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| Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) |
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| Wallace Stevens is recognized as one of America's greatest modernist poets, yet he was not widely celebrated for his poetry until the last years of his life in the early 1950s. Stevens was a private man who was in many ways quite different from his poetic contemporaries and the other great American modernist writers. His unusual trajectory as a poet was circumscribed by the relatively late age at which he began to publish, by his lack of foreign travel, by an at times unhappy marriage, and by his consuming work as an insurance lawyer and vice-president at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. Nonetheless, Stevens' poetic world was immense, and his verse exhibits his preoccupations with the nature of poetry itself and with the complex relationship of the mind, the imagination, and reality. Stevens published his *Collected Poems* in 1954 at the age of 75 to great acclaim and died the following year of stomach cancer. |
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File: WallaceStevens1948.jpg  Figure 1 Wallace Stevens, 1948. Photo by Sylvia Salmni  Source: http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/Stevens/stevens-photo.html  Wallace Stevens was born in Reading, Pennsylvania on October 2, 1879 to Garrett Barcalow Stevens, a prosperous lawyer, and Margaretha Zeller. On both sides of his family, Stevens was able to trace a long and influential American heritage, and through his mother's Dutch origins, he counted himself among the descendants of the first European child born in New Holland. Stevens attended Harvard University for three years as a ‘special student,’ meaning that he did not enrol to receive a degree. At Harvard, Stevens first began to write poetry, which especially in those early stages showed the influence of the Romantics and the Aesthetes. Through his interest in poetry, he also befriended the philosopher George Santayana, who was then teaching at Harvard. After university, Stevens followed his father's wishes and attended the New York Law School. During a visit home to Reading, he met Elsie Kachel and was struck by her beauty. His family, however, frowned upon the match because they saw Kachel as uneducated and lower-class. Nonetheless, Stevens married her five years later in 1909, which caused a permanent rift between him and his father, who soon passed away in 1911. The Stevenses moved to New York, where Wallace worked first as a journalist and then a lawyer. The young couple rented an apartment from Adolph Weinman, a sculptor who made a bust of Elsie that was most likely later used as his model for the famous 1916-1945 ‘Winged Mecury‘ American dime.  File: MercuryDime.jpg  Figure 2 ‘Mercury ‘ dime, or ‘Winged Head Liberty’ dime.  Source: http://www.ngccoin.com/NGCCoinExplorer/SubCategory.aspx?SubCatID=31&PopSubCat=Mercury-Dimes  Stevens, now more established, was able to give more of his time to writing poetry, and his first significant publication was four poems in the November 1914 issue of *Poetry Magazine* when he was thirty-fie years old*.* By 1916, Stevens had moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he would remain for the rest of his life as an executive and later vice-president of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. His first book of poetry, *Harmonium,* was published in 1923 by Alfred Knopf, who would remain Stevens' main publisher for most of his career. This early volume shows Stevens' interest in French Symbolism, pure poetry, Imagism, and abstract painting. *Harmonium* came out when Stevens was forty-four years old, an uncommonly advanced age for a serious poet to release a first book. The volume did not sell more than a hundred copies, but it was positively reviewed by Marianne Moore in the *Dial* and contained several poems that are now among Stevens' best known: ‘The Snow Man,’ ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream,’ ‘Sunday Morning,’ ‘Anecdote of the Jar,’ ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier,’ and ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’ Over the next years, Stevens did not publish any poetry, due mainly to his commitments to the insurance company and to his family, which now included a daughter, Holly Bright, born in 1924. Stevens did not drive, and so he walked 2.5 miles to and from work each day, sometimes composing new poetry as he walked. To commemorate his life in Hartford, there is now an official ‘Wallace Stevens Walk’ in that city that retraces his steps from the insurance company at 690 Asylum Avenue to his former home at 118 Westerly Terrace. Locations of interest along the walk are marked by thirteen Connecticut granite stones, each of which are inscribed with a stanza from ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’  File: StevensWalk.jpg  Figure 3 The Wallace Stevens Walk, in Hartford Connecticut.  Source: http://www.stevenspoetry.org/stevenswalk.htm  When Wallace Stevens reemerged as a poet in 1931, he first re-released *Harmonium* with the addition of fourteen new poems. In 1936, Stevens published *Ideas of Order*, which was more successful but at the same time stirred controversy following a negative review in the Marxist journal *New Masses* that charged him with indifference toward the social plight of the working classes during the Great Depression. Stevens was certainly concerned with such social issues, but his poetry in *Ideas of Order* was centred on issues of philosophy, perception, the purpose of poetry, and the effects of the loss of religious belief. He did try to reflect the social value of art in his next short collection, *Owl's Clover* (1936), but the attempt was largely unsuccessful and Stevens did not reprint the book. During the mid-1930s, Stevens travelled extensively for work and was especially impressed by the Florida Keys and the small group of American writers who often gathered there, including Robert Frost, Archibald MacLeish, and Elizabeth Bishop. Famously, it was in Key West that he lost a fistfight with Ernest Hemingway in which Hemingway knocked Stevens down several times and Stevens broke his right hand punching Hemingway in the jaw.    Stevens' next major poetry collections followed in rapid succession: *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), and *Transport to Summer* (1947), which includes the important long poems ‘Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction’ and ‘Esthétique du Mal.’ Stevens' poetry during this period is marked by a much different poetic style than his earlier verse and a greater meditative turn toward philosophical problems of consciousness and perception. He saw poetry as a philosophical vehicle exceptionally well equipped to explore these issues and also to question the nature and purpose of poetry itself in a self-reflexive manner. Critical appreciation for Stevens' skill grew during this period, and he was elected in 1946 to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1950, he released *The Auroras of Autumn*, which included ‘Large Red Man Reading,’ ‘A Primitive Like an Orb,’ and ‘An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.’ For this volume, Stevens was awarded the second annual Bollingen Prize for the year's best work of American poetry, the National Book Award, and the Poetry Society of America's Gold Medal.    In 1951 followed *The Necessary Angel*, a collection of essays on his central theme of reality and the imagination, and in 1953 Faber and Faber released Stevens' *Selected Poems* in England. The culmination of Stevens' writing career was his *Collected Poems*, which was published in 1954 by Knopf and included a section of new poetry entitled *The Rock*. Critical acclaim surrounded the release of the *Collected Poems,* and Stevens was invited to read his poetry publicly at several venues. Stevens was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and a second National Book Award for the collection, and he received honorary doctorates and even declined an offer from Archibald MacLeish to be the Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry at Harvard for 1955-56. The following year, in 1955, Stevens died of stomach cancer. Even in death, he proved a private and mysterious figure because of claims made by a Catholic priest, Father Arthur Hanley, that Stevens converted and was baptized before his death, which was adamantly denied by his daughter Holly.    Stevens took an intense joy in life and in meditating upon the problems of poetry and our perceptions of the world. His poetry is full of seasons, colours, animals, imagination, symbols, and food. He took pleasure in these things even as he pleasured in art, in the sound of words, and in the importance of poetry. As Stevens argued at the end of his career in his 1955 acceptance speech for the National Book Award for his *Collected Poems*, ‘We can never have great poetry unless we believe that poetry serves great ends.’ Selected List of Works:Poetry *Harmonium* (1923, Revised edition 1931)  *Ideas of Order* (1936)  *The Man With the Blue Guitar* (1937)  *Parts of a World* (1942)  *Transport to Summer* (1947)  *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950)  *The Rock* (1954; published as a section of new poetry in *The Collected Poems*)  *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954; Knopf edition)  *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose* (1957; Revised edition 1989)  *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play* (1971)  *Collected Poetry and Prose* (1997; Library of America edition) Essays *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951) Letters *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (1966)  *The Contemplated Spouse: The Letters of Wallace Stevens to Elsie* (2006) |
| Further reading:  (Bates)  (Bloom)  (Brazeau)  (Buttel)  (Cook)  (Kermode)  (Lentricchia)  (Morris)  (Morse)  (Richardson)  (Richardson, Wallace Stevens: The Later Years: 1923-1955)  (Riddel)  (Sharpe)  (Stevens)  (Vendler)  (Vendler, Wallace Stevens) |