

A Romantic Encounter for a Young Lawyer

Despite his ever-present anxiety about his career, Stevens could still enjoy nature. On March 14, 1901, a day spent for the most part out-of-doors, he wrote in his journal, "Having a glorious time today." He spent most of the day walking all around the city, feeling "like Dante passing from star to star & f. world to world." Stevens's exuberant spirits that day seemed to be related to a five-day abstinence from smoking, since he wrote, "I feel a thousand times better, but long for a cigarette."

No record exists of Stevens's life from the end of March 1901 until August 1902 because he discontinued writing in his journal during this period. It was clearly a time of decision, however, because in October 1901 he entered New York Law School. In addition to his father's encouragement, Stevens was undoubtedly influenced by the entry of his brothers and his friend Ed Livingood into the profession.

After his first year of law school, Stevens spent the summer vacation of 1902 working as a clerk in the law offices of William Gibbs (W. G.) Peckham. Peckham was himself strongly interested in literature and befriended his young employee, inviting him to his home in New Jersey and his summer home in the Adirondacks. It was on the latter visit that Stevens encountered Sybil Gage, a young woman vacationing nearby with her family. Peckham knew the Gage family because he had founded the *Harvard Advocate* with Sybil's father, a lawyer and a poet.

This was not Stevens's first encounter with Sybil Gage. While he was attending Harvard, her family had lived at 5 Garden Street on the route he walked between his lodgings at 54 Garden Street and classes, so he would almost certainly have occasionally passed her on the street. In fact, when he was living alone in New York City a few

months after he left Harvard, Stevens wrote on July 26, 1900, a very personal journal entry that may refer to Sybil.

The proverbial apron-strings have a devil of a firm hold on me + as a result I am unhappy at such a distance from the apron. I wish a thousand times a day that I had a wife—which I never shall have, and more's the pity for I am certainly a domestic creature, par excellence. It is brutal to myself to live alone. Especially when [four almost illegible words] would marry, if the thing was possible. I don't know—sometime I may marry after all. Of course I am too young now etc. as people go—but I begin to feel the vacuum that wives fill. . . . Wife's an old word—which does not express what I mean—rather a delightful companion who would make a fuss over me.

Stevens had erased the two sentences beginning with the word “especially,” but most of the words are still legible. It appears that the four words in question might read “I know whom I,” which would certainly be a logical surmise. Perhaps he was thinking about Sybil Gage, whom he fondly remembered in a letter written almost fifty years later in 1950 to Richard Eberhart, a poet whom he had just visited in Cambridge:

After leaving you, I walked through Hilliard Street . . . until it came out on Cambridge Common by Radcliffe. At the point where it comes out Radcliffe is on the left. At the right there is an old dwelling where one of the most attractive girls in Cambridge used to live: Sybil Gage. . . . Her father was a friend of W. G. Peckham, a New York lawyer, in whose office I used to work at one time, and the two of them, and some others, were, I believe, the founders of the Harvard Advocate. But my principal interest in Mr. Gage . . . was the fact that I was a guest at Peckham's place in the Adirondacks and who should turn up but this angel; so that instead of being a street that I had never heard of Hilliard Street turns out to be a street that I passed every day.

Given the depth of his feeling for Sybil, which remained strong even when he was seventy, Stevens must indeed have been delighted when the chance meeting in the Adirondacks in 1902 enabled him to spend some time with her. As a result of this encounter, Stevens expressed his admiration for Sybil in a poem he presented to her:

TO MISS GAGE

Froebel be hanged! And Pestalozzi—pooh!
 No weazened Pedagogy can aspire
 To thrill these thousands—through and through—
 Or touch their thin souls with immortal fire.

Only in such as you the spirit gleams
 With the rich beauty that compassions give:
 Children no science—but a world of dreams
 Where fearful futures of the Real live.

Years later Holly Stevens spoke with Lowell Tozer, an English professor at San Diego State College who had known Sybil in San Diego, where she spent most of her life. He described her as a “gracious, highly intelligent woman, much interested in literature. She was especially fond of poetry.” From this description, it is not hard to see why Stevens became enamored of Sybil Gage. Tozer was the person who alerted Holly Stevens to the existence of the above poem, which appeared in neither Stevens’s *Collected Poems* nor his *Opus Posthumous*. He noted that Sybil had explained to him that she had spoken to Stevens in the Adirondacks about the contributions Friedrich Froebel and Johann Pestalozzi had made to children’s education.

What is particularly curious is that the information from Tozer that Holly Stevens incorporated into her book *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens* was not the whole story, as William T. Ford relates in a fascinating article that appeared in the *Wallace Stevens Journal* in 2008—“Seeking the Sibyl of *Harmonium*: Wallace

Stevens and Sybil Gage.” A librarian turned lawyer who was the cofounder of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* in 1977, Ford makes a strong case for his thesis that Sybil Gage was the muse who inspired much of Stevens’s poetry. By tracing the work records for Peckham and Stevens, he demonstrates that Stevens may have spent as much as two weeks visiting in Peckham’s Adirondack cabin on Indian Lake that July. Thus Stevens and Sybil may have spent a considerable amount of time in each other’s company, rambling through the woods, as Lowell Tozer reported that Sybil had told him they had done, and probably also boating on Indian Lake.

Ford learned some very relevant facts about this summer encounter from Tozer, who had become acquainted with Sybil at the meetings of a Quaker group in a suburb of San Diego. When the young English professor met Sybil, she was in her seventies and still a very vibrant person and a social activist; the two often conversed about their common literary interests. As a result of this friendship, Sybil gave to Tozer shortly before her death her autograph book from her youth. William Ford quotes Tozer as saying:

Her autograph book contains notes and poems that show that she knew people of education and culture . . . I also found tucked into the book a snapshot of Wallace Stevens as a handsome and dashing young man. She had kept the picture all those years, she said, as they had been sweethearts.

Ford recounts that Lowell Tozer told him that the photo showed Stevens “standing with one foot on a tree stump or fence railing.” Sybil may well have taken the snapshot of him on one of their walks. At any rate, with the key phrase, “they had been sweethearts,” Ford has cast an important new light upon Wallace Stevens’s relationship to Sybil Gage. The scant information Holly has offered about their relationship and Stevens’s letter to Richard Eberhardt leaves the impression that Sybil Gage barely knew Stevens and probably had no romantic interest in him. Quite the contrary was true; it now appears that the attraction was mutual. In Chapter Nine, we will explore evidence in some of his poems that would seem to corroborate Ford’s

assertion that Sybil Gage was the muse who inspired some of Stevens's greatest poetry.

Whatever the depth of their interest in each other might have been in the summer of 1902, circumstances were not conducive to their becoming further acquainted. According to Ford, Sybil was probably headed west that fall. John K. Howat, her step-grandson, says that she "taught school in Wyoming before moving on to California." She eventually made an extended visit to her uncle, Russell Allen, and his wife, Ella, in San Diego. Ford notes that Sybil at some point encouraged Ella to join her in the drive to clean up a red light district; Sybil and Ella also worked in the suffrage movement. Howat has stated: "It wouldn't surprise me if she went to Wyoming because they had granted the vote to women." Sybil may have returned to the Boston area for some time during this period in the West, but in 1909 she married Henry (Harry) Weddle, whose father was her uncle's business partner in the Sweetwater Fruit Company in San Diego, which owned large acreages of citrus trees. Although Harry Weddle's main claim to fame is that he was appointed head of a U.S. Border Patrol of sixty horsemen that covered the California coast from Monterey to Mexico and he was a friend of Wyatt Earp, he must have shared some of Sybil's literary interests because Howat recalls that his step-grandfather reread all of Jane Austen's novels every year.

At any rate, when Stevens returned to New York City at the end of July 1902, he was so smitten with Sybil that he would recall her as an "angel" almost fifty years later. And two decades after his Adirondack encounter with Sybil Gage he suggested to his wife that they name their daughter "Sybil" or "Silvia." His love for Sybil may have contributed to the feeling of despair that motivated him to resume his journal on August 9, 1902, after a lapse of almost a year and a half, writing this entry:

Oh Mon Dieu, how my spirits sink when I am alone here in my room! Tired of everything that is old, too poor to pay for what's new—tired of reading, tired of tobacco, tired of walking about town; and longing only to have friends with me, or to be somewhere with them: nauseated by this terrible imprisonment.

Yes: I might put a light face on it and say it is merely a depression rising from lack of exercise, but from my present point of view I see nothing but years of lack of exercise before me. And then this terrible self-contemplation! To-morrow if the sun shines I shall go wayfaring all day long. I must find a home in the country—a place to live in, not only to be in.

Stevens's belief that being out-of-doors contributed greatly to his sense of happiness and well-being was confirmed the next day when he took the long walk he had contemplated, covering over seventeen miles. After his return he wrote, "I've had a handsome day of it and am contented again."