

The Rhetoric of Plain Fact: Stevens' "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters"

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The poem is the cry of its occasion,
Part of the res itself and not about it.
(“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” XII 1-2)

Metaphysicians have often been called mere poets, especially by the logical positivists of the early years of this century. It is generally assumed that poetry is unable to constitute the real, that logocentric theories are fallacious. In such an atmosphere, it is not often that a poet tries to address ontological questions. Wallace Stevens is an exception to the rule, at least in that he tried to explore the limits of how words behave in either constituting or evading the barest sense of fact. In doing so he was not exploring logic or ontology as a *subject*; but at the level of his experimentation, it is hard to tell whether he is unbuttoning and rebuttoning the very ontology of language, or merely the most fundamental structures of rhetoric.

Stevens' great poem about the poetry of ordinary things is “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”, which contains the lines I have used in the epigraph. Here, as he had often done before, Stevens approached a “plain sense of things”, wanting to “purge [him]self of anything false”.¹ Those who are familiar with Stevens' poetical/epistemological seasons know that this is a wintertime desire: in spring and summer, nature is too boisterous, changeable, multifarious, or overwhelming to be seen with the accuracy required. In midwinter, nature shrinks—sometimes to an accessible stillness, but also, sometimes, to a baffling nothingness, or to the stasis of pure abstraction. When that happens, at the still-point of midwinter, reality collapses into

¹ Or so he wrote to Bernard Heringman, then a graduate student at Columbia. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, Holly Stevens, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) p. 636.

something anti-poetic and unsatisfactory—a rigidity of thought in which the imagination has no part.

Now, this problem has usually been seen by critics not as if it were a problem for poetry, practically speaking, but either as a psychological problem for the poet himself or as an unfortunate metaphysical-epistemological condition in the poet's world. Frank Kermode, for instance:

Such a moment, of unattainable absolute zero, is anyways only to be imagined as a phase in a cyclical process. Language, always metaphorical, falsifies the icy diagram; only when that desire is satisfied do we grow tired of summer lushness and welcome the fall and winter again. So the plain sense continually suffers change, and if it did not it would grow rigid and absurd. It must change or it will simply belong “to our more vestigial states of mind”.²

Kermode sees it as a problem of nothingness, as a kind of ontological zero in the face of which nothing can be understood. This perception of nothingness is so discouraging from a humanistic perspective that we almost demand to see it as merely a point in a cycle, a fact which (like death) ought to be subsumed under a sense of the continuation of the cycle, the ongoingness of life and more easily perceived phenomena. Certainly there is much in Stevens' poetry which appeals exactly to this essentially romantic faith.

But just as often, Stevens spoke of this sense of nothingness as if it were a problem of understanding or knowledge, a lack that could be satisfied by some correct use of words.³ He often, and brilliantly, tried to satisfy this lack through metaphor: in “The

² "The Plain Sense of Things," in Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Burdick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 180.

³ An excellent discussion of the issue of nothingness and the rhetoric of negation is to be found in Barbara M. Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), particularly Chapter Three.

Plain Sense of Things” he spoke of the null point as the sense that “the greenhouse never so badly needed paint”, as the “silence of a rat come out to see”. Yet he also recognized that metaphor can evade or falsify the truth. In “Ordinary Evening”, for instance, he said,

We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself. (IX: 3-7)

In part, the question of whether to permit metaphor or not is a question of whether to recognize the imagination as essential to perception or not. This is essentially a question of whether to admit a romantic epistemology or not, a question as relevant today as it was in his time.⁴ For Stevens, who was forever ambivalent on this question, the task became not merely a problem of epistemological theory; rather, it became a practical rhetorical problem, a problem of trying to strip away the constant evasions, of trying to make the poem constitute a real form of experience itself, not merely a derivation or an explanation of it. Throughout his career, Stevens experimentally reconstructed language in as many ways as he could, exploring its most fundamental structures and trying to understand whether its evasions were avoidable or compensable. In “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters”, we can see some of his more successful rhetorical experiments. It is a poem that literally tries to be a poem of the res, “an alteration / Of words that was a

⁴ It might be objected that, by the lights of contemporary critical theory, what we used to call imaginative perception is merely unacknowledged political commitment. But at the same time we must admit that Theory represents an even more extreme acknowledgment of the theory of the primacy of the imagination. For if the imagination (lately called “subjectivity”) is ruled out of the picture, then nothing is perceived whether political or metaphysical. Whatever we assume, it remains that without a structuring imagination, we are left with a brute irredeemable facticity, a blank existential mystery arguing the failure of both logocentrism and any form of the *a priori*.

change of nature” (“Ordinary Evening” XXIX 14-15). I submit it as an object of study for what it can tell us about the resources of rhetoric.⁵

As a poem which explores the ability of language to posit or to name or to create, it continues certain logogenetic experiments he carried on in certain summer poems, such as “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”, in which Stevens had written about the sun as seen by the “ignorant man”, the sun which “must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be”. The sun, source of light, is Stevens’ chief image of the source of appearances, of pure unnamable phenomena.

But in the extremely cold winter of 1943⁶ it was time to write about the absence of the sun, about pure being. Like most of the midwinter poems, “No Possum” tries to redeem the sense of loss, the stasis and finality that comes when Nature stops and the mind reduces everything to pure thought. It is the kind of poem that might itself have been called an “Esthétique du Mal”. For Stevens had always seen that kind of reductive finality as an aesthetic evil, as a poverty (hence the title) of the spirit. This finality is the theme and the aesthetic problem of the poem.

This problem is stated with a rather unsatisfying discursiveness in line four: “Bad is final in this light”; its reversal is given, equally unconvincingly, in lines 19 and 20: “It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good”. But this is merely the poem's thesis statement; perhaps we should not expect poetry here. What is,

⁵ For another example, see my article “Metaphoric Structures in Wallace Stevens' “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”” in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 71 (1972), 321-335.

⁶ Joan Richardson says the poem is, on a thematic level, about deep disillusionment. Stevens began the poem in January of 1943, she says, when he was worrying about his daughter Holly's rebellions. Much against Stevens' wishes, Holly had dropped out of Vassar College. Stevens had helped her get a clerk's job at Aetna Life insurance Company, but he very much hoped she would go back to college in the fall. *Wallace Stevens, A Biography: The Later Years, 1923-1955*, (New York: William Morrow, 1988), p. 214, 224.

then, the rhetoric of the res? How can language show us how to name a plain sense of things? Shall we find here a language “untouched / By trope or deviation”, a language that goes “straight to the transfixing object”?

In fact we find three very different rhetorics. One of them, indeed, uses what we might expect: an entirely transparent and referential language. Almost entirely free of metaphor or decoration, it would satisfy the most rigorous of objectivist poets:

The field is frozen. The leaves are dry. (3)

The leaves hop, scraping on the ground. (12)

It is deep January. The sky is hard. (13)

The stalks are rooted firmly in ice. (14)

Of these six sentences, five use the static copula “is” with an adjective or a past participle, denoting some fixed condition or some process having come to stasis. One sentence denotes the first of only two actual events that occur in the landscape in the whole poem: the leaves hop, scraping on the ground. Perhaps there is a bare hint of metaphor in the word “hop”: if the leaves can hop, there is no need for a wind to move them. But there is little connotation here beyond emphasizing the stillness; these sentences merely provide the ground on which this landscape is constructed.

But Stevens was never satisfied with mere objectivity in language. There is a second rhetoric here which moves beyond mere referentiality into a kind of surrealism. At the same time he avoids hypostatizing abstract entities through a careful rhetoric of negation. The first two lines are an instance.

He is not here, the old sun,
As absent as if he were asleep. (1-2)

Though the sun is “not here”, its light somehow remains un-negated, so that “bad” can look “final” in it (l. 3). Other adjectives indirectly give us qualities of that light: the air is “bleak”, the fields are “frozen” and the sky is “hard”. The effect is that of a dull light diffused uniformly through the scene, without focus, brilliance, or source.

Lines 5-9, similarly, allow surreal metaphorical images but then negate or deny the vehicles of the metaphors, leaving their tenors as unnamed residuals.

In this bleak air the broken stalks
Have arms without hands. They have trunks

Without legs, or, for that, without heads.
They have heads in which a captive cry

Is merely the moving of a tongue. (5-9)

The idea of a “cry” is first proposed and then denied.⁷ It is “merely the moving of a tongue” in a head which both does and doesn't exist, on a body which is merely a stalk without legs or hands. Such language proposes a metaphor whose tenor is a human figure, but he too has been negated, or erased. At the same time, our sense of a perceiving poet as author of all these figures is erased in the flatness and seeming objectivity of the language.

However, there are other lines which are much less objective than those.

Snow sparkles like eyesight falling to earth,

Like seeing fallen brightly away. (10-11)

At last we have what sounds like a language appropriate to the “poetic”—the brilliance of metaphor, a sense of the poet manipulating images. Yet the pattern of denial and

⁷ Later Stevens would devote a whole poem, “The Course of a Particular,” to the cry of the leaves.

negation continues. Now the light is like eyesight falling or like seeing fallen: the reference to blindness points us to the loss of the sun, while the “sparkle” suggests an unsourced brilliance emanating somehow out of the cold. Referent and connotation thus reinforce and deny each other in an image that magically gives us both darkness and brilliance at the same time. And it is this fusion which is projected on the flat factuality of the scene as the poem returns to its most purely referential language: “The leaves hop, scraping on the ground”.

Juxtapositions like this explain, I think, how the poem manages to give a sense of transcendence to an otherwise dull scene. The trick is indeed a rhetorical one, an ingenious “alteration of words” which establishes more-than-physical presences. First Stevens transcends mere reality through metaphor; next, he denies or erases the vehicle of the metaphor, leaving a sense of a purer tenor behind, miraculously un-negated. The result is a sense of the scene which seeks “nothing beyond reality”, as “Ordinary Evening” puts it, yet includes the “spirit's alchemicana”.

One of the most interesting things to notice in the poem, however, is how Stevens deals with the theme of death, the obligatory element of the traditional winter-poem. Here we find the poem’s third rhetoric, an almost completely empty rhetoric consisting mainly of things which have little or no existence apart from language.

It is in this solitude, a syllable,
Out of these gawky flutterings,

Intones its single emptiness,
The savagest hollow of winter-sounds. (15-18)

There are many such lines in Stevens’ poetry, and for many critics they seem weak because almost entirely non-referential. But we should consider looking at such rhetoric with another attitude. The idea, after all, is to find words which hypostatize an intangible, the finality of stasis, what “The Snow Man” called the “nothing that is”. The

real error for Stevens would be in hypostatizing the conventional ghosts and spirits, false concretenesses. Stevens' words posit desacralized insubstantials—flutterings, emptinesses, hollows, syllables—empty shapes, meaningless sounds. Among them, one strong verb (“intones”) and one strong adjective (“savagest”) shock us into crediting them with existence. He calls them “winter-sounds”.

Nevertheless, Stevens might be accused of hypostatizing false entities here, were it not that he does it with a wink. For if we notice just how arbitrarily named these mysterious entities are, we know that such naming is only a witty game and that he does not mistake them for real essences. The game is revealed as soon as we try swapping around the nouns and adjectives. Suppose he had written, for instance, in place of lines 15 and 17,

It is in this emptiness, a syllable . . .
Intones its hollow solitude

or if line 18 had read, say, the “gawkiest syllables of winter-sound”, or the “savagest flutterings of solitude”, or maybe the “hollowest syllables of emptiness”. They would all, it seems to me, strike approximately the same note. I take this to mean that even as Stevens asserts the existence of these entities, his language denies its own claim to name the unnameable thing heard in the landscape. So that all that is left after the language in effect cancels itself is some residual object of all that “savagery”—a “syllable” which becomes a dominant underlying monotone. This poem calls it the “savagest hollow of winter-sound”; “Ordinary Evening” calls it the “big X of the returning primitive”; but what it actually is is beyond naming, perhaps beyond thinking. “The Plain Sense of Things”, a later poem, admits that it is merely a “blank cold”, in an “inert savoir”.

These three rhetorics suggest Stevens' rigorous efforts to keep language from falsifying the objects it proposes to the attention of the reader. The first is a purely referential, self-effacing language with ordinary objects. The second is a language which

permits metaphor, but then denies the metaphor's vehicle in an effort to leave the pure tenor as residual. The third is a purely connotational language which has the wit, however, to advertise its own arbitrariness as articulation, thus admitting its own inability to name. All of these languages, in one way or another, consciously efface or erase themselves as language claiming ontological status. At the same time they hope to leave behind a sense of their tenor, as an abiding residuum safely beyond the evasions of metaphor. This is a very different hope from that of the bald, abstract, discursive language which sets out the poem's thesis, and which pretends that entities ("bad" and "good") exist simply because language can name them. The poem thus demonstrates that the res includes more than physical objects, more than the conventionalizations and abstractions our language can name. As he put it in "Ordinary Evening":

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (XXXI 15-18)

But the poem does not stop here. There are four more lines amounting to a coda or a proof text, a "new oration of the cold" made possible by the brilliant particulars of the poem.

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.
Bright is the malice in his eye . . .

One joins him there for company,
But at a distance, in another tree. (21-24)

Rhetorically, this is a shift most of the way back to pure referentiality. The crow's rising up is only the second objective event of the poem (the first was the scraping of the leaves); out of so much stasis, this rising up is the sign of a miracle. Of course, risings up are, in traditional symbolism, just that. While the "rusty" color of his wings suggests

another brilliant flash of reflected light, it also suggests that, like the phoenix, he has been in a state of disuse a long time.

But the sudden shift toward symbolic events is only the first of five turns that make the poem's ending seem miraculous. The second is the sudden shift of voice in the next line. Rather than the discursive grammar of description and reportage, we suddenly have the exclamatory rhetoric of praise. The syntactical inversion of "Bright is the malice in his eye" quotes the folksong, "Black is the color of my true love's hair". And what is being praised? The malice, which (and this is the third turn) becomes the mal-ice: the bad, the cold. It renames the bad with the name of a human feeling, though it has now become an inhuman knowledge in the crow's eye. This is far better than saying, with mere abstract discursiveness, that it is "in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good". The crow already knows both bad and good; for him, malice and joy are the same.

The fourth turn is the shift of pronoun which allows the heretofore self-effacing poet to enter the scene. He speaks of himself as "one" who "joins him there for company", one who means to sympathize rather than merely to observe. The "one" is perhaps not literally the poet, who cannot fly; but nor is it clearly another crow (which would have required the word "another"). The ambiguous syntax, in effect, merges the two; the poet's sympathies, if not the poet himself, join the crow—and then, as if on second thought (and this is the fifth turn), the poet keeps himself, out of a sense of reticence and objectivity, "at a distance, in another tree".

Is this poem, then, about seeing things exactly as they are, about finding the "plain sense of things"? Not obviously. There are only three kinds of things in the poem, things with symbolic value that a purely imagistic poet could use. One imagines such a poet writing the poem in three lines:

The field is frozen. The leaves are dry. (The evil condition)

The leaves hop, scraping on the ground. (The cry of protest)

The crow looks rusty as he rises up. (The upward turn)

But this would not be Stevens' poem. What he has added is rhetoric. The result is a poetry in which the poet's participation in language amounts to a participation in nature, while negating itself as mere language. It is a primary example of "an alteration / Of words that was a change of nature", and a primary bit of data on the way our rhetoric creates our sense of the world.