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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Wallace Stevens: Poems Against His Climate

JACQUELINE VAUGHT BROGAN

WALLACE STEVENS' RESPONSE to the climate that surrounded his middle years as a poet became, at its best, a technique for subverting the social, even political, descriptions of his world through an act of sustained poetic "resistance."¹ It was a technique that evolved, ironically, from his artistic resistance to contemporary "objective" or "descriptive" poetry, particularly that of William Carlos Williams. Both of these responses, and the ensuing poetic strategies he developed as well, inevitably pushed Stevens during the last half of his middle period more deeply into poetic theory—including, specifically, the "theory of description" (CP 345). It is therefore not surprising that the great poems of these years (roughly 1938-1945), as well as much of the prose of this period, are consistently preoccupied with poetic theory, as "The Poems of Our Climate," "Poetry Is a Destructive Force," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Pure Good of Theory"—to name only a few—and the earlier essays of *The Necessary Angel* all testify. Nevertheless, defining what Stevens' "theory" is has proven to be a major point of controversy among Stevens' critics, a controversy fueled by conflicting theories expressed not only in different poems of Stevens' canon but within single poems as well.² For example, in "Description Without Place," the evocation of the "Book of a concept possible / In description, canon central in itself, / The thesis of the plentifullest John" (CP 345) celebrates what could be accurately called a "logocentric" theory of poetry,³ that is, the theory that the *logos* is ultimately grounded in *being*. Yet only a few lines earlier in the poem Stevens has countered the possibility that language may be "central in itself" by defining description as "a desire . . . / A little different from reality: / The difference that we make in what we see / And our memorials of that difference" (CP 344). This alternative "theory," which anticipates poststructuralist theories of signification, reminds us that the word is never equivalent to *being* but consistently evades the "thing itself."⁴

That these two conflicting "theories" should appear side by side in one poem, particularly one so obviously devoted to an exploration of poetic "description," is symptomatic of Stevens' interest in both the creative capacity and the inherent liability of the linguistic medium with which he worked. Yet, however much they preoccupied both his imagination and his poetry, it is useful to remember that what we abstract as competing theories of poetry within his verse had a greater urgency, even immediacy, for the poet himself than our criticism sometimes suggests. As we are beginning to see, Stevens' poetry was deeply responsive to his own contemporary climate,⁵ and during these middle years, at least, that response was not "of" but pointedly "against" the climate of his time.

I

The poem entitled "The Poems of Our Climate" (1938) offers a useful point of departure for exploring this response. The context of this poem is quite complicated, both aesthetically and historically. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, its "cold porcelain" (*CP* 193) is the modern, American substitution for Keats's "cold pastoral"—an observation which allows him to conclude that the "opening irony, or alternation of imagistic presence and absence" of this "Keatsian meditation" is "perhaps Stevens' most ineluctable swerve away from poetic origins."⁶ In a somewhat different fashion, Joseph Riddel argues that the opening lines of "The Poems of Our Climate" recall the "dix-huitième quality of Imagist exercises," although he also suggests that its main purpose is to place the imagination in a modern climate—one of "chaos and change"—as opposed to a lost, earlier climate of "orderly and fixed laws, a still life."⁷ Although Imagism and Keats, and even the more generalized "chaos and change" that began to accompany the late 1930s are undoubtedly part of the larger climate that informs this poem, the self-reflective irony of the title suggests that "The Poems of Our Climate" is primarily an ironic critique of the particular *poetic* climate at the time, one dominated to a large degree in 1938 by the "objective" poetry of his well-known contemporary, William Carlos Williams.⁸

Even this particular context of Stevens' poem is quite complicated: though nearly life-long, Stevens' and Williams' friendship was alternately bullying, playful, respectful, and somewhat "uneasy."⁹ For example, although he once criticized Williams for being "more interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say" (*L* 544), Stevens also said, quite simply, "I love his stuff" (*L* 286). But, however positive or competitive their relationship may have been, there was on Stevens' part, as Hugh Kenner has already noted, a real misunderstanding of Williams' poetic enterprise.¹⁰ Stevens' conclusion, for example, that Williams "rejects the idea that meaning has the slightest value" and that Williams "describes a poem as a structure of blocks" (*L* 803) may be an unfair assessment, but it is one which nonetheless informed Stevens' various critiques and reviews of Williams' poetry that, in turn, broadened the misunderstanding between the poets.

Of these various critiques, the preface Stevens wrote for Williams' 1934 *Collected Poems*¹¹ is of particular interest here, for it tells us quite specifically how Stevens read, or even "misread," his contemporary during this period. After his opening remark that the "slightly tobacco odor of autumn is perceptible in these pages. Williams is past fifty," Stevens describes Williams as a "romantic poet," albeit a unique kind of romantic poet, who has a "passion for the anti-poetic." He then expresses his admiration for Williams' "sentimentality," which, he says, "cures" Williams' otherwise excessively "anti-poetic" poetry: "Something of the sentimental is necessary to fecundate the anti-poetic. Williams, by nature, is more of a realist than is commonly true in the case of a poet." Toward the end of the preface, Stevens notably praises Williams for the "ambiguity produced by bareness" and the "addition to im-

agism" achieved in "Young Sycamore": "The implied image, as in YOUNG SYCAMORE, the serpent that leaps up in one's imagination at his prompting, is an addition to imagism, a phase of realism which Williams has always found congenial." He then says, "In respect to manner he is a virtuoso. He writes of flowers exquisitely" (WCP 1-4). Although Kurt Heinzelman has argued that this preface is "honorific," such praise as is given in this "Preface" appears to me somewhat back-handed, and it certainly "nettled" Williams.¹²

More important, the preface cues us to the ways in which "The Poems of Our Climate," written four years later, uses poems in that collection as a background, even a "con-text," for its own artistic production (within which Stevens elaborates a very different "theory of description"). In addition to describing "exquisite flowers," the opening lines of the poem are noticeably "bare" and "sentimental," imitating Williams' particular form of Imagism far more than "dix-huitième exercises" or any Keatsian ode:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations . . .

(CP 193)

There are a number of precursors to this passage in Williams' 1934 *Collection*. "The Lily," for example, begins with a description of flowers and air in much the same way that "The Poems of Our Climate" does: "The branching head of / tiger-lilies through the window / in the air—" (WCP 37). Again like Stevens' poem, "Birds and Flowers" focuses on flowers, enhancing their color with white: "the white / shellwhite / glassy, linenwhite, crystalwhite / crocuses with orange centers" (WCP 53). However, "Nantucket," possibly the best-known poem in that collection, offers the most striking "pre-text" for Stevens' poem:

Flowers through the window
lavender and yellow

changed by white curtains—
Smell of cleanliness—

Sunshine of late afternoon—
On the glass tray

a glass pitcher, the tumbler
turned down, by which

a key is lying—And the
immaculate white bed

(WCP 42)

The exquisite flowers, glass pitcher, and “immaculate white” are the most immediate precursors to Stevens’ “pink carnations,” “brilliant bowl,” and “snowy air,” constituting a “source” that stands in an intensely ironic relation to Stevens’ text.

It is important to clarify that although “Nantucket” sustains the illusion of accurate, objective description throughout the poem, in its strategy it moves from “pure” description (if that is possible) to something quite close to phenomenological transformation as the interior is revised by the larger context of the external world. As such, the poem is precisely what David Walker calls a “transparent lyric,” in which the “dramatic center” of the poem has been shifted from a “lyric speaker to the reading experience itself.”¹³ Yet, as I noted, Stevens’ preface to the 1934 *Collection* in which this poem was included, in no way acknowledges this facet of Williams’ poetry, and “The Poems of Our Climate,” as allusion to Williams, certainly does not.

However, as a notable critic has argued, “The etiology of the allusion, like the etiology of the word, originates in ignorance, in the inevitable slippage of understanding that divides us from our past.”¹⁴ Such slippage, it seems to me, is also inevitable (and perhaps intentional) in contemporary allusions. From this perspective, “The Poems of Our Climate” may be said to demonstrate Stevens’ “ignorance” of Williams’ poetry or, more specifically, of Williams’ poetic strategy. However much we may find that Williams ultimately succeeds in evoking the “act of the mind” (*CP* 240) Stevens desires of modern poetry, such “objective” poetry remains for Stevens far too “anti-poetic.” Against what he describes in “Rubblings of Reality” as Williams’ desire to present an “exact definition” of his subject (*OP* 258), Stevens attempts to demonstrate that the subject is “not seen / As the observer wills” (*CP* 197)—and most certainly not if it is willed to be seen “objectively.”

As he will with increasing sophistication throughout the poems of these middle years, Stevens counters the notion of objective, descriptive poetry in “The Poems of Our Climate” by subverting the notion of description itself—particularly, by exploiting the latent, if not inherent, irony of textual allusion in order to debase both Williams’ subjects and his style of writing. Immediately after the opening lines (cited above), he clarifies his somewhat contemptuous attitude toward such poetry, saying, “one desires / So much more than that” (a statement reiterated in the second stanza: “Still one would want more, one would need more, / More than a world of white and snowy scents”). This self-reflective intrusion clearly describes the critical distance between itself and its pre-text, intentionally divorcing the poem from the poetry inscribed in its own first lines.

The crucial rupturing of text and pre-text occurs, however, before that intrusion and may be described through a critical difference between Stevens’

poetic strategy and that of Williams. In contrast to the “objective” descriptions sustained throughout “Nantucket,” “The Poems of Our Climate” immediately violates the possibility of objective description, primarily through the similes of its second sentence, “The light / In the room more like a snowy air, / Reflecting snow,” which ensure that the descriptions are not merely objective. Quite subtly, but irrevocably, the words “like” and “Reflecting” disrupt the illusion of verisimilitude in language itself, debasing, in consequence, the very kind of poetry they pretend to imitate. The opening passage is not, finally, a Williams “exercise” either, but a deliberate act of “sub-version.” Such subversions continue throughout the poem. The “vital I” of the second stanza (recalling Williams’ “eye”), is “evilly compounded” here. Even if it were possible to attain some “complete simplicity,” a “world of white, / A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,” says Stevens, “There would still remain the never-resting mind, / So that one would want to escape, come back / To what had been so long composed.” The irony here is devastating. Against the presumption of *stasis* in artistic “composition”—elaborated in Williams’ “A Sort of a Song” as “Compose. (No ideas / but in things)” —Stevens’ poem reminds us that what has really been “composed” is this “compounded” world and an “evilly compounded” (and thus “vital”) “I” which continually confronts the radical drift between the world and the words through which it describes the world. The “perfect” world of Williams’ sharp-edged delineations is not, at least according to Stevens, possible, either in life or in poetry; and this is a critical part of a “theory” that he reiterates from “Sunday Morning” to “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Pushed to its extreme, then, “The Poems of Our Climate” discloses “description” as “de-scription.”

As sophisticated as this strategy may be, it must be stressed that in 1938 Stevens did not intend to “deconstruct” poetry, either Williams’ or his own. Despite his acute awareness that language may be a “Destructive Force” (CP 192), Stevens still insists upon the creative capacity of the medium in which he works. Thus, after disrupting the “still life” of Williams’ “objective” poetry, Stevens concludes “The Poems of Our Climate” with a validation of language as the only (however ironic) source of meaning:

The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

(CP 194)

On the one hand, Stevens’ affirmation of the “imperfect” is made at the expense of Williams’ “perfectionisms.”¹⁵ On the other, this affirmative play is a serious confirmation of the very “reflective” nature of both language and the “never-resting mind”: as many modern critics have shown, and as Stevens seems to have fully realized, both language and the mind depend

.....
It was how the sun came shining into his room:
To be without a description of to be,
For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
With its organic boomings, to be changed
From a doctor into an ox . . .

(CP 204-05)

Here Stevens suggests both that the “old descriptions” can be an imprisoning “doctrine” that denies *being* and that description is not only inevitable but also inescapable. With a playful gesture toward the poet he calls elsewhere “old” doctor Williams (L 286), “The Latest Freed Man” describes the possible freedom from “doctrinal” descriptions achieved through subversive poetic descriptions. Stevens, it would appear then, is equally concerned during this period with demonstrating that the word has the power to create, that “In the way you speak / You arrange, the thing is posed” (CP 198) and that for this very reason it is all the more crucial that language not be taken naively for “the thing itself,” that the most exquisite images be recognized as “An evading metaphor” (CP 199).

The urgency for this recognition, at least on the part of Stevens, is implied by the degree to which he reiterates this point in the many poems of this period. But it is made quite explicit in one of the later poems of this period, “Description Without Place” (1945):

Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne
Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon,

To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake.
.....

The eye of Lenin kept the far-off shapes.
His mind raised up, down-drowned, the chariots.

And reaches, beaches, tomorrow’s regions became
One thinking of apocalyptic legions.

(CP 341-43)

The possible “apocalyptic” extension of the “eye,” that is, the potential consequence of our interpretations of reality made precisely through descriptions of reality, leads Stevens to conclude in another poem written in the same year that “the nicer knowledge of / Belief” is “that what it believes in is not true” (CP 332). This, as the title tells us, is “The Pure Good of Theory.”

Stevens rehearses this theme, repeatedly, in the many poems of this period. In “Certain Phenomena of Sound” (1942), to choose another example, the

"vital I" is potentially reduced to a linguistic sign inscribed in the word *Semiramide*:

There is no life except in the word of it.
I write *Semiramide* and in the script
I am and have a being and play a part.
You are that white Eulalia of the name.

(CP 287)

Yet as the poem demonstrates, the "I" is present, ironically, but necessarily, in its description—in this case, through *intra-textual* allusions (such as the "I am" which also appears "in the script"). As Stevens explains, with a certain clarity and urgency,

the power of literature is that in describing the world it creates what it describes. Those things that are not described do not exist, so that in putting together a review like *ORIGENES* you are really putting together a world. You are describing a world and by describing it you are creating it. (L 495)

In this letter, written in 1945, there is an implied responsibility, perhaps even an implicit moral imperative, in choosing our descriptions not found in "The Poems of Our Climate." That imperative is, strictly speaking, phenomenological, for in 1939, the world went to war again.

II

The poems written between the "Canonica" (1938) and the "canon central in itself" of "Description Without Place" (1945) mark the rapid maturing of a poet into one of the greatest poets of our century. In part this development may be accounted for by Stevens' working through his own "theory of poetry," which meant, among other things that "it must not be fixed" (NA 34). For Stevens, the subject of poetry is the "act of the mind," with its implicit movement and ambiguity, rather than that "'collection of solid, static objects extended in space'" (NA 25), with its implicit *stasis* and flat objectivity. As he says with great force in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (1940), the "mind is the end and must be satisfied" (CP 257) and seemingly flat descriptions, like those in "Nantucket," would never do.

Yet despite his persistent inquiries into the nature and theory of poetry, and despite his rather personal response to Williams, Stevens' nearly explosive poetic growth during these few years must also be accounted for by the most significant element in his climate after 1939, the Second World War. In "Forces, the Will & the Weather," Stevens suggests, with humor in this case, one of the potential catastrophes of the war:

There was not an idea

This side of Moscow. There were anti-ideas
And counter-ideas. There was nothing one had.

.....

It was a shift

Of realities, that, in which it could be wrong.

(CP 229)

The "latest freed man" of the "Canonica" is no longer free in this poem, having become imprisoned by the times and its overpowering ideas. The "shift / Of realities," Stevens warns, with both aesthetic and ethical consequences, "could be wrong."

Part of this "shift" included the new kind of poetry that began to enter the climate—that is, such anti-war poems as those of Karl Shapiro and Randall Jarrell, which, following the new tradition of war poetry established in the Great War before, were meant to be "objective" (albeit in a way entirely different from that of Williams' poetry) and specifically anti-heroic. However, the main "shift / Of realities" appears, at least for Stevens, to have been created by the more generalized "descriptions" of his time, rather than any particular poetry. As he explains in "Two or Three Ideas,"

The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion. For a long time before the war nothing was more common. In those days the sea was full of yachts and the yachts were full of millionaires. It was a time when only maniacs had disturbing things to say. . . . People said that if the war continued it would end civilization, just as they say now that another such war will end civilization. It is one thing to talk about the end of civilization and another to feel that the thing is not merely possible but measurably probable. (OP 224)

There may be a possible allusion here to Williams' 1935 poem, "The Yachts," an allusion which, given the "horror of the race" described in that poem, is again highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, Stevens' reaction to modern war is quite clear, and painfully so, as it is in many of his poems during this period.

This fact about Stevens' poetry has been largely ignored, although two recent studies have convincingly demonstrated Stevens' preoccupation with war (among his many other concerns) in both his early and his late poetry. In *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years 1913-1923*, Glen MacLeod discusses Stevens' response to the Great War as it is manifested in his earliest poetry—in particular through the influence of Eugene Emmanuel Le Mercier's "Lettres d'un Soldat."¹⁹ Even more provocatively, in *Forms of Farewell*:

The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens, Charles Berger focuses on the poems written during and after 1944 as “war poems.”²⁰ Yet it is precisely the poems of his middle years, the years which coincided with those of the Second World War, that remain largely unmentioned in this connection. And it is precisely in these poems that Stevens most urgently uses his poetry as a resistance to that increasingly violent “pressure of reality,” a “whole generation and . . . a world at war” (NA 20).

After the “*Canonica*” of 1938, most of the poems discussed above, as well as many others of his middle period, are explicitly concerned with this “pressure” and with finding what will “suffice” to “resist” its suffocating power, though this concern is made most overt in “*The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words*” (first read at Princeton in 1941). The third section of that essay is devoted to explaining how “an extraordinary pressure of news—let us say, *news incomparably more pretentious than any description of it*” is threatening consciousness “to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (NA 20; italics mine). He goes on to explain, more suggestively, that “Little of what we have believed has been true. Only the prophecies are true” (NA 21). It is for both these reasons—both the “pressure” that necessitates “resistance” and the implicit responsibility in what we choose to “prophesy”—that Stevens then insists that the “measure” of the poet is, “in spite of all the passions of all the lovers of the truth,” a “measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (NA 23). As he says near the conclusion of this essay, “The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without” (NA 36).

His resistance to that “violence without” is readily seen in a poem entitled, appropriately enough, “*Examination of the Hero in a Time of War*” (1942). In contrast to “realistic,” anti-heroic war poems, this one is intentionally abstract and, to some degree, idealistic: “Unless we believe in the hero,” Stevens asks, “what is there / To believe?” (CP 275). Yet as he clarifies later in the poem, the hero he has “in mind” cannot be reduced to a particular image:

It is not an image. It is a feeling.
There is no image of the hero.
There is a feeling as definition.
.....
The hero is a feeling, a man seen
As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen and saved that mystic,
Against the sight, the penetrating,
Pure eye.

(CP 278-79)

In contrast to any attempt to arrive at a precise description of this “hero,” Stevens insists upon trying to capture the “feeling, / In the object,” the emotion, that ironically “describes” and “saves” the human from the “penetrating / Pure eye.” This “feeling” is pitted quite specifically against the “dry descriptions” of images and allegory, upon which, Stevens says, we cannot live.

Although the “con-text” for this poem of his middle years is no longer Williams, we see in “An Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” a certain “resistance” to his climate—again, in the interest of mental freedom—that was learned, at least in part, from his resistance to the earlier “objective” poetry. This rather odd conjunction of Stevens’ preoccupation with limitations of “objective” poetry and with the “pressure” of the Second World War suggested by this poem does not mean, of course, that Stevens felt that the forces behind the poems of his climate equalled the forces behind the war. Rather, this conjunction suggests the degree to which Stevens recognized that words taken naively as fact are dangerous, even as he insists that without words people are not only less than heroes, but finally less than human. Believing in the “hero” becomes believing in poetry and in its ability to “truly bear” (CP 281) and bare our truer selves.

Similarly, “Extracts from the Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas,” written in 1940, also insists on both the liability of language, as well as its necessity. It concludes with an especially harsh section that asks, specifically in relation to the War, whether we “live in evil and afterward / Lie buried there.” Yet the same stanza begins by saying that although “We live in a camp,” “Stanzas of peace / Lie in the heart’s residuum” (CP 258), stanzas presumably of the “new” world in which “all men are priests”:

They preach and they are preaching in a land
To be described. They are preaching in a time
To be described.

(CP 254)

This new world, however, as Stevens well knows, has not yet been described, as the final lines of the poem imply: “Behold the men in helmets borne on steel, / Discolored, how they are going to defeat” (CP 259). Yet the possibility of “a land” and “a time” yet “To be described” (or “prophesied,” to use the vocabulary of “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”) is the ironically nostalgic center of the poem:

He . . . wanted to think his way to life,
To be happy because people were thinking to be.
They had to think it to be. He wanted that,
To face the weather and be unable to tell
How much of it was light and how much thought,
In these Elysia, these origins . . .

(CP 257)

This "he," who "think[s] his way to life," is in direct opposition to "Ercole," whose way of thinking is "the way to death" (CP 256).

In a slightly different fashion, Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," written in the same year, says quite specifically that modern poetry "has to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice," even as Stevens describes the rupture between "modern poetry" and "what / Was in the script" (CP 239-40). And "Man and Bottle," also written in 1940, addresses the difficulty even more directly:

[The mind] has to content the reason concerning war,
It has to persuade that war is part of itself,
A manner of thinking, a mode
Of destroying, as the mind destroys,

An aversion, as the world is averted
From an old delusion, an old affair with the sun,
An impossible aberration with the moon,
A grossness of peace.

(CP 239)

This poem is directed, in part, against nineteenth-century aesthetics, the "romantic tenements / Of rose and ice" (CP 238). But however much Stevens may have been criticized for a lack of social awareness,²¹ it is also specifically a "resistance" (OP 225) to the war as a pressure in reality. Its inherent "freedom" lies in the subversive trope in which war is subsumed as an analogy for the "mind" and its "mode / Of destroying"—a "mode" which, within the poem, succeeds precisely in "de-scribing" the ominous pressure of 1940. As the lines above imply, this act is a deliberate a-version.

Despite his sustained attempts through these years to create in poetry an imaginative space in which "we can survive," Stevens did encourage his contemporaries' judgment that his poetry was socially irresponsible by saying that the poet does not owe "any more as a social obligation than he owes as a moral obligation" (NA 27). Yet Stevens qualified that statement with the explanation that "The truth is that the social obligation so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet . . . is bound to resist or evade today" (NA 28). In other words, with great consistency, Stevens opposes both "objective" and essentially propagandistic poetry—that is, poetry in which the words are taken, naively, for "the things themselves." However, such opposition certainly does not preclude "social" involvement. As he goes on to conclude in "The Noble Rider," the poet's function is "to help people to live their lives" (NA 29), and he elaborates this "belief" in the concluding coda of his most famous poem, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942):

Soldier, there is a war between the mind
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.

(CP 407)

This coda is not, as M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall have remarked, a “mawkish” afterthought, tacked on at the end of the poem to adapt “his metaphysical groping on the subject of language to a momentarily political end.”²² While it does follow the rest of the poem, so that the concern with the war is not immediately apparent in the numbered cantos, the concluding canto, as coda, explains quite clearly one of the “necessities” of a “supreme fiction” in poetry. As such, this coda is the culminating expression in his work, at least at that time, of Stevens’ thinking deeply about the relation between the descriptions of our world achieved in poetry and the descriptions of our world realized in politics, specifically in war. That “relation,” Stevens insists, in “Two or Three Ideas,” is one of a “possible conversion”:

The trouble is that the greater the pressure of the contemporaneous, the greater the resistance. Resistance is the opposite of escape. The poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. . . . In poetry, to that extent, the subject is not the contemporaneous, because that is only the nominal subject, but the poetry of the contemporaneous. Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance. (OP 225)

The possibility of such “conversion” is intimated by his “Prose statement on the poetry of war,” originally included in *Parts of a World*.²³ In the “statement” Stevens asserts that “Nothing will ever appease” the desire for war—equivalent, there, to “the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be” and to do so “quickly”—other than “a consciousness of fact as everyone is at least satisfied to have it be.” In other words, what will “satisfy” is not necessarily changed *facts* but converted *consciousness*. This is “an act of the mind” that can be achieved only through the power of language—a power that must, at the same time, “destroy” the “old descriptions” of the world, particularly the notion that the “old descriptions” are objective, valuable, or inevitable.

It is, at least in part, this terribly ironic conjunction of aesthetic and political concerns that appears to have transformed, in a nearly explosive way, an already remarkable poet into the great master of his later years. Beginning with a relatively light-hearted play against the poems of his climate, Stevens' treatment of "description" during this middle period was colored progressively by the felt sense of powerlessness in modern war that seems to have been nearly universal during these years. Thus, as it became more involved with the "pressure of reality," his own, deeply subversive "theory of description" emerged as a technique for resisting this spiritual "defeat," for countering the human ability to *destroy* with the human ability to *create* (however ironically, through words) at least "part of a world" in which we can survive. Given the total context of his work, including the oppressing mass media news which Stevens felt threatening to the freedom of human consciousness, there is not only an intensely ironic, but also an urgent political appeal behind the imperatives, "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure."

This particular, recurrent theme in Stevens' poetry achieves perhaps its supreme affirmation not in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," but in "Description Without Place." Although it may not finally achieve the stature of the earlier poem, "Description Without Place" fully integrates his concern with both the aesthetic and social consequences of the "theory of description." It was composed specifically for the 1945 Phi Beta Kappa lecture at Harvard, and he explains its "subject" in the April 4th letter to Henry Church: "It seems to me to be an interesting idea: that is to say, the idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself, and in every vital sense we do" (L 494).

It is quite in line with Stevens' development during this period that he should again incorporate his subtle "resistance" to "objective" poetry in his own attempt to describe "Description Without Place." In the opening section of the poem Stevens turns to the figure of the sun (with which he opened "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" in 1942): "It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is" (CP 339). This tentative affirmation is placed in opposition to "objective" descriptions of the world. In contrast, perhaps, to such seemingly realistic statements as "Green is green" (a line from the first poem Stevens had mentioned in his "Preface" to Williams),²⁴ Stevens here describes the "vacancy" inherent in linguistic description in the opening section of the poem:

This green queen

In the seeming of the summer of her sun
By her own seeming made the summer change.

In the golden vacancy she came, and comes,
And seems to be on the saying of her name.

(CP 339)

As in the earlier poems of his middle period, these lines engage in an argument with the “realistic” assumptions about language that Stevens felt to be presumed in “descriptive” or “objective” poetry. It is an argument, however, once again designed not to denigrate language, but rather to reaffirm the power of the word. As he insists later in the poem,

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that *exists*
In its own seeming . . .

(CP 344; italics mine)

As already noted, the quasi-religious didacticism of this argument reaches its fullest expression a few lines later, “In description, canon central in itself / The thesis of the plentifullest John.” The potential didacticism of this theory of description is tempered there, however, by its own playful allusion to (and de-description of) that *scripture*, as well as by its own serious examination into the possibilities and the limitations of “description” itself. Yet with equal urgency, Stevens also insists in “Description Without Place” that in spite of the limitations of language and its inherent deviation from reality, language remains powerful—in reality. The references to such historical figures as Calvin, Nietzsche, and Lenin (already cited) demonstrate the power of people’s visions or “descriptions” of the world to become precisely “Seemings that it is possible may be” (CP 342). Thus, the colors of the world become “discolorations” in Nietzsche’s mind, and “his thoughts” in turn become the “colored forms” (CP 342).

Ultimately, however, Stevens’ greatest explanation of this “theory” lies not in his theorizing about poetry, but in its practice—specifically in the concluding lines of “Description Without Place.” The “theory of description matters most,” he says, because

 everything we say
Of the past is description without place, a cast

Of the imagination, made in sound;
And because what we say of the future must portend,

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening.

(CP 345-46)

Perhaps again in contrast to the “delineating” way that Williams uses color in such poems as “The Red Wheelbarrow” (WCP 95) or “The Red Lily” (WCP 45), Stevens deliberately combines a static image (the red rubies) with an act

of the mind (“rubies reddening”) that is obviously created through an act of language—*through description itself*.²⁵ This conjunction is, as we know, not an object in reality; yet even as they expose the gap between meaning and the world, these words prove the power of description to create meaning. This is the power of the word, one which Stevens feels we cannot repress and should not dismiss.

In the poems of his later years, Stevens would use different means, though not essentially different assumptions, to explore the “theory of description,” though to explore this fully would move beyond the scope of this essay. Although the “violence” of the Second World War had finally ended, the subsequent “pressure of reality” became increasingly for Stevens a “poverty” (CP 533) in reality which demanded *compensation*, rather than resistance. This is not to say that the dominant concerns of his middle period disappear altogether in the late poetry. In the 1947 “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together,” for example, Stevens playfully and quite self-consciously calls his twelve highly imaginative descriptions of a pineapple, “casual exfoliations,” “Apposites, to the slightest edge, of the whole / *Undescribed* composition of the sugar-cone” (PM 298—italics mine). And in “The Bouquet,” *circa* 1948, he combines an image quite reminiscent of that from “The Poems of Our Climate” (the “bouquet” itself) with the figure of a soldier. This poem is particularly intriguing, for it shows Stevens in his most cynical of moods. The bouquet “stands in a jar, as metaphor” (CP 448), leading through the course of the poem to a discourse on “meta-men” and “para-things”; in the last section, however

A car drives up. A soldier, an officer,
Steps out. He rings and knocks. The door is not locked.
He enters the room and calls. No one is there.

He bumps the table. The bouquet falls on its side.
He walks through the house, looks round him and then leaves.
The bouquet has slopped over the edge and lies on the floor.

(CP 452-53)

Here the claims of metaphor are utterly incapable of resisting this rather boorish “pressure of reality,” although it is with obvious irony that this metaphorical “defeat” is created within the metaphors of Stevens’ poem.

Nonetheless, in the majority of his late poems, such as “Credences of Summer,” “Angel Surrounded by Paysans,” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” Stevens consistently evokes a sense of reconciliation between the self, language, and the objective world. The best of his late poems are gathered in *The Rock*, the title of which, with its singular subject and definite article, suggests a fundamental change from the middle poems gathered in *Parts of a World*. In his final lyrics, the poet’s reconciliation with reality, however illusory, tends to be stronger and his poetic strategies, because less

obvious, even more critical. It is not the strategy of "The Poems of Our Climate" nor that of his middle poetry in general: the last poems are at once more deeply private and simultaneously more universal to the human experience. But more important, they postulate a "cure" (CP 526) rather than a "conversion" of reality—a redemption of, rather than a "resistance" to, the climate after 1945. Addressed to the "finally human," however "unaccomplished" (CP 504), the last poems acknowledge even more than the middle poems the limitation of language while confirming the power of language to "help us to live our lives" (NA 36), to endow our lives with meaning:

It was not important that they survive.
What mattered was that they should bear
Some lineament or character,

Some affluence, if only half-perceived,
In the poverty of their words,
Of the planet of which they were part.

(CP 532-33)

As Stevens had said in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," "Time troubles to produce the redeeming thought" (CP 257), and in poems such as "Lebensweisheitspielerei" and "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," he gave that "thought" its most moving expressions. As we can infer from the lines above, taken from "The Planet on the Table" (1953), in the end, Stevens' poems would come to be of, rather than against, his climate.

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Notes

¹This particular word is taken from "The Irrational Element in Poetry," reprinted in Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1972), 225; hereafter abbreviated as *OP*. The abbreviations *CP*, *L*, and *NA* are used in the text to refer, respectively, to the standard editions of Stevens' collected poems, letters, and essays.

²The parameters of this debate are summarized in Joseph N. Riddel's "The Climate of Our Poems," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 7 (Fall 1983): 59-75; and discussed at length in my *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³See Ralph J. Mills, Jr., "Wallace Stevens: The Image of the Rock," *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1963), 100, in which he discusses the "transfer of the generative power from the divine Logos" to "the human spirit" achieved in these lines.

⁴See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1972), 247-72.

⁵In addition to Helen Vendler's and Harold Bloom's contributions to this understanding of Stevens, see Glen G. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years 1913-1923* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1983); Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wal-*

lace Stevens (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 1985); and Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years 1879-1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986).

⁶Wallace Stevens: *The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1976), 150, 140-41.

⁷*The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 154, 65.

⁸For example, Williams had published his *Collected Poems: 1921-1931* (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934) hereafter abbreviated as WCP, as well as *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (New York: Alcestis, 1935) immediately prior to the period being examined here.

⁹See MacLeod, Chapter Six; Kurt Heinzelman, "Williams and Stevens: The Vanishing-Point of Resemblance," in *WCV & Others*, ed. Dave Oliphant and Thomas Zigal (Austin: University of Texas, HRC, 1985), 85-113; and Martha Helen Strom, "The Uneasy Friendship of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens," *Journal of Modern Literature*, 11 (July 1984): 291-98.

¹⁰*A Homemade World* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 55.

¹¹Rpt. in Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Knopf, 1972), 254-57.

¹²See Heinzelman, 95; and Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*, ed. Edith Heal (New York: New Directions, 1958), 23; cited in MacLeod, 90.

¹³*The Transparent Lyric: Reading and Meaning in the Poetry of Stevens and Williams* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), xii. Walker convincingly demonstrates that Stevens and Williams cannot be critically distinguished as "polar opposites" (ix). Yet, despite the similarities that we may be able to perceive in the lyrics of each poet, Stevens still placed himself in opposition to Williams' poetry. It is this ironic "source" with which I am concerned here. (We should note that Stevens' own ambivalence about Williams' poetry is clearly indicated in a 1947 letter, in which he both praises Williams and criticizes him for being "more interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say" [L 544].)

¹⁴Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 18.

¹⁵As Albert Cook points out in *Figural Choice in Poetry and Art* (Hanover: University Press of New England for Brown University, 1985), 137, "perfection" is one of Williams' favorite words.

¹⁶With regard to the inherently ironic "reflective" nature of consciousness and language, see Paul de Man's discussion of "the conscious dialectic" of "reflective poetic consciousness" in "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image," *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), 65-77.

¹⁷Among the more amusing of the "sub-texts" to Stevens' poems is the relation of Williams' 1937 review of *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, in *New Republic*, 93 (Nov. 17, 1937): 50, to Stevens' preface for Williams. In response to Stevens' "Williams is past fifty," in his review Williams accuses Stevens of having aged. For the lengthy "dialogue" between these two poets, see Heinzelman.

¹⁸"Canonica," *The Southern Review* 4 (1938): 382-95.

¹⁹*Stevens and Company*, 55-64.

²⁰See Berger's explanation in *Forms of Farewell*, xi, ff.

²¹The most famous of these criticisms of Stevens is Yvor Winters, "Wallace Stevens, or the He-donist's Progress," *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1943), 88-119. However, the negative evaluation of Stevens' lack of social relevance had wide currency among Stevens' contemporaries. Even as early as 1940 Cleanth Brooks was saying that "probably none [of the poets] . . . in our time has had to face so continually the charge that his work was precious-obvious ivory-tower ware" (*The Harvard Advocate*, 127, 3 [December, 1940]: 29).

²²*The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 363.

²³The "Prose statement," while excluded from Stevens' *Collected Poems*, is reprinted in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972), 206.

²⁴Williams' "All the Fancy Things." In this regard it is interesting to compare Stevens' late "The Green Plant" (CP 506) and "the barbarous green / Of the harsh reality of which it is part."

²⁵The concluding image of "Description Without Place" may have had its own "precursor" in Picasso's verbal description of his artistic process:

Poems Against His Climate

Auparavant les tableaux s'acheminaient vers leur fin par progression. Chaque jour apportait quelque chose de nouveau. Un tableau était une somme d'additions. Chez moi, un tableau est une somme de destructions. Je fais un tableau, ensuite je le détruis. Mais à la fin du compte rien n'est perdu; le rouge que j'ai enlevé d'une part se trouve quelque part ailleurs. (Picasso, "Conversation Avec Picasso," ed. Christian Zervos, *Cahiers d'Art*, 10 [1935], 173; cited in Susan B. Weston, "The Artist as Guitarist: Stevens and Picasso," *Criticism* 17 [1975]: 115.)

In *this* description, which Stevens appears to have read (see Weston, 113), the "rouge" remains, ironically *re-presenting* a power through which, at least for Stevens, we can "convert" our circumstances. It seems to me that this "supreme" possibility is precisely the sense that Stevens meant to convey earlier in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" by the "possible red" (CP 393), the "Red-in-red repetitions never going / Away, a little rusty, a little rouged" (CP 400). In this regard, the following lines from the 1944 "Esthétique du Mal" prove quite suggestive:

Livre de Toutes Sortes de Fleurs d'après Nature.
All sorts of flowers. That's the sentimentalist.
.....
And then that Spaniard of the rose, itself
Hot-hooded and dark-blooded, rescued the rose
From nature, each time he saw it, making it,
As he saw it, exist in his own especial eye.
(CP 316)

A number of critics have suggested that the "Spaniard" is Williams, though it seems likely to me that in addition to Baudelaire at least one of the "sources" for the "sentimentalist" is Williams and that Picasso is "Spaniard of the rose," the artist who in this poem notably represents the possibility of achieving a compensation for, if not conversion of, the red

rose that is the soldier's wound,
The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood . . .
(CP 318-19)

The 'Man in the Glass': The Specular Subject of Stevens' Poetry

R. D. ACKERMAN

Imagine that mirrors would not be *in* the world, simply, included in the totality of all *onta* and their images, but that things "present," on the contrary, would be in *them*. Imagine that mirrors (shadows, reflections, phantasms, etc.) would no longer be *comprehended* within the structure of . . . ontology . . . but would rather envelop it in its entirety.

—Jacques Derrida

A man that looks at himself in a glass . . .
finds

It is the man in the glass that lives, not he.
He is the image, the second, the unreal,

The abstraction. He inhabits another man,
Other men, and not this grass, this valid air.
He is not himself. He is vitally deprived . . .

—Wallace Stevens

MY SECOND EPIGRAPH is drawn from a late poem whose ironic title "Americana" evokes a tradition of apparently stable selfhood that contrasts sharply with the unsettling mirage of the "man in the glass." The poem's opening lines provide a glimpse of this pioneer world:

The first soothsayers of the land, the man
In the field, the man on the side of a hill, all men
In a health of weather, knowing a few, old things . . .¹

This fabled "American" mode of identity is rejected in the poem's concluding stanza as mere "buckskin hoop-la," the cowboy trappings of a self identified with a "health of weather" and not with the vital deprivation of an image in a mirror. Stevens' lengthy confrontation with this question of specular doubleness can be viewed as the poetic counterpart of a broad philosophical interrogation of the idea of the subject that traces back especially to Nietzsche and has emerged recently in the thinking, for instance, of Derrida, de Man, and Lacan.² But my purpose here is not to profile this theoretical background. Rather I aim to add Stevens' name to this list of questioners and to suggest ways in which this poet's approach to the question of the subject both concretizes and amplifies the theoretical dimension of the problem.³

Stevens' encounters with the specular self help to focus in a far-reaching drama that is played out throughout his poetry, the drama of the poet's divided allegiance between the paradigmatic models of both nature and language.⁴ The overall trajectory of this poetry can be plotted according to Stevens' ongoing effort to reveal a natural foundation for a secure idea of selfhood to counter the sense of doubleness arising from his own "terrible self-contemplation" (L 58), as he described in an early journal entry his compulsive reflexivity. In his early poetry, Stevens seeks first to situate the self within the contours of the natural world. But his means of access to this world is threatened by his growing recognition of a problematic of representation or idea of language that disarranges the boundary line between the self and the privileged otherness of nature. Thus the second stage of Stevens' endeavor is dominated by his attempt to ground his nature paradigm in a constellation of the sun as the essence of natural self-identity and the basis of singular human identity, the figure now of the "central man." Instead of serving as a foundation for such selfhood, however, the sun itself gradually comes to share in the specular interplay of the self's unstable reflexivity until—in the final stage of this development—Stevens' later poetry witnesses a further undermining of his organic foundation and the emergence of a world of description or "seeming," an uncertain world of desire that reflects the instability of the specular self.

The first stage of Stevens' effort to reveal a firm foundation of selfhood is initiated in his poems from the *Harmonium* period. In "The Comedian as the Letter C," for instance, Crispin "[beholds] himself, / A skinny sailor peering in the sea-glass." This mirror of nature⁵ is an "inscrutable" force of natural otherness beyond Crispin's merely human control, a vast sea of tempests and gales that "severs not only lands but also selves." This polyphonous mirror "dissolves" Crispin's artificial, "ancient" images of self "until nothing of himself / Remain[s], except some starker, barer self" (CP 27-29). At least that is the hope articulated by this poem and indeed by a certain strain of Stevens' poetry overall, the hope, that is, that a minimal but secure subject will emerge through the destructive but cleansing force of the sheer otherness of nature. In "Comedian" Stevens observes simply: "What counted was mythology of self, / Blotched out beyond unbleaching." The mirror of nature is intended to provide a much reduced but more viable and *living* sense of selfhood than that to be gained through humankind's own reflective devices. In an even earlier poem Stevens exhorts "Blanche McCarthy": "Look in the terrible mirror of the sky / And not in this dead glass" (OP 10). But his ensuing poetry testifies to Stevens' inability to take this advice. The vital mirror of nature proves to be an unreliable alternative to the dead glass of human reflexivity. The relationship between self and other is stymied by the intervention of a problematic of representation, a questioning that increasingly dominates Stevens' approach to the domains of both nature and the self.

This question of representation takes center stage in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem from mid-career that marks a crisis in the poet's sense

of unified selfhood. "Where / Do I begin and end?" he asks here. "And where, / As I strum the [guitar], do I pick up / That which momentarily declares / Itself not to be I and yet / Must be. It could be nothing else" (CP 171). This destabilization of the boundary between self and other leads to a questioning of the very idea of a *living* subject born of the mirror of nature:

Things as they are have been destroyed.
Have I? Am I a man that is dead

At a table on which the food is cold?
Is my thought a memory, not alive?

(CP 173)

Elsewhere during this period this table turns into a "mirror in which [men] sit and look." Cut off from the mirror of nature, these disinherited men have no alternative but to "feast on human heads, . . . eating reflections of themselves" (CP 228).

Given the grotesque denouement of such unraveling of the relationship between the starker self and its mirror of natural otherness, it should come as no surprise that "Blue Guitar" also contains an intensified idealization of unified selfhood. The more the self threatens to dissolve in the dead glass of its own reflexivity, the more the poet struggles to identify a secure idea of the subject beyond such fragmenting doubleness. Section 21 opens grandly: "A substitute for all the gods: / This self, . . . one's shadow magnified, / Lord of the body, . . . lord of the land and lord / Of the men that live in the land." Despite such elevation, though, this is no "gold self aloft," Stevens maintains, but rather a self of "the flesh, the bone, the dirt, the stone" (CP 176). Not only does this lordly self (an anticipation of the "central man") not stand above the men of the land, this substitute for the gods is identified directly with such autochthonous soothsayers (as we have noted in "Americana") and their unmediated relationship to their land, their weather, and themselves. But, as we will see, even this magnified projection of selfhood continues for Stevens to require further mediation, the mediation precisely of a "gold self aloft," the natural self-identity of the sun.⁶

The reason behind the need for this solar mediation can be traced to the double role that nature must play in order to serve as Stevens' basis of singular identity. On one hand, the mirror of nature must retain the force of sheer otherness that dissolves ancient representations of human selfhood. In "Blue Guitar" the poet advises himself to throw away his "definitions" and his "rotted names"—the worn-out "crusts" of his former "shapes"—in order to experience the true "madness of space" (CP 183). He aspires to become the "intelligence" of this "monster" of nature (CP 175). On the other hand, as we have seen, his means of access to this monster requires an initial familiarity, the sense of indigenoussness of the "men that live in the land." "I am a native in this world," Stevens claims, "and think in it as a native thinks" (CP 180).

Nature is both home and monster; the poet is both native and alien. If the model of nature is to remain efficacious as Stevens' ground of singular selfhood, then the unifying essence of nature must itself lie beyond these divisive scenes of "Blue Guitar."

Although solar figurations are crucial to Stevens' poetry from the outset, the identification of sun and self is made most explicit in a number of short poems immediately following "Blue Guitar." Stevens' quest of a "mythology of self" is revitalized now as these poems become once more the "descant of a self," the "barbarous chanting of what is strong" (CP 191). The "Latest Freed Man" announces: "The moment's sun (the strong man vaguely seen) . . . Of him / And of his works, I am sure." Here the "ant of the self [is] changed to an ox / With its organic boomings" (CP 204-05). Since now the sun is the "color of a self," the poet no longer need question where he himself begins and ends: "He is what he hears and sees." He evades the specular interplay of the problematic of representation: "He has not / To go to the Louvre to behold himself . . . [where] each picture is a glass . . . [and] the walls are mirrors multiplied" (CP 194-95).

But the poet's celebration as the freed man is premature. Stevens is unable to avoid the mirrors of the Louvre. Although he sings the song of unified selfhood, the very idea of this central self is projected from a site of meditative doubleness where the poet continues to question where the self begins and ends. In fact, in order to distinguish the rotted representation from the monstrous otherness of nature, the poet finds he must continue to perform reflective acts of decreation, that is, continue to enter into "Blue Guitar's" divisive scenes of representation, the self's house of mirrors. The sun and its central self cannot remain inviolate from the doubleness of this thinker's reflexivity.

Thus the crucial figure of the "central man" first appears in Stevens' poetry under the auspices not of the sun but of a mother of meditation, the "Woman That Had More Babies than That"—more offspring, that is, than mother nature. In this poem the self is identified as a "cloister" that "Detects the sound of a voice that doubles its own, / In the images of desire, the forms that speak" (OP 82). As Stevens observes in his "Adagia": "When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of someone else" (OP 168). Like the mirror scene of "Americana," this cloister too marks a site of desire where the self always finds itself somewhere (and someone) else.⁷

Instead of lending its natural self-identity to the human self, the solar figure of the central man (and even the sun itself) gradually comes to share in the instabilities of specular (non)identity. The hope of "Asides on the Oboe" that the central man can be both a "philosophers' man" and a natural "mirror" of "transparence" (CP 250-51) is not to be realized in Stevens' poetry. This implied division within the central man himself surfaces again—more dramatically—in "Chocorua to Its Neighbor." Here in the midcourse of the moun-

tain's own lengthy encomium of the central man, the central man himself speaks (a different story):

"My solitaria

Are the meditations of a central mind.
I hear the motions of the spirit and the sound
Of what is secret becomes, for me, a voice
That is my own voice speaking in my ear.

There lies the misery, the coldest coil
That grips the centre, the actual bite, that life
Itself is like a poverty in the space of life,
So that the flapping of wind around me here
Is something in tatters that I cannot hold."

(CP 298-99)

The voice of the central man does not issue from the undivided source of nature's sun. It is the offspring of a meditative doubleness that reflects a discontinuity both within and without, a radical difference between the human and natural orders, a gap at the center, at the site of intended unification where the crisis of the divided self is supposed to be resolved.

But it is not only the figure of the central man that is implicated in this glassy doubling. The principal drama of the later poetry results from Stevens' calling into question also the primordially of the sun, the priority of natural self-presence. The pivotal "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," for instance, marks *both* a culmination of Stevens' belief in the power of decreation to reveal the paradigmatic otherness of nature *and* the beginning of a turn toward a paradigmatic idea of language (of "Description Without Place") and its "never-ending meditation" (of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven").

Stevens advises the ephebe of "Notes" to seek behind the merely "invented world" of names for an "idea of the sun" beyond our "images." "The sun / Must bear no name," he tells the ephebe, "but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be" (CP 380-81). The sun is Stevens' metaphor for an order of being beyond metaphor, beyond the domain of human desire. The "first idea" of the sun, the poet explains, is distinct from the mirrored self-imagery that humankind has always mistaken for the true sun and earth. Already Adam and Eve "found themselves . . . in a glass; a second earth . . . a varnished green." But although even Eve "made air a mirror of herself," Stevens urges the ephebe to return to the "idea" that was here before the human intervention: "From this the poem springs: that we live a place / That is not our own . . . not ourselves" (CP 383). This modernist impulse to return to the naked otherness of natural things-in-themselves, however, unravels in the long course of "Notes" to the point where Ozymandias later acknowledges that his "contemplated spouse" is "never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396). In the final section of

"Notes" Stevens' "fat girl" of earth remains a "more than natural figure," an "irrational distortion," a "fiction that results from feeling" (CP 406). By this point one must conclude that the "place that is not our own" is always already our own, that there is no naked sun accessible beyond our images.

Thus the opening lines of "Description Without Place" situate the unnamable sun itself precisely in the realm of names, in the "seeming" of description or representation:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is.

The sun is an example. What it seems
It is and in such seeming all things are.

(CP 339)

Prior to the presence of the sun is the "seeming" of the sun. The once discredited realm of description or metaphor is now "Intenser than any actual life could be, / A text . . . More explicit than the experience of sun / And moon." We live in a "world of words." Unlike Crispin, the "hidalgo" of this poem no longer discovers his starker self in a place that is not his own, in the mirror of sea and sky. This protagonist "lives" in the "mountainous character of his speech" and discovers whatever self he has in the "mountainous mirror" of his own description (CP 344-45).

Thus the paradigmatic orb of "A Primitive Like an Orb" is not the sun but a "poem," not a solar strong man but a "giant of nothingness" (CP 443). This giant is not a figure of unified selfhood like the "latest freed man." The giant's poem of description is a play of representation, the site not of self-identity but of a "never-ending meditation" (the questioning of a divided self that lives in a glass), as we will see next.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" opens:

The eye's plain version is a thing apart,
The vulgate of experience. Of this,
A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—

As part of the never-ending meditation,
Part of the question that is a giant himself:
Of what is this house composed if not of the sun . . .

(CP 465)

The "vulgate of experience" is largely displaced as the seat of paradigmatic authority in Stevens' late poetry by a questioning that qualifies the "eye's plain version" with a never-ending series of "and yet's." This questioning traces the "poem" not to the place that is not our own but to "a sense in which we are poised, / Without regard to time or where we are" (CP 466).⁸ The

world that appears (throughout "An Ordinary Evening") through the auspices of this sense of difference is enigmatically "amassed in a total double-thing" (CP 472), a "mobile and . . . immobile flickering / In the area between is and was" (CP 474). The question of a unitary grounding for this divided world and self becomes academic: "Why, then, inquire / Who has divided the world . . . ? The self, the chrysalis of all men / Became divided in the leisure of blue day" (CP 468).

The figure of the sun (and the self it authorizes or by whom it is authorized) that returns in Stevens' last poems is a "resemblance of the sun" (CP 465), a metaphor of the sun wrought through the dispensation of Stevens' "poem" of description or theater of "seeming." "As at a Theatre" opens: "Another sunlight might make another world . . . Like the artifice of a new reality." But this sunlight is not the light of nature but rather "the candle of another being . . . that stands / And meditates an image of itself" (OP 91). In "A Discovery of Thought" Stevens bases his hope for this theater of representation on the realization of a new idea of selfhood, the birth of the child of a new "reality," an "antipodal, far-fetched creature" in whom the "accent of deviation . . . is its life preserved" (OP 96). This accent, I suggest, is the "separate sense" of "A Primitive Like An Orb" and "An Ordinary Evening," the vital deprivation of the man who "lives" in a glass.

The world of these last poems comes into being through the divided self's sense of deviation. The controversial "cure" of "The Rock" results from the recognition that even the sun is not self-identical. Like the human self, the sun too is entangled in and constituted by a "métier"—a "theorem" of desire or "design" of happiness—that legislates the covering of the rock of nothingness with the "illusion" of "green leaves" (CP 525-26). The sun too diverges from itself before it can even be itself. The earth is the sun's illusion, its language of desire. Instead of providing a paradigm of self-presence, the sun and earth figure forth now as a model of noncoincidence. The sun's cure of leaves legitimates or is legitimated by the cure of the human "poem." These are not natural leaves but a "fiction" of leaves like the "flickering" leaves of "An Ordinary Evening." "The Rock's" "cure of the ground," then, is not a means of recuperating natural presence but a way of enlisting the sun's paradigmatic influence in the cause of a "poem" of description and its world of "seeming." The "second earth" of Adam and Eve is no longer secondary.⁹

The cost of this cure is the loss of self-identity. The world and the self remain divided as the condition of the "poem" of description. Although Stevens' last poems have often been read as vehicles for the recovery of natural presences or things-in-themselves, the perceptual accords of these poems are enacted within a theater of "seeming."¹⁰ Stevens' "new knowledge of reality" (CP 534) results from his meditative acknowledgment of the "separate sense" and its vital deprivation. In "The World as Meditation," for instance, Penelope's flickering world emerges through the undecidability of her never-ending meditation: "But was it Ulysses? . . . It was Ulysses and it was not" (CP 520-21). Her world is granted her not through the auspices of her "eye's

plain version" but through this reflexive interplay of a desire that divides her and accents her sense of the world's "seeming"—as in the prefixed quotation from Georges Enesco: "*Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour.*"

The concluding section of Stevens' last longer poem, "The Sail of Ulysses," provides a significant revision of "Blue Guitar's" celebration of the self as "lord of the body" and "lord of the land," a "substitute for all of the gods." "What is the shape of the sibyl?" this section opens. The "sibyl of the self" that reads the flickering leaves of our future is no "directing sceptre" but rather a figure whose "diamond" is "poverty" and whose "jewel" is "need":

the sibyl's shape
Is a blind thing fumbling for its form,
A form that is lame, a hand, a back,
A dream too poor, too destitute
To be remembered, the old shape
Worn and leaning to nothingness,
A woman looking down the road,
A child asleep in its own life.

(OP 104)

This sibyl's chief identifying feature is the poverty of the vital deprivation that destines her to seek in the future for the self-possession she lacks in the present. Like the central man's life in "Chocorua," her life too is like a "poverty in the space of life." Like Penelope, the sibyl "lives" in the dream of her poem. She is a "child asleep in its own life," waiting to be born to itself, an antipodal child who lives not in a mirror of sea or sky, nor in the light of nature's sun, but rather in the mirror only of its own "seemings"—like a man who "looks at himself in a glass and finds / It is the man in the glass that lives, not he" (OP 94).

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Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957), 93-94; hereafter cited as *OP*. Other abbreviations for Stevens' writing: *CP* for *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *L* for *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

²Along with the work generally of Derrida and de Man, and among many recent discussions of specular doubleness and self-reflexivity, I will mention the following: Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986); David Carroll, *The Subject in Question* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); J. Hillis Miller, "The Disarticulation of the Self in Nietzsche," *The Monist* 64 (1981): 247-61. The current interest in questions of specularity can be traced in part to Jacques Lacan's essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in his *Écrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977). See also my discussion of Derrida's *Memoires: For Paul de Man in Philosophy and Literature* 11 (1987): 101-07.

³This problematic of reflexivity provides a fruitful opening for a deconstructive approach to Stevens. See J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), esp. 409-18, and Joseph N. Riddel, "Metaphoric Staging: Stevens' Beginning Again of the 'End of the Book,'" in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 308-38, 354-58. For a critical discussion of the orthodox view of the self that appears in certain recent works on Stevens, see my "Whatever Self He Had: The Canonization of Stevens Continues," *Review* (forthcoming).

⁴I have dealt with the relationship between these paradigms in "Stevens' Skepticism: From Romantic Irony to Deconstruction," *Studies in Romanticism* 22 (1983): 551-67, and in "Death and Fiction: Stevens' Mother of Beauty," *ELH* 50 (1983): 401-14.

⁵For the background of this term, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

⁶On the sun as the principal metaphysical figure of natural self-presence, see Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁷Like Stevens, Nietzsche too identifies this doubleness with death: "No one speaks with me but myself, and my voice comes to me like the voice of a dying man! . . . For my heart . . . forces me to speak as if I were two persons" (*Philosophy and Truth*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale [Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1979], 33). But Stevens' man who *lives* in a glass is not only divided; he is dispossessed. Commenting on the mirror-effects of Mallarmé's *Mimique*, Derrida observes: "We are faced then with mimicry imitating nothing, . . . a double that doubles no simple. . . . This speculum reflects no reality. . . . For this double . . . reality, indeed, is death. . . . [I]n this mirror of a mirror, a difference . . . does exist. . . . But it is a difference without reference, . . . a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh" (*Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981], 206).

⁸This "sense" is related to the "separate sense" (CP 440) of "A Primitive Like An Orb" through which we gain access to the central poem. But this sense of division and distance is the mark neither of escapism nor aestheticism. To the extent that it "poises" us without regard for nature's time and place, this sense intensifies our reliance on cultural or historical time and place. In "An Ordinary Evening," the poet is advised to speak "the poem as it is, / Not as it was" (CP 473); the painter should learn "to paint / In the present state of painting and not the state / Of thirty years ago" (CP 478).

⁹Miller develops in detail the ramifications for literary thought of his similar view of "The Rock" (*Linguistic*, 390-422).

¹⁰Even Steven Shaviro's perceptive reading of these poems in "'That Which Is Always Beginning': Stevens's Poetry of Affirmation," *PMLA* 100 (1985): 220-33, underestimates the paradigmatic inclusiveness of Stevens' "poem" of "seemings" and therefore blurs the doubleness of the late poetry into the "unlimited affirmation" of a Deleuzean Nietzscheanism. See my response to his article in *PMLA* 100 (1985): 814-15.

“This Refuge that the End Creates”: Stevens’ “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself”

WILLIAM V. DAVIS

Take the case of a man for whom reality is
enough, as, at the end of his life, he returns to
it like a man returning from Nowhere . . .

—Wallace Stevens

THE TYPICAL TACTIC of much of Stevens’ major, and especially late, poetry is to internalize an exterior and then to let the mind play over the internalized images until, when they are externalized again, often at the end of the poem, everything seems changed, even though we know that, except through the artifice of the poetry itself, nothing really “has been changed except what is / Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.”¹

As much philosopher as he was poet² Stevens linked the two when he described “the search for reality” as “the philosopher’s search / For an interior made exterior / And the poet’s search for the same exterior made / Interior” (CP 481). Such a search might finally issue in “a visibility of thought, / In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once” (CP 488). This visibility of thought and this search for reality haunt the late poems and come to climax both tactically and thematically in “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself,” the poem Stevens placed last in his *Collected Poems*.

Eric Neumann suggests that in “the works of the great artists’ old age . . . the polarity of outward and inward—nature and art—seems to be resolved” and as “the phenomenon of transcendence occurs, the transpersonal seems, even though it has passed through the medium of the human, to have achieved its own objectivity—to speak, one might say, with itself.” Neumann goes on to say that “This art no longer relates either consciously or unconsciously to any historical time; the solitary monologue of these ‘extreme’ works is spoken, as it were, into the void.”³

One might argue that much, if not all, of Stevens’ work has this “extreme” quality, but surely this quality is intensified in his last works. And, surprisingly, although “Not Ideas” has held the final position in Stevens’ canon for more than thirty years, it has not received the attention one might have suspected when it is remembered how carefully and at what late date Stevens arranged the poems in his *Collected Poems*. As Samuel French Morse notes in his introduction to *Opus Posthumous*, “Stevens resisted the publication of his *Collected Poems* for a long time” even though his publishers and friends suggested such a volume “even before the appearance of *Transport to Summer* in 1947” (OP xiii). And, as James Baird points out, “It is perhaps not generally recognized that the arrangement of the last four lyrics in the *Collected Poems* is the final evidence of precision.”⁴ Likewise, Charles Berger links “Not Ideas” and “Of Mere Being,” Stevens’ two “death” poems, placed last, re-

spectively, in the *Collected Poems* and the posthumous *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. However, Berger's suggestion that "Of Mere Being" "reads like an intentional revision of ['Not Ideas'] as if Stevens were aiming at making a new ending—or at least providing a more mysterious poem to occupy the final position" is compromised, as Berger admits, by the fact that "Not Ideas" "has the prestige granted by the poet's designation."⁵

Stevens' title, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," is immediately intriguing, but it becomes even more so when we realize that the poem itself seems to contradict the title. Instead of giving us "the Thing Itself," as the title promises, the poem seems rather to provide only "Ideas about the Thing," ideas which never really get us to "the Thing Itself," but, finally, only to a something, an "it," which, at best, is only "like," and then only "like / A new knowledge of reality" (CP 534)—which may or may not be what has been meant by "the Thing Itself." In short, the intrigue remains even at the end of the poem. Of course, this tactic is not unusual in Stevens. He often suggests that the thing to be realized (the theme of the poem) must precede its realization (the poem itself) in order for the process of poetry to be undertaken, understood and fully accomplished. In this context it is interesting to recall that Stevens' early notebook, "From Pieces of Paper," which, as George Lensing has shown, Stevens drew on from about 1930 until the end of his life, contains the fragment which was to become the title of this final poem.⁶ Further, "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," another poem on the same theme as "Not Ideas," begins by instructing the ephebe to "Begin . . . by perceiving the idea / Of this invention" (CP 380, my italics). And in "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," at the point of "the final Projection, C," where "The arrangement contains the desire of / The artist" (CP 295-96), we are told that, "To get at the thing / Without gestures is to get at it as / Idea" (CP 295). There is often in Stevens, as "A thinker of the first idea" (CP 386), a confusion between "ideas" and "things" such that "The first idea is an imagined thing" (CP 387), "Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands" (CP 238). This "flux / Between the thing as idea and / The idea as thing" (CP 295) occurs in such a way that "Progress . . . is a movement through changes of terminology" (OP 157) so that, often, even when Stevens "seems to be asserting unconditionally," he "can escape being final."⁷

When we turn to "Not Ideas" itself, we find that things begin "At the earliest ending of winter" (CP 534) as our persona, a listener like the listener in "The Snow Man," the early poem which "Not Ideas" immediately reminds us of, hears, or thinks he hears, a "scrawny cry," coming either from within his own mind or from somewhere "outside." The identification of this cry and its source is the main concern of the poem and what he, speaker or listener, and we, reader, make of the cry, both in terms of its source and significance is what, finally, both the "ideas" and "the Thing Itself" of the title focus on. The fact that this cry is "scrawny," slight, thin, ill-nourished or diminished, is also significant—it both fits the ambiguity in terms of the cry's source and simultaneously satisfies Stevens' inevitable habit of subtlety and restraint. In

"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" Stevens mentions "that difference between the and an" (*CP* 255). Here, the shift from the indefinite article, "a scrawny cry" (l. 2) to the definite article, "That scrawny cry" (l. 13) focuses the specificity of the cry and transfers it from the realm of seeming, "Seemed like a sound in his mind" (l. 3), to the realm of being, "It was" (l. 13).⁸ This movement parallels the initially hesitant, "It would have been" (l. 9) and then the negatively defined, "It was not" (l. 10) cry, with the triads of what "It was" in the last six lines, which, although they end in the simile, "It was like / A new knowledge of reality," focus the cry and the knowledge of reality which it portends.

The fact that the knowledge to which the poem points comes by way of a "cry," that is, through the auditory sense, is important. Stevens has always been interested in sound, as is evidenced not only in the way he regularly works a line but in some of the poems overtly associated with sound. Perhaps the best example would be "The Man with the Blue Guitar," a poem which is important to Stevens' canon not only stylistically, but also thematically. In 1936-37, when he was at work on "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens talked about it as dealing "with the relation or balance between imagined things and real things" which, he said, "is a constant source of trouble to me." He added, "I don't feel that I have as yet nearly got to the end of the subject." Then, anticipating the question of "abstractions," he said, "I have been trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is" (*L* 316). Obviously, these considerations remained in Stevens' mind throughout his career. With regard to this, we need only remember some of the more blatant examples of the use of sound for its own sake ("Bantams in Pine-Woods," "The Ordinary Women," "Anything Is Beautiful if You Say It Is," or the sixth section of "It Must Change" in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction") as well as the obsession Stevens had with the notion of "harmonium" from the beginning to the end of his career.⁹ In these terms, "The Course of a Particular" (*OP* 96-97) is an important poem, recapitulating, as Helen Vendler says, "all his previous efforts"¹⁰ and it has some obvious associations with "Not Ideas." The leaves which "cry" in the "nothingness of winter," with its "icy shades and shapen snow" do not "transcend themselves" and they come to mean no more than that they "are in the final finding of the ear," "the thing / Itself" and the "cry here concerns no one at all" outside the self. Likewise, Stevens may as well be remembering his early poem "The Sun This March" (*CP* 133-34) which has several parallels with "Not Ideas." There, there is the possible connection between what seems like a new discovery, described in astronomical terms of "the colossal sun / Surrounded by its choral rings" and Keats's metaphor of discovery in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." And, of course, in the important late poem "The Planet on the Table," "Ariel . . . glad he had written his poems," acknowledges that "His self and the sun were one / And his poems, although makings of his self, / Were no less makings of the sun." Still, in "Not Ideas" Stevens' use of sound not only for its own sake but also as the major metaphor of the poem is rather unique.

The key to understanding "Not Ideas" occurs at the point where, both structurally and thematically, the poem turns—at the end of the third tercet, the beginning of the fourth. By this point in the poem the basic thematic tension has been established by the ambiguity of the source of the sound of the bird's cry and, structurally, the poem has reached a point of stress. Both form and theme demand a release of tension and some kind of resolution. Thus, the central caesura at the end of line 9, the stanza break, and the "It was not" at the beginning of line 10 signal the formal movement from the first to the second section of the poem. And the introduction of the "ventriloquism" in this same line signals the thematic shift which will carry the poem to its ultimate conclusion. Not only is the word "ventriloquism," situated climactically in the literal, structural, and thematic center of the poem, the key word in the entire poem, it is also the one word which catches up the auditory imagery which runs throughout the poem. This is a very rich word in its context and deserves specific attention.

In his short poems in particular, Stevens often seems to place a good deal of weight or emphasis on one word and often it is a word which catches up the theme succinctly in itself. "It was not from the vast ventriloquism. . . ." A "ventriloquism," a sound which seems to come from some other or distant source, is here received as heard, an auditory "response," set within the context of the self, but separated from it. It is an exterior made interior or internalized, one example among many in which Stevens worries the relationship of art to life which, he says, "is of the first importance" and which "in the absence of a belief in God" (an exterior, sustaining source of consolation and confidence) creates the inevitable situation in which "the mind turns to its own creations and examines them" (*OP* 159), "as far as nothingness permits" (*CP* 463). Here the mind turns toward and into itself to examine itself—which would be one way to read the title of the poem. This examination is a sorting through of the mind's voices, cries, hymns (when "cry" has become "choir," l. 14) in an attempt to find or arrive at, through these "less legible meanings of sounds" (*CP* 488), some "new knowledge of reality," the "palm at the end of the mind" (*P* 398).

When we think of "ventriloquism" we think of what is heard and of the way in which it is heard first, and then we think of the trick that has been played on us by the ventriloquist, the way he has "thrown his voice" to make it seem as if the sounds have come from some source other than himself. The fact that, in terms of the metaphor Stevens uses as his vehicle here, the heard sound and the source of the sound heard are one and the same is crucial to an understanding of the poem. The "final finding of the ear" (*OP* 97) here is to find the sound within the self and to rediscover and acknowledge what has always been known, that one must depend fully and finally only on the self and make of that self all the world there is. It must be, must become, finally, "a new knowledge of reality."

Another side of the ventriloquist metaphor needs to be considered since the "ventriloquism" is here linked to "sleep's faded papier-mâché . . ." (Stevens'

ellipsis). Years before, Stevens wrote a short poem, "To the Roaring Wind," which seems, then and now, almost to have escaped notice, but which might be seen as prefiguring "Not Ideas." Furthermore, since Stevens placed "To the Roaring Wind" last in his early "Primordia" group of 1917 as well as last in both the 1923 and 1931 editions of *Harmonium* and placed "Not Ideas" last in his *Collected Poems*, the two poems are parallel in that they both serve as crucial poetic conclusions in Stevens' canon.¹¹

"To the Roaring Wind" is only four lines:

What syllable are you seeking,
Vocalissimus,
In the distances of sleep?
Speak it.

(CP 113)

Here the "vocalissimus" seeks, down the corridors of sleep, a "syllable," some snippet of sound which, when he can find it and "Speak it" will, apparently, suffice both as question to and answer for his search. Further, because the poem is addressed to the wind, it combines an exterior and an interior source and search since the wind, for the speaker, is both the air around him and the breath within him. Like another late poem, "The Region November," the wind here seems to be "Saying and saying, the way things say / On the level of that which is not yet knowledge" (OP 115). And thus, as the metaphor of "To the Roaring Wind" (and of "Not Ideas") makes it, the speaker seeks only within himself, even though the answer, should he find it, will seem to come from "outside."

Another parallel between the two poems has to do with the "distances of sleep" which both poems explore. References to sleep are common in Stevens' poems but perhaps the most obvious poem to be remembered in this context is "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (CP 431-36) in which "the ear repeats, / Without a voice, inventions of farewell" and "Sleep realized" becomes "the ultimate intellect," surely something like "a new knowledge of reality." The argument seems to run: the "ultimate intellect" would be conscious awareness of even unconsciousness, consciousness without content, "sleep realized," since sleep exists *per se*, outside of life or any individual perception of life. This is, then, another variation on the exterior-interior paradigm Stevens never tired of exploring, like "a new account of everything old" (CP 529).

Still, sleep is a state in which images come to the mind visually and auditorily. Thus, "the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-mâché . . ." simultaneously combines a visual and an auditory image, both the source of the sound as exterior to and "real" for the speaker. That is, it is (since "It was not") neither dream nor auditorial imagining. Although no pun is intended here, surely Stevens, more consciously than most poets, was constantly "editing" his poem in terms of "the relation between the imagination and re-

ality" since there are "degrees of the imagination" just as there are "degrees of reality" (NA 7). Stevens' most definitive statement of this "relation" is in his letters, where he says, "Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. . . . Thus, reality = the imagination, and the imagination = reality" (L 364). These ideas have been the thematic rock of Stevens' poetry from the beginning, nowhere more insisted upon than toward the end and, in this sense, "Not Ideas," perhaps more than any other single poem Stevens wrote, forces the issue furthest.¹²

After the ellipsis of line 11 and the firm statement of the next line, closing the central section of the poem, things move rapidly toward closure. The last two tercets of the poem bring back the "cry," now firmly placed "outside" the poet's mind, and suggest how it may come to serve as an emblem of the "new knowledge of reality" which the poem takes us toward, "a new known" (OP 116). Although the cry is still "scrawny," it is also "A chorister whose c preceded the choir"; "part of the colossal sun"; and "like / A new knowledge of reality." This trinity is important. The first two affirmations *are*, are introduced definitively by "It was," while the third is the simile with which the poem ends.

"A chorister whose c preceded the choir." This is a full line, packed tight as only Stevens could pack a line. On the most obvious level it is inbred in several ways: the "c" in the mind must needs precede the c sung, as the chorister precedes the choir, and thus the interior-exterior dichotomy occurs, condensed, again; the chorister's "c," literally, punningly, precedes the c of "preceded," making its own music in an archetypically Stevensian way and bowing to the early poem, "The Comedian as the Letter C" (CP 27-46), as well. Like Crispin, the "introspective voyager" of the earlier poem, the speaker here hears, as he speaks, "a new intelligence . . . to which all poems were incident" as "The whole of life that still remained in him / Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear" (CP 28).¹³ The image, in "Not Ideas," of cry, chorister, and choir continues the auditory metaphor of the poem, but now the music swells to include the individual "chorister" in the "choir," suggesting an aggregate of sound, prelude to the up-coming "colossal sun."

Next the cry becomes "part of the colossal sun." This image is less immediate than the earlier image of the choir and it is more immediate than the metaphysical image with which the poem ends. Thus, since it is transitional, it becomes crucial to the trinity of sequence here at the end of the poem. The sun, as source of heat and light, of life, is an almost mythic presence ("colossal") removed in time and space ("Still far away") and yet close to us in our understanding of its power and presence over our existence. It is, then, a physical mystery just as the mind is a metaphysical mystery and we chorus back and forth between these kinds of things, these thoughts of things, to make our world known, understandable and real. If all of this cannot be defined adequately by poetry or philosophy, perhaps it can be definitively suggested as a "was" which is "like / A new knowledge of reality." In such a situation, like becomes more than less and reality becomes "an activity of the

"This Refuge that the End Creates"

most august imagination, . . . an argentine abstraction approaching form" (OP 110).

The key word in "Not Ideas," the last word Stevens left us, is "reality." Stevens habitually uses the word, particularly in his late poems, in several seemingly self-excluding ways.¹⁴ If "Stevens usually means by *reality* an undetermined base on which a mind constructs its personal sense of the world" and if the world is "antecedent in itself,"¹⁵ then world and mind merge in such a way that "ideas about the thing" become "the thing itself" and this poem's title paradoxically resolves itself at the end in a "new knowledge of reality." And if this is what Stevens intended in this individual poem and in his "whole harmonium" of poetry which this poem brings to completion, then, as he had said several years before, "Reality is the beginning not the end" (CP 469). This, then, finally, is "the refuge that the end creates" (CP 373) and "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" becomes "the cry of its occasion, / Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP 473) in a world in which "poetry and reality are one, or should be" (NA 81).

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Notes

¹*The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 396, hereafter cited as *P*. Other works by Stevens will be cited in the text as follows: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954) as *CP*; *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957) as *OP*; *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951) as *NA*; *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) as *L*.

²In his important essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens writes, "no one is needed to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin" (NA 30). Later, he introduces his essay "A Collect of Philosophy" by saying, "It is often the case that concepts of philosophy are poetic" (OP 183). He goes on to say that "poets and philosophers often think alike" (OP 186) even though they might not write alike, and that "the uses to which the philosopher and the poet put the world are different" (OP 198).

³*Art and the Creative Unconscious*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 102-105.

⁴*The Dome and the Rock: Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), 90.

⁵*Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 184.

⁶"From Pieces of Paper: A Wallace Stevens Notebook," *Southern Review*, 15 (1979): 877-920. We know from Stevens himself that he often had a title before he had the poem to go with that title (L 297).

⁷Helen Hennessy Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 25.

⁸Donald Davie mentions, pejoratively, the "persistent" use, in Stevens, of the indefinite article, just as Rostrevor Hamilton had found the "compulsive" use of the definite article in other modern verse. If it is true that Stevens has this "persistent mannerism," then the shift here to the definite article is indeed significant. (See Davie, "Notes on the Later Poems of Stevens," *Shenandoah* 7 [1956]: 40-41.)

⁹As is well-known, Stevens proposed using "The Whole of Harmonium" as the title for his collected poems (see L 831, 834) as he had earlier debated "Harmonium" as the title for his first book (see L 237-238).

¹⁰Vendler, *On Extended Wings*, 5.

¹¹Stevens insisted that "To the Roaring Wind" remain as the final poem in the expanded 1931 edition of *Harmonium*, specifically instructing Alfred Knopf to insert the new poems to be added in this edition *before* "A Tea" and "To the Roaring Wind." Stevens wrote, "After this new material the book is to be closed with the two poems in the original edition, entitled A Tea, on page 139 and To the Roaring Wind, on page 140" (L 260; Cf. *OP* xviii-xix).

¹²In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens spoke of "the pressure of reality" as "the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual." He went on to say that "It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era" (NA 22-23).

¹³If, as Vendler says in *On Extended Wings*, "The plot of the *Comedian* is an epic one—the grand voyage and the return home" (38) then it is not difficult to think that Stevens would be thinking back to it here, at the final turn toward home.

¹⁴For the best brief summary of Stevens' uses of "reality" see Frank Doggett, *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 200. Cf. also William H. Pritchard's comments: "The last poems in particular have been seen as effecting some final reconciliation between imagination and reality, and it may be that Stevens himself had such an aspiration in regard to them. Yet what makes them . . . so splendid, and arguably the best ones he ever wrote, is their preoccupation with . . . 'nothing more profound' than how to respond, as a man and poet of seventy years, to the 'speechless externality' which is no longer animate" (*Lives of the Modern Poets* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980], 227).

¹⁵Doggett, *Poetry of Thought*, 200.

**‘Spinning its Eccentric Measure’:
Stevens’ ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’**

MARY ARENSBERG

Of an earth in which the first leaf is the tale
Of leaves, in which the sparrow is a bird
Of stone, that never changes . . .

—Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme
Fiction”

The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this is given by Tasso in his romantic epic, *Gerusalemme Liberata*. Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’ army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.

—Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*

I

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*, J. Hillis Miller, reading Deleuze, distinguishes two theories or traditions that inform Western ideas of repetition.¹ The first, stemming from Plato, defines “the world of copies or of representations,” a world where difference is predicated and evaluated according to sameness: art repeats nature, the novel reproduces life, or an archetype reoccurs through time. Literary theories of mimesis depend on this type of repetitive production as does “the presupposition of realistic fiction” or painting.² The second or uncanny type of repetition derives from Nietzsche’s notion of “eternal return” and may be traced through Freud to Eliade, Lacan, and Derrida. Instead of a “world of copies,” this mode posits a world of differences or phantasms in which similarities arise with ghostly effect from a baseless plane.

Repetition that derives from a “first idea” or prototype is grounded in an imagined “origin,” or as Stevens says, a “belief in an immaculate beginning.” Yet in Nietzschean repetition, the notions of origin and ground are problematized, the principles of Freud’s “dreamwork” become operative and repetition occurs not as sameness but as an echo or “subversive ghost . . . between two opaquely similar events.”³ The first form of repetition is generated through a compulsion to repeat, while the second is paranormal and obeys

the laws of “uncanniness” or what Derrida has termed *differance*. Uncanny repetition, then, is alogical, idiosyncratic and follows the principles of deconstruction; Platonic repetition is sequential, normative and falls within the realm of the New Critical imagination.

The essay that follows will evoke both types of repetition in Stevens’ master-text, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.” Moving from a single figure or trope to the larger schemes of intra-textual and canonical repetition, this reading will disclose the poem’s intentional mimetic effects as well as its “soft-footed phantoms,” the irrational repetitions. These ghostly effects register on the reader’s consciousness as repressed images returned from the detritus of earlier poems or arise, like Cinderella at the end of “Notes,” from the memory-traces of our own subconscious.

II

In deconstructing texts, critics most often encounter the “ingot” of primary structure in disguised form, either buried within the sedimented language of a poem or within the complex rhetoric of a prose narrative. But with a writer like Wallace Stevens, whose works intentionally expose the rhetorical principles on which they are constructed and may even flaunt their own structural logic, the deconstructive ingot may be apparent in the form of a central trope. Stevens’ fondness for this type of partitive construction is apparent in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” in the telling figure that opens the tenth section of “It Must Change,” a point at which the poem threatens to shatter its own artifice and conspires to undermine the construct of change itself. I am referring to the phrase “Theatre of Trope,” a figure that tropes on the notion of trope to disclose the deconstructive ingot of “Notes,” perhaps Stevens’ definitive poetic manifesto. Just as the phrase, “parts of a world” is able to be broken down into its component parts to expel the “latent double” of its words, “Theatre of Trope” provides its reader with a “crystal hypothesis” on which the text of “Notes” is predicated.

The origins of the word “theater” are rooted in concepts of *topos* and vision: the theater is literally “a place for viewing” and, as a verb, means to see or behold.⁴ To see at the theater, however, is not to see that the spectacle on stage is an illusion. Seeing at the theater is to be blind to the baselessness of the proffered vision. To see a trope too is to be blind to the underlying nothingness of the illusion it invents. The theater is visible to the sightless viewer, just as a trope is a seeing “through a willing suspension of disbelief.” A trope is invisible, an unseeing and still a seeing in the mind’s eye, while the theater is a seeing that is an unseeing. The theater is a trope itself for the illusion created on the stage, and the stage is a trope itself for the illusion of a world that cannot be named. The dialogical grid disclosed in this theater of the absurd is repeated in the modulations of the word theater as it lives with and engages the other words in its context:

A bench was his catalepsy, Theatre

Of Trope. He sat in the park. The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.⁵
(CP 397)

The phrase occurs within an alogical context. Why is a catalepsy appositioned by the phrase, "Theater of Trope," and what is the relation between a park, a bench and a catalepsy? In disentangling the threads of meaning in this language scene, it is useful to recall J. Hillis Miller's reading of "The Rock," a text which he describes as a "running *mise en abyme*."⁶ Finding his deconstructive ingot in the words "ground" and "cure," Miller describes how the poem "takes the apparently simple words 'ground' and 'cure' and plays with each word in turn, placing it in a context of surrounding words so that it gives way beneath its multiplying contradictory meanings to reveal the chasm below."⁷ A similar pattern is at work here in "Notes" which begins with the construction of an artifice, the theater of trope, and leads to its unveiling as a theater of the absurd, paradoxically the closing of the theater of trope. In "Notes," as in "The Rock," this moment of *aporia* results from a flooding of the language scene or linguistic overload, when the irrational becomes rational and meaning is discontinuous.

The word "theater," then, becomes the node of the text, or the knot of language from which the other words in its context engage in the free play of dissemination. A theater was originally a place constructed in the open air for viewing plays and other spectacles; yet it is also a natural formation or carved out space that suggests the structure of a stage. A park is also an enclosed place of ground that is not a natural phenomenon but a man-made spot for pleasure. Many parks contain natural theaters which can be filled with artificial things of the man-made stage. These inherent parallelisms that are not quite precise analogies are characteristic of all *mises en abyme* and fictional involutions, and they contribute to the moment Stevens calls "cataleptic"—when one is seized by the abyssing proclivities of language and grasps the underlying nothingness of the fiction.

In philosophy, a catalepsy is a revelation or apprehension of a certain truth, or in other words, a moment of epiphany. Loss of consciousness and sensation are characteristic of the physiological phenomenon, when the patient is thrown into a seizure or trance. The linguistic bifurcations stemming from the root catalepsy embrace in this passage when the bench of the theater becomes the bench in the park, when seeing is blindness and unseeing is vision. The curtain of the theater opens, the trope is invisible, and the viewer is entranced by the illusion of the scene; when the curtain closes, the trope is visible as an invented illusion and the beholder "sees" the nothingness of the vision. An opening that is a closing and a closing that is an opening is that

point in the intercourse of intertextuality, when the impasse of language becomes the embrace, as Stevens says, of "the imagined / On the real" (CP 392). The theater is the park and "North and South are an intrinsic couple."

These enclosures of park and theater are synecdoches for the self-referential enclosures of the total poem. Such play with the container and the contained or with constructs of inside/outside are, as Miller points out, characteristic of all abyss scenes and contribute to the poem's *trompe l'oeil* effect. Stevens' "Theatre of Trope" provides an ideographic pattern for his readers who catch the eye of the "vagabond in metaphor" (CP 397), the vision of the abyss between the world and its parts.

The other facet of this deconstructive phrase in the text is its implicit pattern of repetition that informs and shapes the philosophical arena of the larger design of the poem. To trope is to turn, and to behold (theater) a trope is to see a turning or revolving scene. The theater is itself a kind of repetition because it is a repeating of what was already in a script. Stevens uses "theatre" in ten poems and each time connects its use with the idea of repetition.⁸ Stevens' theaters are revolving sets or theaters in the round, spinning out set pieces, as in "Of Modern Poetry," or mounting new productions with changed sets, as in "Repetitions of a Young Captain." The earth too is described as a theater with an "appointed repertoire," spinning around the sun and turning out the seasons, weather, and "withered scenes," as in "Lettres d'un Soldat."

A mapping of the patterns of repetitions in "Notes" is an exercise without closure because the routes are circuitous and always lead into another sequence of incremental repetitions. I would propose that there are three basic patterns of intratextual repetition in "Notes," and that these constellations are repeated (in different form) each time the pattern is deconstructed. This process is not peculiar to this text but becomes Stevens' "appointed repertoire" throughout the canon. The first two kinds of repetition, *filiative* and *affiliative* are derived from Edward Said's essay, "On Repetition."⁹ Filiative repetition in "Notes," as in the rest of the canon, is the "generational" descent of the ephebe, Stevens' fiction of the poet, major man, from his poetic father who has failed to find the first idea. The struggle in Stevens is an intra- rather than intertextual anxiety elicited by the imagined presence of an Oedipal precursor. The list of fictive poets who have failed—Crispin, Peter Quince, the snow man, the Northern man, the man of glass, and the "latest freed man"—are the casualties left over from "the war between the mind and sky," all Nabobs and all fathers of ephebic fictions. The birth of the ephebe occurs in Stevens' poetry when the father's conception of firstness fails or is deconstructed. Major man is the subsumptive trope that encompasses both the ephebe and his failed father or the entire generational heritage.

Affiliative repetition, instituted to preserve and insure the return of the filiative pattern, sanctions the various unions in the text. In "Notes," sexual union is represented by the fictive marriages which take place between the fictions of the poets and their interior muses or feminine doubles. That

"shadowy psychodrama" of poet and interior paramour which occurs as a subliminal sub-text throughout the preceding canon reaches its climax in this text and is registered in its repeated epithalamic celebrations.¹⁰ The course of Stevens' "interior paramour" begins (and ends) in the unbroken circle that started with "the radiant bubble that she was" in *Harmonium*. Yet she always returns to become the focal point of the freshening of his poetic world: she is the image to which he returns always with a "later reason," "the ever-never changing appearance of the same," the divadame.

These two patterns, the filiative and affiliative, are part of the more general scheme of canonical repetition. For "Notes" anatomizes the preceding canon, subsumes its variations on the *cantus firmus*, and seals off the circularity of its recurring patterns. It is a canon within a canon and a self-referential world of which the preceding poems in the canon are its parts. But "Notes" remains an aspiring canon still attempting to discover a supreme fiction or sublime. The "notes" of its title have been taken from the poems of the preceding canon, itself a theater of trope as textbook. Readers of the poem, like Harold Bloom, discover that it "seems a waste that the poet of *Notes* should tell us what is no news."¹¹ The news in the poem is that there is no new news under the sun: all is a vast repetition of the same, the theater of trope turning round and round. Change is merely an illusion effected through an alteration of the poet's terminology or a shifting logos to expedite an unchanging logic. Return, however, is not despair, for repetition, as Said points out, "involves no giving up, but a self-possession carried to the point of no return."¹² Repetition is return, as Kierkegaard recognizes, "raised to the second power" or the consciousness of a world repossessed yet once more. This going round becomes, by the end of the poem, "a final good, / The way wine comes at a table in a wood" (*CP* 405).

The tropes of the spinning theater of the text revolve about the central image of the poem or the "inconceivable idea of the sun." The sun is the poet's source of repetition and epitomizes return as it invents the world each day, perpetuates the "calendar hymn" yet remains the unnameable. A theater of trope itself, the idea of the sun is "the essential poem at the center of things," the idea of firstness and the first idea. The poet's project is to unlock its secret, but the sun reveals nothing except a return from a place unseen and a descent into unnameable depths.

"Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" begins with a love poem or amoretto addressed to the "interior paramour" who is perceived as the "exciting cause" of the poem:

And for what, except for you, do I feel love?
Do I press the extremest book of the wisest man
Close to me, hidden in me day and night?
In the uncertain light of single, certain truth,
Equal in living changingness to the light
In which I meet you, in which we sit at rest,

For a moment in the central of our being,
The vivid transparence that you bring is peace.
(CP 380)

This dedication to the poem initiates the pattern of affiliative repetition in its revival of the romance of the poet and the lover who lies within. The moment is both anamnestic and proleptic as it anticipates the "intensest rendezvous" of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" and looks back on "Poem with Rhythms" or "Re-statement of Romance." We glimpse here the "ever-early candor" of first love and its "late plural," the autumnal embrace of the "Auroras of Autumn." This re-statement of the "you" or bifurcated fictions of poet and paramour at the beginning of the poem creates a vital boundary which circumscribes the canon or father-text (now a preface) and its offspring, the text of "Notes." For the origin of "Notes" is posited in the preceding canon which is both father and son, or preface and text. Similarly, the "notes" themselves are the offspring of the preceding canon that is subsumed by the text when it assumes authority over its preface (son) and father-text. The decentering of the text and its perplexing genealogy obliterates its origins and is reflected in the telling names of its fictions. The MacCullough is a father-poet whose name denotes his own filial status, while the Canon Aspirin is not only an anagram for "Crispin anon," the poet-hero of *Harmonium*, but a pun on Stevens' canon that still aspires toward its own origins.

"It Must be Abstract" is occupied with the line of filiative descent and opens with the father-poet's address to his ephebe. The voice we hear is a composite patriarch (the personae of "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle") who passes on the poet's project to his son: the re-imagining of the first idea or origin. Everything from the preceding canon returns in "Notes" yet all returns with the uncanny hindsight or "later reason" of the poetic precursor.

As he speaks to the poet-son within himself, the father displays a nostalgia for the "absent origin" and an anxiety about repetition:

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

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye
And see it clearly in the idea of it.

(CP 380)

The world here is seen as a theater revolving about the metaphor of the sun that can only be seen when the perceiver forgets that the sun is a trope or invention. To "see the sun again with an ignorant eye" is to become the theater-goer who sees with an eye that is blind to metaphysical illusion. Yet not to

see the illusion denies the possibility of ever seeing the "[sun] clearly in the idea of it." And so, by the end of its second stanza the poem repeats the aporetic impasse of the preceding canon which has failed to find the center. Throughout "Notes," these fissures or textual black holes in the authority of the text recapitulate the abyss scenes of the preceding canon and culminate with the coda or final disjunction with the poet patching the moon together in his room.

In the final canto of "It Must Be Abstract," the poet comes upon the major abstraction—"the idea of man." It turns out that the project of the poet is not to re-imagine the sun but the son or poetic ephebe who enters when the father fiction vanishes from the stage:

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

(CP 389)

Stevens' vision here of the line of poetic fictions and their offspring is a repeating of a Viconian pattern that reads generational repetition as poetic:

For men are men, he says, because they are makers, and what before anything else they make is themselves. Making is repeating; repeating is knowing because making. This is the genealogy of knowledge and human presence.¹³

The project for the poet is the propounding of man: Adam in Eden was the father of Descartes and Stevens in Hartford is the maker and father of the MacCullough, the Canon, and all his major men. Yet the genealogy of human presence or the origin of major man begins because there is an absence, and the making of man for Stevens is an ever-repeating affirmation of the absence of the self. The absence of the self is never filled but is registered metaphorically in the canon in its perpetual displacement of the father fiction by his son. From the predicate of nothingness, the fiction of the major man is made. Under the "old coat" and "sagging pantaloons," the confections of a self, is a vagabond of metaphor, the fiction of a major man, a theater of trope.

The filiative process is both distinct from and yet the progenitor of the other generational scheme in the preceding canon. Represented by the fictive marriages between poets and paramours, the affiliative process repeats the filiative descents of the canon as fathers and sons reinvent the interior paramour or internalized muse. Stevens selects the self-conscious device of the mirror to structure the narcissistic doubling of the absent self in the fiction of the feminine other. This doubling of the "self" begins with the poem's preface where the paramour, addressed as "you," is evoked not only as an extra-linguistic presence, but also as the object of a lover's discourse. The deception is sustained in the preface until the reader realizes that Stevens once

again is troping on "the lover that lies within us" (CP 394). She is merely a reflection of the "living changingness" within the poet's mind, a figuration of poetic eros that wishes or wills being to come true. They seem to have met in the center of the poet's being, which is the linguistic space to which he refers the experience of desire. The "transparence" that she brings is the light reflected from the illusion of the mirrored self which meets its sister in the uncertain light of an invisible dwelling.

This powerful mirror of living changingness in the preface to "Notes" is reflected again in the fourth canto of "It Must Be Abstract," when "Eve made air the mirror of herself." Eve's "distant mirror" is held up here as a reflection of metaphoric duplication, the origin of the figurative mirror of art that encases the earth in a world of glass. The encasing of the earth in the mirror of art is, in turn, reduplicated in the mirroring of the self by Eve as artist; self-solipsized in the mirror world, she herself is the illusion of the doubled self that creates her in the text. Eve's distant mirror initiates the pattern of crystalline entrapments and circular reflections that persists throughout the poem, and like the theater of trope, is an image that reflects the text's repetitive cyclicality.

The naked Eve, a sister semblance of the poet's "paltry nude" of *Harmonium*, is the image of the poet's first love that keeps returning as a "damsel heightened by eternal bloom" (CP 15). Perceived each time with a later reason, she appears again in "Notes" as Nanzia Nunzio.

On her trip around the world, Nanzia Nunzio
Confronted Ozymandias. She went
Alone and like a vestal long-prepared.

I am the spouse. She took her necklace off
And laid it in the sand. As I am, I am
The spouse. She opened her stone-studded belt.

I am the spouse, divested of bright gold,
The spouse beyond emerald or amethyst,
Beyond the burning body that I bear.

(CP 395)

In this fable of the contemplated spouse, time has passed since the paramour was Eve, and the mirror of air has accumulated layer upon layer of figuration. Nanzia Nunzio, the reflection of Eve or Eve of the thousand crystals, appears before the fiction of the major man, still desiring to make air the mirror of herself. Her name is not only an anagrammatic mirroring of the name Ozymandias, but an instance of linguistic doubling with its second part, Nunzio, appearing as a mirrored distortion of its first part, Nanzia. She too is a circulating image, a spinning theater of trope, who confronts her poet on her trip around the world. Seeking to divest herself of fictional entrap-

pings, she performs a deconstructive strip-tease. Her wish is to be clothed in "the final filament" (CP 396) or the "single-colored, colorless, primitive" (CP 242) sought after by the man of glass.

The faceted crystal, a variation of the mirror device of the poem, is the icon of textuality in the fable; Nanzia Nunzio's intention is to strip herself of fictions, to go "beyond emerald or amethyst" to arrive at the nakedness of pure being. Yet the impossibility of her gesture is undermined by the poet even before the definitive deconstruction of the last stanza. For as she lays down her necklace on the sand, crystals against smaller crystals, the weaving of another fictive covering has already begun. The marriage between Ozymandias and his contemplated spouse fails because their desire to be at "the end of distances" (CP 527) is always a deferred end, a dissemination of desire displaced into the fictive covering that "Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396).

The poem's next marriage, between the maiden Bawda and her fictive consort, the great captain of Catawba, occurs in the final section of "Notes," "It Must Give Pleasure." The possibility of change, already deconstructed by the previous section ("These are not things transformed. / Yet we are shaken by them as if they were" [CP 399]), has been redefined as repetition. Change is merely an alteration in terminology or a shifting in the sands of the lexical field. Thus, the mystic marriage in Catawba is rendered as a purely linguistic event that unites love's literal characters or language signs. The union of this poet and his paramour is a rite of demystification that verges on the edge of parody and Derridean delight. By now, the poet is "he that of repetition is most master" (CP 406), enjoying his newly acquired taste in the merely going round and round. With Nietzschean exuberance, he extracts joy from his newly formed world of alphabetic origins, the world of words to the end of it:

The great captain loved the ever-hill Catawba
And therefore married Bawda, whom he found there,
And Bawda loved the captain as she loved the sun.
(CP 401)

This princess springs literally out of the word for the place her poet loves. Not made in heaven or hell, and not even earth, the marriage is created as a syntactic event on the poet's page. Bawda, the bride as catachresis, is not prized for herself, but "as sign, short sign / To stop the whirlwind." And from this parody of consummation as linguistic event, Stevens is able to move his text of repetitions into its final phase, the Cinderella dance.

In the last canto of the poem, the haunting of the theater of trope and its paramour have begun. She is becoming the "soft-footed phantom . . . however fragrant, however dear" (CP 406). As she turns from a figure of presence to a trope of absence, the interior paramour assumes the guise of Cinderella:

These external regions, what do we fill them with
Except reflections, the escapades of death,
Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?
(CP 405)

The difficulty and uncanniness of this passage derive from the poet's linking of the ultimate dream fantasy, the Cinderella story, with defensive reaction formations against death. In a sense, if we look at the Cinderella narration more closely, it becomes not only a tale of rags to riches and transformations but essentially a myth of origins and their displacement. For it is the story of a young girl whose natural mother is deceased and who lives in poverty. She bears the burden of her station with patience and grace until, through supernatural intervention, she is transformed into a princess when her wish is fulfilled. Her dream of someday meeting her prince is actualized when she puts on the fictive clothing of magic and dances within the mirror world of the prince's ball. And the dream is sustained until the post-midnight world when her fictive self disappears and only its trace is left in the shoe of glass.

Cinderella's fate is echoed and mirrored in the figure of the paramour, for the muse is invented and fictionalized precisely because her origins are unknown. She springs from a place that is not our own, from those "external regions" where "nothingness [is] a nakedness" (CP 403). Her "hour / Filled with expressible bliss" (CP 404) proceeds from the fact of absence, from a world made visible through the theater of trope. In these final strophes, the exercise of the major man dances to Nietzsche's drunken song that asks for everything back, "all anew, all eternally, all entangled, all ensnared, enamored." The dance of the paramour is a parallel Cinderella ball which stops at midnight before the clock can make our dreams disappear. Seemingly caught forever in the chrysalis of the maiden moment, the shadowy other is frozen "revolving except in crystal" (CP 407), spinning endlessly within the theater of trope.

Stevens' love-hate relationship with repetition begins with *Parts of a World*. Sitting on the heap of language trash, the poet as "the man on the dump" is tired with mimetic production: "how many men have copied dew" (CP 202); or, as the "latest freed man," he is "Tired of the old descriptions of the world" (CP 204). And so, in "Asides on the Oboe," rejecting Platonic repetition or poetry that valorizes "immaculate imagery," Stevens moves into the world of difference where "the final belief / Must be in a fiction" (CP 250). His man-hero now, "The impossible possible philosophers' man" (CP 250), is Derrida himself, "The glass man, without external reference" (CP 251) who is formed, not from nature, but from the endless possibilities of linguistic combinations. A fiction capable of shattering into "a million diamonds" (CP 250) the glass man is also Stevens, "spinning [his] eccentric measure," yet "he that of repetition is most master" (CP 406).

State University of New York at Albany

"Spinning its Eccentric Measure"

Notes

¹J. Hillis Miller. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

²Miller, 8.

³Miller, 9.

⁴*Oxford English Dictionary*.

⁵All citations from the text are from Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1961), hereafter cited as *CP*.

⁶J. Hillis Miller, "Stevens 'Rock' and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review* XXX (1976): 5-31.

⁷Miller, "Rock": 13.

⁸See Thomas F. Walsh, *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963).

⁹Edward Said, "On Repetition," *The Literature of Fact, Selected Papers from the English Institute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 143.

¹⁰See my "Wallace Stevens' Interior Paramour," *Wallace Stevens Journal* 3 (1979): 3-7.

¹¹Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 179.

¹²Said, 146.

¹³Said, 147.

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The Wallace Stevens Journal
Department of Humanities
University of Michigan-Dearborn

Poems

Starting Off Like Wallace Stevens

A fishbelly sunrise. Frost
ripples like knowledge on the lawn.
My neighbor's goats crowd to the wire
to watch me at my window,
my face as pale as hubbard squash.

What happened to the lives I left
writhing in the streets of Boston?
Why do the leaves of lilac feel
slick and limp as uncooked bacon
as they brown on the frozen lawn?

If I could place my favorite trope
more or less firmly onto place,
despite these shifting points of view,
I'd feel I had a topic,
a scale, and perhaps the taste

with which to baldly generalize,
fitting the mind to the means.
Otherwise, the simple gesture.
This happened in Connecticut:
a sixteen-year-old hunter

shotgunned his best friend to rags,
then turned his gun on himself.
Somewhere near Berlin, New Hampshire,
a moose stomped a motorcycle,
killing the driver, then strode

balefully into the spruce.
Phenomena. Embracing them,
I stare backwards into the world,
but the window of my room's
no "magic casement . . . to faery land

forlorne," only the prototype
of that hole in the mind through which,
regretful as heat loss, a fumbling
for the true potency of matter
continues at prudent remove.

William Doeski
Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire

Anti-Poem from Cold Mountain

If I hide out at Cold Mountain
Living off mountain plants and berries—
All my lifetime, why worry?
One follows his karma through.
Han-shan, *From Cold Mountain Poems*

1

But then perhaps I was wrong to give up
everything to move to Cold Mountain alone—
though my poems now touch the Immortals,
my shoulders long for one to hold.

2

After purifying my ears with the gentle
music of a just-melted mountain stream—
after I had watched the last bird fly away,
singing the song he had sung a thousand years

A voice inside said to me: sometimes I tire of things
exactly as they are, sometimes I long to hear
my lonesome wolves sing the silly little songs
of a young girl, making up the words as she goes.

3

A governor climbed all the steep way up
Cold Mountain on the bleakest, coldest day
of my worst winter, and all I had to tell him—
“You were right to take the path you took.”

Jeffrey D. Bolt
University of Wisconsin

Reviews

Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory: Conceiving the Supreme Fiction.

By B. J. Leggett. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.

I will say that I like and recommend this book if—maybe a biggish “if”—I can trim the title somewhat. True, the book is about Wallace Stevens, with such concentration that it never deviates towards by-paths and sidelights that may interest us lay readers (e.g., there is plenty of consideration of what Coleridge and Vico meant to Stevens but not even a passing reference to what they meant to Eliot and Joyce). Beyond the truth-in-titling fidelity of the “Wallace Stevens,” I have to say that the book, not really restricted to poetic theory, reaches beyond poetry to include much that is not exclusively the business of poetry: psychology, epistemology, ontology, and general aesthetics. Nor is there any particular emphasis on “conceiving the supreme fiction.”

Leggett’s study is a specialized book, and probably a specialist’s as well, but it has none of the major flaws of the usual run of narrow-minded, one-way specialism (such a fate, I judge, has hit Joyce hard). What Leggett has reported (in good economical prose, I might add) is a matter of giving scrupulous attention to four books that Stevens read. Leggett has not just read these books; he has examined the very copies that Stevens annotated. Leggett furnishes a largely convincing comparison of the books and the details and designs of Stevens’ later major poems. The books are I. A. Richards’ *Coleridge on Imagination*, H. P. Adams’ *The Life and Writing of Giambattista Vico* (with a lengthy bone-picking excursus on Harold Bloom’s work on Stevens), Charles Mauron’s *Aesthetics and Psychology*, and Henri Focillon’s *The Life of Forms in Art*—all alongside “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” and “The Auroras of Autumn.”

Since I am, I repeat, a lay reader with no ax to grind or bone to pick, I can be satisfied that Leggett is convincing about the central importance of those four books to some inexhaustibly interesting and occasionally baffling poems. Now and again, Leggett impresses me as going a bit too far. That both Stevens and Mauron used “horror” in different settings illuminates neither; Mauron’s use of “arabesque” pretty clearly has nothing special to do with that moony Arabian in “It Must Be Abstract.” It may be more significant that Leggett gives Focillon what is a bit too much credit for bringing Viollet-le-Duc to Stevens’ attention. Leggett does not hedge; he says that “Focillon’s discussion allows us to see how Viollet-le-Duc got into the poem [‘Notes’]” and mentions, without qualification, “Stevens’s borrowing of Viollet-le-Duc from Focillon.” But this Viollet-le-Duc (even if his name did not reverberate with Ice-cream-the-Emperor and Rabbit-the-King) is not so much the circumscribed “nineteenth-century architect and restorer of medieval structures” as the indefatigably didactic composer of guidebooks that meant so much to Henry Adams (and maybe to Ezra Pound, too; a strange passage in *The Cantos*—“Topaz I manage, and three sorts of blue”—looks a good deal like something Adams quotes from Viollet-le-Duc about medieval stained glass).

I ought to say that Leggett usually does hedge, and he is less interested in making exclusive claims for the linkages he has labored to uncover than in suggesting parallels that may help in figuring out some extremely resistant opacities. Most of the time—and almost all of the time in small and medium matters—Leggett is balanced and persuasive. (He does, however, say that Stevens’ “fusky” is “foreign to our lan-

guage—it does not exist in *Webster's Unabridged*." It does exist in the *OED*). I cannot, however, say the same for his handling of "The Auroras of Autumn." He cites readings by Donald Davie, Helen Vendler, and Harold Bloom, whom he graciously calls "three distinguished critics," but he says that Vendler and Bloom have "skirted" some implication of the poem, and he speaks patronizingly of Davie "who offered his early reading as pure elucidation, innocent of the knowledge of any larger biographical or theoretical context." Wait a minute! What's wrong with poor old "pure elucidation"? What "large biographical or theoretical context" has made so much difference that a wise critic who happens to lack knowledge thereof deserves to be patted on the head as "innocent"? After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

As for the abundant Bloom, he can take care of himself. The rest of us might as well adopt a protocol that says, in effect, that "the aforementioned Professor Bloom is utterly brilliant, original, audacious, eloquent, witty, prolific, memorious, and all in all a prodigy of purest ray serene; and as an opponent he is a total Tar Baby from whose cumulatively omnivorous stickiness none escapes alive." Then, instead of having to go through the usual exercise of trying to summarize Bloom's unsummarizable arguments (or whatever they are) and then refute them, point by point, we could just invoke the "Bloom Protocol" and everybody will know what we mean. For me, Bloom's work is not theory, criticism, or scholarship; it is—as he himself has suggested—a kind of stupendous prose-poem, like one of those interminable John O'Hara novels that I can neither admire nor put down.

Let me end with a note about the kind of thing Stevens allowed himself to be influenced by. Of the four books examined by Leggett, none could be called a primary text of primary wisdom. With the two French books, we can observe that they have to do with psychology and aesthetics and not much with poetry, and, further, that Stevens was content with translations—something that I, as a poet, would think that he, as a poet with good French, could not abide. He read Richards-on-Coleridge-on-imagination (and not Coleridge's poetry) and Adams-on-Vico instead of Vico. All four books are prose, but not prose of the first intensity or distinction. Stevens' habit may betray what, after all, amounts to a sort of anxiety of influence. He must have known how susceptible and impressionable he could be, and, rather like a chameleon trying to stay away from leaves, he said, in a letter that Leggett suggests may be "unconvincing," that he had "purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously." Such a claim prompts me to think that writers *must* be influenced by their predecessors, immediate or remote, in the same medium, but that such *influenza* hampers respiration, so that writers typically shun obvious origins (as Eliot avoided Tennyson and Browning, and as Joyce avoided Thackeray and Dickens) and deliberately cultivate other passions: for the sister arts or for literature in another genre, language, age, or class. If this is the case, it does not make much difference whether Stevens had any belief in the ideas that he read about. He did *absorb*, and what he absorbed became more of a temporary scaffold (as Joyce said of the Homeric parallel) or particle of diction than an article of faith. Even so, with some such warning label in mind, I shall be returning to Leggett's book often for his stimulating examination of such terms as "abstract" and "form." It matters.

William Harmon
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the Discourses of Difference.

By Michael Beehler. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot missed each other by a few years at college, but they shared the excitement of being at Harvard during what has been called the golden age of American philosophy. Eliot, we have to remind ourselves, took two courses with Stevens' friend and correspondent, George Santayana, and adopted so much of his teacher's manner that Ralph Perry thought he was a "sort of attenuated Santayana" himself. (Nor was Perry's identification benign. It would in 1919 have cost Eliot an appointment in the Harvard philosophy department, had he then wanted one.) More interesting, as Stevens' letters suggest, the Cambridge of the time was fascinated with "the will to believe" along with the other writings of William James. Both Eliot and Stevens paid serious attention to the running dialogue between James's pragmatism and the nearly identical idealism of Eliot's thesis advisor, Josiah Royce. Meanwhile Royce was reading letters from his friend C. S. Peirce to the graduate seminar that included Eliot, and James's name commonly appeared alongside those of European luminaries such as Bergson and Bradley.

Acknowledging little of this history, Michael Beehler yet begins his *T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and the Discourses of Difference* on a promising note—by looking at the Ph.D. dissertation Eliot wrote under Royce (*Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*) and more specifically by examining Eliot's references to C. S. Peirce's theory of signs. Insisting on what he sees as Eliot's acknowledgment of "the strictly differential nature of signs as they emerge in an interreferential field of significations," Beehler argues that Eliot's habitual "desire . . . to close language and signification upon a determinate identity of meaning" is a mystification that the Peircean element of Eliot's own dissertation deconstructs. Beehler contends the same deconstruction can be observed in Eliot's poems and plays, and goes on to provide extended readings of *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *Four Quartets*. Similarly (this time bolstered only by a late letter that suggests "I have always been curious about Pierce [the spelling mistake is Stevens', not Beehler's]"), Beehler uses Peirce's semiotics to read Stevens' "Description Without Place," "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," "The Comedian as the Letter C," "The Auroras of Autumn," and a handful of Stevens' later lyrics.

As his already quoted words may suggest, though, instead of engaging himself with the development of Peirce's ideas in Cambridge between 1897, when Stevens matriculated, and 1914, when Eliot departed, Beehler tends to shift rather quickly from the terms of Peirce's semiotics to those of Derrida. We look in vain in his book for the careful study of modern poetry and philosophy available in Sanford Schwartz's *The Matrix of Modernism* or for a recognition that it was possible in turn-of-the-century Cambridge to reconcile an epistemology more extreme than Peirce's with a notion like Royce's "absolute pragmatism." And we find, almost inevitably, that Beehler misjudges even Eliot's thesis, underestimating the sophistication of Eliot's theory of object and signs while at the same time overestimating the radical tendencies of that sophistication. Imposing Derrida on the discourse of nineteenth-century pragmatism and reading Derridean implications out of the works he explicates, Beehler spoils an excellent premise. Which is a great shame, for his discussions of Stevens' tropes suggest that with more discipline he might have written a valuable book.

But perhaps I should explain my uneasiness with the way Beehler handles texts

through an illustration. At the beginning of chapter four, Beehler proffers a programmatic introduction to his reading of Stevens' "Comedian as the Letter C" and alludes to a letter Stevens wrote in January 1948 to José Rodríguez Feo. Beehler chooses to cite selections from the letter, but the passage needs to be quoted in full:

You are wrong, by the way, in thinking that I read a lot of poetry. I don't read a line. My state of mind about poetry makes me very susceptible and that is a danger in the sense that it would be so easy for me to pick up something unconsciously. In order not to run that danger I don't read other peoples' poetry at all. There seem to be very few people who read poetry at the finger tips, so to speak. This may be a surprise to you but I am afraid it is the truth. Most people read it listening for echoes because the echoes are familiar to them. They wade through it the way a boy wades through water, feeling with his toes for the bottom: the echoes are the bottom. This is something that I have learned to do from Yeats who was extremely pernickety about being himself. It is not so much that it is a way of being oneself as it is a way of defeating people who look only for echoes and influences.

It is a letter, I think, whose sense is relatively straightforward. (Stevens' letters are notorious for being less difficult—and less interesting—than his poems.) Risking reduction, we might paraphrase as follows. Stevens avers that few people read poetry with finger-tip sensitivity and many read, so to speak, by feeling for familiar turns with their feet. He therefore vows to stop reading other peoples' verse to keep his own poetry echo-free. (He's been told that Yeats abstained for the same reasons.)

Now look at what Beehler makes of the letter:

In a letter written to José Rodríguez Feo in 1948, Wallace Stevens describes two styles of reading poetry. Characterizing his own state of mind about poetry as "very susceptible," and feeling himself to be in danger of picking up something unconsciously from other poets, Stevens writes, "In order not to run that danger I don't read other peoples' poetry at all." Or, he writes further, when he does, he reads that poetry only "at the finger tips, so to speak." He opposes this style of reading, which consciously refuses to plumb the depths of poetry by remaining only on its superficial surface, to the style in which "most people read [poetry]"—by "listening for echoes because the echoes are familiar to them. They wade through it the way that a boy wades through water, feeling with his toes for the bottom." Whereas Stevens reads by lightly treading water or by floating in poetry's sea of words and reading its surface with his fingertips, these people read by searching in its watery language for a "bottom" of literal substance that, like a meaty incarnation of some ultimate meaning, would be the ground upon which they could safely walk.

Here Stevens' sense has been turned upside down, so that reading sensitively has become "consciously refus[ing] to plumb the depths of poetry." And a few sentences later the echoes he so disliked have become positives, opposed to a "'bottom' of literal substance"; the Derridean preparation is now in place, and the Derridean implications are not long in coming:

From this neutral ground they could completely explain the shifting differences and account for the multiple currents of poetry's words. For Stevens, this wading in the river of poetry suggests a style of reading that can pass through poetry's flowing verbiage only by finding the solid core that supports and shapes it. It cautiously wades; it does not risk the freedom of floating or of being carried away by poetry's metaphoric tides and currents.

This hermeneutics, however, ultimately encounters interference and noise, for as Stevens observes, "The echoes are the bottom." On one hand the figure of the bottom suggests a stable ground discoverable at the most profound limits of poetry's depths; on the other hand the characterization of that bottom as "echoes" raises some perplexing problems for those who would wade through poetry. *Echoes* here suggests influence, the appearance of another's voice in one's own poetry, and Stevens reflects a certain anxiety about such influence when he writes, "It is not so much that [his style of reading] is a way of being oneself as it is a way of defeating people who look only for echoes and influences." Echoes, in other words, multiply the voice in poetry; an echo is a complementary, parasitic, and interfering overvoice that repeats what is spoken as though it came from a different source. Far from revealing a determinable and substantial poetic bottom or a single, univocal identity that grounds poetry's flood of words and voices, the echo suggests a polyphony of voices in which identity can only be a problem.

His introduction complete, Beehler proceeds to apply its conclusions to "The Comedian as the Letter C." I would be surprised, though, if at this point I were the only one reluctant to follow.

Ronald Bush
California Institute of Technology

Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets.

By Lisa M. Steinman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.

Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets is one of the first accounts of modernist responses to science and technology in America. Lisa Steinman forces us to reevaluate the work of Williams, Moore, and Stevens by recovering the "American Context" in which they produced and defended their poetry. The American modernists who did not leave this country, Steinman argues, inhabited a climate in which the writing of poetry was considered an "unmanly" or effeminate pursuit—one to be pursued in "the private, rather than the public, realm." Stevens, she reminds us, asked his wife, Elsie, in 1913, "to keep secret his attempt to put together a collection of poems."

Given the status of the arts, then, American modernists were forced to develop new strategies for appealing to their audience. Arguing that "by 1920, modernity was firmly linked with commercial and scientific development," Steinman maintains that Williams, Moore, and Stevens (to a lesser degree) allied their enterprises with the dominant values of business, commerce, science and technology as a way

of appealing to a public that devalued the arts. At the same time, she contends, these poets “attempted to undermine the more familiar American attitudes they included in their poems.” Williams, for example, in *Spring and All* (1923) appears to sympathize with an audience who is hostile to poetry, though finally he indicts this readership, Steinman suggests, by linking “the contempt for poetry to a statistical approach to life.”

Steinman recontextualizes with precision the social and historical nexus of forces these writers encountered between 1910 and 1930. The first half of the book, which is devoted to this historical backdrop, includes discussions of Van Wyck Brooks, John Dewey, Leo Stein, and I. A. Richards among others. Steinman also describes how technology, with its emphasis on machines and products, influenced the visual arts as well as poetry. Chronicling the increasing gap in America between technology and theoretical science, she argues that poets—particularly Williams and Stevens—came to endorse Einsteinian physics as a means of validating “a poetry of process.” Physics had the added attraction for these poets, she points out, of not being associated with the production of some commodity.

The second half of the book consists of readings of Williams, Moore, and Stevens in that order. The Williams chapter is the most compelling of the three, perhaps because it focuses so specifically on the relationship between his poetics and practice. Williams’ enterprise represents for Steinman the increasing distance between applied science and theoretical science. Maintaining that Williams moves from a “machine aesthetic” to a “growing concern with motion” or a fluid style, Steinman asserts that finally in his “mature poetics” he achieved a reconciliation between the two. Her close readings of poems like “Young Sycamore” and “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower” illuminate the varying ways Williams’ thinking about science and technology emerge in his practice.

Moore is presented as someone who “obviously accepted just those aspects of American life (of business, technology, science, and advertising) regarded with more ambivalence or downright distaste by some of her contemporaries.” Yet, as Steinman argues, Moore often redefined the values associated with science and technology. “The idea of speed or motion,” Steinman contends, “to judge from her reading diaries and *Dial* editorials, consistently captured Moore’s attention and was related on the one hand to an ideal of creative energy and on the other hand to grace and nonpossessiveness.” Steinman implies that all of Moore’s “human encounters with the world—be they scientific, industrial, or literary—” are moral ones because “they involve reclassifying, revaluing, and so in some sense changing, the world.” The Moore Archive provides ample evidence for her assumptions; drawing on Moore’s notebooks, her library, and her essays written for *The Dial*, Steinman asserts that Moore came to view science “not as primarily practical, but rather as endless investigation, indicative of a kind of spiritual energy.”

By Steinman’s own admission, Stevens is the most problematic figure for her thesis. “Reading Stevens in isolation,” she maintains at the beginning of her study, “it is at first difficult to see that his defense of poetry is a response to the American context in which he wrote.” Steinman suggests that unlike his contemporaries “Stevens was not usually taken with the look of modern technology or of the modern urban landscape.” Yet, she points out that Stevens paid more attention to the “new physics” than most of his contemporaries did. Steinman documents this assertion with references to Stevens’ letters, what he read, and finally with a reading of his 1941 essay, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.” In describing Stevens’ interest

in the way quantum theory might help him define his own poetics, Steinman suggests that his poetics resembles Williams'. This alliance is fair enough on the surface; given her thesis, Steinman must highlight the similarities among these three poets. More attention, however, could be given to the way their differences also illuminate their responses to the "American context." There are occasional references to them—particularly Stevens' with Williams—but these are glossed over in the interest of showing how, read in concert, each illuminates the other's project. Nevertheless, Steinman's formalist readings and her re-positioning of these writers in their historical context constitute a major contribution to the study of modernism and modern American poetry.

Celeste Goodridge
Bowdoin College

Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism.

By Joseph Carroll. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987.

As Joseph Carroll rightly notes in the introduction to *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction*, critics have been "reluctant to acknowledge" Stevens' "visionary purpose." It is Carroll's intention to overcome this reluctance by demonstrating how consistently—from the essays to the letters, from *Harmonium* to *The Rock*—Stevens' "aim" was "the creation of a supreme fiction, that is, 'a poem equivalent to the idea of God.'" However insightful this thesis may be, the phrase "visionary purpose" points both to the major strength and major weakness of Carroll's argument. On the one hand, especially when he addresses the "need" that prompted Stevens' search for a "vision," Carroll proves to be a very responsive reader of Stevens, offering intelligent (and responsible) interpretations of many poems that are ultimately, to use Stevens' own word, "spiritual." On the other hand, when presuming a conscious "design" for such a vision, he makes Stevens' "aim" or purpose in writing a bit too purposeful—even programmatic—thereby reducing the essential discovery or creativity in Stevens' work to something bordering on the dogmatic. As Helen Vendler warned years ago, what are "possibilities" in Stevens tend to become "doctrine" in the hands of Stevens' critics, a warning much to the point here.

Yet it is true that the visionary and spiritual dimensions of Stevens' work have been slighted by the majority of Stevens' critics, and in this respect Carroll's book stands as an important addition to our many ways of looking at this poet. It is also intended to be comprehensive and is the first book on Stevens in a number of years which attempts to explicate the vast majority of Stevens' poems. Carroll begins by focusing on Stevens' essays collected in *The Necessary Angel*. After that he takes up each volume of Stevens' poetry in chronological order over the next six chapters and concludes with an appendix ("In the Fold") which considers the question of Stevens' possible conversion to Roman Catholicism. Along the way, Carroll attempts to present a "dialectic" in Stevens' work, which is described as an interaction between two sets of oppositions (alternately called dualism and transcendentalism, pluralism and monism, and normative poetry and pure poetry, aestheticism and new Romanticism). However, informing the whole book is Carroll's sense of the "religious and transcendental character" of Stevens' "supreme fiction." Here Car-

roll is at his best; consequently, the introduction to the book, the last chapter (devoted to *The Rock*), and the appendix are the richest portions of this work. The penultimate sentences of the last chapter bear repeating here:

Stevens failed to effect a permanent integration with the essential poem. He failed to transform men into gods or earth into paradise. He nonetheless succeeded in creating a mode of poetic experience in which religious awe and Romantic wonder are still possible. Having discarded the outworn myths, he fashioned a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world, a cosmos in which the forms of thought are elemental potencies, and where divinity is a pure principle.

This conclusion is so contrary to the reigning critical interpretations of Stevens—and is, it seems to me, so close to describing what Stevens really attempts, especially in the late poetry—that Carroll should be applauded for his sheer courage in attempting to describe the visionary aspect of Stevens' work. In the last chapter, where he attends to this "failure" (which is concomitant with being human) as well as the desire for "divinity," Carroll makes his most important contribution to Stevens criticism. As he also says in this chapter (called "A Final Construction"), "Stevens' reconstructions of his visionary fulfillments take place against a background of spiritual desolation." This comment accurately reflects both the warmth and the poignancy of Stevens' so very "humane" late poetry.

Nonetheless, much of the time Carroll is far more programmatic in his presentation of Stevens' "search for a centre" than the preceding paragraphs may suggest. Despite the claim to present a changing "dialectic" through the course of Stevens' career, Carroll repeatedly implies that Stevens consciously designed and pursued a certain poetic path—so much so that Stevens' poetic development begins to sound rather like a modern version of *Pilgrim's Progress*. The "fiction" behind *Stevens' Supreme Fiction* is precisely an ordered, if not ordained, progress. Thus Carroll begins the chapter called "That Slight Transcendence" by saying, "If Stevens is to escape Crispin's fate, he must ultimately establish a doctrinal basis for a new Romanticism." In Chapter Four, "The Pure Idea," he announces that Stevens "has organized his thoughts and set his course. After *Parts of a World*, the eventual realization of the supreme fiction seems almost inevitable." In the next chapter he asserts that "the task of *Auroras* will be to synthesize this breadth and to bring all the parts of the world within the closed circle of the transcendental imagination." Within this framework, it is perhaps not surprising to find discussions of individual poems that are even more doctrinaire than these assertions. For example, he concludes his discussion of "Montrachet-le-Jardin" (which is at least as much a resistance to World War II as a statement that "The mind can be satisfied only by spiritual unity") by saying, "The doctrinal problem seems simple enough, but the poetic resolution remains remote." The implication is that while Stevens may have a long way to go before his poetry will match his doctrine, at least he is on the *right path*. It is also interesting to note, since Carroll's thesis is a departure from the usual ways of regarding Stevens, that his book often repeats basic critical prejudices. *Ideas of Order* is largely dismissed as an inferior volume (although there is much in that volume that could have supported his thesis), *Transport to Summer* is heralded as among the best, and *Parts of a World*, which Carroll reads as a deeply philosophical volume, ends up being criticized for those poems in which Stevens "loses sight" of his "purpose" (i.e., "creating a supreme fiction") during the time of war.

Carroll's delineation of Stevens' poetic development also encourages him to misrepresent or at least to misinterpret many of the female figures in Stevens' poetry. Having said that Stevens has announced "his intention to achieve a mystical unity of vision" in *Parts of a World*, Carroll also argues that "The emotional and intellectual fulfillment this achievement would effect manifests itself in Stevens' passionate depiction of the female figure who is largely to embody this vision." Although the word "largely" does qualify this remark, and although Carroll will later suggest that there are two sets of female figures in Stevens' poetry (one aligned "under the aegis of normal poetry" and the other under "pure poetry"), the itinerary Carroll sees for Stevens' career allows him to sweep over many troubling female figures. The "drunken mother" of "Meditation Celestial and Terrestrial" and the female characters of "Madame La Fleurie" and "O Florida, Venereal Soil," for example, are surely not the "voluptuous personification[s] of the natural world" that Carroll says they are. Given that Carroll sees the female figure of the "ancient mother" as being central to Stevens' search for "mystic unity," this reductive reading of the feminine figure presents a serious flaw in interpretation.

Still, despite various weaknesses, Carroll's perspective does give serious attention to a facet of Stevens' poetry that needs further exploration and elaboration. Occasionally his perspective develops into truly sensitive and important readings of Stevens' poems, such as his discussion of "Crude Foyer" (which, he convincingly argues, should be seen as among Stevens' major poems). Often, however, especially in the middle chapters, real analysis gives way to mere citation. While it is fair to say that this book presents a promising thesis, one which makes an important contribution to our understanding of Stevens, the execution of that thesis does not always fulfill its promise.

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan
University of Notre Dame

Announcement

Annual Meeting of the Wallace Stevens Society
1987 MLA Convention
San Francisco
Wednesday, December 30, 1987
8:30-10:30 a.m., Mason, Hilton
Presiding: Beverly Coyle, Vassar College

1. "Sexism and Stevens," Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, University of Notre Dame
2. "Birds at the Edge of Space: Stevens and the Descent into Unreason," Alan Perlis, University of Alabama, Birmingham
3. "'Seemings of History': The Political Poetics of Wallace Stevens," Melita Schaum, University of Michigan, Dearborn

News and Comments

The most unusual Stevens item to appear in a catalogue recently was his autograph note inviting W. B. Wheelwright to the Harvard Class of 1901 annual dinner (on May 1, 1900), sponsored by the *Advocate*. Also included was the printed program, signed by all participants (including Stevens), and the menu. Not present was the keepsake, which contains the poems read by Stevens and Wheelwright (Edelstein B2). The Lot, number 244 at Swann Galleries in New York on March 5, 1987, brought \$660 (including commission) from Glenn Horowitz, who later sold it to a private collector.

Pharos Books, of Connecticut (Catalogue 1, 1987), offered "An ordinary evening in New Haven," *Trans. of the Conn. Acad. of Arts and Sciences*, 1949, unopened, for \$180, and a "very fine" copy of *Two or Three Ideas*, 1951 (Edelstein A16), for \$300. A "fine copy" of the latter was also offered by William Reece (Catalogue 51, March, 1987), for \$350. In the same catalogue Reece had *Three Academic Pieces*, one of 52 copies, initials handcolored by Wightman Williams, signed by Stevens, this copy presented to Theodore Spencer with a letter from Stevens to Spencer laid in, at \$3,000. Black Swan (Catalogue 72, May, 1987) offered a copy of *Harmonium*, 1923, second binding but inscribed by Stevens, at \$2,750.

Stevens scholars who have worked at the Huntington since last year's report include Milton J. Bates (Marquette University), on Stevens' commonplace book; Judith P. Butler (George Washington University), journal article on Stevens' references to Hegel; Al Filreis (University of Pennsylvania), Stevens' letters, for a biography; David M. Hertz (Indiana University), a book on Stevens and music; Du-Hyoung Kang (University of California, San Diego), dissertation on Stevens; B. J. Leggett (University of Tennessee), book on Stevens; Robert D. Moynihan (State University of New York, Oneonta), article on Stevens; Cees Nooteboom (Amsterdam), assisted by his wife Simone Sassen, a book on Stevens; Harvey Teres (Princeton University), a book on Stevens and the American Left; and Glenn P. Wright (Eastern Illinois University), on Stevens' references to philosophers and philosophical works.

Daniel Woodward, Librarian
The Huntington

From Princeton

Stevens and Simile

A Theory of Language

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan

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Presiding: Barbara M. Fisher, City College of CUNY

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3. "The Passion of the Poet," Charles Fishman, SUNY, Farmingdale