

“Artificial Populations” (OP, p. 112)

“The center” in question here is a spiritual focus, a composing of the ego. The poem begins by defining it as a state of mind that has the clarity and composure of “weather after it has cleared.” The poem goes on to qualify that definition: the “center” is more than a static state of mind; it is a state of mind that sustains itself to create an ambiance, an imagery. It is like weather that has clarity and composure and sustains them, producing a climate which in turn produces a population appropriate to that climate (one that is “rosy,” happy in disposition in response to such weather.) Just as the climate produces its appropriate population (“artificial” both because it is a hypothesis of the imagination and something created), so also the central state of mind creates an imagery appropriate to itself which reconciles the mind with reality, and consequently heals its “sickness.” Angels imagined on steeples by a religious sensibility, or, in contrast, humanity seen mirrored in configurations of leaves, are appropriate projections of the mind as artificial populations are appropriate projections of the weather; the climate produces a population that is harmonious with it as the mind images a reality that is harmonious with the mind. The “faces in a summer night” are, perhaps, such images created in response to a season and a time fertile for the imagination. Finally, there are also populations (or kinds of imagery) that are appropriate to various kinds of weather (or states of mind), as well as kinds of imagery appropriate to dream (“late sleep”), and to enduring poetry (or any art resembling poetry for which “music” might stand).

“A Clear Day and No Memories” (OP, p. 113)

The experience described in “A Clear Day and No Memories” is one of composure without content, of composure through exclusion of content. There is no one in the mind’s

prospect who is involved in the struggles of life, “No soldiers in the scenery,” nor is the attention directed to memories of those from the past. The mind has withdrawn from reality, “the weather,” into itself. What surrounds one, “the air,” yields no perception other than its immateriality to the mind so withdrawn. To the mind so disconnected from it, the external world has no meaning. That world seems remote to the point where it seems that no one has any memory of it, nor any present connection with it, that one is absent from it. As the mind withdraws, what is beyond it becomes unreal, an unconvincing performance, an activity imperceptible to it, not a reality at all but a “sense,” a faculty of the mind. What is described, then, is a composed disengagement of the ego from its life in reality.

“As You Leave the Room” (OP, p. 116)

Samuel French Morse notes in his introduction to *Opus Posthumous* (p. xvii) that “As You Leave the Room” grew out of an earlier version called “First Warmth” (OP, p. 89), which dates from 1947. He says of the later poem that it “must be one of the very last poems he wrote.” Among the other additions to and modifications of the earlier poem, the addition of the contentious initial statement by a third person calls for more of an argument than is presented in the first version, and therefore allows the second to become more assertive, more of an apologia. The argument is carried on in a reflection as the first speaker leaves the room. He has said that he who dominates the contemporary scene, “Today’s character,” is not one separated from sensuous life, like a skeleton escaped from its death chamber. But, the argument goes, the writer’s poems (they seem identifiable poems of Stevens’) are about the concerns of life, not those of someone separated from life, “not what skeletons think about.” Is he one who, not accepting the realm of the real as “a disbeliever in reality,” has lived apart from reality as one dead to life, “A countryman of all the bones in the world?” Proof

that this is not so is provided in the experience which now occurs, and which, presumably, is to be taken as a paradigm of his past experience. The snow, to which his attention now returns, seems to be part of an important, or "major," reality because he suddenly appreciates it as a part of reality, and since he does so appreciate it, since he discovers something meaningful in it, he undergoes an exaltation of mood, "an elevation." (The snow has also become an addition to reality, as Roy Harvey Pearce points out in his reading of the word "appreciation.")⁵⁵ The relation thus formed with reality is an intensely sensuous one, so that it is as if he left this experience (or, perhaps, as if he were leaving life itself) not merely with something to be formulated in words, but with something he could "touch, touch every way." This relation is formed through the kind of modification of mind and feeling of which his poems consist, which occurs not in the realm of the real but in that of the unreal, the ego. Nothing has altered in reality, but this modification of unreality, far from being divorced from reality, is a way of reaching the latter, of getting a sense of reality.

"Of Mere Being" (OP, p. 117)

"Of Mere Being" sets up existence itself as the goal of desire. One senses existence beyond thought as a palm "In the bronze distance," as though it were a goal sought for in an ideal, hence brazen, atmosphere. It is, perhaps, present "at the end of the mind" not only because it is beyond thought, but also because it is what the mind desires. But, the point of existence, the song of the golden bird in the palm, is alien to humanity and, since it is without human meaning or feeling, is not available to thought or desire. Therefore, fulfillment of desire or its frustration, happiness or unhappiness, does not depend on the reason; it makes no difference what we think, or what we want. The bird goes on singing, its feathers shining, without regard to us. The palm does not exist for us and is as remote from us as it can be, "on the

edge of space." Yet to us and, no doubt, especially to an old man close to death, existence itself seems as dazzling as the bird and as tantalizing as the palm's slowly moving branches and the bird's dangling feathers. The bird does not sing for us, and will continue singing without us, but it is its song that we above all want to hear, the sense of mere existence that we most want to sustain.

NOTES

¹ Samuel French Morse finds that "echoes of Pope's rhetoric and tone and even prosody abound in 'The Comedian as the Letter C' and 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,' and in *Harmonium* as a whole." "Wallace Stevens: Some Ideas About the Thing Itself," *Boston University Studies in English*, II (Spring 1956), 59-60.

² Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1961), p. 44. So also for the "interior paramour"—see Eugene Paul Nassar, *Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 139. If one must resort to mythology here, the imagery seems to suggest Hera or Juno at least as much as Aphrodite or Venus. However, any such search for an allusion is probably superfluous. Stevens writes: "My recollection is that the Mother of Heaven was merely somebody to swear by, and that the reference was not symbolic" (LWS, p. 251).

³ Compare Kermode, p. 44: the apple "was also the cause of unreasonable passion, and comes to be moralized only when the moralist is too old to be passionate."

⁴ Stevens' comment (in LWS, p. 251), identifying the "rose rabbi" with youth—which he apparently made without a text at hand—has no meaning in context, except, possibly, the tenuous one that the "rose rabbi" represents a stage of youth succeeding the "dark rabbi" stage, and which carried over into the present of middle age.

⁵ J. V. Cunningham, "Tradition and Modernity: Wallace Stevens" (formerly published in *Poetry*, LXXXV [Dec. 1949], 149-65), *Tradition and Poetic Structure* (Denver, 1960), p. 112.

⁶ "The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," *Southern Review*, V (Winter 1940), 467.

⁷ See Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge, 1965), pp. 94-95.

⁸ Simons, "The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," p. 456.

⁹ See, for example, R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," *Form and Value in Modern Poetry* (Garden City, New York, 1957), pp. 207-8: "Moonlight is imagination, a reflection or interpretation of the sun, which is the source of life." Simons' interpretation, p. 458, in which the moonlight stands for the "romantic" imagination and the sun for matter-of-fact realism, is more satisfactory—though the realism is more likely that of Yucatan than matter-of-fact.