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Stevens's Library

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CHAPTER 14

Stevens's Library

Chris Beyers

It would be tempting to assert that Stevens's personal library provides the secret map to his imagination, but, alas! such a beautiful claim is not warranted by the facts. For one thing, as might be expected, he did not possess copies of all the books that he read and that were important to him. He often cites books in his poems and prose that either he did not own or that had disappeared by the time scholars got around to cataloguing his library. For example, Stevens quotes from Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and from his *Two Sources of Morality and Religion* in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (639, 666), yet the catalogs of his personal library list only a single volume by Bergson: *L'Intuition Philosophique*. Perhaps Stevens found these books at a public or private lending library, as was his habit when he lived in New York and was a frequent patron of the Astor Library. In Hartford, for instance, he had access to the libraries of the Hartford Theological Seminary and Trinity College. Further, Stevens owned a number of books with uncut pages, which suggests he never read some of the books he did own.

Partly because a number of his books were sold to a bookseller who did not keep records,¹ and partly because some of his books were given away, discarded, or disappeared for some other reason, a complete accounting of Stevens's library is impossible. Still, there is a sizable collection at the Huntington Library,² and a much smaller number in the Special Collections department of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst library.³ After the poet's death, Elsie Stevens had over 200 books auctioned off by Parke-Bernet Galleries (which was acquired by Sotheby's in 1964).⁴ The catalogs from these auctions are extant.⁵ Together, these sources suggest the scope and direction of the poet's library.

Stevens's books from school and college are an unremarkable lot that reflect the traditional canon. He owned a smattering of Renaissance texts, including volumes of Spenser and Herrick; eighteenth-century authors,

leaning toward essayists like Johnson and Addison; Romantic poets and essayists, like Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, and Lamb; and Victorian writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ruskin, Arnold, and Fitzgerald. Stevens owned little drama and fiction. He had few books by American writers, though the ones he owned – such as the essays of Emerson and the letters of James Russell Lowell – were among the most heavily annotated of his books. A few of his books were clearly for the courses he took at Harvard, such as Kuno Francke's *Social Forces in German Literature*.

A number of critics have noted that the college-age Stevens wrote in his volume of Lowell's correspondence that he had decided to read these letters instead of going to the 1898 Harvard–Yale football game. This is one of the very few marginal markings where the poet mentions himself, but as biographical information it is slightly misleading. Stevens's decision to miss this game was actually uncharacteristic. After graduating, he usually attended The Game (see *L* 700, 801, and 851) and his driver at The Hartford remembered taking Stevens to football games.⁶

Still, a few marginal notes have autobiographical significance. In the margin of a reprint of *Rambler* 137, where Samuel Johnson had been complaining about the narrowness and arrogance of academia, Stevens wrote:

The Harvard System keeps one closer to the aims of life and therefore to life itself, but in many other cases this [*i.e.*, Johnson's disparagement of academic scholars] is probably true. When one accomplishes a set task or finishes a prescribed course of studies the feeling is natural that one has finished the only worthy task and the one accepted course of studies. Freedom of choice gives liberality to learning.⁷

By connecting "choice" and "liberality," Stevens was echoing the educational philosophy of Harvard's then-President, Charles William Eliot, who lamented in his inaugural address that too many teachers and professors lacked "faith in the prophecy of a natural bent . . . But the young man of nineteen or twenty ought to know what he likes best and is most fit for." Striking a decidedly Emersonian tone, Eliot continued, "When the revelation of his own peculiar taste and capacity comes to a young man, let him reverently give it welcome, thank God, and take courage." Eliot then connected the "system of elective studies" to a liberal education.⁸ In a later essay, he criticized educational systems without such electives which, he said, more resemble "the drill of a word of command than the free development of personal power" and treat the individual as "an average atom in a homogeneous mass."⁹ In praising "The Harvard System," the young

Stevens was defending his own academic program. As a special student not seeking a degree, Stevens was in effect taking nothing but electives, following his own peculiar tastes and developing his personal power.

Immediately after college, Stevens continued to buy books, augmenting his holdings in classical and Romantic poetry while adding more modern writers like Walter Arensberg, Alice Meynell, John Davidson, and George Moore, as well as modern drama by Synge and Ibsen. However, it was only after Stevens began his career at The Hartford that he began to accumulate a large library.

As might be expected, Stevens amassed a sizable collection of books of poetry. He owned many books of verse written by friends, including multiple volumes by Richard Eberhart, Harriet Monroe, Marianne Moore, Delmore Schwartz, Allen Tate, and William Carlos Williams. Of course, he also owned a number of books written by poets as diverse as George Chapman, Jonathan Swift, Robert Bridges, and W. H. Auden. However, his possession of a book of poetry did not necessarily indicate that he liked the poet's works. Some books were sent to him by publishers eager to show the poet an example of the quality of their press – for example, Ronald Lane Latimer of the Alcestis Press sent him a volume of poems by John Peale Bishop, which Stevens declined to read (see *L* 306), and Kenneth Patchen sent Stevens a number of books partly in hopes that Stevens would pay for the printing of a new volume, which Stevens refused to do (see *L* 389). Likewise, Stevens owned four books by Charles Henri Ford – all sent by Ford – even though Stevens did not think much of him as a poet (see *L* 505). Stevens also owned a few books by poets that he never read – or, at least, that he claimed not to have read. Stevens wrote to Eberhart that he had not been “influenced by anybody and have purposely have held off reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything” (*L* 813), yet his library contained Pound's *Pavannes* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*; he also owned *Prufrock and Other Observations* and a pamphlet of a talk Eliot gave, *Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca*, as well as a book of essays about Eliot.

His library also contained a number of foreign-language books. He owned many books by French poets, including volumes by Paul Avenel, Charles Baudelaire, Nicolas Boileaux, Tristan Corbière, Alfred de Musset, Gérard de Nerval, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Valéry, Paul Verlaine, François Villon, and many others. His substantial collection of French prose authors included volumes by Albert Camus, Jean La Fontaine, and Jean Paulhan. He also had a scattering of books of poetry in other languages, such as Petrarch in Italian and Rainer Maria Rilke in German.

Stevens's books also show that he had an abiding love of maxims and aphorisms. As A. Walton Litz has noted, "Among [Stevens's] personal books that have survived, there are more than thirty collections of aphorisms, proverbs, or pithy journal entries . . . The range of volumes is quite astonishing. Standard collections of sayings in English – *Proverbs and Family Mottoes*, *A Treasury of English Aphorisms*, *The 100 Best Epigrams* – are supplemented by less familiar volumes on the proverbial wisdom of France, Italy, Morocco, China, Japan, and India."¹⁰ In addition, Steven had a particular interest in American history and his own genealogy. The Huntington houses some twenty-one genealogical books, and that list can be added to by some of the books sold at auction, including two Amish Mennonite hymnals, as well as histories of Brooklyn, Delaware, and the *Frontier Forts of Pennsylvania*.

Stevens was also active in buying new books and following the trends of his time. For example, he had a subscription to Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press, which provided books by Clive Bell, Charles Mauron, Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf, and others to his library. Given the variety of periodicals that Stevens read and subscribed to, it might be expected that his library had a sizable collection of literary and "little" magazines, but apparently they were discarded. The Huntington has over 150 of such publications from Stevens's library – all contributors' copies.

The books sold at auction show another side of Stevens's attitude toward books – that of the book collector who loves rare books and fine bindings. In a letter, Stevens's casual mention of bidding unsuccessfully at one of Parke-Bernet's auctions (*L* 510) suggests that bidding at auctions was not an unusual thing for him. Understandably, the descriptions in the Parke-Bernet catalogs generally focused on what made the books rare and valuable for bibliophiles. For example, Parke-Bernet auctioned off Steven's four-volume set of books by Émile-Auguste Chartier (better known by his pen name, Alain), octavos with "full morocco and full calf, gilt, gilt tops" with "morocco-edged slipcases"; Stevens's 1864 duodecimo two-volume edition of Charles Nisard's *Histoire des Livres Populaires ou de la Littérature du Colportage* not only features "numerous woodcuts with a fold-in plate in color," but also "An extremely beautiful and interesting pair of bindings," heavy on the morocco and gilt; and Stevens's octavo edition of Eustace-Hyacinthe Langlois's *Essai Historique, Philosophique et Pittoresque sur les Danses des Morts* (Rouen, 1852) had woodcuts, copper-engraved plates, and other illustrations, with a "full polished French levant, center panel of colored inlaid moroccos depicting Adam and Eve with a serpent and the symbolic tree of death, top and bottom margins with skulls and oakleaves"

and many other such decorations, with "richly colored silk doublures and end leaves, by [Charles] Meunier." Stevens had each of his own books specially bound in leather for his personal library.

The few mentions of the physical aspects of books in Stevens's works – such as the frontispiece-portrait of Claire Dupray in *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* or the dispersal of the "Schlossbibliothek" in the 1936 version of *Owl's Clover* (622, 575–6) – suggest that, at times, the poet valued rare books primarily as aesthetic objects and historical artifacts. Thus, his books with uncut pages – for example, the works of Jeremy Taylor, the seventeenth-century Anglican cleric, and a two-volume edition of *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber*, both published in the 1920s by the Golden Cockerel Press, which specialized in fine, limited editions – were probably valuable for Stevens because they were redolent of their era as well as beautiful. This is not to say, however, that Stevens never read any of these books that ended up being sold at auction. Footnotes in the *Letters* alert the reader to a few instances when Stevens quotes from one of these books (see *L* 451*n*, 522*n*, and 568*n*).¹¹ Furthermore, certain of the fine bindings that were auctioned off represent the depth of Stevens's interest in French literature, including some fifty-six volumes by Alain, by far the most by any single author.

Stevens also owned a large number of art books, with French artists dominating the collection. The poet often bought fine, limited editions, such as *L'Oeuvre Gravé d'Eugène Bèjot*, with "vellum backed board marbled boards" published in a run of only 350. The Bibliothèque Nationale's 1932 edition of Camille Corot's etchings and lithographs, which featured "20 facsimile reproductions . . . each matted," could not have had an especially wide audience. His library contained books on Paul Cézanne, Salvador Dali, Honoré Daumier, Albrecht Durer, Jean-Honoré Fragonard, Paul Gauguin, Paul Klee, Claude Lorrain, Camille Pissarro, Nicolas Poussin, Georges Rouault, Vincent Van Gogh, Jean-Antoine Watteau, and many others. There were also books on Chinese art, Japanese art, woodcuts and wood engravings, and, not surprisingly, the art of bookmaking.

Naturally, Stevens did *not* write notations in his fine editions. Most of his marginal comments and markings appear in books from his college years (and a few years afterwards) and in those he read while preparing his essays. His marginalia and markings typically record his reactions to the poetic theories of his day. An interesting case is his note in Cecil Day Lewis's *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933). Day Lewis's long poem is an idealized imagining of Magnitogorsk, a city in which the Stalinist government was trying to modernize the Soviet Union by creating a huge steel mill, iron works, and worker's paradise.¹² The poem had an overt "ideological and political"

agenda, even intended as “propaganda” for the left, as Albert Gelpi notes.¹³ This bias is evident in such things as the speaker’s unironic use of the word “comrades.” To Stevens, the poem amounted to a challenge to take an overt political stance in his own verse.

In response, Stevens copied a passage from a lecture by Leon Kroll onto the back flyleaf of the cover. An art critic, Kroll had been invited by a John Reed club – a Marxist-Leninist club for artists and intellectuals founded by people from *The New Masses*¹⁴ – to talk about the relationship between art and politics. His speech was published in the April, 1933 number of *Hound and Horn*, which is probably where Stevens came across it. In copying the passage, Stevens tellingly omitted a number of key phrases. The passage is too long to quote in its entirety but a brief excerpt is sufficient to represent his method. I have put the phrases that he did *not* copy in italics:

The stirring of emotional resentment which many of us feel at the frightful conditions we live under, *due in a measure to the injustice, the selfish bungling of supposedly superior minds, even in the outworn system of distribution in power here*, is in my opinion, a quality of emotions quite apart from that under which the artist works.¹⁵

Stevens’s selective quotation here typifies his handling of the entire passage: he eliminates every concession Kroll made to his leftist audience. This edited version of Kroll’s remarks is an early chapter in what would become Stevens’s preoccupation in the thirties – the relationship between the poet and society, or between art and socio-political realities. As Alan Filreis points out,¹⁶ less than a year later Ronald Lane Latimer would start provoking Stevens with a series of letters on the same issues, and the poet’s responses can be seen in such works as “Owl’s Clover” (1936), “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937), and many of the poems in *Parts of a World* (1942).

In his discussion of “The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet,” B. J. Leggett, using evidence from Stevens’s markings in his copy of Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*, argues that Stevens “misread” the book.¹⁷ While Leggett makes a convincing case for his claim, from one perspective such an argument is unimportant, since Stevens read his books as a writer and not as an academic. As a poet, he read primarily looking for *material*, seeking ideas that were in accord with his own, and his prose – like his poetry – is preeminently interested in finding an approach to the world and a way of understanding human experience that makes human life worth living. For Stevens, it was enough to say something he felt was significant, and it did not matter to him if he presented only one side

of a philosophy or took the writer's ideas in a direction the writer would not agree with. As Leggett points out, misinterpretation may be "helpful to a theory of poetry,"¹⁸ particularly if you are a poet using other texts to articulate your own theory of poetry.

Thus, Stevens annotated his books primarily as a way to work out his own ideas. As Robin Schulze has argued cogently, the poet's annotations in his copy of Marianne Moore's *Selected Poems* (the 1935 edition) served as a staging-ground for Stevens's ideas about a new sort of Romanticism,¹⁹ ideas the poet was also exploring around that time in such poems as "Sailing After Lunch" and "Re-statement of Romance."

Stevens's annotations in Moore's *Selected Poems* also provide an opportunity to see something that is rarely visible: his process of composition. Generally, after having finished an essay or poem, Stevens discarded his drafts, and early stages of published works have seldom survived – the extant, unpublished early version of "The Comedian as the Letter C," titled "From the Journal of Crispin" (984–95), is the most remarkable example.²⁰ Stevens's extended comments in Moore's *Selected Poems* amount to an early draft of the essay that eventually became "A Poet That Matters" (774–80). For example, Stevens was struck with the many animals described in Moore's poems, writing in his copy:

There are no people in the book. Thank God. This is a great relief. It is nice to relax with a book that is not about people. On the other hand, there are more animals than there are in Barnum & Bailey's big show.²¹

Stevens's relief that Moore's poetry lacked people probably should be read as his resistance to the notion that poetry should be personal and psychological rather than as evidence of the poet's antipathy to human beings. At any rate, it is fortunate that he did not use these thoughts in the review, because there are, in fact, plenty of people in Moore's *Selected Poems*. In a later annotation in the book, Stevens refined his opinion: After mentioning many of the human figures cited in the volume, Stevens wrote that they "are not people. They are names that affect the imagination."

Further, Stevens saw in Moore a poet who was wrestling with some of the same problems of modernist poetic form that he was wrestling with. Opposite the table of contents, Stevens copied out the entirety of an unsigned short notice of her *Selected Poems* which appeared in the May to October, 1935, issue of *The London Mercury*. The review noted that Moore's verse had "a balanced prose rhythm, broken into a regular pattern only by her rhymes" and subtly used "an unstressed [syllable] rhyming with a stressed syllable." Stevens checked these assertions against the text,

marking the rhymes of many of the poems, as well as the syllable counts of "The Steeple-Jack" and "The Hero."

Moore's syllabics and rhyming strategies intrigued Stevens. In the margins of his copy, Stevens wrote, "artificial rhythms are the reverse of natural or free rhythms." In his published review, he fleshes out this idea. "If the verse is not to be free," he comments, "its alternative is to be rigid" (774). This dichotomy mirrors Samuel Taylor Coleridge's distinction between organic and mechanic form,²² a distinction that helps explain why Stevens later describes Moore's syllabic form as lines that "repeat themselves, syllable by syllable, without variation" resulting in stanzas that are "mechanisms" – though he is quick to add, without "mechanical effect" (775). What he found in Moore's poetry, then, was a highly structured verse that did not follow the conventions of accentual-syllabic versification. At the time, Stevens's ideas of poetic form were evolving from the variety of formal ideas in *Harmonium* (the iambic pentameter of poems like "Sunday Morning" and the freer structures of poems like "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird") to the loose pentameter of his later verse (see *L* 407). Stevens found Moore's rejection of traditional prosody bracing, but took the *via media* himself.

Thus, Stevens saw the books he acquired as emblems of the people and eras that produced them, and his library, although not a complete guide to his imaginative world, can be seen as a collection of intellectual and spiritual souvenirs, mementos that point to the aesthetic, political, and intellectual journeys of his life.

NOTES

- 1 See J. Edelstein, "The Poet as Reader: Wallace Stevens and His Books," *The Book Collector*, 24 (1979), 56.
- 2 See Milton J. Bates, "Stevens's Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 2.3–4 (1978), 45–61, and "Stevens's Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist (Concluded)," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 3.1 (1979), 15–33. See also Robert Moynihan, "Checklist: Second Purchase, Wallace Stevens Collection, Huntington Library," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 20.1 (Spring 1996), 76–103.
- 3 See Peter Brazeau, "Wallace Stevens at the University of Massachusetts: Check List of an Archive," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 2.1–2 (1978), 50–4.
- 4 The titles of all the books and the precise number of them is unknowable, because Parke-Bernet occasionally listed a book and noted that others would be auctioned with the same parcel. A number of Stevens's books – including his personal copies of many of his publications – were kept by Holly Stevens and are now the property of her son, Peter Hanchak.

- 5 *Costume Books with Profusely Illustrated Color Plates French Works Many Superbly Bound Limited Editions and Other Books Collected by William Mitchell Van Winkle Rye, New York the Late Wallace Stevens Hartford, Conn. Sold by Order of Owners. Mrs. Stevens and Others* (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1959) (the auction occurred on March 10, 1959); *Americana. Early Newspapers and Maps. Travel – Exploration – History* (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, 1959) (the auction occurred on April 7–8, 1959).
- 6 See Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered: An Oral Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 55.
- 7 Huntington Library, RB 440361.
- 8 Charles William Eliot, *Addresses at the Inauguration of Charles William Eliot* (Cambridge: Sever & Francis, 1869), 39–40.
- 9 Charles William Eliot, "Undesirable and Desirable Uniformity in Schools," *Journal of the Proceedings of the National Educational Association of the United States* (1893), 82.
- 10 A. Walton Litz, "Particles of Order: The Unpublished *Adagia*," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, eds. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 57–77, at p. 57.
- 11 Doubtless there are other allusions that have not been identified.
- 12 See Stephen Kotkin's account of the city, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1995).
- 13 Albert Gelpi, *Living in Time: The Poetry of C. Day Lewis* (Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 35, 39.
- 14 See Virginia Hagelstein Marquart, "'New Masses' and John Reed Clubs, 1926–1936: An Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 12 (1989), 56–75.
- 15 Huntington Library, RB 372039.
- 16 Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Left to Right* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapter 2.
- 17 B. J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory, Conceiving the Ultimate Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 160.
- 18 Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory*, p. 161.
- 19 See Robin Schulze, *The Web of Friendship: Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 101–26.
- 20 See Louis L. Martz, "'From the Journal of Crispin': An Early Version of 'The Comedian as the Letter C,'" in *Wallace Stevens*, eds. Doggett and Buttel, pp. 3–29.
- 21 Huntington Library, RB 440488.
- 22 See Thomas Middleton Raysor (ed.), *Shakespearean Criticism*, 2 vols. (Dent: London, 1960), vol. I, p. 198.