

Wallace Stevens and Zen

ROBERT AITKEN

I THINK it would be fair to say that certain Asian vapors were part of Stevens's Hartford, but they were faint. He had a Buddhist image in his room, sent by a friend from Ceylon, which he liked because it was "so simple and explicit" (L. 328). He admitted to influence by "Chinese and Japanese lyrics" in one letter, and denied the importance of such influence in another (L. 813 & note). Buddhism itself is not mentioned once in his letters, unless we count a passing reference to "Buddha and Christ" (L. 632).

Nonetheless, there is a profound relationship between Stevens's work and the teachings of Zen Buddhism. The ground of this relationship is "a mind of winter," where there is no intellectual overlay to obscure things as they are:

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,
And spruces rough in the distant glitter
Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,

* References to Stevens's poetry are accompanied by the page number in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954). The abbreviation "L." followed by page number refers to *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York, 1972). Unattributed translations are the author's.

WALLACE STEVENS AND ZEN

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. (9)

The title of this poem, "The Snow Man," refers not to a construction of snow with two pieces of coal for eyes, but rather to a man who has become snow. A snowman is a child's construction; a Snow Man is a unique human being with "a mind of winter," or, as Yasutani Hakuun Rōshi used to say, "a mind of white paper." Many Zen stories point to this same mind:

A monk asked Tung-shan, "When cold and heat visit us, how may we avoid them?"

Tung-shan said, "Why not go where there is neither cold nor heat?"

The monk asked, "Where is there neither cold nor heat?"

Tung-shan said, "When it is cold, the cold kills you. When it is hot, the heat kills you."¹

"Killed with cold" is to "have been cold a long time." That is the place where there is neither cold nor heat as concepts. When it is cold, one shivers. When it is hot, one sweats. There is just cold, or just heat, with no mental or emotional associations "in the sound of the wind,/In the sound of a few leaves."

The ultimate experience of perception of "pine-trees crusted with snow," or of "the sound of the wind," is the explicit sense that there is only that phenomenon in the whole universe; as Stevens expresses it: "the sound of the wind . . . is the sound of the land." This is the nature of seeing or hearing for the Snow Man, perception by the self which has been killed with cold. It is the mind of white paper that is confirmed by that sight, that sound. Dōgen wrote, "That the ten thousand things ad-

¹ *Hekiganroku*, trans. Kōun Yamada and Robert Aitken, unpublished ms., Diamond Sangha, Hawaii; see also J. C. and Thomas Cleary, trans., *The Blue Cliff Record*, 3 vols. (Boulder and London, 1978), II, 306.

vance and confirm the self is enlightenment."² In other words, it is that form, that sound, which make up my substance. "I am what is around me" (86).

Yun-men said to his assembly, "Each of you has your own light. If you try to see it, you cannot. The darkness is dark, dark. Now, what is your light?"

Answering for his listeners, he said, "The storeroom, the gate."³

In maintaining a mind of winter, Yun-men finds his light. There is nothing to be called the self except its experience of the storeroom, the gate, and the junipers shagged with ice. "The soul, he said, is composed/ Of the external world" (51).

But when the mind is sicklied-over with concepts of the wind as a howling human voice, then also clouds are faces, "Oak Leaves Are Hands" (272), and the self perversely advances and confirms the ten thousand things. This is projection, the opposite of true perception, and is, as Dōgen says, delusion⁴—the fantasy of Lady Lowzen, "For whom what is was other things" (272). As Ching Ch'ing says, "Ordinary people are upside down, falling into delusion about themselves, and pursuing outside objects."⁵ Presuming that our emotional concerns are the center, we project ourselves onto the wind and the leaves, smearing them with our feelings. We have not yet reached the place where there is neither cold nor heat. We fall into delusion about ourselves, and seek to enlarge that delusion by the pathetic fallacy. Stevens had great fun mocking such self-centered fantasy:

In the weed of summer comes this green sprout why.
The sun aches and ails and then returns halloo
Upon the horizon amid adult enfantillages. (462)

"Enfantillage" means child-play, or childishness. "Adult enfantillages" I would understand to refer to the ascription of human qualities to non-

² Dōgen Kigen, "*Genjōkōan*," *Honzanban Shukusatsu Shōbogenzō* (Tokyo: Kōmeisha, 1968), p. 24; see also Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi, trans., *The Way of Everyday Life* (Los Angeles, 1978), n.p.

³ *Hekiganroku*; Cleary, III, 554.

⁴ Dōgen Kigen, "*Genjōkōan*," p. 24; Maezumi, n.p.

⁵ *Hekiganroku*; Cleary, II, 324.

human things, beginning with "why," the conceptual weed which takes us furthest from realization of things as they are, and continuing with the projection of aches and other silly business upon the sun. This is the imagination which is not grounded in a mind of winter, and is thus infantile.

Vital imagination has its roots in the bare place outside—which is "the same bare place/For the listener," a generative, not a nihilistic place. Yamada Kōun Rōshi says, "The common denominator of all things is empty infinity, infinite emptiness. But this infinite emptiness is full of possibilities."

Empty infinity and great potential, the nature of all things as realized by the mature Zen Buddhist, is also the vision of the Snow Man, with his mind of winter and his capacity to perceive phenomena vividly. Indeed, the final line of "The Snow Man," "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," precisely evokes the heart of Zen teaching:

Form is no other than emptiness,
Emptiness no other than form.⁶

This emptiness of all phenomena, including the self, is being uncovered in modern physics. What appears paradoxical emerges as the complementarity of the suchness and emptiness of all things. This the mind of winter perceives.

Dōgen expressed this complementarity in experiential terms:

Body and mind fall away!
The fallen-away body and mind!⁷

When body and mind fall away, the self is zero. The listener is "nothing himself" and thus experiences the "nothing that is not there," which is all things just as they are, with no associations—just "the junipers shagged with ice." With this perception, the great potential is fulfilled, and all things are the self: "The fallen-away body and mind!" That is the self as white paper filled with the sound of the wind and the sound of a few leaves.

⁶ *The Heart Sutra (Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya)*, Diamond Sangha; see also D. T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto, 1957), p. 26.

⁷ *Denkōroku*, trans. Kōun Yamada and Robert Aitken, unpublished ms.

AITKEN

Bodhidharma, who brought Dhyana Buddhism from India to China and is revered as the founding teacher of Zen, conveyed this same teaching:

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the first principle of the holy teaching?"

Bodhidharma said, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy."⁸

"Vast emptiness" is not only the common denominator of all things, it is itself all things, all space, all time together—as Wu-men wrote:

Before a step is taken,
the goal is reached;
Before the tongue is moved,
the speech is finished.⁹

Stevens wrote, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

There was a muddy centre before we breathed,
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete. (383)

This is as far as one can trace Stevens's credo as set forth in "The Snow Man," but "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," the companion of "The Snow Man" at their first publication, is, I feel, its completion (65). Hoon's descent "in purple," with its connotations of royalty, is the king-like nature of one who emerges from emptiness, like the Buddha rising from his profound experience under the Bodhi tree.

When I was a young lay student in a Japanese Zen monastery, I was surprised at the way the monks would seem to equate confidence with religious realization. Their dignity was regal when genuine, merely arrogant when false, but in both instances, quite contrary to the humble attitude I had previously associated with religion.

Stevens knew better. He would have appreciated D. T. Suzuki's translation of a line by Wu-men: "In royal solitude you walk the universe."¹⁰ Professor Suzuki took liberties in using "royal" in this instance,

¹⁰ D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, Second Series (London, 1953), p. 248.

⁸ *Hakiganroku*; Cleary, 1, 1.

⁹ *Mumonkan*; see also Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (New York, 1974), p. 326.

WALLACE STEVENS AND ZEN

for it does not appear in Wu-men's original Chinese.¹¹ I feel sure that he was projecting his own experience of empty potency here, and that he shared the vision of "mountain-minded Hoon" (121). Fully personalizing "the junipers shagged with ice" is to realize those junipers are none other than myself. "I was the world in which I walked" (65). Confirmed by all things, Hoon walked the universe in royal aloneness, "And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (65). One is reminded of words attributed to the baby Buddha immediately after his birth, which Zen teachers are fond of quoting:

Above the heavens, below the heavens,
Only I, alone and revered.¹²

Thus in different epochs and in different cultures, Wallace Stevens and Bodhidharma and his successors present the potent emptiness. I do not know how this could be, but there it is, perhaps no more remarkable than that they had the same number of sense organs. As Nakagawa Sōen Rōshi once said, "We are all members of the same nose-hole society."

But I think we have here something far more significant than human beings expressing common humanity. We are touching the connection between a certain kind of poet and a certain kind of religion. Zen teachers from the very beginning peppered their discourses with quotations from such poets as Tu Fu and Bashō, poets who had little or no formal connection with Zen. Of course, Zen was a part of the cultural atmosphere of T'ang China or Tokugawa Japan, but Tu Fu and Bashō were no more "Zen poets" than Stevens was. It is here that "the green sprout why" would take over our cultivation if we let it. I am content to acknowledge Stevens as one of the very few great poets who will be a source of endless inspiration for future generations of Western Zen teachers.

¹¹ *Mumonkan*; Shibayama, p. 10.

¹² Robert Aitken, *A Zen Wave: Bashō's Haiku and Zen* (New York and Tokyo, 1978), p. 84.