"Wallace Stevens and the New York School"

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Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism

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Coda
Wallace Stevens of the New York School

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My title for this brief, whimsical coda is not actually "Wallace Stevens and the New York School" but, rather, "Wallace Stevens of the New York School." I want to write less about Stevens' influence on, for instance, John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara than about Stevens (although he was older than these then-emergent poets) as a kind of cohort, operating in the early 1950s in a parallel universe of New York School-style non-narrative discontinuity and I-do-this-I-do-that seriality—a mode that derived from some of the same sources but separately, by way indirectly of modern and contemporary painting more than directly through contemporary poetry. In the end, my purpose is to construct a sample of New York School Stevens.

As the foregoing chapters have suggested, Stevens had always been taking the train into New York from Hartford, but this habit really accelerated in the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1951 alone, this otherwise reticent person (1) read at the YMHA Poetry Center (we know it now as the 92nd Street Y); (2) lectured at the City College of New York; (3) gave an acceptance speech at the National Book Awards ceremony (he won for The Auroras of Autumn); (4) spoke at a banquet given by the Poetry Society of America; and (5) gave a lecture on poetry and painting at the Museum of Modern Art.

A week after Stevens gave the MoMA lecture, Monroe Wheeler wrote a letter asking Stevens if they could print it (Braeau 189-90). Stevens put Wheeler in touch with Alfred Knopf, his publisher, and Knopf and MoMA's staff both felt it was time to put out a book of Stevens' essays and talks. And so, in a very real sense, the occasion of the MoMA lecture, "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting," made the book The Necessary Angel possible—that is, made possible Stevens' foray into critical/theoretical prose.

Stevens could have given a poetry reading at MoMA, but Wheeler had heard from the influential curator and art critic James Thrall Soby (who lived in Hartford and was at the Athenaeum there but also worked at and with MoMA and spent ample time in New York) that Stevens loved to wander the New York streets, stopping in at sometimes quite small, out-of-the-way galleries and a few carefully planned visits to archives and art museums. So Wheeler asked Stevens to talk about "what a poet feels about
painting" (qtd. in Brazeau 1990, italics added). This was an interesting way of phrasing and framing the request, since Stevens was already infamous for having lots of ideas but not many "feelings" about visual art.

Later Wheeler remembered thinking that "finally [Stevens] ... didn’t know a great deal about painting" (qtd. in Brazeau 1990), but he meant academically—and was not aware of the actual extent to which Stevens pore over art magazines, dropped in at galleries on every visit to the city, was writing letters knowingly about fairly new painters, and had for years been engaged in a regular correspondence with his dealers (a father and daughter) in Paris, exploring especially the inexpensive, war-disrupted postwar market for paintings he bought sight-unseen. I have published several essays about the complex semiotics of this indirect process and its connection to both wartime and cold-war-era politics. In sum, it has been my view that Stevens' version of Serge Guilbault's thesis that the postwar period was a time when New York stole the idea of Modern Art from Paris was something of a reversal of and a refusal to flow in the expected direction: for his own paintings, Stevens had always assumed he had to be looking to New York, but just when (in what we now generally understand as a triumphant act of economic super-ascendancy) everyone started to look to New York, he more than ever looked to Paris.

An example: for months, by mail he tried to ascertain what a certain painting he coveted looked like—having only the words of his Parisian dealer (writing in French, of course—a language secondary for the poet) and several simple abstract sketches of the outlines and forms of this particular still life. Sometime during the process—and I found evidence that it was certainly before the painting itself arrived in Hartford and he laid eyes on it for the first time—he wrote a poem bearing the same title as the one that he had informally used in the painting, based on his dealer's verbal descriptions of it. The poem is a human narrative emerging from the mere forms of the painting he had only known through translated hasty epistolary language written for commercial purposes. When the painting arrived, he was indeed delighted by it—but it less than ever resembled the painting rendered formally in the poem.

All this was exciting, but it was not New York—which is to say, in the Stevensian mind, it was not reachable by train. It was not to be walked, paced, visited, digressed into.

Then, soon after, came the MoMA invitation. The prospect of an art-world audience. The buzz of the New York art world in 1951. There were poetry-world people there, of course, but this was different: he had been invited into a contemporary aesthetic realm he had known mostly by way of analogy—poetry is to painting as X is to Y. Had Frank O'Hara been already working at MoMA by then, he would have been just the type to be in that audience—the poet as member of the contemporary art community. O'Hara arrived—to a celebratory mock-tourist-junket drive around Manhattan—on a hot day in August 1951, just a few months too late to catch Stevens. Was

John Ashbery—who was one instigator of that summertime joy ride—there at MoMA to hear Stevens? I will inform you in a moment.

I think Stevens' MoMA talk was a turning point in his aesthetic Americanism—in what I am somewhat puckishly here calling the New York School Stevens.

If in his resistance to the flow of modern painting's postwar economic and cultural standing from Paris to New York, he had developed a Stevensian abstractness in his response to what had been put on the canvas—thrice removed from the presence of the actual painted surface, his imagination of modern and contemporary painting could fully tend toward pure form (shape, color, formal idiom, decreed symbolism)—now, on the other hand, he could have the painting's surface right there in front of him, the surprise of the painted-on, the action implicit in the analogy between setting a word or phrase onto a page in a poem's line, and dabbing, stroking, sticking, adding to, even dripping (although he did not incline to Pollock).

If one is looking for the drama of this late transition in the lecture itself—in "The Relations Between Poetry and Painting"—one will be disappointed. Its categorizations are smart, but a bit stiff, a bit too predictably academic. Its art-world references are mostly old, not new. But I want to suggest that in context—as a cry of its occasion—it contains loads of energy and was a kind of proto-New York School-ish coming out, a re-orientation and re-entry.

We now read the printed text of a paper—and the careful, trite ordering of its presentation, the dullish pattern of its argument, prevents us from hearing what the MoMA hearers would have heard. Indeed, given how such talks are ascertained, the New York art talk—a remarkable instance of it, I think—its tendency (by the phrase) toward giddily manifesto, pleasurably overstated dictum—is perhaps all that they really heard. Extract this rhetoric and present it to the post-war art-world denizens of 1951 and it would, I think, seem to him or her—whether abstract expressionist, serial artist, proto-Beat, or trendy art critic—to fit remarkably well into the ambient linguistic noise at some gallery opening:

"I see planes bestriding each other . . . ." [quoting Cézanne]. (CPP 750)

"... purified, aggrandized, fateful." (CPP 748)

"... a generation that is experiencing essential poverty in spite of fortune." (CPP 748)

"The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind. . . ." (CPP 748)

"... modern art is . . . bigoted. . . ." (CPP 745)
"... too little or too much punctuation... have nothing to do with being alive." (CPP 746)

"The senses deform..." [quoting Braque]. (CPP 741)

"... I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of [art's] process" [quoting Henry James]. (CPP 747)

"... the same sense of exquisite realization and the same sense of being modern and living." (CPP 746)

"The world about us would be desolate except for the world within us." (CPP 747)

"... in France,... theory... is a normal activity... [and the artist] must engage in such activity or be extirpated." (CPP 749)

"There are imitations within imitations..." (CPP 747)

"I wanted to be able to see anything as a composition..." [quoting Leo Stein]. (CPP 742)

"... a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things are joined together, that we can reach them." (CPP 750)

"... vital self-assertion in a world in which nothing but the self remains, if that remains." (CPP 748)

"... reality is... the momentous world of [art]. Its instantaneities are the familiar intelligence..." (CPP 750)

The artist "need not display... authenticity in orphic works." (CPP 748)

"One is better satisfied by particulars." (CPP 740)

Had Ashbery been in the audience, he might have recognized his own emergent poetics: there is the non- or anti-orphic, there is the conveying of instantaneities, there is the satisfaction of particulars, there is the cognition that anything is available as composition, and doubts about the remnant self, and the familiar intelligence, and imitations within imitations, and there is the prodigious search for appearance.

Just to be certain Ashbery was not there, at MoMA in 1951, I asked him. He told me that he did not attend the talk, cannot now recall if he was aware of it or not, and is certain O'Hara was not there (O'Hara began at MoMA that fall). (Ashbery also reminded me that he had heard Stevens give a poetry reading at Harvard a few years earlier.)

Six months before Stevens spoke at MoMA, in August 1950, Ashbery in New York had written to O'Hara in Boston:

I've been reading tons of Wallace Stevens. Please open Parts of a World this instant and read a poem called "Yellow Afternoon." That poem has completely floored me with its greatness—every time I read it I am ready to turn in my chips and become an osteopath. (qtd. in Gooch 173)

A few months later, Ashbery mailed O'Hara a new poem, "Illustration"—which Brad Gooch, O'Hara's biographer, is not wrong to suggest is in part a rewriting of "Yellow Afternoon," although in the modernist-couplet form Stevens used in almost every other poem in Parts of a World, except "Yellow Afternoon." (And, of course, when Ashbery's first book, Some Trees, was published, including the poem "Illustration," it was greeted by public praise from O'Hara connecting him to Stevens: "the most beautiful first book to appear in America since [Stevens'] Harmonium" ["Rare Modern" 313].)

Much that is beautiful must be discarded
So that we may resemble a taller

Impression of ourselves. But how could we tell
That of the truth we know, she was

The somber vestment?

But he came back again as one comes back from the sun
To lie on one's bed in the dark, close to a face
Without eyes or mouth, that looks at one and speaks.

The first part of what you have just read is from "Illustration" (Selected Poems 18), the second from "Yellow Afternoon" (CPP 216). I am tempted to say that the end of the Stevens poem is Ashberyan: dour yet surreal (and thus antithetical in its downbeat selfless soliloquizing way) and open-ended: "that looks at one and speaks." (Shouldn't the poem go on to say what was spoken? No, because it does not matter. It is humanly moody about the inhumanity of what remains of the self; it is a meta-poem, asking "how can we tell that of the truth we know.")

I am being historical here—not anachronistic and, alternatively, not theoretical—and no effort is being made to assert, for instance, Ashbery's specific influence on Stevens. Moreover, despite the poem and speech I have mentioned and quoted, the New York School Stevens in the early fifties is
not to be found in the published poetry. Wallace Stevens, an old poetic dog resistant to new tricks, was not going to tell you in a poem where he got a sandwich for lunch on a hot Manhattan avenue, what hotel is best for a haircut, what literary magazines he is reading just now as he is writing, who in the art world is acting most ridiculously and therefore memorably. But I would suggest that if you read the letters from, say, 1948 through 1952, and concentrate on those describing especially his many New York visits, you will begin to witness a pre-writing of O’Hara’s Second Avenue or Ashbery’s “And You Know” or “Decoy.” “We are fond of plotting itineraries,” writes Ashbery in “Decoy,” “Seeking in occasions new sources of memories, for memory is profit / Until the day it spreads out all its accumulation, . . . / But until then foreshortened memories will keep us going” (Selected Poems 101). Let me end this coda with a sample of an I-do-this-I-do-that Stevens, strolling, contradictory, irritably loving New York’s stimulation, mixing art and perishables. My sample is drawn from less than ten pages (622–30) in the published Letters:

My day in New York was a particularly good one.
Salesmen disguised as catalogues get on one’s nerves.
At the Greek’s fruiterly I expect sapodillas and South Shore bananas and pineapples a foot high with spines fit to stick in the helmet of a wild chieftain.
Matisse has a collection of Dubuffet’s drawings.
A few hasty oysters in the hole in the ground at Grand Central.
Abstract sculptors should be totally abstract, not half so.
Why should I answer questions from young philosophers when I receive perfumed notes from Paris? What I really like to have from you is news about chickens raised on red peppers.
The main stack contains endless incubabula.
Your secret self will be enriched.
I am going to carry that freedom forward.
These are the two poles of feeling in New York now: fantasy on the one hand and realism on the other: evasion and evasion.
I cannot find out what has become of the poems, which makes me feel that they thought them too rotten to spend postage on them.
In Radio City they have erected a Christmas tree, fir or spruce.
The rink was crawling with skaters.
I go to a place on Ninth Avenue, Manganaro’s, for some Dago things, including grated Parmesan cheese.
I spent an hour at the Morgan looking at various things of Piranesi’s.
He is too much a man of taste to be a leader.
Duveen’s is a citadel of routine.
I am interested in arranging for a series of postcards.
I have seen no-one in New York.

I dropped into one or two bookshops where I know people.
We can have lunch and perhaps a little talk.
It is nice to feel that Christmas is not far behind us.
His things are prismatic raindrops.
Wildenstein has a larger collection of Courbet.
What a superb freedom it is to cut oneself loose from all ties and all errands and to carry no parcels.
In the small gallery one is always in danger of knocking things over with one’s elbows, particularly on a Saturday afternoon when one has more elbows than usual.
I go into a fruit store nowadays and find there nothing but the fruits du jour: apples, pears, oranges, I feel like throwing them at the Greek.
One is so homeless over here.
I spend the time walking in the open air.

WORKS CITED