

D. L. Macdonald

## Wallace Stevens and Victor Serge

Stevens's critics generally have been reluctant to place his poetry in a political context. Perhaps they have been repelled by such statements as (in a letter of 1935): "The Italians have as much right to take Ethiopia from the coons as the coons had to take it from the boa-constrictors" (LWS 290)<sup>1</sup>—a statement that may also be offensive to herpetologists, since boas are not indigenous to Africa; perhaps they simply have been confused by such statements as "While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors" (LWS 295), and "I do very much believe in leftism in every direction" (LWS 287). But Stevens himself found Stanley Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* in *The New Masses*, "extraordinarily stimulating" (LWS 296), though he dismissed Burnshaw's arguments and regarded the periodical itself as "just one more wailing place" for the left (LWS 287). What stimulated him was simply being placed in a new context, a political context (LWS 286); the most obvious result of this stimulus was "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," the second part of *Owl's Clover* (1936). Nine years later, an article in another leftist periodical, this time one he admired, stimulated one of his central poems, *Esthétique du Mal* (1944).

The periodical was Dwight Macdonald's *Politics*, which in 1945 Stevens would describe as "about as far to the left as such a thing can be," adding: "If the exponents of socialism were as interested, as keen and as honest generally speaking . . . as MacDonald [sic] is, this great force in politics and in life would be more than the mere disruption that it so often seems to be" (LWS 486). The article was "The Revolution at Dead-End," an account of intellectual life in Leningrad in 1926, excerpted from the memoirs of Victor Serge, an extraordinary figure, much too little known—a self-educated proletarian revolutionary, a political prisoner both in France and in the Soviet Union, a journalist, historian, polemicist, poet, and novelist.<sup>2</sup>

The fourteenth canto of *Esthétique du Mal* begins with a verbatim quotation from Serge:

Victor Serge said, "I followed his argument  
 With the blank uneasiness which one might feel  
 In the presence of a logical lunatic."  
 He said it of Konstantinov. Revolution  
 Is the affair of logical lunatics.  
 The politics of emotion must appear  
 To be an intellectual structure. The cause  
 Creates a logic not to be distinguished  
 From lunacy . . . One wants to be able to walk  
 By the lake at Geneva and consider logic:  
 To think of the logicians in their graves  
 And of the worlds of logic in their great tombs.  
 Lakes are more reasonable than oceans. Hence,  
 A promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind,  
 By a lake, with clouds like lights among great tombs,  
 Gives one a blank uneasiness, as if  
 One might meet Konstantinov, who would interrupt  
 With his lunacy. He would not be aware of the lake.  
 He would be the lunatic of one idea  
 In a world of ideas, who would have all the people  
 Live, work, suffer and die in that idea  
 In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,  
 Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.  
 His extreme of logic would be illogical.  
 (CP 324-25)

Stevens's critics have not given this canto much sympathy or even attention. Helen Vendler dislikes the whole poem, for being, among other things, "violently unconnected in tone" (206); Harold Bloom admires most of it, but not canto XIV: he and Vendler agree that the canto is "an uneasy throwback to the anti-Marxist polemic of *Owl's Clover*" (Bloom 234; cf. Vendler 217). Their discomfort with the canto's subject-matter—which Bloom frankly calls "too political" (235)—may account for this judgement. In fact, nothing in Stevens is much less like the visionary extravagance of *Owl's Clover* than the simple syntax, dry and abstract diction, and intellectual satire of this canto. Nor is the canto a disposable part of a disconnected or incoherent whole. Imprisoned in his logic and oblivious of the lake, Konstantinov recalls and contrasts with the man reclining "in his Mediterranean cloister" in the previous canto, who "establishes a time / To watch the fire-feinting sea and calls it good" (CP 324). Living in a world of ideas, he anticipates and illustrates the aphorism that opens the next and final canto of the poem: "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" (CP 325).

Jan Pinkerton has suggested that the setting of this canto, and that of the fourth canto of "Description without Place," written the next year, which describes Lenin sitting on a bench beside a lake, feeding the swans but "thinking of apocalyptic legions" (CP 342-43), may be drawn from a passage in *The Renaissance in Italy*, by John Addington Symonds. Symonds describes "St. Bernard travelling along the shores of the Lake Lemán [Lake Geneva], and noticing neither the azure of the waters, nor the luxuriance of the vines, nor the radiance of the mountains with their robe of sun and snow" (Symonds 1:10-11; quoted in Pinkerton 128); the point of the parallel, Pinkerton argues, is that Konstantinov and Lenin's communist ideology makes them as unable to perceive the beauty of their surroundings as Bernard's Catholic ideology made him. Some of the canto's most striking lines are devoted to the beauty of which Konstantinov is unaware, especially that of the "clouds like lights among great tombs . . . Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire." But even if Konstantinov is unaware of his surroundings, they are appropriate for him: lakes being more reasonable, more logical, than oceans, they are where one might expect to meet a logical lunatic.

Stevens's Konstantinov is not only an obsessed figure but an oppressive one; he not only lives in a world of ideas, but is "the lunatic of one idea," who wants to force all the ideas in his world into "an intellectual structure" centred on his one idea, so that "all the people" will have to "Live, work, suffer and die in that idea / In a world of ideas": they will all be "martyrs of [his] logic." The canto's tomb imagery suggests the imprisonment and oblivion logical lunacy imposes on its victims, and it moves as if inevitably from the individual to the universal level, from "the logicians in their graves" to "the worlds of logic in their great tombs." This logic is indistinguishable from lunacy not because it is incoherent but because it is too coherent and too extreme: it is its own *reductio ad absurdum*. Stevens's defense of intellectual freedom is clear and, I think, eloquent.

It does not, however, respect the context of the quotation with which it begins, which is an ironic defense of intellectual integrity—a virtue that Stevens, who required of the supreme fiction that "*It Must Change*," may not have appreciated fully. Serge had met Konstantinov, an examining magistrate for the Cheka, in 1920, and regarded him as "a professional maniac" ("Dead-End" 149). By 1926, Konstantinov's mania had apparently gotten the better of his professionalism, and he had been pensioned off. (Later, he would be sent to Siberia, where he would disappear.) He was anxious to meet Serge again because he knew that Serge, as a member of the Left Opposition, was critical of the comparatively conservative New Economic Policy that

Lenin had been forced to adopt to contend with the famine that accompanied and followed the civil war. Konstantinov wanted to tell Serge a momentous secret—which, Serge soon realized, was actually a paranoid delusion: that the N.E.P. was the work of an international bourgeois conspiracy, designed to destroy the revolution from within:

I followed his argument with the blank uneasiness which one might feel in the presence of a logical lunatic. And I saw that he had the inspired look of a madman. But in what he said there was the germ of a basic idea, and it was not the idea of a madman: "We did not fight the revolution for this." ("Dead-End" 150)

Stevens has taken the emphasis on one idea from Serge, as well as the sentence he quotes, but he has inverted Serge's meaning. To Stevens, the one idea is the centre of Konstantinov's lunacy, which is not to be distinguished from his logic; to Serge, Konstantinov's basic idea is logical, sane, and sharply distinguished from the lunatic structure erected on top of it. There is no international bourgeois conspiracy, but there is something terribly wrong with a policy that "has produced Soviet millionaires of a strange kind, former red Partisans, whose daughters live in the most beautiful hotels in the Crimea and whose sons gamble for large stakes at the casinos" ("Dead-End" 149). In its original context, the anecdote illustrates the intransigence of the Left Opposition, despite its increasing isolation: Serge, the former colleague of Zinoviev, has been reduced to talking to lunatics, but he is not afraid to concede that the lunatics may have a point to make about the state's new conservatism. Stevens has turned this into a familiar conservative critique of Marxism: that it is too rigorously logical, oblivious of the contradictions inherent in reality and intolerant of contradictory opinions.

Serge makes the same critique himself, from within (as a member of the Left Opposition, he adhered rigorously—like a logical lunatic—to Marxist principle at a time of official pragmatism). His memoir dwells on "the psychoses of power" and "the dangers of regimented thought" ("Danger (1)" 77, 78), and analyses them in terms that recall Symonds's critique of Catholicism more explicitly than Stevens does:

Bolshevik thought takes it for granted that truth is its peculiar possession . . . . The party, quite simply, is the custodian of truth; any idea at variance with party doctrine is either pernicious error or backsliding. Here, then, is the intellectual source of the party's intolerance. Because of its unshakeable conviction of its exalted mission, it develops astonishing reserves of moral energy—and a theological turn of mind which easily becomes inquisitorial. ("Danger (2)" 111).



Serge is talking about escaping the natural but lunatic logic of contagion through combat, the cycle of repression and revolt; Stevens, about discovering an order without having to impose it. The coincidence reminds one that Stevens's vision here is also political (the imposer of orders also builds capitols and establishes statues—a phrase that suggests both erecting statues and establishing statutes), and that, insofar as it is political, it is, despite the anti-utopianism of *Owl's Clover* and of *Esthétique du Mal*, utopian. Simply discovering order without having to impose it never has been possible, and unfortunately there is no reason to suppose that it ever will be, let alone that it must be. Stevens's utopianism, accordingly, is anything but hopeful: it is hard not to hear a note of desperate protest in "It must / Be possible."

Serge's politics are also visionary, but he is always aware of the difficulty of realizing his vision. (Commenting in 1921 on the "authoritarian centralism" of the Russian Revolution, he remarked: "One may perhaps deplore it. Unfortunately I do not believe that it could have been avoided" [*Memoirs*, xii]. In the end, despite his tough talk about "firm belief" and "tenacity and will-power," he is little less desperate than Stevens. His "it *must* be possible" imposes an obligation only on himself; he largely succeeded in meeting this obligation, as in his abstention from a counter-polemic against Trotsky, and in the uncompromising but generous eulogy he wrote after Trotsky's murder in 1940, but it is hard not to see in his personalism (as he came to call his position) something of a withdrawal from the social demands of socialism.

Thus the American reactionary and the Russian revolutionary, the poet and the politician, the man of mutability and the man of integrity—men so far apart that the one apparently cannot even read the other—nevertheless find a kind of middle ground in the vision of despair. Stevens's despair, I would suggest, is a moment in the psychological and epistemological cycle which structures his work, and for which, in his work, the cycle of repression and revolt is usually a symbol. Serge's despair is a result of reflection on a life of activism, exile, and poverty, ten years of imprisonment, "a victorious revolution gone astray, several abortive attempts at revolution, and massacres in so great number as to inspire a certain dizziness." But Serge followed a cycle too; he closed the reflection I have just quoted with the remark: "Let me have done with this digression; those were the only roads possible for us. I have more confidence in mankind and in the future than ever before" (*Memoirs*, 10)<sup>5</sup>.

## NOTES

1. I use the following abbreviations in referring to Stevens's work: *LWS*: *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); *CP*: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954).
2. The precise source of the quotation was identified by Jan Pinkerton, "Stevens' Revolutionaries and John Addington Symonds," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 1.2 (Summer 1977): 128.
3. Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1901-1945*, tr. Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford UP, 1963), 349. Sedgwick's translation is superior to Libson's, but I have used the latter where Stevens might have read it.
4. It was not excerpted in *Politics* or in *Partisan Review*. The whole of the *Memoirs* was not published until 1951, nine years after Stevens wrote *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, and was not translated into English until 1963, eight years after Stevens died.
5. The ending of this paper, in particular, is indebted to the comments of Patricia Elliot.

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