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Imagination and Belief: Wallace Stevens and William James In Our Clime*

IHAB HASSAN

We have always sought the golden key to our condition, to its griefs and exorbitant hopes. We have sought it in Godliness and Reason, in History, Power, and Love. Of late, Language has nearly preempted our minds. But in our postmodern clime, so I will argue, other abstractions may give motive to our metaphors, blood to our thought. I mean Imagination and Belief. Hence this uneasy conjunction of Wallace Stevens and William James.

Imagination, I grant, has fallen on dolorous times. We think of it, in this post-structuralist epoch, merely as a play of tropes or differences, the tuck and slip of languages, our own dear, gorgeous nonsense. Once, I made for it a larger claim, hoping that it might serve as the teleological organ of evolution, predicting, directing, fulfilling change.¹ But even Stevens, though he called imagination "the necessary angel of the earth," dismissed any vatic notion of it as "unhappy Rodomontade." I sense no desperate contradiction between our views: Stevens rejects only the Romantic, not noetic, concept of imagination. Thus he writes: "the best definition of true imagination is that it is the sum of our faculties."² This is mind in its fullness, for which I claimed a role in evolution. This is our sentient intervention, spastic immanence—from quarks to quasars—that I also called the "new gnosticism."³ Perhaps it is also what Stevens himself foresaw four decades ago: a new order of violence and abstraction in the world, a "pressure of reality," he said, "great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another."⁴

Our own era has proven savage enough in its occasions, and this marks both the fanaticism and emptiness of its heart. Hence the urgency, the terror, of everything touching its beliefs. Hence, too, the appeal of William James. (The new American pragmatists, bright and brash as they are, look primly away from their own beliefs.) For James presaged many of our postmodern afflictions, epistemic and political; he had a good nose, and he put it to the wind. He understood that the will to believe may be as radically constitutive as any will to power. He suspected that though our brains may be as "ready to grind out falsehood as veracity," ideals—what he also called "over-beliefs"—are our best part.⁵ He argued that the belief in truth, "that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other," is itself a "passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up."⁶ "The only escape from faith," James concluded, "is mental nullity."⁷ This is the nullity to which deconstruction tends without ever reaching, since it, too, contains, conceals, its own faith.

Imagination and belief, then, are *questions* of our time. But how congruent, really, are these faculties, or the authors who made them the "bright *scienza*" of their lives?

*With thanks to John Serio who returned me to Wallace Stevens.

Stevens, we know, read James, may have heard him lecture at Harvard; later, Stevens referred approvingly to the magus of pragmatism in correspondence. To a degree, they were consanguine Americans.⁸ They shared, for instance, an "agreement in reality" (Stevens), disdaining the fustian of metaphysics; they understood our "willing nature" (James) and the promptings of desire.⁹ Indeed, in a letter to Henry Church (to whom "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" was dedicated), Stevens explicitly linked the "will to believe" with the "willing suspension of disbelief."¹⁰ But the link remains tenuous. Observe how the shades of difference deepen as their notions of imagination and belief come into sharper focus.

We know that Stevens emptied the sky, placing a jar on a hill: he substituted imagination for religious piety. From the start, he liked to make high-toned old Christian women wince. Winking, he wrote:

Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.
Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven.¹¹

And to the last, in a final soliloquy of his interior paramour, he averred: "We say God and the imagination are one" (524). The poem, like a rock, remains the icon of the world and "the figuration of blessedness" (526). In the death of god all the gods expire; in the death of Satan we find only "a tragedy / For the imagination" (319).

James eschews this elegant atheism, this fastidious disbelief. His pragmatism is altogether more robust: it, or rather *she* as he often calls pragmatism, "widens the field of search for God. . . . She will count mystical experiences if they have practical consequences. She will take a God who lives in the very dirt of private fact—if that should seem a likely place to find him."¹² Outrageously, he asks: "And if needs of ours outrun the visible universe, why *may* not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there? . . . God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity."¹³ (Would Rorty, inebriate on skepticism, say anything of the kind?)

Connoisseurs of Stevens might object that he qualified his atheism toward the end of his life. There is his letter to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn (21 December 1951) on this subject; there is Professor Eucalyptus seeking God in New Haven "with an eye that does not look / Beyond the object" (475). There is much else, which persuades Nathan A. Scott to remark: "for all the testimony to the contrary that comes from many of his interpreters, Stevens is a profoundly religious poet. But he exemplifies a kind of sensibility for which the direction . . . of transcendence is not outward but downward . . . given in and with and under the immanent."¹⁴

No doubt, the point is moot, though many readers would concede that Stevens' sentiment for Being became stronger in his late, long poems. There, he spires to become himself the severe, harassing master who would extemporize:

Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness . . .
(486)

And in *Opus Posthumous*, Stevens sees "mere Being" as "life lighter than this present splendor, / Brighter, perfected and distant away, / Not to be reached but to be known."¹⁵

Yet if Being comes to participate in both imagination and reality, Stevens never really resolves the tension between these two paramount terms of his poetry. The equivocation is everywhere, whether he speaks of ideas and facts, thoughts and objects, sun and moon, or "A tune beyond us, yet ourselves, / A tune upon the blue guitar / Of things exactly as they are" (165). Anyone can catch tigers in red weather because neither dream nor reality can by itself exhaust the case. This is not dualism but something close to its antithesis, a vital prevarication, the universal theatre of tropes. It is what Canon Aspirin quizzically learns, "expressible bliss," a moment "In which majesty is a mirror of the self: / I have not but I am and as I am, I am" (405).

The enigma of imagination and reality in Stevens, then, requires nothing less than unending tact. Perhaps it is best left as a poetic tergiversation, invincible as the sun. But how, now, is imagination different from belief in Stevens, and belief different in Stevens and James?

That query invites us to return once more to their common ground. Stevens' poems of our climate admit: "The imperfect is our paradise" (194). This is certainly pragmatism, "flawed words and stubborn sounds" that evoke James's crudity of experience, a world "eternally incomplete, and at all times subject to addition or liable to loss."¹⁶ Stevens' man on the dump also knows that "One beats and beats for that which one believes" (202), and so ends wondering "Where was it one first heard of the truth?" (203). These are workable views of belief and truth, plural, conative, scattered freely on the road home. "Words are not forms of a single word. / In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts" (204), Stevens says, as if describing precisely James's paratactical pluriverse of "additive constitution."¹⁷ In that multiple world, James insists, "you can't weed out the human contribution": "what is true of it [the world] seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation."¹⁸ Stevens concurs: "A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (396). And again, more prosaically: "it is no doubt true that absolute fact includes everything that the imagination includes."¹⁹

Such concord of minds, however, masks a critical difference: Stevens barely distinguishes between imagination and belief while James rarely invokes the imagination at all. The point needs elaboration, nuance.

In an aside on his oboe, Stevens commands: "So, say that final belief / Must be in a fiction" (250).²⁰ But this is largely an aesthetic fiction, sparing in ethical or

spiritual import. It is what the capable man creates "out of the martyrs' bones, / The ultimate elegance: the imagined land" (250). True, such fictions accrue to Being; they make the grapes seem fatter and the fox run out of his hole. They also solicit the supreme poem:

The poem refreshes life so that we share,
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies
Belief in an immaculate beginning

And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
To an immaculate end.

(382)

In the end, though, Stevens' fictions dwell poetically in the earth, an earth that is itself imagination, making "meanings of the rock" (527).²¹

How different is James! His "will to believe" is active, appetent, affective, not poetical or pensive.²² It is also larger—more gritty, rowdy, strenuous—than the ephebe's "unconscious will." However widely Stevens cast the net of his imagination, it remains a collection of intricate holes stitched together with verbal twine. It simply lacks the *feel* of belief as we experience it in marrow or mind. Listen, instead, to James:

we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will. . . . Our faculties of belief were not primarily given to us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by.

Real possibilities, real indeterminations, real beginnings, real ends, real evil, real crises, catastrophes, and escapes, a real God, and a real moral life, just as commonsense conceives these things, may remain in empiricism [read pragmatism] as conceptions which that philosophy gives up the attempt either to "overcome" or to reinterpret in monistic form.

In the end, it is our faith and not our logic that decides such [ultimate] questions . . . I find myself willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous . . . I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is.²³

Is this the figure of the philosopher as virile postmodernist? James knew very well the risks of belief before our current encounters with terrorists of every fanatic stripe. He knew that "there is really no scientific or other method by which men can steer safely between the opposite dangers of believing too little or believing too much."²⁴ But his *style of belief* is not hypothetical as Stevens', not as artful and debonair. For James, the deprivations of the human condition are not assuaged by an esthetics of evil; nor would he much care for Stevens' reflexive sol-

ace: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (322).

If I claim anything at all in this paper, then, it is that William James may offer us right notions for our clime. In him, we may find surcease from both the bleached mythologies of poststructuralists and dismal phantasms of neo-Marxists. From him, we may derive—derive provisionally, in the quiddity of this time or that place—the tolerant will to act in our "half-wild, half-saved universe," to which our nature seems so cunningly adapted.

Yet to say this is to subtract nothing from Stevens' indefectible greatness. Opinion varies so much in him, about him, that it can only adduce to his majority. His poems, which "resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (350), finally lead us, through "Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief" (522), to a renascence of reality.²⁵ No more wars between mind and sky, no more vast ventriloquism of language. Only, perhaps, a quiet normal life, only old Stevens:

And the oldest and the warmest heart was cut
By gallant notions on the part of night—
(523)

This abides—and may even suffice.

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Notes

¹Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. xiii-xvi, 61-74.

²Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1951), p. 61.

³Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), pp. 121-150, and *The Right Promethean Fire*, pp. 139-172. Friedrich Nietzsche prefigured the tendency to "think in fictions," a century earlier, in *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1976).

⁴*The Necessary Angel*, p. 22.

⁵William James, *The Will to Believe and Human Immortality* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 18, xiii.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁸See Stanley J. Scott, "Wallace Stevens and William James: The Poetics of Pure Experience," *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Spring 1977).

⁹See *The Necessary Angel*, pp. 58f.

¹⁰See Scott, p. 188.

¹¹Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954), p. 59. All future references to this work are given, between parentheses, in the text.

¹²William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 61. James also says in *The Will to Believe*: "we have a right to believe the physical order to be only a partial order; that we have a right to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order . . ." p. 52.

¹³*The Will to Believe*, pp. 56, 61.

¹⁴Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *The Poetics of Belief: Studies in Coleridge, Arnold, Pater, Santayana, Stevens, and Heidegger* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 144. See also footnotes 20 and 21 below.

¹⁵Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1957), p. 101. But see also Stevens on the "annihilation" of the gods, leaving "no mementos behind," pp. 206f.

¹⁶*Pragmatism*, p. 112.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 100f, but see also p. 112.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166.

¹⁹*The Necessary Angel*, pp. 60f.

²⁰See also *Opus Posthumous*, p. 163, and Milton J. Bates's discussion of fictions and religious beliefs, in *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 201-212.

²¹Nathan A. Scott says about Stevens (among others): "the necessary *praeparatio* for the constitution of *fundamental* belief is formed by a venturesome step forward by the imagination into that which is before us," p. 13. How far Stevens moved toward "*fundamental* belief," however, remains a vexed point. Harold Bloom, for instance, argues for the "desperate and involuntary Transcendentalism" of Stevens, in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 20. On the other hand, Frank Doggett maintains that "throughout Stevens' poetry, the only continuous strand of thought is a *fundamental* naturalism" (my emphasis), in *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), p. ix. See also Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974).

²²"Call him, then, the man of thought," Denis Donoghue says of Stevens' hero. "At all cost not the man of action, since we are reading Stevens and not another poet. The best chance is that he is Stevens himself raised to the nth degree, *sua voluntate*; metaStevens." See Denis Donoghue, "Nuances of a Theme by Stevens," in *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, eds. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 225. Donoghue allows, however, that Stevens seems to have modified his "skeleton's life" as a "questioner about reality" toward the close of his poetic career, pp. 239-242.

²³*The Will to Believe*, pp. 29, 56, ix; *Pragmatism*, pp. 190f.

²⁴*The Will to Believe*, p. xi.

²⁵See Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 309-314.

Wallace Stevens' "Vacancy in the Park" And The Concept of Similitude

JACQUELINE V. BROGAN

In what is recognized as one of the most important of recent contributions to the humanities, Thomas M. Greene demonstrates that not only for those Renaissance writers concerned with imitating older texts, but for the greatest of our writers throughout Western civilization, the problematic natures of time or "historicity" and of language or meaning have been related problems.¹ Although Greene's particular subject in *The Light in Troy* is the concept of *imitatio* as evinced in Renaissance poetry, his insights have bearing on the poetry of Wallace Stevens as well. As Greene shows, for many writers the complex field of intertextuality necessitated by *imitatio* has been historically both the battleground and sanctuary for the inherent conflicts between language, historicity, and their complicated relation to truth (or the "thing itself").² Stevens appears to be far less concerned with other written texts than were the authors of the Renaissance period, but his interest in other kinds of "texts" (such as painting and music), as well as his sense of the world as text, or the "world as word,"³ encourages him to explore similar conflicts in a somewhat related fashion. As exemplified in his late poem "Vacancy in the Park" (and with ramifications that extend to many other poems), in the concept of similitude rather than imitation Stevens found both the means for elaborating and for enduring the tenuous relation of time and meaning.

I am deliberately distinguishing Stevens' similes here from the larger category of metaphor for several reasons. Regardless of the theoretical approach, which tends to range from a "romantic epistemology" to deconstruction, Stevens' critics have used his metaphors to support their interpretative and theoretical insights; often, however, these discussions have concentrated on particular images constructed by: "like" or "as."⁴ The question of whether all language finally is metaphorical is far too complex to be considered here, as is the question of whether similes are merely extended, and therefore inferior metaphors, as Aristotle and most theorists since him have assumed.⁵ Nevertheless, subsuming Stevens' similes into a discussion of his metaphors obscures the linguistic subtlety in many of his poems. One reason for this obscurity is the linguistic palimpsest of what is called the "radical" form, "A is B," unconsciously assumed in most discussions of metaphor. The "radical" form, with its implicit copulative equation, encourages certain assumptions about the "identification" or unity created by a metaphor or leads to extremist conclusions about the obvious discrepancy in that identification.⁶ Thus, examining Stevens' poetry under the rubric of "metaphor" encourages the conflict between those who see his poetry as a reconciliation of subject and object, or of imagination and reality, and those who see his poetry as a reiteration of a widening linguistic abyss.⁷

Stevens himself has perhaps inadvertently encouraged this conflict by making the word "metaphor" prominent both in his poetry and in his prose, whereas

he almost never uses the word "simile."⁸ In fact, in "Prologues to What Is Possible," he specifically calls the eighteen lines following the opening simile, "The metaphor" (CP 515-16). Still, as he suggests throughout the first of "Three Academic Pieces," when speaking of metaphor he is speaking of "resemblance," a word which, notably, shares the same etymological root as "simile."⁹ Stevens concludes the third "Academic Piece," the poem entitled "Of Ideal Time and Choice," with these lines:

And what heroic nature of what text
Shall be the celebration in the words
Of that oration, the happiest sense in which

A world agrees, thought's compromise, resolved
At last, the center of resemblance, found
Under the bones of time's philosophers?

The orator will say that we ourselves
Stand at the center of ideal time,
The inhuman making choice of a human self.

(NA 89)

Because "resemblance" is "not . . . identity" (NA 72) nor total "degeneration" (CP 444), these questions and their answers both announce the impossibility and simultaneously evoke the possibility of a relation between "time" and "text" — most notably in the "center of resemblance." It thus seems likely that we can gain insight into Stevens' poetry (as well as into his metaphors) by examining his own exploration of "resemblance" in obviously stated questions of similitude. For similes, unlike "radical" metaphors, deliberately raise issues about their own verisimilitude—that is to say, about the relation of the word to the "thing itself."

"Vacancy in the Park" provides an especially useful illustration of how Stevens successfully wrestles with these concerns through similes. Though largely ignored by Stevens' critics, this poem, given its title and its subject, is clearly vulnerable to deconstruction. Yet the poem resists its own latent abyss, affirming the power of language to mean. Because it does not initially appear to address the nature of the *logos* informing its resemblances, it is possible for us to see in practice what Stevens speculates about in his more overt discussions of poetry and "resemblance." Structured almost entirely by similes, this small poem exposes a linguistic gesturing toward "identity" (naming at the source of being) and a simultaneous rupturing in the sign (naming as the erasure of being)—in sum, language that announces its own displacement while paradoxically assuming continuity:

March . . . Someone has walked across the snow,
Someone looking for he knows not what.

It is like a boat that has pulled away
From a shore at night and disappeared.

It is like a guitar left on a table
By a woman, who has forgotten it.

It is like the feeling of a man
Come back to see a certain house.

The four winds blow through the rustic arbor,
Under its mattresses of vines.

(CP 511)

What might be called the whole Romantic problem of presence/absence, immediacy/mediation is traced throughout this poem and is revealed, ironically, through the temporal tension inscribed in the similes or “resemblances.” It is not without significance that the very absence (or vacancy) that Stevens attempts to “present” both in the park and in the language of the poem is itself delineated as a tension between the present tense of the “root” similes (“It is like . . .”) and past tense of the extended comparisons. Each attempt at naming is presented as an analogy to something already past, “forgotten,” “disappeared.” Yet the poem does successfully present us with an image, or at least a likeness, of that vacancy in the park, which is also a vacancy in time and in language. Quite ironically, we are confronted simultaneously with similitudes of absence and with language insisting, almost despite itself, upon its ability to present meaning.

This paradox can be traced throughout the poem, though it seems especially ironic, given Jacques Derrida’s terminology, that the “telling” tracks or footprints presumably left in the snow are in fact never named in the poem.¹⁰ The “vacancy” begins with the word “March,” which initially suggests the month of March and spring; immediately, however, the word suggests the activity of marching since “Someone has walked across the snow.” The word, therefore, is ambiguous in a particularly appropriate way; and as Stevens notes, “The ambiguity that is so favorable to the poetic mind is precisely the ambiguity favorable to resemblance” (NA 79). Whether marking the passage of winter into spring, of nothingness into creation, or indicating someone’s passing, a presence moving into absence, the word is an affirmation and a negation at once—as is the empty and silent space in the poem filled by the ellipsis. A similar dual motion is revealed in the image of someone’s having walked across the snow in which someone who is absent is evoked as a presence. In addition, this someone is (or was) looking for something, but for something “he know not.”

The inherent tension of the poem’s subject, indicated by the title, and the latent but equally inherent tension in time and in the language through which both subject and time are expressed become more extreme in the expanded similes. Not only do the root similes simultaneously connect and rupture, but the things to which the indefinite “it” is compared in the expanded similes continually evoke

an image as a presence only to veil it again in a receding temporal void. The boat, vividly seen pulling away from the shore, finally cannot be seen: it has "disappeared." To use Heidegger's terminology, the boat is a "presence sheltered in absence."¹¹ What is a boat that has disappeared *like*? How can that be presented in language? The answer given in the poem is that "It is like a guitar left on a table," a guitar which is there, but not there, since it has been "forgotten" or erased in the mind of the woman. Similarly, the man "Come back" to a "certain house" is both where he was and, of course, not where he was since the present can never coincide with the past.

Even more importantly, as the three similes compare the nebulous "It" to something that is both there and not there, they repeat a movement toward union or identification and a movement toward displacement or deferral that is conveyed semantically in the word "like" itself. As such it is the similes themselves that most obviously reveal the "calling" that "calls into itself . . . here into presence, there into absence"¹² that is characteristic of the whole poem. In the clause "It is like a boat," the pronoun is *irrevocably* divorced from the boat by the word "like" even as that word joins "it" to the boat. Similarly, "it" both is and is not a guitar, is and is not a feeling. In other words, the similes make the kind of copulative statement of identification implied in metaphor and the kind of fragmenting predication we have come to recognize as inherent in all signification. In the first instance, the "thing itself" can be understood only through the synthesis or "interanimation" of subject and object (or subject and complement).¹³ In the second instance, the "thing itself" remains traced in the absence signified by the words. Yet, as implied by the single word "like," these two modes of predication (or perception) bear a relation to each other.

The last two lines of the poem, syntactically quite different from the preceding lines, serve as the poem's "coda" — a kind of summary of that gone before them.¹⁴ There is notably no attempt in these lines to convey either the difficult passage of time nor the difficult presentation of meaning — no attempt to say what either is "like." Instead, entirely in the present tense, the words of the coda represent themselves as purely factual or true, even as they describe an almost mythical resolution of opposition (the "four winds") in this "center of resemblance." The coda offers, then, a delicate repose to the shifting images of the preceding lines, but a repose that must be regarded neither too naively nor too skeptically. On the one hand, the final image clearly is intended to "replace" the preceding ones; in that sense it repeats the successive erasure of linguistic signs. On the other hand, these lines do imply that momentarily (in the present) the recession of images has been stopped by the presentation of the "thing as it is." We should note, however, that there is a latent "textuality" or "history" imbedded in these images which depend upon ancient myths such as the four winds, the four corners of the earth, and a mythical point of centrality or origin to endow them with meaning. Underneath the rather flat, "rustic" vocabulary is a strata of historical *topoi* taken from other texts and other times.

This "merging and dividing like language itself"¹⁵ is indeed the unstated subject of the poem. The entire poem merely extends or reiterates what is implicit

in the opening simile, "It is like a boat." Even the title, as we have seen, suggests that something is simultaneously its opposite—that a vacancy (or absence) can be described as a presence *in* the park. The poem continually addresses what we might call a gap between evocation and deferral, between identification and receding signification. Yet at least for Stevens such a gap is not necessarily equal to a nihilistic abyss, but rather is the space necessary for meaning or relation. Without that space, language, time, and even the "thing itself" would have that kind of permanent stasis Stevens rejects in "Sunday Morning." The ironic "presence" of that space, the vacancy, is precisely what makes life, meaning, even the "present" possible. Peter Brazeau has told us that there is a "real" park that Stevens used to frequent that is the "source" of this poem,¹⁶ but I think it fair to say that the "Park" in this poem has successfully become the "cry of its occasion" (CP 473), a celebration of the power of language to create meaning, despite its inherent "vacancy."

What we learn in "Vacancy in the Park" encourages wider exploration in other poems where, we find, Stevens uses similes in equally complex and interesting ways. For example, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens claims that "Among time's images, there is not one / Of this Present" (CP 476) and then goes on to show that it is precisely in those "intricate evasions of as" that he can most closely present us with the similarity of time and text:

This endlessly elaborating poem
 Displays the theory of poetry,
 As the life of poetry. A more severe,

More harassing master would extemporize
 Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
 Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as . . .

(CP 486)

Quite subtly Stevens rejects the "theory" that language, specifically expressions of similitude (or "as"), can be negatively reduced to mere "evasions." As he suggests through the pun on "extemporize," the "harassing master" who would demand absolute identity between the "theory / Of poetry" and the "theory of life" would also deny the temporality of, "ex-temporize," both language and life and thereby reduce both to static nothingness. (As Stevens says in "Description without Place," "In flat appearance we should be and be, / Except for delicate clinkings not explained" [CP 340]). Yet as the passage above demonstrates, such absolute stasis is impossible in language and time: even the attempt to hypothesize a "theory" of total unity must be articulated through the improvisation, or extemporizations, of "As it is" (italics mine). "Evasions" are therefore "creations," and Stevens consequently prefers the "theory of poetry, / As the life of poetry," displayed in its own elaborations or resemblances. With the recognition that the

absence in language that makes meaning possible is *like* the "absence in reality" (CP 176) that makes life possible, Stevens affirms it is "as if" the "words of the world are the life of the world" (CP 474).

Throughout his poetic career, from "Sunday Morning" to his late poems, Stevens insists with analogies or similes drawn from language itself that the space inherent in time and language is the space that makes possible both life and meaning. Hence the truth, as well as the irony, of "It Must Change" (CP 389). In one of his last poems, "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," Stevens writes of

an appearance made
For a sign of meaning in the meaningless,

No radiance of dead blaze, but something seen
In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life,
Itself, the presence of the intelligible
In that which is created as its symbol.

(CP 529)

Against the relentless background of "the meaningless," Stevens affirms the possibility of a relation between "appearance," "sign," or "symbol" and "meaning," "life," or "presence." He summarizes that relationship in the following line, which itself contains a simile expressing the delicate relation between time and text: "It is like a new account of everything old."

These various similes help to explain Stevens' curious tendency to blur the boundaries between the "as" or "like" used as similes and the "as" or "like" used as conjunctions or elements of time. For example, in the early poem "Domination of Black," it is finally impossible to determine whether the repeated "as" (itself an illustration of the poem's repetitions) expresses simultaneous duration or resemblance:

Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?

(CP 9)

At least in the first two instances, the word "as" creates an analogy as well as suggesting temporal simultaneity. Thus, an adequate paraphrase of these lines must take both functions into account: the leaves turn in the wind, analogously to the

way the flames turn in the fire, analogously to the way that the peacock tails turn in the loud fire; but the leaves also turn in the wind, while the flames are turning in the fire, while the peacock tails are turning in the loud fire. The ambiguity here allows the relationships posited by the comparisons to be made even more dynamic by their participation in time. Such ambiguity, occurring often in Stevens' poetry, is in keeping with his rejection of the permanent or static ideal and with his insistence that "The imperfect is our paradise" (CP 194).

Even more provocative is Stevens' use of the word "as" in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem rather obviously concerned with representation, with the similarity between painting, music, and poetry, as well as with the similarity between these forms of representation and reality or "things as they are."¹⁷ It is consequently difficult to hear this particular "as" as merely a conjunction, although grammatically it serves that function often in the poem:

The man bent over his guitar,
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

The man replied, "Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are."

(CP 165)

Always about the edges of this conjunction is the sense of "as" as a simile. We find this dual sense of "as" in Stevens' prose as well; for example, in the essay, "Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

The subject-matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are. (NA 25)

It is especially revealing, given the issues Stevens examines through "resemblances," that the speaker of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" utters these lines:

"So it is to sit and to balance things
To and to and to the point of still,

To say of one mask it is like,
To say of another it is like,

To know that the balance does not quite rest,
That the mask is strange, however like."

(CP 181)

Despite the potential despair of these lines, this passage implies that the lack of "balance" or the lack of stillness inherent in language, in time, and in that mysterious "like" is the necessary lack or "vacancy" that allows language to approach, if not achieve "intercourse" with reality:

Is it
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?

From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
In the universal intercourse.

(CP 177)

Throughout his career Stevens was concerned with the "absence in reality" (CP 176) and the "absence for the poem" that language seems to necessitate. In the concept of similitude he describes the space, however temporary, that makes the relation between these possible: "seemings that are to be, / Seemings that it is possible may be" (CP 342).

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Notes

¹See the first four chapters of Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), particularly pp. 4-20. Note that Greene sees the "anxiety of linguistic mutability" as "synecdochic" for the "impermanence of all human constructs," pp. 6-7.

²See p.12 in which Greene asks, "What is it that permits cultures to communicate across time, even to survive, if in fact language is so radically unstable as Derrida argues?" One answer, he says, is an understanding of Renaissance "intertextuality . . . as an interplay between stabilizing etiologies and a destabilizing perception of disjuncture," p. 30.

³Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954; rpt. New York: Knopf, 1975), p. 268, hereafter abbreviated in the text as *CP*. Other abbreviations of Stevens' works will include *L* for the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); and *NA* for *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951).

⁴For a recent summary of the "critical climate" of Stevens' poetry, see Joseph N. Riddel, "The Climate of Our Poems," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 7 (1983), 59-75. It is worth noting that Riddel demonstrates the wide range of critical choices at each end of this critical spectrum: he argues that there is no single "deconstructive" approach to Stevens' poetry just as there is no single "romantic" reading of the poems, pp. 64-66.

An exception to the generalization that Stevens' critics have concentrated on the poet's "metaphors" is Joseph Kronick, "The Metamorphic Stevens," *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 6 (Spring 1982), 3-9. Although

examining Stevens' sense of metaphor, Kronick argues that "resemblance" is the key term for understanding Stevens' poetry. The best of the recent essays on Stevens that shows the tendency to subsume Stevens' similes into a discussion of metaphor is Charles Altieri, "Wallace Stevens' Metaphors of Metaphor: Poetry as Theory," *American Poetry*, 1 (1983), 27-48. Despite the title and subject of this study, Altieri's most insightful comments about Stevens' theory of poetry are focused on his analogies or his use of "as"; see in particular pp. 36 and 46.

⁵Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Bk. III, Ch. 4, 1406b, 20ff.

⁶As Greene points out, "To recognize the variability of the copula is to call into question the stability of the term *metaphor*, a stability assumed by most rhetoricians across the centuries," p. 26. Such assumptions about the presumed "stability" of the copula may account for Northrop Frye's definition of the "radical form" of metaphor as "A is B," *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1967), p. 123, as well as Frye's interpretation of Stevens' metaphors as reconciling the imagination and reality, "The Realistic Oriole: A Study of Wallace Stevens," *Hudson Review*, 10 (1957); rpt. in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 169-70. For the seminal essay exposing the lack of such "identity" in metaphor, see Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), 5-74.

⁷The parameters of this conflict are summarized in Riddel.

⁸I know of only one instance in which Stevens uses the word "simile"; see L 98.

⁹The importance of the word "resemblance" in "Three Academic Pieces" is fully discussed in Kronick.

¹⁰The word "trace" (with its play on "track") is important to Derrida's "Differance," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 62, 3 (1968), 73-101; rpt. in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 129-60.

¹¹Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 199.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹³I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936; rpt. 1976), p. 93.

¹⁴The term "coda" is borrowed from Frank Doggett, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 74.

¹⁵Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 407.

¹⁶Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 231-32.

¹⁷The poem's relation to music is announced in its title. Note that Stevens insists he "had no particular painting of Picasso's in mind" when he wrote the poem (L 786), although it is generally agreed that Picasso's "Man with a Guitar" is the "source" of Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar"; see Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 429.

Getting the World Right: Stevens, Science, and the American Context

LISA STEINMAN

Stevens may be the American modernist poet that made the most serious use of modern physics, especially of quantum theory. I want to suggest how his use of science is related to his attempt to provide American poetry with a new rationale. Stevens' need to defend poetry did not always include a self-consciousness about poetry's place specifically in America; however, family pressures forced him to confront common American attitudes towards poetry as "effeminate"¹ from his youth. In part, then, he required a defense of poetry in order to declare himself as a poet in America. Finally, for Stevens, an adequate defense of poetry had to indicate that poetry had some relationship to the "real" world.

It is in this context we should place Stevens' often noted concern with the relationship between imagination and reality. His attempt to characterize this relationship began during his school days, when, at times, he related poetry to the world by calling for close observation in poetry. A journal entry for 1899, for example, rejected abstractions and celebrated "small, specific observation" (L 30). Yet, at other times, Stevens claimed an airier model for poetry, and expressed the desire "to escape from . . . Facts" (L 150), either towards a more sensual enjoyment of the world or towards a more ideal vision.

It is, of course, often noted that Stevens' poetry refuses to settle the terms of the relationship between imagination and reality. As a 1931 letter states, for Stevens one "of the essentials of poetry is ambiguity."² Less frequently noted is the large debt Stevens' vision of reality, and his initial puzzlement over what poetry and the imagination have to do with reality, owe to his view of science.³ Stevens' first notes to himself on the subject of poetry reveal his sensitivity to the antagonism between poetry and fact, and to the idea that scientists might be better observers than poets and have more direct links with the world. His diary recalls a walk taken with two friends, Shearer and Mengel, on July 31, 1899: "taken up with conversations about gale-bugs or gale-flies, ichneumon bugs, . . . etc. You felt in the two men an entire lack of poetic life, yet there was an air of strict science, an attentiveness to their surroundings which was a relief from my usual milk and honey" (SP 49).

As Stevens told Hi Simons, when he was young he believed there was "a law of contrasts" (L 368), and in contrasting science with poetry he seems generally to have placed the ideal nature of poetry against the practical and factual nature of science. That is, despite his periodic celebrations of specificity and detail, what Stevens claimed for poetry often seemed to be neither factual nor particular. His obviously long-standing argument with Shearer yielded an earlier (July 18th) diary entry: "Shearer may be right about the infinity of facts—but how many facts are significant and how much of the ideal is insignificant?" (SP 46). Again, in Au-

gust of the same year, he wrote: "I believe . . . in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact—with a background of the ideal. [. . .] I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look *at* facts, but *through* them" (L 32).

Stevens' contradictory stances were both related to commonplaces found in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century comparisons between poetry and science. On the one hand, it is not unusual to find claims about poets as observers of the real or of the particulars overlooked by scientific classifications and generalizations. Thus, in an early piece in *The Harvard Advocate* (1899), Stevens presents a poet who dismisses "Science," and wants to become "less Faust than Pan" (SP 27). On the other hand, one equally often finds poetry associated with the ideal—with Stevens' "milk and honey"—as opposed to science, which is linked with what Whitehead calls the "irreducible and stubborn facts."⁴ In short, Stevens, before 1915, shared the American view of science, whether defined as factual or as the quest for intellectual knowledge, as antithetical to poetry. Consistently, he contrasted science (whether Faustian or botanical) with poetry (whether sensual or idealist), while claiming throughout that poetry was still in some way part of the everyday, "real" world.

Before 1915, Stevens' writings contain these contradictory stances more or less unself-consciously. On the one hand, poetry would eschew the mere work-a-day scientific facts and celebrate the ideal, the higher relationships between things. On the other hand, poetry would involve specific, living reality, and celebrate a Pan-like sensuality in contrast to the dry abstractions of science. By 1915, however, Stevens seems to have found a way to fuse these inherited contradictions into a more coherent view that allowed him self-consciously to insist both that poetry concerned the "quick, unexpected, [and] commonplace" (L 29) *and* that poetry looked for larger interrelationships or "systems."

However, by the thirties, the poetics that informed Stevens' early volumes no longer sufficed. Not only the Depression but career and other pressures made the importance of poetry in the modern American world again seem difficult to define. And yet, as Stevens wrote to Latimer in the mid-thirties, he felt there was a need for a "conception of the importance of [poetry]" (L 299).

Stevens' most assured accounts of why imaginative process should be valued appeared a few years later, in the forties.⁵ He said, in fact, that he accepted the invitations to give the papers in which his poetics are most clearly articulated because they made "it necessary to take a good look at ideas that otherwise would drift about, vaguely."⁶ In these essays, Stevens reviewed his claims for poetry and went on to point out how poetry was practical—that is, linked to objective reality—because it expressed and even anticipated the results of modern physics. This ability to show how the world celebrated by poetry was the same world arrived at by physics proved the defense of poetry's value for which Stevens was looking; it was a way "to create a perspective for poetry: that is to say, to give it a bearing and a position" (L 382).

In his essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," written in 1941, we can see the ways in which Stevens draws on physics. Allen Tate's preface to the

volume in which Stevens' piece was published says that all the essays have as a common premise "that poetry, although it is not science, is not nonsense," an indication of the generally shared perception that poetry needed a new defense in the modern, scientific world. I. A. Richards' essay, "The Interaction of Words," may bear out Tate's introductory remarks most clearly. Richards discusses how science underwrites poetic truths, since for modern poets "the distinction between matter and activity vanishes—as it does for the modern physicist when his ultimate particles become merely what they do" (p. 84).

This suggestion seems to have been an important one for Stevens, although Richards' essay may not be where he first encountered the idea. Stevens' early volumes had already insisted on how perception must be an ongoing activity, which gives people their sense of the world and also, in that interaction, constitutes the world. Yet his statements from the thirties indicated his worry that the motions he celebrated and the uncertainty he courted never adequately grasped or presented "the central" of self or world. Richards' notes on modern physics, then, suggested that such radical uncertainty had a basis in fact. If the ultimate building blocks of the universe are simply what they do, if they—like Stevens' creative mind—cannot be fixed, then the elusive truths that poetry enacts have a solid, scientific foundation. That is, while the interaction between the world and the perceiving imagination long preoccupied Stevens, earlier he could not theoretically reconcile the uncertain world thus uncovered with the reality of industrial suburbs, economic hardship and everyday living. In "The Noble Rider," however, we find an appeal to philosophy and physics, which had certified that the vibrations, movements and changes, always central to Stevens, were indeed "things as they are."

Russell's 1941 *Let the People Think* also notes the effect that modern philosophy (from the American pragmatists to Bergson) and the new physics had on notions of truth; his mention of both Bergson and Whitehead in one breath is characteristic of many popular accounts of modern science.⁸ Stevens cites Russell's book in "The Noble Rider," while talking about the importance of Americans acquiring immunity to eloquence. The context on which Stevens draws helps show how the development of his poetics was in part a response to typically American attitudes towards (and respect for) science.

In his essay, Stevens considers several sculptures and public images that, like the statues in "Owl's Clover," either fail to emphasize imagination or, conversely, are too detached from contemporary reality. Stevens rejects as mere fancy⁹ the statue of an American hero, Andrew Jackson, in favor of a painting of a carousel. It is not surprising that Stevens liked the motions and *joie de vivre* underlined by a merry-go-round, the very name of which emphasizes the pleasures of merely circulating, even as the image is drawn from contemporary American life. It is also characteristic of Stevens to prefer figures on wooden horses that move—and go nowhere in particular, moving for the pleasure of movement—over public figures on static, monumental stone horses.

It is worth asking, however, why Russell is mentioned in this discussion of American images. Russell's book helps clarify the point; he asks there for an em-

phasis on the *process* of scientific thinking as opposed to the *products* of science (p. 42). Moreover, Russell contrasts the Renaissance *joie de vivre*—echoing a Stevensian phrase (cf. *L* 793)—and the American association of science with practicality and utilitarian language (pp. 81-85). In his essay, Stevens is unhappy about the aspect of the American character displayed in Clark Mills's statue, which draws on commonplace associations rather than the mind's free play: it is a work which shows selections "made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed" (*NA* 10-11). Thus, like Russell, Stevens celebrates the joy of language and thought in process rather than language, thought, or image in the service of a predetermined practical end. Yet Russell also insists that scientific progress has grown out of just such mental play, adding weight to the enterprise poetry valorizes. Moreover here—in contrast to the defensive treatment of ideology and politics in "Owl's Clover"—we find Stevens' most convincing argument as to the central place of poetry in a democratic society. In ways, then, Stevens overturns Russell's proposed stereotype of Americans as relentlessly practical. At the same time, however, Stevens allies his playful style with the cast of mind that produced scientific progress, and so implies that his very impracticality is practical.

By the forties, Stevens' claim was also that his poetic style could provide the language required by modern physics even as he invoked physics to sanction modern poetry. Again in "The Noble Rider," Stevens quotes C. E. M. Joad's piece on Henri Bergson, in which Joad discusses how philosophy and modern physics have "dismissed the notion of substance": perception, we are told, is constantly changing and similarly "with external things. Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer" (*NA* 25).¹⁰ Stevens adds that the poet is not interested in the intellect's false view of a "'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are" (*NA* 25). Here we find the definition of reality that eluded Stevens earlier. Joad's statement about physics—"what is *it* that vibrates, moves, changes"—proposes how language might capture "things as they are," given that there are no things in the sense of "solid, static objects." Stevens, who always found ambiguity fueled the imaginative play of language, could thus claim he had evolved the poetic style required by the world Joad describes, even as he implied that physics guarantees modern poetry's relationship to reality.

There is, according to physics, no "it," and the very syntax of Stevens' sentences seizes upon this revelation. For example, he discusses nobility saying, "I am evading a definition. If *it* is defined, *it* will be fixed and *it* must not be fixed. As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves *itself* into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix *it* is to put an end to *it*. Let me show *it* to you unfixed" (*NA* 34, emphasis added). The essay ends as it proceeded by a dazzling string of anecdotes and associations that illustrate the play of the mind—the process—which cannot be fixed or encapsulated. At the same time, as with his use of the figures and aphorisms that punctuate the poems, Stevens provides

a momentary and qualified fixity—a way of emphasizing his point without destroying it—in his use of a seemingly logical introductory paragraph (“Let me show it to you unfixed”) and his use of a pronoun (“it”), the reference for which scientists agree cannot be found. Again, poetry provides the language physics needs even as physics is placed in the service of poetry in that Stevens uses it to underwrite a long-standing practice.¹¹

“The Imagination As Value,” a 1948 essay, reveals a similar turn-about. The piece concludes with an image of Jean Paulhan seated under a lifeless effigy of Marshall Foch. For Stevens, clearly, Paulhan’s thoughts constitute the normal world just as much as the setting in which and about which he thinks. While this idea is an extension of the argument begun in poems such as “Owl’s Clover,” the strength of the defense of the imagination rests on Stevens’ style, his playfulness. And again, the source of Stevens’ assurance of the value of his endeavor is related to his discovery that the imagination he celebrated (and the style in which he presented that celebration) could be seen as part of objective reality, given his reading of modern philosophers and physicists. Moreover, Paulhan was one of the men who later wrote to Stevens explaining quantum physics in detail (*OP* 195-96, 200), and noting the physicists’ need for the poets’ language: “progress in physics is . . . in suspense because we do not have the words or the images that are essential to us” (*OP* 196).¹²

Much of Stevens’ knowledge of modern physics seems to have come from friends or articles, such as the one by Joad, found in the *New Statesman* and other popular magazines. While he referred to the new physics as early as 1941, a 1951 letter to Barbara Church suggests that it was not until he received Paulhan’s explication of modern philosophers of science and of quantum theory that Stevens really registered how thoroughly he might use those fields (*L* 725). It is interesting to speculate that Stevens’ career might have aided in his understanding of modern physics. The management of surety bonds must have given him some insight into modern physics with its statistical truths that are universally true and yet always leave knowledge of specific cases incomplete. In any case, his essays increasingly repeat the affinity he felt between his view of poetry and quantum theory. And by the fifties, from whatever sources, Stevens was using the new physics and mentioning figures such as Whitehead frequently.

To some degree, his later references to science simply extend the way he was already referring to science in essays such as “The Noble Rider.” The 1951 “A Collect of Philosophy,” for example, quotes Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World*.¹³ “My theory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times, for every location involves an aspect of itself in every other location. Thus every spatio-temporal standpoint mirrors the world” (*OP* 192). Stevens comments: “These words are . . . from a level where everything is poetic, as if the statement . . . produced in the imagination a universal iridescence, a dithering of presences and, say, a complex of differences” (*OP* 192). By adding his own typical vocabulary for mental exhilaration (“iridescence,” “dithering”) to Whitehead’s universe, Stevens again appropriates

science to ground the poetry he had long defined as involving interrelationships and uncertain presences; citing Whitehead, he could claim without qualms that such an ambiguous world was both real and objective.

Whitehead also introduced quantum theory and proposed that the scientific materialism associated with nineteenth-century science could be challenged, noting that "each primordial element [is] a vibratory ebb and flow of an underlying energy, or activity."¹⁴ Having "associate[d] the quantum theory with vibration" (p. 52), Whitehead went on to argue for a "new doctrine of organism" (p. 53). Perhaps most importantly, Whitehead linked his theory with Romantic poetry, which, he said in the chapter Stevens cited, stands "against the exclusion of value from the essence of matter of fact" (p. 133). In sum, Whitehead proposed that one could be an objectivist and a realist without being a materialist (p. 127). He further suggested that modern philosophy could heal the post-Cartesian split between mind and matter by bringing "together the two streams into an expression of the world-picture derived from science, and thereby end the divorce of science from the affirmations of our aesthetic and ethical experiences" (p. 218).

In 1953, Stevens looked back at section twenty-five of "The Man With The Blue Guitar" (involving a man who balances the world on his nose, keeping it in motion) and said the man was "[a]ny observer: Copernicus, Columbus, Professor Whitehead, myself" (L 790). The choice of Whitehead is not casual. Again, the balancing act that seemed difficult to defend in the thirties is here seen as the "real world," uncovered by poets and readers, but also discovered and validated by science and philosophy. The company in which Stevens places himself (Copernicus, Columbus, Whitehead) links poetic discovery with the tangible or verifiable discoveries of the world by literal voyagers, and scientists. Thus, scientists or philosophers of science, Whitehead in particular, ratified Stevens' desire to include reality in poetry without identifying reality with material reality or objects.

In short, Stevens continued to use modern science and explicators of modern science (like Joad and Whitehead) to develop theoretical foundations for his poetry. As he wrote in 1945, "If you don't believe in poetry, you cannot write it" (L 500). He also wrote that he needed "a true belief" (L 793). Modern science allowed Stevens to demonstrate the universality—and, given the contemporary respect for science, the truth—of his belief in ongoing process. He maintained his insistence that poetry involved "the joy of language,"¹⁵ but called on physics to testify that the unending process of describing and redescribing parts of the world (and thus one's encounters with the world) in language was the most accurate picture of reality available.

The use of Planck at the end of "A Collect of Philosophy" is exemplary. André George's note on Planck in *Les Nouveaux Littéraires* helped Stevens add a new dimension to his attempt, as he put it, to show how poetry did "matter nowadays" (L 729).¹⁶ Planck was best known for his part in developing quantum theory, a theory that among other things suggested hesitation or fluctuation was part of the world. Fluctuation was not a new feature of Stevens' poetics. As he wrote, even in the thirties: "where there are no fluctuations, poetic energy is absent" (OP 229). Stevens' new understanding of Planck, however, let him extend his

ideas on poetic fluctuation and energy. Planck, who had been a determinist, was bothered by the inexplicable relationship between observer and observed that he posited. Thus the hesitation Stevens cites is Planck's as well as the world's, although George's prose makes it difficult to tell which hesitation is at issue—that of Planck in accepting his results, or that inherent in his law of causality which "is neither true nor false" (*OP* 202). This linguistic ambiguity exactly parallels both hesitations. Thus, Stevens appropriates for poetry the ambiguous relationship between Planck, the language in which George described him, and the relationship Planck proposed between man, language, and world. Lastly, the way Stevens himself arrives at his final figure—giving us Pascal and then replacing him with Planck—is also an embodiment of the hesitation he wishes to emphasize. In fact, by letting the suggestion of Pascal as a possible figure remain in the essay despite his announced change of mind, Stevens leaves the reader with both figures, providing also an instance of the excess of poetry on which he focuses earlier in the essay.

The figures of Pascal and Planck are specifically raised in the course of asking whether philosophy or poetry is greater.¹⁷ Stevens' suggestion that philosophers and philosophy, physics and physicists, are poetic shows that poetry and imagination are central—not mere play, but part of endeavors, such as scientific endeavors, often viewed as more valuable, and as providing greater access to truths about the world. As Stevens explained: "To say that philosophers are poets . . . does them no harm and at the same time . . . magnifies poetry" (*L* 734). Moreover, poetry is said to subsume science and philosophy, taking over the task Whitehead had marked out for philosophers, namely remarrying mind—formerly the province of philosophers—and the world—formerly the province of scientists—even as these disciplines are asked to verify that modern poetry is needed to provide some means of describing reality. Finally, then, as Stevens leaves us with both figures, he suggests poetry's inclusiveness. As early as 1940, trying to convince Henry Church to establish a chair of poetry, Stevens wrote that the "knowledge of poetry is a part of philosophy, and a part of science" (*L* 378). By 1951, philosophy and science are parts of poetry. As in "Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," poetry is proposed as the supreme activity, in that it can appropriate and relate both philosophy and physics: "It was not a choice / Between, but of. He chose to include the things / That in each other are included, the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony" (*CP* 403).

Stevens' philosophical affinities are often noticed. Less commented on is how often he draws on scientific theories to bolster and shape his poetics. One can say, moreover, that his use of science in the search for an adequate defense of—and figure for—his all-important essential imagination was in turn shaped and necessitated by the American context, its love of the tangible, its respect for hard fact, its suspicions of poetry. Stevens' development is not easily explained by pointing to the influences on him. To speak of his confusing juvenile discussions of poetry's place or of how poetry differs from science (early on, from the biological sciences) is not to explain the emergence of the poems found in *Harmonium*. Nor does showing his recognition of how poetry could be affirmed by mod-

ern physics explicate the later poetry, by any means. Indeed, if Stevens could continue his defense of poetry in part because of his use of modern physics, he did not stop asking questions about whether poetry was important. One of his last poems still asks: "I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life, / As a disbeliever in reality . . . ?" (*OP* 117).

"As You Leave The Room" goes on to include a self description of Stevens as a "countryman of all the bones in the world" (*OP* 117). But to place Stevens in a specifically American context, I would argue, is to help show how even one of the apparently most abstract (and least local) of the American modernists was deeply influenced by the climate in which he wrote. Knowing American attitudes towards poetry and science helps clarify Stevens' felt need for a defense of poetry's place in the world and his preoccupation with finding that poetry was tied to what he could convincingly call "objective reality," or "fact." As he said when asked if he thought of himself as an American poet, "not flagrantly American, but I hope that I am American."¹⁸ Marianne Moore might be allowed the final word on the quietness of Stevens' affiliations with his country: "Stevens recoils from admitting the force of the / basic emotions / obliquely treats of it thru the interacting / vibrations of allusive imagery."¹⁹ By locating the source of some of that allusive imagery we can add to the force of Stevens' quest for an adequate defense of the imagination.

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Notes

¹*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 26, hereinafter cited in the text as *L*. References to *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977); Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951); *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957); and Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), will be cited in the text as *SP*, *NA*, *OP*, and *CP*, respectively.

²Cited in Holly Stevens, "Flux," *The Southern Review*, Wallace Stevens Centennial Issue, 15 (Autumn 1979): 773.

³Kenneth Burke, *Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), pp. 223-226, describes Stevens' theory of poetry as a form of scientism. Burke implies that Stevens was unaware of his affiliations with science, which—by the forties—was not entirely true. Still, Burke's argument on the scientism implicit in certain forms of idealism suggests part of the reason Stevens ultimately could amend some of his early ideas about the antagonism between poetry and science.

⁴Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures, 1925* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 3. Alan Perlis, "Poetry and Physics: A Confrontation Across the Spheres," Chapter III (work in progress), pp. 86-94, nicely outlines three often contradictory commonplaces about the relationship between poetry and science: poetry deals with the timeless, science with materialistic and fleeting particulars in time; poetry is concerned with the concrete, science stays with the general; and science uses reason while poetry requires imagination.

⁵See A. Walton Litz, "Particles of Order: The Unpublished *Adagia*," in Robert Buttel and Frank Doggett, eds., *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 59, for a note on how Stevens "won through to a tenable aesthetic" in the forties. See also Frank Doggett, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), which acknowledges Stevens' changing ideas on the nature of poetry and the increasingly explicit poetics evolved in the forties (pp. 106, 109, 123).

⁶Cited in Peter Brazeau, *Parts Of A World: Wallace Stevens Remembered, An Oral Biography* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 162.

Philip Wheelwright, *et al.*, *The Language of Poetry*, ed. Allen Tate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), p. viii.

⁸Bertrand Russell, *Let the People Think: A Selection of Essays*, Thinker's Library Number 84 (London: Watts and Company, 1941), pp. 97 and 49. Bergsonian philosophy and Einsteinian physics were frequently associated, as in Wyndham Lewis' *Time and Western Man*.

⁹Stevens explicitly says he is using the word in a Coleridgean sense; although he owned several books on and by Coleridge, he may well in this context have been thinking of Richards' book, *Coleridge: On Imagination; A Study of the Critical Theory of Coleridge* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, Limited, 1934). The quotation used at the beginning of "The Noble Rider"—on Plato's "dear, gorgeous, nonsense" (NA 3)—definitely comes from Richards' book (p. 149); in Stevens' copy it is noted on the flyleaf.

¹⁰From "Henri Bergson," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 11 January 1941, p. 34.

¹¹See Isabel G. MacCaffrey, "The Ways of Truth in 'Le Monocle de Mon Oncle,'" in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, p. 216, on Stevens' use of indefinite pronouns.

¹²The idea was not unusual. See also, for instance, Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1958), p. 144, explaining that any "kind of understanding, scientific or not, depends on our language, on the communication of ideas. Every description of phenomena, of experiments and their results, rests upon language as the only means of communication." Stevens, however, almost certainly drew on more popular sources. Moreover, scientists did not necessarily sanction the readings their words were given by literary figures. Heisenberg was also capable of faulting scientists such as Bohr for using "ambiguous language," which "reminds us of a similar use of the language in daily life or in poetry" (p. 179).

¹³Whitehead's 1925 book does not seem to inform Stevens' writings before the forties, although he could have read it earlier and, in "A Collect of Philosophy," draws on Samuel Alexander's 1920 *Space, Time, and Deity*, which Whitehead recommends in his preface (Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1925], p. xi). Stevens more likely encountered Alexander's book through mention of it by C. E. M. Joad, "Another Great Victorian," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 2 March 1940, pp. 280, 282, as noted in "Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets," II, Huntington, MS, pp. 1-2. Some contemporary responses to Stevens' use of mostly popular sources for his ideas about philosophy as well as science are found in *Parts Of A World*, pp. 210-14.

¹⁴*Science and the Modern World*, pp. 24-25, 51. See also Whitehead's suggestion that the "reality is the process . . . The realities of nature are . . . events" (p. 102).

¹⁵See "Particles of Order," p. 75, and *Opus Posthumous*, p. 174.

¹⁶See Peter Brazeau, "'A Collect of Philosophy': The Difficulty of Finding What Would Suffice," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, pp. 48-49, for a discussion of Stevens' encounter with George's piece on Planck.

¹⁷This comparison owes at least something to Stevens' earlier desire (most obvious in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet") to persuade Henry Church to establish a chair of poetry, the argument having been that chairs of philosophy were more common and yet less worthy (*Parts Of A World*, pp. 183-84).

¹⁸*Twentieth Century Verse*, American Number, 12-13 (October, 1938), p. 112.

¹⁹Bonnie Costello, "Marianne Moore's Debt and Tribute to Wallace Stevens," *Concerning Poetry*, 5 (Spring 1983): 29.

Strategies of Smallness: Wallace Stevens and Emily Dickinson

FRED MILLER ROBINSON

In "Bantams in Pine-Woods"¹ Wallace Stevens invented an "inchling," a creature of the "personal" who mocks and dismisses a "ten-foot poet" swelled with the sense that he is "universal." The inchling asserts his own power both because and in spite of his smallness. He "bristles" and "points" the "tang" of the pines that dwarf him, as though infused with their own nature, rather than imagining, as the puffed-out Chieftain poet does, that the phenomenal world attends him. His very smallness is the occasion for his exerting a power that allows Nature its integrity as something much greater than observers can apprehend. The power of the personal vision derives from the very awareness of its size. The inchling has many cousins in *Harmonium* and in the poems that follow: the girls plotting against the giant, the worms at heaven's gate, the *infanta marina*, the continually diminished Crispin, the macabre mice, the dwarf, the rabbit as king of the ghosts, and so on—even, one could add, the jar that organizes the whole wilderness of Tennessee.

In the seventh section of "The Sail of Ulysses," the poem Stevens delivered at the Phi Beta Kappa exercises at Columbia University in 1954, he offered the fullest articulation of the importance of the small in relation to the large. Although it was a poem, as Stevens himself said, of "intolerable generalities" forced on him by the combination of the subject of knowledge and the occasion of birthdays (in this case, Columbia's 200th);² "The Sail of Ulysses" resists, to some extent, the pallor of its abstractions with its insistence on the mortal mind that must imagine them. These are the relevant lines:

The living man in the present place,
Always, the particular thought
Among Plantagenet abstractions,
Always and always, the difficult inch,
On which the vast arches of space
Repose, always, the credible thought
From which the incredible systems spring,
The little confine soon unconfined
In stellar largenesses—these
Are the manifestations of a law
That bends the particulars to the abstract,
Makes them a pack on a giant's back,
A majestic mother's flocking brood,
As if abstractions were, themselves
Particulars of a relative sublime.
This is not poet's ease of mind.
It is the fate that dwells in truth.³

Stevens has gathered phrases and images from other poems and related them appositely. The particular and credible thought of the living man is the difficult *inch* on which vastnesses repose, it is the small and necessary keystone of the architecture of abstraction. In this way abstractions become "themselves / Particulars . . ."; they cannot, like Plato's chariot, wing it on their own. And yet the "little confine" is also, thereby, released from its constrictions, particulars are bent to the vast arches, and so their necessity becomes powerful.

This is the law that is manifested: the large is measured by the small (just as the measure of the Chieftain is taken by the inchling) and the small is infused with the power of the large (just as the inchling bristles in the pines that dwarf him). This "fate that dwells in truth" is an Emersonian fate: the immense circumstance that "is known to us as limitation," but which becomes, housed in us, a source of freedom and power as we antagonize it, seeking to resist its confines. I am borrowing phrases from Emerson's essay on "Fate," near the end of which he says "that the rainbow and the curve of the horizon and the arch of the blue vault are only results from the organism of the eye"⁴; that is, the geometry of the universe must repose on the keystone arch of the living person.

This person is, necessarily, small. In Emerson he may be man as "'the dwarf of himself,'" in whom the overflowing currents of Nature have "'shrunk to a drop" — this is from "Nature."⁵ Later, in his journals, Emerson identifies the dwarf as a believer in fate, someone made weak and impotent by circumstance, cut off from God's fullness.⁶ Or he may be an infant; as Emerson says in "Circles," "Whilst we converse with what is above us, we do not grow old, we grow young," we become an Infancy which "counts itself nothing,"⁷ a phrase that recalls the passage in "Nature" where Emerson speaks of Infancy as "the perpetual Messiah,"⁸ limited by mortality but seeking home. The dwarf and the infant, in Stevens as in Emerson, are two versions of the Puritan idea of the minuteness and insignificance of people before God's creation. The dwarf is abased; but the infant can, as Emerson says in "Experience," "clap his hands in . . . joy and amazement before the first opening . . . of this august magnificence."⁹ The infant is the dwarf regenerated, unaware of limitation, who, while only glimpsing what is close to him, can nevertheless glimpse in it the absolute Oneness, the Puritans' *Ens primum*. (As we shall see later, even the dwarf has a chance in Stevens' poetry.)

For Stevens and for Emily Dickinson, as for the older Emerson, the vision of wholeness that frees us from our mortal confines is more difficult, at time impossible, to achieve, is most often prospective. In Stevens' "On the Road Home," it is stated that "In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts. / The world must be measured by eye." We are left with only "parts of a truth," or a litter of truths, the organism of the eye remaining confined. But it is then that the world becomes "warmest, / Closest and strongest," contracting to our dimensions on the road home (CP 204). As Stevens says in his "A Collect of Philosophy," the infinity of the world makes us realize "that we are creatures, not of a part, which is our everyday limitation, but of a whole for which . . . we have as yet no language" (OP 189). If, then, "Words are not forms of a single word" (CP 204), poetry is

cut off from the whole and we must struggle with parts of a world, struggle with "the edgings and inchings" of a "final form" (CP 488) that lies beyond us. In the meantime it is enough to be small—indeed, it is as necessary as Fate—it is enough to see what is close.

Could it possibly have been Emily Dickinson whom Stevens had in mind when he wrote "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers"? Dickinson herself, in poem 699, asks an Owl, in its small house at a small price, to select a tune to sing to her at midnight. Her Father thinks "The Judge is like the Owl," but she brings it down to her path on the way to the barn and makes it an image of herself, a small creature.¹⁰ In Stevens' "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," he says,

Hoot, little owl within her, how
High blue became particular
In the leaf and bud and how the red,
Flicked into pieces, points of air,
Became—how the central, essential red
Escaped its large abstraction, became,
First, summer, then a lesser time,
Then the sides of peaches, of dusky pears.

Hoot how the inhuman colors fell
Into place beside her, where she was,
Like human conciliations . . .
.....
The crude and jealous formlessness
Became the form and the fragrance of things
Without clairvoyance, close to her.

(CP 246-47)

In this diminishing of the vast to the confines of what is close to her is a "profounder reconciling" of the abstract and the particular, profounder than the small becoming large, abstract, in the stern realm of the distant Fathers.

And could Emily Dickinson have possibly been one (or perhaps each one) of the women in "Conversation with Three Women of New England" (OP 108-09)? The first woman describes a "single source and minimum patriarch" of life. The second woman makes a huge carved king a "part of a human landscape." The third woman says that only man "encompassed in humanity" is himself, the author of his canons, "Not some outer patron and imaginer." The women (or is it one woman, in progressive modes of thought?) are domesticating the patriarch, king, patron, to their human confines. Stevens goes further. At the end he says it is not necessary to choose in which worlds of thought all of them are at home; it is enough

. . . to have seen
And felt and known the differences we have seen

And felt and known in the colors in which we live,
In the excellences of the air we breathe . . .

In this air of what he calls in "The Sail of Ulysses" the "relative sublime," the conversation "shifts the cycle of the scene of kings": the small exerts its power, appropriates power from the patriarchs.

Surely this feeling and knowing in the colors in which we live is Emily Dickinson's world. I have spoken of a domesticating of the large, and I mean that in the strict sense of making familiar, as if in a *domus*, house. In his essay on "Heroism," Emerson, speaking of our delight in the hero, says that "All these great and transcendent properties are ours. If we dilate in beholding the Greek energy, the Roman pride, it is that we are already domesticating the same sentiment. Let us find room for this great guest in our small houses."¹¹ In Dickinson's poem 405, she finds the loneliness of her house more comfortable than the intrusion of the holy.

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness—
I'm so accustomed to my Fate—
Perhaps the Other—Peace—

Would interrupt the Dark—
And crowd the little Room—
Too scant—by Cubits—to contain
The Sacrament—of Him—

I am not used to Hope—
It might intrude upon—
Its sweet parade—blaspheme the place—
Ordained to Suffering—

It might be easier
To fail—with Land in Sight—
Than gain—My Blue Peninsula—
To perish—of Delight—

In her room in her house she experiences the divine through suffering and loneliness, as Christ did. To be fulfilled, at peace, would—and here is her heresy of Emerson—"blaspheme" this experience. The great guest would only crowd her small house; to let Him intrude would be to lose herself, to perish. Yet so to perish would be delight, something hoped-for, and the lack of it a failure. So if she resists Emerson's heroic largenesses, she realizes what Emerson calls in "Fate" a "double consciousness"¹²: knowing Fate and Freedom at once, what binds us and what will liberate us, experiencing the painful tension between contraction and dilation.

Like Stevens, Dickinson knew the various ways of outmaneuvering the antagonisms of the Authoritative, the Abstract, the Patriarchal, the Regal and Imposing, the Vast. We are all familiar with how, in her second letter to Higginson, she said, "I could not weigh—Myself—My size felt small—to me." And how then, in her third letter to him, reacting to his apparent critique of her poems, she said, "I smile when you suggest that I delay 'to publish'—that being foreign to my thought, as Firmament to Fin . . . My Barefoot-Rank is better. You think my gait 'spasmodic.' I am in danger, Sir."¹³ The sudden modulation to irony and assertion must have discomfited Higginson. Dickinson's voice of the modest and deferential lady of her time was only one of her many strategies of smallness. In poem 696 she modulates from assertion to pleading.

Their Height in Heaven comforts not—
Their Glory—nought to me—
'Twas best imperfect—as it was—
I'm finite—I can't see—

The House of Supposition—
The Glimmering Frontier that
Skirts the Acres of Perhaps—
To Me—shows insecure—

The Wealth I had—contented me—
If 'twas a meaner size—
Then I had counted it until
It pleased my narrow Eyes—

Better than larger values—
That show however true—
This timid life of Evidence
Keeps pleading—"I don't know."

Her vision might be confined, her wealth a meaner size than the personae of Heaven's, but there is no question that it *is* wealth, that it pleases her, that the world of glory beyond doubt is to her "insecure," that her "timid" life is "Better than larger values." How close this is to Stevens' ironies directed against "haunted heaven," and his preference for "our own houses, huddled low / Beneath" its arches, from which the voices great within us shall rise up (CP 138). How similarly he and Dickinson did not like Paradise. But Stevens' ironies are more assertive, Dickinson's more insidious, no doubt because, being a genteel woman, and given the expectations that attended on her gender and station, the vantage of smallness was more natural to her, and so more available for subterfuge.

Consider poem 271:

A solemn thing—it was—I said—
A woman—white—to be—
And wear—if God should count me fit—
Her blameless mystery—

A hallowed thing—to drop a life
Into the purple well—
Too plummetless—that it return—
Eternity—until—

I pondered how the bliss would look—
And would it feel as big—
When I could take it in my hand—
As hovering—seen—through fog—

And then—the size of this “small” life—
The Sages—call it small—
Swelled—like Horizons—in my vest—
And I sneered—softly—“small”!

It is characteristic of Dickinson that she sneers “softly” —that she maintain the role of the modest woman, a Mary figure, hoping God should count her fit, even as she describes swelling with the life of the infinite, achieving her calling—which in one sense is writing poetry. She maintains the role of a woman who speaks softly despite her power because it is at once useful as irony (a soft sneering is even more effective) and necessary to her sense of self: she never ceases to be a “woman,” she wishes to experience her womanhood as large without thereby becoming a Sage. Her power is felt as *hers*, in her vest, like the Bomb she holds in her Bosom in another poem (443). That is why, in poem 508, having left behind the “small” rank of being her Father’s and the Church’s daughter, and having achieved her own supremest rank, she chooses “just a Crown.” Behind that “just” is at once the recognition of her queenliness and her smallness, the former stressed through irony, the latter through humility.

By sustaining her sense of smallness, even as her perception, her life, is enlarged, Dickinson is keeping about her her immediate sense of the world, what Stevens describes as “the form and fragrance of things.” Her temporal experience swells, like her many cocoons, with feelings more conventionally appropriate to the infinite and eternal, to the religious abstractions she grew up with. Yet it never ceases to be particular, is never simply liberated into vastnesses and hence lost to her. In poem 1099, although she says she must, as a cocoon, blunder and baffle, must use, as Stevens would say, “flawed words and stubborn sounds” (*CP* 194), we feel her “power of Butterfly” as potential, the large packing the small, tightening its limits. In poem 616, when the power of the large (God, preachers, Sages, Fathers, “Them”) drops, her soul grows straight and she has the power to “lift” him who sank. In smallness grows the sinew of the particular.

In like manner Stevens' Crispin, in "The Comedian as the Letter C," is made small by the magnitude of what is around him, only to have his apprehension "enlarged" by this very diminution. Through this experience of comic contradiction, of being always deflated and reflatd, Crispin arrives (or we arrive, observing him) at Emerson's "double consciousness": bound by Fate, hemmed in by circumstance, *magister* only of a single room, utterly diminished "To things within his actual eye" — yet at the same time liberated into a "new intelligence," at one with the harmonious music and colors of that actual world (CP 42, 37). In this Crispin is like "The Dwarf" in Stevens' poem of that name (CP 208), who sits beside his lamp, nibbling citron and dribbling coffee, while around him the web of winter is being woven and is "waiting to be worn / Neither as mask nor as garment but as a being," including the dwarf's being. The dwarf will have to wear the weave of a diminishing year, as the season contracts to his dimension; he will become, like the Snow Man who becomes "nothing himself" (CP 10), part of something larger than himself, its being his own and vice versa. Stevens' dwarf, like Emerson's, is fated to "bear" the winter, but that very fate may be the discipline — as Emerson himself would acknowledge when he wasn't demeaning dwarves — that will enable him, eventually, to expand as the season expands, swollen with power. As Emerson says in "Fate," "We can afford to allow the limitation, if we know it is the meter of the growing man."¹⁴

It is interesting that a central image in "The Dwarf" is weaving, the weaving of both mind and nature. The root for weaving (L. *texere*) is akin to the Greek *technologia*, the systematic treatment of the particular. For the Puritans, *technologia* was the doctrine whereby the study of the diverse and concrete universe — that which is available for man to grasp — will yield, in time, the principles of God's wisdom. For such wisdom only reveals itself in the *particular*, what God has chosen to make material. The "totality of God's wisdom and the particular wisdom which God has chosen to materialize in the universe" is distinct: we cannot trespass upon divine knowledge, but only proceed from what takes visible form before us. Yet if we use our powers and study the visible world, we can perceive the order and purpose of His laws.¹⁵ We can only know parts and the parts may suggest the whole. Or, put another way, the visible universe is a book through the study of which we may arrive at some knowledge of the intention of the author, an intention that must needs be withheld from us. Emerson, of course, wished to break through the Puritan distinction between the created world and the revelation of God, to have man expand beyond the confines of his abasement. Dickinson and Stevens, inheriting Emerson's doubts as much as his lyricism, return us more fundamentally and problematically to the small awareness, the finite seeing, the technology of observation and study. But if they insist on smallness — a sort of Puritan "I don't know" — it is a strategy, a way of eluding the easier and larger values — easier because inherited, paternal — to become "the heroic children whom time breeds / Against the first idea" (CP 385), the new-come bees rising above the President (CP 390). With this strategy they discipline Emerson's vision with a stronger sense of the strength of the particular, the doing "the little Toils" (273), "Life's little duties" (443), slowly bending the particulars to the ab-

stract, "not to console / Nor sanctify, but plainly"—always resisting the infinite—"to propound" (CP 389).

In comparing Stevens and Dickinson, and in tracing certain of their images back to Emerson and the Puritans, I am only arguing for what Perry Miller calls "restatements of a native disposition," the persistence of "basic continuities" in a culture "which underlie the successive articulation of 'ideas.'"¹⁶ It would be difficult to make connections more firm than that. I am suggesting that Stevens and Dickinson, consciously or unconsciously, were able to imagine, through these continuities, the large strength of the small particular. Dickinson's heritage, of course, can be traced to the Puritans, and her reading to Emerson. Stevens' relation to Emerson has been well established, if not fully articulated. His relation to anything Puritan is more problematic, except through irony. Perhaps there is a strange and, so far as I know, unexplored, relation between the American modernist stress on the particular—the availability, indeed the existence, of Wholeness having long been doubted—and the Puritan metaphysic and ethic of our insignificance as we labor to understand an Order that must come to us only in reflection and refraction, "particular wisdom."

In "The Blue Buildings in the Summer Air" (CP 216-17), Stevens imagines the mice in Cotton Mather's church outliving him, possibly swallowing the steeple, always searching for the "honey-comb" as the plaster drops and the arches grind. The honey-comb is the particular world offered to us, all the heaven that the mice and the "seeing man" can know, while Cotton Mather looks down from "the blank." We, the mice and the bantams and the owls and rabbits and clowns and cocoons and dwarves and girls and housewives, all of what Stevens calls "the smalls" (CP 443), can only inch and nibble, measure and propound, search in what Mather himself called "daily spiritualizing" among the "little Fragments and Filings of our Golden Time."¹⁷ Mather, of course, thought of this small business as mean and vile, however necessary. Emerson wished to regard smallness as only external, and to see it disappear, along with Fate, when God fills us with His fullness. But in Stevens and Dickinson the power of smallness itself is celebrated, in a double consciousness that contracts the universe to the dimensions of the eye and dilates the eye to the dimensions of the universe.

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), pp. 75-76. Hereafter cited as CP in the text.

²*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 835.

³Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 103. Hereafter cited as OP in the text.

⁴*Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Prose and Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1969), p. 234.

⁵*The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 42.

⁶From the journal of April 6-12, 1842: "Herein then I have this latent omniscience coexistent with omnignorance. Moreover, whilst this Deity glows at the heart, & by his unlimited presentiments gives me all power, I know that tomorrow will be as this day, I am a dwarf, & I remain a dwarf. That is to say, I be-

lieve in Fate. As long as I am weak, I shall talk of Fate; whenever the God fills me with his fulness, I shall see the disappearance of Fate." *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 283.

⁷*Works*, II (1979), p. 189.

⁸*Works*, I, p. 42.

⁹*Works*, III (1983), p. 41.

¹⁰Citations from Dickinson's poetry are from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960).

¹¹*Works*, II, p. 152.

¹²*Selected Prose and Poetry*, p. 234.

¹³*Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 173, 174.

¹⁴*Selected Prose and Poetry*, p. 225.

¹⁵See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 161-63.

¹⁶Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 187, 184-85.

¹⁷See Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), pp. 404-05.

"Golden Vacancies": Wallace Stevens' Problematics of Place and Presence

MARY ARENSBERG

For Wallace Stevens, the poetic process is a fantasy of desire or lover's discourse that invents the poem. The poem is an appointed meeting or "intensest rendezvous" that never takes place between the inventor of the discourse and "the lover who lies within the self," his fiction for Otherness. He calls her his "interior paramour."¹ Their love affair (the trysts, her face, his longing) is grasped by the reader subliminally within the shadowy silence of the *Collected Poems*: we sense and briefly know her, but our knowledge has been baseless. As Stevens writes in "Description Without Place," "In the golden vacancy she came, and comes, / And seems to be on the saying of her name" (CP 339).

In these two lines, Stevens introduces the two problematics which intersect one another throughout the canon: his invented fiction of the Other, the feminine paramour and ultimately a trope of presence; and the fiction of place, "the golden vacancy," or the nothingness to which we refer the experience of time and space. Both tropes metaphorize "presence" outside the text at the same time they refer to "presence" within the text. In other words, the paramour is at once the "lover" of the major man and the muse of his invention even as she signifies a construct outside the text such as Other, Imagination, the Sublime, or Nature.

And since presence in Stevens is fictionalized, appearing and then reappearing from the abyss of words, it is extremely difficult to identify this veiled, evasive female who behaves like a "supreme fiction" or a floating signifier: she is abstract, like being, a presence without a place; she must change and does, at once Eve aging with her poet in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" or Susanna among the elders in "Peter Quince"; and she certainly brings pleasure, not only in her metaphoric changes but in the pale fire of her absence which sheds its light on some of Stevens' strongest poems.

This same doubleness or multiplicity of signification found in the figure of the paramour is also true for the problematic of place. In Stevens, place is not merely a text but contains the theory of description itself. The poet's most articulated image of place is "the column in the desert, / On which the dove alights" (CP 343). Desert here signifies place (*topos*) with the attendant qualities of absence, blankness, expanses of nothingness. Imposed upon the scene of absence is the column, a trope of artifice and order, on which the dove, a trope of desire, alights.

In this allegory of place, Stevens identifies the three components of his central problematics: absence, difference, and desire. The three conditions correspond with the chain of metonymic signifiers which Terry Eagleton reads as Lacan's climatic conditions of sexuality and language. As the child relinquishes its tenacious hold on the body of the mother (absence) to perceive its own father as difference and repress the desire for the mother, so language displays, as Eagleton says,

this potentially endless movement from one signifier to another (and is what Lacan means by desire. All desire springs from a lack, which it strives continually to fulfill. Human language works by such lack: the absence of the real objects which signs designate, the fact that words have meaning only by virtue of the absence and exclusion of others. To enter language, then, is to become prey to desire.²

The two problematics of place and paramour intersect throughout the *Collected Poems* to dramatize the canon's three major quests: 1) the failed attempt to break through imaginative repetition to primary firstness or what the poet calls "the first idea"; 2) the doomed search for transcendence or disclosure (to be in touch with essence or sublimity); and 3) the attempt to recover lost origins and enact a fantasy of a primal scene. While most of Stevens' poems are engaged in these quests for a supreme fiction, their enterprise is thwarted from the start, as fictionalized in the plight of the paramour. Trapped within what Michael Beehler calls "the rhetoric of a logocentric metaphysics,"³ she lives perpetually on the edge of fulfillment, a Cinderella, waiting in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," for being to come true. For she represents what a trope can never be or do: that is to break through the matrix of metaphoricity and gaze on poetry's extra-linguistic source. "[T]here was never a world for her" (CP 130)—or for Wallace Stevens, for that matter. There is only the pleasure of merely circulating in a world of words without place. New Haven, Key West, Bergamo, "Paris in conversation" (CP 486) are descriptions of cities without place, without referents, perceived through the mediation of the ever-present trope.

As we move from *Harmonium* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* into *Ideas of Order* and *Parts of a World*, Stevens' poems begin to contain their own commentary and disclose their non-literalness and ontological impossibility. During his major phase, as Harold Bloom has commented, "Stevens has given us a canon of poems more advanced as *interpretation* than our criticism has yet gotten to be."⁴ In fact, the criticism running through this later phase not only mimics the endless circles of Heidegger's hermeneutics, but looks back towards Freud and Nietzsche while gesturing towards Derrida and beyond.

* * *

The two cities which dominate the canon are polar opposites: Key West, which inspires Stevens' most haunting shore lyric, "The Idea of Order at Key West," and New Haven, a city not home for the poet but a mere hour away from Hartford. I would like to focus first on Canto XXVIII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," a passage that links paramour and place, and then return to Key West where Stevens' vision of that city revises his ideas of both place and presence. Both texts are meditations on poetry: New Haven takes up the notion of "reality" only to expose phenomenal presence as mere fiction; while Key West invalidates presence even while it is haunted by its demarcations.

If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,
The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her

Misericordia, it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one: New Haven
Before and after one arrives or, say,

Bergamo on a postcard, Rome after dark,
Sweden described, Salzburg with shaded eyes
Or Paris in conversation at a café.

This endlessly elaborating poem
Displays the theory of poetry,
As the life of poetry. A more severe

More harassing master would extemporize
Subtler, more urgent proof that the theory
Of poetry is the theory of life,

As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.

(CP 485-86)

In this canto, the linguistic node of the text for me is fixated on the word "Misericordia," literally the misery of the heart, and more figuratively, compassion or pity. However, Stevens as a forager of language and etymologies, would like us to look further and associate the word with a 19th century term meaning the relaxation and indulgence of monastic rules of deprivation and fasting. The word is also aligned in the *OED* with a dagger used to enact a *coup de grace*. This language site poses several questions: what does reality have to do with a dagger, the "long-bladed knife" of line 3, the tin plate and the loaf of bread? And who is "she," sick at heart, in this linguistic gathering of seemingly unrelated elements? In disentangling the language threads of this scene, it is useful to conceive of the construct of reality as the paramour of the poet, sick at heart in her impoverished state, deprived of food or drink: that is, phenomenal reality. She feeds on the nothingness outside the text, until the imagination, dispensing its indulgence, erases the boundary between the real and the unreal.

When real and unreal are one, language becomes privileged over an absent reality, while phenomenal presence fades into a picture on a postcard. Thus the poem, invented from nothing except "postcard images," bypasses the "real" and is given life through its fictive elaborations. The "intricate evasions of as" or the privileging of metaphor over simile sets up a tropological network in which reality does exist, even though we know it is untrue. "In the golden vacancy she came,

and comes, / And seems to be on the saying of her name" (CP 359). New Haven, Paris, Rome, Sweden are fictions of place made more real through metonymic turning. Even the cutting edge, which belongs not to the long-bladed knife but to the word or phallic pen, performs its *coup de grace* on reality itself. With the emasculation of the real, the fiction of reality is no longer sick at heart or impoverished; she lives now on the bread and wine of words and envisions "the heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands."

This reading of Canto XXVIII of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" provides an entry into "The Idea of Order at Key West" (CP 128) written in an earlier period but which looks forward proleptically towards New Haven. Commentaries on the poem have turned on several questions posed by the text itself: what is the nature of the singer who strides there so solitary by the sea? Is this poem a crisis-lyric that attempts to overcome the shore scenario pre-empted by Whitman in "Out of the Cradle so Endlessly Rocking"? And perhaps, more persistently, is this text in quest of its own origins and orderings or is it able to refer to an outside represented by the seascape at Key West? Although central to any reading of the poem, these ideas do not account for the double structure of the text which posits two other "ideas" through its metonymic chain.

The first of these comes with the introduction, in the late stages of the poem, of the French formalist critic Ramon Fernandez whose presence within the text points towards the entire range of critics and critical reading. The reader, of course, is innocent of this "presence" until the poem's final strophes, when the speaker asks, "Ramon Fernandez, tell me if you know . . ." The question at first sounds predominately gratuitous and almost a teasing challenge. If Stevens were to write the poem today, he might ask, "Geoffrey Hartman, tell me, if you know, / Why when the singing ended . . ." The poet's absorption of the critic within his text achieves two effects: it is both a silencing of the interpretative act and a textualization of criticism that precludes the possibility of a world outside the borders of the text. "There never was a world for her" or Fernandez or for Hartman, only a rage to order the words of the text.

The textual "key" of Ramon also discloses Stevens' notion of the figurative process and its limitations. Fernandez is first introduced as a foreign name whose referent is properly signified: person with a name. In the second instance of the naming (the final strophe), he is "pale Ramon" whose presence is now felt more dimly. This ghostification of Ramon is an overdetermined trope that mirrors the dimming of any extra-linguistic or foreign element injected in a text and its further haunting by mimetic repetition. The entrance to any poem is perhaps through a "fragrant portal," but one which is "dimly-starred": all who enter there are merely pale reflections.

The paleness of Ramon at the end of the poem is a textual node that reorders the verbal complex of the text and sends us back to the beginning where the ocean, a sea of trope, is "like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves." But something is foreign here too, as we enter a symbolic landscape that is not unlike a cave of dreams. This climate of dreams suggests the second idea which circles around the figure of the paramour/singer. The dream of the first few

stanzas of "The Idea of Order at Key West" is of the fictive female singer who utters her song by rote ("Since what she sang was uttered word by word"). Her song is of "the veritable ocean," which, like the "bodiless serpent" in the late poem, "Auroras of Autumn," is an absent presence, all fictive covering with nothingness underneath.

The ocean cannot be put into words, because it has no body, and yet the silent speech of its motion produces an alien, inhuman cry that is both familiar and unfamiliar to the speaker of the poem. But why is the silent cry of the sea both understood and foreign, like a dream? What we have in these lines is the material of the primal fantasy or the "fallen poetry" of the unconscious, stirred to life by the belated shore scene and the song of memory that hears but cannot speak the riddle of the scene of origin.

The sea scene of origination, however, cries out to memory, but its sounds or grinding and gasping are translated into the familiar fear and phantasmagorical horrors of the child outside the door. Excluded from his origins, the child dreams of the rescue of his mother from the grasp of the sea, but the sea here is so threatening, so menacing and "ever-hooded" that the poet denies its power to insist that "it was she and not the sea we heard." Stevens evokes the illusion of the primal scene and its attendant memories twice in his poetry: here at Key West and later in the "Auroras," again at the shore, when the white cabin of his childhood is effaced by the contamination of memory. Both topoi are informed by the principle of belatedness or the forbidden entry into a time and place that exist only as ordering ideas.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea
That rose, or even colored by many waves;
If it was only the outer voice of sky
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,
However clear, it would have been deep air,
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound
Repeated in a summer without end . . .

(CP 129)

If only he could hear the sounds of origin, they would be "a summer sound / Repeated in a summer without end / And sound alone." But the sounds of pure logos, the parental discourse, pure sound, are merely the fixation of an aural text that repeats but cannot medley the ocean's song. The sea, then, is a mask and so is she; "The meaningless plungings of water and the wind" disguise the inaccessible knowledge of the carnal, while she conceals the bodiliness nature of the self invented from a song of memory, itself constructed from the body's silence. The layers of disguise mimic the scaffolding of this text which, in its quest for its own origins, can only make "words of the sea."

At this point, we can return to Ramon and the question of origins: if the text, sea and singer are empty sleeves without bodies, where and from what does the poem get written and why is the night arranged, deepened, and enchanted by

the writing of the poem? Although these questions are never answered here, especially by the silent Ramon, we are left with the predicating power of language or sea of words where "fragrant portals" may be both the entrance to the text and the entry into the primal chamber; where the cry of the ocean's mimic motion pantomimes the sounds of parental union; and where the origins of the text are grounded in the fallen poetry of the speaker's unconscious. What these analogies that are not quite precise equations suggest is that textuality is indeed a ghostification of a never accessible outside, but, too, a ghostly demarcation that gestures towards our origins and ourselves and haunts us with its presences that never were. Place and paramour, Key West and its solitary singer, are all "evasions of as":

In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.
(CP 486)

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 524. Further reference to this source will be cited in the text with the abbreviation CP and page number in parentheses. The only mention of the phrase, "interior paramour," comes in the late poem, "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour"; however, the figure is present in the poetry from the beginning. Poet and paramour engage in an elusive, subliminal relationship which begins with the "paltry nude" of *Harmonium* and reaches its climax in the "Final Soliloquy"

²Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 171.

³Michael Beehler, "Stevens' Boundaries," *Wallace Stevens Journal* VII 3/4 (Fall 1983), p. 106.

⁴Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 119.

Romantic and Symbolist Contexts in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

DANA WILDE

Wallace Stevens' connections with romantic poetry have been clearly demarcated by his critics. His connections with symbolist poetry are less fashionable topics for criticism, but most critics allow that Stevens was influenced by symbolism, if not a direct participant. The phrase "gaiety of language," so often applied to Stevens' early poetry, calls attention to that aspect of Stevens' poetics which concentrated on the sound and rhythm of poetry, the unusual or uncommon word, and the fabulous, opulent quality of his imagery as it is apprehensible through his difficult diction. Because of Stevens' gaiety of language, it is often difficult for a reader to find a way into the meaning of any given poem. The difficulty of finding meaning in unusual language creates on the surface a link with the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé, particularly, and other difficult symbolist poets like Paul Valéry or Jules Laforgue: their poetry can seem opaque or even meaningless to those who allow it to resist their intelligence.

The problem of reading Stevens' poetry is complicated by the fact that his apparently opaque poems are eventually comprehensible in a way that many symbolist poems are not. Not that symbolist poems are incomprehensible—but symbolism as a poetic movement came after the romanticism of the early 19th century, an extension of the great outburst of emotion which reacted against the industrial revolution, and it tended to focus on immediate instants of time by unifying words in crystalline forms which evoked a mood or a sensibility rather than orderly thought. The poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, on the other hand, is understandable in an intellectual way which symbolist poetry defies. The problem of reading Stevens is that his poetry seems to have been influenced by both romanticism and symbolism. While Stevens is a poet of deep consideration, thought, and philosophy (though he would not accept the latter term), he is also a poet of that crystalline suggestiveness characteristic of symbolism. Beyond the obvious historical connection of romanticism and symbolism, Stevens' poetry continually questions and asserts different kinds of contextuality which include both linguistic contextuality and a contextuality of place. In his lifelong effort to place himself in the universe, Stevens arrayed himself consistently with the language of symbolism and the problems of romanticism.

Yvor Winters traces the history of romanticism from the age of reason which, warring against reason itself, eventually gave rise to the expression of emotion—romanticism.¹ Romanticism gave way to a "System of Thoughtlessness," or symbolism, which Winters believes completely threw over the moral pursuit of reason for the immoral pursuit of emotion. Eventually this gave rise to Stevens the hedonist. Winters may in some senses be correct, but he probably misread symbolist poetry. It was not an attempt to disorder or disfigure what we all rationally agree upon as much as it attempted to "convey a supernatural experience in

the language of visible things, and therefore almost every word is a symbol and is not used for its common purpose but for the association which it evokes of a reality beyond the senses."² This corresponds roughly to Stevens' statement in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" that the irrational is to the rational what the unknown is to the known.³ Stevens was continuously interested in the unknown; and in many ways, the unknown was the world itself, things as they were different from himself. Rational thinking could not solve the problem of his feeling of alienation from things as they are, which may have been why he always dismissed the notion that he was a philosopher. The irrational, because it dealt with the unknown rather than the known, suggested that an as yet undisclosed ordering of the world could be disclosed.

In *Harmonium* and his early poetry, Stevens seems to verge on the "hedonism" Winters suggests. But Winters' moralistic terms also seem inappropriate to Stevens because there is clearly a search under way on Stevens' part. Because romantic transcendence was not a viable answer to anything for Stevens, he came out on the periphery of Nietzsche with a sense that the imagination alone could order the world for any individual. The act of ordering was an act of making, and poetry which seemed hedonistic was not really operating on the level of sheer materialism but on the level of Coleridge's primary imagination: it was making something of the world around it. A poem like "Floral Decorations for Bananas" (CP 53) suggests an opulence and a materialism that Stevens might not have denied, but at the same time it suggests a theme that recurs throughout Stevens' poetry, namely, that where we are determines to a great extent what we are, how we make order. A desire for elegance and the good life may be at work in "Floral Decorations for Bananas," and if it was the only thing at work Winters might be justified in his criticism. But to the extent that this other theme is contained in the same poem, then more needs to be considered.

What needs to be considered is Stevens' sense of place. In the sense of place for which Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Shelley were the main exponents in the romantic tradition, Stevens is a main exponent in modern poetry. The point I want to make here is that Stevens saw man as being essentially in a context, in the world. His problem with the context paralleled Wordsworth's and Shelley's in that he felt a need to grapple with the problem of subject-object, in-here/out-there as we say now. If the speaker of "Floral Decorations for Bananas" suggests the transformation of a place to opulence and sensuousness, it is not primarily for hedonistic purposes, but more importantly to try to make a place which is identifiable with the inhabitant. This speaker desires an order which he feels himself to be part of; he prefers a Keatsian beauty to a detached preeminent drabness. If he feels a desire for beauty (however sensuous), then he prefers to be part of a beauty. At least, he tries to be.

"Floral Decorations for Bananas" shows how a context can be perpetrated, but even more to the point is a poem like "The Comedian as the Letter C" which speaks explicitly to Stevens' sense of place. Crispin in his search moves from Mexico north to the Carolinas. At first he appears to be trying out the idea that "man is the intelligence of his soil," as the first line of the poem states. Later, after ap-

proaching Carolina, the dictum is amended to "his soil is man's intelligence" (CP 27, 32). Stevens is grappling with the question of what place means to the human intelligence. At first Crispin makes the order of the place around him; he feels himself to be powerful, but as he feels the need to change, his sense of place changes. In Carolina he is no longer the sole orderer of his surroundings, but he begins to think that the place, or soil, also affects the man. Crispin in most critical contexts is said to have failed somehow because he seems to dissipate, sinking finally into a fanciful, unproductive, nice shady home with daughters. In some ways, Crispin has ceased to undertake his responsibility to order the world imaginatively.

From *Harmonium* to *The Rock*, many of Stevens' poems are concerned with a man trying to put himself into the context of his place—trying to feel himself to be part of a setting. This is one of Stevens' strongest links to the romanticism of Wordsworth and Shelley. In "The Idea of Order at Key West" the singer is engaged in a transaction with the sea which is clearly not transcendent, but which reveals the singer to have made a connection with the sea that involves both the ordering abilities of the singer and the chaotic sounds of the sea itself. The ordering does not solve the problem of the autonomous imagination in the context of a natural setting, but it takes the problem a step further than Crispin did. Not only can the narrator say that the "soil is man's intelligence," but—including, still, a separation—there is a connection in which "when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker" (CP 129). The tentativeness of the last two stanzas qualifies and sharpens the immediate sense of the human with a place *in* a natural context yet still apart (as maker).⁴

In later poems the man-nature context becomes still more explicit. For example, in "The Latest Freed Man" a man just waking says:

"I suppose there is
A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
Which is enough: the moment's rain and sea,
The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen),
Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape."

(CP 204)

The man here has freed himself of the detached impulse of, say, the narrator of "Floral Decorations for Bananas" to order the world by doctrine—or to order the world the way he *thinks* it should be ordered. By this point, being is enough; by feeling himself to be in his context (at the present moment), the man need do no more—he is freed, "ignorant" of doctrines which tend to separate him from things as they are. The many figurations which follow the man's speech in this poem tend to distance the reader from the actual point of the man's revelation, and language begins to become a problem—"To be without a description of to be" (CP 205).

The places of Wordsworth and Shelley correspond to Wallace Stevens' places. A famous example of Wordsworth's sense of place occurs in "Tintern Abbey" on the banks of the Wye River. He describes the scene, then reflects:

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life . . .⁵

The "influence" remembered forms have had on Wordsworth spring from his sense that he has been a part of the scene, part of the context of that place, and that he carries that sensibility with him. Compare Wordsworth's sensibility with the final lines of "Esthétique du Mal":

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

(CP 326)

Wordsworth will go on to say that he senses a spirit that "rolls through all things," while for Stevens there is no transcendence. But both feel the pressure of reality around them: the air is swarming with changes, feelings. Each in his own way, concordant with his surroundings, sees into the life of things. As the moon rises over Mt. Snowdon, Wordsworth feels an encompassing imaginative sensibility, a feeling of tremendous unity, himself included. In "The Auroras of Autumn," Stevens' family of poem III also feels a unity connected with their place: "They are at ease in a shelter of the mind / And the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together" (CP 413). The controlling image for Stevens' meditation, the aurora, is, like Wordsworth's moon, a natural figure. Both poets invest energy in "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (NA 27).

Both poets feel themselves to be a part of something, at least at moments. The romantic poets were not free from the doubt, the separation that Stevens reveals in his early poetry, but they were able to work through it. Coleridge could do it

in a single poem, like "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison." It took Stevens the better part of a lifetime to "make a dwelling in the evening air" (CP 524). Shelley in "Mont Blanc" echoes Wordsworth's crestfallen encounter with the same mountain. He begins his poem with characteristic shouting about "The everlasting universe of things," excited perhaps the way Wordsworth was excited as he climbed toward the summit. But as he ponders on himself in this place, he begins to feel his separation—"when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange / To muse on my own separate fantasy."⁶ Stevens also mused on his own separate fantasy, but from a different angle. While Shelley needed to invoke a feeling, Stevens started out, as I showed in "Floral Decorations for Bananas," with an outer making-over of reality, where the imagination was not equal and seemed to supersede reality.

Stevens and Shelley end at roughly the same place, though. As he comes to grips with the significance of the imagination as it is related to man in his natural context, Shelley says:

And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy?

Stevens' "anti-master-man" in "Landscape with Boat" (CP 241) wants "the eye to see / And not be touched by blue," but the narrator of the poem points out that this man who wants to see the vacancy of everything, without imagination, "never supposed / That he might be truth, himself, or part of it." And finally,

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds.

As the silence and solitude of Mont Blanc are not necessarily vacancy for Shelley, the reduplicating emeralds of the sea are not necessarily vacant for Stevens. Both bring to bear the imagination on the world, and moreover they can be "with nature reconciled," that is, become a part of a place. Shelley says that the wilderness can cause doubt about the possibility of man's reconciliation with it, but the last three lines of his poem, though a question, focus on the imagination as a way of becoming again part of the context. Similarly, Stevens' anti-master-man would like to "not be touched by blue," but he is better off if he *does* suppose and accept a place beside the sea, in a context.

The sense of being in a place surpasses the solipsistic peregrinations of Hoon, where everything he senses comes only from himself. The imagination has to come to bear on reality. In Shelley's words, "All things exist as they are perceived; at least to the percipient."⁷ The pressure of reality, the sense of being in a time and place with external reality inheres in this idea, while Hoon is separate. And more goes on; imagination is

mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.⁸

Stevens pushes this sense of the relation of conscious man to the world to this point: "We live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there" (NA 65). He is speaking here with the blue sky itself in mind. In this sense, the sky and the imagination create a gigantic context of place, in which the imagination dwells and realizes what is there and what is not there. Later, by the time of "A Primitive Like an Orb," the idea will formulate itself this way:

these men, and earth and sky, inform
Each other by sharp informations, sharp,
Free knowledges, secreted until then,
Breaches of that which held them fast.

(CP 441)

Man and place inform each other—they exist together in a context.

Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, and Coleridge expressed their contextual existence in a language which was more exuberant, more evocative of feeling than their forebears in the age of reason.⁹ The "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," in a significant departure from previous poetics, expressed Wordsworth's impulse to write with "the real language of nature," with more common diction. It is impossible to assign this poetic to Stevens. His diction is difficult, and especially in *Harmonium* his locutions and unusual word-choice make his poetry difficult to understand. In Yvor Winters' historical scheme, Stevens was simply utilizing the "System of Thoughtlessness" devised by the symbolists on the groundwork laid by the romantics. In this sense it might follow that Stevens was simply the product of historical trends, different by virtue of his own misreading.

More is at work in Stevens' poetry than the anxiety of influence, though. He does not merely echo a romantic sensibility in modern, post-symbolist language. The connection between his post-symbolist language and his romantic sense of place occurs at the word "context" again, I think; consider the previously quoted sentence from *The Necessary Angel*: "We live in the center of a physical poetry." He speaks here of the sky itself in terms of geography, place. But the word "poetry" attaches a strange connotation to the entire idea: as the blue sky is a physical context in which a romantic sensibility finds itself, it is also a figure of the romantic imagination which is "the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM"¹⁰—blue as the color of the imagination in Stevens' figuration. But moreover, it is a physical "poetry," something that has been made as an act of the imagination: as the imagination works on things as they are (such as the sky), it also gives form to its sensibilities, it *makes*, as the singer at Key West *makes*. Stevens gives this broad meaning to the word "poetry," that it is whatever is for-

mulated by the imagination—poems, paintings, sculpture, architecture, and so on.

The imagination creates a formal context of its own. A poem in this sense is a context of words, what Hugh Kenner calls “words set free (from historical denotation) for chemical interaction”; and more:

Ecology—interest in transactions with an environment—is a romantic discovery, in poetics as in biology. (Thoreau was an ecologist.) *Symbolisme* was poetic ecology made scientific: whole poems existing as systems of linguistic interaction . . . In the Symbolist poem the Romantic effect has become a structural principle, and we may say that Symbolism is scientific Romanticism.¹¹

Stevens’ poems have that symbolist opacity, like Valéry’s or Mallarmé’s poems, which resist the intelligence almost successfully. This opacity is derived from words combined not in a rational, linear way as Winters prefers, but in a coherent system or context which is meant to illuminate a single moment “for the association which it evokes of a reality beyond the senses”—a feeling uninhibited by linear, rational thought.

The imagination which works on things as they are to produce poetry sets up, influences, makes a context, the way the singer at Key West makes a context. The result is a unity of words, what by the end of “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” becomes a “crystal.”

Several perspectives on Stevens’ poetry illustrate this interconnection of language and being. Stevens’ search for a place in the world is related to a search for wholeness or unity—the desire for an interconnection with the world rather than alienated observation alone. This unity is what symbolist poetry strives toward, as well. A poem like “Domination of Black,” for instance, does not work linearly. Instead it builds up a series of figures which repeat in various patterns to create an effect: there is an ecology of imagery in peacocks, hemlocks, fire, and wind which culminates not at a certain point at the end, but which cumulatively addresses a single sensibility and creates a unified effect.¹² The poem is a crystal of meaning: not linear and rational, but ecologically irrational, building to the moment of penetrating something unknown.¹³

This irrational moment exists by parallel with symbolist poetry, especially in Mallarmé and Valéry. The significant idea of Mallarmé here is that poetry is made not of ideas but of words. In a poem like “L’Après-midi d’un Faune” there is a complex buildup of rich and elegant imagery and sound which by the end of the poem is almost inebriating. Even though a reader might not be able to say rationally what he has read, Mallarmé’s skill with the language itself has perpetrated a linguistic context which has a profound effect: the meaning may be opaque, but the sensibility is crystalline. What happens to the reader is analogous to what happens to Stevens’ lone rower in “Prologues to What is Possible”:

There was an ease of mind that was like being alone
in a boat at sea,
A boat carried forward by waves resembling the bright
backs of rowers,
Gripping their oars, as if they were sure of the way
to their destination,
Bending over and pulling themselves erect on the wooden
handles,
Wet with water and sparkling in the one-ness of their
motion.

(CP 515)

Like this rower, the reader can be carried along on words the way waves carry a boat, eventually to a kind of intoxication sometimes.

A unity of language can be like a fabric, with such a tight interweaving of threads that a dreamlike effect is created. In "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" a sensibility like this is embroidered by poem III:

There he saw well the foldings in the height
Of sleep, the whiteness folded into less,
Like many robings, as moving masses are,

As a moving mountain is, moving through day
And night, colored from distances, central
Where luminous agitations come to rest,

In an ever-changing, calmest unity,
The unique composure, harshest streakings joined
In a vanishing-vanished violet that wraps round

The giant body the meanings of its folds,
The weaving and the crinkling and the vex,
As on water of an afternoon in the wind

After the wind has passed.

(CP 433)

In Valéry's "Le Cantique des Colonnes" a similar sense is created by suggestions surrounding a different kind of structure:

Harmonious columns with
capitals day adorns,
embellished with real birds
that walk around the turns,

sweet columns, orchestra
of distaffs! Every one
sacrifices its silence
to be in unison. . . .

What sonority
our limpid elements
draw from the clarity!¹⁴

The point here is not only that Stevens' poetry often resembles symbolist poetry, but that like our impressions of the natural world, words can also generate impressions without traditional rational meanings. Again, Stevens' words: "There is always an analogy between nature and the imagination, and possibly poetry is merely the strange rhetoric of that parallel" (NA 118); and further, "the irrational element in poetry is the transaction between reality and the sensibility of the poet from which poetry springs" (OP 217). The contextual relationship of man to the natural world is apprehensible in the contextual relationships of words in poetry.

Later in "Prologues to What is Possible" the man in the boat is "lured on by a syllable without any meaning," a syllable which "contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter" (CP 516). The meaning contained in the context of words has a mysterious analogy, or even direct relationship, to the meaning contained in a man's interconnection with his place. This interconnection fails to work in spots where the imagination fails. The best example of this is Crispin, who continually changes place as he becomes less and less active imaginatively; as he searches for a place (for the home which is found more blueily later in "The Auroras of Autumn") in Mexico and Carolina, he dissipates. The interesting point here is that "The Comedian as the Letter C" proceeds linearly, as an obscure narrative following the linear events of Crispin's faltering quest. The language of "Comedian," on the other hand, is the post-symbolist language of *Harmonium*, difficult, rich, surprising: it attempts to assert that unified crystal in a poem which progresses linearly through time. For this reason, I think, most readers find the language of "Comedian" to be inappropriate to the subject.

Because language is intimately related to man's place in a context, it may serve as a way of being, as a stance in the world. Contextuality implies a unity of parts. Each part must have its own identity as well as be a part of the ecology. The original problem, posited here for Stevens, was that he felt himself apart, alienated from the world; he felt the need to make himself part of the physical poetry—he wanted to feel an ecological interconnection. The problem involved his stance in the world, what way of seeing the world best suited him. The stance a person took could be influenced by what he believed truth to be. Eventually, it became better to be "ignorant," a condition of the spirit exemplified by the latest freed man. This condition is also connected to language. In "On the Road Home" (CP 203) a speaker affects his stance in the world by saying "There is no such thing as the truth' "; his partner replies, "There are many truths, / But they are not parts of a truth.'" The significance here is that the speakers are *saying, mak-*

ing a stance; and the idea of "parts of a truth" fully integrates itself into a linguistic problem when the speaker says,

"Words are not forms of a single word.
In the sum of the parts, there are only the parts.
The world must be measured by eye."

The speakers are engaged in creating a stance for themselves in relation to the truth by forming linguistic contexts for their ideas. Their linguistic contexts affect ("It was when I said . . .") their apprehension of their place in the context of reality:

It was at that time, that the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest.

The speaker comes closest to—least alienated from—his environment at the moment of *saying*, or making. (It should be noted here that it is not the words but the act of imagining which is important; a poem like "The Motive for Metaphor" spells out the inadequacy of figuration itself to make pure connections.)

The crystalline symbolist moment of words became directly related to the poet's place in the world. Actual geographic locations like Florida or Connecticut influence the geography of the mind. In specific terms, a mythology reflects its region. In an earlier poem like "Nomad Exquisite" there is a direct suggestion of this connection; Louis Martz says that the speaker has established a liaison with nature.¹⁵ But the diction of the poem is still the "gaiety" of *Harmonium*—the emphasis is on the language rather than the place. The lushness of Florida is a keen analogue for a phrase, "The immense dew of Florida," and the lushness affects the poet—"So, in me, come flinging / Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames" (CP 95). But this speaker is still separate from the geographic context itself. He is still the intelligence of his soil and has not established the liaison expressed in "The Auroras of Autumn."

A poem from the transitional book *Parts of a World* illustrates the relationship between the poet in his geographic context and the poet as creator of linguistic contexts, especially with regard to Stevens' developing capacity to create a "liaison" with nature through the imagination. "Variations on a Summer Day" (CP 232-36) establishes a clear geographic context not only by place names, but by vivid images. The images become interconnected with the sense of sound and making, and the poem finally culminates in a symbolist image rich with sound and visual uncertainty, yet impregnated with the romantic sense of place. True to the meditative technique of most of his longer poems, Stevens does not follow any linear narrative or theme, and this technique enhances the sense of the crystal poem of many parts but a single moment.

The first poem in "Variations" is reminiscent of earlier imagist moments, for example the blackbird in the mountains in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird": "Say of the gulls that they are flying / In light blue air over dark blue sea." The opening word "Say" tends immediately to remove the speaker and the reader from the place. This speaker is clearly observing and making, like the speaker of "Nomad Exquisite," not yet feeling himself a part of the place. The connection here is more intimate, though. In poem II there is "A music more than a breath"—not simply an observer visually, separately seeing gulls fly over water, but an observer who has come closer to the world and senses a music in it. It is "more than a breath, but less / Than the wind," and at this point we tumble to the fact that this music has romantic connotations: Wordsworth's blessing in this gentle breeze, wind and breath signifying in the romantic sensibility a spirit—as often as not a unifying spirit. Stevens does not invoke a spirit that rolls through all things, though. He prefers the things themselves, the sensibility itself, and the tentative nature of this music is "sub-music like sub-speech, / A repetition of unconscious things, / Letters of rock and water, words / Of the visible elements and of ours." What is happening in the mind which spurs words is related with an intimacy of the unconscious to the things of that outer context, the rock and water.

The relationship becomes clearer in poem III. The imagination works on things and creates figurations—rocks become dogs become fishes that "leap / Into the sea." In poem IV the context is broadened into the universe at large. "Star over Monhegan, Atlantic star" lets us know that we are in Maine, beside the Atlantic Ocean, beneath the wide sky. There is almost a Shelleyan expansiveness to this place. The star drifts almost aimlessly, or it drifts as the result of some larger will; it is not clear to either the reader or the speaker what kind of will is really at work in the universe. Shelley might have "leaped" to the idea of a transcendent will, but Stevens' romanticism reins in and tentatively inserts "if there is a will," and follows it with possibilities in time and quality for this will: "Or the portent of a will that was, / One of the portents of the will that was." This is clearly a romantic context, the imagination is at work, and there is an impending sense of participation in the context, but the modern skeptic emerges at the point which might have served as divine afflatus for Shelley or Wordsworth.

In poem V there is more imagery, more figuration, and more reference to making through words. The shaken leaves of the sea serve as a figure of change which in the later poetry would become "hallucinations on every leaf" (CP 529). The tree becomes not just a man but a father, suggesting time, history, a sense of the past embedded in the geography. And in the final line, "We sat beneath it and sang our songs," that is, made or said something of this context. Poem VI qualifies the sense of time from poem V: "It is cold to be forever young," and this phrase alludes almost certainly to the timelessness of Keats's Grecian urn. Again the imagination has coursed over the geography, and that imagery returns, as the speaker becomes engaged with the sea, coming "to tragic shores" and flowing "In sapphire, round the sun-bleached stones." The singer at Key West who sang beyond the genius of the sea was never able to take on the eternal youth and an-

cientness of the sea. In this poem the speaker seems to have connected with that sense of interminable youth, flowing, tide, water that wears down rocks that change little even "for old men" and that are for the old men the "time of their time."

The context of "Variations" weaves back on itself in poem VII as the speaker returns to the gulls of poem I. "One sparrow is worth a thousand gulls, / When it sings." Not only is there a sub-music in the air of the gulls over the water, but there is a sparrow which seems to sing back. This singing is valuable a thousand-fold. The gull sits separately, is observable, but the sparrow "requisites one, without intent." The sparrow seems to make or say, and this act of engagement, of exchange, creates an interconnection in the physical context which the gull alone is incapable of. Poem VIII tentatively retreats from this contextual connection, and the sense of "variation" is evoked—how the figuration on the rocks and trees had come, spontaneously: "one looks at the sea / As one improvises, on the piano." There is that rhythmic clattering of waves upon the imagination, seemingly random, shaken and shaken, a portent for hallucination on every leaf.

Poem IX evokes an impression of Maine itself: the physical poetry of the seacoast "produces / More nights, more days, more clouds, more worlds." It is not merely that "land and sea" produce material for the imagination to work with, but that the world itself is changeable, and that the imagination which creates dogs from rocks and leaves from waves is interwoven with that world and fluctuates with it. More and more variations are possible. Poem X expands this sense:

To change nature, not merely to change ideas,
To escape from the body, so to feel
Those feelings that the body balks,
The feelings of the natures round us here:
As a boat feels when it cuts blue water.

This is not merely to change the imagination, but to change nature. His soil is man's intelligence, if he can "feel / . . . The feelings of the natures round us here," as a boat feels in its own context, part of a context. The speaker at this point, having felt the strange eternity of the sea in poem VI, and actually having been requited by the singing sparrow in poem VII, now meditates upon the place of language in this context in poem XI. Naming the grass and Pemaquid in order not to lose the sense of place, the ineluctable changes of nature—warm to cold, moon after sun—are likened to the changes that take place in literary translation. "The moon follows the sun like a French / Translation of a Russian poet." Here, heat had come before cold, and sun had come before moon, and there are respective parallels: heat/sun and cold/moon. The parallel structure should extend itself to heat/sun/Russian and cold/moon/French, but this at first seems slightly disjointed. The Russian language is notably less mellifluous or warm than the French. The failure of translation through language is implicit in the apparently improper parallel. What should have been warmer is actually colder; it has a less direct light—not the sun, the moon. The distancing that began the poem—"Say

of the gulls"—is varied here, but the same problem exists: a problem of trying to translate one sensibility by use of an intermediary tool, language. Even French, the language of Mallarmé and Valéry, is moonlike compared to the original Russian.

Poem XII returns, then, to figuration. Parallel to poem III in which rocks became dogs became fishes, in poem XII spruce trees become soldiers become spruce trees. In the figuration a history is being recalled of Sergeant March's defeat at a fort in colonial times, and the trees come to stand for change, "A repetition of unconscious things" through history (poem II). Similarly, the meditations of "Variations" are repeating themselves, both in imagery and in theme. After repeating these structures which should have been at work unconsciously in the reader (read: an element of symbolist poetics), the imagery of poem XIII verges on the surreal. I take a "sand rose" to be the wild rose which grows abundantly on cliffs along the Maine coast; the speaker here has fused the rose bushes with the sea itself ("Cover the sea with the sand rose") and perhaps invaded the sub-speech of his unconscious with the word "radiantiana" which sounds suspiciously like "Santayana," Stevens' teacher at Harvard. Stevens' own history would have been one of having been irradiated by Santayana's light in the same way sea spray crashes on the rocks and dots the roses. This is a kind of fertilization: "Let all the salt be gone," that is, salt is usually sown to sterilize, but the salt sea is really something deep and fertilizing, like the history of our learning.

Santayana the philosopher was a man of words, presumably spraying Stevens with them; hence poem XIV: "Words add to the senses." After the figuration of spruce trees, the sense of historical moment, and the sense of a personal growth in the past, the meditation returns to the problem of language.

Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle
Of mica, the dithering of grass,
The Arachne integument of dead trees,
Are the eye grown larger, more intense.

If the word "say" removed us from the geographic scene itself, words have served another purpose: to give us images. Following this idea we get a series of images, all overshadowed by the word "dazzle" which, in its context with "mica" and "dithering" and "Arachne integument of dead trees," suggests that glittering symbolist crystal. These words "Are the eye grown larger, more intense." The imagination making the connection between place and language attempts to approximate the intensity of reality itself—the intensity of the sensuous symbolist moment.

Poem XV throws the place and the person into a single context, as the images of poem XIV have been unified in a single dazzle:

The last island and its inhabitant,
The two alike, distinguish blues,
Until the difference between air

And sea exists by grace alone,
In objects, as white this, white that.

The island and its inhabitant are parts of this geographic whole. The difference between them is the kind of difference noticed in "The Idea of Order at Key West" when "It was her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing" (CP 129). The sky is acute where it vanishes at the horizon, and at Pemaquid "the difference between air / And sea exists by grace alone," the grace, or influence, of other objects in the context of the scene. The inhabitant is part of this scene. As the inhabitant is human, he has words, and words are sounds; in poem XVI the sound and rhythm of the water return—this inhabitant is in the center of a physical poetry. Centrality is suggested by poem XVII, which, with its images of doors and walls and sleepy coziness by a pine fire ("pine-figures" recall the spruce trees that became men that became trees), evokes a sense of home, a center—a place like that of Crispin, but purer because the inhabitants have achieved a kind of unity: in some mysterious way of the imagination they are the trees that they bring in to burn for warmth.

Poem XVIII opens with what seems to be an observation like that of poem I: "Low tide, flat water, sultry sun." But there is no intervening "say" here. "One observes profoundest shadows rolling" gives us the image, but despite the fact that "one observes" (at a remove), the words now are sounds rather than sayings; the place is beginning to be interconnected with the formless sounds—like "the bell of the water," for instance—that are in this context: "Damariscotta da da doo." Poem XIX similarly shows an image, then introduces sound ("Hurroo") that does not carry specific semantic implications, although is more meaningful than "da da doo." But next, it fuses the image of body and boat from poem X into a single image: "the man-makenesse, neater than Naples." The interconnectedness of man and boat is enforced by the strange word "man-makenesse" which seems to imply that an essence is being referred to, not just a boat with a man but the creative power of man to make a thing and become part of it—"man-boat." "Neater than Naples" seems to serve no specific semantic function. The alliteration of *n*'s appears to etch sounds upon the sensibility, to ring together the imagery with the flirtations with nonsense of "da da doo" and boyish "Hurroo."

The speaker of the poem and the inhabitant of the last island having become intertwined in both the geography of the Atlantic coast and the sounds of the words which describe it, it remains for the final poem to impart a sense of that powerful moment.

You could almost see the brass on her gleaming,
Not quite. The mist was to light what red
Is to fire. And her mainmast tapered to nothing,
Without teetering a millimeter's measure.
The beads on her rails seemed to grasp at transparency.
It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping.

The uncertain words used to describe the image here are strong evidence for George Bornstein's point about Stevens' romantic tentativeness: "almost," "Not quite," "mist," "tapered," "seemed," "not yet." The speaker's sense of the place can not quite be conveyed in words. What emerges, then, is a hazy scene, highly evocative of that surreal sense of distance on the sea, especially in late summer haze (or "mist" as Stevens calls it). There is a "gleaming" in this final image which is almost "transparence" — "The mist was to light what red / Is to fire." The language here is the language of symbolism, images evoking a feeling which drives into the unconscious and requires the reader to feel the actuality of the situation where ideas alone do not convey it precisely. Compare this poem to this passage from "L'Après-midi d'un Faune":

The only wind
prompt to exhale from the twin-pipes before
it can disperse the sound in an arid rain,
is, on the horizon unstirred by a wrinkle,
the visible and serene artificial breath
of inspiration, which regains the sky.¹⁶

This is a sensibility made of words, not ideas.

Words could only approximate for Stevens; they could not purely express the first idea, but they at least could provide a form to create a context analogous to reality. In *Harmonium* it is still a theory that "I am what is around me" (CP 86)—it is separate, an idea that a detached observer has. In a transitional period, the speaker of "Variations on a Summer Day" is not continuously feeling "the feelings of the natures round us here," and there is still some doubt about the relationship of man and place—"It was not yet the hour to be dauntlessly leaping": the fish spawned from dogs' heads from the cliff faces of poem III are not fully or completely reliable in the haze of perception this speaker has achieved. Stevens' modern sense of unity is not constant. Even by 1950, in "The Course of a Particular," he can say, "And though one says that one is part of everything, / There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved" (OP 96).

The intense eye that sees into the auroras, though, has established a stance in the universe that Hoon could not have adopted: the sense of the interior paramour that "out of the central mind, / We make a dwelling in the evening air" (CP 524). There is an uneasy point at which Stevens can accept a tentative, contextual relationship with the world rather than just theorize about it:

The partaker partakes of that which changes him.
The child that touches takes character from the thing,
The body, it touches. The captain and his men

Are one and the sailor and the sea are one.

(CP 392)

More than simply a system of thoughtlessness, a poem springs from our participation in a place that is not our own, not ourselves. Place and language meet at the imagination. The sense of that interconnection is disclosed not as an act of fancy, but as a readministering of the impression. A poem can take the place of a mountain because it, too, is a context, a system of parts that compose an ecology of sound, images, and rhythms.

They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the citrons.
In the land of big mariners, the words they spoke
Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk.

(CP 486)

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Notes

¹See Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens or the Hedonist's Progress," in *In Defense of Reason* (New York: Swallow Press, 1947), pp. 431-59.

²Anna Balakian, *The Symbolist Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 4.

³Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957), p. 227. Subsequent references to this source will be cited in the text as *OP*. Stevens' *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954) and *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951) will be cited in the text as *CP* and *NA*, respectively.

⁴For a discussion of the tentative qualities of Stevens' romanticism, see George Bornstein, "The New Romanticism of Wallace Stevens," in *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 163-230.

⁵William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, Selected Poems and Sonnets*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 97.

⁶P.B. Shelley, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Modern Library, 1951), pp. 369-73.

⁷Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry," p. 519.

⁸"A Defence of Poetry," p. 494.

⁹So much has been said about Stevens' relationship to Keats that I will not belabor it further here. Helen Vendler's remarks are especially illuminating.

¹⁰S.T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald A. Stauffer (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 263.

¹¹Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 125, 128, 130.

¹²Allan Chavkin quotes from Stevens' letters on "Domination of Black": "I am sorry that a poem of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images and sounds that it contains." See "Wallace Stevens: The Romantic Imagist," in *Ball State University Forum*, XXI, no. 1 (1980), p. 41.

¹³"Your knowledge is irrational. In that sense life is mysterious; and if it is mysterious at all, I suppose that it is cosmically mysterious" (*OP* 226).

¹⁴Paul Valéry, *French Symbolist Poetry*, trans. C.F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 109.

¹⁵Louis Martz, "Wallace Stevens: The Skeptical Music," in *The Poem of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 186.

¹⁶Stéphane Mallarmé, *French Symbolist Poetry*, p. 57.

Poems

Homage to Wallace Stevens

Word for word, what the cicada says
Is beyond him, now. And the moonlight,
Writing its blue notes
In the margins of everything . . .

*

Sunday evening. Night falls in the stilled suburbs
Of Hartford. He's making a low sound. Under
His breath, he's muttering about the mangroves
And jasmines he has seen in Key West,

The bright exhaustion of stars, the lust
Of the bougainvillaea. Physical streets
Of the physical town. Your ear swims in the sound.
It is like nothing, nothing you have heard.

*

The wind in Asia is and is not the wind
In Hartford, he says. The tongue
Is an eye. The eye is an element,
Like air, like water . . .

*

Nothing's shimmer on the Kanawha River.
Honky-tonk of crickets on the bank.
Everything ticks like a clock.

*

The planet on the table
Shines on, in an absence of sun—

Be with us, old, fancy man.

Tom Andrews
University of Virginia

Under the Surface Full of Sun

A poem's surface full of clouds—
full of exhalations of the sky.
It makes one think of the sun,
purple Phoebus, gold flourisher,
the mind in the act of finding names.
We pour brilliant iris on the mirror.

And in the definition growing certain,
in the etching of sea-blooms certain,
mirroring the eye, the echo of the I,
we rouse the freshest fresh light
kept greenest under moving crystal.
I hear the whole, the complicate fluendos,
following the words that sink as stone,
filling with light the bubbles that are not.

David P. Rosen

Selecting Adieux

From here, now, the silence—
the absence of tree-
peepers, fallen asleep in rain—
a void, something missed,
like newspaper thuds, a
sullen no-ness, expecting
all the congruities, a balcony
where everything is alive and
dead, like memory.

I remain,
hopefully yours, waiting
for the tree-peepers,
snow-drops, early rain,
the news from Vienna,
perfect letters from China.

Peter Van Egmond
University of Maryland

Stevens Seen From Grad School in a Purple Light

Poets, one would think, should expire flaringly
and be burned upon a pyre
while their friends swim out to sea
and later pluck their blazing hearts
hot from the heroic coals.

Hi! Whisk it . . .

Wallace Stevens didn't even get drunk
and drown in his best friend's swimming pool.
He never strode clear-eyed into the Ouse

Lurched toward two enlarging headlights
in the Carolina dark, thinking
"I just can't take it any more"

Sprazzled out on an electric fan
right in the embarrassing Kierkegaardian middle
of a conference of saffron-robed monks.

He never got his trait'rous top chopped off
or (Cockalorum)
caught TB.

The wily old coot took good care of himself
bundled up in Brooks Brothers overcoats
and lived forever.

He remarks on page eight hundred and ninety
in the second last
of his *Letters*

That he'd better not do anything rash
(drive up to Maine, look at delphiniums)
he had to save strength for the office.

What a madman!
Weird, weird dude
up to his neck in Insurance

But his head was free.

John Gorman
University of Houston-Clear Lake

News and Comments

Glenn Horowitz, Bookseller (141 East 44th Street, New York, NY 10017), lists the following Stevens items in their recent **Catalogue 11**.

640 STEVENS, Wallace. Brief TLS, 1947, to the writer William Humphrey. A full four years prior to the publication of his first book, Humphrey had written Stevens with an unusual proposal: Stevens was to buy Humphrey a farm and support him while he tended the farm and wrote his stories, in exchange for which Humphrey would provide Stevens and his family with a constant supply of food. Stevens, in his most wryly legal manner, replies in the negative: "You cannot seriously expect me to do as you ask. . . . there doesn't seem to be much hope for you as a writer if you are going to engage in farm work. I am sorry that I don't have the answer." Signed in full in ink, folded for mailing, else fine. \$550.00

641 (STEVENS, Wallace). *OEUVRES COMPLETES DE MOLIERE*. Paris: Garnier Freres, Libraires-Editeurs, n.d. Two volumes. Uniform 12mos. Sumptuously bound in three-quarter red morocco with raised bands, stamped in gilt. Both volumes bear the early (1902) ownership inscription of Wallace Stevens, then preparing to attend law school in New York. Covers rubbed; light, natural darkening to the pages, otherwise fine. A nice ex libris. \$750.00

642 (STEVENS, Wallace). "Broom." Volume II, Number 2. December, 1921. Folio. Printed wrappers. First appearance of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws." Edelstein C67. Wear to the edges of the oversize wrapper, else fine. \$40.00

643 STEVENS, Wallace. *OWL'S CLOVER*. New York: Alcestis Press (1936). First edition. 8vo. Printed orange wrappers. One of 85 numbered copies signed by Stevens. By virtue of limitation one of the rarest Stevens titles. By virtue of the verse one of the great books of 20th century poetry. One stain to front wrapper, else a fine, fresh copy. \$3200.00

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