

6 WALLACE STEVENS (December 2018)

1879 - 1955



The Emperor of Ice-Cream
 BY WALLACE STEVENS

Call the roller of big cigars,
 The muscular one, and bid him whip
 In kitchen cups concupiscent curds.
 Let the wenches dawdle in such dress
 As they are used to wear, and let the boys
 Bring flowers in last month's newspapers.
 Let be be finale of seem.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

Take from the dresser of deal,
 Lacking the three glass knobs, that sheet
 On which she embroidered fantails once
 And spread it so as to cover her face.
 If her horny feet protrude, they come
 To show how cold she is, and dumb.
 Let the lamp affix its beam.
 The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.

This is the first Wallace Stevens poem I think I ever came across and it intrigued me from the outset. It comes from his first collection of poems, called ‘*Harmonium*’, published in 1923, and these poems carry many of the hallmarks of modernism: experimentation, disorientating forms, expression and ideas, a rejection of tradition (though not totally...); ambiguities, irony and multiple voices.

Modernism is good at taking us by surprise, so perhaps we should start by asking what “modernism” refers to. An early 20th century phenomenon, it started in Europe well before the First World War (Cubism, for example, following Cézanne’s earlier experiments in making landscapes more abstract, dates from about 1910). Clearly, however, the Great War accelerated the way artists reflected the enormous social fractures and political upheavals that were taking place in Europe. There was concomitantly a complex interaction going on between America (with its jazz, architecture by Frank Lloyd Wright, cinema from Hollywood) and Europe - Paris, particularly (with Picasso and Matisse amongst many other artists; Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes; and the Stein family, notably Gertrude Stein, who collected European art and promoted writers like Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound and Scott Fitzgerald). It was a rich and novel fusion (though Henry James had perhaps anticipated such a fusion before the turn of the century) that passed back and forth across the Atlantic, taking in London, a little awkwardly, on its way.

From the USA, Pound and Eliot headed straight for Paris and London, along with others. “Make it new!” was Ezra Pound’s battle cry and Dadaism, Cubism, Imagism, Futurism, Vorticism, Fauvism, Expressionism, were all doing just that! A quick list of early key poems in English for me would include “*In a Station of the Metro*” (1913) by Ezra Pound, “*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*” by T.S. Eliot (1915) – and his majestically stunning “*The Waste Land*” (1922) - also “*The Second Coming*” (1919) by WB Yeats. These have come to epitomise many aspects of early modernism with the turbulent mixture of anger, disorientation, fracture and confusion which marked those strange, unsettled times in Europe.

Wallace Stevens was tuned into European culture in interesting ways and he certainly *can* reference French art or poetry often enough, or he can “imagine” Rome, in a poem like “*To an Old Philosopher in Rome*”, but, unlike Pound, Eliot, Hemingway, Fitzgerald and most others, for whom Europe was the great attraction, Stevens remained resolutely American in his bearings, never once even *travelling* to Europe! The only other comparable American poet, I think, is William Carlos Williams, who was also very ‘Americo-centric’ in his writing.

This Americanism is very apparent in ‘*The Emperor of Ice Cream*’, which is a favourite of mine. The ironic-sounding title sounds as if it might be a cheerful reflection on the delights of eating ice-cream, but the poem itself strikes a more solemn and confusing note. Who is the “muscular one”? Who has died? Where? What? Why? Who is *talking* to us?

Complexity, it should be remembered, is rarely there deliberately to confuse, obfuscate, confound us: the puzzlement and delayed reaction may be part of the poem’s strategy, and complex ideas may well *require* complex formulation. Here, we need to remind ourselves of a certain mental landscape, which is peculiarly American – that of the southern, tobacco growing plantations. It all sounds a little like “Gone With the Wind” country, only, instead of Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler, we have here more of the servants’ quarters and these characters *might* even be black rather than white, as we might possibly have assumed.

There has been a death, evidently, the death of an old serving woman, whose “horny” feet are protruding beneath the sheet covering her body and testifying to her hard life. Her death, however, ironically provokes little disturbance in the big house; the serving girls (“wenches”) are not to change their dresses and the boys are bringing flowers wrapped in old

newspapers. But, this is a vigil and, for all the signs of poverty, the luxury of ice-cream is going to be enjoyed (along with cigars, perhaps) in order to mark or celebrate (for this seems like a wake, finally) the old woman's passing.

There is a solemnity, a gravity about the tone in this poem, which I find moving. The commands are very simple and unambiguous. The repeated refrain, however, of "The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream" is, I think, *very* ambiguous. The poem seems to suggest on the one hand that, against the backdrop of death, we should enjoy and celebrate the pleasures of life. It also, however, appears to undercut this idea simultaneously, for ice-cream is ludicrous in the context of empires and is surely never going to win out against the emperor of death, against whom it is implicitly pitched.

My reading of "Let be be finale of seem" (which on a first reading looks like a misprint!) is that death *refocuses* our awareness of appearance and reality, in other words, the priorities of life. It does not matter how one dresses, or whether the ice-cream is served in cups rather than glass dishes, or even that the plain "deal" (or pine) dresser lacks "three glass knobs." What is important is that the passing should be marked in a special and luxurious way. The word "concupiscent" is not chosen lightly. The ice-cream looks and tastes 'sexy' – it stirs the senses in a way which ultimately could lead to renewals of life (if the "boys" and the wenches" take the hint!).

Who, then, is the "roller of big cigars"? A butler, perhaps, a master of ceremonies, who is being commanded to lead the feast with cigars and ice-cream. *Carpe diem!*

Yet, the conclusion, I feel, is double-edged, perhaps as all such wakes (even poor ones) are intended to be. They celebrate the pleasures of life, in the light (or perhaps in the shadow) of death, who will always be the ultimate "emperor".



THE HOUSE WAS QUIET AND THE WORLD WAS CALM
by Wallace Stevens

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book; and summer night

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

The words were spoken as if there was no book,
Except that the reader leaned above the page,

Wanted to lean, wanted much to be
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom

The summer night is like a perfection of thought.
The house was quiet because it had to be.

The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:
The access of perfection to the page.

And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,
In which there is no other meaning, itself

Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself
Is the reader leaning late and reading there.

This lazy-sounding, soporific and seemingly simple poem (no hard words anywhere!) hides more than one may imagine! It has become, over the years, perhaps my very favourite poem of Wallace Stevens and I want to explore why it moves me so much. It comes from his collection "*Transport to Summer*" published in 1947.

We can note that the word "calm" is repeated five times. In itself, the word is a soft sound with a long syllable. There are many repetitions, of "reader", "summer" and "night", creating a dreamy, lulling sense of peace. Nothing happens in the poem to jar or shatter the serenity of what is being described. And yet, nothing is being *described*: neither house, night, scholar nor book: we know nothing of context other than a "summer's night", and this turns

the poem into a series of very (weirdly) general statements. We are given to understand that the experience of reading, in a quiet house on a summer's night, is not only in itself a serene, calming experience, but also one where the reader's imagination creates the "access of perfection to the page". Something very positive, therefore, is on offer and within our grasp, apparently, although it may not be clear who or what is granted "access" and what this might involve.

The poem is constructed of paired lines, as if pointing out the dual nature of the house and the world or perhaps the reader and the book. Although there are no rhymes as such, there is a strong rhythm, particularly at the end where there is a tripling of "itself is....". Elsewhere there are repetitions of "lean" or "wanted". Phrases like "conscious being", "thought" and "mind" suggest (ambiguously because they could apply both to the reader *and* to what is read) that how we experience the world is through our perceptions, regulated by our minds, and that reading is an active event of interpretation and experience that has to be worked at ("leaned"), rather than a passive one – that of the reader simply receiving a pre-packaged experience.

Although this is a poem of ideas, there is a lot of feeling in the repetition of the "reader", who "wanted to lean, wanted much most", as if reading has to be worked at with passion. There is an insistence on "calm" and "quiet" as if solitude and silence are necessary in order to create the "truth" that is imparted in the reading experience. It is interesting that "the words were spoken", because in reading, we do have an impression that written words *are* spoken, particularly in poetry. Here, there seems to be an almost incantatory element added, for the repetitions almost act as a spell, hypnotising us drowsily as we sink into the text of the poem itself.

"The house was quiet because it had to be." *Had* to be? Why? Well, yes, reading is best done in a quiet house. But we can also read this as "it had to 'BE'". A further nuance, perhaps. The poem, after all, causes the house to come into a sort of literary existence, that *might* just correspond somewhere to a 'real' house that 'actually' exists. Stevens' poetry often plays with such ideas of whether ideas or reality correspond or not with 'reality' – or whether all 'reality' is shaped and ordered by our *consciousness* of such 'realities' as we experience the world imaginatively (through our senses and through our reading, which can act upon our senses).

This is getting a little difficult, but these are perfectly proper philosophical questions. How can we *know* 'reality'? How do we *experience* 'experience'?

One of the questions, which the poem carefully sidesteps, is 'what is referred to by the word "truth"?' Perhaps the poem is suggesting that in a world where "truth" is so hard to define, the only truth *is* the truth each one of us creates for ourselves. There is something very moving about the calm, reassuring assertions. "And the world was calm." The triple ending completes this reassurance, but there might be a moment of potential horror at the end, with the phrase "in a calm world In which there is no other meaning...". Is the poem somehow suggesting that in the real world there *is* no exterior meaning? That the universe may be absurd and meaningless? If so, then the act of reading becomes of the *utmost importance*, for by doing so readers *create* meaning and sense in an otherwise meaningless world. It is a measure of the poem's "calm" reassurance that this message is delivered with such serene authority, when the implications behind it are so potentially frightening.

It's a truism that reading takes you out of yourself, and that you "become" part of what you are reading. Here, in this poem, that idea is given a sharper edge as we are encouraged to identify with the reader and become involved with the "world", the "house" and the "book": figments of our mind, perhaps, but also connected to the exterior world of experience. The reader is also, somewhere, linked to the poet, for the poet, the writer, lies behind what is being read. The poet has conjured everything up for us to read and reflect on, including the idea that the reader *inside* the poem is also the reader *outside* the poem!

Why do I love Wallace Stevens' poetry? I like its *bizarreness*! Of course, I admire and love "The Waste Land" which so astonishingly "gets" the desolation, spiritually, culturally, psychologically of Britain and Europe after WWI. Stevens instead, however, gives us a very cerebral "world" to wander in, still questioningly, but not tied to such a European perspective. Reading Stevens, you are hardly aware that anything climactic has happened to the world outside America. Instead, he is free to wander in his own strange imagination, cut adrift, almost, from other currents. He is worlds away from Yeats' preoccupations, say, with Irish nationalism, for example, or Eliot (and most other writers?) desperately searching through the "fragments" and the fragilities of European culture(s) that have become so fractured and fragmented.

Wallace Stevens, I find, is a perpetual puzzle but under his pen words fizzle and crackle excitingly, with the oddest ideas attached to them!

Here is Wallace Stevens' very last poem:

Of Mere Being

*The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze décor.*

*A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.*

*You know then that it is not the reason
That makes us happy or unhappy.
The bird sings. Its feathers shine.*

*The palm stands on the edge of space.
The wind moves slowly in the branches.
The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.*

Holly Stevens, his daughter, changed 'décor' to 'distance'

I think décor is better, though a later emendation to what had come to be accepted, so I will stick with his word. "Décor" suggests art as well as artificiality – an aesthetic of the inner mind. What do you think? I think this starts me on a totally different train of thought, taking in, perhaps, Yeats' "Byzantium" (?) This is a remarkable meditation, surely, on beauty in art and nature. It is cryptic, elusive, oblique... What a final line!!