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## The Spiritual Journey of Wallace Stevens

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How an Atheist Professor Nudged  
a Post-Christian Poet toward Catholicism

WHEN THE NEWS SPREAD through literary circles that Wallace Stevens had been baptized a Catholic in the last weeks of his life, many were dismissive of its significance.<sup>1</sup> There was, after all, a strong consensus among critics that the major theme in the poet's work was life after the death of God.<sup>2</sup> Stevens himself had done much to reinforce that consensus, both in his famous poem "Sunday Morning" where Jesus is dead and buried somewhere in Palestine, and in statements at certain points in his life to the effect that, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."<sup>3</sup>

And yet, there was always something in Stevens's poetry that spoke powerfully to many believing Christians. For Orthodox writer Rod Dreher, "The best of his poems are so mysterious and beautiful that they quietly overwhelm me. They make me feel like I'm staring at an icon, or a mandala, and intuiting depth even though I don't fully comprehend."<sup>4</sup> Catholic theologian David Tracy borrowed the title of his best-known book, *The Blessed Rage for Order*, from one of Stevens's most famous poems. And the biography by Paul Mariani, a

distinguished poet in his own right, contains a host of intriguing details about Wallace Stevens's longstanding interest in things Catholic.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I suggest that the notion of Stevens as the post-Christian poet par excellence ignores the abundant evidence from his best biographers, as well as from his own poems, letters, and lectures, that he was a man who was preoccupied with religion throughout his life in a more than trivial way. Though he rejected the pious Christianity of his youth in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, he seems to have spent much of his life on that "plain of doubt" where, as Joseph Ratzinger once pointed out, believer and nonbeliever often meet as they contemplate the human condition.<sup>6</sup> Toward the end, his love of beauty seems to have led to a kind of epiphany, thanks in no small part to the role played in his life by George Santayana, a stubbornly self-described "Catholic atheist."

There were five major stages in Stevens's spiritual journey after his early rejection of the faith of his ancestors: his encounter at Harvard with Santayana who awakened him to the richness of the cultural inheritance of Christianity; a long period of searching for something that could take the place of religion in his life; a period when he seems to have decided that poetry and the imagination would have to "suffice" (to use his word) for that purpose; then a period in which he reexamined some of his earlier ideas; and finally his entry "into the fold" (as he put it) shortly before his death in 1955 at the age of seventy-five.

### *1. Putting Away Childish Things*

Imagine a young man born in 1879 in southeastern Pennsylvania, a young man who grew up in a household where his mother read the Bible to the children every night, whose family attended church services on Sunday mornings and sang hymns together afterwards at home, a young man whose valedictory address to his high school classmates urged them to be true to their Christian values, and to follow the cross and defend it forever.<sup>7</sup>

Now, picture that young man entering Harvard College in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the Protestant churches have weather vanes instead of crosses on their steeples. George Santayana, then teaching in the philosophy department, has left us a memorable description of the university in those days: "Harvard College had been founded to rear Protestant divines, and as Calvinism gradually dissolved, it left a void . . . it became first Unitarian and afterwards neutral."<sup>8</sup> The Spanish-born philosophy professor likened his fellow faculty members to "clergymen without a church [who] not only had no common philosophic doctrine to transmit, but were expected not to have one."<sup>9</sup> As for the students, most of them struck him as leading "an idyllic, haphazard, humoristic existence, without any familiar infusion of scholarship, without articulate religion: a flutter of intelligence in a void, flying into trivial play, in order to drop back, as soon as college days were over, into the drudgery of affairs."<sup>10</sup>

Santayana was more than a bit of a snob when it came to the culture of his adopted country. In his book *Character and Opinion in the United States*, he remarked that the American mind from the outset had been somewhat chilled and impoverished by the combination of Protestantism and absorption into material tasks.<sup>11</sup> He had even less esteem for the high-minded humanism that had taken the place of religion among New England elites. In a famous passage, he said: "About the middle of the nineteenth century, in the quiet sunshine of provincial prosperity, New England had an Indian summer of the mind; and an agreeable reflective literature showed how brilliant that russet and yellow season could be. There were poets, historians, orators, preachers . . . they were universal humanists. But it was all a harvest of leaves; these worthies had an expurgated and barren conception of life; theirs was the purity of sweet old age."<sup>12</sup>

In such an atmosphere, it is no great cause for wonder that the young Stevens wrote a sonnet in which he (who had never travelled beyond Reading and New Haven) compared cathedrals erected by man unfavorably to the majesty of nature. With the encouragement of his English professor, he shared the poem with the great Santayana

who—remarkably—took the trouble to reply with a sonnet of his own.<sup>13</sup> The philosopher's poem was a sharp reproof to the younger man—it celebrated the beauty of Christianity which, whether one deemed it true or not, had given the world creations beautiful beyond anything humanity had previously imagined.<sup>14</sup>

Not that Santayana was a religious man. Far from it. He always called himself a Catholic atheist, insisting on both the Catholic part and the atheist part. He liked to say that he preferred Catholic ideas to Protestant because Catholicism was more like paganism.<sup>15</sup> But he had no patience with people who were dismissive of Christianity because, as he put it, "In the confused, tormented, corrupt life of Christendom, not only do we find many a bright focus of mercy, sanctity, poetry, speculation, and love, but even the tone and habit of the common mind seem shot through with . . . wit, insight, and merriment."<sup>16</sup>

For a scholar of Santayana's standing to compose a sonnet in reply to a beginner's efforts was a pretty big deal. Yet most commentators do not seem to have taken the full measure of Santayana's influence on Stevens.<sup>17</sup> The author of *The Sense of Beauty* made Stevens aware of aesthetic and cultural aspects of Christianity with which the young man had been unfamiliar; he awakened in him a lifelong interest in the relation between religion and the imagination; and he encouraged Stevens's vocation for poetry. Many years later Stevens recalled, "I always came away from my visits to him feeling that he made up in the most genuine way for many things that I needed."<sup>18</sup> Over the years, Stevens alluded to Santayana again and again in letters and lectures, and paid homage to him in one of his very last poems, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."

In 1900, Stevens left Harvard, where he had steeped himself in English and French literature, and, after a short stint as a journalist, decided to go to law school. He briefly practiced law in New York City before switching to the legal office of an insurance company and eventually settling permanently in the insurance capital of the United States, Hartford, Connecticut.

His attitude toward religion in those early years was ambivalent, but hardly indifferent.<sup>19</sup> He threw away his boyhood Bible, yet still said his prayers. He attended Lutheran services intermittently, yet read Thomas à Kempis and began a habit of stopping in St. Patrick's Cathedral for quiet thought. He told his journal that he wished there were "still something free from doubt": "I grow tired of the want of faith—the instinct of faith. Self-consciousness convinces me of something, but whether it be something Past, Present or Future I do not know. What a bore to have to think all these things over . . . ! It would be so much nicer to have things definite—both human and divine."<sup>20</sup> After reading a life of Jesus, he wrote his fiancée, Elsie Moll, a hometown beauty with a ninth-grade education, to tell her that he had dropped into a chapel to see what symbols of Jesus's life he could find there. Discovering nothing but a crucifix on the altar, his thoughts must have returned to his conversations with Santayana, for he reflected:

When you compare that poverty with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. . . . One turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus—temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness—tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup>

He told Elsie that he had experienced "a peculiar emotion" in reading about the historical Jesus. For the first time, he was prompted to wonder about the Incarnation:

Before today I do not think I have ever realized that God was distinct from Jesus. . . . People doubt the existence of Jesus—at least they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say, the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God. I think everyone admits that in some form or another. The thought makes the world sweeter—even if God be no more than the mystery of Life.<sup>22</sup>

In 1909, when Stevens was thirty, he and Elsie embarked on what was to be an unhappy yet lasting marriage. He continued to write poetry while building his career in the insurance business, but it was not until he was in his mid-thirties that his poems began to be published. The most famous of these early poems, "Sunday Morning," is the reverie of a woman deciding not to go to church.<sup>23</sup> It has been described as a hedonist's elegy for Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

At the outset of the poem, the woman basks in the pure sense of being, breathing the scent of coffee and oranges, and pushing away thoughts of what happened long ago in Palestine. She says she is content with life as it is, with all its pleasures and pains:<sup>25</sup> "Why should she give her bounty to the dead?" "Divinity must live within herself." Although she says she still feels "the need of some imperishable bliss," she reflects that it is the very perishability of worldly things that gives them their poignant beauty: "Death is the mother of beauty." The tomb in Palestine is simply "the grave of Jesus, where he lay."

Scholarly analyses of the poem stress the woman's acceptance of the fleeting beauty of the world as all there is. Stevens's striking use of color caused many to compare him to modernist French painters like Matisse and Cezanne.<sup>26</sup> But the vibrant oranges and greens vanish as the poem goes on, and, although the final stanza speaks bravely of a world where one is liberated from old myths, that world of freedom is described with words like "chaos," "solitude," "isolation," and "dependency." At the end, the flocks of pigeons sink "downward to darkness," in "ambiguous undulations."

"Sunday Morning" established Stevens in many minds as a post-Christian poet. In my view, however, it is too simple to characterize this early poem as an "elegy for Christianity." The mood is ambivalent; it speaks to feelings and doubts that assail believers and non-believers alike as they journey through life, and no doubt that is part of the reason for its appeal to many Christians. It is hard to read "Sunday Morning" without recalling Paul's words to those Corinthians who were doubting the Resurrection: "If it is for this life only that we have hoped in Christ, then truly we are the most pitiable of men."

“Sunday Morning” is probably the most celebrated of Stevens’s poems, but as his subsequent work reveals, it was but an early step in a quest that would last for many years.

## 2. *Searching for Meaning: 1916–1934*

In the next phase of his journey, Stevens read widely while exploring in his poems the question of what, if anything, could take the place of a lost religion. Helen Vendler, the doyenne of American poetry critics, credits him with critically “evaluating the claims of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche long before most members of his generation.”<sup>27</sup> He had considerable respect for Freud,<sup>28</sup> but his attitude toward Nietzsche<sup>29</sup> was much like that of P. G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves, who told Bertie Wooster, “You would not enjoy Nietzsche, Sir, he is fundamentally unsound.”<sup>30</sup> His view of Marx was even more disdainful.<sup>31</sup>

Meanwhile, approaching middle age, he was fending off the tendency to depression that ran in his family.<sup>32</sup> With his marriage sunk in shared disappointment, he was face to face with Freud’s trilogy of woes that beset the human condition: the certainty of death, the implacability of nature, and the suffering entailed in personal relations.<sup>33</sup> Adopting the remedy Freud had chosen for himself, Stevens immersed himself in work.<sup>34</sup> For over a decade, from 1923 to 1934, his energies, according to his only child, Holly Stevens, went largely into his duties at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.<sup>35</sup> He produced only a handful of poems in those years. Then, suddenly, at age fifty-five, he embarked on a new period of creativity with a poem that many consider his greatest, “The Idea of Order at Key West.”

Stevens had been introduced to the Florida Keys while on a business trip in the spring of 1916.<sup>36</sup> It was a discovery that would change his life and influence his poetry. To his northern eyes, those then-pristine islands looked like paradise on earth. He was bowled over by the colors of the sea (“pale blue shading as the water deepens to indigo”) and the luxuriant vegetation (“oleanders as large as orchard trees, groups of hibiscus resembling hollyhocks, strange trumpet vines,

royal palms, coconut palms full of coconuts which litter the ground, orange and grapefruit trees, mangoes in bloom, bougainvillea").<sup>37</sup> He began to take annual vacations there with a few good friends, and by all accounts, it seems that those escapes filled with fishing, card playing, cigars, masculine bonhomie, and plenty of Scotch whiskey, were the brightest spots in his life for years to come. It was there—loafing in the sun and sea—that he said he felt he was himself.<sup>38</sup>

In "The Idea of Order at Key West,"<sup>39</sup> the narrator and his companion are listening to a woman singing as she strides along the seashore. The sounds of the ocean are "mindless"—"inhuman" noises that could never be "formed to mind or voice." But the woman can do what the sea cannot. Defying the implacability of nature, "She sang beyond the genius of the sea." The ocean keeps making its "constant cry," but the narrator tells us that "it was she and not the sea we heard." The poet had come a long way from his undergraduate sonnet comparing the creations of man unfavorably to the works of nature.

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
 The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
 Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.

\* \* \*

It was her voice that made  
 The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
 She measured to the hour its solitude.  
 She was the single artificer of the world  
 In which she sang.

For many commentators, that is the core of the poem: the singer, and the poet himself, as makers of order, imposing a fragment of form on the chaos of the natural world.<sup>40</sup> But there is more to the story, for a question occurs to the men, a question that they clearly think is important:

Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew  
 It was the spirit that we sought and knew  
 That we should ask this often as she sang.

The men have a sense that something more is happening here: "More even than her voice, and ours." That question is left hanging. Then, as night falls and the men turn back toward town, the narrator turns to his companion with another question. Noticing how the lights along the shore impose a kind of order on the night, he asks:

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,  
 . . . tell why the glassy lights,  
 The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there, . . .  
 Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
 Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
 Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.

Receiving no answer, he cries:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
 The maker's rage to order words of the sea,  
 Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
 And of ourselves and of our origins,  
 In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

Critics tell us that this famous poem celebrates the creative acts of the singer and the narrator. That seems right as far as it goes. But there is also the question that was left unanswered—the men's wonder about creativity itself. And what about the silent character in the poem: "Pale Ramon"? Some commentators maintain that this is a reference to a real person, a literary critic named Ramon Fernandez.<sup>41</sup> But Stevens, when asked on two occasions, specifically denied that was so. He said that "Ramon Fernandez was not intended to be anyone at all. I chose two everyday Spanish names. I knew of Ramon Fernandez the critic, and had read some of his criticisms, but I did not have him in mind."<sup>42</sup>

The interesting question, then, is: Why Spanish? The man with whom the narrator has shared this experience, and to whom he turns with his question is not one of his fishing buddies from the cold North. He turns to someone whose very name evokes a world

of meaning that Stevens has only glimpsed from afar—someone who might be able to understand, even explain, “The maker’s rage to order.” Someone from the world of an old Spanish philosopher who insisted on calling himself a Catholic atheist.

### 3. *Can Imagination Suffice? 1934–50*

“The Idea of Order at Key West” marked the beginning of Stevens’s most prolific period as a poet. He was almost sixty when he embarked on this extraordinary period of creativity (while never failing to put on his gray three-piece suit and walk to work every day with his painterly eye taking in every detail, and his head full of strange and wonderful imaginings).

It was a period of experimenting with new forms; many of the poems have been compared to the paintings of Braque, Matisse, and Klee, and to the verse of Valéry and Mallarmé. In the view of several critics, the hermetic poems in this phase were Stevens’s greatest works. To Harold Bloom, for example, “the persistence and diversity of strength that attended him between the ages of fifty-five and seventy-five [was] a glory almost unique in the poetry of the last several centuries.”<sup>43</sup> Others, however, were disappointed. For Yvor Winters, this period of greatest productivity and fame was one in which Stevens not only failed to live up to the promise of his earlier works, but often descended into triviality or mere novelty.<sup>44</sup> Frank Kermode seems correct in attributing that divergence to differing attitudes toward abstract art.<sup>45</sup>

In terms of Stevens’s spiritual journey, the period was one in which he seemed relentlessly bent on finding a definitive solution to the problem of what can “suffice” to provide meaning in life. In the correspondence from these years, we find him telling a friend that he is constantly “thinking of some substitute for religion.”<sup>46</sup> More and more, it looked as though he had decided to fill the role once played by religion with poetry or the imagination.<sup>47</sup> Thus, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”<sup>48</sup> we read:

Exceeding music must take the place  
 Of empty heaven and its hymns,  
 Ourselves in poetry must take their place

The poems of this period are increasingly about the relation between imagination and reality. Stevens was particularly interested in what he called “the painter’s problem” of getting to reality through the imagination in such a way that the reader too would encounter reality in a new way.<sup>49</sup> We hear this, too, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”:

The man bent over his guitar,  
 A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, ‘You have a blue guitar,  
 You do not play things as they are.’

The man replied, “Things as they are  
 Are changed upon the blue guitar.’

To a correspondent in this period, he ventured the thought that poetry is a concept as great as the idea of God: “The idea of pure poetry, essential imagination, as the highest objective of the poet appears to be, at least potentially, as great as the idea of God, and, for that matter, greater, if the idea of God is only one of things of the imagination.”<sup>50</sup> In response to the same friend’s query about the meaning of a poem, he wrote, “If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else.”<sup>51</sup>

For a time, Stevens’s subject became the imagination itself. His essays on imagination bear a remarkable resemblance to the thought of Bernard Lonergan. In fact, the epigraph for Lonergan’s magnum opus, *Insight*,<sup>52</sup> could just as well stand at the head of Stevens’s work: “The thinking faculty thinks the forms in images” (from Aristotle’s

*De Anima*). Like Lonergan, Stevens was fascinated by the mysterious role of imagination in human cognition.<sup>53</sup> He believed that “we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them,”<sup>54</sup> and that there is a way in which “knowledge and the thing known are one.”<sup>55</sup> Like Lonergan, he held that a thinker or artist must strive to “cleanse the imagination of the romantic.”<sup>56</sup>

But poetry and the imagination in themselves did not ultimately suffice. Mariani’s biography shows us a man who was still restlessly searching, a man who “often hovered on the threshold between two worlds, questioning himself, holding back, and yet desiring something more.”<sup>57</sup>

#### *4. Turning Outward: 1950–1955*

Somewhere around 1950, Stevens’s quest for meaning took a new turn, and became less introspectively focused on the imagination. In a short autobiographical note submitted to a publisher, he makes a telling remark: “There are many poems relating to the interactions between reality and the imagination, that are to be regarded as marginal to [my] central theme.”<sup>58</sup> Then, in 1953, he acknowledged to literary critic Sister Mary Bernetta Quinn that he liked a few of his early poems “better than anything I have done since.”<sup>59</sup>

Three of his late poems reveal that he was also reconsidering his ideas about religion. In “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” Stevens, then seventy-one, imagines an old man alone, who, like the woman in “Sunday Morning,” is communing with himself.<sup>60</sup> But the man’s “intensest rendezvous” with his inmost thoughts leads him away from mere introspection. In fact, it leads him to a place where he forgets, or loses, himself. He says to himself, “We collect ourselves . . . into one thing/A light, a power, the miraculous influence.”

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,  
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.  
 We say God and the imagination are one . . .  
 How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
 We make a dwelling in the evening air,  
 In which being there together is enough.

Regarding the nature of the obscure “order” or “knowledge” or “central mind” that “arranged” this interior rendezvous, Stevens told a friend at the time that he could get “no further than the statement that God and the imagination are one.”<sup>61</sup> It thus might appear that he never got far beyond his old mentor Santayana, who held that “poetry raised to its highest power is . . . identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth.”<sup>62</sup>

But the following year he does venture further in a pair of poems where his mind travels to two places that he had visited only in his imagination—to Rome, where George Santayana lay dying in a convent cared for by nuns, and to the Rosary Chapel (designed by Henri Matisse) that had just opened in southern France.

In his homage “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,”<sup>63</sup> Stevens imagines his old mentor

On the threshold of heaven  
 The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome  
 Beyond.

In the sickroom there is a candle the light of which is

tearing against the wick  
 To join hovering excellence, to escape  
 From fire and be part only of that of which  
 Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

Like the candle, the old philosopher is “alive/Yet living in two worlds.” As to one, Stevens says, “he is impenitent” and as to the other

most penitent,  
 Impatient for the grandeur that you need  
 In so much misery.

(For the record, Santayana was so determined to preserve his atheist credentials that he left explicit written instructions to his executors that if it should be reported that he accepted the last rites in his dying moments, it must be understood that he did so only to get the nuns to stop pestering him.<sup>64</sup>)

Meanwhile, another Catholic atheist whose work Stevens had always admired unveiled his crowning achievement. The 1951 opening of the Matisse chapel in Vence, France, was an epoch-making event in the art world. Henri Matisse, who designed and paid for it in gratitude to the young Dominican nun who had cared for him during his convalescence from cancer surgery, considered it his masterpiece, the culmination of his life's work. It is widely regarded as one of the greatest artworks of the twentieth century

Just as Stevens had been stunned by his first glimpse of Key West, he seems to have been overwhelmed by *Life* magazine's photographs of the chapel's interior, flooded with light from semi-abstract stained glass windows in Stevens's own signature colors of blue, green, and gold.

In "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," we can see how Matisse's chapel led the poet to a new insight. The speaker in the poem perceives in the chapel of a run-down church something of Christianity that still lives:

No radiance of dead blaze, but something seen  
 In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life,  
 Itself, the presence of the intelligible  
 In that which is created as its symbol.<sup>65</sup>

One of the great virtues of Paul Mariani's biography is to show that "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside" represented a major breakthrough for Stevens.<sup>66</sup> Through the genius of Matisse, Stevens

was able to see how the “ever ancient, ever new” could be made vividly present for new generations. In the dilapidated shell of the old church, the poet saw the Christianity that he had left behind; but in its chapel he discerned something else burgeoning forth: “It is like a new account of everything old/Matisse at Vence and a great deal more than that.” In a flash, Stevens saw “the need of each generation to be itself,” and “in the air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,” he discerned “That which is always beginning because it is part/Of that which is always beginning, over and over.”

Here is how Mariani describes Stevens’s epiphany: “The Christianity his poems had for so long rejected, from ‘Sunday Morning’ on . . . has nothing of the present found in Matisse’s Catholic chapel full of light, ‘this *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new/And of becoming,’ embodied in the living light of this newly realized sacred space, the ever-fresh immanence of green reality merging with even as it maintains its own identity from the ever-refreshing blue imagination.”<sup>67</sup> “After a lifetime of wrestling,” Mariani says, “the poet has come to terms with himself, so that standing in the chapel in Vence, bathed in the light of Matisse’s imagination, would be enough.”<sup>68</sup>

Around this time, Stevens wrote to Irish poet Thomas McGreevy, telling him that “it would be nice to be able to read more and think more and be myself more and to make up my mind about God, say, at least before he makes up his mind about me.”<sup>69</sup> Stevens, who had never travelled to Europe except in imagination, congratulated McGreevy on his good fortune to be temporarily living in Rome. How pleasant it must be, he wrote, to be among the “peace-giving memories of the Pope [Pius XII], and his glorious church and the happiness of feeling both sanctified and everything else all at the same time, as if you had been on an airplane trip through several of the more celebrated planets with two or three days of heaven thrown in.”<sup>70</sup> To Sister Mary Bernetta, he wrote, “I am not an atheist, although I do not believe in the same God in whom I believed when I was a boy.”<sup>71</sup> To an inquirer about his religious affiliation, he described himself as “a dried-up Presbyterian.”<sup>72</sup> Ambivalent as ever, he bought a Latin edition of

the *Imitation of Christ*<sup>73</sup> and wrote to a friend that he found Jacques Maritain fascinating.<sup>74</sup> No believer in retirement, he continued going to his office at the insurance company until he was diagnosed with stomach cancer in April 1955.

### 5. Into “the Fold”

During his first stay at St. Francis Hospital, he met the hospital chaplain, a Catholic priest who, three months later, after several conversations, baptized him and gave him communion.<sup>75</sup> The priest’s account of the baptism was contested by Stevens’s daughter, but Paul Mariani found the story credible after weighing evidence in the poems, letters, and journals, and considering interviews with persons who knew Stevens well in those days.<sup>76</sup> The issue arose again in 2016, when Helen Vendler reviewed Mariani’s biography of Stevens in the *New York Review of Books*. It seems that if there is anything about Stevens that annoys the high priests and priestesses of the literary establishment more than his having been a successful businessman and a Republican, it is the suggestion that he might have become a Catholic. Vendler harshly criticized Mariani for giving credence to what she called a “dubious anecdote” that she said was “probably an unconscious elaboration by an old priest of the importance of his visits to the poet’s bedside.”<sup>77</sup> Mariani, in a dignified response, said that after much study he had “come to accept what those who knew Stevens as a colleague and friend say when they speak of a change in Stevens’s mood in his last months.”<sup>78</sup> His view was also based, he said, on the late poems that “re-examine the earlier assertions of “Sunday Morning.”

As a lawyer, I find Mariani’s sober evaluation of the evidence convincing. There are numerous statements and musings in Stevens’s poems and letters—many of which I have cited here—that make the story of his Catholic conversion plausible. Stevens had a long history of wrestling with questions about religion and had been drawn to people and things that were more than culturally Catholic. He main-

tained close friendships and a lively correspondence with men and women who were practicing Catholics, telling one of them that if he ever did join a church it would be Catholic.<sup>79</sup> He knew enough about Catholicism to explain to a translator why he chose to imagine himself in a poem as a Franciscan rather than a Jesuit.<sup>80</sup> Friends who visited him in the hospital remember seeing a New Testament on his bedside table, and a small crucifix on his pillow.<sup>81</sup>

It seems to me that Vendler and other skeptics of Stevens's conversion greatly underestimate the power of beauty to affect a man like Stevens with a painterly imagination. He broke permanently with his parents to marry a stunningly beautiful young woman whom they considered to be of a lower class; he was brought by Santayana to an appreciation of Christianity's contribution of beauty to the world; he loved to go to St. Patrick's Cathedral and just sit there; he never ceased to be amazed at the brilliant colors of southern waters, skies, and flowers; he was awestruck by Matisse's achievement at Vence though he had only seen it in photographs. Not without reason did so great a theologian as Pope Benedict once say that the Church's best arguments for the truth of the faith are her art and the lives of her saints.

Of course, no one can ever know what was in Stevens's mind. But I believe that tracing the steps in his spiritual journey sheds light on why Stevens's poetry speaks so powerfully to many Christian believers. It could be simply that the poetry is very fine. My theory, however, is that Stevens's poetic gift was so powerful that it enables many people to see "the grandeur of God" through his poetry even though for most of his life he couldn't see it himself. Many great artists, Stevens among them, can see more clearly and more deeply than the rest of us, but they can't always explain what they are seeing or what they are enabling us to see. Stevens's sense of beauty was so strong that it not only hinted at the nature of God to many readers, but even, towards the end of his life, may have led him aesthetically to a destination he could not reach intellectually. If so, an old Spanish "Catholic atheist" surely deserves some of the credit.

## Notes

1. Helen Vendler, "Wallace Stevens: The Real and the Made-Up," *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2016.
2. See for example, Adam Kirsch, "The Patron Saint of Inner Lives," *The Atlantic* (April 2016): "The great subject of Stevens' poetry from beginning to end" was "how to live a life 'unsponsored' by a deity, in which we are responsible for inventing our own meanings"; Frank Kermode, *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1960), 127: "In the end, that is the subject of Stevens: living without God and finding it good, because of the survival of the power that once made Him suffice."
3. "Adagia," in *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose by Wallace Stevens*, S. F. Morse ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 158.
4. <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/serenity-and-wallace-stevens/>.
5. Paul Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium: The Life of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 401–403.
6. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 45–47 (first published 1968).
7. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 8.
8. George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York: Norton, 1967), 39–40.
9. Quoted by Richard Neuhaus in "Santayana Lately Revisited," *First Things*, February 2005.
10. Santayana, *Character and Opinion*, 51.
11. *Ibid.*, 52.
12. *Ibid.*, 1.
13. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 22–23.
14. *Ibid.*
15. "I prefer Catholic ideas to Protestant, and Pagan to Catholic; or, if you like, I would only accept Christianity as a form of paganism. For in paganism I see the only religion that tried to do justice to all life, and at the same time retained the consciousness that it was a kind of poetry." *Letters of George Santayana* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 1:218; "Catholicism is the most human of religions, if taken humanly: it is paganism transformed and made metaphysical." Santayana, *Persons and Places* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 93.
16. George Santayana, *The Realm of Spirit* (New York: Scribners, 1942), 212–13.
17. Mariani is a notable exception.
18. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977), 482.
19. See Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 29, 31, 35, 51, 53–54, 37, 46, 121.
20. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 86–87.
21. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 140.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 66.
24. Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, 41; see also Kirsch, "The Patron Saint of Inner Lives."

25. Here, following Joan Richardson and Frank Kermode, I treat "Sunday Morning" as an interior reverie. Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879–1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 436; Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, 41–43. Some readers, like Harold Bloom, see the second voice as that of Stevens as narrator, Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Cornell, 1977), 28–29.
26. Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), 13.
27. Helen Vendler, "The Hunting of Wallace Stevens," *New York Review of Books*, November 1986.
28. "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, 218–19 (crediting Freud for giving "the irrational a legitimacy it never had before").
29. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 431–32.
30. P. G. Wodehouse, "Jeeves Takes Charge" in *Carry On, Jeeves* (London: Jenkins, 1925).
31. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 291–92.
32. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 59.
33. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961), 24.
34. "Fate can do little against one," said Freud, "if one can sufficiently heighten the yield of pleasure from the sources of psychical and intellectual work." *Ibid.*, 26.
35. Holly Stevens, editor's note, in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 243.
36. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 141.
37. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 192.
38. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 205; *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 233.
39. *Collected Poems*, 128.
40. Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, 74; Thomas Grey, *The Wallace Stevens Case* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 94–95.
41. Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, 96.
42. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 798; see also 823.
43. Bloom, *The Poems of Our Climate*, 89.
44. Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the Hedonist's Progress," in *In Defense of Reason* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1947), 431–59.
45. Kermode, *Wallace Stevens*, 51.
46. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 348.
47. Kirsch, "The Patron Saint of Inner Lives."
48. *Collected Poems*, 165.
49. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 222.
50. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 369.
51. *Ibid.*, 370.
52. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).
53. Stevens, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," in *Opus Posthumous*, 219–20.
54. Stevens, "Imagination as Value," in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 154.
55. "The Sail of Ulysses" in *Opus Posthumous*, 99.

56. Stevens, "Imagination as Value," in *The Necessary Angel*, 138.
57. Mariani, "Did Wallace Stevens Convert?" *New York Review of Books*, July 14, 2016.
58. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 820.
59. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 807.
60. *Collected Poems*, 524.
61. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 701.
62. Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 290.
63. *Collected Poems*, 508.
64. Recounted by Neuhaus, "Santayana Lately Revisited."
65. *Collected Poems*, 529.
66. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 367–68.
67. *Ibid.*, 368.
68. *Ibid.*, 369.
69. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 763.
70. *Ibid.*, 680.
71. *Ibid.*, 715.
72. *Ibid.*, 792.
73. *Ibid.*, 766.
74. *Ibid.*, 772.
75. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 394–402.
76. *Ibid.*; see also Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983).
77. Vendler, "Wallace Stevens: The Real and the Made-Up."
78. Paul Mariani, "Did Wallace Stevens Convert?" *New York Review of Books*, August 18, 2016.
79. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 398.
80. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 784.
81. Mariani, *The Whole Harmonium*, 398, 403.