

Wallace Stevens: Toward a Supreme Fiction

Wallace Stevens (1879-1955) was an American modernist poet. Born in Reading, Pennsylvania, and educated at Harvard and the New York Law School, he worked as an executive for The Hartford Insurance Company in Connecticut. The photograph by Sylvia Salmi was taken in the 1940s, at which time he was vice-president of the company. In his free time Stevens wrote poems, publishing his first book *Harmonium* in 1923. Throughout his life he considered poetry as the “supreme fiction,” something that could replace religion in human life, and provide us with a more complete understanding than that provided by science or philosophy. In 1942 he published a set of poems entitled *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, to illustrate the nature and power of poetry.

The Romantic Revolution

In the late 18th and early 19th Century, artists and writers insisted that art should stress individual creativity rather than formal learning, and that the emotional response to the world was more important than the rational. Not everyone appreciated the new poetry. In 1820, the satirist Thomas Love Peacock described *The Four Ages of Poetry*: the iron age of wherein rude bards celebrated the exploits of their chieftains, the golden age of Homer, the silver age of civilized verse lasting from Virgil to Dryden, and the current brass age wherein poets described their feelings. His invective was venomous: he described the characteristics of romantic poetry as

harmony, which is language on the rack of Procrustes; sentiment, which is canting egotism in the mask of refined feeling; passion, which is the commotion of a weak and selfish mind; pathos, which is the whining of an unmanly

spirit; and sublimity, which is the inflation of an empty head.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote a response to Peacock in 1821, but he died in 1822, and *A Defense of Poetry* was not published until 1840. Shelley distinguished two kinds of mental action: reason (Greek *logizein*, logic, analysis) and imagination (Greek *poiein*, poetry, synthesis).

Reason is the enumeration of qualities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those qualities, both separately and as a whole. Reason respects the differences, and imagination the similitudes of things. Reason is to imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.

He proposed that it is through the imagination that we obtain new knowledge:

The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

And at the end of his essay, he claimed

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

The word hierophant, used initially in the context of the Eleusinian Mysteries, comes from the Greek *hieros* (sacred, holy) and *phainein* (show, reveal).

Shelley embodied these ideas in his 1819 *Ode to the West Wind* (full text available). This poem describes the west wind of autumn that blows the leaves from the trees and heralds the coming winter. It ends

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

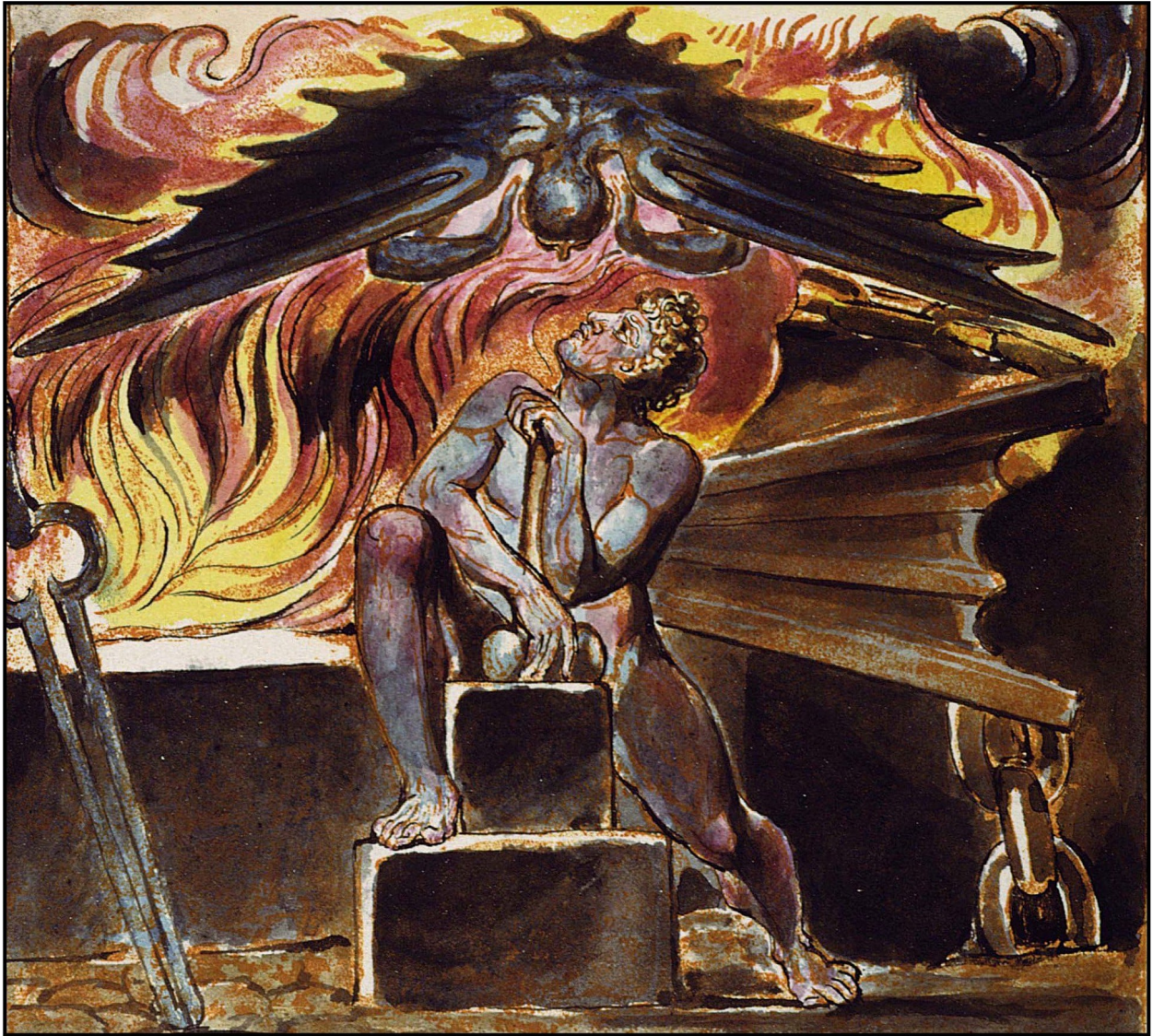
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Shelley was not alone in considering poetry as a great system for creating knowledge and understanding. In his prophetic books, William Blake described Los as the personification of the creative imagination, in despair at the state of the world following the Industrial Revolution. In the 1820 book *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Los is driven by his demonic Spectre to destroy the present state of England (personified by the Giant Albion), and reforge a new world. The following is Blake's representation of Los from page 6 of *Jerusalem*:



Los proclaims

I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another
Man's

I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create
(Blake, *Jerusalem*, 1820, p 10)

Modern Ideas of Poetry

Shelley and the Romantic poets were soon criticized for being too idealistic, too removed from the real world, and too emotional. The following quotation is from a critique of

Shelley by George Santayana (1863-1952), a poet and philosopher who taught at Harvard when Wallace Stevens was an undergraduate there. Stevens and Santayana became friends, exchanged poems and stayed in contact long after Stevens graduated (Mariani, 2016, pp 21-23). Santayana claimed that Shelley

could never put together any just idea of the world: he merely collected images and emotions, and out of them made worlds of his own. His poetry accordingly does not well express history, nor human character, nor the constitution of nature. What he unrolls before us instead is, in a sense, fantastic; it is a series of landscapes, passions, and cataclysms such as never were on earth, and never will be. (Santayana, 1913, pp 181-2)

After Romanticism, the Realists had their day. And as the 20th Century began, Modernism came to the fore. Modernists poets tended toward the everyday rather than the fantastic, irony rather than idealism, objectivity rather than passion, and innovation rather than derivation. In his 1942 poem *Of Modern Poetry*, Stevens remarked

It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.

It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage.

Despite being critical of Shelley's poetry, Santayana nevertheless largely agreed with his idea that poetry creates our understanding of the world. He described the "great function of poetry:"

to repair to the material of experience, seizing hold of the reality of sensation and fancy beneath the surface of conventional ideas, and then out of that living but

indefinite material to build new structures, richer, finer, fitter to the primary tendencies of our nature, truer to the ultimate possibilities of the soul. (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

Santayana realized that the creative imagination works in science as well as poetry:

Science and common sense are themselves in their way poets of no mean order, since they take the material of experience and make out of it a clear, symmetrical, and beautiful world (Santayana, 1900, p 271).

He also proposed that poetry and religion were closely related:

Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence, for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive. (Santayana, 1900, p 290).

These last two quotations recall Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry*:

Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred

These ideas were not accepted by all modernist poets. W. H. Auden (1907-1973) had much more restrained views on the function of poetry:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

(Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, 1940)

Wallace Stevens, however, thought about poetry in much the same way as Shelley and Santayana (Italia, 1993). In his essay *The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet* in his 1951 collection *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens quotes Shelley extensively:

He speaks of poetry as created by "that imperial faculty whose throne is curtained within the invisible nature of man." He says that a poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. It is "indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge . . . the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds . . . it arrests the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life." In spite of the absence of a definition and in spite of the impressions and approximations we are never at a loss to recognize poetry. As a consequence it is easy for us to propose a center of poetry, a *vis* or *noeud vital*, to which, in the absence of a definition, all the variations of definitions are peripheral. (Stevens, 1951, pp 44-45).

Stevens' conception of the poet was very similar to Shelley's:

what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (Stevens, 1951, p 31)

Stevens used the term "fiction" to describe the creative process of poetry. "Fiction" comes from the Latin *fictus* the past participle of *fingere* meaning to shape, form, devise, feign; "poetry" comes from the Greek *poesis* meaning a fabrication or creation, which is itself derived from *poiein*, to make or compose.

Stevens' proposal of poetry as the process primarily

responsible for our understanding of the world is similar in many ways to the Martin Heidegger's ideas about Hölderlin's poetry, though neither writer could have been aware of the other:

The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This The poet names the gods and names all things with respect to what they are. This naming does not merely come about when something already previously known is furnished with a name; rather, by speaking the essential word, the poet's naming first nominates the beings as what they are. Thus they become known as beings. Poetry is the founding of being in the word. (Heidegger, 1941, p 58)

What we can express in words we can hope to understand. Poetry is unlike other modes of expression used in religion, law, or science. Poetry is particularly and vividly close to experience, and because of its attention to sound and metaphor it makes that experience memorable. In his essay *On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, a student of Heidegger, points out that poetry brings experience "near" to us:

A genuine poem ...allows us to experience "nearness" in such a way that this nearness is held in and through the linguistic form of the poem. What is the nearness that is held there? Whenever we have to hold something, it is because it is transient and threatens to escape our grasp. In fact our fundamental experience as beings subject to time is that all things escape us, that all the events of our lives fade more and more, so that at best they glow with an almost unreal shimmer in the most distant recollection. But the poem does not fade, for the poetic word brings the transience of time to a standstill. (Gadamer, 1986, p 114)

Gadamer realizes, however, that poetry is but one of many linguistic modes used to gain understanding of the world:

Language gives all of us our access to a world in which certain special forms of human experience arise: the religious tidings that proclaim salvation, the legal judgment that tells us what is right and what is wrong in our society, the poetic word that by being there bears witness to our own being. (Gadamer, 1986, p 115)

Supreme Fictions

Stevens first used the term “supreme fiction” in his 1923 poem *A High-Toned Christian Woman* (Brazeal, 2007). The main theme of the poem (full text available) is that human creativity knows no hierarchy: poetry is as valuable as religion, jazz improvisations as important as choral hymns, and bawdy merriment as meaningful as moral laws. The poem begins

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That’s clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones.

Stevens is indulging in word games: “nave” leads to “knave,” “palm” recalls “psalm,” and the “supreme fiction” brings to mind the “supreme being” who created everything, the creator free of any church, the godhead of Deists and Revolutionaries.

Stevens had given up his belief in the Christian God but still felt the need for something to believe in. That it might be possible to believe in a fiction was suggested in his 1942

poem *Asides on an Oboe* (full text available) which begins

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

Two ideas – the concept of a supreme fiction by which the poetic imagination could create and understand a world, and the need of human beings to believe in something – ran through all of Stevens's thought and poetry. In the *Adagia* (an unpublished collection of aphorisms), he claimed

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly (Stevens, 1997, p 903)

Unfortunately, although the word "fiction" means an imaginative creation, it also carries the connotation that it is untrue. In this regard, Stevens' statements become contradictory since we cannot believe in something that we know to be untrue (Brazeal, 2007). Stevens is using William James' idea of the will to believe. But, as Brazeal points out, it was not James's view that we could just believe in anything. Rather we could believe in what we thought was true even though we had not yet fully proven it.

Stevens discussed the problems about believing in a fiction in a 1942 letter to Henry Church about *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*:

One evening, a week or so ago, a student at Trinity College came to the office and walked home with me. We talked about this book. I said that I thought that we had reached a point at which we could no longer really believe in anything unless we recognized that it was a fiction. The student said that that was an impossibility. that there is as no such thing as believing in something that one knew was no true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time.

There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief, if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that are extensions of reality. There are plenty of people who believe in Heaven as definitely as your New England ancestors and my Dutch ancestors believed in it. But Heaven is an extension of reality (Stevens & Stevens, 1996, p 430)

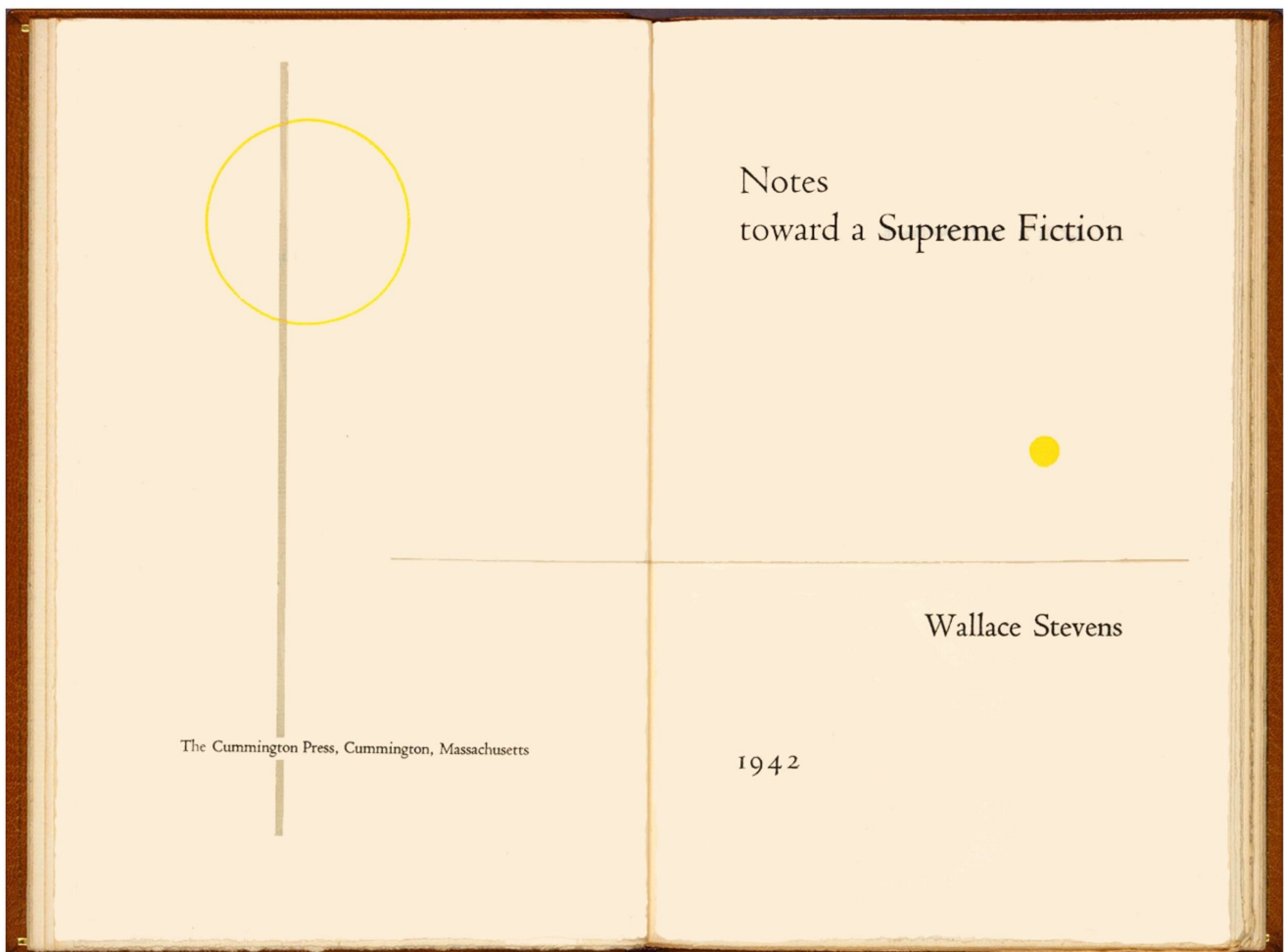
Some resolution of these contradictions may be found in the way we consider fiction. Any worthwhile work of fiction must be "true to life." If it has no relevance to real life, it is not worth reading. This is likely the meaning of Stevens' fiction – something created by the human imagination that represents what could or does happen in real life as accurately and completely (as "truly") as it can. Michael Frayn has discussed some of the complex relations between truth and fiction (2006).

Notes toward a Supreme Fiction

In 1942 Stevens published *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* with Cummington Press, a fine press founded by Harry Duncan in 1939 in Cummington, Massachusetts. 273 copies of the 45-page book were hand-printed, 80 of which were signed by Stevens. A second edition of 330 copies was published in 1943. The book was dedicated to Henry Church, a patron of the arts, whose fortune derived from his father's patent for baking soda (with the brand name *Arm and Hammer*). The design for the book's title page was by Alessandro Giampietro. Stevens told Henry Church in a 1942 letter

that the straight lines in the designs of the book represent direction and that the circles mean comprehension. (Stevens

& Stevens, 1996, p 418)



The poem (full text available) consists of a prologue of 8 lines, three sections containing ten poems, each composed of 7 unrhymed tercets (21 lines), and an epilogue in the same form as the preceding poems. The printing was set up so that the title, dedication (to Henry Church), prologue, section titles and the poems were each printed on a separate page.

The title informs us that this is not the definitive description of the supreme fiction. The poetry provides notes – either in the sense of early observations or in the sense of musical notes that can form an overarching harmony. Furthermore, it is “a” supreme fiction – the creation of Stevens rather than of the ultimate creation of everything.

The prologue is addressed to something not clearly identified,

probably the creative imagination with which the poet interacts to bring forth understanding – the “vivid transparency” that leads to “peace.” Older poets would have called it their “muse.”

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparency that you bring is peace.

The three sections of the book are entitled

It must be abstract
It must change
It must give pleasure

These titles denote the essential characteristics of any worthwhile fiction.

A detailed commentary is beyond the scope of this essay, which will limit itself to a few of the poems. Many scholars have provided more extensive analyses: Kermode (1960, pp 111-119), Sukenik (1967, pp 136-163), Vendler (1969, pp 168-205), Bloom (1977, pp 167-218), Cook (2007, pp 214-236), Bates (2007).

The first poem in the first section (It must be abstract) is addressed to an “ephebe,” the name for a young man in training in Ancient Athens.

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
Of this invention, this invented world,
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye

And see it clearly in the idea of it.

The poet urges to ephebe not to accept what he has been taught – not to believe in the gods – but to make his own understanding of the world

The death of one god is the death of all.
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber,

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was
A name for something that never could be named.
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

Umbra is an earth-brown pigment, but the word derives from the Latin *ombra*, shadow, and suggests the shades of the dead. The epithet “gold flourisher” describe the sun’s essential characteristics: the sun as an abstraction.

The final poem in the first section considers the idea of what man must become. The poet envisions a man in clothes too big for his body seeing the world clearly without regard to what religion requires or what humanity desires

Cloudless the morning. It is he. The man
In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons,

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

The 5th poem of the second section (It must change) describes a deserted plantation on a tropical island – likely in the Florida Keys, which Stevens visited many times in 1920s and

1930s.

On a blue island in a sky-wide water
The wild orange trees continued to bloom and to bear,
Long after the planter's death. A few limes remained,

Where his house had fallen, three scraggy trees
weighted

With garbled green. These were the planter's
turquoise

And his orange blotches, these were his zero green,

A green baked greener in the greenest sun.

These were his beaches, his sea-myrtles in

White sand, his patter of the long sea-slushes.

Before the recurrent hurricanes had ruined the plantations, the Florida Keys were famous for the limes used to make Key lime pie. Stevens' poem about the planter illustrates how our conception of the world must take into account its transience. And find this beautiful. The poem's third verse is remarkable for its portrayal of the sound of the waves upon the beach.

This poem concludes with a eulogy to the planter. Because he is no more, the eulogy is expressed in negative terms:

An unaffected man in a negative light
Could not have borne his labor nor have died
Sighing that he should leave the banjo's twang.

Vendler (1969, p 170) transcribes the verse without the negatives:

He lived in a positive light, a man deeply affected by his islands, and therefore he could bear his labor, and could die, in spite of exile and desire, sighing that he should have to leave even so simple and small a pleasure as his banjo's twang.

The 6th poem of the second section deals with birds:

Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
When in my coppice you behold me be.

Ah, ke! The bloody wren, the felon jay,
Ke-ke, the jug throated robin pouring out,
Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.

There was such idiot minstrelsy in rain,
So many clappers going without bells,
That these bethous compose a heavenly gong.

One voice repeating, one tireless chorister,
The phrases of a single phrase, ke-ke,
A single text, granite monotony

Stevens was a connoisseur of birds and could whistle a multiplicity of birdsongs (Cook, 2007, p 224). The following are some typical songs of the birds mentioned in the first two verses

Sparrow:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/sparrow.mp3>

Wren:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/wren.mp3>

Bluejay:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/bluejay.mp3>

Robin:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/robin.mp3>

As the poem provides its brilliant rendition of the different birds, it makes passing references to other birds that have found their way into poems. “Coppice” is a reference to Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush*; “pouring forth” and “glade” are quoted from Keat’s *Ode to a Nightingale*.

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul
abroad

In such an ecstasy!

Stevens cannot resist the wordplay between the “jug-jug” sound of the robin and “pouring out” from a jug.

However, Stevens notes that most birdsong is monotonous. Because it does not change it is not like the supreme fictions of a poet. Stevens criticizes the tendency of the Romantic poets to liken themselves to birds or to other natural phenomena. The “bethous” that he monotonously repeats are a reference to Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*.

Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Stevens’ poem concludes

These are of minstrels lacking minstrelsy,
Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird

Of stone, that never changes. Bethou him, you
And you, bethou him and bethou. It is
A sound like any other. It will end.

The birdsongs are not supreme fictions because they never change.

In the 8th poem of the second section (It must change) Stevens imagines how Shelley's Ozymandias, who thought he could impose his order on the world, could have been seduced by the beautiful Nanzia Nuncio so that the constant order that the king of kings desired could give way to changing fictions:

I am the woman stripped more nakedly
Than nakedness, standing before an inflexible
Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.

Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me
In its own only precious ornament.
Set on me the spirit's diamond coronal.

Clothe me entire in the final filament,
So that I tremble with such love so known
And myself am precious for your perfecting.

Then Ozymandias said the spouse, the bride
Is never naked. A fictive covering
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.

In the 7th poem of the third section (It must give pleasure), Stevens contrasts politics, the imposing or order on the world, to poetry, the discovery of order in the world. And finds pleasure in the changing order of the seasons (Lensing, 2007):

But to impose is not
To discover. To discover an order as of
A season, to discover summer and know it,

To discover winter and know it well, to find
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible.

The final poem of the third section is a paean to the world we live on, affectionately referred to as the "fat girl," the earth in all its plenitude and beauty, and "my green, my fluent mundo." A world that we can only understand through feeling and through fiction:

That's it: the more than rational distortion,
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

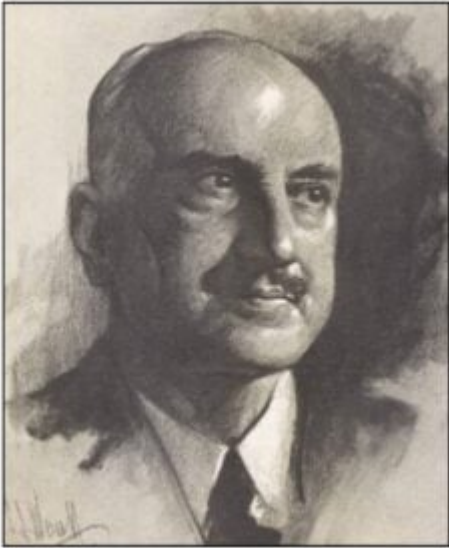
Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction concludes with an epilogue in which Stevens compares the poet to the soldier. Stevens may have thought this necessary in a poem written during war. However, the epilogue really does not work. Poets lay down their lines but not their lives for what they believe in. Stevens claims that poetry can give meaning to the soldier's sacrifice. But as James Merrill pointed out in his 1985 poem *Page from the Koran*:

How gladly with proper words," said Wallace Stevens
"The soldier dies." Or kills.

Death Comes for Philosopher and for poet

George Santayana resigned from Harvard University in 1911 and spent the rest of his life in Europe. He was financially supported by a small inheritance from his mother and by the royalties from his books, among which was the best-selling novel *The Last Puritan* (1935). His portrait by Samuel Johnson Woolf graced the cover of *Time* magazine in 1936.



At the beginning of World War II, the philosopher was living in Rome. It soon became difficult to transfer money from his American publishers to Italy. In 1941, rather than undergo the stress of travelling during wartime, the 77-year-old obtained lodgings with the Sisters of the Little Company of Mary, who ran the small Calvary Hospital next door to the ancient Basilica Santo Stefano Rotondo. Since the sisters also managed a hospital in Chicago, Santayana's publishers could pay the sisters in Chicago for his upkeep in Rome (McCormick, 1987, p 420). Santayana continued to live with the sisters after the war. Despite being a confirmed atheist, he enjoyed the liturgy, austerity and tranquility of his Catholic surroundings. Robert Lowell later commented that Santayana believed that "There is no God and Mary is His mother" (in the poem *For George Santayana (1863-1952)* in *Life Studies*, 1959). Nevertheless, Santayana maintained his scepticism to the end and insisted on being buried in non-consecrated ground.

In the summer of 1952, Wallace Stevens wrote a poem about the old philosopher. Santayana died from stomach cancer before the poem was published later that year. As well as describing his situation in Rome, Stevens' poem makes multiple allusions to Santayana's 1923 *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (Griswold works through these references on his website). The poem (full text available) begins

On the threshold of heaven, the figures in the street
Become the figures of heaven, the majestic movement
Of men growing small in the distances of space,
Singing, with smaller and still smaller sound,
Unintelligible absolution and an end –

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of the mind.
It is as if in a human dignity
Two parallels become one, a perspective, of which
Men are part both in the inch and in the mile.

How easily the blown banners change to wings...
Things dark on the horizons of perception
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the
extreme

Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled...

The bed, the books, the chair, the moving nuns,
The candle as it evades the sight, these are
The sources of happiness in the shape of Rome,
A shape within the ancient circles of shapes,
And these beneath the shadow of a shape

In a confusion on bed and books, a portent
On the chair, a moving transparence on the nuns,
A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part only of that which

Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible.

The “more merciful Rome” of the second stanza is heaven and the parallel lines becoming one represent death as a transition to eternity.

The poem ends:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, and pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

The “inquisitor of structures” may refer to Santayana’s likening architecture to poetry:

Every human architect must do likewise with his edifice; he must mould his bricks or hew his stones into symmetrical solids and lay them over one another in regular strata, like a poet’s lines. (Santayana, 1900, p 261)

Griswold suggests that the final lines relate to Santayana’s

The ultimate reaches of doubt and renunciation open out for it, by an easy transition, into fields of endless variety and peace, as if through the gorges of death it had passed into a paradise where all things are crystallised into the image of themselves, and have lost their urgency and their venom. (Santayana, 1923, p 76)

The following is Steven’s recitation of the poem

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/To-An-Old-Philosopher-In-Rome.mp3>

Wallace Stevens himself developed stomach cancer less than 3 years after Santayana (Mariani, 2016, pp 394-402). The cancer was inoperable and a gastroenterostomy was performed at St Francis Catholic Hospital in Hartford. During his recuperation Stevens met the hospital's chaplain Father Arthur Hanley and talked to him about poetry and religion. Stevens was discharged but re-admitted a few months later. During this second and final hospitalization he agreed to be baptized by Father Hanley (Hanley 1977). Stevens had been brought up as a Lutheran as an adult he had questioned the need for any organized religion. Although Stevens was prone to irony, it appears that his final conversion was sincere. Perhaps he took to heart the words of his friend Santayana:

Scepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer: there is nobility in preserving it coolly and proudly through a long youth, until at last, in the ripeness of instinct and discretion, it can be safely exchanged for fidelity and happiness. (Santayana, 1923, pp 69-70)

The Internal Paramour

One of Stevens' last poems *Final Soliloquy of the Internal Paramour* was published in the *Hudson Review* in 1951:

Light the first light of evening, as in a room
In which we rest and, for small reason, think
The world imagined is the ultimate good.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

Within its vital boundary, in the mind.
We say God and the imagination are one...
How high that highest candle lights the dark.

Out of this same light, out of the central mind,
We make a dwelling in the evening air,
In which being there together is enough.

The following is Stevens' recitation of the poem

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Final-Soliloquy-Of-The-Interior-Paramour.mp3>

Stevens does not directly identify his internal mistress. She shares qualities with the idea of the self that, like a shawl, we wrap tightly about us. This formulation is related to Santayana's description of the self:

If I exist, I am a living creature to whom ideas are incidents, like aeroplanes in the sky; they pass over, more or less followed by the eye, more or less listened to, recognised, or remembered; but the self slumbers and breathes below, a mysterious natural organism, full of dark yet definite potentialities; so that different events will awake it to quite disproportionate activities. The self is a fountain of joy, folly, and sorrow, a waxing and waning, stupid and dreaming creature, in the midst of a vast natural world, of which it catches but a few transient and odd perspectives. (Santayana, 1923, p 146).

However, the mistress is also the creative imagination that proposes our understanding of the world: "an order, a whole, a knowledge." The creation of this supreme fiction may be like God speaking the words "Let there be light!" The crucial comment, "We say, God and the imagination are one ..." refers to

one of Stevens' *Adagia*:

Proposita:

1. God and the imagination are one.

2. The thing imagined is the imaginer.

The second equals the thing imagined and the imaginer are one.

Hence, I suppose, the Imaginer is God. (Stevens, 1997, p 914)

The poem harks back to the prologue of *Notes to a Supreme Fiction*, which described the poetic process as a meeting between the poet and his creative self:

In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,
For a moment in the central of our being

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Story of Job

Everyone knows the story of Job. A righteous man is tested by God. All that Job owns is taken away, all his children are killed, and he is struck down by disease. Job's friends advise him to seek God's forgiveness since he must have somehow offended Him. However, Job insists on his own righteousness. He does not repent. He demands an explanation for why he is being unjustly punished. An angry God appears unto Job in a whirlwind. He proclaims His workings to be far beyond the understanding of Job. He talks of Behemoth and Leviathan. He castigates Job's friends. He grants Job happiness and prosperity. He neither explains nor justifies what happened.

Everyone knows the story of Job. No one fully understands its meaning.

The Land of Uz

איש היה בארץ־עוץ
איוב שמו והיה
האיש ההוא תם וישר
וירא אלהים וסר
מֵרַע:

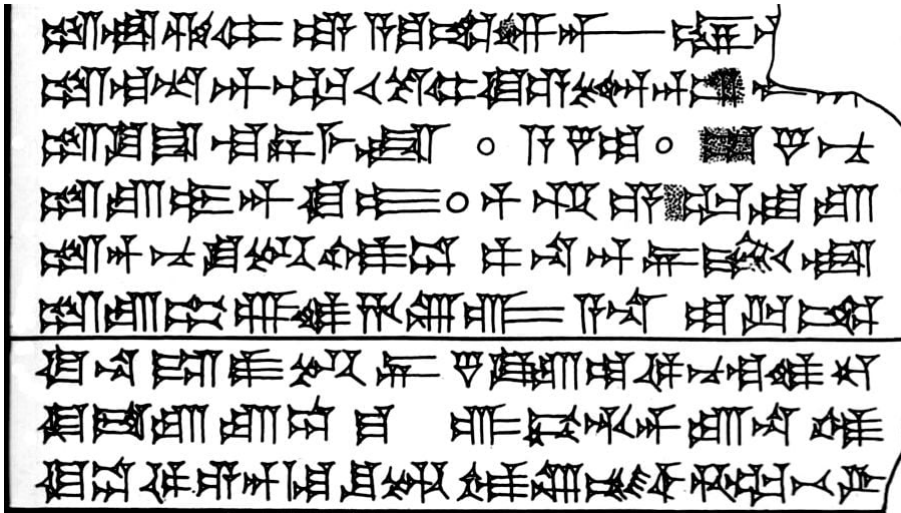
There was a man in the land
of Uz, whose name was Job;
and that man was perfect
and upright, and one that feared
God, and eschewed evil.

(Job 1:1)

Thus begins the story of Job. The text was likely written in the 6th or 5th Century BCE (Crenshaw, 2011; Pope, 1965). Job was a righteous man who worshipped God. The God he worshipped went by the name “Elohim” (אֱלֹהִים). Job was not Jewish; his god was not Yahweh (Sawyer, 2011). Job made all of the appropriate sacrifices. A Byzantine illumination from the 11th Century CE (Papadaki-Oekland, 2009) shows him making a sacrifice and receiving a blessing from the hand of God.



No one is sure about the Land of Uz (Pope, 1965). Some have suggested that it is equivalent to the land of Edom to the south and east of Israel. This fits with the idea voiced in the later *Testament of Job* written in the 1st Century BCE (James, 1897) that Job was descended from Esau, the son of Isaac who ceded his birthright to his brother Jacob, and left to found the nation of Edom. Others have suggested that Uz is located in the Hauran district of Southern Syria. Arabic traditions consider the town of Sheikh Saad (also called Karnaim or Dair Ayyub – “monastery of Job”) as the home of Job and site of his tribulations. A third possibility is raised in one of the Dead Sea scrolls called the *War Scroll*, which mentions Uz as one of the lands “beyond the Euphrates”



The Hebrew *Book of Job* is a far more complex and poetic creation than these Mesopotamian stories. The writer of Job may have heard these tales during the period of the Babylonian Captivity (597-539 BCE), and worked them into a poetic whole then or on his or her return to Jerusalem. The *Book of Job* does not directly mention the exile of the Jews. However, it might subtly reflect the idea that the people of Israel were for a while completely forsaken by their God.

Maimonides (1190, Chapter 22) considers the Land of Uz a fantasy. He points out that “uz” is the Hebrew verb “take counsel.” The name Uz is therefore an exhortation to study well this story.

... its basis is a fiction, conceived for the purpose of explaining the different opinions which people hold on Divine Providence.

Job’s name is as ambiguous as the land he lived in. On the one hand, it might derive from the root ‘yb meaning “enmity”; on the other hand, it might come from the root ‘ab indicating “repentance” (Pope, 1965). Is Job the enemy of God, or His repentant servant?

The Council of the Gods

After introducing us to its main character, the *Book of Job* takes us to Heaven where God has called a council. Amongst

those gathered is one they call the “Adversary” (Alter, 2010) or the Satan, someone who is part the Lucifer of Isaiah, and part the Devil of later scriptures. The following is an illustration of the council from a Byzantine manuscript of the 11th century CE. God is represented only by his hand; the Adversary is dark and has been defaced.



God indicates his servant Job to the Adversary:

Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? (Job 1:8)

The Adversary claims that Job is only good because God treats him well. If he were not so well taken care of, he would curse God to his face. God refuses to believe this, and allows the Adversary to take away all that Job has, and ultimately to strike Job himself.

The Ruination of Job

The Adversary arranges for all Job’s holdings to be stolen or killed and for his children to die. Job is bereft but curses not God. He accepts his fate in a verse that has become the focus of the Judeo-Christian funeral rites (Eisenberg & Wiesel, 1987, p 13).

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. (Job 1: 21).

Although Job is not Jewish, this verse comes from the Jewish tradition. The Lord whose name is blessed is Yahweh.

Ultimately the Adversary strikes Job with a terrible disease. Job's wife urges him to curse God, but he rebukes her. Covered with boils he sits disconsolately "among the ashes" (Job 2:8). The Greek Septuagint and the 14th Century Wycliff Bible translate this as a "upon a dunghill," but this appears poetic license.

From ancient times human beings in mourning have covered themselves with ashes to signify bereavement and repentance. Ashes are particularly significant in Jewish history – the ashes of the first temple destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, the ashes of the second temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, and the ashes of the millions of Jews murdered and cremated by the Nazis in the 20th Century CE. Dust and ashes go back to Genesis. Adam is expelled from Eden with the words "dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19), and Abraham admits to God that he is "but dust and ashes" (Genesis 18:27). Dust and ashes return later as the final words of Job.

The peace and prosperity of Job and his family at the beginning of the story is well characterized in the first of William Blake's illustrations for the *Book of Job* (Blake, 1821/1995). The cataclysm leading to the death of his children is the subject of his third illustration:



Job's Comforters

Three friends of Job – Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar – come to comfort him in his grief. They spend seven days and seven nights in silence with him. Only when Job finally speaks do they say anything. This is the way that those in mourning should be comforted: visitors should allow the bereaved to be quiet, and only speak when he or she initiates conversation.

After Job begins to talk, however, multiple debates follow. These form the bulk of the Book of Job – Chapters 3 to 27. Job describes the injustice of his situation. His friends attempt to show that it must in some way be his own fault. Job and his friends go through multiple exchanges, which are portrayed in exquisite Hebrew poetry, quite unlike the prose that describes the story of Job's downfall.

Job begins by cursing the day of his birth. For this I shall use the translation of Stephen Mitchell (1987), which is more colloquial than the King James Version:

God damn the day I was born
and the night that forced me from the womb.
On that day—let there be darkness;
let it never have been created;

let it sink back into the void.
Let chaos overpower it;
let black clouds overwhelm it;
let the sun be plucked from its sky.
Let oblivion overshadow it;
let the other days disown it;
let the aeons swallow it up.
On that night—let no child be born,
no mother cry out with joy.
Let sorcerers wake the Serpent
to blast it with eternal blight.
Let its last stars be extinguished;
let it wait in terror for daylight;
let its dawn never arrive.
For it did not shut the womb's doors
to shelter me from this sorrow.

Job's curse is remarkably similar to that of Jeremiah the prophet who lamented the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Captivity (Eisenberg & Wiesel, 1987, p 60).

Cursed be the day wherein I was born: let not the day
wherein my mother bare me be blessed.

Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying,
A man child is born unto thee; making him very glad.
(Jeremiah 20:14-15)

Job's friends attempt to demonstrate to Job that what has happened to him is just. He must have sinned in some way to warrant his misfortune. The illustration below shows Blake's view of Job's comforters casting accusing fingers at their friend. In the background is a large stone monument. Blake placed his land of Uz on the Salisbury plain.



Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar believe firmly in the idea that God rewards the good and punishes the evil. Job must therefore have sinned in some way. Their belief in Divine Providence is clearly expressed in the first of the *Psalms*:

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.

And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away.

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor

sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

Eliphaz' first reply to Job restates this idea of divine justice:

Remember, I pray thee, who ever perished, being innocent? or where were the righteous cut off?

Even as I have seen, they that plow iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.

By the blast of God they perish, and by the breath of his nostrils are they consumed. (Job 4:7-9)

Eliphaz then recounts a dream (Job 4:12-21) that warns us not to question the justice of God (Blakes illustration is shown on the right. In 1815 Lord Byron wrote some lyrics for *Hebrew Melodies* that were composed by Isaac Nathan (Byron, 1815; Cochran, 2015). One of these lyrics was a translation of the dream of Eliphaz:

The face of immortality unveiled—
Deep sleep came down on every eye save mine—
And there it stood,—all formless—but divine;
Along my bones the creeping flesh did quake;
And as my damp hair stiffened, thus it spake:

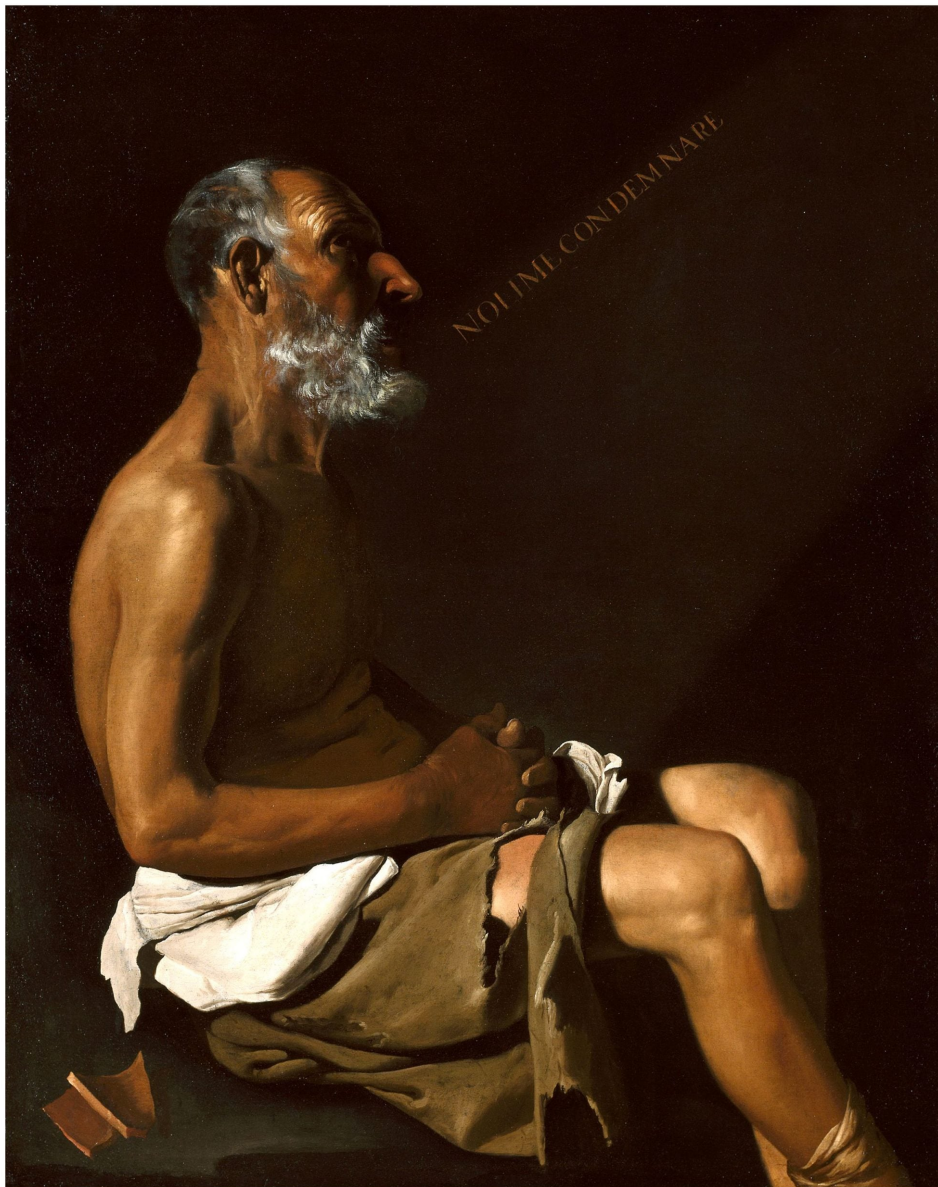


'Is man more just than God? Is man more pure
Than He who deems even seraphs insecure?
Creatures of clay—vain dwellers in the dust!
The moth survives you, and are ye more just?
Things of a day! you wither ere the night,
Heedless and blind to wisdom's wasted light!'

Nathan's music is not memorable. In 1854 the violinist Joseph Joachim wrote *Hebrew Melodies for Viola and Piano*. His music presents an impression rather than a setting of Byron's poems. The sound of the viola suits the pathos of Job. The following is the ending to the second movement played by Anna Barbara Dütschler and Marc Pantillon:

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Hebrew-Melodies-II-Grave-ending.mp3>

Job insists that he has done no wrong and that his suffering is therefore unjust. He demands that God confront him with his sin. The illustration below shows a representation of Job attributed to an unknown Spanish painter from the early 17th Century. Some have suggested that the painter might actually have been the young Velasquez (Terrien, 1996). Job says unto God "Noli me condemnare" – "Do not condemn me" (Job 10:2).



Only do not two things unto me: then will I not hide myself from thee.

Withdraw thine hand far from me: and let not thy dread make me afraid.

Then call thou, and I will answer: or let me speak, and answer thou me.

How many are mine iniquities and sins? make me to know my transgression and my sin. (Job 13: 20-23)

Job describes the transience of human life in verses that recall *Ecclesiastes*, and remonstrates that God should judge him rather than pity him:

Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble.

He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

And doth thou open thine eyes upon such an one, and bringest me into judgment with thee? (Job 14:1-3)

Then he asks God not to deprive him so much during his brief time on earth that he not be able to accomplish something:

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass;

Turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground;

Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. (Job 14:5-9)

Sins of Omission

After a while Job's insistence on his own innocence becomes tiresome. No one is perfect. Indeed, as Wiesel points out a true *Tzadik* ("righteous one") would never proclaim his own goodness (Wiesel & Eisenberg, 1987, p 32). Even if he has done no wrong, he may not have done sufficient good. In one of his speeches (Job 22), Eliphaz accuses Job of not giving water to the weary or bread to the hungry. Job does not immediately reply to this rebuke. Later (Job 29-31) he insists that he always helped the poor and the orphans. But was this sufficient? Job remained rich and the poor remained poor.

Wiesel retells a story from the Midrash that attempts to explain why Job's appeals to God are initially met with

silence (Wiesel & Eisenberg, 1987, p 22-23). When asked by Moses to “let my people go,” the Pharaoh consulted three counselors: Jethro, Billam and Job. Jethro urged the Pharaoh to agree, Billam rejected the proposal, and Job stayed silent. The Midrash insists that when faced with the suffering of others one must not remain neutral. Not to attempt to prevent evil is as great a sin as the evil itself.

The Redeemer

The debates continue between Job and his friends. At one point, Job calls upon a redeemer or a “vindicator” to bear witness to his righteousness.

Why do ye persecute me as God, and are not satisfied with my flesh?

Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book!

That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!

For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth:

And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God (Job 19: 22-26)

Christians have taken this passage as a prophecy of Christ. George Frideric Handel set the last two of these verses for soprano in his *Messiah* of 1741. The Christian interpretation does not make sense. According to Christian teachings, Christ came to save the sinners not to vindicate the righteous.

Who then is this “vindicator”? Job is appealing to someone in God’s entourage to serve as his advocate. In his *Answer to Job*, Jung (1956/2010) suggests that Job’s god has many aspects. The very name of God – Elohim – is in the plural. God is both good and evil – Satan is as much a part of him as Christ. God is both knowing and unknowing. According to Hebrew traditions, Wisdom or Sophia was part of God from the

beginning. In the Proverbs Wisdom describes herself as being with God from before the creation of the universe:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old.

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water.

Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth:

While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world.

When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:

When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep:

When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth (Proverbs 8:22-29)

Christians often take this as indicating that God the Father and God the Son were together from the beginning. This fits with the idea that Christ was the word or *logos*, a concept similar to wisdom. However, this is not the meaning of the idea in the Hebrew bible and Christ is not the advocate to whom Job calls.

The *Book of Job* also contains a full chapter devoted to Wisdom (Job 28). Many commentators believe it to be a later interpolation. However, it fits nicely at the end of the disputation between Job and his comforters:

Whence then cometh wisdom? and where is the place of understanding?

Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all living, and kept close from the fowls of the air.

Destruction and death say, We have heard the fame thereof

with our ears.

God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof.

For he looketh to the ends of the earth, and seeth under the whole heaven;

To make the weight for the winds; and he weigheth the waters by measure.

When he made a decree for the rain, and a way for the lightning of the thunder:

Then did he see it, and declare it; he prepared it, yea, and searched it out.

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding. (Job 28 :20-28)

After Job makes his final statement of innocence, he is rudely interrupted by Elihu, a brash young man who cannot understand why foolish old Job does not recognize the justice of God. Most commentators consider this section of the book (Chapters 32-37) to be a later interpolation. One possibility is that it is the work of a young scribe who, when copying the initial version of book, became frustrated with Job's refusal to acknowledge justice and inserted more argument for the benefit of the reader. Wiesel (p 390) remarks that some Talmudists have suggested that Elihu might be Satan in disguise, muddying the waters of the argument.

Yahweh's Response to Job

After Elihu's diatribe, God suddenly appears to Job. Yahweh – this is indeed the one true God – describes the creation and maintenance of the universe. This exuberant paean to the wonders of the world is expressed in some of the most beautiful poetry in the Bible.

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee,
and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who
hath stretched the line upon it?

Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid
the corner stone thereof;

When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of
God shouted for joy?

Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, as
if it had issued out of the womb?

When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick
darkness a swaddlingband for it,

And brake up for it my decreed place, and set bars and
doors,

And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here
shall thy proud waves be stayed? (Job 38:1-11)

On the left below is William Blake's illustration of the
appearance of God in the whirlwind, and on the right is his
image of the sons of God. In 1930 Ralph Vaughan Williams set
this latter image to music as part of his *Job, a Masque for
Dancing*. This particular piece is called *Pavane for the Sons
of Morning*, a slow and stately dance appropriate to the
majesty of creation.



https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/vaughan_williams_job_pavane_sons_morning2020.mp3

The Patience of Job

Many different interpretations have been provided for the story of Job. The most common focuses on the patience of Job. In the Epistle of James (5:11) we have

Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy.

The idea is that if we are patient everything will turn out fine. In the 2011 movie *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* the hotel manager Sonny (Dev Patel) claims "Everything will be all right in the end and if it's not all right, then it's not yet the end." This saying has been attributed to John Lennon, but it is probably just

an old Indian proverb, similar to the thought of *Ecclesiastes* 7:8:

Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof: and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.

The *Testament*

of *Job* and the mention of *Job* in the *Qur'an* (sura 21:83) both stress

the idea of *Job's* patience and God's mercy in his time of adversity. Joseph

Roth's novel *Job* (1931) tells the story of a good and pious Jew from the

Pale of Settlement who undergoes much suffering but is finally rewarded in his old age.

The Justice of God

The interpretation of *Job* as a man who patiently awaits the mercy of God misses the great poetic center of the book. The debates between *Job* and his friends deal with theodicy – the justice (*dike*) of God (*theos*). If God is just then righteousness should be rewarded and evil should be punished. This is not the case. Suffering occurs without regard to innocence or guilt.

The term "theodicy" originated with Leibniz's book *Theodicy* (1710), based on his discussion of the problem of suffering with Queen Sophie of Prussia. The understanding of suffering for those who live in comfort differs from the experience of those who survive in poverty (Guttierrez, 1987). Leibniz argued that God chose to create a world with as much good in it as possible. Though this entailed some concurrent evil, the optimal world contained much more good than world completely devoid of evil. Leibniz' idea that this is the "best of all possible worlds" was ridiculed by Voltaire in *Candide* (1759).

The philosophical problems concerning God and justice have been discussed for centuries (Draper, 1989; Laato & de Moor, 2003; Hume, 1799; Illman, 2003; Larrimore, 2013, Chapter 4; Sarot, 2003; Surin, 1986; Tooley, 2015), and are beyond the scope of this posting. The main problem of theodicy has to do with the concept of God as an omnipotent and omnibenevolent entity. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1799), David Hume states the basic trilemma of theodicy, attributing it to Epicurus:

Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil? (Section X)

Whence then is evil? The question of evil became acute during the 20th Century with the Holocaust (Wollaston, 2011). How could God have allowed this to occur? In his memoir *La Nuit* (1958), Elie Wiesel recounts how in Auschwitz he took Job's part and railed against God. He later described how certain great Talmudic masters convened a rabbinic court in Auschwitz to indict the Almighty for failing to protect His people (Wiesel, 1980). After hearing witnesses, and following due deliberation, the court pronounced a verdict of guilty. After a brief but profound silence, the judges moved on to evening prayer. Wiesel (1978) later wrote a play about *The Trial of God* (1979), though he distanced it from his experience by placing it in the fictional Ukrainian village of Shamgorod in the immediate aftermath of a pogrom that happened there three centuries before.

MacLeish's 1958 play *J.B.* tells the story of the complete ruin and ultimate redemption of a successful American businessman. In a framing story, two out-of-work actors using masks play the parts of God ("Mr. Suss" from Zeus) and Satan ("Nickles" from "Old Nick", an ancient name for the Devil, perhaps coming from "Old Iniquity"). In the Broadway debut these roles were played by Raymond Massey and Christopher Plummer



(illustrated on the right). Hume's question about the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God is presented in in Nickles' song

I heard upon his dry dung heap
That man cry out who cannot sleep:
"If God is God He is not good,
If God is good He is not God;
Take the even, take the odd,
I would not sleep here if I could
Except for the little green leaves in the wood
And the wind on the water."

<https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/nickles-song-x.mp3>

In *A Masque of Reason* (1945), the American poet Robert Frost has God discuss with Job the meaning of his story. The portrait on the right shows the poet in full didactic mode as photographed by Yousef Karsh in 1958. As Frost points out, the story of Job brings to an end the idea that a Divine Justice rewards and punishes each individual based on his or her behavior. We are not guaranteed our just deserts:

I've had you on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me

Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
Virtue may fail and wickedness succeed.
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.
I should have spoken sooner had I found
The word I wanted. You would have supposed
One who in the beginning was the Word
Would be in a position to command it.
I have to wait for words like anyone.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was of the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
And it came out all right. I have no doubt
You realize by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought.
My thanks are to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.
The only free will there at first was man's,
Who could do good or evil as he chose.
I had no choice but I must follow him
With forfeits and rewards he understood—
Unless I liked to suffer loss of worship.
I had to prosper good and punish evil.
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.
You are the Emancipator of your God,
And as such I promote you to a saint.

Job is indeed commemorated as a Christian Saint in the Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.

A Scent of Water

In his discussion of theodicy in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1799), Hume concludes that the forces that

drive the universe are neither benevolent or malevolent. Rather the original source of all things is indifferent, and has no more regard to good above ill than to heat above cold, or to drought above moisture, or to light above heavy. (Section XI).

These thoughts are remarkably similar to those of Marvin Pope in the conclusion to his introduction to *Job* (1965, p lxxvii)

Viewed as a whole, the book presents profundities surpassing those that may be found in any of its parts. The issues raised are crucial for all men and the answers attempted are as good as have ever been offered. The hard facts of life cannot be ignored or denied. All worldly hopes vanish in time. The values men cherish, the little gods they worship—family, home, nation, race, sex, wealth, fame—all fade away. The one final reality appears to be the process by which things come into being, exist, and pass away. This ultimate Force, the Source and End of all things, is inexorable. Against it there is no defense. Any hope a man may put in anything other than this First and Last One is vain. There is nothing else that abides. This is God. He gives and takes away. From Him we come and to Him we return. Confidence in this One is the only value not subject to time.

But how can a man put his faith in such an One who is the Slayer of all? Faith in Him is not achieved without moral struggle and spiritual agony. The foundation of such a faith has to be laid in utter despair of reliance on any or all lesser causes and in resignation which has faced and accepted the worst and the best life can offer. Before this One no man is clean. To Him all human righteousness is as filthy rags. The transition from fear and hatred to trust and even love of this One—from God the Enemy to God the Friend and Companion—is the pilgrimage of every man of faith. Job's journey from despair to faith is the way each mortal must go.

The description does not differ much from the scientific view of Nature (e.g. Williams, 1993). Is there anything beyond this view? Does God exist in any way other than as an impersonal force? Is there any reason for human beings to have faith in this God or in its goals? Does Nature have a goal toward which it is moving or does everything occur by chance? Can human beings significantly alter the course of Nature?

Perhaps in the poetry of Job we might find some inkling that the universe is proceeding towards something that is good rather than evil (Janzen, 2009). And that we can perhaps contribute in some way to this evolution. As we have already considered, at the center of his story, Job asked God to allow him time to accomplish something:

Seeing his days are determined, the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass;

Turn from him, that he may rest, till he shall accomplish, as an hireling, his day.

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease.

Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground;

Yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant. (Job 14:5-9)

The idea of the rain bringing forth new life recurs throughout the *Book of Job*. Yahweh mentions it in his description of the thunder, and Nickles mentions the “little green leaves” in his song about the nature of God. This continual rebirth makes us wonder whether there is some mindfulness behind Nature’s apparent randomness. And makes us wonder whether we might somehow contribute to this purpose.

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Stonehenge

Over five thousand years ago the Neolithic people of Britain began to erect a monumental stone structure known as “Stonehenge” on the Salisbury Plain. The name likely means “hanging” or “suspended” stones. The structure underwent several changes over the years of its construction, reaching its final form around 2000 BCE.

The stones are of two kinds. The largest are the sarsens, which have their origin in the hills about 40 km north of Stonehenge. The word “sarsen,” first used at the time of the Crusades, comes from “Saracen” and essentially means “pagan.”

The smaller bluestones come from the Preseli Mountains in Southwest Wales 240 km away. Most archaeologists currently believe that these were transported across the Bristol Channel and then overland to Stonehenge. The bluestones may have been used in several ways during the different periods of construction. In the final form of the monument they are arranged within the outer circle of sarsens and within the inner horseshoe of larger sarsens.

The monument has long been a symbol of ancient Britain. Over the years, however, our understanding of it has changed radically. This posting considers how Stonehenge has

interacted with the British imagination. Because of its striking appearance, images are given as much space as words.

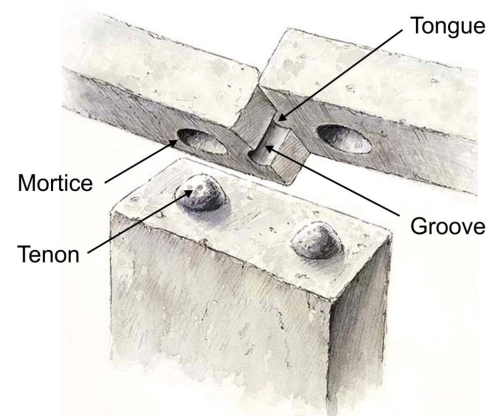
Past and Present Structure

The following figure shows a photograph of the monument taken from the Southwest by Diego Delso in 2014. A larger version of the photograph is available from Wikipedia.

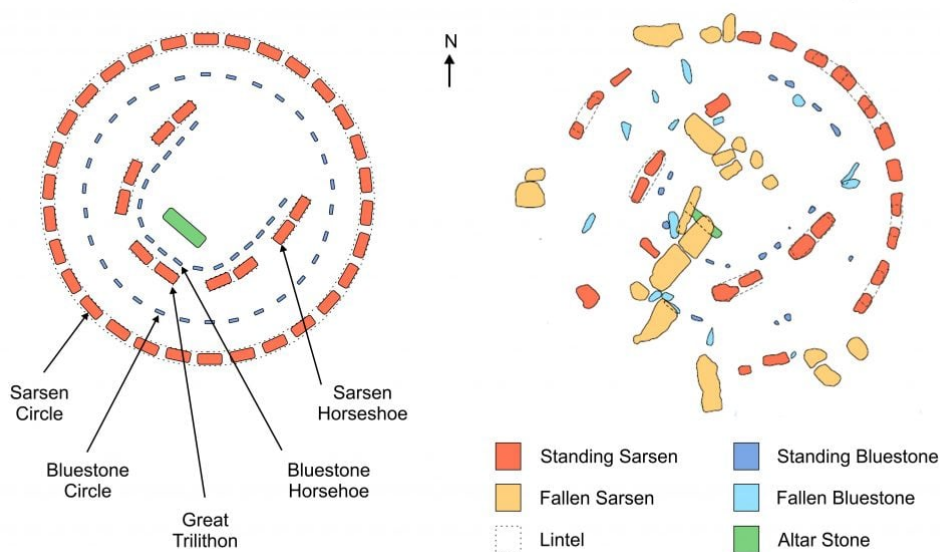


In the center of the figure is a large standing stone – the only stone still upright from the great trilithon (“three stones” – two erect stones with a superimposed lintel). At its top is a small peak representing the tenon of a mortice-and-tenon joint that served to maintain the lintel on top of the two uprights.

Behind and to the right of this central stone can be seen the surviving arches of the outer sarsen circle. The lintels on this circle are held in position using tongue-in-groove as well as mortice-and-tenon joints. These techniques are similar to those used in woodworking (Chippindale, 2012, p 12; Johnson, 2008, pp 142-148). The figure on the right (modified from the English Heritage site) illustrates these procedures.



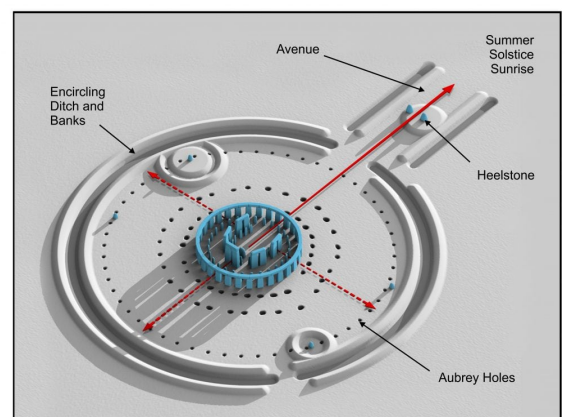
Many of the original stones have collapsed. Some fallen stones were probably long ago broken up and used for other buildings. Others lie on the ground; others are buried. Most of the sarsens on the south and west of the outer circle fell and vanished long ago. The following figure shows on the left a diagram of how the monument might have been in 2000 BCE (based on Johnson, 2008, p. 166). and on the right a plan of the present site (modified from the English Heritage Webpage).



The outer ring of sarsens with the superimposed lintels rose almost 5 m above the ground. The trilithons of the inner sarsen horseshoe varied in height: those at the open end of the horseshoe were about 6 m high, the adjacent trilithons a little higher and the great trilithon at the center of the horseshoe almost 7.5 m. The bluestones are much smaller and quite variable in size and shape. The illustration below shows a digital model by Hypnagogia of how the completed monument might have appeared as viewed from the Northeast at sunrise.



The great trilithon collapsed long ago. The eastern upright broke in two over the altar stone. The western upright fell only halfway and was for many years held up at an angle by the inner bluestone. It was re-erected and stabilized in 1901. The first set of stones whose fall is historically recorded is the southwestern trilithon which collapsed in 1797. It was re-erected in 1958.



As shown on the right, the standing stones are at the center of a larger circle marked by a ditch and by the Aubrey Holes. These are the oldest part of the monument, predating the sarsens by several hundred years. Parker Pearson (2012, pp 181-186) has suggested that the Aubrey Holes may have been the

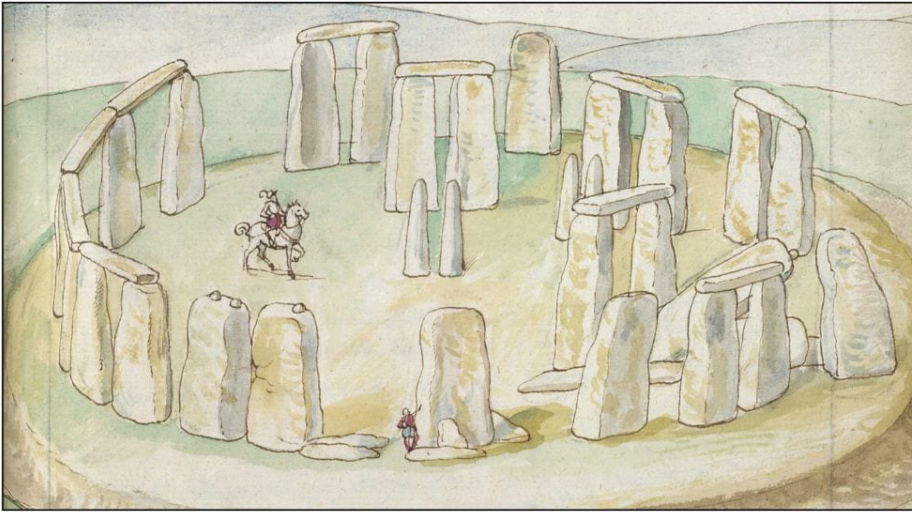
original location of the bluestones, which were later removed and placed within the sarsen monument.

Early Views of Stonehenge

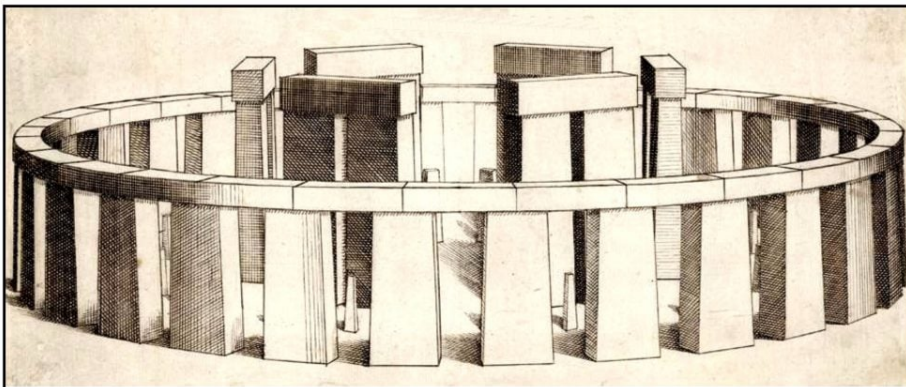


One of the earliest accounts of Stonehenge occurs in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* (1136). Chapters 10 to 12 of Book 8 provide a fanciful tale of the stones being erected by giants under the supervision of Merlin, the sage of the Arthurian legends. The Egerton 3028 manuscript in the British Library contains an illustration of this story.

The first "realistic" depiction of Stonehenge was a 1575 watercolour by Lucas De Heere, a Flemish refugee in England. The painting shows the general size and arrangement of the stones as viewed from the Northwest but is woefully incorrect in its detail (Chippindale, 2012, pp 33-35). The most glaring error is that the monolith of the great trilithon is depicted as leaning outwards rather than inwards.



The great English architect Inigo Jones studied the monument in the 17th Century. John Webb collected Jones' notes and published them posthumously in 1655 in a book entitled *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain, Vulgarly called Stone-Heng on Salisbury Plain*. Jones thought that the stones were erected as a temple by the Romans during their occupation of Britain. He considered the ancient Britons too savage to have built a monument of such perfectly classical proportions.



This idea was disputed by John Aubrey, the author of the famous *Brief Lives*, who published his *Monumenta Britannica* in 1665. He made a careful study of the Stonehenge site and noted the circle of chalk pits around the stone monument, which are still called Aubrey Holes (Johnson, 2008, p. 57). He pointed out that the Britain and Ireland contained multiple Neolithic monuments and stone circles, and that many of these were in areas where the Romans had never penetrated. He therefore suggested that they were erected by the Britons as "Temples of the Druids" (Hill,

2008, p 33).

Aubrey's proposal was promoted by William Stukeley, a friend of Isaac Newton. He published *Stonehenge, A Temple Restor'd to the British Druids* in 1740. Initially he had made some accurate observations of Stonehenge: he was the first to notice the "avenue" leading to Stonehenge from the Northeast (Chapter 8), and he noted that the monument and the avenue were oriented along a line pointing to the sunrise at the summer solstice (Chippindale, 2012, p. 75).

Imaginative Interpretations of Stonehenge

However, Stukeley soon let his imagination take over, and he concocted a narrative of how the Jewish patriarchs had visited England in ancient times with the Phoenicians (Chippindale, 2012, Chapter 8; Lewis Williams & Pearce, 2005, pp 169-172; Hill, 2008, pp. 39-49). This was all part of a grand universal history of humanity, with the pure original religion being initially subverted by idolatry and then restored by Jesus. He considered Stonehenge as a temple of this primordial religion, where divine observances were conducted by the Celtic Druids. Stukeley was so enthusiastic about these ideas that he took to calling himself Chyndonax, Prince of the Druids. His work has exerted a tremendous influence on the popular views of Stonehenge. Modern dating methods have shown that Stonehenge was built by Neolithic Britons more than a thousand years before the Iron-Age Celts (who only became evident in Britain by after 1000 BCE). Nevertheless, to this day druids still conduct services at Stonehenge on the days of the summer solstice.

Some of Stukeley's ideas are present in William Blake's poem *Jerusalem*:

And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,

On England's pleasant pastures seen!

And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!

I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land

Hubert Parry's 1916 musical setting of this poem has become an extremely popular anthem, traditionally sung with great fervor and flag-waving on the last night of the Proms.

Blake's poem is contained in the preface to his illuminated book *Milton a Poem* (1811). The poem deals with the need for the creative imagination to liberate mankind from slavery to established morality. Some illustrations of megaliths (e. g. part of page 4 shown on the right) are included in this long poem, and at times Blake seems to suggest these as evidence of religion's Satanic power over the people. Some interpreters have even considered the "Satanic Mills" of the second verse of the prefatory poem mean the established churches rather than the cotton mills of the industrial revolution.



However, Blake's view of Stonehenge was ambiguous. The last page of a later illuminated book *Jerusalem: The emanation of*

the giant Albion. (1821) contains a striking image:



The central male figure is Los, the personification of imaginative energy, with the hammer and tongs he uses to create. On the left is his spectre carrying the sun. On the right is his emanation, Enitharmon, the female personification of spiritual beauty. She holds what appears to be a spindle, from which descend the threads of life. Below them is a serpentine line of trilithons with a central circle similar to the Stonehenge. The meaning of this final image is not clear. In his notes to the facsimile edition of the book, Paley suggests that these structures may represent the creation of Jerusalem in England. However, the words of a prophet can be difficult to understand.

Romanticism

J. M. W. Turner visited Stonehenge in 1799. He made several drawings of the ruins. The following small sketch represents a view from the West.



In 1827 he created a watercolor based on his earlier sketches. The final painting depicts Stonehenge during a storm. Lightning strikes the ground in the middle of the ruin, killing many sheep and the shepherd who lies in the right foreground. The shepherd's dog howls disconsolately. An 1829 engraving of this image became very popular, appealing to the public's new romantic fascination with the unrestrained power of nature:



John Constable's 1835 watercolor of Stonehenge also sets the monument in a scene of great natural power. The view is from the South. In the North are dark storm clouds, onto which the sun has cast a double rainbow. At the time of this painting, Constable was grieving for his recently deceased wife. The

painting is imbued with sadness; the rainbows are drained of color.

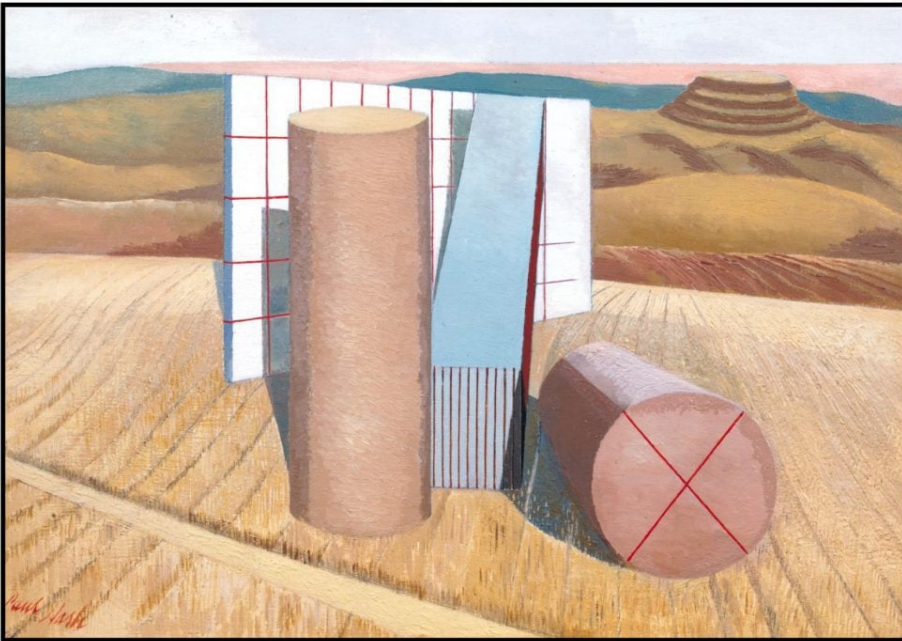


Constable (quoted in Chippindale, 2012, p 105) provided a caption when his painting was first exhibited:

The mysterious monument of Stonehenge, standing remote on a bare and boundless heath, as much unconnected with the events of past ages as it is with the uses of the present, carries you back beyond all historical recall into the obscurity of a totally unknown period.

Modernism and Stonehenge

The Romantic approach to Stonehenge does not do justice to its austere beauty. However, Modernism also fails to capture the essence of the site. The following is a 1935 painting by Paul Nash entitled *Equivalents for the Megaliths*. Large geometric shapes are set down in a stylized English landscape. The painting does not convey the power of Stonehenge or the other megalithic monuments, though it does suggest their incomprehensibility.



John Piper's ink-and-wash painting from 1981 is more successful. This considers Stonehenge from the point of view of a Romantic Modernist.



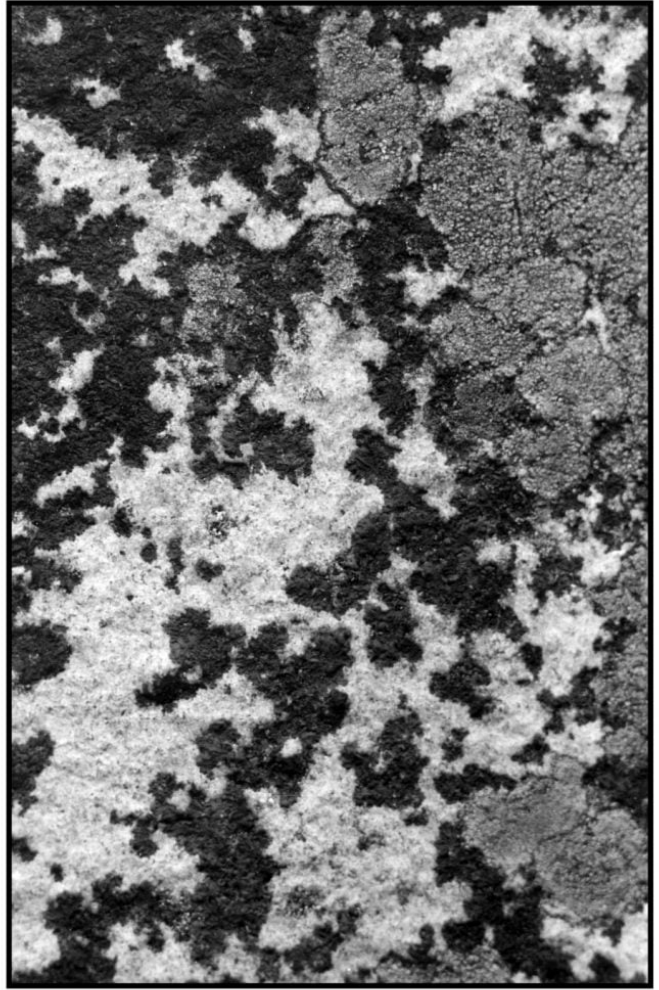
Photographs of Stonehenge

Photographs provide a realistic view of Stonehenge. The following is the first known photograph, a calotype by William Russell Sedgfield in 1853 (copied from Chippindale, p.149). The view is from the west. A carriage stands by the leaning upright of the great trilithon.

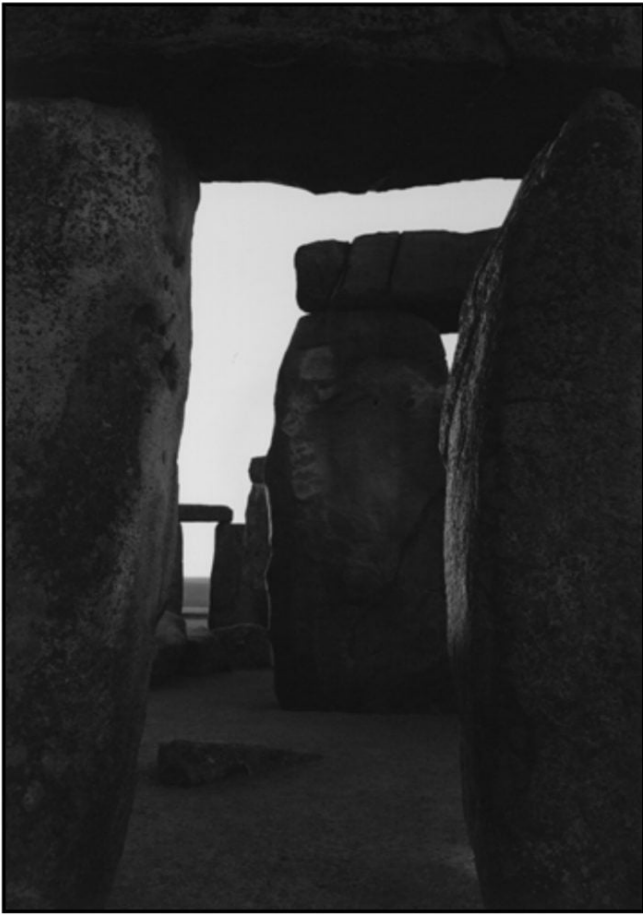


Photographs also provide a record of the reconstruction. The following photograph by John Piper shows the upright resurrected. This photograph was taken before the 1958 reconstruction of the southwestern trilithon (which can be seen in the 2014 photograph at the beginning of this posting).





John Piper in another undated photograph in the Tate Britain collection focuses on the surface of one of the stones. In so doing he captures their very tactile impression. Unlike other megaliths, the stones at Stonehenge were dressed using stone axes so that their inner surfaces were smooth. Over the years lichen have painted upon them in an abstract expressionist style.



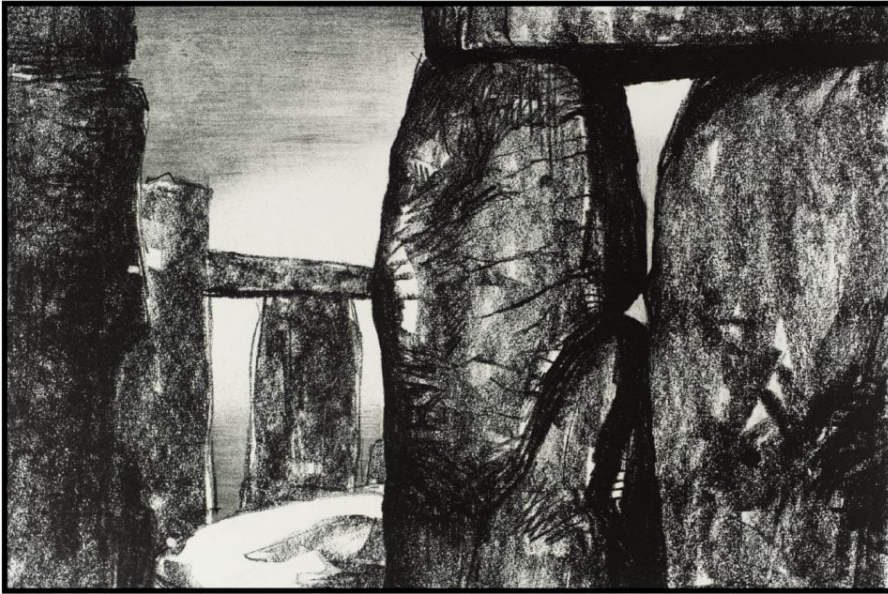
Photographs can give a sense of the place as well as providing a simple record. The photograph to the left by Paul Caponigro is entitled *Inner Trilithon through Circle Stones, Stonehenge* (1970). Caponigro published a large book of photographs of the Neolithic monuments in Britain, Ireland and France in 1986. The outer reaches of Europe contain numerous stone structures dating back to several thousand years BCE (Mohen, 1999)

Prints of the Stones



Print-makers have been very successful in capturing the form and feeling of Stonehenge. Perhaps they are more comfortable with stones, since they work closely with them in lithography. Their prints concentrate on how the light plays on the monument. They tend to consider the monument in part rather than in whole. On the right is a 1961 aquatint print by Julian Trevelyan.

Henry Moore made a series of lithographs of Stonehenge in 1973. All are available at the Tate Britain website. Below is *Stonehenge IV*:



On the right is a 1974 intaglio by Norman Stevens. Stonehenge at night has a brooding majesty.

Nature of Stonehenge

What purpose did Stonehenge serve? Many fanciful explanations have been proposed with little support other than the imagination (Hutton, 2013). Any ideas that the site served as a place for living are completely dispelled by the lack of any archeological evidence for everyday life. The people who built Stonehenge lived nearby but not at the site of the monument. They stayed close to the River Avon in a place called Durrington Walls, where archeologists have found signs of ancient wooden buildings, and the refuse of everyday life (Parker Pearson, 2012). Some of the wooden buildings, such as Woodhenge, were circular. The people then used the techniques of the wooden buildings when constructing Stonehenge.

Why then did they build their great megalithic monument? Was it a place for meetings or a site for religious observances? One would have thought that the objects used in such meetings or rites might have remained, but the site is largely empty of anything unrelated to the stones or to the burials. Was Stonehenge a shrine where the sick went for healing under the benign influence of the stones? The human remains do not show evidence of obvious illness. Was Stonehenge a celestial observatory to help predict the seasons and eclipses (Hawkins & White, 1965)? When one stands at the base of the great trilithon at the summer solstice, one can see the sun rise over the Heel Stone. Although the monument is laid out along the line of the solstices, most archeologists now feel that this was more of gesture to the heavens rather than a way to measure them (Brown, 1976; Ruggles & Hoskin, 1999; Hutton, 2013)

Because of the cremated human remains found in the Aubrey Holes, Parker Pearson (2012) has suggested that the site was built as a monument to the dead, perhaps as a place to honor noble ancestors. He tells an intriguing story of how he was told by Ramilisonina, an archeologist from Madagascar, that people in his country spent their lives in wood structures, but gave their dead stone houses to last them for eternity. Other great stone monuments such as the Egyptian pyramids were certainly built as places for the dead, as were the British barrows and dolmens that predated Stonehenge.

Words

Thomas Hardy set the penultimate scene of his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* at Stonehenge. Tess has killed Alec, her seducer and tormentor. Tess and Angel Clare are now fleeing at night across the Salisbury Plain. When they reach Stonehenge, Tess is too tired to go on, and she lies down on one of the recumbent stones. She asks Angel if he believes that they might meet again after they are dead.

Like a greater than himself, to the critical question at the critical time he did not answer; and they were again silent. In a minute or two her breathing became more regular, her clasp of his hand relaxed, and she fell asleep. The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.

The great stones are silent about what happens after death. They persist through the centuries. They evoke memories of those who built them so that they might, themselves, remember

and honor their ancestors. Yet the world has moved on and all those ancient people are no more.

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