For Stevens, these moments—literary descendents of Wordsworth's "spots of time" (272)—are acts of the mind or imagination on elements of reality as it really is. elements like those named in the poem "Of Modern Poetry": "a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman/Combing." This poem defines modern poetry as "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice." For Stevens, modern poetry enacts a search process in which it produces "Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses." These rightnesses come suddenly and they are temporary in nature; they are moments of perfection or transcendence which must be recreated repeatedly, for the mind passes beyond them after making them.

Stevens's angel surrounded by Paysans is "seen for a moment" The speaker in de la Mare's poem describes Marguerite's emergence from the canvas into life as similarly short-lived: "A moment she and I / Engage in some abstruse small colloquy - / On time, art, beauty, life, mortality!" Both poems pass through momentary rightnesses. And indeed, Pater offers us such moments as well in the essay in which he studies the aspiration of the arts toward each other. He studies how paintings from the school of Giorgione blend form and matter smoothly, capturing in its subject matter the sudden act, the rapid transition of thought, the passing expressing—these he arrests with that vivacity which Vasari has attributed to him." Pater goes on to say of

the highest sort of dramatic poetry, that it presents us with a kind of profoundly significant and animated instants, a mere gesture, a look, a smile, perhaps – some brief and wholly concrete moment – into which, however, all the motives, all the interests and effects of a long history, have condensed themselves, and which seem to absorb past and future in an intense consciousness of the present. Such ideal instants the school of Giorgione selects . . . exquisite pauses in time, in which, arrested thus, we seem to be spectators of all the fulness of existence, and which are like some consummate extract or quintessence of life. (118)

These moments which arrest time contain all the elements of history, transcending reality on its own terms even as they embrace it. They offer an ideal created by painting that aspires to the condition of music, transgressing its own bounds. Perhaps we can say that poems that respond to paintings incur a similar propensity for moments that both embrace and transcend reality on its own terms, as though the painting is the reality in itself and the poem responding to it is the act of the mind passing through a sudden rightness that other poems will recreate. Stevens ends his poem "Credences of Summer" by describing a play

that produces such a rightness

In which characters speak because they want
To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,
Free, for a moment from malice and sudden cry,
Complete in a completed scene, speaking
Their parts as in a youthful happiness. (292)

In "Of Modern Poetry," he has told us the poet is an actor; perhaps "Credences of Summer" gives us another version of the sudden rightness that poetry can achieve. Like Pater's moments "containing all the interests and effects of a long history," the scene at the end of "Credences of Summer" is "complete." And, like Pater's moments, it is ideal: the characters are doing what they want in a state of freedom and happiness. Stevens is honest that the scene is exactly that—a work of art in which the actors act *as* in a youthful happiness. He ends with simile to distinguish his play from reality on its own terms, and, to honor it as necessary angel. Because he does, it lifts him above reality in a scene—perhaps we might think of it as a painting—rendered by a poem as the two genres come together. Perhaps we might think of it as a special transcendence that poems about paintings can achieve

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