

THEOLOGIANS OF THE POETIC IMAGINATION

Matthew del Nevo

Under this title I will be talking about two poets in particular and about poetry, I hope, in general. I will be talking about Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), the Austrian poet writing mostly in German, and Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), the American poet of Connecticut.

The phrase 'theologians of the poetic imagination' is mine. It originally occurred to me as a description of Rilke's stance toward poetry and imagination. In this stance poetry and imagination are fundamentals and essentials of everything whichever way you look at it. As 'theologian', I envisaged the poet as an authoritative figure, and someone caught up with God - that is, with the ultimate unknowns - whether the presence of these or their absence.

Lou Andreas-Salomé - to whom Nietzsche proposed, Rilke lived with, and who was a student and friend of Freud in Vienna before Freud ever considered the idea of students of psychoanalysis - recalls in her *Memoirs* that

for Rainer, God himself was always the object of his art, the expression of his attitude toward the most intimate centre of his own being, [an ultimate anonymity beyond all conscious limits of the ego.] And that at a time when viable images for 'religious art' were no longer provided, or rather, dictated, by a generally accepted belief system.¹

Rilke and Wallace Stevens write in a time when there was no 'generally accepted belief system'. They are theologians 'after God', but 'God' remains, as do 'angels', in the work of both poets as words which keeps the unknown before them; for only with the unknown truly before them can poets really live. The poetic imagination is both a realm of exploration (of limits and off-limits) and the means of exploring that realm.

I met my phrase when I was reading Michael Hamburger's book *The Truth of Poetry*. He says:

There is an extraordinary accordance between the private religions of Rilke and Wallace Stevens, both of whom were *theologians of the poetic imagination*.²

Neither poet had a religion in any formal sense and neither was a Christian, and yet both poets were theologising by the light of the poetic imagination. Let me illustrate with a reading from a letter Rainer wrote to his wife in

1908 from a hotel on Rue de Varenne in Paris. His wife Clara had been trying to cajole him into reading *The Sayings of the Buddha* which had then only just been translated into German. Rilke is more interested in reading Bettina's letters to Goethe. In reply to Clara he wrote:

You [Clara] are at the moment directly approaching the divine; more, you are flying straight toward it, irresistibly surmounting all obstacles. But I have been there, always, even as a child, and am returning on foot. I have been sent back, not to proclaim it, but to be among what is human, to see everything and reject nothing, not one of those thousand transformations in which the absolute disguises itself, vilifies itself and makes itself recognisable. I am like a man gathering fungi and healing herbs among the weeds, who appears to be bent and occupied with small things whilst tree-trunks around him stand and pray. But a time will come when I will prepare the potion. And yet another when I will mount upwards with it - this potion, in which everything is distilled and combined, the most poisonous and deadly elements as well, because of their strength. And I will take it up to God, so that he may slake his thirst, and feel his own glory running through his veins.

To write the kind of work Rilke has in mind here, which will quench the thirst of the divine itself, one would *need* to be *at least* a theologian of the poetic imagination. The letter *itself* undoubtedly reflects a powerful poetic imagination. Not only this, Rilke will actually live to believe that he fulfilled his calling - for what he describes in this letter is not his ambition - he had none! - it is his fatality - or at least part of it. The other parts being his loves and his terrible death.

On the face of it Rilke and Stevens are worlds apart. Stevens, from up-State New York in the age of the Skyscraper, the Cadillac and the Boogie-Woogie, and Rilke, from Central Europe, who lived most of his adult life in the castles and palaces of Princesses and Countesses from ancient aristocratic noble lineages. In one of his most famous letters, to Withold von Hulewicz, his Polish translator, Rilke wrote as follows:

For our grandfathers a house, a fountain, a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat, was infinitely more, infinitely more intimate; almost every object a vessel in which they found something human or to which they added their humanity. Now, from America, empty indifferent things crowd over to us, counterfeit things, the veriest dummies. A house, in the American sense, an American apple or one of the vines of that country has *nothing* in common with the houses, the fruit, the grape into which have entered the hope and meditation of our forefathers. The lived and living things, the things that share our thoughts, these are on the decline and can no more be replaced. *We are perhaps the last to have known such things.*³

The connection between Rilke and Stevens cannot be made on the basis of extrinsic co-ordinates. Outwardly they lived in different worlds. The connection is one which belongs to something intrinsic to them both.

When, in the quotation just given, Rilke says, 'we are perhaps the last to have known such things', he is not being nostalgic. He is airing a concern for things which he shares with Wallace Stevens, and which, it seems to me, is a primary characteristic of the poetry penned by these theologians of the poetic imagination.

Now I want to read from the poetry of Stevens and Rilke. In this way we can *listen* to them as theologians of the poetic imagination. The first poem is by Wallace Stevens and is called 'The Snow Man'. It comes from the 1923 volume *Harmonium*.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Who is the snowman in this poem?

It is not a *romantic* poem about a thing - a snowman - but a poem which, if we listen carefully to it, bids us take the snowman to heart.

More than that: it bids us imaginatively *to be* the snowman.

To do this - to be the snowman - one must *winter* oneself.

This is what the poem calls for.

And this is what *listening* to it means.

'For the listener, who listens in the snow,

And, nothing himself, beholds

Nothing that is not there and nothing that is.'

The reader listens to the poem and hears of another listener *in* the poem.

The listener in the poem is the poet.

But the *true* listener is the one *the poet* recognises in the poem.

The true listener *this* winter day is the snowman.

For the snowman is one with the white wintry world.

Yet this poem is not romantic. There is no *yearning* for at-one-ness.

There is simply at-one-ment by virtue of the Thing:

this snowman, this winter day.

Here is the time for the sayable, *here*.

And the poet says it, the poem says it;

they *both* say it -

for the poet is at one with the poem.

His poems *are* him, that is, *parts* of him.

The poem makes us want to stop *with* the poem, to contemplate.

To contemplate ourselves as wintered poets, as snowmen.

And this is the key to Stevens as it is to Rilke as it is to appreciating them as theologians of the poetic imagination: their poems call to contemplation. They and their works do not romanticise, rather, they wish to realise. The poet realises himself in his work, and the work evokes or desires an equivalent realisation from the reader.

The call to contemplation in the work of Rilke and Stevens is not a call away from the world - to emotion recollected in tranquility - as it was for the Romantics of the Nineteenth Century, but a call *to* the world, *to* poetic experience, and to the realisation there of poetry. The Things which inspire the poems rise up within the poetic imagination of the reader, just as they originally did through the poet; in the poem I read, the Thing is the snowman, or literally, 'the mind of winter' .

The next poem is also by Wallace Stevens. I will read the second half. It is called 'Landscape With Boat', from *Parts of a World* (1942). Notice, at the end the poet reveals his own centrality to the poem itself, to show that the poem is *part* of him.

It was his nature to suppose,
To receive what others had supposed, without
Accepting. He received what he denied.
But as truth to be accepted, he supposed
A truth beyond all truths.

He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue
Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine

Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
And say, 'The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime.'

This poem is not romantic.

It is a meditation - a meditation on blue
- on the colour blue and the blue illusion,
- on the colour of the world and the illusion of the world,
and the colourlessness of the poet.

The poem says: it is not what *we* suppose
(in our psychological-psychologising, subjective-subjectivising ways)
but that the world supposes *us*.

We are supposed.

Landscape in blue: we part of it:

'He never supposed

That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,

He never supposed divine

Things might not look divine.'

The reality is the pantomime

(a recurring theme of Stevens' poetry, notably of one of most well-known poems, 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction').

Stevens' complete works are the search for a Supreme Fiction - a concept which his work alone brings best into view - a search for 'the essential poem at the centre of things' in which 'one poem proves another and the whole.'⁴ This is realist poetry, in the sense that it seeks to realise experience of Things. This means to realise poetic imagination. This realisation happens in the poem, and, through contemplating the poem and identifying with it, in life. A theology of poetic imagination is at work. The objects of this theology are those unknown qualities which *things* are. And sometimes, more often than not, these things are invisible, *in us*.

Finally, throughout his writing, but especially in the *Elegies*, in Rilke's Ninth 'Duino Elegy' written at the chateau of Muzot in Switzerland in 1922, he battles with his angel.

Let us not ask 'What does Rilke mean by angels?'

Rilke would rather we raised ourselves to the level of the question of his angels. For they were enigmas to him as well.

We need to raise ourselves toward Rilke's level

- which is the level of his angels

- if we are to read his *Duino Elegies* with any understanding.

They were written from such daunting depths of silence

that it may take years of reading them before one can begin to identify with them

and realise the experience of his poetic imagination in one's own.

Rilke was a task-master to himself

and he sets great tasks before his readers in his *Elegies*

- these poems designed and destined to slake God's thirst.

Rilke's angels belong to language in which the Visible (so-called) is being 'transmuted' into the so-called Invisible. 'Transmuted' is Rilke's word. This is language - and not just language, but poetic imagination become experience - in which imagination transmutes the forms of one kind of thing into the forms of another: a world in which spirits are corporealised and in which bodies are spiritualised. The conceptions are difficult. But they are not simply conceptions, they are callings to our potential as humans to *let our imagination use us*.

Letting our imagination use us. This is what Rilke has in mind when he charges that we - poets and listeners - become 'bees of the Invisible' or when Stevens calls the poet 'priest of the invisible'.⁵ By the Invisible Rilke refers to those forces which grip our imagination, which, in Stevens' language, gulp up our formlessness. For both poets - and in this it can be said they are theologians of the poetic imagination - do not come face to face with the earth as with a conglomeration of physical facts, neither do they see *themselves* this way. They see the earth as an angelic apparition through the poetic imagination; and they also appear to themselves this way, that is, angels appear to them.

'I am the necessary angel of the earth' (says the angel in one of Stevens' poems), 'Since, in my sight, you see the earth again.'⁶ This seeing the earth again, and us *in* it, not *on* it, for it is one of our essential elements, not merely something underfoot which needs us to 'save' it - this seeing the earth again is what they conduct in their poetry.

'Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
Invisible?' [Ninth Elegy]

This transmuting ourselves so we can see the earth, this seeing the earth so that it rises up invisible within us, is not some doctrinaire agenda Rilke obscurely shares with Stevens. These things refer to ways the poets push us towards praise. Theirs is the poetry of praise. *What* they praise and the tones of voice *in which* they praise differ widely between Rilke and Stevens; yet, *that* they praise, that they can *still* praise, even *after* God, that they teach *us* to do so, this is to be commended in both of them. In this they are theologians of the poetic imagination.

REFERENCES

¹ Andreas-Salomé, Lou, *Looking Back: Memoirs* (ed. Ernst Preiffer, tr. Breon Mitchell, New York, Marlowe & Company, 1995), p. 75.

² Hamburger, M., *The Truth of Poetry*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1972, p. 112.

³ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Selected Letters 1902-1926* (tr. R.F.C. Hull, intro. John Bayley, London: Quartet, 1988), p. 394.

⁴ 'A Primitive like an Orb' from *Auroras of Autumn*, 1950.

⁵ Rilke: *Selected Letters*, p.394; Stevens: *Opus Posthumous*, pp.XV, 158, cited by Hamburger, p.112.

⁶ 'Angel Surrounded by Paysans'.