

ANALYSIS

“The Comedian as the Letter C” (1923)

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“The Comedian as the Letter C” (the significance of the title, I regret to say, escapes both my learning and my ingenuity) is a narrative poem in six parts, dealing with a poet who begins with romantic views of the function of his art and who, in reforming them, comes to abandon his art as superfluous. [1] The first part of the poem deals with Crispin’s encounter with the sea, that is, with his realization of a universe vast, chaotic, and impersonal beyond his power of formulation or imagination, and rendering him contemptible by contrast.

[2] In the second part, Crispin arrives in Yucatan, disillusioned as to his old convictions, but finding a heightened experience and new food for his art in the barbaric violence of the tropical landscape; finding these, that is, until he is overwhelmed by a thunder storm, of which the symbolic function is similar to that of the sea in the first part, and is driven with the terrified crowd about him into the cathedral. [3] In the third part he returns to North America, intent now, not on the extreme and unnatural excitements of the southern landscape which he has left, but on the discovery of reality.

But he is bent on discovering not the reality of his own nature, but rather the reality of his native country. Man is no longer, as in the first line of the first part, the intelligence of his soil; but the soil, as we note in the first line of the next and [4] fourth section, is man’s intelligence. These statements do not have the philosophical lucidity which would delight the present simple paraphraser, but they seem to mean, in their relationship to this poem, that Crispin has been turned away first from the attempt to study himself directly, and second from the attempt to indulge in exotic experiences, and that he has been turned instead to the attempt to master his native environment—to master it, that is, for the purposes of poetry.

The nature of this last procedure I do not pretend to understand, and since the words which I have just used are my own and are not quoted from Stevens, it is possible that my confusion is of my own contriving. But in general, I should say that Stevens appears to have slipped here into the Whitmanian form of a romantic error common enough in our literature, but current especially in Stevens’ generation and espoused in particular by Stevens’ friend W. C. Williams: the fallacy that the poet achieves salvation by being, in some way, intensely of and expressive of his country.... The ideas are the attempt to justify a kind of extroversion: the poet, cut off from human nature, which is his proper subject-matter, seeks to find a subject in the description, or, as the saying goes, in the expression, of what is round about him....

Crispin seeks, then, an understanding not of himself but of his native landscape, and his native landscape is a temperate one, which does not offer the flamboyant and succulent excitement of Yucatan.... Having returned from Yucatan, [Crispin] hopes now to achieve the beatific pleasure reserved for the successful hedonist, not by extravagance of experience, but by honesty and accuracy of experience... He abandons his art, in order, as very young people are sometimes heard to say, to live.... Honest description renders the feeling appropriate to purely sensory experience, and is hence a kind of judgment of that experience. But if Crispin had realized this, he would have realized the whole moral basis of art, and would have proceeded to more complex subjects; not realizing this, he lost interest in his simplified art, and found the art even in this simplified form to be the last element of confusion remaining in his experience: to achieve intelligent objectivity, Crispin is forced to abandon his description and merely enjoy the subject-matter of his description....

For Stevens himself the entire poem is a kind of tentative leave-taking; he has not the courage to act as his hero acts and be done with it, so he practices the art which he cannot justify and describes it in terms of contempt. Furthermore, the chief instrument of irony in this passage, and throughout the poem, and indeed throughout much of the rest of Stevens, is a curious variant on the self-ridicule, the romantic irony, with

which we are familiar from Byron through Laforgue and his modern disciples, the instrument is self-parody, a parody occasionally subtle, often clumsy, of the refined and immutable style of Stevens at his best.... Since the poet...however, is not to abandon his art, there remains only the possibility that he seek variety of experience in the increasingly perverse and strange.”

Yvor Winters
In Defense of Reason
(Alan Swallow 1937-47) 439-44

“The imagination serves (in its several mutations) as Stevens’ metaphysical instrument. The poet, everyman, the ‘Comedian as the Letter C,’ is forever concerned to fashion an aesthetic of order, an ‘explanation’ of reality, that will help him to define his place within it.... Crispin is a ‘clown,’ an acrobat of the imagination, trying to adjust himself to a world of objects, which he has failed entirely to understand and place.... ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ is a travesty account of the artist as picaresque hero in a world of bewildering variety. A poem of six divisions, it describes the changes a person undergoes in his attempt to find an imaginative order for his expression....

Sensitive and alert as Crispin is to all forms and varieties of sense-impressions, he is aware that these pleasant pictures are not vital.... In Part II, Crispin, more confident in the power of his imagination, searches for a suitable education of the sense. He finds ‘a new reality in parrot-squawks’... His education is interrupted by a storm, whose ‘Tempestuous clarion’ frightens him away from his new-found interest in the workings of his imagination.... In Part III, ‘Approaching Carolina,’ the search for an aesthetic enters a new phase; the moonlight through which Crispin travels is the light of the imagination, the sun seems an undifferentiated and vibrant reality, and Crispin is not altogether sure about his choice. Perhaps the moonlight ‘really gave / The liaison, the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment...’

He decides finally against the moon; it is a pale reflection of reality, while the sun is the source of life. He has abandoned the practice of merely annotating reality and will now attempt fully to understand it. Part IV shows this new intelligence at work.... [His] decision, as we note in Part V, has drained him of his energies; the sun is a hard taskmaster, leaving him with ‘The blue infected will’... So that (Part VI) Crispin, in risking a return to the sun, has had to abandon his project and has been left a victim of the reality he sought to understand. He decides that his experience is material enough for a ‘doctrine’....

The ‘Comedian’ has been waylaid by his efforts to organize his senses and thus to minimize their confusion. In his failure he becomes a victim of their fate. The substance is slight, but the manner of presenting the rich range of sensation, the rhetorical exhibition of Crispin’s sensuous life, are at once the essence of poetry and a plea for its value.”

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
(Viking/Crowell-Coller 1949-62) 212-16

“The longest, most difficult, most ambitious, and, I think, most inadequate of the poems in *Harmonium*, ‘The Comedian as the Letter C.’ Here the protagonist, condemned, once more, to a life of rich perceptions, is something of a poet. Thus he is in a position to reflect learnedly and at length on his situation and generally to resolve its meaning. The poem describes its protagonist’s growth to artistic maturity and is thus a kind of projection in biography of the development of Stevens’ poetics. The poet progresses from romantic subjectivism, to crude realism, to exotic realism, to a kind of local colorism, to a disciplined, mature and modestly imaginative realism. Because of his vocation, he comes to know, more than any other protagonist in the *Harmonium* poems, the potentialities and the limits of his own imagination and realizes that his hopes for poetry in the New World—deriving apparently from his understanding of the role of poetry in the Old—must be muted.

At this point he can face life squarely; he marries, begets children, and grows wiser. Yet at the end he is in a period of cautious skepticism, now dubious about any acceptance of reality, however self-conscious and mature that acceptance may be. Acceptance might be surrender. How to distinguish between the two: this is the poet’s problem. The point is that he has made some sort of successful adjustment or adaptation. This is the ‘meaning’ of the poem. Yet its technique is of a kind which can only inhibit the emergence of

this meaning. Particulars get in the way of implicit generalization—the sense of detail, however much imaginatively informed, in the way of implicit dialectics....

The overplus of language—parallels, appositions, repetitions, words unabsorbed into the whole, the overpowering concreteness, maximally irrelevant texture—gets in the way of the developing analysis of the poet's situation and what it is coming to. The poet-protagonist himself, with his powerful sensibility, gets in the way. Crispin's is a reality-principle in which everything can be celebrated except reality. We should at least have some sense of the demands which Crispin's reality-principle put upon him. What end does his skepticism serve? Crispin is conceived in the tradition of Emerson's *Representative Men*; but Stevens has yet no way to account for and expound the representativeness....

The 'relation of each man / to reality—which is the substance of the poem—might necessarily be 'distorting.' The comic mood of the poem induces Stevens to claim that it may not matter after all, since each 'relation comes, benignly, to its end,' presumably in death.... Stevens' statement of this theme in 'Sunday Morning' is clearer, although it no more than hints at the explicitly philosophical problem stated in 'The Comedian...': 'Death is the mother of beauty...' In 'The Comedian as the Letter C,' Stevens, trying, and on the whole failing, to derive a 'general' meaning from his materials, moved toward the mode of the later poetry, an expository, 'philosophical' mode. Only such a mode would serve if he were fully to understand the involved predicament of a Crispin and those whose problems his adventures are meant to resolve. At the end Crispin is presumably stripped to his essential being—not Crispin but 'the letter C.' Thus the poem predicates the abstracting process which was so much to concern the later Stevens. As the relations of each man had to end in death, so had it to live in being properly named. In the name, in the poem, in something man-made, lay the power to give life."

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 387-89

"That he was not content to rest in aestheticism is clear as early as 'The Comedian as the Letter C,' which he once called his 'anti-mythological poem.' Perhaps the most serious and important effort to deal directly with the question, What can poetry do in an age of science? In our poetry of this century, 'The Comedian' comes very close to ending in the conclusion that William James said even Pyrrhonic skepticism itself left standing, that the only thing we can really know is that the consciousness of the moment exists. Very close to this, I said; but, in terms of what can only be called *hope*, not quite to this conclusion. For Crispin, the barber-valet-poet, recognizing his absurdity and the hopelessness of finding Truth, still preserved his 'integrity,' and in doing so suggested the possibility of a development in Stevens' thought that came about only very much later..."

Crispin ends, that is, by becoming a 'realist' poet; but with this difference, that he leaves open the possibility that at some time in the future the 'prose' truth 'to which all poems were incident' might wear a different aspect, one which would seem less inimical to the values of poetry. In literal truth, he decided, lay his only integrity... Stevens's own integrity as man and poet is suggested by the many years he endured the despair implicit in 'The Comedian' while continuing to nourish the hope that prose truth might wear a different guise at last. Throughout *Harmonium*, the truth Stevens desired is contrasted principally with religion, which is understood as man's principal illusion."

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 432-33

Michael Hollister (2015)