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Apocalyptic Hysteria in Stevens

JOSEPH ADAMSON

"Eucalyptus as against apokalypsis, or the sudden, extraordinary uncovering of things" is how Eleanor Cook, in an ingenious gloss on the name "Professor Eucalyptus" in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," has characterized Stevens' uncanny sense of revelation as re-veil-ation: "'Eucalyptus' means well-covered, as the flower of the eucalyptus tree is, until its time for uncovering arrives in the ordinary course of things" (299). It is undeniable, however, that Stevens often enough goes through at least the motions of apocalypse, giving equal time to the urgency of a need for the uncovering of things as they are. If the only satisfaction lies in the quest for a satisfaction that is perpetually lacking, Stevens' poetry does not by the same token ever forgo the dream of presence, of a plenitude without difference or deferral. The dream remains as irresistible as the evidence of its impossibility. In Derrida's words, used in another context to describe the puzzling effect of Rousseauian desire (what he calls its "destiny of non-satisfaction"), "Differance produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible" (Grammatology 143). For Stevens as for Rousseau, it makes indeed an obsession of presence—one as compelling as the very forces that inevitably resist its pull.

Nowhere is this propulsion more pressing, more promising than at that famous juncture (III, vii) in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where an imposed order is dramatically refused in the name of discovery. Is "Notes," then—to investigate possible further implications of Cook's intriguing analysis—the apocalyptic poem to which "An Ordinary Evening," for example, is the counterpart, one might even say the more mature and considered response? Or is this passage itself only another example of eucalypse, of a disclosure that still teasingly withholds the truth even as it proffers it? The fascination of the closing crescendo of canto VII may finally be explained, indeed, by the peculiar tension at play between a purported unveiling of the real, which is so emphatically announced, and the "hysterical" use of syntax upon which that epiphany depends, between a "proper" revelation and the discovery here predicated on the suspension of any "law of the proper," to use Derrida's term for the economic rule governing truth-oriented discourses.¹

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

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,
It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible. It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute—Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound.

(CP 403-04)

The event of disclosure at this point in “Notes” is curiously speculative. This
proper event, or event of the proper, this Heideggerian Ereignis, turns out to be
essentially conjectural, which accounts for the compulsive tone that seems to in-
vade the canto. We sense the effort to give birth to something that is already a
ghost of itself, the event of the proper as a simulation of the proper: not paradise
regained, but paradise refeigned. Belief here hardly suggests belief in the truth
of what is disclosed. Like Coleridge’s willing suspension of disbelief, or like the
belief in metaphor in “The Pure Good of Theory” which sticks to “the nicer
knowledge of / Belief, that what it believes in is not true” (CP 332), it is a belief
in the fiction of something, the recognition that the real is revealed only when
“secreted” in a figurative covering (“Secrete us in reality” [CP 310], the orator is
commanded at the end of “Repetitions of a Young Captain”). Not surprisingly,
the contradiction of such a belief “in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction,
there being nothing else” (OP 163) induces a visible note of hysteria, which takes
the form of an impossible effort to translate the speculative into the actual, the
present—and into a presence as well.

Stevens’ use of tenses is especially crucial. It reflects what Helen Vendler, ac-
counting for similar shifts in “Owl’s Clover” and “Description without Place,” calls
“the manipulation of tenses to yield apocalypse, as conjecture . . . becomes
hypothesis . . . and hypothesis is hypostatized to a visionary present tense” (Ven-
dler 220). This “manipulation” makes the reader a bemused but skeptical ob-
server trying to follow a sleight-of-hand that has already slipped the nut under
another shell. First of all, we are in the subjunctive, the realm of mere possibil-
ity: “It is possible, possible, possible.” The urgency conveyed by the repetition
seems to indicate that an hysterical need for the eventual is encroaching on an
object which is completely speculative. It is a true invocation, as though by mere
insistence on the event’s possibility we may be assured that “The real will from
its crude compoundings come.” This driven lyrical voice has left far behind the
cautions doubt of Saint John’s Back-Ache who, if he admits the possibility of
an absolute, unmediated presence, does so only grudgingly: “It may be, may be.
It is possible” (CP 437). With the repeating of “possible” we shift surreptitiously
from the indicative “is” of “is possible” to the imperative in the auxiliary “must”:
“It must / Be possible.” Expressed is a certain propriety, not of that which necessarily is, but of that which should in fact be. But the “must” here is even more sneaky, since it still affirms only the possibility, not the event itself. There is something syllogistic (in the pejorative sense) about Stevens’ furtive shifts of verb tenses and moods here; it is reminiscent of the speciousness in the equally stealthy change from “must” to “is” in the lines from canto IV of “Credences of Summer”: “The utmost must be good and is” (CP 374, italics added). Just as the critical distinction between the initial subjunctive mood and the imperative is lost forever in the shuffle (in the move from the speculative to an unconditional, categorical necessity, as “may” becomes “must”), so too in the next step the significant difference between the actual event and the mere demand for it is skirted and eluded in the shift from the imperative “must” to the future “will” of the subordinate clause in the lines: “It must be that in time! The real will from its crude compoundings come.” What began as only conjecture or possibility, hypothetical and speculative, has now become a future actuality, an assured, foreknown event. The merely speculative is treated here as a proper (authentic) event, which, in an almost Heideggerian fashion, is also an event of the proper, the coming into its own of the proper. But the speciousness of the logic only succeeds in undercutting the very ground of such an affirmation. Moreover, the deceptive, syllogistic, elliptical turn of the argument is intended to be only partially concealed. The suspect nature of the invocation not only is, but is expressly shown to be an indispensable aspect of this apocalyptic event, which is affirmed as both proper and entirely speculative at once. This advent of the real may, in fact, ask that we think of it as purely conjectural, hypothetical, but without—paradoxically—unilaterally or unequivocally rejecting its “reality.” Otherwise this event cannot take place, cannot take place as that by which, to invoke Mallarmé’s “RIEN N’ AURA EU LIEU QUE LE LIEU” from Le Coup de dés, nothing will have taken place but place, which means that nothing takes place, nothing but an effect of pure speculation.

Vendler quite rightly describes this elliptical shifting as a “manipulation of tenses to yield apocalypse.” But it does not follow that Stevens is simply manipulating the reader. The reader may in fact be invited to catch the cheating going on, to recognize that with this apocalypse we have ironically never left the speculative even for a moment. For if Vendler’s extraordinary sensitivity (hard to find equalled in any other critic) to the quirks of this poet’s use of words allows her to nab Stevens every time he slips another card from the bottom of the deck, an all-important question still remains to be asked: what if “the sleight-of-hand man” is doing everything in his power to get caught, yet without ever seeming to want to get caught? In that case, is he actually cheating, and what could be the ulterior motive behind such a red-handed clumsiness, which is perhaps all too clever by half? Stevens discusses, in a letter, a similar invocation of apocalypse in “Owl’s Clover” (the passage beginning “Time’s fortune near” [OP 61]), and outlines, presumably to his own disadvantage, the same overtly specious and hysterical argument for an eventual, final disclosure of reality. Just as in “Notes,” the event exposes itself as groundless speculation, with signs as well of the same ob-
sessive insistence: “Time’s fortune near = now that the disinherited are to come into an unexpected inheritance: Time’s categorical inheritance, the fortune concealed in it must be so, it cannot be otherwise (It will, it will be changed and things that will be realized . . .)” (Letters 371).

Apocalypse is finally the fiction of apocalypse. This may seem a rather nice distinction, but we are concerned, after all, with the “nicer knowledge of / Belief” (CP 332), with “apocalypse,” not apocalypse: that is, with the supreme fiction as fiction, with the remarking or quoting of a signifier that, in this case, has the peculiar irony of signifying the very end of the signifying process, the fading away of all signifiers in face of a compelling, transcendental signified. By remarking or quoting, I mean that the passage alludes to, cites or summons “apocalypse” by the metonymic use of the “beast” that is such a notable companion of revelation in the biblical and literary sources. Stevens’ “beast disgorged” is, by detour of Yeats’s “Second Coming,” a summoning of the apocalyptic beasts in Daniel and Revelation:

It must be that in time
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,
Warmed by a desperate milk.

The image of these “crude compoundings,” which as the real emerges dissolve and vanish, recalls that perfected, “proper” scene in “The Poems of Our Climate,” which, clean and white, has “Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed / The evilly compounded, vital I” (CP 193). As these lines suggest, this stripping is still only another form of concealment. In “Notes” one is stripped in a similarly ambiguous way—“of every fiction except one,” that of revelation itself, which is still a fiction and therefore suggests that in Stevens’ apocalypse the real has not evaded every covering; in fact, it is only disclosed in this very evasion of the real. As Ozymandias knowingly observes in his put-down of Nanzia Nunziò’s offering of her favors in canto VII of “It Must Change”: “the spouse, the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (CP 396). Also of moment here is Peirce’s analogy for unlimited semiosis, the infinite regression of representations and interpretants; he uses the kindred image of a “stripping,” and equally recognizes that meaning, however progressively diaphanous, is always clothed by interpretation, by a representation or sign:

The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But this clothing never can be completely stripped off; it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally, the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series.

(quoted in Eco 69)
Purity, as shown in "The Poems of Our Climate," is only a fiction that conceals and threatens to obstruct a vital imperfection. So in "Notes" the real invoked as shedding "its crude compoundings" may suggest a result as fatal as it is compelling. If the compounding is vital, the fading away of this complexity may well be the opposite. What saves us from this unmediated disclosure is, ironically, the real itself. We are not to be stripped of every fiction, not to be divested of this final one: "The fiction of an absolute." The ultimate revelation is that revelation is itself a figure, that a disclosure of the real is possible only "in the intricate evasions of as" (CP 486). We enter reality only secretly, in the nicer knowledge that there is no way not to cover one's nakedness. Nor is this to insist that the real is a fiction but, rather, that we only ever know the real as fiction, which is a significantly different proposition.

Not surprisingly, in light of the impossibility of any unmediated disclosure of the real, a certain hysteria pervades this passage of "Notes." It is reflected in the very image of "a beast disgorged, unlike, / Warmed by a desperate milk." "Disgorged," this apocalyptic creature of the throat ultimately gives voice to "The luminous melody of proper sound" which, at the end of canto VII, the competing Angel is ordered to take in in silence. But it is brought into the world only by the need for itself; the advent of such a beast only calms the very want or desperation that, like its mother, has brought it forth and nursed it into life. This hysterical self-generation recalls "the weaving round the wonder of its need" (CP 434) of the form in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," where the figures attendant upon our extreme experience with death are "visible to the eye that needs, / Needs out of the whole necessity of sight" (CP 432), as though they only ever evolved out of this acute necessity. A similarly insatiable desire for a proper speech appears in canto VIII of "An Ordinary Evening": "Our breath is like a desperate element / That we must calm, the origin of a mother tongue / With which to speak to her" (CP 470-71). Once again, necessity is the mother of invention, need, in a circular way, the origin of the very speech that satisfies, as though need fulfilled itself in its own self-expression.

The apocalyptic beast in "Notes" is also a close cousin of the "Fire-monsters in the Milky Brain" (CP 331) or "beast of light" (CP 333) in "The Pure Good of Theory." In canto IV of that poem it is equally a case of a "beast disgorged": a guttural monster, a deformed creature born from the throat, a future being of speech or sound whose specular emergence seems to result from an extreme demand, suggesting, as in "Notes," a bottomless or abysmal desire. A desperate self-fulfillment marks "the beast of light," as it groans

in half-exploited gutturals

The need of its element, the final need
Of final access to its element—
Of access like the page of a wiggy book,
Touched suddenly by the universal flare
For a moment, a moment in which we read and repeat
The eloquences of light's faculties.

(CP 333)

The "need of its element" gives birth here, spontaneously, to that which fulfills it, an apocalyptic speech or script, a book that is primarily a rhetorical achievement, an effect of "The eloquences of light's faculties." The "universal flare" is also homonymically the "flair" of an acute sense of style or manner:

It is never the thing but the version of the thing:
The fragrance of the woman not her self,
Her self in her manner not the solid block . . .

(CP 332)

Vision, for Stevens, is not a seeing beyond all fiction. It is a verbal fluency. We "read and repeat" a final reality that is only imaginatively and figuratively accessible, which we enter only as a world of words, "like the page of a wiggy book." The "beast of light," like the apocalyptic "beast disgorged" of "Notes," is born, groaning in "half-exploited gutturals," from the throat's drastic hunger for a final eloquence, for a fiction which its own hysteria, "the final need / Of final access to its element," generates to satisfy itself.

The inherent lack of satisfaction in Stevens' demand for the "fiction of an absolute" or "luminous melody of proper sound" recalls Mallarmé's "Don du poëme," where the poet presents his starved, half-dead poem to his nursing wife, desperately pleading that she resuscitate it at "le sein / Par qui coule en blancheur sybilline la femme / Pour les lèvres que l'air du vierge azure affame." Rimbaud's famous closing line from "Conté" also comes to mind: "La musique savante manque à notre désir." For Stevens, this insatiability means that a proper speech is always extrinsic. "The supplement itself," as Derrida sums it up, "is quite exorbitant, in every sense of the word" (Grammatology 163). This idea of the exorbitancy of all signification is also theoretically very similar to Lacan's depiction of the desire for the real, which is always "situated in dependence on demand—which, by being articulated in signifiers, leaves a metonymic remainder that runs under it, an element that is not indeterminate, which is a condition both absolute and unapprehensible, an element necessarily lacking, unsatisfied, impossible, misconstrued (méconnu), an element that is called desire" (154). That word which fulfills apocalypse brings into play at the same time an irreducible extra, like that "wiggy book" in "The Pure Good of Theory," which if it supplies a lack is also purely additional, excessive ("wiggy" suggests that the book is artificial, supplementary, and eccentric as well). It is certainly not an event of the proper in Heidegger's sense of Erignis but, as eloquence, affirms propriety or decorum in the rhetorical sense. The beast slouching to be born in "Notes" resembles that "antipodal, far-fetched creature, worthy of birth" (OP 96), which is a metaphor of metaphor in "A Discovery of Thought," a poem whose subject is also a version
of apocalypse. Revelation in that poem does not culminate in a transcendence of signification in a final meaning. Rather, it is a moment in which we are born again and live on, "the effort to be born / Surviving being born, the event of life" (OP 96). Even if this "first word," which is "of the susceptible being arrived, / The immaculate disclosure of the secret no more obscured" (OP' 96), seems at first glance to point to an original word of being which has overcome all figuration before the pure evidence of the real, the event of disclosure in this poem, and by extension in "Notes," announces, on the contrary, the difference of this "event of life" as an emergence of "The accent of deviation in the living thing" (OP 96), as a birth of metaphor, not its end.

I have been using the word metaphor, but more specifically what concerns us here is a very particular species of metaphor: catachresis. The hysterical (from *hysterikós*, "of the womb") generation of a new and deviant word typifies a recurrent topic in Stevens' poetry; it is even a sort of *topos*, the commonplace of un-commonplace, the staging of the trope of invention, of a word born out of nothing which itself gives birth to reality. The real is disclosed only as a figurative effect or verbal issue. The need for a new word, in order to name a reality that has no name and no reality until named, impregnates itself (hysterically, if you like) and gives birth to a monster, a grotesque deviation from any natural, normal form or type: a gross verbal impropriety. This deviation corresponds in fact to the very definition of catachresis as "an improper use of words": etymologically, "contrary-to-usage-ness." In "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," the extreme need for the vital forms that can help us to cope with death gives birth to a trio of bewildering figures, "monsters of elegy" (CP 435) like the centaur-like, misaligned and hybrid figure of "peace, the godolphin and fellow, estranged, estranged, / Hewn in their middle as the beam of leaves" (CP 434), which is an example of two-bodied grotesquery analogous to the verbal misapplication that goes by the name of catachresis. So in "Notes" the real is born in the monstrous shape of an unseemly and dissonant "beast disgorged, unlike." Like Derrida's "future," as he invokes it in the exergue to *Of Grammatology*, which is only to be "anticipated in the form of an absolute danger," Stevens' violently uttered apocalyptic word, radically open to the unknown, is "that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity" (5).

Catachresis is the supreme example of figurative impropriety. It is itself not even a proper figure, for unlike metaphor it does not substitute for an already existent name, but replaces nothing, naming by transference something for which there is no name. Catachresis is "A name for something that never could be named," which is how Stevens describes the outmoded use of "Phoebus" for the sun in the opening canto of "Notes"; in that same canto, he then turns around and names the sun, catachrestically, of course: "The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher" (CP 381). "Gold flourisher" is a perfect example of catachresis, a name that, like the "legs" of a table or chair, fills a lexical gap, supplies the dearth of a name. This need is always most pressing in limit-situations, at the origin or at the end of a history of naming. Stevens is fascinated by these two turning-points or crises: the auroral moment of naming and the setting of a verbal sun. The first
two cantos of "Notes" contain between them both the uncrowning of old names ("Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber, / Phoebus is dead, ephebe" [CP 381]) and the crowning of the new ("desire at the end of winter" [CP 382]), the rising and setting, the turning of a sun that language cannot name finally except improperly? This catachrestic moment is as close as we get to an origin in Stevens, for here original naming and original reality intersect and are fully interdependent. In the apocalyptic mode, furthermore, as in that climax of "Notes" where the discovery of the real is so urgently announced, original and final naming are joined: the origin is supposedly resumed and reappropriated (with interest) in the finally restored proper name, that name for the sun, for the elusive reality that is the obsessive object of quest throughout Stevens' poetry. This moment, however, is always complicated by an economy of signification whereby, in Derrida's words, "proper meaning derives from derivation" (Margins 280). Discovery is inventio: the desire "To find the real" does not concern the simplicity of a presence: the return to an origin through the resumptive advent of a final reality results in a new displacement. The arrival of reality is a derivation, a de-rival?

Stevens' apocalypse, then, even at its most urgent, is still eucalyptus; it uncovers, reveals, only in re-covering. As in Peirce, the movement towards an approachable truth comes up against an instant which is, significantly, both an end and a beginning, a revolution; the critical return to the origin is at the same time a digression, which opens the sign to its future. The revelatory word affirms no proper reality, no restored truth; it affirms instead a deviation, a distortion, a catachrestic, "monstrous" departure from any stringent state of being or literal meaning.

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Notes

1Derrida locates this "law of the proper" via Heidegger in "this value of Ereignis, so difficult to translate and whose entire family (ereignen, eigen, eigens, enteignen) intermingles with increasing density, in Heidegger's last texts, with the themes of the proper, of propriety, of propriation, of de-propriation on one hand, with that of light, of the clearing, of the eye on the other" ("Retmit" 17). Involving among other things the distinction between figurative and literal meaning, this "law" is fundamental to what Derrida calls the "metaphysics of presence," as discussed, for example, in the following passage from Of Grammatology: "Metaphor shapes and undermines the proper name. The literal (proper) meaning does not exist, its 'appearance' is a necessary function—and must be analyzed as such—in the system of differences and metaphors. The absolute parousia of the literal meaning, as the presence to the self of the logos within its voice, in the absolute hearing-itself-speak, should be situated as a function responding to an indestructible but relative necessity, within a system that encompasses it. That amounts to situating the metaphysics or the ontotheology of the logos" (89).

2Patricia Parker, in her subtle concern for what she calls "Stevens' wariness of apocalypse or centre" (240), effectively paraphrases the paradoxical movement of this passage of "Notes": "Even the reduction to the 'first idea' in 'Notes' ends in an 'imagined thing.' The ephebe is to learn that 'Phoebus is dead,' to 'clean the sun' of all its images. But the sun which must 'bear no name' is simultaneously, and beautifully, called 'gold flourisher,' a kenning which reimports figuration in one of its most elemental forms" (238-39). The most elemental form of naming, and the most inventive (indeed, it is famous for providing names for that which has just been invented) is proverbially catachresis.

3I am grateful to Peter Nesselroth for some of his suggestive ideas on Derrida's use of catachresis.


"And Things Beyond Resemblance": On Stevens' Embedded Similes

LAURY MAGNUS

My point of departure is our sense of Wallace Stevens as the sleight-of-hand man, and especially in one particular mode: the exacting poetics of his simile-making. It is a poetics closely related to his syntactic style and his use of repeated appositions and qualifications. Just as these repetitions do, Stevens' similes operate in such a way that at a certain point the act of simile-making obscures the very basis of statement itself, moving far away from the context which it is supposed to illuminate, dislocating the reader and losing him in reverie on reverie. Various critics, notably Helen Vendler and, more recently, Frank Doggett and Jacqueline Brogan, have argued that Stevens' similes function like his syntax: to promote the evasions of the imagination by assaulting and breaking down the entrapping categories of reality; thus, for example, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," sky, sea, singer, and song become an orchestrated part of a fusion made manifest through the very operations of sound. I agree that such a metamorphic or "evasive" effect is produced by repetitions and embeddings of simile in Stevens, but I find that, characteristically, once simile-making has fully exploited the anarchic potential of language, new orders of being or seeing can then be decisively posited in what become more definitive acts of predication.

Stevens' multiple similes, like his repeated appositions and multiple qualifications, often hang, suspended, on the same syntactic thread and as such are an extreme extension of the exploratory and digressive possibilities of sentential syntax; they correspond to Stevens' fully articulated lexicon of the hypothetical, which Vendler has traced with some thoroughness. As she indicates, Stevens' "characteristic 'as if' " (and, as she fails to mention, his characteristic "like") liberates the imagination from the laws of logic and predication, and with both of these connectives, "currents of feeling . . . become so entangled by the end of [the] poem . . . that the logical sense of the ending is dissolved in the affective result of the comparison." Thus, embedded similes are the most radical type of repetition of syntax, for they pose a serious threat to syntax itself.

Let us consider, for a moment, why this is so. As with apposition and qualification, the natural effect of the simile is digressive, since it serves to draw attention, though even for a moment, away from the progression of narrative, logic, or predication. Thus, even the epic simile is only the logical extension of the simile's inherently digressive potential. But Stevens' are expanded epic similes, since, following a pattern first discernible in Dante, they tend to embed still other similes; instead of gradually working back to the original predication, these embedded similes seem to move further and further away from predicating anything and contribute to what Doggett sees as an improvisatory, shifting style. Put another way, such similes deliberately suspend statement in the middle in order to move back to a time prior to statement, as we shall see with particular clar-
ity by examining the openings of such poems as “Martial Cadenza” and “Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers,” and by an in-depth examination of “Prologues to What Is Possible.” Thus, they create a “hall of mirrors” type of effect, for it is not only as though one thing is being compared in multiple ways to others but also that one act of comparison is being compared to others and, in turn, to others. The similes, like repeated qualifications and appositions, invoke the play of premature, anarchic release from the responsibility of statement, and instead serve as muses of speculation and rumination. Their effect on the reader is to lead him by stages to so enter the domain of the simile that the poem’s original tenor is forgotten. At this point, the truest agon between imaginative expansion and precision, between mind and reality, can take place. This defiant and joyous digressiveness at least provisionally refutes the notion of exposition or narration because it perversely refuses to yield thereto. Ultimately, however, the refusal to “come home” to the initial tenor of statement is only a prolonged ploy: just when the reader gives up expecting such a return, he mysteriously finds himself at or adjacent to the point of departure.

One of the earliest instances of this assault on traditional poetic predication is “Martial Cadenza,” of which I quote the first half:

I

Only this evening I saw again low in the sky
The evening star, at the beginning of winter, the star
That in spring will crown every western horizon,
Again . . . as if it came back, as if life came back,
Not in a later son, a different daughter, another place,
But as if evening found us young, still young,
Still walking in a present of our own.

II

It was like sudden time in a world without time,
This world, this place, the street in which I was,
Without time: as that which is not has no time,
Is not, or is of what there was, is full
Of the silence before the armies, armies without
Either trumpets or drums, the commanders mute, the arms
On the ground, fixed fast in a profound defeat.5

We start out, at least, in a particular time and place, on solid ground. But here the particularity of the initial act of observing the evening star low in the sky at a particular time ("the beginning of winter") is dissolved in successive veils of qualification and simile. The progression moves from the "factual" of "I saw" through a slight disruption which suggests that the present is cyclical, habitual—"I saw again." Paralleling this is the further modification of "star"—the object of the factual "I saw"—to "the star / That in spring will crown every western horizon, / Again," now the subject of a visionary projection. The star so modified by
the vision is what then becomes the subject of the two similes that follow, for its projected return is what generates a new simile—a simile which modifies the initial seeing: "as if it came back, as if life came back." But the embodiment of the principle of eternal recurrence is highly qualified by the new simile. The return is not a regeneration through "a later son, a different daughter, another place"—another set of particularities altogether (those, let us say, who might be around after the war to still be seeing the star); rather, the return is a reembodiment of the present imagining self through the very act of imaginative projection involved in simile-making. Thus, another simile, with its pronounced syntactic signal, introduces this new embodiment. The eternal return is "as if evening found us young, still young, / Still walking in a present of our own." Simile's shifting of ground carries with it a time shift as well, for, of course, this projected future, this "finding," has already, imperceptibly, shifted into the past ("as if evening found") and, finally, into the timelessness of the adverb and participle, "Still walking," into the timeless "present of our own." Paralleling this time shift is what happens to Stevens' initial "I." While that "I," like Dante's, insists upon the self as the seat and anchor of imaginative vision, it nevertheless recognizes the universality of the ego-function: "I," pronoun of the singular and idiosyncratic, projector of the vision of universal recurrence, expands into "us," yields to "our," into what Leo Spitzer refers to as "the possessive of human solidarity," and its personal present now becomes "a present of our own," an all-inclusive consciousness.

The most startling shift, however, is the inter-strophic shift visible at the beginning of stanza II. Usually in poetry, the type of description we find here serves the purpose of poetic verisimilitude, not simply suggesting the occasion for a meditation, but providing the particular space which is mnemonically and emotionally adjacent to a meditation. The metaphysics of "It was like sudden time in a world without time, / This world, this place, the street in which I was" should, traditionally, come after the elaborate descriptio of a Wordsworthian landscape, of a vivid cityscape such as Eliot or Baudelaire might paint, or of the kind of local café scene such as Yeats uses in "Vacillation." But here these metaphysics are generated from other, foregoing metaphysics, and despite the tenuousness of the previous strophe, one notes how suddenly the "as if" now has become "It was." The simile-bred magical projection of the self has now turned into an irrefutable context, a new starting point of putative definiteness which can therefore serve as a jumping off point for further comparisons. Thus, the inward motion of similes and philosophical distinctions creates an elaborate knot at the poem's center—one cut through by force if not untied by logic at the end of the poem.

A similar process takes place in the initial stanza of "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," though here it is a somewhat less extended and voracious overtaking of simile:

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It was as if thunder took form upon
The piano, that time: the time when the crude
And jealous grandeurs of sun and sky
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Scattered themselves in the garden, like
The wind dissolving into birds,
The clouds becoming braided girls.
It was like the sea poured out again
In east wind beating the shutters at night.

(\textit{CP} 246)

Here again, the "time" first mentioned is the mere shell of a context for an act both of hearing ("\textquote{thunder took form upon / The piano\textquote{) and of seeing, and the contextual information is again "dissolv[ed]" by the successive likenings of the perceiving mind. Or, consider this strophe of "Chocorua To Its Neighbor":

\begin{quote}
The feeling of him was the feel of day,
And of a day as yet unseen, in which
To see was to be. He was the figure in
A poem for Liadoff, the self of selves:
To think of him destroyed the body's form.
\end{quote}

(\textit{CP} 297)

Here the tenor would seem to be more concrete: "The feeling of him" — until the simile sets up completely paradoxical conditions for enabling the reader to imagine the "unseen" vision.

But perhaps the most ingeniously expanded of the simile poems is "Prologues to What Is Possible." Not only can we say that here we witness the increasing resonance of the similes as they enfold new ones, but that the poem stops midway in order to examine its own progression, and to take up the idea of the dangerous aggression of the act of analogy. From this metapoetic tactic, a truly dialectical exchange between the values of reality and of imagination ensues. I quote the poem in full:

I

\begin{quote}
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.

The boat was built of stones that had lost their weight and being no longer heavy
Had left in them only a brilliance, of unaccustomed origin.
\end{quote}
So that he that stood up in the boat leaning and looking before him
Did not pass like someone voyaging out of and beyond the familiar.

He belonged to the far-foreign departure of his vessel and was part of it,
Part of the speculum of fire on its prow, its symbol, whatever it was,
Part of the glass-like sides on which it glided over the salt-stained water,
As he traveled alone, like a man lured on by a syllable without any meaning,
A syllable of which he felt, with an appointed sureness, That it contained the meaning into which he wanted to enter, A meaning which, as he entered it, would shatter the boat and leave the oarsmen quiet
As at a point of central arrival, an instant moment, much or little, Removed from any shore, from any man or woman, and needing none.

II
The metaphor stirred his fear. The object with which he was compared Was beyond his recognizing. By this he knew that likeness of him extended Only a little way, and not beyond, unless between himself And things beyond resemblance there was this and that intended to be recognized, The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses On which men speculated in summer when they were half asleep.

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed, Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread, As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering, The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which he gave A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace—
A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes.

(CP 515-17)

In this poem's opening, the initial description is even more obviously a mere pretext, a pseudo-description, than in "Martial Cadenza," and the use of the impersonal "There was" further blurs the contours of the locale and the situation: in some unspecifiable place, "There was an ease of mind that was like..." From there the first stanza takes off with three modificatory similes, one embedded in the other. Yet since each is more particular than the next, instead of becoming fainter, the increasingly embedded similes gain in strength, digression overtaking predication. One other major "trick" is deftly and almost unnoticeably passed off with the embedding process, and that is a simultaneous play on singularity and plurality and on aboveness and belowness: the initial ease of mind is likened to a sense of buoyant aloneness—is "like being alone in a boat"; the boat, however, is carried by waves which resemble the bright backs of rowers, rowers who should, of course, be in or on the boat but instead, and in turn, are buoying the boat. Moreover, the rhythmic uniform labor of the rowers in their "Gripping," "Bending," and "pulling" subverts the original oppositions between singularity and plurality, between position and superimposition, even between "ease" and labor, and makes a unity of the collectivity of rowers "Wet with water and sparkling in the one-ness of their motion."

And, as in "Martial Cadenza," the strophe break sees the metamorphosis of these resemblances into fact. The original "ease of mind" tenor disappears, and the boat which had existed only in the initial simile in strophe I is now a new object, or rather a new subject for description: "The boat was built of stones." The new tenor—those stones which make up the boat—is at first somewhat puzzling until one reflects on its metapoetic significance. Just as the stones which make up the bark owe their brilliant "unaccustomed origin" to their having "lost their weight," so does the brilliant, effortless glint of those similes which have lost their anchorage from the original predication. Because of this correspondence between the creative and the descriptive technique, the "he" who suddenly enters the poem is seen as an intricate "part" of the vessel he thus has engendered—the concrete self is its creation, or at least in part.

An anatomy of that "partness" is then given, as the repetitions and appositions ("Part of the speculum," "Part of the glass-like sides," etc.) establish the analogies between man and his imagined boat and create an almost frenetic extension of simile via anadiplosis. The unity of man and boat is thus also linked to the act of making similes, for his "travel[ing] alone" is, again, likened to the voyage of "a man lured on by a syllable without any meaning," "A meaning which... would
shatter the boat" which never existed because it was bred only of a simile, a shatter-
tering which occurs only "As at a point of central arrival." At this central point,
not only has the generated object taken on an existence of its own, an existence
sprung from nowhere out of nothing, but it has a power to destroy that which
has engendered it.

But this exuberant and awesome rhythm of amplification is squelched as the
reader crosses the divide to Part II of the poem, and as suddenly, an analytic voice
takes over and pulverizes the poem which has thus far been written. For it would
seem that the uncontrollable momentum of simile-making has suddenly become
frightening; its creation dwarfs the locally human, moves "beyond his recogniz-
ing," beyond his grasp of the real. However, it is the very impossibility of rein-
ing in or fixing this infinite power once unleashed that produces the crucial "un-
less," the supposition on which the balance of the poem hangs. Just as the infinite
multiplication of similes causes an awareness of the limits of one's imaginings,
and of the pseudo-reality of all initial contexts, so the awareness of imaginative
limits illuminates the vast distance between "himself" and "things beyond resem-
blance," beyond simile.

Even vast distance, however, implies at least potential connection—and that
is the redemptive possibility of simile-making. Just as there is a tenuous connec-
tion between the possible infinitude of analogies, so there must be tiny points
of contact, touches of "this and that" which connect the human creature to
"things [even] beyond resemblance," touches "intended to be recognized" and
which are intuited when the mind, "being no longer heavy," is free to enter "the
closures of hypotheses," like the unanchored simile.

This speculative correspondence among the self, a transcendent world, and
simile is tested in the following and final two stanzas by a question: "What self,
for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed, / Snarling in him for
discovery as his attentions spread . . ." Because the challenge takes the form of
a question—and a hypothetical, paradigmatic question at that—it remains ten-
tative, and the notion that there is such a "self contained within the self" merely
speculative. Yet even this hypothetical will be superseded by an increasing cer-
tainty which will yield a final revelation. And in the conversion from hypothe-
sis and simile to willed fact, the sheer mental energy marshaled will liberate that
"encaged" self, that self that by ordinary means cannot be supposed, no less
reached. What that freed because acknowledged self finds at the end of the poem
is the spark of creation, the incendiary "puissant flick" that stands at the threshold
of the possible and the actual, and that "Creates a fresh universe out of nothing-
ness by adding itself."

In having examined the vast distance traversed since the original "ease of mind
= man in boat" simile, one can understand the total effect of Stevens' expanded
epic simile. It is, ultimately, an epistemic agent provocateur, illuminating our dis-
tance from the transcendent world so that we may reaffirm our potential access
to it through analogy. Moreover, with this clearer apprehension of the self's re-
lation to its own imaginative power, a new siting for an imaginative reality in af-
finity with the transcendent becomes possible. Thus, in "Prologues to What Is
Possible," as in "Martial Cadenza" and "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," the function of the embedded simile is not to evade the categories of the real but to invite the imagination to create the "truest" possible model of the real and the subtlest possible dialogue between what is real and what is able to be imagined.

Paradoxically, it is in these time-suspended similes, which move furthest away from the linear, syntactic arch of the poem, that the true effects of poetic time most clearly emerge. The correspondence in "Prologues" between the imaginative and the creative act, between the persona's imagined world and his simile-making, is enacted in the launching forth of and subsequent overtaking by simile. Its dynamics recalls Augustine's famous and paradoxical re-definition of time in his Confessions, where he talks of time future, "the present of things future," and time past, "the present of things past," as blurring into each other, held simultaneously in imaginative balance in the enacted recitation of a verse? In the elaborate extension and embedding of Stevens' similes, the notion of syntactic progression, of starting from a perceptible "time or place present" is so nearly obscured that the poem seems correlativey to forfeit the possibility of closure, and comes close to self-extinction. As the simile gets more and more elaborate, the expectancy, the anticipation of newly opening landscapes of the possible (of "what I am about to repeat") almost completely obscures the initial premises of statement, the syntactic grounding of the simile, indeed of the poem itself ("my memory of that which I have repeated"). This near-extinction of point of origin, however, is what clears the mind for its final invocation and what clears the created landscape so that the eye can focus on a final, definitive point of arrival—the creative principle of the unexpected "slight dithering." Stevens, like Augustine, is a good Kantian, and this new creation bears the stamp of the being or mind who creates it, for what is created "Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself." Moreover, the source of this creation is revealed as within what already exists or what can be imagined as existing, the "look or a touch"; and in service of the epiphany, the once suspended "puissant flick" of time is powerfully re-engaged as similitude cedes to statement. Within that quintessentially Stevensian moment of transition, the creative act becomes what it most characteristically is—an act of remaking that once apprehended bequeaths the faint but vibrant trace of its engendering.

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Notes

1In Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), Vendler writes "On the Qualified Assertions of Wallace Stevens," and much of that material is expanded in her book on Stevens' longer poems, On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966). Vendler does go a bit far, however, in saying that the sole purpose of qualification is that of evasion. (On page 20, for example, she says that "the evasion of direct statement . . . he regarded as central to poetry.")

The dialectical and elusive quality of Stevens' rhetorical and syntactic strategies is penetratingly and gracefully described in Frank Doggett's Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). Doggett also finds similarities between Stevens' use of apposition and of metaphor (see especially pp. 150-54).
Jacqueline Brogan, in *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), sees this tendency toward poetic fusion as one pole of the normal domain of Stevens' similes, the "unitive" poetics of ontological equations drawn by all metaphors, but she stresses the double nature of Stevens' similes as well; the other pole she discusses is the disjunctive function—simile's creation of fertile ground for the play of poetic "difference." This dual realm in which simile operates functions, ultimately, to lay bare the metapoetic layer of language, as she deftly shows in her brief analysis of "Prologues to What Is Possible" (see pp. 15-18).


At least these are the first simile embeddings I have encountered. Dante's simile embeddings are certainly less elaborate than Stevens', but they, too, seem to flirt with the reader, evading the original context of simile-making and enhancing the similes' digressiveness by invoking a metapoetic dimension. Usually, this happens at the tail end of a simile; Dante will seem to be terminating a comparison and to be coming back to his "point," only to slip in another comparison. See for example, *Inferno*, III.112-117, XVI.94-105, or XVII.19-24.

In his intelligent discussion of Stevens' later stylistic habits, Doggett summarizes his assessment of Stevens' stylistic strategies as follows:

These assertions of resemblance that appear to be statements of equalization, or these series of modifications that seem to be reconsiderations, the predicate nominative which says this is that, or the appositive which states that one thing becomes another, another, another—these are the characteristic sentence forms of Stevens' later style.

The special quality of the late style is so permeated with the effects of apposition that some critics have considered that it resembles improvisation, and it may be that often it is. (150-51)


Allen Mandelbaum, in the introduction to his translation of *The Divine Comedy*, cites Spitzel's acute phraseology in this term, which refers specifically to Dante's "cammin di 'nostra vita," one which is in a subtly dialectical relationship to the idea of the "io sol undo"—the "I myself alone" (see *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: A Verse Translation*, with Introduction and Commentary by Allen Mandelbaum [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980], p. xiii).

The Augustinian passages in Book XI of his *Confessions* are curiously Stevensian not only in their lexical repetitions but also in their appositions and qualifications.
The Comedian as the Sounds of the Letter C

MARTHA STROM

In a letter written fourteen years after the period of his most intensive work on "The Comedian as the Letter C," Wallace Stevens insists that the reader must listen to the poem in order to understand it.

I suppose that I ought to confess that by the letter C I meant the sound of the letter C . . . throughout the poem. While the sound of that letter has more or less variety, and includes, for instance, K and S, all its shades may be said to have a comic aspect. Consequently, the letter C is a comedian. . . . The reader would have to determine for himself just when that particular sound was being stressed . . . As a rule, people very much prefer to take the solemn views of poetry.

The long and short of it is simply that I deliberately took the sort of life that millions of people live, without embellishing it except by the embellishments in which I was interested at the moment: words and sounds.

In another letter, written almost twenty years after the poem, Stevens again encourages readers to listen as they read:

It is true that the letter C is a cypher for Crispin, but using the cypher was meant to suggest something that nobody seems to have grasped. I can state it, perhaps, by changing the title to this: THE COMEDIAN AS THE SOUNDS OF THE LETTER C. You know the old story about St. Francis wearing bells around his ankles so that, as he went about his business, the crickets and so on would get out of his way and not be tramped on. Now, as Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the letter C accompany him, as the sounds of the crickets, etc. must have accompanied St. Francis. . . . You have to think of this incidentally as you read the poem; you cannot think of it directly. . . . The natural effect of the variety of sounds of the letter C is a comic effect. (L 351-52)

Critics have preferred "to take the solemn views," almost completely ignoring the poem's "words and sounds," as if they were mere "embellishments." No one has made any real effort to determine "just when that particular sound was being stressed," or what that sound might mean? But as William Empson writes, "a sound effect must be interpreted," and the poem's sound effects serve as richly complex clues to the major psychological riddles that Stevens dramatized, without fully resolving, in the character of Crispin. A few examples from the first two parts of "The Comedian as the Letter C" show how "the sounds of the letter C" enact locally the drama played out in the large framework of the poem.
The final lines in stanza two of Part I ("The World without Imagination") announce the primacy of sound in the poem as they demonstrate what they describe:

The whole of life that still remained in him
Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,
Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,
Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust.

Whereas "The whole of [Crispin's] life . . . Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear;" the poem's sound effects represent a reversal of Crispin's psychological and poetic dwindling as they multiply the "one sound" of the letter C into a plethora of variations on a single sound, creating a polyphonic effect. Wildly diverse tones and meanings are presented as a unit, like notes played together in a complicated chord. Undoubtedly, most readers are as bandied about by the complications of this polyphonic narrative method as Crispin is by the "polyphony beyond his baton's thrust," beyond his control. But by paying attention to sound, readers can gain an understanding, otherwise inaccessible, of Crispin and his problems.

"Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh" at once imitates perfectly the alternate hissing and clapping of waves as they gather and crash; refers to the frequent conflict and collision in the poem; and articulates the poem's comic treatment of Crispin's potentially violent "concussions" of the spirit that always dissipate into mere sighs when he resists growth. The line both embodies and prescribes the function of the sounds of the letter C. Just as the soft C sounds in this line follow the hard C sounds—repairing the breach in the flow of language—so the poem's comedy of "words and sounds" (the "natural . . . comic effect" of the C sounds) softens and lightens the fundamentally somber tale of Crispin's failure to expand beyond the limits of his narrow personality.

This formula is immediately apparent in the poem's opening lines:

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates
Of snails, musician of pears, principium
And lex. Sed quaeritur: is this same wig
Of things, this nincompooped pedagogue,
Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt.

The poem hisses at its own flimsy jokes even as it makes a serious attempt to imitate the sound of the sea for the first of many times, invoking in the first lines one version of the poem's polyphonic mode, which here consists of the coexistence of the comic and the glum, sustained in a kind of polyphonic suspension. For example, the sound of afflatus (breathing or hissing) evoked literally in the excessive fifty-six sibilants in the poem's first fifteen lines, provides comic relief from
the other kind of afflatus, which is somewhat bombastically intoned by the narrator.

In the first stanza, the sibilants hiss; the narrator, we suspect, chuckles at the reader who is inevitably disoriented by the perplexing word puzzles in the opening lines; and the reader, in self-defense, scorns Crispin's—or the poem's—pretensions. Though we may feel "a touch of [self] doubt" as we begin to read, there is the suspicion that we have been duped into timidity by a mere guise of specious verbal virtuosity; and so we develop a derisive attitude toward the narrator, whose personality or identity is not yet clear. By the same token, those who enjoy verbal acrobatics must relish the sportive language and the nearly tactile evocation of the elements in Crispin's world, the so vivid portrayal of things that they leap out from the page in a flurry of poetic noise. Even more likely, the reader is wont to feel a little of each of these reactions, and so responds polyphonically. As Randall Jarrell warns, "Few poets have made a more interesting rhetoric out of just fooling around . . . This rhetoric is the rhetoric of a kaleidoscope." This "fooling around" is apparent not only in the "words and sounds" of "The Comedian," but also in the kaleidoscopic shifting of narrative voices. Happily, Stevens' sonic tricks help us untangle the "multitudinous tones" of the narrative voices that create for the reader an experience as unpredictable and uncontrollable as Crispin's.

Just as the sea's "shifting diaphanes" modulate into two colors, "blue and green," two sides of Stevens appear "in alternate strain" behind the gauze surface of the poem. Because Crispin represents an atrophying part of the poet, the voice of the outgrown aspect of Stevens—the voice of Crispin—sometimes modulates into the voice of the more balanced narrator, who speaks for the mature poet, who still bears traces of the Crispin side of himself. But when the center of consciousness approximates Stevens' more mature point of view, the voice of the poet-narrator resounds, drowning out the Crispin voice. Although it is true that the voice of Crispin is continually absorbed into the poet-narrator's voice and presence, so that one voice never entirely eclipses the other, my terminology simplifies this continuum of tone by exaggerating what is a tenuous separation between Stevens and his character in order to highlight the split that modulates into so many dualities in this poem. My term for this narrative technique, in which two voices together tell Crispin's story and never fully merge, is "narrative polyphony." The two main strands of narration sometimes divide and multiply. For example, when Crispin feels divided and ambivalent in the "savage" landscape, we hear in his narration two distinct strains in one voice. The two tones of voice both express Crispin's dual nature and reflect Stevens' own divided state when he wrote the poem. These shifting voices alert us to the argument between two parts of the poet, and direct us to places in the text where the large structural principle of ambivalence is worked out on the minute level of the "words and sounds." The complexities in the narration of the poem are patterned after the sonic polyphony in the poem's "words"—like the various C sounds, the narrative voices modulate into many "shades."
Stanza three demonstrates how this narrative polyphony works. There are two voices become distinct. The opening consists of an alternation of hard C and soft C sounds that continues the onomatopoeic imitation of waves breaking and sweeping across the shore. “Could Crispin stem verboseness in the sea” begins abruptly in aural ‘concussion,” but the concussive “Could Crispin” soon falls into a “sigh” in a string of soft C sounds. The line initially harkens back to the truncated verbal “concussions” that characterize the narration in the first two stanzas, and then prefigures the expansive narrative tones that begin to predominate here.

Crispin’s attempt to “stem verboseness” explains the verbal thrift of the first two stanzas as a manifestation of Crispin’s puritanical quest for chastening. But then the assonance, the alliterative soft C sounds, and the final prolonged metrical emphasis on “sea” combine to create an opposite illusion of lingering indolence. Ironically, the paradigmatic line opens a stanza that contains increased “verboseness”—in this unremittingly verbose poem. More lines, more words, longer sentences, and less syntactical economy introduce the opposition between Crispin, who inclines toward a “starker, barer world” of verbal restraint, and the poet-narrator, who is, in contrast to Crispin of the “sunken voice,” expressive as a “hallucinating horn.”

Toward the middle of the stanza, sibilants begin to dominate again, but instead of the derisive hissing of the first stanza, the sound now whispers:

Triton incomplicate with that
Which made him Triton, nothing left of him,
Except in faint, memorial gesturings,
That were like arms and shoulders in the waves,
Here, something in the rise and fall of wind
That seemed hallucinating horn, and here,
A sunken voice, both of remembering
And of forgetfulness, in alternate strain.

Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved.
The valet in the tempest was annulled.

It is here that the reader’s original resistance breaks down, as the hissing becomes a whisper, as the tone of the poem drops and softens, and the opposition between a poet-narrator and Crispin becomes clear. Perhaps even more important, the sea becomes imaginatively accessible for the first time, which seductively clinches the reader’s responsive participation in the poem. When the narrative veers in the second line of the stanza beyond Crispin, the marching meter slows and loosens, the stringent voice of Crispin disappears and the voice of the poet-narrator tells of the drowning of an old god in language that mimics the regular ebb and flow of a now peaceful sea in its repetitions and long mellifluous rhythms.

Predictably, the verbal signs that discriminate between Crispin’s austerity and the poet-narrator’s luxuriance culminate in a medley of contrasting sounds. The
wind rises and falls, and seems like both a horn and a “sunken voice.” At once projecting sound, as a horn does, and muffling it, the sound effect in this passage embodies the opposition between the two narrators and between the two emotional states “of remembering / And of forgetfulness.” Again, the alternation of narrators is perhaps not so clear-cut here as my terminology suggests, and the narrative voices shift as subtly as the sea’s “shifting diaphanes.” What actually happens is that the narration is tinted one moment with Crispin’s pallid coloration and then the next moment changes tone. But I think it is useful to dramatize these undulations by exaggerating the division of narrative labor into these discrete narrators, even to the point of speaking of them as separate “characters,” with full knowledge that the entities I treat as separate figures are, in Stevens and in the poem, parts of a whole.

The assertion of a similarity between Crispin and Triton (“Just so an ancient Crispin was dissolved”) only mocks Crispin’s grandiose idea of himself and reinforces, ironically, our sense of their opposition. When there is “nothing left of [Triton],” there are yet his “faint, memorial gesturings,” but Crispin “Dejected his manner to the turbulence[... until nothing of himself / Remained.” After Triton drowns, traces of his gestures linger to express “that / Which made him Triton,” but Crispin throws his “manner” (a word Stevens uses interchangeably with poetic “style” in his essays) to the turbulence until there is nothing left of him. Crispin’s attitude of self-abasement is the very opposite of Triton’s “gesturings” that are so spirited that they take on physical form, “like arms and shoulders” raging against waves. When Crispin pokes back in, later on in the stanza, the expansive style contracts, the grand vision dissolves, and the clipped, choppy, repetitive diction marks Crispin’s reappearance, as the narrative shrinks abruptly to a lugubrious self-portrait of a withering soul:

The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,
The dead brine melted in him like a dew
Of winter, until nothing of himself
Remained, except some starker, barer self
In a starker, barer world, in which the sun
Was not the sun because it never shone
With bland complaisance on pale parasols,
Beetled, in chapels, on the chaste bouquets.
Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried
Celestial sneering boisterously. Crispin
Became an introspective voyager.

As we gradually recognize that the alienating, stilted verbiage we recoil from in the first stanza represents Crispin; that the poem’s style seems simply to play, dupe, and to pretend, and thus to comment ironically on Crispin’s search for justification; that Crispin’s attempt to “stem verboseness” is mocked by the poem’s spirited word play; that the poem’s proliferation out of the seed of the C sound (the sea sound) points up Crispin’s failure to bear literary fruit and demon-
strates his preference for "plums" instead of poems, our resistance is likely to convert into resilient affection. The polyphonic narration enables the poem to sustain contradictory attitudes, and the resultant irony frees the reader to engage his sympathy for Crispin's failures even as the successful poetic effort evident in the poem itself—which reinforces the reader's sense of Crispin's bungling—enlists his admiration. Of course, when we embrace this "polyphony" of attitude, if you will, and adopt this spirit of generous tolerance, we unavoidably adopt the light-hearted spirit that the poet-narrator and the poem as a whole represents, and which implicitly criticizes Crispin's limited imaginative faculties. But although Stevens dissects and analyzes his Crispin side, he is not merciless toward Crispin, and the reader acquires similar sympathy for the "aspiring clown."

We may lose patience with poor assiduous Crispin while sustaining an interest in the poem, so full of what Crispin lacks—humor, flexibility, ingenuity, play—and we grow fonder of the way the tale is told, as we tire of Crispin's blights. The poem's polyphonic mode liberates us from having to reject Crispin in favor of rigid commitment to the aesthetic the poem manifests. Our experience of the poem's "polyphony" of attitude expands our critical and poetic faculties as affection intertwines our original resistance and alienation. The poem's "multitudinous tones" unsettle and disturb us, but whereas Crispin "was washed away" by the vicissitudes of experience at sea, we gradually learn to tolerate "ubiquitous concussion" as we learn to ride the waves of narrative polyphony beyond our control or understanding. In contrast to Crispin's fruitless chafing at the bit of his own limits, the act of reading the poem breaks the reader's tendency to "close" the text and reduce it to "one sound."

The fastidious voice of Crispin continues in "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan" (Part II) and the bright tropical colors in the first stanza are consistently chastened by his stark rhetoric. Just underneath the dazzling surface of new scenery, Crispin's restlessness and discontent obtrude, and render the brilliant colors dull and sour: the transformation of Crispin and the text proves illusory.

In Yucatan, the Maya sonneteers
Of the Caribbean amphitheatre,
In spite of hawk and falcon, green toucan
And jay, still to the night-bird made their plea,
As if raspberry tanagers in palms,
High up in orange air, were barbarous.
But Crispin was too destitute to find
In any commonplace the sought-for aid.
He was a man made vivid by the sea,
A man come out of luminous traversing,
Much trumpeted, made desperately clear,
Fresh from discoveries of tidal skies,
To whom oracular rockings gave no rest.
Into a savage color he went on.
Crispin's claim to enlightenment ("He was a man made vivid . . . out of luminous traversing, . . . made desperately clear, / Fresh from discoveries") is undermined by puritanical, judging language ("barbarous" and "savage"). When he condemns the Maya sonneteers for their fear of local, "barbarous" birds, he judges his own inability to find "aid" in "any commonplace." He is still a "skinny sailor peering" at projections of himself, and although the scene has brightened and warmed, he finds "no rest" in it. When he goes on into "a savage color," he will find what seems to him to be a terrain implanted with hidden danger, and his language likewise continues to be imbedded with clues to his proclivity for his own annihilation.

Crispin seems to be troubled by a fundamental fear of life that stalks him wherever he goes, and this fear always comes through whenever he is the center of consciousness. In this stanza, Crispin's pristine language freezes a tropical landscape into something like a jumble of colorful, inanimate balloons; he can only reveal his own resistance to Yucatan, rather than the exotic world he tries to portray. In the next stanza, when the landscape appears truly savage, Crispin's narrative cuts away abruptly from that scene, and he runs into a cathedral to hide from a thunderstorm. The next stanza begins in an interplay between growth and limitation, between movement and obstruction:

How greatly had he grown in his demesne,
This auditor of insects! He that saw
The stride of vanishing autumn in a park
By way of decorous melancholy; he
That wrote his couplet yearly to the spring,
As dissertation of profound delight,
Stopping, on voyage, in a land of snakes,
Found his vicissitudes had much enlarged
His apprehension, made him intricate
In moody rucks, and difficult and strange
In all desires, his destitution's mark.

Crispin has grown, he declares—as the narrator of his own life story—but immediately that assertion is qualified by an epithet that belittles this "auditor of insects." Autumn is "vanishing," striding away, and yet Crispin saw it boxed "in a park," through the deadening enclosure of his literary pretense (his "decorous melancholy"). And he responded to spring, the season of growth and change, by containing his "profound delight" safely in a couplet. Although Crispin supposedly has grown beyond his adolescent approach to life, he is incorrigibly inhibited, prufrockian. He still stops while moving ("Stopping, on voyage"); and his vicissitudes only enable him to "apprehend[d]"—to clamp into his grasp, in sad repetition of his reaction to seasonal change.

In this passage, and in fact in the entire stanza, it is not easy to argue that either Crispin or the poet narrator dominates the narrative voice of the poem. The vitality of the poetry exceeds Crispin's capacities as we have come to know them,
but the narrative point of view is clearly his. Perhaps, after all, Crispin has a little life in him. Be that as it may, the narrative voices nearly merge in this stanza, and yet the irony that usually depends on more distinct narrative polyphony is stronger and more obvious than in any passage we have looked at so far. So, Crispin is himself a version of the poem’s polyphonic method in his multiple conflicts, his contradictory impulses to move and to stop, to grow and to cower, to seek fresh places on voyages and yet stifle himself.

The first part of the stanza depicts Crispin’s ambivalence in a tug-of-war between movement and stasis. The next part of the stanza, beginning with “Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly,” is filled with paired opposites caught in a polyphonic moment, before one element cancels out the other; when “sleepers halfway” wake; when Crispin’s heat is just beginning to cool; when “Green barbarism” is “turning paradigm”; when inward rattling is balanced by exterior sonorousness. Now, the oppositions pause, suspended; later in the stanza, oppositions will collide and finally disperse the vitality of the poetry.

He was in this as other freemen are,
Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly.
His violence was for aggrandizement
And not for stupor, such as music makes
For sleepers halfway waking. He perceived
That coolness for his heat came suddenly,
And only, in the fables that he scrawled
With his own quill, in its indigenous dew,
Of an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed,
Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt.
Green barbarism turning paradigm.

That odd, gnomic clump of words, “Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly,” catches our attention and arrests our reading. Like “Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,” it yokes smooth and rough sounds, and the sounds it describes correspond to the central sound pattern. “Sonorous” both embodies and describes the soft C sound, and “rattling” describes the effect of the hard C sounds in the poem. And the line characterizes, “in a nutshell,” the texture of the stanza where we find it. “Sonorous” resonates with reference to the membrane of sound that covers the surface of the poem like a shell. The nut images the condensation of meaning we find in this line which contains in a kind of potential form the use of the sounds of the letter C in the surrounding verse—and this meaning is “hard to crack.”

These four words discuss sound, and a careful look at the line helps us see how Stevens links the “words and sounds” in “The Comedian” to the two narrative voices that sound so dissimilar. “Rattling” recalls the “concussion” in the first section of the poem and foreshadows the excessive ripeness (only a very ripe nut rattles in its shell) at the end of this stanza that erupts in the “rattling” of thunder in the next. “Inwardly”—besides reminding us, homophonically, of the
"sonorousness" or "rattling" heard *in words* in the poem—informs us that the poem's "rattling" may be inward, muffled or indistinct; heard "incidentally." In fact, "inward rattling" may be so muffled that it appears, when we perceive it initially, "sonorous." These four words not only reflect the poem's verbal style but also mirror the tandem narrators and their double perspective: Stevens is wreathed in his persona in a manner something like a nut housed in its shell. And of course Crispin also has a double nature. His keen interest in "barbarism" and "savagery" and the occasional bursts of vitality in the language in this section of the poem contrast sharply with his attraction for "beautiful barenesses" and the stripped down, ascetic style that characterizes him in "The World without Imagination."

As the stanza begins, we see its "sonorous" shell, but in the last half of the stanza, its "inward" "rattling" surfaces. Crispin's emotional ambivalence is apparent here in the Miltonic "satanic" style in which hints of destruction wrap around diction denoting creativity:

Crispin foresaw a curious promenade  
Or, nobler, sensed an elemental fate,  
And elemental potencies and pangs,  
And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen,  
Making the most of savagery of palms,  
Of moonlight on the thick, cadaverous bloom  
That yuccas breed, and of the panther's tread.  
The fabulous and its intrinsic verse  
Came like two spirits parleying, adorned  
In radiance from the Atlantic coign,  
For Crispin and his quill to catechize.  
But they came parleying of such an earth,  
So thick with sides and jagged lops of green,  
So intertwined with serpent-kin encoiled  
Among the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns,  
Scenting the jungle in their refuges,  
So streaked with yellow, blue and green and red  
In beak and bud and fruity gobbet-skins,  
That earth was like a jostling festival  
Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,  
Expanding in the gold's maternal warmth.

There are one hundred and thirty-five C sounds in the stanza, and they rattle more and more loudly as the hidden savagery of the preceding stanza emerges as uncontainable potential energy. The sensuosity in the last half of the stanza glances mockingly back at the earlier pristine landscape, and the excessively fertile earth is now so "intertwined with serpent-kin encoiled" that it becomes a "jostling festival" too violent, "too juicily opulent" for Crispin to tolerate.
The inward “rattling” explodes, in terrible fulfillment of Crispin’s basic fear of life. In the last part of the stanza, all balance between “shell” and inward “rattling” is lost. The savagery “rattling inwardly” in the first stanza of “Concerning the Thunderstorms” burgeons now in “cadaverous bloom,” whereas it had been hidden in a conditional clause (“As if raspberry tanagers . . . were barbarous”) or deflected away from the present “Into a savage color” somewhere in the future; whereas it had been held in check in the first part of stanza two. The whole stanza is about growth, and it imitates the process it describes. It begins in a wintry, barren, colorless assertion of Crispin’s growth and ends in an effulgent jungle of language describing an overgrown earth. Crispin is the narrative center here, and so his vision is superimposed on the stanza, tinting the natural processes of life with horror. The stanza evolves into a nightmarish proliferation of the preceding one; the savagery that lies crouched in the grass of the forest of the first stanza runs ferociously about in these lines.

It is as if Crispin has gone to sleep, and the dimly felt nuances of the preceding stanza appear in his dream, exaggerating and magnifying what had been mere inklings of unease in ordinary waking consciousness into such extreme distortion that their linkage to the “daytime” experience of the last stanza is almost imperceptible. The way this passage works is something like the way the sounds of the letter C appear in the poem. The tiny C seed is engulfed in the giant plant it produced; and in the sprawling poem it is only lightly visible, barely traced, hardly remembered; felt, if at all, as incidental. Similarly, the intense violence of the ripe sensuousness at the end of the stanza so captivates us that we almost forget its origin in Crispin’s halting reluctance as he gravitates toward “savagery.”

“Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan” imitates a thunderstorm, beginning with the initial mood of stasis—the calm before the storm. It surges in the density that collects like humidity in the increasingly compressed second stanza and then rumbles in the march of regular alliteration and assonance in the second and third stanzas. Part II of “The Comedian as the Letter C” ends in falling tones that sound like the quieting thunder in its final “lapsing.” During the storm the fertility and color of the last stanza fade into a civilized world where there is no color at all, but only fluctuations of light and shade:

The white cabildo darkened, the façade,
As sullen as the sky, was swallowed up
In swift, successive shadows, dolefully.

Gesticulating lightning, mystical,
Made pallid flitter.

Crispin’s fleeting contact with physical life vanishes as the storm washes the colorful landscape away; and his elated relief reinforces, ironically, our sense of his entrapment. But after the thunder stops, Crispin goes on “to vociferate again,” and we are forced to suspend our assessment of “this odd / Discoverer.”
In the remainder of the poem, it becomes more and more obvious that Wallace Stevens rid himself of his Crispin side by writing about it. Crispin gradually sinks into poetic lethargy and a generalized ennui, giving up poems in favor of plums and daughters with curls. No longer does Stevens seem of two minds about Crispin: Crispin has become a poetic failure; and so Stevens no longer indulges his persona as he did in the first two parts of the poem. For example, Stevens ends the poem in a sentence that contains no polyphonic or ironic cushioning. The line includes three C sounds: “So may the relation of each man be clipped.” The sound of the sentence reflects its role in the poem. It seems to stop in midair, as if it were suddenly “clipped,” truncating the poem before we expect it to end. Likewise, the ambivalent relationship between Stevens and Crispin, which had been reflected in the polyphonic mode of describing Crispin, comes to an unequivocal end. Crispin, as Stevens’ alter ego, is a “relation” of the poet. In the poem’s final sentence Crispin is “clipped,” or cut off from his creator, forever.

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Notes


2Samuel French Morse, in “Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater,” ELH 31 (March 1964) says, “The significance of ‘the sounds of the letter C’ can be taken with a grain of salt” (p. 24); Eleanor Cook, in “Wallace Stevens: The Comedian as the Letter C,” American Literature 49 (May 1977), wavers between two extremes, at first asserting that “Sound is an integral part of The Comedian,” and then wondering, “Is it not all rather arbitrary?” (p. 199); A. Walton Litz, in Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), hears “the ring of sincerity” in Stevens’ explanation of the meaning of the poem’s sounds (p. 123). Everyone shies away from the serious investigation Stevens calls for. Bernard Duffey, in Poetry in America (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), makes perhaps the boldest comment on the matter of sound in “The Comedian” when he suggests that “when we reflect that the four syllables of the poet’s name contain three syllables dominated by such sounds, we may feel that Stevens’ arbitrary-seeming interest plays a more organic part in the work than would otherwise appear. Crispin and his creator at least had a joke in common” (p. 319).


If Stevens never seemed to belong in the “enclosed garden” of the New Criticism, however, many will hasten to remark that he does not deserve to be identified with the nihilistic blight of the yet newer criticism, that discouraging word . . . “Deconstruction.” . . . Why is Stevens today affiliated with the avantest garde-in, with a nihilism or “mortal no” that he explicitly renounced in a “passion for yes”?


It was a rabbi’s question, let the rabbis reply.

Wallace Stevens

In spite of—or perhaps because of—the far-reaching implications of deconstructive criticism such as J. Hillis Miller’s and Joseph N. Riddel’s on Stevens studies, practitioners of this recent turn in criticism have found it necessary to defend their version of Stevens throughout the ’70s and ’80s against new seizures of the poet from a variety of critical camps. The polemics that continue over the appropriation of this poet have brought about in some cases a clarification of the deconstructive stance, in others an attempt to move beyond the enterprise of the “new rhetoric,” and in still others a vigorous attempt to dismantle the deconstructive position, each camp using Stevens as both the weapon and the “hard prize, / Fully made, fully apparent, fully found,” of its theoretical investigations. Moreover, the context of critical debate in the past two decades has widened into a self-conscious scrutiny of the process of canon formation and encompasses in many instances a re-definition of the concept of literary modernism itself.

A genealogy of contemporary debate might begin at what seems an unlikely spot, with the publication of Hugh Kenner’s The Pound Era in 1971. Somewhat ironically, Kenner’s remarkable dismissal of Stevens from the canon of modernist literature may well have occasioned Stevens’ most strenuous reinstatement by way of counter-criticism and response. Kenner’s book, which fixed Ezra Pound monolithically at the helm of the modernist canon and dismissed Stevens in the often-quoted phrase as “an Edward Lear poetic pushed toward all limits,” began to throw light on irreconcilable breaches among critics and their definitions of modern poetry. “[The] very real gap between Pound and Stevens—a gap that perhaps no inclusive definition of Modernism can quite close—had become ap-

In her article "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" Perloff attempts to define the rift between two versions of the modernist poetic enterprise and to identify the assumptions of either side's advocates. She sees the split between the "Stevensians" and the "Poundians" in current criticism as the rift between modern poetry as a poetry of "thought" versus modern poetry as poetry of "technique": the "what" in contention with the "how" of the poet's discourse. The project of modern poetry as seen by Stevens' critical advocates (stridently enough, in fact, to constitute what Perloff terms an "anti-Pound myth") emphasizes the poet's task of addressing the problems of "belief and value in a world without established systems of truth" and creating instead the "sustaining fiction" of poetic truth. In contrast stands Pound's preoccupation with poetic style, his "attempt to master reality with persistence of method rather than with persistence of thought," the culmination of which technique in the Cantos remains, for "Stevensian" critic Lucy Beckett, "the saddest of modern defeats" ("Pound/Stevens" 487).

The matter versus manner debate, however, is seen to point to a deeper juncture in the assessment of modern poetry. For Perloff, the "desperately triumphant poetic humanism" (489) of Stevens discussed by such critics as Harold Bloom, J. Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, and Frank Kermode indicates an "Arnoldian . . . essentially Romantic view of poetry" (491), one which valorizes the lyric voice and the "organic unity" of Stevens' verse, one which implicitly seeks out a Romantic "mythologizing of self" that replaces history (502) and an "inwardness" leading to the apprehension of personal poetic truth. In contrast, the "Poundians" privilege the rupture of lyric into the "serial," collage-like mixture of modes of the Cantos, and the abandonment of poetic "inwardness" for a renewed attention to the "surface" of poetry: the move from thoughts and truths to structure and technique, with the words and things "speaking for themselves." In his supporters' view, Pound breaks out of the bankrupt heritage of Romantic solipsism and into a consciousness of history and tradition in the search for external reality, the "assertion that we have not invented meaning" (503).

In the end, the division becomes for Perloff the venerable split between Romanticism and Classicism, with the "Stevensians" believing that "[the] best twentieth-century poetry . . . carries on the great tradition of Romantic visionary humanism . . . with a slight influx of French Symbolisme to add piquancy" (504), against the Pound advocates, who "regard Modernism less as a continuation of Romanticism than as a very real rupture with it. . . . Surely it is no coincidence that Pound scholars have so often been classicists. . . . For all these critics, the Pound Era is the era when the norms of the Romantic crisis poem as of the Symbolist lyric were exploded" (505). For Perloff, furthermore, it is Harold Bloom who commandeers the vanguard of the "Age of Stevens" critics in reappropriating Stevens as Romantic—as she states in her parodic formula for Bloom's poetics: "(1) It must be Romantic. (2) It must question Romantic premises. (3) It must be Visionary Humanist" (490).
Though Perloff's summary of Bloom's drift may be correct, the technique of Bloom's "rewriting" of Stevens in his 1977 *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* was a far more complex and far more significant critical act than the easy placement of Wallace Stevens at the helm of an American Romantic heritage. Bloom's book does instate Stevens as the culmination of Western poetic tradition in sharp answer to Kenner, with modern poetry inhabiting an age he suggests "we might begin to call the Age of Stevens (or shall we say the Stevens Era?)" (*Climate* 152). At the same time, however, Bloom effects a wresting away of the method (strong reading) and the prize (Stevens) from other comers to the critical scene, most notably the deconstructive critics. In an intricate method of rhetorical analysis, Bloom subsumes the deconstructive tenet of "rhetoric as knowledge" in an elaborately inclusive theory of "rhetoric as persuasion" and an examination of the transformative process of signification. As such, Bloom believes himself to avoid deconstruction's rhetorical cul-de-sac while he attempts, in a sense, to hoist that theory by its own petard.

In brief, the book presents an exhaustive study of Stevens as American poet fulfilling the Romantic tradition of Emerson and Whitman. For Bloom, Emerson stands as a strong figure of pragmatic idealism, the New Romantic aware of the bankruptcy of the sublime, yet substituting for it a new, willfully self-created ideal. He sees Emerson's three-part poetics of Fate/Freedom/Power paralleled in the critical formula of ethos/logos/pathos: a trinity of terms pointing to the process of articulation, the wresting of meaning from linguistic limitations through the "strength of misprision." Emerson, moreover, prefigures deconstructive critics in his awareness of the illusory nature of previously comforting symbols of unity and transcendence: "no discourse has ever been so overtly aware of its status as rhetoricity" (12), claims Bloom, and traces in his first chapter repeated instances of Emerson's ambivalence toward "comforting illusions" and examples of his essential reductiveness. But Bloom stresses the ideal of a final ascent to poetic "Power," a radically willed reinstituting of significance, an imaginative redemption derived from the poet's own struggle into the act of expression.

As such, Emerson is reductive and yet supplies the structure for a poetic rebuilding, a father-figure for his creative descendants both to emulate and to rebel against. And Stevens supplies the figure of the consummate rebel son of the Emersonian dialectic, a poet who successfully uses the weapons of trope to "willfully transfigure the Emersonian reduction." Bloom articulates the new system as follows: "In Stevens, we will see Emersonian Fate turning into . . . the First Idea. Transcendental Freedom in Stevens becomes the refusal to bear so dehumanizing a reduction. Power or Will in Stevens' mature poetry is the reimagining of a First Idea" (27). Or, in other terms, "Fate in Stevens is the First Idea, Freedom is the realization that the First Idea cannot suffice, and Power or Will is a finding of what may suffice, a revision of the First Idea" (54). Through the Bloomian Stevens, the First Idea—in a revised, successful form—is recaptured through the poet's own struggle to expression. Stevens becomes a figure of the redemptive strength of imagination and will to overcome a debilitating realization of entrapment and abyss and to find a successful re-signification of the poetic act.
Christopher Norris writes that "Bloom clearly sees himself as doing for present-day criticism what Stevens achieved for American poetry" (Deconstruction 120)—or, what is more likely, Bloom sees Stevens "doing" poetically what Bloom himself is trying to "do" in (and to) the critical arena. And what Bloom "does" for criticism—in terms of his "redemptive" gesture of the reversing will—is to reverse and overcome the deconstructive negative moment of *aporia*—to move, in short, "beyond deconstruction."

For Bloom the idea of rhetoric-as-persuasion must be revived to parallel (and eventually overshadow) the deconstructive hobby-horse of rhetoric-as-knowledge, for the latter inevitably ends in a figuration of doubt, failure, and absence, focusing only on the self-contradictory, self-subverting nature of language itself. Against this deconstructive "reduction," Bloom sets his criticism to move beyond the "limitations" of such critics as Paul de Man, allowing rhetoric (both critical and poetic) once more to "transcend" the labyrinth of trope and re-enter the space of persuasion and individual will: "The issue of the limits of deconstruction will be resolved only if we attain a vision of rhetoric more comprehensive than the deconstructors allow, that is, if we can learn to see rhetoric as transcending the epistemology of tropes and as re-entering the space of the will-to-persuasion" (387-88). For Bloom it becomes a question of a diachronic view of language as a transformational process, in opposition to the limiting synchronic "asceticism" of deconstruction, the former view including considerations of tradition, association, intertextuality, and the "ancient identity between rhetorical and psychology that is still being partly obscured by that endless clearing or curing of the ground now being called 'deconstruction'" (396-97). Through this and his final, elaborate theory of poetic "crossings"—moments of psychic crisis which the poet overcomes through rhetorical shifts—Bloom's critical thrust is continually on the writer's ability to recuperate rhetorical power and significance, to overcome (while recognizing) the deadening limits of language and the past.

Far from spearheading a "Stevensian" consensus, as Perloff suggests, however, Bloom's work evoked a number of reviews most notable for their extreme ambivalence. Scholars seemed anxious to reclaim Stevens from the imposition of this rigorously wrought critical apparatus which promised to find Stevens' poetry "more truly and more strange" than ever before. Such critics as Denis Donoghue could commend Bloom's illumination of some aspects of Stevens, while condemning the inhibition of others (NYRB 39). More strenuously, Ronald Sukefull could tackle this "quirky" publication by calling it on the one hand "probably the best book on Stevens, though this isn't high praise" ("Misreading" 634), and on the other lament the "frequently apt theory and frequently inept Stevens explication" of this critical "provocateur" (636). Perhaps the best illustration of the grudging acknowledgement of Bloom's work comes from Frank Kermode, whose rhetoric in the following quotes demonstrates the extremes of ambivalence towards Bloom's "benign interpretive violence": "Bloom's interpretations and judgments of Stevens, extricated from their sometimes obnoxious packaging, nearly always strike me as right, and as having their own exactness" (NYT 29). At the same time, Bloom persists in "cobbling together overlapping 'systems' from
philosophical, rhetorical, psychoanalytical and Kabbalistic odds and ends. . . . It is usually possible to translate even the toughest passages; but that does not make them less hideous" (44). Finally, Kermode must face the dilemma of evaluation: "And now the time has come to answer the question, Who is Stevens's best commentator? And the answer seems to be, 'Harold Bloom, alas!' " (44).

Among the variety of responses, however, Joseph N. Riddel's "Bloom—A Commentary—Stevens" stands as perhaps the most perceptive of Bloom's attempt to out-rhetorize the rhetoricians in his oddly intra/contra- deconstructive endeavor. Riddel uses Bloom's book as a vehicle with which to examine the nature of the critical enterprise itself, commending Bloom's perspicuity in theoretical self-awareness, but finally calling on the deconstructive strategy itself to undermine Bloom's evasions. Riddel begins by citing Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault on the difference between commentary and criticism, undermining the traditional, mystified notion of "commentary" as a screen behind which much contemporary criticism continues to conceal its interested, provisional nature. Traditionally seen as a concern for the "primacy" of the literary text compared to the secondary "transparency" of criticism, commentary is here "unmasked" by Foucault. "What Foucault calls the 'infinite rippling of commentary'—its desire to say what has already 'silently been articulated deep down' in the primary text, yet to say this 'never said for the 'first time'—implicates commentary in a 'masked repetition.' Even 'simple recitation' translates, transcribes." For Riddel, Anglo-American literature in general tends to repress the contradiction and the "play" and to present the relation of critical text to creative text in the guise of a simple, orderly representation, a humble criticism that effaces itself, becomes transparent, in the very moment of finalizing a commentary that is itself finalized and ordered by the priority of the creative text. American criticism wants to make the "infinite rippling" of commentary into a fixed repetition, to mask its own "masked repetition," to proclaim itself "valid," a "proper" "description," a description with (rather than without) place. (111)

This preface provides Riddel with a polemical foundation for approaching Bloom's work, which Riddel commends for standing in a far less disguised relationship to the creative text of Stevens than previous criticism had. Rather than offering a transparent revealing of "the" Wallace Stevens, Bloom's system instead has irritated conventional "Stevensians" in its clearly non-transparent, non-secondary nature. Traditional commentators, Riddel points out, are appalled at Bloom's "audacity in placing the grid of his system upon the Stevens canon" in an intertextual play of critical and creative texts which "has touched (and contaminated) the rituals of commentary . . . [Bloom] has claimed to see Stevens, if not steadily and whole, then centrally and totally—but at the center of a rhetorical prism that appropriates Stevens, the Stevens, overwriting him in a commentary that refuses to efface itself, that refuses the practiced humility of com-
mentary” (111). Riddel identifies the perplexity of the “Stevensians” as a reaction to the obviousness of Bloom’s critical appropriation: “it is Bloom’s Stevens, and not criticism’s fictionally true Stevens, the Stevens of some hypothetically neutral, transparent commentary. . . . So much for the masks of unmediated commentary; not to say, unmediated poetics” (112).

What Bloom calls into question with his revision of Stevens, for Riddel, is the issue of the original, privileged “author” altogether, and of the traditional enterprise of criticism to penetrate that “central” and “original” self behind the text. And Bloom’s notions of misprision and intertextuality shatter the autonomy of the poetic text as well. “Bloom reminds us that texts are, after all, repetitions on which one writes ‘masked repetitions’ which have ‘rippling effects,’ and moreover, that the primary text on which the critic writes is itself a layered repetition, a weave of interpretations, a reading of earlier texts. This irrefutable Nietzschean complication has put the very notion of author/self in jeopardy, and routed the classical notion of hermeneutics” (112).

Compared to the “ventriloquism” of traditional commentary which attempts to efface itself as the “voice” of the text, contemporary criticism more aware of its own enterprise “overwrites, displaces, appropriates the text”—a stance Bloom shares with the deconstructive criticism he attempts to refute. “Bloom’s system revises the poetic text as surely as any deconstruction. Bloom, then, begins from the foreign assumption that poetry is a discourse” (112). Nonetheless, Bloom veers from deconstruction’s rigorous evaluation of poetic language in that “he would try to provide a sanctuary, a privileged place for it” (113). Having found Bloom’s “negative moment,” Riddel proceeds to examine the critic’s attempts at “restoration,” the move beyond an aporia of powerlessness into a reclamation of language and will. In Bloom’s attempt to appropriate (or “save”) the text from the deconstructors, he is in fact attempting to restore the poetic self, placing the “troper” before the “trope”—even though that “self” is now one entangled in “lines of succession, a struggle of generations . . . a complicated history marked by the drama of conflict and anxiety played out as a psychic economy” (112).

Riddel surveys Bloom’s complicated system of maps, substitutions, poetic repetitions and crossings, tracing his attempt to locate “the dialectical turn that allows each poet to be ‘original’ . . . that accounts for the movement within a poet’s individual poems, within his entire canon . . . and within the tradition of ancestors that his work rereads” (114-15). Riddel sees Bloom’s basic error to be his ultimate desire for authority, both in poetry and in his own criticism:

Bloom’s celebration of the will to power of rhetoric, of the triumph of strong poets over their strong fathers, or the three-fold movement of the strong poet and strong poem in fragmenting the old vessels and putting them back together in a new arrangement, and his own insistence that his theory can eventually transume de Man’s locating of the irreducible contradiction of language, chance all the risks of repeating what has had to be abandoned by traditional criticism. For Bloom wants nothing more than to recuperate, perhaps for a final time, the primordial power
that western poetry and criticism celebrates in the form of loss. He wants
to valorize a language that has been denuded by modern criticism . . .
. He seeks to rewrite the fable, to recompose a rhetoric that is real . . .
He cannot remain, or allow his poets to remain, within the brokenness
which must be produced with every effort to begin again, to be origi-
nal . . . So Bloom rewrites the critical fable, and does it within the fab-
ulous coherence of an ad hoc dialectic, a daemonic invention. Bloom's
system is so overwrought that it must reveal its own artifice: it is like a
dedale with its false and self-consuming center. (115-117)

The strenuous conclusiveness of Bloom's "fable" becomes, for Riddel, both a
revealing indicator of the desire for coherence underlying traditional modes of
commentary and, as such, an invitation for its own deconstruction. Riddel indi-
cates a number of points at which Bloom's system must be broken: his frame-
work of post-Romantic epistemology (that "secularization of the theological vi-
sion of Transcendentalism"), his own unexamined valorization of speech over
writing, and his desire to subsume all other systems into his own powerful and
authoritative mechanism. Riddel suggests an authentic mode of intellectually
countering Bloom's own system through "rereading," while at the same time he
commends Bloom's break from the paradigm of traditional "transparent" com-
mentary. Bloom's critical system
cannot be simply denied. Nor logically unlocked. Like Emerson's rhet-
oric, as Bloom himself argues, it cannot even be deconstructed. But it
can be reread. That is, Stevens can be reread. Which will include a
rereading of Bloom's reading. Not in the way of the old critical argument,
by a point-by-point refutation and a corrective. But by a reading. I won-
der how many critics will take the trouble, or even concede its impor-
tance? And how many will simply go on denouncing Bloom's enterprise,
on the ground that criticism must finally uncover the Stevens. (119)

 Whereas Riddel's strategy is to see Bloom as a kindred spirit to deconstruction
in the "unmasking" of commentary, yet one who fell back into the desire for
authority which, implicitly, more rigorous theoreticians have had to abandon,
a critic such as Paul Bové confronted Bloom—and his reading of Stevens—with
significantly less leniency. In the preface to his work Destructive Poetics, Bové ques-
tions the entire idea of tradition in literature seen as a continuous, privileged in-
terrelation among texts, promoting instead a version of intertextuality which in-
sists upon "the open form of the destructive language event which is the poem"
and which sees all "genuine" uses of language existing in a destructive mode
"oriented towards the future in a discontinuous, nonimitative relation to the ver-
bal events of the past" (xiii). Bové uses this more radically disjunctive view of the
relationship among texts to analyze the failure of a number of critics—specifically
Harold Bloom, Walter Jackson Bate, and Paul de Man—to confront issues of
poetic interrelations and the implicit problems of influence, poetic autotelism,
and history.
For Bove, Bate and Bloom (who himself makes use of Bate in tracing the history of associationist psychology important to the theory of The Poems of Our Climate [397]) both use unexamined genetic models to answer questions of literature's relationship to the past. Bate's trope takes the form of a linear development in the poet's historical neurosis, from its beginning in the "burden of the past, its growth into a middle of paralysis, and its end or death in an awareness that the entire problem is a neurotic illusion" (5). Similarly, Bloom's theories derive from "the genetic metaphor and its variants—the myth of the Fall, the idea of origins, the language of loss and nostalgia, and the ultimate death of poetry" (78). Even Paul de Man neglects to examine his own formulas and presuppositions in crucial ways. Where de Man fails, for Bove, is in his unconditional belief in the authenticity of poetic language, in literature's constant awareness of its own fictuality. For de Man, "Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and . . . [t]his persistent naming is what we call literature" (44). But this itself puts literature in a privileged position, seen to be eternally self-aware and constantly calling attention to the aporia beneath all language.

For Bove, instead, language itself is continual interpretation, and a new literary "history" must "include not only the series of critical misreadings of a given text, but also the interrelationships among poems as they are interpretations, deconstructions, of each other" (48). The "stripping of stability" from criticism and from literature is needed, constituting the necessary step from all stability of privilege and continuity, into the "radical flux" of discourse which does not discriminate among modes. Using Heidegger's "Phenomenological Destruction" to effect that step towards a more "authentic mode of interpretation," Bove emphasizes the hermeneutic awareness of the interrelationship between method and truth, between interpreter and text. "Truth," or uncoveredness, must be seen as continually falling back into hiddenness, true "speaking" into "idle talk," and the process of interpretation becomes an ongoing process of recovery and reclamation. The "disclosure" is, furthermore, not only of the thing-itself, but of our "relation to and involvement with the thing" which operates from the fore-structure of our understanding. Authentic interpretation cannot escape this fore-structure: in Heidegger's famous phrase, "What is decisive is not to get out of the circle, but to come into it in the right way." An awareness of the nature of our own interpretive enterprise and its limits, along with a conception of the interpretive/destructive nature of the text we are examining, informs Bove's poetics of "destruction."

With this groundwork of theory in place, Bove engages Stevens' work in a chapter titled "Fiction, Risk, and Deconstruction: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens." Bove sees the idea of "fiction" to be the dominant element in Stevens' poetry: "Not only is the self and the other defined as fiction" in Stevens, "but 'empirical reality' is seen to be finally devoid of transcendent certitude; in the last measure, we are left with nothing but 'fiction': 'The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else'" (181). Yet for Stevens' critics, Bove explains, this concept of the fictionality of reality is seen, not as radically as Bove would expect, but merely in the outdated light of "the Romantic
and dualistic metaphysical tradition," which posits either a Symbolist transformation of reality into internal order or the realists' concept of an empirical "reality" having primacy over the mind (182).

Bové takes on three major "Stevensians"—Pearce, Riddel, and Bloom—and examines them as emblems of particular critical fallacies in their approaches to Stevens. For Bové, Pearce represents the "typical" stream of Modernist criticism for which the "Romantic desire both for synthesis by dialectic and for the developmental metaphor underlie the perspective which causes these critics to look for a 'final' position in Stevens." Bové summarizes Pearce's stand as follows:

Although Pearce defines himself in opposition to the New Critics, his language of continuity keeps him in essentially the same tradition. Pearce begins from the assumption that Stevens continues in the tradition of Romantic and American dualism and proceeds to argue that he brings it to culmination by achieving a kind of Kantian synthesis which posits reality in a "third term": the conjunction of self and outside world in an active perception of empirical reality . . . The developmental metaphor of nineteenth century organicism and positivism dominates Pearce's discussion of Stevens. He sees Stevens' career as a movement from a clear beginning to a definite end which achieves synthesis and thereby eliminates the tensions which the unresolved conflict arouses. (182-83)

These residual images of synthesis and teleological completeness which Pearce illustrates haunt criticism as "variations of the myth of presence," variations which Bové also commends Riddel for unveiling in his critiques of Stevens criticism. Bové agrees with Riddel that Stevens is, in fact, engaged in the destructive enterprise of turning traditional discourse back upon itself. It is a view of Stevens as "archetypal 'ironist'" who "uses poetry to scrutinize its own origins until he finds that at the 'center' of poetry and all reality there is no 'presence'" (185). But Riddel himself comes under Bové's censure by using the metaphor of search and discovery to define Stevens' poetic task. Although Riddel's belief that the "search" in Stevens is one which reveals the centerlessness of poetry, by using the critical rhetoric of teleological finding or achieving, Riddel himself is inconsistent. Had he carried to completion the insight that this poetry scrutinizes itself by looking for its origins, he would recognize that the very metaphor of search, which he employs to describe Stevens' works, is also being turned back upon itself. It is by virtue of the awareness that there is no center that Stevens is able to rethink specific centered myths and metaphors and show them to be fiction in a radical sense in the early poetry . . . Stevens does not learn by a failed quest for a center that center and therefore quest are meaningless. Rather, he actively employs the telos-oriented quest metaphor against itself not merely to show that there is no center but to test in fiction various poetic and personal myths and
metaphors in a world with no firm point of reference. Herein lies the radical risk of Stevens' poetry. (186-87)

Stevens' poetic act is one of radical destruction of the "hardened" "truths"—acquired beliefs, myths, interpretations—which had inauthentically "acclimated man in the world . . . which had anthropomorphized and reified disclosure" (187). In this way, Stevens' poetry also "preempts" a critic like Harold Bloom, who attempts to ground poetic free-play on a stable continuum and imply a final, willed transcendence into significance. Bové's Stevens instead "begins with a more complex sense of the issues at stake in reducing poetry to the free play of substitutions resting on a sure ground—Stevens, unlike Bloom, seriously questions his own 'first idea'—and . . . Stevens' poetry is often a destruction of the sublime as Bloom describes it" (188).

Bové sees the poet answering the problem of language instead through a Kierkegaardian employment of "mastered irony": "Stevens is free of the coercive genealogical myth of progress and the aesthetic myth of ironic hovering. Consequently, his 'tests' of various tropes and metaphors against the absence of center to reveal what is still positive and redeemable within the sedimented tradition are, as Kierkegaard says of Goethe, ways of 'making his existence as a poet congrue with his actuality. . . . The truth is that the particular poetic production is simply a moment' " (189). By revealing the fictionality of the static center, Stevens reinstitutes discourse as a temporal act, as an occurring-in-the-world.

Bové sees "The Snow Man" as an example of Stevens' abilities in tracing the movement from the "comforting delusion" of anthropomorphization to the revelation of the nothingness at the "center" of existence:

In the state prior to the reduction traced in this poem, "the listener" could only respond to the nothingness which exists by making it meaningful, by adding to it a sense of depth which makes it less "other." He refuses to let the "other" stand as it really is, as a mystery he cannot understand. He demonstrates no "Negative Capability," but, instead, transforms the "other" into something possessing "human" qualities, that is, readily interpretable along the lines of habitual, anthropocentric patterns of expectation which reflect the "listener's" own image back upon his senses. . . . After reduction, the listener "beholds" more clearly that his pathetic identification with a seemingly concrete other is a fiction at the root of which lies "nothing." As well, he learns of a more profound relation between himself and the other. He is "nothing himself," that is, he is ontologically identical with the other insofar as they are both part of "what-is" existing in and by virtue of "nothing." . . . He senses the falsity of the dualistic separation of res cogitans and res extensa and sees the primordiality of Being-in-the-World, alongside the World, as a structure of his own Being. (190-91)
This reading of the poem sees it piercing fictions of self, presence, center, "the soothing concepts of the transforming sympathetic imagination and of the unique self" (191). The poem even deconstructs itself to reveal itself as a fiction based on nothing; it "refuses analogy, metaphor, and correspondence . . . the poem is not even an allegory of the failure to name the center . . . Stevens is willing to decenter even the most assuring myths of self, of the ability of poetry to reach some final position which will give it a unique value, and of the comforting aesthetic possibility of reading a poem simply as a narrative allegory of its own failed, fictional nature" (192-93). Discontinuous, engaged in the "risk" of the ultimate deconstruction of itself as fiction, Stevens' poetry demonstrates a re-interpreting of the tradition, both to destroy its obscuring myths and to allow what has been "covered up," in the terminology of existential phenomenology, to emerge. "The poems refuse all sense of finality or simple reversal. Instead, they remain open to whatever may appear as the poem itself subverts habitual structures and expectations" (194).

Despite attempts to refine and re-define its engagement with Stevens, the deconstructive project fell under the censure of yet another critic attempting to define a new direction for critical study. Frank Lentricchia, in his book After the Nezu Criticism, attempted to illuminate the problematics of a number of directions in modern criticism, many of which made use of versions of Stevens to ground their arguments. Among them, the techniques of poststructuralist American critics received Lentricchia's saltiest indictments for their re-privileging of literary discourse, their devices of "new formalism" and "hedonist" aesthetics, their various uses of the concept of "abyss" (or "nothingness") as an inverse ontological ground and as a new totalizing "center" for critical discourse, and finally, their a-historicization of literature and language.

Early in his own career, Lentricchia had engaged the poetry and poetics of Stevens to new ends in his study The Gaiety of Language: An Essay on the Radical Poetics of W. B. Yeats and Wallace Stevens. His use of Stevens here, the stance of his early polemics, and the subsequent changes in his treatment of the poet reveal much about the growth of a historicist theory which adds its voice in contrast to and struggle with the major contemporary directions in criticism. Lentricchia found himself in the mid-sixties facing conflicting contexts in criticism—specifically, conflicting views of Wallace Stevens. On the one hand, the New Critics' "contextual" theory of the autonomy of the artwork saw modern poetry as effecting a radical break with its "romantic" heritage; on the other, a critical suspicion of "self-sufficiency theories" revealed New Critical tendencies to be simply "restatements of Coleridgean poetic" and viewed modern poetry as an ongoing illustration of the romantic legacy. But given the options of "antiromantic" formalism and the "romanticist" views of visionary poetics (including those of Harold Bloom), Lentricchia asserts that "neither alternative is adequate" to account for the "radical poetics" of Wallace Stevens (Gaiety 1).

In The Gaiety of Language, Lentricchia cites his opponents by name—J. Hillis Miller, Roy Harvey Pearce, Harold Bloom, and Joseph N. Riddel—and as an alternative to their then-current theories of Stevens as "philosophical poet," mod-
ern humanist, or visionary romantic, Lentricchia posits Stevens the “fictionalist,” the “impure” Burkean ironist who wavers in an “unresolved dialectic” between the “yes” of transcendent desire and the “no” of his factive naturalism. Throughout much of the study, Lentricchia carefully severs the presumed ties between the romantic aesthetic and the poetics of Stevens, establishing him finally as a poet who precludes 19th century idealism through his awareness of the finite imagination, wherein his “escapism” through deliberate fictions nonetheless remains rooted in the strictures of the “real.” In the end, moreover, Lentricchia’s theory of the “poetics of will” points in an important historical direction which might wrest Stevens from both “contextualism” and romanticism, and which will inform the bulk of Lentricchia’s future criticism. Here an excerpt from the book’s concluding pages illustrates the already-present emphasis on historicism:

The poetics of will defines the imagination as a finite energy that seeks to ground itself in the linguistic medium, and isolates poems as the artifacts of the private self operating in a particular place at a particular time. The role of the poet is that of shaper or maker: the poet is not a seer or a “representative,” symbolic figure; the poem is not a symbol for another reality. The continuum of nature has been fragmented. Consequently, Yeats and Stevens invite rather than discourage historical probing as they place themselves in Camus’s world of “irrational bitterness,” a “semi-world” with no transcendental completion. Their acceptance of the naturalistic and even existential schemes of the world of experience puts poetry irrevocably back into time. (Gaiety 189)

This existential, self-consciously fictional Stevens re-emerges in After the New Criticism as the central man of “post-Kantian” aesthetic theory grounded on a radical self-consciousness of the poetic act. Stevens’ irony appears to point the way towards a strategic break from theoretical modes dominating the critical scene, just as in The Gaiety of Language, the “poetics of will” allowed Lentricchia an avenue by which to circumvent New Criticism and “visionary” Romanticism. In After the New Criticism, however, the “radical poetics” of the prior Stevens have become a “conservative” fictionalism, an “avenue” which is here shown to lead, not to a break with the prevailing formalist aestheticism or with myth-criticism’s “grander aestheticism,” but to a cul-de-sac harboring its own “guilty aestheticism,” incorporating the most insidious elements of isolationism, hedonism, and moral relativism.

Lentricchia summarizes the currency of the “fictionalist” tendency in modern criticism and Stevens’ immense impact on the course of modern theory. During the 1960s, the American theoretical avant-garde

was beginning to become fascinated with Wallace Stevens, and soon the language of fictionalism was to displace the language of myth criticism.
It is . . . difficult to overestimate the vogue of Wallace Stevens in the 1960s. No young academic coming out of graduate school in the middle of the decade with an advanced degree in literature could claim critical sophistication unless he could discourse knowingly, off the cuff, on "supreme fictions," the "gaiety of language," and the "dialectic of imagination and reality." No mature intellectual could be comfortable unless he could move smoothly into such ponderous conversation. Not long after the poet's death in 1955 the Stevens industry began to prosper such that it eventually swallowed whole all competition in the criticism of modern poetry. (ANC 30)

Lentricchia, self-parodically astute, once just such a "young academic" (with his revised Duke University dissertation The Gaiety of Language as membership card in the Stevens vogue), now extracts himself firmly from both the nominal source and the eventual course of such criticism.

Stevens' "fictionalism"—earlier a token of the poet's authenticity, a type of good faith, a "gaiety" in spite of (or because of) language's provisional freedoms and the poet's own scrupulous self-awareness—now becomes a tendency "paranoid" (ANC 33), "perilous" and "schizoid" (ANC 241), an agonized "last-ditch humanism" (ANC 33) in the terrible face of modern nihilism. The concept of reality as "other," once the vehicle for Stevens' rupture with romantic idealism and the hitching-post on which he grounded the imagination, now bears the epithet of "inhuman chaos," the "sure engulfment, madness, and death," an existential horror which, when "privileged," can (and does) reveal our creations to be "pitifully unheroic lies" (ANC 33). In all, "Stevens' dominant tendency to align truth and reality with an inhuman chaos 'outside' human consciousness and human discourse produces an antipoetics whose constant lament and wearisome message is the futility of all human effort" (ANC 33).

Beginning from this "mortal no," Lentricchia traces the dilemma of the fictionalist aesthetic in the works of Frank Kermode who, with Murray Krieger, in this book stands in a theoretically filial relationship to Stevens, ranked among the members of "a post-Kantian line which, in its ultimate extension in Sartre, concludes in an odd mixture of Kantian and anti-Kantian themes" (ANC 31). Lentricchia takes issue with the "obsessive" dualism established in post-Kantian theory and traces the ramifications of the antitheses of fiction and reality as it has evolved from Kant and Nietzsche, through Sartre, Vaihinger, and Kermode. One aspect of that dualism is the implicit trivialization of fiction: Kant, in separating fiction from any cognitive function or ontological status, in Lentricchia's assessment "became the philosophical father of an enervating aestheticism which ultimately subverts what it would celebrate" (ANC 41). The self-consciousness of fictionality here becomes that capacity of reminding ourselves of the impotence of our own imagination, its arbitrariness and severance from the "real" world. What results from this recognition, Lentricchia asserts, is a "dialectic of guilt and desire"—an oscillation towards the trivial but necessary comforts of fiction (which we desire), balanced by a guilty return to the real world (in which we cannot
abide)—the agonized movement of which pervades the poetics of conservative fictionalism.

Permeating this dualism Lentricchia perceives is an inveterate privileging of "the real," involving a turn towards ontology which both compounds the trivialization of fiction and leads to an ultimate dilemma in the fictionalist tradition. In the early works of Nietzsche, this takes the form of the Dionysian judgement accorded privilege over the Apollonian "veils" of fiction, since the former "comes from being," and is rooted in "the core of things." Sartre, too, in Lentricchia's detailed analysis, reveals himself to be a "secret ontologist" who rhetorically gives prominence to nonhuman being over the human consciousness (the en-soi over the pour-soi), and so "appears to reprivilege that world behind the scene which with Nietzsche he had thought to have forever banished" (ANC 45).

Nonetheless, Sartre still sees the imagination as a temporary freedom from life—and it is this further aspect of the fiction/reality dualism which Lentricchia pinpoints as a thinly veiled contempto mundi aesthetic. Despite the preeminence of "being" for these theorists, the world is consistently seen as horrible, an attitude which Lentricchia repeatedly diagnoses as "paranoia." For Stevens the world is "a 'violence' which presses in upon us" (ANC 53). For Hans Vaihinger, the real consists of a "hostile external world" which "assaults" the human consciousness (ANC 53). And even in Sartre, for whom consciousness of the real arouses nausea, Lentricchia perceives that, in the end, "the existential-phenomenological rhetoric of this Continental philosopher cannot mask the constant theme of the conservative fictionalist who would like to leave the living to the servants, but who couldn't respect himself if he did" (ANC 53). Not only does this attitude suggest for Lentricchia guilt and paranoia, but true to that pathology's delusions about the grandiose self, it suggests a perverse elitism, an "arrogance" and the self-congratulatory, self-pitying cultivation of a "myth of chaos" which then bestows on the act of "form-making" an "ultimate value," and on the modern artist the limelight of agonized triumph (ANC 55).

All in all, Lentricchia indicts Stevens' legacy of "conservative fictionalism" as perpetrating a duality leading to elitism, isolationism, and inactivity—an inactivity which, furthermore, bears with it the effect of a laconic evasion of moral responsibility in the real world. Fictionalism's "guilty aestheticism," moreover, violates its own theoretical integrity by attempting the "magical" sleight-of-hand of mediating between fiction and reality, forgetting in its inadvertent slip into ontology the violation of its own premises by attempting to transcend its own dualism. This move demonstrates, for Lentricchia, an uncritically presence-oriented, implicitly metaphysical stance, one unaware, finally that its own foundation of antithesis "is itself a construction" (ANC 60).

Lentricchia's crusade against aestheticism runs deep, decried as a stance both theoretically infirm, morally relativistic and nihilistic, and most importantly as an obstacle to understanding literature in its fully temporal, fully historical light. Stevens himself, once seen as returning the poetic act to time, has now become co-conspirator in an atemporalizing aestheticism pervasive throughout modern criticism. Moreover, Stevens plays a role in Lentricchia's critique of poststructural-
ism, in a chapter offering two bold alternatives to contemporary criticism: "History or the Abyss."

That essay begins by reiterating Stevens' impact on modern criticism's tendency toward (or inability to evade) privileging the literary realm (ANC 158) and later places Stevens in a central role in the advent of deconstructive criticism in America. It was to a large extent J. Hillis Miller, argues Lentricchia, who ushered the theories of Derrida into the American critical scene of the early '70s, by way of numerous reviews and attacks, and a major two-part essay on Wallace Stevens ("Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," Georgia Review 30, 1 & 2 [1976]). It was a time when Miller "assumed the burden of chief spokesman and polemicist" for deconstruction in America, and in the course of which he "carried Stevens into the poststructuralist camp" (ANC 162). But Lentricchia's unspoken assumption seems to be that Stevens' abduction (notably from the New Critical camp) was not at all difficult, given the striking similarities Lentricchia seeks to demonstrate between modernist formalism and postmodernism's segue into the "ultimate formalism." Implicitly, through Stevens, the connection is already suggested—much being revealed about links among critical schools by the poetic company they keep—specifically in a poet like Stevens, whom Lentricchia isolates as an alluring model for and invitation into critical aestheticism.

Lentricchia goes on to analyze systematically the problems inherent in the "Yale school" of Derridean critics (Lentricchia names Miller, Paul de Man, and Geoffrey Hartman as practitioners) and their falling-off from a trend toward historicism in Derrida's writings which Lentricchia would resurrect. He begins by identifying an implicit and pervasive "new hedonism" in the writings of the Yale Derrideans, brought about by the misuse of the concepts of freedom and play suggested by the deconstructive principle of decentering.

Terms like "joy" and "activity," and their variants, are fundamental [in the work of the Yale critics]. They recall the overt preoccupations of the nineteenth-century aesthetes with a telos of "pleasure" and a quest for "freedom" that have typified an astonishing variety of modern critical theories whose presuppositions are idealistic (in the Kantian sense) and whose critical practices are disposed toward one sort of formalism or another. (ANC 169)

Yet, in actuality, Lentricchia claims:

The fundamental aspects of Derrida's writing plainly do not sanction a new formalism or a new hedonism, but the Yale appropriation of him . . . is just as plainly an ultimate formalism, a New Criticism denied its ontological supports and cultural goals . . . The Yale Derrideans will not in the long run threaten every partisan of traditionalism, because they will turn out to be traditionalism's last formalist buttress. (ANC 169)

Not only does Lentricchia indict deconstruction on the grounds of its pervasive formalism, he also detects an underlying ontology in their use of Derrida's
second central concept, differance. Whereas "Derrida is no ontologist of le néant because he is no ontologist," and the concept of differance stands as "the subversion of all ontological versions of the center" (ANC 171), Lentricchia claims that the figure employed throughout the Yale Derrideans' writing, that of *mise en abyme*, becomes itself a "new center," and a new ontological grounding:

though Derrida warned that differance, as the subversion of all ontological realms, could authoritatively command nothing, the Yale critics have taken differance as a radically subversive authority which autocratically commands, as *abyrne*, the whole field of writing, and while doing so establishes writing as a monolith itself that forever escapes determination. (ANC 173)

In opposition to the Yale appropriation of Derrida into a new formalism and a new authority which privileges the literary text, Lentricchia employs Derrida towards a new direction, positing a Derridean theory of historicity in sharp contrast to the Yale formalism:

Put as baldly as possible, Derrida's point [in his proposal to shift the philosophical focus from self-present speech to writing] is that once we have turned away from various ontological centerings of writing, we do not turn to free-play in the blue, as the Yale formalists have done. Rather, it would appear that our historical labors have just begun. . . . Consciousness, the subject, the presence or absence of being, apparently forever dissolved as versions of the untouchable transcendental signified, now suddenly return as they all become situated as intertextual functions of semiological systems which do recognize the "rights of history, production, institutions" to coerce and constrain the shapes of free-playing discourse. Semiological systems based on the principle of difference "have been produced," and the key questions become what and by whom. . . . If Derrida concludes the project of Nietzsche . . . then he also suggests the initiation of a new project (in this sense he has surely known exactly where he is going), a project already handsomely underway in the poststructuralist writings of Michel Foucault: to uncover the nonontological reincarceration of the signifier within cultural matrices which, though themselves subject to difference and change, nevertheless in their moment of power, use the signifier, take hold of it, establish dominance over it. (ANC 175-76)

Lentricchia's attempt to rescue Derrida from the Derrideans (just as in Part II of the book he attempts to rescue Harold Bloom from Harold Bloom) is a powerful attempt in the interests of historical consciousness to claim the field from the deconstructive critics. Joseph N. Riddel, however, was one who rallied to a rebuttal, in which he sought to demonstrate not only the continuing stronghold of deconstruction, but its reach and scope as well. And, as so often before, the sub-
ject for study was Wallace Stevens—a casualty in Lentricchia's battle for historicity, but now enthusiastically re-enlisted in the continuing war of critical appropriation.

Riddel's polemic, spearheading a 1983 special issue of The Wallace Stevens Journal on "Stevens and Postmodern Criticism," discusses the general clamor over and mistrust of deconstructive criticism, and in particular its appropriation of Wallace Stevens. He cites the attempts by such critics as Harold Bloom to use Stevens as a subversive weapon against that movement, using the poet as "the eternally American answer to European negative theology, and hence to 'deconstruction'" (WSJ 60). Nonetheless, "it was not until Frank Lentricchia's After the New Criticism that there has been any serious attempt to dislodge Stevens from the eccentric center of what some call post-modernism" (WSJ 60). Riddel's project in this essay elects to be a neutral one: "to trace out the variety of climatic vortices into which Stevens' poetry has been swept, and to suggest why, more than any other modernist poet, he has been made to stand at the crossroads of contemporary criticism" (WSJ 60). But the essay quickly abandons neutrality in favor of a strong critique of Lentricchia, and an equally strong re-emphasis of deconstruction's all-encompassing tenets.

Riddel's dismissal of Lentricchia's position centers on a number of points, some more conclusively argued than others. In general, he indicts Lentricchia for at once succumbing to a type of Wimburgian moralism and dogmatism, for implicitly validating a literary history that privileges the literary imagination over "the world," even for being a surrogate "Romantic" himself in his definitions of a "responsible poetic language." Addressing Lentricchia's criticism of deconstruction, Riddel attempts to show the reductiveness of Lentricchia's discussion of the "Yale formalists," first by broadening the clientele of that group to demonstrate that Stevens is by no means "central" to that (itself quite fluid) "school," then by illustrating the variety of "Stevenses" that the Yale critics Bloom, Hartman, and Miller in fact employ. For Riddel, Lentricchia's depiction of "the so-called newest 'Yale School'"

ecessarily discounts Paul de Man, whose literary models remain largely European . . . and Jacques Derrida, who if he has heard of Stevens at all may think of him only as an American Mallarmé. And since Derrida and de Man are the theoretical core of the school, and only Miller among the doctrinaire "deconstructionists" employ Stevens as a central metaphorician, as it were, such histories [as Lentricchia's] of "schools" not yet accredited are at best useful for polemics.

In other words, the Stevens on whom Lentricchia centers the entire modern history of an abysmal nihilism, Stevens the aesthete, is hardly the one who turns up as a paradigm for the two major proponents of deconstructive criticism, and as for the other three, Stevens would seem to be at least four different poets: 1. the Gnostic poet of Bloom, who passes through the negative or skeptical abyss—which Bloom misconstrues as the deconstructive moment—in order to signify the "tran-
sumption” or overcoming that is America’s and Emerson’s answer to Europe and Nietzsche; 2. Hartman’s provider of metaphors for the ultimate privilege of poetic warmth over philosophical coldness; 3. Miller’s “sure questioner” suspended over the abyss of language who nevertheless offers us a “cure” for criticism’s appetite to retrieve truth or knowledge from poetry, thereby making poetry a certain kind of undeceived discourse; 4. that Stevens who for all three signifies the privilege of poetry to philosophy and who can thus provide the critique for all extant literary theories while offering a medium out of which to fashion a new one. (WSJ 62-63)

This “new theory” for Riddel is one which must paradoxically undermine itself, must be “at once a methodical strategy for opening a reading and an interference with or disruption of method . . . the disturbance in every reading which begins to attend to the way language breaks its own laws” (WSJ 66). Moreover, for Riddel, deconstruction’s project is not so much to re-read the poet “correctly,” but in fact to contest the authoritative “correctness” of any critical reading, to “challenge the claims of other methods to read him properly” (WSJ 66). Riddel’s claim is that by virtue of the nature of language, both literary and critical, all texts are “already self-deconstructions” which undo and create, disrupting closure in themselves as well as engaging in the “dis-semantic” play of meaning occasioned by that rupture. And deconstruction as a critical act “keeps pointing up those moments when the illusion of self-reflexivity in a text breaks down, whether upon an undecidable sign or a rhetorical crux, and where in this catachresis a play takes over” (WSJ 67). Finally, regarding the conventional desire for explicative meaning and truth in Stevens criticism, deconstruction “can only remind us that such closures belong not to the poems, which are readings themselves, but to the readings of the poems which have grown tired of Stevens’ challenge to, if not lack of, seriousness” (WSJ 68).

As a program for redefining and broadening the deconstructive enterprise to disclaim its accruing notoriety as “a purely textual practice which repeatedly arrives at the same conclusion” (WSJ 63), or as “just another version of the old [aesthetic, formalist] structure” (WSJ 65), or even as “a reading program or strategy adapted to certain kinds of texts” (WSJ 65), Riddel’s polemic is not altogether successful, especially as the critic concludes his essay with an explication of Stevens’ “Credences of Summer” which, though an excellently wrought exercise in figural analysis, itself does not altogether escape Lentricchia’s earlier charges of deconstruction’s formalist tendencies. Moreover, as a critique of Lentricchia’s historicist position, Riddel’s essay merely dismisses the very crux and motive of Lentricchia’s argument as a “blindness” and “frosty impasse” (WSJ 64), as yet another of many mystified critical searches for “an adequate external language . . . that opens up or frees the creative or internal language of the poem even as it effaces itself” (WSJ 64). In this manner, Riddel appears to overlook Lentricchia’s more complicated adherence to the theories of Michel Foucault and the latter’s self-aware historicism which posits the exploration of “cultural matrices” rather than
any autotelic "internal language," and whose project is to situate the critic within his own historical discourse, a discourse presumably not "self-effacing" at all, but itself hermeneutically aware.

But if Riddel's essay might not itself undermine Lentricchia's call for a historically oriented criticism, the ongoing production of deconstructive versions of Wallace Stevens attests to the continuation of that method and its attraction to the "linguistic and textual tangle" of such a poet. Nor has the field of critical dissent been narrowed to the two combatants, "History or the Abyss." A recent collection of essays edited by Albert Gelpi, titled Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism, attests to a newly complicated faceting of this major modern poet as he is rewritten into the '80s, moving between and beyond the larger theoretical battles of strong reading, existential phenomenology, deconstruction, and historicism.

Gelpi's motives for compiling the collection, articulated in his preface, present an ambitious but somewhat misleading introduction to these essays. As part of his proposal he suggests:

one of the purposes of this collection is to present in concert six critics of twentieth-century poetry who have not previously published much, if anything, about Stevens—critics who are not, in any case, members of the Stevens critical establishment. His work has rightly commanded the attention of some of our ablest critics, particularly since the fifties, and the results have been extremely illuminating. But in the process something of a consensus approach has emerged, concentrated on explicating the strategies for fictionalizing the interaction of the imagination and reality into poems. The essays in this volume hope to contribute to a new phase of Stevens criticism from a number of intersecting and overlapping perspectives. (vii)

Despite the suggested disinterest of these critics, however, and their presumed anti-establishment "innocence," each moves well within the boundaries of "established" Stevens criticism—not due to any narrowness of approach, but given the reach of Stevens criticism and its incorporation of the major theoretical polemics of the day. As such, furthermore, it is a field which hardly evinces the "consensus approach" which Gelpi so easily suggests. In the end, the "new phase of Stevens criticism" to be inaugurated and illustrated through these essays, in all its eclecticism, still reflects in central (though undisputably innovative) ways advances and refinements of pre-existing theoretical struggles which have dominated Stevens studies.

Michael Davidson's essay, "Notes Beyond the Notes: Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics," is an excellent example of an analysis which acknowledges and incorporates, while it attempts to move beyond, landmarks of Stevens criticism such as Bloom's theories of influence and the Romantic element in Stevens, Bové's hermeneutics, the insights of the Yale deconstructors, and the contemporary move toward historical criticism. Davidson opens by asserting the in-
fluence of Stevens on Charles Olson's central postmodern concept of "Projective Verse," by way of Robert Creeley's admiration and use of Stevens' poetics. Davidson sees Stevens as having provided for this group of postmodern poets a version of the Romantic organicist theory which could circumvent the problems of "Kantian disinterestedness" and the New Critical preoccupation with "autotelic form." As an alternative, Stevens "reintroduced into theories of Romanticism what Coleridge elsewhere calls 'form as proceeding,' that might serve as a paradigm for more recent open-ended and processual modes" (142). In light of this thesis, Davidson's essay seeks to explore Stevens' three contributions to postmodern poetics:

- the use of the long poem in producing a destructive or decreative poetics; the operational or performative use of language to create a philosophical poetry; and the transformation, by these means, of a poetry of "place" into a poetry of "occasions." (144)

Davidson's application of Stevens to the postmodern poetic enterprise must address—and, as Davidson does, either appropriate or dismantle—previously monolithic figures in Stevens criticism. Justifying his own venture into an analysis of influence (here Stevens' "bounty" traced in the works of postmodern poets like Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, and Michael Palmer), Davidson takes issue with Harold Bloom's "psychopathological" mechanism of poetic heritage. Interestingly, he invokes both Paul Bové and Frank Lentricchia as polemical supports with which to critique Bloom's having "severely limited the contextual field in which we may read literary history" (143) and having created a theory which "limits the kind and scope of influence to those poets who most resemble [Stevens] at the level of rhetorical surface" (144). In clearing a wider field for his own investigations, however, Davidson offers no alternative "theory," but merely an "alternative reading"—simply "a study of elements in Stevens' poetics that have helped generate at least one tradition in postwar poetry" (144).

Addressing Stevens' contributions to the destructive nature of the contemporary long poem, Davidson employs the findings of such theorists as Bové and the insights of hermeneutic criticism in Stevens studies, appropriating their concepts of Stevens' revisions of the Romantic crisis poem and their use of Heidegger to articulate the concept of language as "generative," as "existential disclosure" of the temporality of Being, thus anticipating in Stevens the postmodern move into a poetics "destructive" towards both literary and philosophical stabilities:

The poet is thus [through the "open-ended, processual style" shown in Stevens' long poems] able to step beyond the closed, spatial text of high Modernism into a more speculative, temporally generative text whose end is not literary history but existential disclosure. As a philosophical project, the authentically Postmodern poem dis-covers (aletheia) or un-covers the temporal nature of Being. (146)
Davidson, however, focusses the hermeneutical stance on the project of reading rather than on writing, expanding the ramifications of Stevens' "generative text" in new directions which are taken up elsewhere in this collection, in Charles Altieri's essay on Stevens and the nature of Modernist abstraction.

Davidson also pursues the concept of Stevens' "per-formative" language, bringing J. L. Austin's concept under the service of rhetorical analysis, and employing as an illustration a commentary on Stevens by Yale critic Geoffrey Hartman which, in its striking resemblance to formalist textual analysis, cannot help but evoke echoes of Lentricchia's earlier criticisms of that school. Here, however, both comment and concept are employed to new ends:

What is more pertinent to our concern with the later poems is Stevens' treatment of language as a system—its acoustics, its syntax, its pragmatics—in dramatizing ideas... When he titles a poem, "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," as Geoffrey Hartman points out, he captures in the minute phonemic difference between two words something of the larger semantic resonance of the poem—the ironic portrayal of the uncle, metonymically figured in his eyepiece. This kind of operative or per-formative use of language has had an increasingly important function for contemporary poets as a way of writing a poetry of ideas within the very terms that those ideas present. (149)

Analysis such as Hartman's, once easily employed in the formalist enterprise of illuminating the structural and rhetorical closure of the poem, now illustrates a new view of the poet, one geared toward the use of active, "operative" language acts to dramatize a world of generative ideas, finding correlatives in a postmodern poetry which attempts to show "not the results of inquiry but the processes" (153).

With Davidson's third thesis, Stevens seems very nearly to return to a Bloomian paradigm of late Romantic crisis and alienation, overcome through a new type of imaginative reintegration. Davidson speaks of Stevens' "central romantic theme of personal and spiritual alienation," aligned to his uses of poetic language:

The fall of man, so the familiar version goes, is a fall into a demythologized world, a world of neutral signs, in which an Adamic language of unmediated presence has been lost... This alienation is both destructive and creative: In order to conceive of a place as "ours," we must destroy it as "other" and naturalize it in our own terms. This act of transformation generates another kind of reality, "the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of [the world]." (153-54)

Davidson sees a parallel movement in the work of postmodern poets, whose similar sense of "not-at-homeness" and perception of a rift between language and meaning results in what appears to be poetry of "place" (the regionalism current among contemporary writers) but which subtly shares in Stevens' more
"propositional landscapes" (154). Stevens’ final contribution to postmodern poetics is here the integration of change and temporality which qualifies and reintegrates the local: "Place is the becoming conscious of more than place, transforming spatial reality into occasion" (156).

Davidson concludes his essay by situating Stevens “in the transition between Modernism and Postmodernism,” pointing to his experimentation with language, his preoccupation with the poet’s apprehension of the world, and his likeness to postmodern self-awareness in a poetry “critical of its own ability to achieve a supreme fiction at the expense of the world, critical of language in service to a transcendental ideal” (157). On the other hand, Stevens is divorced from the “critical poetry” of later decades in what Davidson perceives to be Stevens’ removal from social, political, and ideological conditions. Here the emphasis on historicizing the aesthetic act evokes striking parallels with Lentricchia’s prior critique of the dangers of atemporal aestheticism. Davidson seems to agree that Stevens’ “well-known difficulties in responding to the specific conditions of historical change reflect a willingness to uphold the barrier between aesthetic and material production” (157), and implies consequences similar to Lentricchia’s views of moral relativism:

If “Life consists / Of propositions about life,” as [Stevens] says in “Men Made Out of Words,” there is the danger that all such propositions are equally valuable and that their origin is entirely monologic rather than part of human dialogue. It has been for later poets to take up the kind of propositional, philosophical poetry that Stevens began and direct it toward particular social and ideological forms . . . to enlarge the dialogic and discursive possibilities of poetry . . . [to bring] the material nature of its own creation into sharp focus, treating poetic language not as a separate, sacrosanct domain (the poetic function) but as a dimension of sign and thus a social product. (157-58)

Davidson’s essay, as it moves in a pattern of disengagement from and engagement with such theorists as Bloom, Bové, Lentricchia and the perspectives they have represented in their arguments over Stevens, suggests that the “novelty” of this current criticism is qualified at best—more likely, it indicates the inevitable circulation of critical language within the parameters of previous debate. This is not to imply that Davidson’s insights prove illegitimate or unoriginal—the use of Stevens as a context by which to illuminate certain facets of contemporary poetry highlights interesting aspects of Stevens’ own experiment with language, as it raises additional questions about the process of poetic inheritance. But editorial suggestions of these essays’ exemption from “the Stevens critical establishment” reveal instead a continued competition with the palimpsest of previous critical rewritings. The polemics of “establishment” Stevens studies continue to inform and direct the re-situating of this poet within the shifting context of modern poetics.
With their variety of voices and concerns—many contradictory, but in this fashion continuing the tradition of Stevens studies—the essays in this volume are effective in complicating networks of influence and affiliation in the Modernist enterprise, while extending and questioning existing theoretical debates in the realm of Stevens scholarship. As a project, the redefinition of Modernism itself reflects the contemporary atmosphere of concern with principles of canon formation, a general critical climate which by its nature moves scholarship into a historically self-aware realm. And the illuminating of new resemblances in 20th century literature, in which Stevens plays so integral a part, may point to future rewritings of this poet: Stevens may well develop further in his figure as a theorist of reading, continuing the exploration of generative, performative models of literature and language for which Charles Altieri demonstrates philosophical and humanistic outcomes ("Why Stevens Must Be Abstract," PM 86-120), and with which Davidson illustrates the fluid, operative processes of language and thought continued in the postmodern poetic enterprise. Stevens may also occasion a fruitful re-examination by historicist critics, and by the very intractability and complexity of his poetics necessitate a deeper scrutiny of the aims and methods of the historicist project, taking into account cultural and ideological matrices surrounding a poet's work, yet allowing for nuances of artistic involvement with temporality, change, and man's situatedness in the 20th century.

Wallace Stevens remains a central man of this century's ongoing critical dissent and exploration. His advocates and his opponents alike reveal the richness of his poetics, as they reveal the ideological grounds of disagreement moving well beyond the parameters of the poetic subject at hand. The complexity of Stevens' poetry—from the time of his emergence early in the century to the present—has occasioned re-definitions of Modernism, of the poetic act, and of our own involvement in the project of interpretive appropriation that continues to inform the scene of 20th century criticism.

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Works Cited


Poem

Of Wallace Stevens in Late Afternoon California

I grab the poem out
of the air around me I grab the poem
as the sun falls like a dish of pie

on the red table where Wallace Stevens
sits in his elegant urn turning the dazzling
dictionary into the fire of good wine

as afternoon turns, slowly, toward dusk
& the voices of memory climb out
of the bushes & trees & turn also

into the dark fire of black wine in blush—
black red wine at the lips of the glass
of beginning: the immortal Wallace Stevens

in his great gray suits, splendidly
pressed, with his magnificent wand
waving the letters forth

from the abysses of under-earth
the great husk & bassino, the deep
bolt of magic booming & sway

the burst & spread the tessellation
of water the way the great lake
unfolds: the water is the mind

of the sun & the sun is
the shadow of one million stars

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Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth.

Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth is one of several recent signs of the coming of age of Stevens criticism, signs, that is, that scholars are beginning to tackle the kinds of historical, biographical, and theoretical issues that accompany the recognition of a major artist. To say of the first four decades of criticism on Stevens that they gave us largely readings of poems is not to disparage the best of his readers, who made at least a portion of the verse accessible. In contrast to other major artists such as Yeats and Eliot, however, Stevens has been for a very long time not much more than a set of difficult texts to be deciphered. More recent studies—that of Peter Brazeau, Milton J. Bates, and Joan Richardson, for example, as well as Albert Gelpi's edition of essays devoted to Stevens and modernist poetics—indicate clearly an effort to move from poetic texts to other texts equally important in the search for the poet behind the poems.

George S. Lensing's contribution to this effort is substantial. The value of his study for the specialist lies in its unwavering focus on Stevens' craft. From his examination of published and unpublished letters, journals, and notebooks, the poet's reading and notetaking, his epigraphs, and his paraphrases of his own poems, Lensing draws together a wealth of material that sheds new light on Stevens' poetic apprenticeship, his habits of composition, his sources of inspiration, his conception of the practice of his craft. Despite Lensing's claim that the book is intended primarily for those already familiar with Stevens' work, the general reader will also find it of great value simply because of its accessibility. The clarity of Lensing's style is exemplary, and in the process of charting the development of Stevens' craft during the early years, the period leading to Harmonium, he gives us as clear and concise a biographical sketch of the young poet as any we have had. It should also be noted that the book takes the form of a number of closely-related and sometimes overlapping essays rather than one developing argument; consequently, the reader of whatever degree of familiarity with Stevens may pick and choose among its sections with no great loss of understanding.

Lensing presents his examination of Stevens' poetic development in three separate sections, and in each of them he raises significant issues. The first section, which deals primarily with the Harvard and New York period—Stevens' years, progressively, as undergraduate, newspaper reporter, law student, unsuccessful attorney, husband, and junior insurance executive—centers on the conflicts that retarded Stevens' growth as a poet. The young man who decided on a poetic vocation while a student at Harvard was a middle-aged man before he produced his first successful poems and a man approaching forty-four when his first volume of verse appeared. What was responsible for this exceptionally long apprenticeship? Lensing's examination of this period is detailed, and he introduces a number of factors that encouraged and delayed Stevens' progress as a poet. His focus, however, is on a conflict that, he feels, not only explains the postponement of Stevens' poetic career but followed throughout that career as a base for his conception of poetry. It takes a number of forms—idea versus fact, commerce versus art, dream versus deed, imagination versus reality—but it has its roots for Lensing in the familiar conflict of father and son. With Garrett Stevens representing the middle class commercial values of his time and his son representing the aesthetic values reinforced by his Harvard experience, Lensing gives us a "powerful psychological battle between father and son, the consequences of which would be long lasting." Through his examination
of the letters between Garrett Stevens and his son during the Harvard years and shortly thereafter, Lensing makes a strong case that it was the father's influence that postponed indefinitely any serious attempt at poetry. Moreover, Lensing's analysis of the journal Stevens kept during his last two years at Harvard traces the seeds of the poet's initial attempt at a conception of art to the father-son conflict. Behind the issues that dominate the journal lie "the conflicting claims of his father's pragmatism and his own idealism," a conflict that "would find reformulation in his later poetics of imagination and reality."

Lensing presents a great deal of convincing evidence to shore up his analysis of this crucial phase of Stevens' development, yet the reader who is familiar with the portrait of Stevens that emerges from the published letters and journals may raise a number of questions about his account of the poet's long gestation period. Is his father-son conflict sufficient to bear the weight of everything Lensing attributes to it, including the poet's chief epistemological interest? Is the issue of earning a living as opposed to indulging one's aesthetic gifts not the central concern of any young poet? If Garrett Stevens had retired from the field, would Wallace Stevens have become an accomplished poet fifteen years earlier? Did the conflict, that is, lie in the relationship between father and son or primarily in the son? Despite Lensing's compelling argument, the sense we derive of Stevens' temperament, the personality that shows through in the letters, for example, does not encourage the view of a man willing to risk all for art.

It is the scholarship of the second and third sections of Lensing's work that provides his unique and original contribution to present Stevens studies. While the first section covers familiar ground reinterpreted, the last two present a great deal of new material, including the reproduction of two notebooks, Schemata and From Pieces of Paper, in which Stevens entered random phrases, metaphors, and aphorisms from various sources and on which he drew for titles and images. In the chapters of these sections Lensing also considers such issues as the origins of Stevens' modernism, his use of epigraphs, his personal correspondence as a source for poems, the influence of Harriet Monroe's early sponsorship, and the poet's own readings and paraphrases of his poems. What holds these diverse interests together is Lensing's single-minded attention to what he calls the how of the poet's achievement rather than the what. His intent is not to interpret poems but to discover clues to Stevens' work habits, his methods of composition, the ways, for example, that casual phrases from his reading made their way into his poetry.

Lensing's examination of Stevens' use of epigraphs provides one instance of his critical method, and his conclusions are revealing. He notes that the sources for Stevens' epigraphs are typically not classical texts or even works of any fame but popular essays and journal articles, and his analysis of the poems employing epigraphs tells us a great deal about the relationship between Stevens' reading and the origin of his poems. It suggests, for one thing, that the source for a poem was frequently nothing more than a turn of phrase or a whimsical assertion that Stevens stumbled upon in a current essay. And what is true of the few poems whose sources are identified by their epigraphs must be true as well for hundreds of poems whose sources are unknown. It may be, in fact, that the chief conclusion to be derived from Lensing's analysis of Stevens' epigraphs, the poems that originate in the letters from foreign correspondents, and the titles and lines lifted from the random entries of From Pieces of Paper is one that many readers have already suspected without much evidence to support it: Stevens was an unsystematic reader and writer whose poems at times exhibit a haphazard and fortuitous character that may be traced in part to his habits of reading, notetaking, and composition. This conclusion does not in the least impugn the worth of the poems so conceived, but it helps to account for their whimsical and unpredictable quality as well as their frequent obscurity.
Lensing does not himself develop this last point at any length, although he raises all these questions in passing. His account of Stevens as craftsman is remarkably balanced, and it contains a number of insights that will, without much question, inspire other critics to take up the issues he introduces. The strength of A Poet's Growth is its success in expanding the field of inquiry on Stevens and in gathering much of the material to which future inquiry on his poetics will turn. Like the poet's own notebook From Pieces of Paper, the work is a collection of important pieces of Stevens scholarship that will be reshaped in various forms for years to come.

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Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language.

Jacqueline Brogan provides a new look at the often discussed tension in Stevens' poetry and poetics between imagination and reality. She recasts this opposition between mind and world as a conflict between two modes of language, which she identifies as metaphor and fragmentation: the former represents the "unitive" or "logocentric" conception of language and the latter a "disjunctive" conception. She argues that Stevens found in simile a medium between these two extremes that allows for the balanced interaction of both tendencies in language. Her secondary goal is to reconcile the differences between poststructuralist criticism and more traditional approaches by arguing that the former is not as radical as it is thought to be by both its proponents and its detractors.

Brogan begins with a promising thesis that would shift the language of Stevens criticism from the dialectical confrontation of subject and object or mind and world to a theoretical problem of models of discourse. She is most successful when she analyzes the ambivalence Stevens continuously expresses in his letters, essays, and poems concerning the relation between language and the world. Confining her commentary to the short poems and brief excerpts from the major works, she moves ably through the canon and demonstrates the complex interaction of theory and practice in Stevens' poetry.

Brogan divides the book into five chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The middle chapters are entitled "Metaphor," "Fragmentation," and "Simile," and in them she advances her theoretical argument and interpretation of Stevens. She argues that metaphor is typically construed as the fusion or identification of two different things. Her logical model is the predicative structure A is B. Metaphor promises unity but robs the world of meaning because of its drive toward an undifferentiated oneness. Fragmentation, on the other hand, denies identity altogether and insists that language is "an infinite deferral in potentia" of meaning. The paradigm for fragmentation is the distinction between signifer and signified. Between these two poles stands simile, which balances metaphor's drive toward identity with fragmentation's insistence upon difference.

In the third chapter, "Fragmentation," she considers the repression of unity in order to generate meaning. She argues that Stevens needed language to defend against the "pressure of reality," just as he felt a "need for poetry to displace belief." This disjunctive notion of language has received its most widely known exposition in Saussure's theory of the sign and Derrida's critique of it in Of Grammatology. Saussure argued that all signification depends upon difference, and Brogan's notion of predication (A is B) depends upon this theory of the sign. The copula would erase the difference between A
and B, but cannot do so, for A and B, like all signs, are already marked by difference in
and of themselves. Because she fails to see that the grammatical function of the copula
coexists with the lexical, she treats Derrida's thought apart from his critique of phenomen-
ology and Heidegger's ontological argument, thereby misrepresenting his works.

Brogan does not claim, however, to be writing a Derridian interpretation of Stevens
and, in fact, draws upon a diverse range of authors, including St. Augustine, Aquinas,
Hans Vaihinger, and Northrop Frye, for her discussion of figurative language. Neverthe-
less, she liberally refers to deconstruction as if it were a methodology aiming to undo
the rigid opposition between the unitive and disjunctive theories of language. Although
Brogan argues that neither metaphor nor fragmentation provides an adequate theory
of language, her argument is marred by her adherence to them as conceptual models
even when she herself acknowledges their limitations and convincingly argues that
Stevens' poetry employs a far more subtle approach to the problem of representation.
The theoretical dimension of her book would have benefitted from a consideration of
Derrida's arguments in "Di~rance" and "White Mythology" where he undoes the di-
alectical model of language as either a vehicle for expression or as the ground for Being
and/or knowledge.

When Brogan turns to simile in the penultimate chapter, she makes her case for the
pervasiveness in Stevens' later works of his simultaneous sustaining of both poles in "as
if" propositions or more directly in his frequent use of similes. Her argument is much
more compelling when she abandons the artificial poles of metaphor and fragmenta-
tion and focuses on Stevens' ability to consider opposites simultaneously. Here she does
greater justice to the interplay in Stevens' poetics between the figurative and referential
aspects of language.

Brogan's claim for Stevens' power as theorist and poet rests upon her concept of sim-
ile. She writes, "what is clarified in Stevens' use of similes is that it is only a function of
limited perspective which makes it appear as if language unites or fragments in some
predication." The problem with this argument lies in the artificiality of the dialectic. Al-
though Brogan admits that metaphor has a tendency toward disjunction and fragmenta-
tion toward identity, the heuristic device of establishing two poles is theoretically un-
sound. In the passage just quoted, we find her shifting the grounds of her argument from
language to epistemology: perspective is what determines whether language unites or
fragments; hence, simile is the "best model for understanding language" because it medi-
ates between the extremes. Despite the relative singularity of her emphasis on simile in
his poetry, she primarily thinks of Stevens as an epistemological relativist who resolves
his doubts through the will to "believe, without belief, beyond belief:"

If Brogan had given more careful attention to Derrida's and de Man's critiques of reflex-
vivity and representational language, she may have come closer to her goal of providing
a linguistic model for Stevens' concepts of reality and imagination. However, she proves
to be a sensitive reader of Stevens' poetry and provides a good introduction to his notori-
ous ambivalence toward confirming the primacy of either poetry or reality. Her treat-
ment of poststructuralist theory, on the other hand, suffers from her reliance upon a sub-
jective model of consciousness and her failure to recognize the poststructuralist critique
of reflexivity. Although Brogan does not support her argument for the non-radical na-
ture of deconstruction, she offers a detailed account of Stevens' use of simile and its sig-
nificance for his poetry that will encourage others to explore in a rigorous fashion the
place of tropes other than metaphor in poetic discourse.

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Harold Bloom fell in love with the poetry of Wallace Stevens as a freshman at seventeen. By his own admission, there had been earlier loves—Blake, Shelley, Hart Crane—but with the purchase of Transport to Summer, upon its publication, Bloom had succumbed: “I still remember the pleasurable shock of first reading Notes toward a Supreme Fiction, Esthétique du Mal, and Credences of Summer. I read them over and over, memorizing them until I could hear myself chanting them in my sleep” (The Breaking of the Vessels). Although, at first, he could hardly tell what to make of them, Bloom’s love affair with Stevens’ poems has persisted; and this latest collection, an introduction and ten essays including one by the editor, is, like Stevens’ own preface to “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” an amoretto addressed to the “vivid transparence” of the poetry.

In Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (1977), Bloom had placed Stevens’ poetry within two British and American traditions: in the Romantic line of the crisis-poem; and in the tradition of an American Sublime. Bloom himself has fathered a version of the American Sublime that begins with Emerson and Thoreau as precursors and ends with the contemporary poets A. R. Ammons and John Ashbery. In between are the poetic ephebes: Whitman, Dickinson, Crane, and Stevens whose texts “expose the central solipsism of our Native Strain” and try to breach Emerson’s “innavigable sea” that washes between us and the things we desire.

This introduction reaffirms Stevens’ centrality as a poet of the American Sublime, “sets him higher than Pound, Eliot, Frost and Williams” and casts him as the only poet since Whitman and Dickinson to express “the essential solipsism” at the center of our weather. This is not news to readers of Bloom on Stevens; yet, his readings of “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night” and “Poem with Rhythms” provide insights into the nature of Stevens’ solipsism and articulate what the poems would quicken in us, his readers. Stevens’ solipsism, Bloom suggests, is a poetic consciousness alone with its own figurations, particularly the Interior Paramour with whom he engages in a Dialogue of One. Mirrored in the violet spaces of wish and will, their love affair for Bloom is the “most firmly interior” of all poets and muses in the Romantic tradition.

What then, according to Bloom, would Stevens educe from us? Essentially, it is our “nobility” (with its root meaning “to see”), our ability to see with him “that visible he labors to make a little hard to see.” Stevens’ poetry is addressed to an elite: “not to a drab but to a woman with the hair of a pythoness.” A pythoness is a woman who is able to read the leaves, who possesses knowledge of the invisible and intuits the self. Bloom’s Stevens unveils the pythoness within ourselves, so we may hear and know “the cry of the peacocks.”

The ten reprinted essays in the volume, all strong readings, span fifteen years of Stevens criticism (1969-1984) and represent various critical modes: two of the essays trace the poet’s relation to romance tradition; the others comprise decretive, phenomenological, antithetical, linguistic, and deconstructive approaches to mostly major texts. Helen Vendler’s “The Sausage Maker” opens the collection. It is an essay which still “gives pleasure,” moving its reader through the discontinuities of “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery” and coming to rest on the “black principle” of the earlier poem, “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” Vendler’s strategy is to fill the textual lacunae of “Like Decorations” recognizing that Stevens was content to leave this text in fragments, a condition which she tropes into the chain of linked sausages. Her vision of these poems is acute: “the fragments of vision seen in the mirror of the mind refusing to reconstruct itself.”
J. Hillis Miller's reading of "The Rock" (1976) introduced American readers to the Yale School brand of Derridian deconstruction. In "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," he demonstrated how this text plays with the words "rock," "ground," and "cure" to create a running *mise en abyme* that leads the reader further and further into a labyrinth of multiplying meanings. This essay discloses the text not only as a maze of Indo-European language roots, but also as a "labyrinth of forking connections going back through Whitman and Emerson to Milton, to the Bible, to Aristotle." One is grateful to have this essay reprinted here, for as Part One of Miller's survey of contemporary literary theory which appeared in the *Georgia Review*, it has served as a paradigm of deconstruction in America.

Bloom's own contribution to the collection is his extensive mapping of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." The reading unfolds as both a comparison of the longer and shorter versions of the New Haven text and a schema of the "image patterns of the post-Wordsworthian crisis-poem" with an emphasis on *askesis*, Bloom's ratio of limitation. "An Ordinary Evening" is the final instance of self-revisionism composed just two years after the revelatory text of self-annihilation, "The Auroras of Autumn." Emptied of illusions, yet seeing with a clearer vision, the poet enters the final phase of the canon in this essay through the drama of Bloom's antithetical context. As Bloom comments: in New Haven, Stevens enters "the universe" of Freud's "repressed psychical structures" which cannot be applied to the standards of "reality."

The essays by Patricia Parker ("Inescapable Romance") and the late Isabel G. MacCaffrey ("Le Monocle de Mon Oncle") place Stevens at the end of the line of the Romance tradition. In Parker's view, Stevens is engaged in a "continuing reductive quest," particularly in *Parts of a World* and after, that decenters the apocalypse and places Stevens finally with Spenser, "the other English poet who knew that 'Death is the Mother of Beauty.'" MacCaffrey also reads Spenser as Stevens' poetic father as she focuses on the notions of love and language, the major themes of "Le Monocle." In this proleptic essay, a pre-Lacanian reading of desire and textuality, she outlines the "worldless world" of the erotic landscape from which our language is generated.

Helen Regueiro's essay, "The Rejection of Metaphor," also describes Stevens' quest to "go beyond the various metaphors to the origin of song"; yet poetry, in its re-creation of the real, destroys the reality it gestures to express. In this double bind, decreation results and instead of the experience of disclosure, the poet is left with "a film of consciousness" that encases his vision in a "mental landscape." Regueiro's reading of "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" most graphically articulates the poet's rejection of "the poses of metaphor." Caught between the poet's "conceptualization of reality" and her actualization in metaphor, Mrs. Pappadopoulos remains a figure (a trope) of possible artistic projections.

Marie Borroff and John Hollander are represented in the collection by two essays which explore Stevens as a rhetorical stylist and "The Whole of Harmonium" as a musical trope. Borroff aptly describes the poetry as a *tourmanonde* (one of Stevens' coinages) or a revolving scene "turning from one metaphor, one analogy, one symbolic setting, person or event to another." Concurrently, she suggests, his modes of expression change too in an attempt to express what remains "perpetually beyond the rhetorician's touch." Stevens' musical program is as varied as his rhetorical acrobatics and displays that same restlessness "with available figurations of sound." Hollander's brilliant reading of the sounds of Stevens' music provides an excursus into the silences, skitterings, and concertos of the birds and sea-sounds. Finally coming to rest on "that scrawny cry" of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," the essay ends with the language of poetry making its "ancient claim" of "musical status for natural sound."
Bloom's volume concludes with two recent studies, Eleanor Cook's "Riddles, Charms and Fictions" and Charles Berger's eloquent commentary on two late poems, "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and "To An Old Philosopher in Rome." Cook's intriguing study takes up Stevens as "beau linguist" who plays with the "latent doubles" inherent in his words. Beginning with the more obvious riddle-poems (René Descartes and des cartes), the essay then deconstructs or undoes such familiar yet problematic stanzas as the "Arabian" canto of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" to disclose not only Stevens' allusions but also the philosophical constructs on which his language scenes are predicated. With Berger's "The Mythology of Modern Death" we are returned to the realm of Bloom's introduction and the poet's solipsism: the mind alone with its own figurations. In describing Stevens' inventions of farewell that begin with "The Auroras of Autumn" and continue in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," Berger discloses the fictive status of Stevens' fabrications while reserving their "quasi-natural status" as seemingly native to human consciousness. Grounding Stevens' elegy in the poetry of Keats and Yeats, Berger gathers the poet's passage from life to death into Stevens' transumptive trope, the winding-sheet or tapestry of the imagination.

In The Breaking of the Vessels, Bloom's love poem to Stevens began with this commentary: "I think that I am not unrepresentative of a generation of critics that learned to read and reread all other poetry by learning the various ways of reading Wallace Stevens." This collection not only reads and rereads the poetry of Wallace Stevens, but reads him well in the light of his "living changingness."

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American Poetics of History: From Emerson to the Moderns.  

In the introduction of this volume Joseph Kronick traces the concept of a "poetics of history" in the American critical tradition. He explains how Roy Harvey Pearce "reverses the still common perception of literature as a mere product of historical forces and suggests that language makes history." This Hegelian inversion of common historical sense is complemented by Richard Poirier who in Kronick's view concludes that "history exists as style," that "the world literature creates is sealed off from what might be called 'objective' history and can only be entered momentarily as a fiction, or what Stevens would call the fiction of a belief beyond belief." In Poirier, Harold Bloom, and others such formulations lead to an "aesthetic of the literary symbol," a thinly disguised humanism. Kronick hopes to challenge this trend in American criticism by following "a philosophical and rhetorical criticism that exposes the metaphysics of a humanistic heritage and, in doing so, uncovers the linguistic problematic underlying not just poetics and hermeneutics but also anthropology, philosophy, psychology, and history." In short Kronick's technique in American Poetics of History is deconstructive.

A poetics of history attempts to subsume history under language, to inscribe it as a discourse: "A poetics of history shifts the ground of historical studies from epistemology to tropology, the rhetorical interplay that poses history as a problematic of reading wherein temporal relations are generated by a linguistic process of exchange." Kronick succeeds in showing how all the writers he selects incorporate a view of history in their work. It is sometimes more difficult to see how the historical views expressed are generated by a linguistic process. But given the range of the undertaking, Kronick's scholar-
ship is impressively thorough. In this volume are chapters given over to Emerson and Thoreau, Whitman, Adams, Pound, Williams, Crane, and Stevens. And within discussions of each of these writers Kronick shows his intimate understanding of those thinkers, such as Coleridge, Hegel, Georges Cuvier, Auguste Compte, Melville, Darwin, Eliot, and Santayana, who influenced the thought of his principal subjects. The whole is informed by an appreciation of American studies, and is particularly influenced by the deconstructive works of Joseph N. Riddel, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, and Jacques Derrida.

While the scope of the drama and its cast of characters are familiar, Kronick is careful to show at the onset how his efforts differ from the past productions of Harold Bloom. He redefines the creation of an American literary identity in terms of rhetorical tropes, without attempting, like Bloom, "to revive a tired metaphysics grounded in the ahistorical self." Thus, without grand generalization Kronick shows how each of his subjects reacts to the burden of the past by reinscribing history inside a personal aesthetic. Yet the reader is not told why just these writers belong in a volume on the American poetics of history. The writers Kronick chooses fit nicely into the Bloomean dialectic of literary primogeniture, a scheme which precludes the feminine without comment. Whether through metaphysical necessity, grammatical exigency, or merely topical convenience, there is no mention of so much as an Emily Dickinson in this volume.

The final chapter on Wallace Stevens shows most clearly how this book differs from the work of Bloom. Kronick carefully narrates Stevens' attempt to research his biological genealogy. He quotes from the letters passages in which Stevens affirms and denies being influenced by other poets. Then he quotes from the poetry passages which reverberate with echoes from Shelley, Milton, Shakespeare, Vergil, and Homer. Kronick finds a Stevens anxious over the problem of influence and traces the way in which the poet generalizes the problem of literary genealogy to include the reader/scholar/rabbi who creates a self in reading a text: "The page is blank or a frame without a glass / Or a glass that is empty when he looks." Unlike Bloom, Kronick is at pains to show a Stevens who is less concerned with creating a literary self than with delineating the tropes which constitute the fictions of self and history. Where Bloom sees humanism created, albeit negatively, out of the struggle for poetic identity, Kronick insists that literary genealogy implies nothing more than allusive tropes. Kronick returns to the Stevens who says, "It is a world of words to the end of it, / In which nothing solid is its solid self."

The flaws of this book are those one comes to associate with poststructuralist criticism. It is best read by the initiate who has made the leap of faith that subsumes everything to a play of signs, who can still enjoy the stale metaphors of economy and semiology once so beautifully employed in Derrida's "White Mythology." And one suspects that a radical insistence in the textuality of history arises ultimately from a Hegelian denial that anything can be unknowable, a denial that it is useful to posit anything outside of cognition (or writing to use the Derridean substitution). But this book exhibits much that is attractive in deconstructive criticism. It includes close textual analysis combined with appeals to biographical and other extra-textual evidence. It compares numerous writers and critical perspectives while holding to the view that the text is neither religious artifact nor psychomachia, but only words. It focuses on the formal aspects of textuality while engaging the ideas of the writers discussed. And Kronick's deconstructive argument is particularly well-suited to the (dare I say) historical situation, because it turns a clairvoyant eye on influence anxiety to help disperse the ontotheological clouds forming over the history of American poetics.

William Dennis Horn
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Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo.

Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo, edited by Beverly Coyle and Alan Filreis, is a welcome addition to Stevens scholarship. Most of the letters from Stevens to Rodríguez Feo are already collected in Letters of Wallace Stevens. But reading these plus the few that were not selected for Letters as responses to those from the young Cuban gives us a closer look at the way Stevens’ imagination played with and against details of an external world—in this case, the world opened up to him through Rodríguez Feo from 1944, when the exchange of letters began, until the poet’s death in 1955.

Stevens’ work as an attorney for “The Hartford” required that in his business correspondence and case preparation he follow matters point by point and give meticulous attention to each issue. The business letters, as well as those connected to his genealogical researches, illustrate Stevens’ keen, almost obsessive, ability for scrutiny. Reading through the poet’s correspondence with Rodríguez Feo is especially interesting because we can see in the underlying structure of his responses that general tendency to take whatever was presented to him into account. At the same time, we also see how in this exchange about what primarily concerned the spirit rather than what had to do with practical reality, Stevens allowed his imagination to choose its focus, sometimes closing in on one particular observation, sometimes creating a poetic fiction from an anecdote, sometimes ignoring questions about books or authors, sometimes answering all such queries.

It may have been the expressions of playful affection that Rodríguez Feo began adding to his admiration for the poet within six months of their first exchange that gradually prompted Stevens to disclose the movement and process of his imagination in much the same way as he had done years before in letters to Elsie Moll during their courtship. Or, it may have been that Stevens chose to show Rodríguez Feo the operation of his intricate mind because he took very seriously the nature of the young man’s involvement with Orígenes: Revista de arte y literatura, the magazine he founded and funded. As Coyle and Filreis note in their introduction, the editors of Orígenes stated as their purpose to locate and illustrate “‘those moments of creation in which the seed becomes a being and the unknown becomes possessed insofar as is possible and does not engender an unfortunate arrogance.’ Whatever the prompting, in his letters to Rodríguez Feo Stevens was consistently and increasingly generous in guiding his tropical ephebe to pay attention to how to live, what to do in order to understand and participate in the life of the mind. As Rodríguez Feo observed in one of his letters to his “dear friend,” this was “platonic” in the purest sense. In collecting these letters, the editors have enabled us to see how humanly this instruction was communicated.

Indeed, one of the most satisfying aspects of this correspondence is the playful tenderness in the changing forms of address, closing, and signature used by the two men. (I was particularly delighted by this myself when I read through these letters at the Huntington, and wished that all readers of Stevens could enjoy it.) After breaking the ice of “Dear Mr. Stevens” within six months of his first letter with “My dear poet,” Rodríguez Feo proceeded cautiously to “My very dear friend,” signing himself “Your admirer, Caribbean [sic], José.” After receiving a letter in return addressed still to “Dear Mr. Rodríguez Feo,” and signed formally, “Yours sincerely, Wallace Stevens,” the young Cuban retreated back to “Dear Mr. Stevens” before again tentatively trying “My very dear friend” and closing with “Carinosamente, José.” Eventually, Stevens began to address him as “Dear
Jose," "Dear Caribbean," "Dear Antillean," though he maintained variations of his formal "Sincerely yours, Wallace Stevens"—with one or two exceptions—until the end.

As the editors of this volume point out, Rodríguez Feo recognized Stevens' humanity and warmth, and also, though "almost alone" in this, "that to know Stevens personally was to know his poetry and vice versa." Stevens acknowledged this recognition by disclosing to Rodríguez Feo the playfulness he showed directly and without barbs only to a very few. The editors are to be commended for showing us how this playfulness emerged in the interchange between the two men as well as for providing carefully researched notes and opening settings for each of the volume's five sections. The general introduction is also informative in providing background about the Orígenes group.

I do have reservations, however, concerning certain broad assumptions based on what seems insufficient evidence. The first is minor. The editors state that Stevens had set up "two barriers . . . to block his contact with others: location and generation." They then observe that "the crossing of generations . . . was out of Stevens' ken." Stevens' isolation was, I feel, more an accidental feature of his personality than a result of active choice. Further, there were many relationships he maintained over the years with individuals much younger than himself, beginning during his New York period when he befriended Walter Butler, eleven years his junior. It was, in fact, in relationships where he could assume an almost parental role that Stevens seems to have felt most comfortable.

A more serious claim is implicit in the editors' unequivocal statement that "José's affinity with George Santayana's insights into matters North and South revived Stevens' interest in Santayana after four decades." The paragraph goes on to discuss the sonnets Stevens and Santayana exchanged while Stevens was still a student at Harvard, and to mention a letter from Santayana to Rodríguez Feo that Rodríguez Feo lent to Stevens; the paragraph closes with a brief analysis of Stevens' poem "The Novel," which in part fictionalizes an anecdote passed on to the poet by Rodríguez Feo about isolation in a life of letters. While I do not question Rodríguez Feo's involvement with Santayana's elaborations on the differences between North and South, and while Stevens' elaborations on the same theme may also illustrate his involvement with the ideas of the philosopher, I have found no evidence myself, while completing research for my biography of Stevens, to justify the assertion that Stevens' interest in Santayana was revived after four decades. The only real facts we have are that Santayana exerted an influence on Stevens as a young man—as evidenced by the information in one of Stevens' first letters to Rodríguez Feo, by memories of Santayana the young Stevens shared with Elsie in early letters, as well as by the sonnets that he and Santayana exchanged; that Stevens was moved by a sentence in the Santayana letter lent to him by Rodríguez Feo; and that he was moved, more deeply perhaps, by the philosopher's death in 1952 when he wrote "To An Old Philosopher in Rome."

Arguing the case for the central importance of Santayana to Stevens throughout his life or in later decades, of course, heavily weights the answer to the question as to whether the poet consciously converted to Catholicism on his death bed. I don't know if he did. The evidence as we have it from the interviews conducted by the late Peter Brazeau is contradictory. Given this, it could be suggested with equal force that on his death bed Stevens was following not George Santayana but William James—one of his other spiritual fathers at Harvard—who in closing The Varieties of Religious Experience offers as a solution to the problem of faith the suggestion of a plurality of religions. Stevens, the playful sleight-of-hand man, could very well have caused the confusion about whether or not he in the end converted simply by saying different things to different people, asking the good sister to pin the crucifix to his pillow and then complaining to his daugh-
ter that the nuns were constantly trying to convert him. The greatest problem of his age, “the will to believe,” as Stevens put it, borrowing from William James, would then still remain a problem to those who might want to use him as a model. This would certainly be in keeping with the poet’s statement in the “Adagia”: “The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.”

In raising the issue of Santayana’s importance for Stevens in connection with the question of his conversion, I may have presumed something I have no right to presume on the part of the editors of this volume. If so, I apologize. I do think it is important to keep in mind, however, that while Stevens respected Rodríguez Feo’s admiration for Santayana, it was precisely at the same time when the editors note that Stevens’ interest in Santayana was revived that he referred to him in a letter to Bernard Heringman as “the decrepit old philosopher now living in a convent in Rome,” and went on to observe that “Santayana is not a philosopher in any austere sense.” While these remarks do not indicate that the poet was not, nonetheless, influenced by his old master, they must be taken into account in a balanced evaluation of his significance in Stevens’ thought.

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BOOKS


ARTICLES


Brogan, Jacqueline V. “The ‘Form / And Frame’ of ‘As If’ in Wallace Stevens.” American Poetry 3 (Spring 1986): 34-50.


Dougherty, Jay. “Stevens’ Mother and ‘Sunday Morning.’” The Wallace Stevens Journal 10 (Fall 1986): 100-106.


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