

Wallace Stevens: A Dual Life as Poet and Insurance Executive by Alison Johnson (Cumberland Press, 2012)

Visiting Wallace: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens

Dennis Barone and James Finnegan, eds. (University of Iowa Press, 2009)

WHEN I DISCOVERED that the word “insurance” appeared in both the title and the opening sentence of Alison Johnson’s new biography of Wallace Stevens, I felt certain that good things lay in store. I was not disappointed. *Wallace Stevens: A Dual Life as Poet and Insurance Executive* is a successful and enjoyable biography of Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Wallace Stevens that offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Stevens’ insurance career and his writing.

The basic story of Stevens’ life is well-known. After attending Harvard, where he wrote poems for student publications, he moved to New York and obtained a law degree in 1903. Following an unsuccessful attempt at legal practice, Stevens settled into the insurance business, specializing in surety bonds, and relocated to Hartford. Beginning in 1916 and continuing until his death in 1955, Stevens worked at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Co., where he became a widely respected senior executive.

While pursuing this successful career and simultaneously struggling with an unhappy marriage, Stevens took advantage of what spare time he could find to write poetry. In 1923, he published *Harmonium*, his first collection of verse and a book now considered to have helped define modern American poetry. Important as it was, it attracted little initial notice, and Stevens remained a respected but somewhat low-profile figure in the literary world until, late in his career, he was honored with National Book Awards, the Bollingen Prize for poetry, and, in 1955, the Pulitzer Prize.

Quoting liberally from Stevens’ letters, journals, and poetry, Johnson tells this story in a compact 276 pages that require neither a doctorate in poetry

nor a background in insurance law to understand. Her account of Stevens’ insurance career draws heavily on Peter Brazeau’s *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered*, a superb oral history of Stevens’ life containing numerous firsthand stories from his professional colleagues at the Hartford and elsewhere. Scholars of Stevens who are familiar with the Brazeau book may feel some déjà vu when reading the chapters in Johnson’s book that deal with Stevens at the office.

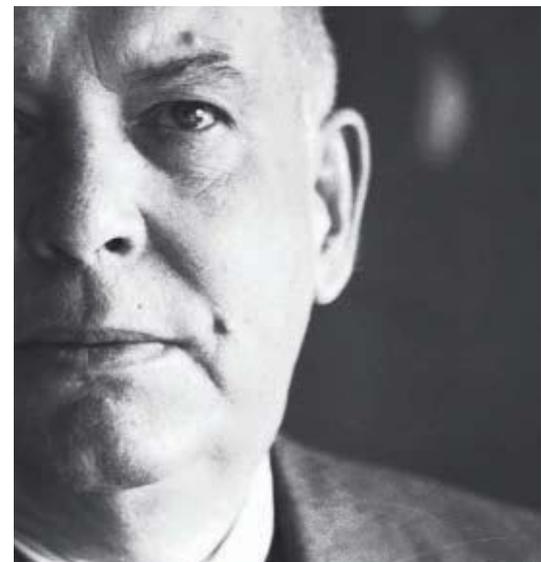
Fresh Insights

There are many areas, however, where Johnson offers fresh insights into Stevens and his work. One of these is her speculation that an unrequited love for Sybil Gage, a woman he met shortly after leaving Harvard, may have been reflected in many of his best-known poems. Drawing on a 2008 article by William Ford, for example, Johnson suggests that Stevens considered Gage to be his muse. Writing of his poem “To the One of Fictive Music,” she notes Ford’s assertion that an earlier version of the second stanza contained the phrase “The vigil of a shadowy sibyl” and that several of the alternate titles for the poem contained the word “muse.” The fact that Stevens edited this line and

title out of the final version makes the argument even more persuasive.

At times Johnson may reach a bit far in searching for autobiographical references in Stevens’ poems. The deleted references to “sibyl” and “muse” sound convincing, and I was struck by the insight that the title of “Peter Quince at the Clavier” might refer to Stevens’ nickname of “Pete” during his college days. Less persuasive, however, are the suggestions that poems with an excessive use of the letter “S” refer to Sybil Gage or that the poem “Red Loves Kit” was a response by Stevens to his wife’s unfounded accusations of adultery.

Where Johnson’s biography truly excels is in its exploration of how Stevens viewed his own professional and poetic worlds. His poetry often appears to be a world of pure imagination that offers an escape from his office and his home



Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock

life. A poem such as “Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock” (see right), for example, laments the lack of imagination among his neighbors, who wear only plain, white nightclothes and do not share the dreams of exotic animals and far-away lands that live only in the mind of a drunken sailor.

Johnson characterizes Stevens himself as a dreamer—one who would rather visit distant lands in his imagination than explore them in person. She quotes a 1910 letter of Stevens’ that articulates this view perfectly:

But I do like to sit with a big cigar and think of pleasant things—chiefly of things I’d like to have and do. . . . For all I know, thinking of a roasted duck, or a Chinese jar, or a Flemish painting may be quite equal to having one.

She also describes how Stevens asked acquaintances to send him packages of souvenirs from overseas. In 1922, for example, he asked the sister of Harriet Monroe (publisher of *Poetry* magazine and Stevens’ first literary champion) to send him objects from China. He also ordered tea from Ceylon and asked legal colleagues and others to send him parcels from Java, Hong Kong, and Siam. Beginning in the 1930s, he arranged for

a bookstore owner in Paris to buy French paintings for him.

A financially comfortable man who traveled frequently within the country for his insurance work, Stevens would have had ample opportunity to travel overseas—to Paris, China, Ceylon, or wherever he wished. Yet he preferred to remain close to his home and business, imagining rather than visiting these other worlds, while asking others to send him the objects that inspired his imaginative visions. That he did so has a great deal to say about how Stevens viewed the role of his insurance work with respect to his poetry—limiting, perhaps, but indispensable.

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

—Wallace Stevens

Professional Obligations

At times, Stevens did seem to regret that his professional obligations prevented him from working full time on his poetry. “Thinking about poetry is, with me, an affair of weekends and holidays, a matter of walking to and from the office,” he wrote to a publisher in the 1930s. “This makes it difficult to progress rapidly and certainly.”

Stevens also tried to discourage his daughter, Holly, from dropping out of college in 1942 by stressing the importance of intellectual pursuits over professional endeavors. “Take my word for it that making your living is a waste of time,” he wrote her. “None of the great things in life



Modernists on the Grass

Wallace Stevens & Gertrude Stein
 were sharing a picnic lunch
 a blanket of shredded texts
 spread on the grave of Robert Frost
 as they discussed insurance
 art
 & rates of interest
 & how to arrange language
 so as to elude auditors & invent annuities
 paying off ever after
 in ambiguity

—Stephen Kessler (from *Visiting Wallace*)

have anything to do with making a living?"

Yet it is clear from Stevens' writings, as well as the way in which he chose to live his life, that the regular schedule of his work—from the long walks to and from the office, to the annual business trips to Key West, to the afternoon cups of Ceylon tea—served to inspire rather than inhibit his imagination. Consider his reflections in a 1950 letter to his friend Thomas McGreevy:

But I have not even begun to touch the spheres within spheres that might have been possible if, instead of devoting the principal amount of my time to making a living, I had devoted it to thought and poetry. Certainly it is as true as it ever was that whatever means most to one should receive all of one's time and that has not been true in my case. But, then, if I had been more determined about it, I might now be looking back not with a mere sense of regret but at some actual devastation. . . . I don't know what would have happened if I had had more time.

Or his simple statement in a 1954 letter to another family friend:

Yet it is precisely on such days that we give thanks for the office. Sometimes one realizes what an exceeding help work is in anyone's life.

Johnson does not dodge these complexities in her biography. She makes the wise choice to let Stevens speak for himself. And in doing so, she provides a better analysis than any other I have encountered about the origins of Stevens' dazzling worlds of imagination.

Stevens as Model and Muse

Enthusiasts of Stevens may also enjoy a recent collection of verse by other poets inspired by him. *Visiting Wallace: Poems Inspired by the Life and Work of Wallace Stevens* is a quirky and thought-provoking assortment of poems that make for

fascinating browsing when traveling on insurance business.

Some of the poems are simply parodies, albeit entertaining ones. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard" and "Thirteen Ways of Eradicating Blackbirds" provide entertaining takes on Stevens' well-known poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

The majority of the poems are more serious in tone, however, and a few of them touch on Stevens' insurance career. Maria Mazziotti Gillan in "Wallace Stevens, I think of you" imagines that poetry is Stevens' escape from "all those insurance drones / sitting in cubicles / measuring out their lives / bent over figures / and paper." Others, such as Stephen Kessler (see above), have a less grim attitude toward the insurance business and explore how it was an essential part of Stevens' poetic work, rather than a mere chore from which he had to escape.

The first poem in the collection, "Memo from the Desk of Wallace Stevens," by Dick Allen, is a poetic description of the same Wallace Stevens portrayed in Johnson's biography—the man who preferred to explore exotic lands by imagination and proxy while remaining at home and at work:

Send me a postcard from
 Chile or Tunis to
 Tape on my dresser or
 Sail through my office. . . .

Post it to Hartford where
 I shall be waiting to
 Sweeten the world with my
 Blackberry mind.

And certainly, Stevens could wish for no better epitaph than these lines from the moving poem "At the Grave of Wallace Stevens," by Edward Hirsch:

The ambassador of imagination is
 dead
 And the guitars are silent. So
 farewell

To the maker of mournful summer
 melodies,
 The connoisseur of moonlight,
 improvisation's king.

Farewell to the laudator of
 imperfection,
 Grandeur in a business suit, the
 stylist

Of the void. Farewell to dried fruit
 From California, tea imported from
 Ceylon,

And fresh ideas sailing in from
 anywhere.
 Farewell to fidelity bonds and surety
 claims.

All those worldly realms of
 reflection
 Have been traded in for a slope of
 trees. □

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