

A FINAL SERIOUSNESS: WALLACE STEVENS' "ST. ARMORER'S SEEN FROM THE OUTSIDE."

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In October 1952, just as he turned seventy-two, Wallace Stevens published a poem in the pages of *Poetry Magazine* which he called "St. Armorer's Church Seen from the Outside." It's—as usual with Stevens—a strange title, for there is no church by the name of St. Armorer's, though there is a portal fronting The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut (Fig.1) known as the Armorer's Porch. It is an ornately decorated stone structure with multiple engravings of machinery and gun components intermingled amid ivy, crosses, and other Christian symbols (Figs. 2 ad 3).



Fig 1: The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut



Fig 2: Acanthus and Colt revolver parts adorning exterior of Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut

The church was financed by Elizabeth Colt, widow of Samuel Colt, who founded the Colt gun manufacturing empire and built the large factory along the Connecticut River most easily recognized by the sky blue onion dome one sees driving along Interstate 91 on the eastern edge of Hartford, Connecticut's capitol.

The church of the Good Shepherd itself lies about a quarter mile west of the former gun factory in an open field with a large parking lot, and was built in Sam Colt's honor in 1868, six years after he had died of gout at the age of forty-seven. Colt

was a hardscrapple man who grew up having to fend for himself and who had become a millionaire by the time he was forty by patenting and manufacturing firearms, especially the six-shot Colt revolver, not only here in the United States, but in England, Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East often by confiding to one country that a rival country had been supplied with superior Colt firearms.

What is particularly odd and a bit unsettling about the church is that the architect, Edward Tuckerman Potter, decorated the friezes, columns, and even the crosses with revolver parts prominently or subtly displayed among the ivy and floral carvings. If you visit the church from the outside, you will find an abundance of 1860 Civil War-era Army Colt parts, including pistol barrels, cylinders, frames, grips, hammers, loading levers, and trigger assemblies. As such, it is the only church in the world to feature guns as part of its decorative structure, and here it remains, in the city of Hartford, within easy walking distance of 690 Asylum Avenue, where for over thirty years, Wallace Stevens, Vice President of Surety Claims for the Hartford Insurance Company, lived and walked and breathed in the good air, visiting the church who knows how many times, at least from the outside.



Fig 3: Peacemaker Colt Revolver parts adorning exterior of Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut

It is this church, and much of what it tells us of American culture, both spiritually and aesthetically, which Stevens compares—unfavorably—to the Chapel of the Rosaire (Fig 4).

Matisse designed the Chapel for the French town of Vence between 1949 and 1951, when he was in his late seventies as a special gift for Monique Bourgeois, the woman who had earlier nursed him during a particularly difficult period of recuperation, the same who afterwards became a Dominican nun, taking the name Jacques-Marie. I want to focus on the Chapel because it seems to provide clues as to what Stevens meant when he spoke of attaining to a “final seriousness” at the end of a lifetime of searching for what he believed might suffice. “St. Armorer’s was once an immense success,” the poem begins, in the best advertising mode of the 1950s, and rose—like so many other successful edifices, “loftily and stood massively.” And, with tongue in

cheek, he reminds us that “to lie/ In its church-yard, in the province of St. Armorers,/ Fixed one for good in geranium-colored day.” One’s bones rest there, but they do so in stately fashion, among the ornate mausoleums and well-trimmed yews and maples. There are, one notices, echoes in Stevens’s poem of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with its “reverberations,” and one of Hopkins’ most famous images from his sonnet, “The Windhover,” with its “blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,” which “fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion,” and which Stevens seems to allude to in the lines, “Its chapel rises from Terre Ensevelie,/An ember yes among its cindery noes.” And of course the poem seems to be in dialogue with a number of other late poems of Stevens’.



Fig 4: Matisse’s Chapel at Vence from the outside

But there is also a short piece of prose which seems to speak volumes about this poem, and that is Stevens's appreciation of the poet, John Crowe Ransom, in the pages of *The Sewanee Review* four years earlier in 1948. Here's the heart of the essay, and what I have done here is to point the poem—as I suspect Stevens intended—to a late *ars poetica* for Stevens' own major concerns. "One turns with something like ferocity toward a land that one loves," Stevens writes, thinking no doubt of Key West and Hartford and New York City—but essentially of his own native land, the Pennsylvania Dutch country of Reading, Pennsylvania as it was in the period from about 1879 to about 1909, the years when Stevens grew up there and was an integral part of the local Presbyterian and Lutheran congregations. It is to that world that Stevens returns now, demanding that it "surrender, reveal, that in itself which one loves." This, he insists, is not merely a nostalgia, "an affair of the heart (as it may be in one's first poems)," but rather a vital affair,

an affair of the whole being (as in one's last poems)...an affair of fundamental life; so that one's cry of O Jerusalem! becomes little by little a cry to something a little nearer and nearer until at last one cries out to a living name, a living place, a living thing, and in crying out confesses openly all the bitter secretions of experience. This is why trivial things often touch us intensely. It is why the sight of an old berry patch, a new growth in the woods in the spring, the particular things on display at a farmers' market, as, for example, the trays of poor apples, the few boxes of black-eyed peas, the bags of dried corn, have an emotional power over us that for a moment is more than we can control. (*OP*, 260, 1957)

This is what is at the heart of the search Stevens the Modern American Romantic carried on for seven decades, and it helps explain why the poet views St. Armorer's from the outside, that is, the outside of the church with its Colt revolver parts which helped shape what we call Modern Civilization with its so-called "peacemakers," but also the idea of the poet as both necessary outsider and at the same native insider. For while the activity of the poet or philosopher may appear to be that of the outsider, it is the insider who, as Stevens explains, "remains as the base of his character, the essential person, something fixed, the play of his thoughts, that on which he lavishes his sense of the prodigious and the legendary, the material of his imagination."

What Stevens has come to understand is that the Twentieth Century American poet in the High Romantic tradition composes poems which "are not composed of the books he has read, of the academies he has seen, of the halls and columns and carvings on the columns, the stairs and towers and doorways and tombs, the wise old men and the weak young men of nowhere in particular, going nowhere at all" (*OP* 261). Rather, the poetic imagination must be composed of the "hard stuff on which

a mountain has been bearing down for a long time with such a weight that its impress on him has passed into everything he does and passes, through him, outward, a long distance” (*OP* 261).

It is as if everything to which one was native took on a special quality, an exact identity, a microscopic reality, which, if only in being what it is, has a value because it is “wholly free from his outsidership....The greater the value he set on it, the dearer it became, the more closely he sought out its precise line and look, the more it became a legend, the peculiar legend of things as they are when they are as we want them to be, without any of the pastiche of which the presence vulgarizes so many legends, the quotidian not as it is, but as we should like it to be” (*OP*, 261-262).

But here’s the question: is Stevens pointing to something more, as if it were a final seriousness with which one could be satisfied, in comparing Mdm. Colt’s Church with the one in Vence designed by Matisse, where the very light itself takes on a new reality as it streams through the stained glass windows, pooling on the floor and continually painting the walls with different transitory hues?

The Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence (Chapel of the Rosary), often referred to as the Matisse Chapel or the Vence Chapel, is a small chapel built for Dominican sisters in the town of Vence on the French Riviera. It was built and decorated with luminous stained glass between 1949 and 1951 under a plan devised by Henri Matisse, who died on November 3, 1954 at the age of 84. It houses a number of Matisse originals and was regarded by Matisse himself as his “masterpiece” (Fig. 5).

In 1941, Matisse, who lived most of the year in Nice in the south of France, developed cancer and underwent surgery. During the long recovery he was particularly helped by a young part-time nurse, Monique Bourgeois, who had answered his ad seeking “a young and pretty nurse” and who took care of Matisse with great tenderness. Matisse asked her to pose for him, which she did, and several drawings and paintings exist. In 1943 Monique decided to enter the Dominican convent in Vence, a hill town near Nice, and she became Sister Jacques-Marie. Matisse eventually bought a home at Vence, not far from the convent where the young nun was stationed. She visited him and told him of the plans the Dominicans had to build a chapel beside the girls’ high school which they operated in Vence. She asked Matisse if he would help with the design of the chapel. He had never done anything like it, but Matisse agreed to help, beginning in 1947. Father Marie-Alain Couturier, who collaborated on several artistic Catholic churches after World War II, was also involved in the project.

Matisse was seventy-seven when he began the greatest project of his life and spent more than 4 years working on the chapel, its architecture, its stained glass windows, its interior furnishings, its murals, and the vestments of the priests. It is perhaps the greatest ensemble artwork of the 20th



Fig 5: Matisse's Chapelle du Rosaire de Vence, interior

century, and certainly the greatest religious commission. While Matisse had been baptized a Catholic, he was not a practicing Catholic, any more than Santayana, Stevens' mentor at Harvard—and for whom he wrote "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," published at the same time as "St. Armorer's." Matisse designed the chapel because it presented an artistic challenge.

The altar is made of warm brown stone, chosen for its resemblance to the color of bread and the Eucharist. Matisse also designed the bronze crucifix on the altar, the candle holders in bronze, and the small tabernacle. The wrought iron candle holder with a flame always burning and hanging from the ceiling was made by local craftsmen who have a special tradition of making wrought iron.

There are three sets of stained glass windows, upon which Matisse spent a great deal of time. All three sets make use of just three colors: an intense yellow for the sun, an intense green for vegetation and cactus forms, and a vivid blue for the Mediterranean Sea, the Riviera sky and the Madonna. The two windows beside the altar are named the “Tree of Life,” but the forms are abstract. The color from the windows floods the interior of the chapel, which is otherwise all white. The light inside is so intense and vivid that children, they say, will cup their hands in order to hold the elusive blues and greens and yellows.

Stevens begins the poem with a send-up of sorts, when he speaks of “St. Armorer’s” as having once been an “immense success,” lofty and massive, with its boldness and grand statement about America as the land of a rugged no-nonsense Protestant Christianity. And to “lie/ In its church-yard, in the province of St. Armorer’s,” was to have arrived, and be fixed for good “in geranium-colored day.” That was his world as well, as a boy growing up in a pious German Lutheran family in Reading, Pennsylvania.

That of course was then, back in America’s Gilded Age, but of course like all things, decline and decay set in, and when the Connecticut River flooded its banks in the 1930s, the church—fittingly called The Church of the Good Shepherd—suffered when the foundation of the church was compromised and a staleness and rottenness permeated the interior.

What is left has the foreign smell of plaster,
 The closed-in smell of hay. A sumac grows
 On the altar, growing toward the lights, inside.
 Reverberations leak and lack among holes . . .

And yet, even now, there is an abstract, ideal chapel at the core of the ruined building that rises from Terre Ensvellie (That Buried Land)

An ember yes among its cindery noes,
 His own: a chapel of breath, an appearance made
 For a sign of meaning in the meaningless,
 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.

Not merely a sign of life, Stevens says, but life itself, the intelligible—a design, then—in the thing which is created as its symbol. But if Mdm. Colt's chapel spoke for a time still reeling from the effects of the War Between the States, it does not speak to us.

"It is," he says,

like a new account of everything old,
Matisse at Vence and a great deal more than that,
A new-colored sun, say, that will soon change forms
And spread hallucinations on every leaf.

This is what he has been after, Stevens suggests, a chapel rising from the earth,

his own, his period,
A civilization formed from the outward blank,
A sacred syllable rising from sacked speech,
The first car out of a tunnel en voyage
Into lands of ruddy-ruby fruits, achieved
Not merely desired, for sale, and market things
That press, strong peasants in a peasant world,
Their purports to a final seriousness—
Final for him, the acceptance of such prose,
Time's given perfections made to seem like less
Than the need of each generation to be itself,
The need to be actual and as it is.

The poem to be successful, then, must do what Matisse did for the sacred, by allowing the sun itself to be transformed by the blues and greens and yellows of Matisse's imagination, so that for the moment one feels lifted into a new sense of the real, the actual, things as they are, but heightened by the artist's imagination.

Of this new present, "Stevens proclaims—and the syntax here rolls on and the language itself lifts into a moment of splendor, this *vif*, the French musical term for that which is alive and lively

this dazzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming, for which the chapel spreads out
Its arches in its vivid element,

In the air of newness of that element,
 In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,
 That which is always beginning because it is part
 Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

And, if the truth be known, Stevens tells us at the close of the poem, there is a chapel buried under the edifice of St. Armorer's, a living ideal, which

Stands in a light, its natural light and day,
 The origin and keep of its health and his own.
 And there he walks and does as he lives and likes.

from, "St. Armorer's Church From The Outside," (CP 529-530)

That would seem to be Stevens' contemporary sense of the idea of sacred and the sacred itself, the quotidian lifted into a natural light to be seen for what it truly is. And in that light, that dazzle-dazzle light, as real as any light, that which is, and that which will suffice come together for the moment and are realized.

And if even the actual light in which we walk and have our being is a fiction we concoct, so be it. The poet has come to terms with himself, with a lifetime of wrestling, and for now, say, the way one might walk or stand in the chapel at Vence, bathed in the light of Matisse's and God's imagination, the three-dimensional space through which we walk in our imaginations appears to be enough.

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