

## THE NECESSARY ANGEL OF THE EARTH

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More than forty years ago, Wallace Stevens' poetry prophesied the current spiritual change from the patriarchal religious system to the spiritual *conjunctio* of the feminine and masculine principles through which we encounter our wholeness. Today, given good press, Stevens would be, depending on the spiritual need and outlook, a secular mystic, an ecospiritual guru, or a priest of the Goddess of the Earth.

While a strong advocate of secular humanism, Stevens' poetic purpose is absolutely spiritual:

Professor Eucalyptus said, 'The search  
For reality is as momentous as  
The search for God.' It is the philosopher's search

For an interior made exterior  
And the poet's search for the same exterior made  
Interior.<sup>1</sup>

Stevens prophesied the Second Coming which would establish a new spiritual order of mystical integration. As the mystic experience is the direct experience of the divine; there are, then, no human mediatory agents. The traditional role of the clergy is challenged by the new spiritual autonomy of each individual:

The lean cats of the arches of the churches,  
That's the old world. In the new, all men are priests.<sup>2</sup>

The second coming has its special annunciation by the necessary angel which appears in the human soul as a *metanoia*, a new spiritual consciousness referred to currently as creation spirituality in which the whole of creation is revered and sacralised:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,  
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again

The Stevens angel imbues reality with the sense of the divine - a sense Stevens had acknowledged early in his life: 'I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore look at facts, but through them'.<sup>3</sup>

In *Angel Surrounded by Paysans* the angel is the imaginative abstraction of reality:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?  
The angel:  
I am the angel of reality,<sup>4</sup>

The angel is additionally rendered as a 'welcome.' 'Welcome' is derived from < *will-* pleasure + *cuma-* guest. Reality is thus a welcome guest that brings with it pleasure and satisfaction. This angel, Stevens remarks, is not the traditional 'heavenly figure' for it does not have the numinous trappings of wings, golden garments, halo or attendant stars. The angel states that the stars 'are of my being and knowing, part.' and also, 'I am one of you and being one of you / Is being and knowing what I am and know.' Thus, by identification, the angel establishes that human nature and nature are one. The oneness is the mystical essence of creation. This relationship between part and whole is encapsulated in the nucleated essence of 'I am.' By integrating stars, humankind and reality through the 'I am' of the angel - a divine cosmicisation is effected, for the 'I am' is an allusion to Jesus' divine identity: 'I tell you most solemnly before Abraham ever was, I am' (Jn 8:58)<sup>5</sup> which is a direct resonance of God's revelation of His Divine Name to Moses: 'I Am who I Am' (Ex 3:14).

The necessity of the necessary angel of the earth lies in its function. The root meaning of 'angel' is *angelos* - a messenger. Angels, metaphorically, are messengers from God, therefore the angel is a mediator between the Mystery and the human spirit, a linking agent between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. The angelic links us back to our divinity. The angel is the reality of the finer energies and sensitivities of the mind: the spark of divinity lodged in human essence which is the transducer of knowledge and the transformer of outer reality. By seeing with the heightened awareness of angelic eyes, a renewed and purified vision of the earth appears through the spiritual penetration of matter.

It is not enough that the mind sees the mystery, the mind must simultaneously praise what it sees. For Stevens, the ultimate creative act is praise and as a result another angel, the 'Archangel of evening and praise' in *One of the Inhabitants of the West*, is not simply an angel but an *arch* angel which is imaginatively superior to the angel of reality. The advent of the archangel is foretold in our being by 'mechanisms of angelic thought'. The natural, starry archangel is not an external phenomenon but a configuration

formed by the human imagination. The human element is reinforced by the image of 'a drop of blood' which is also related to 'guilt.' The images of blood, guilt, 'Horrid figures of Medusa' and 'men of stone' are in juxtaposition with the luminous qualities of the starry angel. It is Stevens' reminder of our dark and light duality, and that the value, inherent in praise, we place on life is hard won. The 'difficulty of what it is to be,' to be spontaneously natural and divine, is poignantly expressed in *Sunday Morning*.

Divinity must live within herself:  
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow:  
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty  
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights:  
All pleasures and all pains, remembering  
The bough of summer and the winter branch.  
These are the measures destined for her soul.<sup>6</sup>

In these lines of praise all human feeling is embraced equally, liberating a spontaneity equal to the natural spontaneity of the changing patterns of natural phenomena. The celebration of the summer fecundity and winter perishability, human and natural, is a mystic act of love, a love for life:

The measure of the intensity of love  
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.<sup>7</sup>

For Stevens, the primary reality is the earth for it is the reality of earth that lies at the core of his mystic experience and his poetic doctrine which filled the empty space of belief left by disillusionment with traditional Christianity:

[T]he strength of the church grows less and less until the church stands for little more than propriety... it is a habit of mind for me to be thinking of some substitute for religion... My trouble, and the trouble of a great many people: is the loss of belief in a God in Whom we were all brought up to believe.<sup>8</sup>

He was later to elaborate on the significance of the angel of reality which he insisted was an 'earthly figure' that evidenced 'there must be in the world about us things that solace quite as fully as any heavenly visitation could.'<sup>9</sup>

Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
In any balm or beauty of the earth,

Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?<sup>10</sup>

This earthy solace, his poems maintain, is all-embracing and affords no disappointment.

*Evening without Angels* recognises that mortality and the desire for immortality are the reason that humans have taken solace in the notion of heavenly visitations:

Was the sun concoct for angels or for men?  
Sad men made angels of the sun, and of  
The moon they made their own attendant ghosts,  
Which led them back to angels, after death.<sup>11</sup>

Stevens, however is not a sad man. The poem's preface sets out the sensuous blessings bestowed on humankind. The joys of air, light, the sensuality of the body and sight are poignantly precious because they are the means by which the poet, the 'Eternal chef d' orchestre' arranges the seraphim, the intelligences of his own imagination, to co-celebrate in wonder with the beauty all around - 'the rhapsodies of fire and fire.' Wonder is the 'true response' and the 'voice that is great within us.' Poetry then is the spoken syllables of wonder and awe. Poetry is the music of the spheres and the poet its eternal conductor for he speaks with a human voice, as natural as the wind, the 'antiquiest sounds of air / In an accord of repetitions' that repeat the history of all past human glorification of life. The simple credo of Stevens' creation-centred spirituality is contained in this simple line:

Bare earth is best.<sup>12</sup>

The desire for meaning is a primal force in humans, and to the question, 'What moves desire?' Locke answers, 'happiness, and that alone.'<sup>13</sup> Stevens is in accord with the Platonic ideal of happiness but for him the locality of ultimate bliss is not in heaven but on earth: 'The highest pursuit is the pursuit of happiness on earth'.<sup>14</sup>

It would be enough  
If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed  
In This Beautiful World of Ours and not as now,  
  
Helplessly at the edge, enough to be  
Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,

And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy.<sup>15</sup>

However, the pleasure principle has long been maligned by the Christian view that God had created a paradise of delights from which humans turned because of original sin which corrupted their nature through ignorance of mind and concupiscence of the flesh. As to the body being a sinful and perverse distraction from God, Stevens resolutely disagrees. Stevens' attitude to the body is sacramental and redemptive. He declares, 'The earth is not a building but a body'(CP 430)<sup>16</sup> and as 'her nature is our nature' it follows that the human body is consubstantiated with the earth which is innocent of sin:

An innocence of the earth and no false sign  
Or symbol of malice. That we partake thereof,  
Lie down like children in this holiness,<sup>17</sup>

The ecclesiastical schism between body and spirit split the mystic vision of nature as all in all and caused the separation and alienation of matter and mind, nature and humankind, humankind from God and nature from God. A tragic irony considering that in Genesis, at the end of each of the six days of creation, God surveyed nature and 'saw that it was good.' The schism degraded the gift of life and was directly responsible for diminishing our humanness and, consequently, the quality of our lives:

The greatest poverty is not to live  
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire  
Is too difficult to tell from despair.<sup>18</sup>

This carnal poverty primarily corrupts the potential for the passion of physical love (and all its nuances) that is, according to Stevens, a natural, biological heritage:

Tonight the lilacs magnify  
The easy passion, the every-ready love  
Of the lover that lies within us...

For easy passion and ever-ready love  
Are of our earthy birth and here and now  
And where we live and everywhere we live.<sup>19</sup>

Stevens' intimacy with the earth was a love affair that has an open erotic dimension, 'The poet looks at the world as a man looks at a woman'.<sup>20</sup> Stevens' first collection of poetry, *Harmonium*, is pervaded with

a voluptuous sensuality, realism and the structured balance of the serious and the comic, sorrow and joy, spirit and body, pain and pleasure.

In *Harmonium* the dance of life is festive and fecund, and sexuality - nature is sexual - is not banished from its Eden;

That earth was like a jostling festival  
Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,  
Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth.<sup>21</sup>

Sexuality is a 'divine' creative force whose rhythm is the eternal cyclic motion of creation and destruction. Death and love unite in sacrifice for out of death comes new life. Sacrifice arises from *sacer-* holy + *facere* - to make, and making love is ultimately a spiritual act of the sacrifice of each generation for the next:

Death is the mother of beauty, mystical,  
Within whose burning bosom we devise  
Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly.<sup>22</sup>

Death is not a termination. Alpha and omega, Eden and Golgotha are one place where matter, mind and spirit participate in a vast cosmological process of dynamic change -- the eternal dance. Death as beauty becomes integral to the order and unity of life. And so transience ceases to be transient in the law of eternal recurrence:

Beauty is momentary in the mind -  
The fitful tracing of a portal:  
But in the flesh it is immortal.  
The body dies: the body's beauty lives.  
So evening die, in their green going,  
A wave Interminably flowing.<sup>23</sup>

Time is transcended by essence. Beauty is an essence eternally manifesting itself in the flesh of generations of beings and as Hegel puts it, 'Beauty is merely the spiritual making itself known sensuously.'<sup>24</sup> By pouring beauty, immortality and flesh into the one mould, Stevens sacralises the earth which is the source of flesh, matter and consciousness. It is as though we have two bodies, our own and the great body of earth, that appear distinct but are one and the same for our consciousness is rooted in both an earthly body and in an earthly environment which make one self.

It is not possible to escape from the earth, nor is it spiritually desirable, for the earth is, according to Stevens, the womb and ground of origin of the

spirit, and with it the spirit has affinities of identity:

The spirit comes from the body of the world,  
Or so Mr. Homburg thought: the body of a world  
Whose blunt laws make an affectation of mind,

The mannerism of nature caught in a glass  
And there become the spirit's mannerism,  
A glass aswarm with things going as far as they can.<sup>25</sup>

The metaphorical significance of the 'body' in the context of these lines draws its vitality from mythological resonances. In order to reconnect the human spirit with the lost vision of the earth as a creative source, Stevens draws from the living well of mythological consciousness the archetypes of the feminine principle embodied in the ancient triune of maiden, mother and crone that preside over the biological cycles of creation, fullness and death. The mystery of birth is naturally associated with the image of the mother, for it is she, and her body, that symbolise the source of life at its origin. In ancient primitive societies the worship of the Great Mother or the Great Goddess antedated patriarchal theocracy. Christianity has maintained an impenetrable patriarchal agenda on the nature of the Source: however there are rare instances when mystics have tapped the primal maternal motif. Eckhart describes God giving birth to Christ in every soul as: 'and so God lies in the maternity bed, like a woman who has given birth.'<sup>26</sup> Julian of Norwich presents a feminine aspect of the nature of God: 'I it am, the Wisdom of Motherhood.'<sup>27</sup> In *Anatomy of Monotony* Stevens acknowledges the image of Mother Earth as the source of human life:

If from the earth we came, It was an earth  
That bore us as a part of all the things  
It breeds...<sup>28</sup>

Stevens establishes the sacred in the here and now of the earth, the field of reality. The earth and matter, in the mystic eye, are not viewed as inanimate and separate from the spirit as the orthodox Christian mindset insists. The mystic view predates religious sophistication and is linked back to the cosmic consciousness of the primitive religious view that experiences existence as a meaningful whole in which matter and mind are not only indistinguishable but fuse in a sacred communion which Eliade calls a hierophany: '[F]or those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can

become a hierophany.<sup>29</sup> Eckhart's understanding of the sacred commonality of all states of being is clearly a hierophany:

The highest angel, the mind and the gnat have an equal model in God.<sup>30</sup>

For Stevens, poetry is the mediator and medium of hierophany:

It is

As if the central poem became the world,<sup>31</sup>

Mysticism repudiates the Kingdom of God as the imminent, hitherto non-existing, eschatological event pronounced by religious fundamentalism which oddly ignores the Gospel's repetitious statements about its actual presence. Luke records: 'For, you must know, the kingdom of God is among you' (Lk. 17:21). The St Thomas Gospel is more explicit: 'Yet the Kingdom of the Father is spread throughout the earth and no man sees it' (113).<sup>32</sup>

To see the kingdom requires a *metanoia* a change of heart or consciousness that is identified with the Christ who is the kingdom and the means of its fulfilment: 'He who is close to me is close to the fire: He who is far from me is distant to the Kingdom' (82).<sup>33</sup> In other words when we have Christ-consciousness we see and are the kingdom that is outside history and is the end of history. In this state, we die to 'becoming' and transcend to a state of 'being.' Eckhart explains the transcendence of time and space as: 'An angel perceives in the eternal Now. But man knows in the now of time. The now of time is the least thing that there is. But take away the now of time, and you are everywhere and have the whole of time.'<sup>34</sup> Furthermore Eckhart certifies that a Christ-consciousness is a cosmic consciousness: 'Those who know themselves know all creation.'<sup>35</sup> This integration of world and self is also expressed by Stevens' exotic Hoon:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw  
Or heard or felt came not but from myself:  
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.<sup>36</sup>

According to Stevens, the earth is not only our home, but also paradise. It is both the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. To be fully human is a daring triumph of unequivocal passion and loyalty to reality that manifests life-loving faith in the actuality of the kingdom of God here and now: Stevens' spirituality culminates in this sublime expression of his faith in the integrity of the earth:

'This man loved earth, not heaven, enough to die.'<sup>37</sup>

## REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> *CP*, p. 254.
- <sup>3</sup> Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens (LWS)* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1981), p. 32.
- <sup>4</sup> *CP*, p. 496.
- <sup>5</sup> All references throughout the text are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible: Popular Edition*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974.
- <sup>6</sup> *CP*, p. 67.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- <sup>8</sup> *LWS*, p. 348.
- <sup>9</sup> *LWS*, p. 173.
- <sup>10</sup> *CP*, p. 67.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- <sup>13</sup> John Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", *A Letter Concerning Toleration Concerning Civil Government, Second Essay An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed. in chief, *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 35, Locke, Berkeley, Hume (Chicago: William Benton, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), p. 188.
- <sup>14</sup> *CP*, p. 157.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 430.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 418-9.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 325.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 394-5.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91-92.
- <sup>24</sup> Evelyn Underhill, p. 21
- <sup>25</sup> *CP*, p. 519.
- <sup>26</sup> Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation*. (New York: Image Books, 1980), p. 93
- <sup>27</sup> Evelyn Underhill, p. 113.
- <sup>28</sup> *CP*, p. 107.
- <sup>29</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*. p. 12.
- <sup>30</sup> Fox, p. 98.
- <sup>31</sup> *CP*, p. 441.
- <sup>32</sup> *The Gospel According to Thomas*, p. 42.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Gospel According to Thomas*, p. 37.
- <sup>34</sup> Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises, Vol. II* (M. O'C. Walshe, trans. London: Watkins, 1979), p. 37.
- <sup>35</sup> Fox, p. 303.
- <sup>36</sup> *CP*, p. 65.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.