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## An Optimistic Approach in the Select Poems of Wallace Stevens

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### Abstract

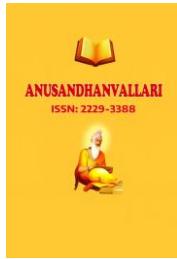
Several of Stevens's key poetic passages are on a deeper level, they shared an intense interest in the poetic process examined against a metaphysical background. But the similarities between them were entirely a matter of coincidence rather than influence, and the differences were far more profound than the similarities. Like all the 'influences' on Stevens except that of *Santayana* this one is overrated almost as soon as it is mentioned, as is Stevens's debt to French literature in general. He was throughout his life devoted to the French language and to the idea of France 'the centre of the world' as he says with rather absurd self-deprecation in the letter quoted above but neither the theory nor the practice of French poetry left any considerable mark on his work. As he once wrote, "denying the influence of Mallarme and Verlaine meant a good deal more to me... But I was never a student of any of these poets; they were simply poets and I was the youthful poet and to the general readers" (45). The great difference between his own poetry and that of the best French poets with whom he has been associated, Mallarm and Valery, is the firm hold on ordinary ways of thought, on what one might call common sense, that Stevens never abandoned and that Mallarme and Valery each in his way thought quite irrelevant to the concerns of poetry.

**Key Words:** Absurdity, Self-Effacement, Humiliation, Resemblance and Coincidence

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**Key Concept:** *Harmonium*, Stevens's first poetic Anthology, was published in 1923. He had wanted to call it *The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae*. As late as 1938, after *Harmonium's* second edition (1931) and the appearance of three more poetic Anthologies, *Ideas of Order* (1935), *Owl's Clover* (1936) and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), The major poetic efforts of all three show an intensely self-conscious, intensely sophisticated preoccupation with the finding of a role for the poet in a world that appears to be inimical to poetry. A text which illuminates the poems of them all at this time is the two sentences' Stevens wrote much later in *The Noble Rider* and *The Sound of Words*: 'The pressure of reality is...the determining factor in the artistic character of an era, and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned.' Pound is perhaps the clearest case. Both the *Homage* and *Mauberley* are, in their different ways, poems about the poet's resistance to the pressure of reality. 'By the pressure of reality', Stevens explained in *The Noble Rider*, "I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (48). This is how Pound described his *Homage* to Propertius which he had written during the war and published in 1918: It presents certain emotions as vital to men faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire...If the reader does not find relation to life defined in the poem, he may conclude that I have been unsuccessful in my endeavour.

Inseparable from the recommendation of 'certain emotions as vital' is, of course, the recommendation of one kind of poetry as opposed to another: *Out- Warriors of Apollo*: "As we know, continue their Martian generalities, we have kept our erasers in order. A new-fangled chariot follows the flower-hung horses; A young



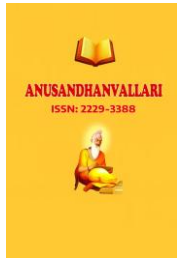
Muse with young loves clustered about her ascends with me into the aether,<sup>1</sup> And there is no high-road to the Muses” (51). Analysts will continue to record Roman reputations, Celebrities from the Trans-Caucasus will Maud Roman celebrities and expound the distention of Empire, But for something to read in normal circumstances? For a few pages brought down from the forked hill unsullied? he ask a wreath which will not crush my head.

Throughout the *Homage*, as in this brief example, private love and the high private standards of the poet as craftsman - 'We have kept our erasers in order' - are held up for celebration together. Pound's choice of Propertius as his vehicle, a love-poet in an age of belligerent imperialism, epitomized but also over-simplified the problems con-fronting Pound himself and his contemporaries. Hugh Mir Mauberley, begun in the early years of the war and completed, after the *Homage*, in 1920, detaches from the conflict of private and public emotion the central ultimately separate question of whether the poet can resist or evade the pressure of reality without becoming a mere aesthete, writing only in order to write well and in the end abandoning every-thing real, everything human. Mauberley is one of the great poems of this century and it is of the highest significance that its answer to this question is in the negative. The despairing ironies of the short poems that make it up catch aspect after aspect of the complex army of forces that the modern world fields to defeat its poets. Against the collapse of standards, the demand for cheap realism, the defection of artists themselves toward fashionable raptures or quick financial returns or phoney drawing-room reputations, the poet's efforts seem as futile as the deaths of the soldiers dying 'For a botched civilization' in a futile war. In the concluding section of the poem, 'Mauberley 1920', were shown the final failure of the poet whose devotion to his art - 'His true Penelope was Flaubert' — has led only to complete withdrawal from reality:

Mildness, amid the neo-Nictzschean clatter,  
His sense of graduations,  
Quite out of place amid  
Resistance to current exacerbations,  
Invitation, mere invitation to perceptivity  
Gradually led him to the isolation  
Which these presents place  
Under a more tolerant, perhaps, examination.  
By constant elimination  
The manifest universe  
Yielded an armour  
Against utter consternation,  
A Minoan undulation,  
Seen, we admit, amid ambrosial circumstances  
Strengthened him against  
The discouraging doctrine of chances,  
And his desire for survival,  
Faint in the most strenuous moods,  
Became an Olympian apareon  
In the presence of selected perceptions (42).

So 'the artist's urge' is destroyed, and Mauberley vanishes into the blissful isolation of absolute silence.

This is not, of course, what happened to Pound himself. Mauberley records the perception of one path open to the modern poet, the path of aestheticism, of 'purely literary values'; it also records the realisation that such a path leads to a dead-end where neither the poet him-self nor his art retain any significant existence. With Mauberley Pound turned his back on the option that had seemed possible to Stevens at the 'time when [he] liked the idea of images and images alone, or images and the music of verse together'. With the Cantor Pound, who

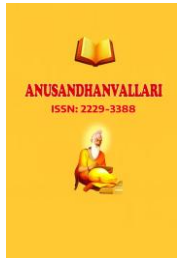


had been for all his proclamations of revolution, the last notable apostle of 'art for art's sake', wheeled to confront reality with a poem whose enormous sprawling heterogeneity should be as limitless as the pressure of reality itself and has come to a term only with Pound's life. The attempt, held together only by an extra-ordinary wild consistency of technique, is a failure. In even the best stretches of this vast poem, the early cantos, written before 1930, and the Pisan cantos, written while Pound was imprisoned in a cage awaiting trial for treason in 1945, it is reality rather than the poet who is the victor. The political and economic obsessions that led him to that cage, the vituperative hatreds that erupt again and again, the furious ambition somehow to rescue by himself the relics of world civilisation from a universal conspiracy of fools and murderers all this combines to swamp both the poet himself and his art almost as completely as the denial of reality had extinguished the fictional Mauberley. The poet of exquisite craftsmanship, whose solitary campaign for discipline in the writing of poetry so deeply influenced Eliot, Yeats and many others, is in the Cantos crushed by the violence of reality and the violence of his own responses to it. Again 'the first phase of the poet's problem is himself', and the best passages in the Cantos show an increasingly desperate realisation of this truth. It is in the end not the fulfilment but the defeat of the hope expressed in the recurrent line:

In the gloom, the gold gathers the light against it that the poem illustrates. The gold of the organising imagination does occasionally shine through the gloom, but not nearly often enough. Pound's mind is like a clouded kaleidoscope: the fragments of his own experience and of the civilisations, literatures and histories that have caught his attention remain a shifting heap of splinters until, now and again, the mirrors of the instrument suddenly clear and for a moment a pattern is revealed. In the tragic Pisan Cantos, his own consciousness of weakness in the face of reality and the poet's necessary struggle with it is at its most apparent. Acre the recurrent line, equally wistful, equally defeated, is 'Le Paradis is Artificial', once followed by its bleak corollary 'L'enfer non plus'. One is re-minded of Stevens's lines from *Esthetique du Mal* written at almost the same time (1944) as these Cantos: His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell are one, and here, o terra infidel.

But Pound could not summon the steadiness or concentration to move forwards from such a thought. His most fundamental weakness, the lopsidedness of his view of poetry and hence of his whole poetic ambition, is clearly visible in the Cantor. His emphasis in the many passages that refer to his own situation as a poet is always upon technique. Supremely aware of the poet's responsibility in respect of the disciplined use of language, he is hardly aware at all of the poet's responsibility in respect of thought. The problems of belief and value in a world without established systems of truth, the search for 'what will suffice', the poet's task envisaged by such as Arnold and *Santayana*, concern him very little. In this sense he is a most un-modern poet. His most powerful response to the modern world is disgust; his most powerful emotion is nostalgia. Mauberley shows that he was able to realise that the poet in the modern world must be more than a fine craftsman, but nothing in his work shows that he himself was able to achieve the more that Mauberley could not manage.

He loathed first the America he abandoned and then the Europe he adopted for failing to provide him with a sufficient publicly-accepted role as a poet, and, failing to construct a sufficient role for himself, he turned longingly to civilisations of the past which seemed to him to justify his own poetic efforts. 'Out of key with his time', as he wrote in Mauberley, he could neither resign himself, like, say, Robert Graves, to the minor lyric perfectionism, careless of fame and influence, that is celebrated in *Homage to Sexists Properties*, nor find the intellectual and moral strength to brave the issues that in the end must confront the more than minor poet. He took refuge in bitterness, in Fascism, in hopeless yearning for the moral support of more congenial times, and in a poetic tech-nique that should somehow protect him from responsibilities he could not cope with. He remains it with his *Migliore Fabbro*, and the Cantos, that colossal attempt to master reality with persistence of method rather than with persistence of thought, remains the saddest of modern poetic defeats.



Life seems glorious for a while, then it seems poisonous. But you must never lose faith in it, it is glorious after all. Only you must find the glory for yourself. Do not look for it either, except in yourself; in the secret places of your spirit and in all your hidden senses.

I have been reading poetry what strikes me is the capable, the marvellous, poetic language; and the absence of poetic thought...We get plenty of moods (and like them, wherever we get them, whether in novels, or poems, or talk, or paintings); and so, we get figures of speech, and impressions, and superb lines, and fantastic music. But it's the mind we want to fill with life” (45).

The readers admit now that Truth is the warrior and Beauty only his tender hide.

**Conclusion:** The lack that Stevens complains of here, 'the absence of poetic thought', is exactly the lack that Arnold has observed and described. Stevens himself had not yet devoted any-thing like systematic thought to the problems confronting the modern poet. But often in these early diaries and letters there are signs that his ideas and his priorities were very much the same as those of the two older writers. Fle had not yet, as least as far as the evidence we have indicates, made an organised connexion between what he thought about poetry and what he thought about religion. But the elements of a connexion are there, and his feelings on both subjects' are in close sympathy with Literature and Dogma, which he had almost certainly not read, as well as with Interpretations of Poetry and Religion which he almost certainly had. When Elsie Moll was considering joining a church (of what denomination is not clear) and had been upset by the derogatory remarks of a friend, Stevens wrote her a letter on To March 1907 which reveals a great deal about his own attitude to religion:

Civilized people is an exquisite and undoubtedly true that they do not influence any. But they are beautiful and full of comfort and moral help. One can get a thousand benefits from churches that one cannot get outside of them. They purify a man, they soften Life. Please don't listen to [the friend], or, at least, don't argue with her. Don't care about the Truth. There are other things in life besides the Truth upon which everybody of any experience agrees, while no two people agree about the Truth.

I'd rather see you going to church than know that you were as wise as Plato and Hackel rolled in one; and I'd rather sing some old chestnut out of the hymn-poetic Anthology with you, surrounded by 'stupid' people, than listen to all the wise men in the world...I am not in the least religious. The sun clears my spirit, if I may say that, and an occasional sight of the sea, and thinking of blue valleys, and the odour of the earth, and many things. Such things make a god of a man; but a chapel makes a man of him.

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