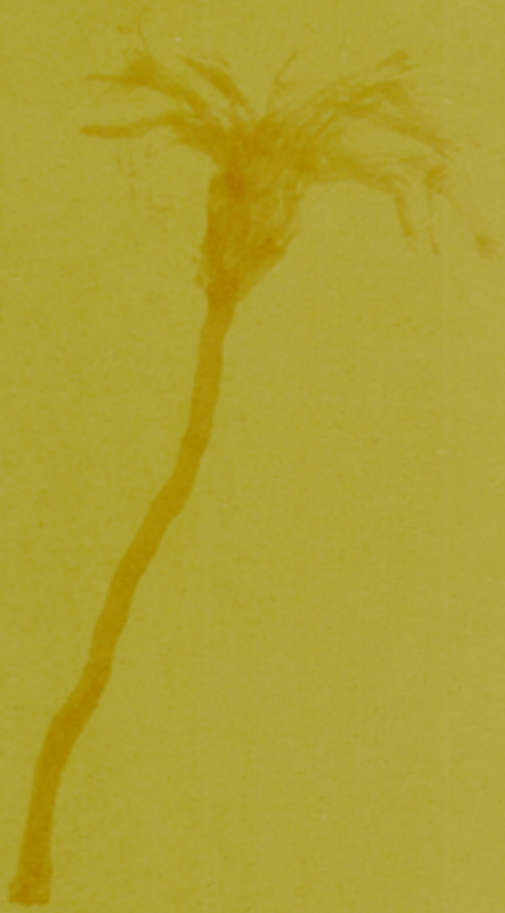
The Wallace Stevens Journal



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Contents

Cover by Kathy Jacobi—from "Of Mere Being"

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Voicing the Desert of Silence: Stevens' Letters to Alice Corbin Henderson

ALAN FILREIS

WALLACE STEVENS' LETTERS to Alice Corbin Henderson, published for the first time with this essay, show Stevens ready to explain his poems, during a period for which little other evidence of such willingness survives. In the long letter of March 1922, Stevens glosses a number of poems that were soon to be collected in *Harmonium*. The letters also add to the evidence suggesting that Stevens wrote his verse plays for performance. And they fill a major gap: Stevens' reaction to the rage for Eliot. Here, in the fifth letter, is an immediate and unmistakably negative response to *The Waste Land*. While the poem claims to voice the universal despair of an age, Stevens says, it succeeds only in proving the personal despair of T. S. Eliot.

The letters also strengthen our sense of Stevens' contacts among American expatriates. His news of literary happenings in Europe is current and accurate. He knows of Alfred Kreymborg's plans for *Broom* and seems to have been able from his remote station in Hartford to arrange for John Rodker in London to join Kreymborg's venture in Florence. He knows that Max Beerbohm has rejoined Gordon Craig in Rapallo. He has been reading Robert McAlmon's Paris stories in typescript. And through Rodker he seems to have begun negotiations to purchase a painting by Wyndham Lewis (so far as we know, the purchase was never made).

The letters add to the little we know of Stevens' interest in exhibits of contemporary painting during the period between his involvement with the Walter Arensberg-Marcel Duchamp group in the teens and his association with the French dealer Anatole Vidal in the thirties. To learn of William Penhallow Henderson's exhibition before the painter's wife wrote to tell about it, Stevens had to be reading the small print in the art sections of the New York newspapers. His critical comments about the popularity of the 1922 Society for Independent Artists show suggest a keen perception: there comes a point in an art movement when the very power of a once-experimental mode familiarizes it. Stevens would not love the paintings everyone in New York loved. Here he points to a new irony in the word "independent"—"you must do as the independents do," he quips—and seems ready to extend the analysis of the problem from painting to all academies, presumably including poetry and criticism. The fourth letter is important if only for this idea.

He is not nearly as perceptive, however, when it comes to another experiment—Alice Corbin Henderson's own. To be sure, it is hardly surprising that Stevens would remain indifferent to her attempts at reproducing American Indian chants and prayers as an aboriginal imagist verse, this not being his sort of experiment. Still, she sent him an inscribed copy of her third book, *Red Earth*, presumably looking for a sympathetic response.

Alice Corbin Henderson took her work with Indian culture very seriously. Her admiration for Frances Denmore's translations led her to study materials Denmore prepared at the Bureau of American Ethnology. Her friendship and correspondence with Mary Hunter Austin, who would write the entry on Indian poetic literature in the 1921 *Cambridge History of American Literature*, was a special encouragement. Later Corbin Henderson served as editor-in-chief of the New Mexico project of the WPA American Guide Series and became the librarian and curator of the Museum of Navaho Ceremonial Art, which under her direction began what is today the largest collection of American sand paintings in reproduction. While she could not resist any opportunity to claim that Native American art "carried [an] Indian vision into a new field of expression," she was also careful to avoid saying, merely, Make It New, in the already conventional sense. For what was "new" here was deeply rooted in the old: "The new development, in fact," she wrote of Pueblo works, "represented no 'break,' but was merely an extension of [a] centuries-old art tradition."[1] Solidifying old with new, and not discounting the important influence of non-modernists Denmore, Austin and Natalie Curtis, Alice Corbin Henderson worked out her own way of expressing native verse in Anglo-American form: in method it was imagist, in content aboriginal. She described the procedure in an essay, "Aboriginal Poetry" (1917). First she took what she called "The Indian keynote." Then she used "not more than a phrase, a single image, with variations of musical inflection and repetition—and expanded it very slightly."[2] With this modification of the contemporary idea of poetic condensation put so deliberately into practice, *Red Earth* unmistakably implies the claim that the American modernist project may be resituated within forms native to America itself.

Stevens' response seems too playfully to ignore these claims. *Red Earth*, he wrote Alice Corbin Henderson, "raises again the question of what to do about the damned Indians. I suppose the poets will have to do just what the pioneers did, and that is assimilate them." He does, however, praise "the native aesthetic" of this aboriginal imagism as "clean as a bone," citing one favorite poem in particular. The letter goes on to criticize Alfred Kreymborg's efforts to ballyhoo Americanism from Europe; Stevens generally saw what might be called "nativist expatriation" as a central irony. Why go abroad to become an Americanist? From this point he could return to further praise of Corbin Henderson: compared with Kreymborg's apparently misplaced efforts, *Red Earth* does satisfy a genuine need. "[O]ur Spanish side," he notes, ". . . is so often overlooked."

But the analogy to the pioneers belies this last compliment. If poets should be to the *damned Indians* what the pioneers were to them, surely in this conception the poets' Indians are not so much real people with a specific historical fate as an old set of cultural materials to be newly inscribed. "[T]heir native aesthetic," Stevens writes, "like the aesthetic of England, France, Peru, and so on, is all something that we have to assimilate, and not imitate. This sort of thing is really becoming an ordeal." From this point of view the "or-

deal" is something endured by (Eastern) American poets who might feel obliged to use native material; thus, remarkably, the *ordeal* Stevens means is not one experienced by the assimilated subject but by the culturally central American poet who fears he must work dangerously at the edges of an obscure boundary (assimilation but not imitation). Stevens has no difficulty understanding the flawed logic in Kreymborg's dislocation ("Their idea [at *Broom*] is to preserve us [Americans] just as we are"). Yet this insight does not extend to sympathy for the obvious alternative offered by Corbin Henderson. In his surprising confidence that American poets will assimilate the Indian aesthetic as they have assimilated the comparatively unchallenging aesthetic of England and France, the implications are that native American culture is essentially foreign and, at the same time, that *as Americans* the Indians may be harmlessly absorbed. In Stevens' disarming conception, poets like himself do struggle to contain genuine American differences while actually remaining well within the limits of modernism then being prescribed in Europe.

As Stevens passed through the Midwest on business in March 1916 and visited the offices of *Poetry*, he was shocked to learn that Alice Corbin Henderson had been diagnosed as tubercular and would have to leave Chicago. A letter to Harriet Monroe a month later indicates that he did not know Corbin Henderson's doctors had given her just a year to live. He had apparently heard of her decision to leave her assistant editorship of *Poetry*, a position she had held since the founding of the magazine in 1912. She would retreat to Santa Fe. He hoped her case would require "only rest and time," yet seemed amazed that a woman who had worked so energetically in the midst of the so-called "New Poetry" movement in Chicago would suffer being "exiled" to the extremities and submit to a rest cure.[3]

What seems to have impressed Stevens most about Corbin Henderson by 1921, when she sent him the copy of *Red Earth*, was how aggressively in the preceding five years she had encouraged American poetry—and to some extent *Poetry* itself—to come to her. Frost, Lindsay, Bliss Carman and Carl Sandburg (the last a good friend from her Chicago years) would each make a visit; Witter Bynner, having come to Santa Fe to recuperate from the influenza, never left, as Stevens knew.[4] Later, her literary "round-ups," held in a Santa Fe garden, included Mary Austin, John Gould Fletcher, Haniel Long, Bynner and others. Harriet Monroe came to Santa Fe in the summer of 1920 to prepare for a Southwest number.[5] William Penhallow Henderson, with his own rapidly developing reputation, risked losing regular contact with galleries and dealers in order to be with his wife and their daughter. The three moved into a small adobe house near Sunmount Sanitorium, where the poet took her treatments. Perhaps because Stevens himself had recently endured a move—from West 21st Street in Manhattan to Hartford, Connecticut—the flexibility of the Henderson marriage especially appealed to him. "It seemed such a spunky thing for you to go down to New Mexico and such a superb thing for Mr. Henderson and the whole family to go with you and

the whole lot of you to go right on as before. Mrs. Stevens is perfectly happy here [in Hartford]—likes it, I know, much better than she liked New-York." One of the strategies of these letters (harmless, it would seem; a friendly epistolary gesture common to Stevens' exchanges) was to attempt to make Hartford and Santa Fe equivalent outposts in American literary culture, equidistant from the centers of literary power and fashion—and, in this instance, to underscore the point by equating himself and Corbin Henderson as poets with agreeable spouses. They had been on the inside of the so-called "New Poetry movement," and now each had chosen (bravely, he seems to imply) to move to the outside. The question now was whether the "Harriet Monroe Doctrine"—Stevens did not use the phrase but others did[6]—would extend outward to the provinces.

Although Alice Corbin Henderson's letters to Stevens do not survive, her letters to others do (such as those to Mary Austin, at the Huntington Library, and to Harriet Monroe, at Texas and Chicago). But from her published reviews and essays, as from her poems, sixty-six published in *Poetry* alone, we can understand the grounds on which she might have challenged Stevens' implication that the two of them lived equally on the margins of American poetry. To begin with, we can quite easily imagine her response to Stevens' comment that American poets should assimilate "the damned Indians" as the pioneers did. At every opportunity she scored "uninformed or flippant eastern critics who have not yet progressed beyond what we may call the cigar-store-Indian 'complex' of our pioneer stage of development—a point of view that reflects little credit on the holder."[7] Writing to Mary Austin, Corbin Henderson ridiculed Van Wyck Brooks's and Randolph Bourne's sense of the American West, as she might well have ridiculed Stevens': "I think their conception of the pioneer is one of the funniest things I have ever come across."[8] In an article for the *Nation*, Austin had divided the American literary world in two, and Corbin Henderson mostly agreed. There was "N. Y. criticism" on the one hand (predominantly male); those on the other hand (led, Austin would sometimes claim, by women) who took native American traditions seriously, and heard in them an unheard American voice, often went West to listen.[9]

Red Earth makes much of this bold distinction, though Corbin Henderson's handling of the subject is a good deal less polemical than Mary Austin's. Still, Corbin Henderson chose to preface her book with lines arranged to put Chicago and particularly Sandburg's muscular urbanism behind her (at the hard turn in the sixth line). Here she also makes a case for the lyric that somehow reproduces native American silence. Whatever else this voice is, it is opposed to "cities of men," deriving its originality and strength from an old woman:

> After the roar, after the fierce modern music
> Of rivets and hammers and trams,
> After the shout of the giant

Youthful and brawling and strong
Building the cities of men,
Here is the desert of silence,
Blinking and blind in the sun—
An old, old woman who mumbles her beads
And crumbles to stone.

(*Red Earth* 3)

The publication of the book signified Corbin Henderson's decision to re-assess the extent to which she and Harriet Monroe had encouraged the importation of verse forms she now found made of American clay. *Poetry*, after all, had been the prime mover of the new foreign forms. Of course the poems of *Red Earth* do not themselves entirely resist this reassessment. They can at some points seem as dependent on Pound's orientalism of *Cathay*, for instance, as on the Indians of the American Southwest. "Waiting" is perhaps one of these:

More still than death
That waits a thousand years
In a new-ploughed field
Of up-turned bones;
So will I wait for you
A thousand years.

(32)

And at times the native American imagism, while competent, seems at first indistinguishable from poems being produced by imitators seeking entry into Amy Lowell's anthologies:

SHADOW

A deep blue shadow falls
On the face of the mountain—
What great bird's wing
Has dropped a feather?

(33)

The more successful free translations in *Red Earth*, such as "El Coyotito" (54), do challenge us to consider the programmatic claims implied by the notes appended to the volume. In naming some of her sources, as for example issues of *The Chippewa* [Ojibwa] *Music Bulletin*, she implies not only that her work is firmly grounded in an American poetic tradition ignored by the derivative "Amygists," but also that the primary materials are accessible. Such information does, as a matter of fact, distinguish "Shadow" from the usual *vers libre* four-liner of this era: the poem is based on the idea that the representations of

cloud and sky in Indian visual design have their structural counterpart in the verse form of Indian songs, so that, whether the poem succeeds in demonstrating the principle or not, the attempt to replicate the interrelation between the visual and verbal arts should itself call new attention to the project of *Red Earth*.[10]

Even if Stevens read the book with less care than his letter suggests, he could not have missed the claims implied by the citations to Indian sources in the appendix. Note in Corbin Henderson's description of the reconstructed Indian form a response to the imagist and vorticist polemic:

> Indian poetry, in its most characteristic form, is at the opposite pole from narrative or descriptive poetry, or even from the usual occidental lyric, which gives a double image, ie., the original emotional stimulus through the thought or emotion aroused by it. *Indian poetry is seldom self-conscious to this degree*. It gives *the naked image*, or symbol, which is *itself the emotional stimulus*. The distinction is subtle, but one who would interpret or translate Indian verse must perceive it. (57; emphasis added)

On this point it is especially unfortunate that Corbin Henderson's letters to Stevens have been lost. It would be helpful to know which of these claims she repeated to him directly. The inscription in his copy of *Red Earth* offers some evidence that she directed him to aspects of the aboriginal in his own poems, perhaps to nourish an alliance between them. On the front endpaper she wrote out the only lines in "Sunday Morning" that endorsed her program: "Supple and turbulent, a ring of men / Shall chant an orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to the sun . . ." The song of this seventh stanza would seem indeed to derive from "a savage source," in Stevens' famous phrase, although to lay much stress on the pre- as opposed to the post-Christian elements of the poem is surely to undervalue Stevens' other interests there.

His responses suggest, of course, that she criticized his poetry in some manner. Unpublished materials in the Alice Corbin Henderson archive indicate that during the course of a systematic evaluation of the poets who had become known through the efforts of *Poetry*, at least one of the editors had begun to see Stevens as too precious and self-conscious to convey "the naked image . . . which is itself the emotional stimulus" in poetry. From Santa Fe Corbin Henderson undertook to assess the entire run of *Poetry*, apparently to prepare a report for Monroe that would propose new directions the magazine should take.[11] Her annotated copies of the issues and contents lists survive, as have letters to and from Monroe pertaining to the business of this evaluation. After re-reading the December 1917 issue, containing Stevens' "Carlos among the Candles," she jotted these words: "Stevens, precieuse, but well done and interesting." And in a letter to Monroe written the same month: "Stevens is a bit precieuse, but at any rate not banal."[12] Hardly the sort of

ringing endorsements we are accustomed to reading in Monroe's letters to Stevens from Chicago. Corbin Henderson recommended that they accept fewer poems, and "above all, these damned little 'imagistes'"—"throw them out when they don't say anything," she said. Apparently, this frank advice, at least to Monroe, did not apply to the poet of "Six Significant Landscapes," "To the Roaring Wind," and "Valley Candle," as the magazine continued to support Stevens without reservation.

Corbin Henderson eventually seized the opportunity to tell Stevens if not that she found his poems precious at least that she found them obscure. He responded forcefully: "My poems seem so simple and natural to me that I am never able to understand how they may seem otherwise to anyone else. They are not intended to be either deep, dark or mysterious. Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly." The occasion for this honest exchange was the revision and enlargement of the famous *New Poetry* anthology for a second edition (1923). And although there are no indications in the Alice Corbin Henderson-Harriet Monroe archive of a conscious plan on Corbin Henderson's part to challenge the representation of Stevens in either the first or second selection, her work on the new volume caused her to re-evaluate the love for Stevens' poems at the offices of *Poetry*, and to confront him at least privately. Thanks to this challenge we have his seven-page letter of March 27, 1922.

Interestingly, one of the glosses he offers her in this reply raises again the Indian Question. He explains a poem that would be collected in *Harmonium*, "The Cuban Doctor." It was first published soon after he had read and criticized *Red Earth*; that letter is dated April 1921, and the poem appeared in *Poetry* in October of the same year. Here is the poem:

> I went to Egypt to escape
> The Indian, but the Indian struck
> Out of his cloud and from his sky.
>
> This was no worm bred in the moon,
> Wriggling far down the phantom air,
> And on a comfortable sofa dreamed.
>
> The Indian struck and disappeared.
> I knew my enemy was near—I,
> Drowsing in summer's sleepiest horn.

This is Stevens' gloss:

> The Cuban is the person fostered by interiors: comfortable sofas etc who cannot keep exteriors out. There was a time when the country really made me ill, more or less. . . . Imagine the American sky or any intense as savage blue as the Indian and so much for that.

If the poem does raise again "the question of what to do about the damned Indians," and in this sense makes quick work of Alice Corbin Henderson's claims for the native American culture as a natural middle ground between modernism and nativism, then Stevens' emphasis on the indoor ordeal of the doctor begins to make sense. The doctor (a psycho-analyst?) is laid out on his own sofa, dreaming of (wishing for?) an attack. Taking its tone from the doctor's pose, the poem is extremely self-conscious. It proposes its own preciousness as a sufficient invitation to the poetically assimilable and thus not-very-savage attack of the "savage" Indian, who embodies the whole Americanist point of view ("the American sky"). Once interiorized, the Indian is imaginable. The reclining man, the indoor drowser, is quite as capable of putting into verse the intensity of the Indian as the healthy poet fostered by outdoors. The doctor cannot get away from the American sky but there seems no ill in that. The "savage blue" of the outdoors—the condition prescribed for Stevens' correspondent as the means to regaining health and, as she would claim, a means to regaining poetic health—becomes the very condition Stevens playfully suggests once "made me *ill*, more or less." In admitting his preciousness, then, and thus disarming the critic's "attack," he associates self-consciousness with the imagination, and imagination becomes, in turn, a power contingent upon the view of "the American sky," and is granted from the indoors out (as East to West). So the doctor prescribes a kind of aesthetic rest cure, exactly as the poem itself (if I am right about Stevens' response to *Red Earth*) whimsically doctors the tubercular Alice Corbin Henderson, exiled to the outdoors. "The Cuban Doctor" responds to her dignified Navajo and Pueblo by refiguring the American Indian as a stale type, who, true to form, stalks, attacks, and intrudes dramatically but ineffectively on the imagination that will always contain him. "*I knew* my enemy was near" implies a hatred disarmed by superior knowledge. "Your difficulty, no doubt, in my own case," he wrote Corbin Henderson, assuming, in my opinion, a similiar attitude, ". . . is simple lack of familiarity with my point of view."

In later years, Stevens would become a little more comfortable explicating his poems for his correspondents. Letters to Ronald Lane Latimer, Hi Simons, José Rodríguez Feo and Renato Poggioli contain more relaxed if less reliable paraphrases. Still, the nervousness with which Stevens writes about his work in several letters to the assistant editor of *Poetry* allows for some rare moments. At such points Stevens condenses and evades aesthetic problems more in the aphoristic manner of the later *adagia* than in the manner of those flat statements written in response to questions from Simons in particular. Typical is the entertaining parallelism about readers who rationalize their own interests by imposing notions of what is reasonable on the poet's verbal-visual experiments; here a painterly metaphor is pressed into the service of a characteristic evasion: "You can imagine people accustomed to potatoes studying apples with the idea that unless the apples somehow contain po-

tatoes they are unreasonable." For Stevens' less "unreasonable" readers I think it will be productive to take this and other expressions of his interest in the modernist's defamiliarized object and to read them against terms proposed later, in the thirties, by "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and the still-life poems. There Stevens' renewed study of relations between depicted forms returns him to important questions left unanswered in *Harmonium* but incidentally raised in these letters.

University of Pennsylvania

Notes

[1]Alice Corbin Henderson, "World of Art," New York *Times*, September 6, 1925, sec. 3, 18-19.

[2]"Aboriginal Poetry," *Poetry* 9, 5 (February 1917): 256.

[3]The diagnosis had been made in February (*William Penhallow Henderson: Master Colorist of Santa Fe* [Phoenix: Phoenix Art Museum, 1984], 16). Stevens' letter to Monroe: *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), 191; hereafter cited as *L*.

[4]Corbin Henderson took delight in Bynner's new regional interest. In the essay, "On the Need of Scholarships for the Study of Indian Culture" (*Poetry* 22, 6 [September 1923]: 326), she quotes his rather naive comment that white poets' activism on behalf of the Pueblos in land conflicts was "the first evidence of a cultural influence on American politics!"

[5]Unpublished letter from Alice Corbin Henderson to Mary Austin, July 21, 1920, Austin Papers, Huntington Library.

[6]Alfred Kreymborg, for example, in his long review of *The New Poetry* anthology, edited by Monroe and Corbin Henderson ("As Others See Us," *Poetry* 12, 4 [July 1918]: 223). In the last lines of his review Kreymborg deepens the critical impression made by the pun on the historical Monroe Doctrine, by quoting the editor-in-chief of *Poetry* suggestively, if slightly out of context: "Our poets have 'the qualities of pioneers,'" she had written in the introduction to the anthology, "'who may lead on . . . to new domains of the ever-conquering spirit of beauty'" (224).

[7]"On the Need of Scholarships," 328.

[8]Unpublished letter from Corbin Henderson to Austin, undated, Box 11, Austin Papers, Huntington Library.

[9]That women writers were especially interested in translating—or, to use Mary Austin's word, "re-expressing"— Indian literature is a significant point borne out by recent literary histories. See Marion Tinling, *Women Remembered: A Guide to Landmarks of Women's History* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1986), particularly sections on New Mexico and Arizona; and Helen Addison Howard, "Literary Translators and Interpreters of Indian Songs," *Journal of the West* 12 (April 1973): 212-228.

[10]Corbin Henderson summarizes this theory of the relation between the visual and linguistic arts in "On the Need of Scholarships," 329. On these poetics she bases her political appeal: "If this symbolism, which is readily perceived in . . . highly imaginative graphic designs, appears also in the rhythmic structure of Indian metrics, should we not make an effort to discover it, before it is too late?"

[11]A letter to Monroe dated March 22, 1918, indicates that Corbin Henderson had by then read through all the issues and would soon send Monroe a summary of the evaluation. Alice Corbin Henderson Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas.

[12]Folder entitled "Materials for contents selection, the new poetry," Alice Corbin Henderson Papers, Texas.

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———, "On the Need of Scholarships for the Study of Indian Culture," *Poetry* 22 (September 1923): 325-30.

———, "Poetic Drama" (essay), *Poetry* 7, 1 (Oct. 1915): 31-35.

———, *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico*. Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour [Dec. 1920].

———, Review of *Des Imagistes: An Anthology*, *Poetry* 5, 1 (Oct. 1914): 38-40.

———, Review of John Rodker, *Poems*, *Poetry* 6, 3 (June 1915): 153-156.

———, *The Spinning Woman of the Sky* (with an original lithograph by William Penhallow Henderson). Chicago: Ralph Fletcher Seymour, 1912.

——— and Harriet Monroe, *The New Poetry: An Anthology*. New York: MacMillan, 1917. Revised edition. New York: MacMillan, 1923. See *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography*, J. M. Edelstein (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), citations B7 and B14 for the poems by Stevens included here. Materials in the Corbin Henderson-Monroe archive at Texas indicate that both editors had also wanted to include "Homunculus et La Belle Étoile" and "Lettres d'un Soldat," No. IX ("Life contracts and death is expected").

[Monroe, Harriet], "Prize Announcement," *Poetry* 8, 3 (June 1916): 159-161. Announcement of Stevens' prize for *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*.

Pearce, T. M., *Alice Corbin Henderson*. Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Co., 1969.

A Note on the Text of the Letters

The letters are presented here with the generous permission of Holly Stevens, who retains copyrights to them, and by arrangement with the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Austin, Texas. Letter three is typewritten and signed; the others are handwritten and signed. The envelopes are extant and in several cases have confirmed the dating. Stevens' underscoring has been italicized. Otherwise I have avoided editorial intrusions, even when Stevens' punctuation is irregular. A few normalizations appear in brackets.

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THE LETTERS[†]

1

care of Hartford Accident &
Indemnity Co.,
125 Trumbull-Street,
Hartford, Connecticut,

June 1, 1916.

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

Many thanks for your note. I am delighted to hear from you. Does this mean that you are getting along?[1] I hope so. If there is ever anything I can get for you or do for you in New-York (or that Mrs. Stevens can,) while you are out there, we should be glad to have you let us know.

But I have no extra copy of the play,[2] alas. I have been revising it. The only copy of the first form has been used up in the process of revision. The second form has just been sent to Miss Monroe.[3] If it is satisfactory to her, I can then send you the copy. But if further changes are desired, I shall need it, at least temporarily, for reference. At any rate, I shall send it to you at the earliest moment.

The play is quite out of the question in the ordinary theatre, for which it is not intended. Personally, I think that in the hands of people of imagination and feeling, it might do very well. And between us, I am exceedingly desirous to see it used as a play, provided it could be done properly and sensitively.[4] But things of this kind must be left to the people who foot the bill.

Who is Miss B? Am I right in supposing it to be Miss Br— ?[5]

It must be glorious in New Mexico just now. Some years ago, I spent a little time at Raton.

Very sincerely yours,
Wallace Stevens

[1]He is referring to her illness. See *L* 191.

[2]*Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*.

[3]Both original and revised versions of the play are now part of the *Poetry* archive at the University of Chicago.

[4]Nearly four years later, on February 13, 1920, *Three Travelers* was produced along with plays by Alfred Kreymborg and Lawrence Langner, at the Provinceton Playhouse in New York. By this time, Wallace Stevens was apparently no longer interested in the details of dramatic production; he did not even see his play performed.

[5]No such name is associated with *Poetry* in these years. Stevens might be referring to the writer, Alice Brown.

2

Minnesota Club
St. Paul

June 19, 1916.[1]

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

Miss Monroe decided to use the first version of my play. My carbon was not in such shape that you could have made much of it. Accordingly, I asked her to send you a set of the proofs. Yesterday, in Chicago, she said that she had done this. This note will explain, Miss Monroe's portentous announcement has, no doubt, made everybody's hair stand on end.[2] It certainly did mine. But there is plenty of room for everything, even hair standing on end.

I hope, most sincerely, that you are growing stronger and that you will soon be able to make the most of New Mexico, if you cannot already do so.

Very sincerely yours,
W. Stevens

[1] *Cf. L* 196, a letter to his wife written the same day.

[2] In the June issue of *Poetry* Harriet Monroe announced that *Three Travelers* had been awarded a prize of $100, offered by the Player's Producing Company. Alice Corbin Henderson had almost certainly been one of the judges. Monroe noted that the play would be printed in a summer number of *Poetry* (in fact, July [8, 4; 163-79]) and explained at length the judges' decision to prefer Stevens' "strange and fantastic work of original genius" to the eventual runner-up, "a pretty and dramatically competent play on a tenderly human subject." While several "experienced producers in the [Chicago] art theatre movement" were certain that stage production would enhance the poetic beauty of *Three Travelers*, most of the judges questioned its "actability" and plainly doubted that an audience would understand it. Yet, Monroe concluded, Stevens' play was part of a "formative moment in our poetic drama" (*Poetry* 8, 3 [June 1916]: 159-61). This announcement seemed even to Stevens' admirers "portentous" indeed, if John Gould Fletcher's reaction is representative: on June 28 he wrote to Amy Lowell, "Have just seen Harriett's [*sic*] June number. . . . I wonder what Stevens' play *is* like" (unpublished letter, Fletcher Papers, Arkansas).

3

125 Trumbull St.,
Hartford, Conn.
Apr. 11
1 9 2 1[1]

Mrs. William P. Henderson,
Santa Fé, New Mexico.

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

I have been in Norfolk, and that is why I have not written to you before. Aren't you a Virginian?[2] It would do you good to see Norfolk now. The leaves are out on the trees, a good many of the earlier bushes are already shedding their first blooms, and the nigger hucksters are selling shad in the back parts of the town for $.30 a piece. It is a great comfort to be able to drop back into the eighteenth century with so little trouble.

Red Earth came just before I left,[3] but I did not have time to read it until last evening. It raises again the question of what to do about the damned Indians. I suppose the poets will have to do just what the pioneers did, and that is assimilate them. Their native aesthetic comes out as clean as a bone in your song about striking the ground with curved horns,[4] which made an impression on me when I first read it. But their native aesthetic, like the aesthetic of England, France, Peru, and so on, is all something that we have to assimilate, and not imitate. This sort of thing is really becoming an ordeal.

Alfred Kreymborg, his ox, his ass, his maid-servant, and so on, are going to Italy in June to publish a magazine which they intend shall be something a good deal more portentous than the Dial.[5] Their idea is to preserve us just as we are, in spite of the international character of what they plan. I am too far away from things in Hartford to say what is going on. But Americanism is clearly in tremendous swing at the moment.[6] A book like *Red Earth* is part of the palette not only for its Indian colors but also because it contains the colors of our Spanish side, which is so often overlooked, and which nevertheless is one of our most fascinating phases. I am grateful to you for sending me the book, and for its inscription.[7]

Occasionally when I am in Chicago I see Miss Monroe, and through her I have learned that you are again, even though it may be necessary for you to remain more or less indefinitely in New Mexico. New York and Chicago are surely great bores; so that you are not missing anything except possibly a little music.

Please burn a little incense before Mr. Henderson on my behalf. His patron, Hahlo, has changed his name to Harlow,[8] and has moved into the very nook of the bazaar. I hope that Mr. Henderson has shared in all this.

Best wishes to both of you.

Very truly yours,
Wallace Stevens

[1]The date appears in this form at the bottom of the letter.

[2]In fact she was born in Missouri (in 1881). She did, however, spend her seventeenth summer at the plantation estate of her father's family, near Norfolk, where she composed her first poems. A later poem, "One City Only," which Stevens is likely to have seen in *Poetry* (7, 4 [Jan. 1916]: 163-64), recalls the water front, the tidal smell and the playful Negro boys in such a way perhaps as

to have contributed to Stevens' sense of the town. In any case, his poem, "Two at Norfolk," dates from this period.

[3]Stevens' copy of *Red Earth*: *Poems of New Mexico* (Chicago: R. F. Seymour [1920]) is now part of the Huntington Library's collection, accession no. RB440499.

[4]He is referring to "Buffalo Dance" (23), which begins: "Strike ye our land / With curved horns!"

[5]Kreymborg's magazine was to be called *Broom*, where Stevens published four poems, beginning with "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" in the first issue (December 1921: 173). Stevens took a special interest in Kreymborg's removal to Italy, telling Ferdinand Reyher he had advised Kreymborg to take a mutual friend, the poet-printer John Rodker, "down to Florence to get out their magazine for them." Rodker did go. (Quoted from Stevens to Reyher, May 13, 1921; also Rodker to Reyher, undated; Kreymborg to Reyher, undated; all unpublished letters, Box 5, Ferdinand Reyher Papers, McKeldin Library, Maryland.)

[6]Compare William Carlos Williams' nativist response to *Broom*, in a letter to Harold Loeb, Kreymborg's co-editor: "What in hell it can mean to anyone that a magazine shall be International is more than I can say. . . . [A] magazine that attempts to be international must be mediocre" (Williams to Loeb, February 1, 1922, Loeb Papers, Princeton). Stevens told Harriet Monroe that *Broom* "was not such a much" (*L* 223).

[7]The inscription, "To Wallace Stevens - / from Alice Corbin - / Santa Fe - / Mar. 24, '21," is followed by the quotation of three lines from "Sunday Morning" (stanza 7, lines 1-3).

[8]Unidentified.

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690 Asylum-Ave., Hartford,
March 27, 1922.

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

My poems seem so simple and natural to me that I am never able to understand how they may seem otherwise to anyone else. They are not intended to be either deep, dark or mysterious. Whatever can be expressed can be expressed clearly. Epater les savants is as trifling as épater les bourgeois. But one cannot always say a thing clearly and retain the poetry of what one is saying. For instance, at the moment I am writing a thing called Palace of the Blondes Who Read Books of Moonlight.[1] Now that means precisely what it says. If I said: this poem is a momentary cure for poverty; it raises a class to its highest exponent, to the satisfaction of its imagination of what it would like to be; it inflames and placates desire—and so on, I should convey the same idea but I should not write a poem. Now, the disbeliever in the Palace of the Babies[2] is the mood of the disenchanted in the presence of the enchanted (I hate like the devil to write like this). The doctor of Geneva[3] is the confined philosopher actual facing the illimitable (his field) in realism. The bland old gentleman who does the talking to the bland and credulous old ladies about him, with whom he is having tea anywhere—at the Palaz of Hoon[4] if you like, is simply explaining everybody in terms of himself. The Cuban[5] is the person fostered by interiors: comfortable sofas etc who cannot keep exteriors out. There was a time when the country really made me ill, more or less.

And there was a very good friend of mine who stayed indoors from June to September one summer. No joke. Imagine the American sky or any intense as savage blue as the Indian and so much for that. Addressing Clouds[6] is an actual address to the clouds. The gloomy grammarians and funest philosophers[7] are the clouds themselves. What could be simpler? Of course, it all depends on the point of view. People scent symbolism as if something of their own realism and reason must, like the blood of an Englishman, be somewhere concealed. You can imagine people accustomed to potatoes studying apples with the idea that unless the apples somehow contain potatoes they are unreasonable. Such people have poignant difficulties with zinnias and pies. We regard Chaplin throwing pies as a simple phenomenon but a writer in the *Beacon*, published in Oxford, raised his eyebrows at what he called pelting with puddings.[8] I know that we agree about this in general. Your difficulty, no doubt, in my own case, or in any specific case, is simple lack of familiarity with my point of view. My things are all perfectly direct and mean just what they say even when that may seem a bit neither here nor there. I have had nothing recent from Alfred Kreymborg. He separated from Loeb,[9] spent the winter at Rapallo, where Gordon Craig and Max Beerbohm are spending their old age, and will be back here, I daresay, shortly. I thought Williams' last book very slight—very. Charming but such a tame[?] savage, such a personal impersonal.[10] Marianne Moore's book[11] meant very little to me. She concerns herself so much with form, and concerns herself by evading it, that I cannot arouse myself about her worth. There is a curious lack of substance in so many of these things, even after conceding that substance may be a matter of nuances, sounds, colors etc instead of eighteenth-century avoirdupois. There appears to be little going on in New-York. This year's Independent show is a poor thing but it has grown almost fashionable and attracts large crowds.[12] The independent scholar is what is lacking. Independence is nothing unless it is liberty to personality, to thought etc. Independence to do as you please is my idea of being out of a job. Besides, of course, there isn't a damned bit of independence about it. You must do as the independents do or be a laughing-stock.[13] Just so, you must do as the academicians do or be a laughing stock. It is as well to live in Hartford or Santa Fe and not be bothered by any public even the public of a small group of friends. The only real independence is to pull people by the ears and not be pulled by them, if it comes to a choice, and it does come to a choice, if you care what people think. I have a good deal of correspondence with people abroad and receive quite a number of magazines from London and Paris.[14] The thing is the same everywhere. John Rodker is trying to interest me in buying a Wyndham Lewis, writes about his latest manner as being something amazing and refers me to the reproductions in the last number of the *Tyro*.[15] Fancy the swank of Wyndham Lewis. I know of only one real literary Deadwood Dick at the present time and that is Robert McAlmon. Awful stuff—but such pep![16] Yvor Winters sent me a copy of his recent attenuations.[17] I like Winters, I suppose, because he likes me but he doesn't exactly smell of

whiskey and I expect nothing from him.[18] So many people play tunes on their finger-nails and think they are making the welkinring. However, this sort of thing is not my forte. By the way, Carl Sandburg was here not long ago.[19] I expected to swallow my Adam's apple when he began to sing but the truth is that I enjoyed it immensely.[20] I often inquire about you and it has been a great pleasure to hear of your recovery. It seemed such a spunky thing for you to go down to New Mexico and such a superb thing for Mr. Henderson and the whole family to go with you and for the whole lot of you to go right on as before. Mrs. Stevens is perfectly happy here—likes it, I know, much better than she liked New-York. Sincerest good wishes to all of you.

Very sincerely yours,
Wallace Stevens

[1]No poem of this title has been found.

[2]*Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 77; hereafter *CP*.

[3]"The Doctor of Geneva," *CP* 24.

[4]See "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon," *CP* 65.

[5]"The Cuban Doctor," *CP* 64-65.

[6]"On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," *CP* 55-56.

[7]See lines 1, 6.

[8]G. C. Grant, "The Theatre in London," *The Beacon* 1, 4 (February 1922): 290-292.

[9]Stevens had access to this information through both Reyher and Williams. In February 1922 Williams corresponded with Harold Loeb, who was then editing *Broom* in Rome without Kreymborg. Reyher heard this from Rodker.

[10]Williams' *Sour Grapes* (1921) contained as many poems as *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), including some considered among his best, such as "The Widow's Lament in Springtime," "Queen-Anne's-Lace," and "The Great Figure."

[11]*Poems* (London: The Egoist Press, 1921), brought out by H. D. and Bryher.

[12]Although his interest in the Society for Independent Artists dates back to Walter Arensberg's involvement with it, Stevens' comment about the popularity of the exhibit does not necessarily mean he had yet visited the sixth annual show, held on the roof of the Waldorf Astoria (March 11 through April 2, 1922). Under the headline, "'Independent' Art / Draws Huge Crowd" in the March 12 New York *Times*, he could have read that the opening had been "besieged" by gallery agents and critics (sec. 2, p. 1). His friend Walter Pach was an officer of the Society. John Sloan, friend of both Alice Corbin and William P. Henderson, was then President of the Independents, and seems to have made the way for a large contingent of New Mexican painters. "The Indians of the Southwest are here again," noted the *Times* reviewer, "with capital little illustrations of their dances and customs" ("Some Gems Among Independents' Art," March 10, 1922, 14). Sloan exhibited his own painting, "Hombres in Garden," depicting his home in Santa Fe. For more on Stevens' relation to the Society for Independent Artists, see Glen MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years, 1913-1923* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), 19, 35-37.

[13]At least one newspaper account of the exhibit pointed to the same irony. "[T]hese artists for the most part are running true to type, stamped all over with the stamp of independence" (New York *Times*, March 10, 1922, 14).

[14]At one time or another, each of his overseas correspondents, Rodker, Reyher, McAlmon, Sanborn and Pach, sent Stevens books and journals. Typical were "odds and ends" from Reyher in London and a "cargo" from Rodker who gathered items in France and Italy (*L* 221, 216).

[15]*The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, No. 2 (1921-22) reproduced six paintings by Lewis, including "Room No. 59," "Red and Black Olympus," "Women," "Girl Reading," and two untitled pieces.

[16]McAlmon sent Stevens typescripts of three stories that McAlmon himself no longer liked. "Awful" as they indeed are, McAlmon's stories, along with his letters, gave Stevens a glimpse of the wild side of expatriate life: for Stevens' amusement, McAlmon called himself "a bird of migration, or a bug, or an insect, or a prehistoric winged reptile" (unpublished letter, [1922], Huntington Library, WAS1157).

[17]Probably a new book of poems, *The Magpie's Shadow* (Chicago: Musterhousebook, 1922).

[18]Only a month earlier, Winters' "A Cool Master," *Poetry* 19 (Feb. 1922): 278-88, had praised Stevens as the "greatest of living and of American poets."

[19]See *L* 226 for more on this visit. Corbin Henderson knew Sandburg well.

[20]This may have been one of the occasions when, as Stevens later recalled, Sandburg "brought his guitar out to the house and sang for us" (*L* 765).

5

Hartford, November 17. [1922[1]]

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

I had noticed that Mr. Henderson was having a show in New-York, before receiving your note.[2] I shall try to see it and him the next time I go down. There is only one possible hitch and that is Mrs. Stevens, a fascinating creature whom one cannot exactly get away from.[3] Eliot's poem is, of course, the rage. As poetry it is surely negligible. What it may be in other respects is a large subject on which one could talk for a month. If it is the supreme cry of despair it is Eliot's and not his generation's. Personally, I think it's a bore.[4]

With kindest personal regards,
Wallace Stevens

[1]A postmark on the envelope confirms the year.

[2]William Penhallow Henderson (1877-1943) was probably part of an exhibit of New Mexico painters at the Howard Young Galleries, New York, November 1922. A newspaper account noted that the New Mexican "skies are a bluer blue than anywhere else and the desert is golden" and that "the Indian who lives there is a good Indian" (New York *Times*, November 4, 1922, 12). Henderson had met Alice Corbin in 1905 at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, where he was an instructor. Even before the Hendersons relocated to Santa Fe, his paintings had been heavily influenced by the Southwestern landscape, as by Native and Spanish American culture. Alice Corbin and William Henderson worked together on a number of projects during these years, including several of her books which he illustrated with original lithographs. Harriet Monroe contributed an admiring introductory essay to a catalogue for one of William's exhibits, where she cited his "sureness of touch" and "magic of harmony" (undated; quoted in *William Penhallow Henderson: Master Colorist of Santa Fe*, 46-47).

[3]On the same day Stevens wrote Carl Van Vechten that he had just returned to Hartford from New York City, where he had dined with Pitts Sanborn (unpublished letter, November 17, 1922, Van Vechten Papers, Beinecke Library). Stevens returned to New York a month later, to carry the manuscript of *Harmonium* to Alfred Knopf; on that trip his wife Elsie joined him (*L* 232).

[4]"The Waste Land" had been published in the October *Criterion*. Stevens had heard about the poem at least as early as July from Robert McAlmon, who had seen it in manuscript and wrote Stevens that "Eliot is devitalized" (unpublished letter, Huntington Library, accession no. WAS 1157).

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690 Asylum. Ave.
Hartford, Conn.
Sept. 9, 1923.

Dear Mrs. Henderson:

I am sending you a copy of my first (and, no doubt, only) book, which has just come out,[1] and hope that you will like it.

Very truly yours,
Wallace Stevens

[1]*Harmonium* was published on September 7.

The Return of the Dead in "Large Red Man Reading"

D. L. MACDONALD

STEVENS' LATE POEM "Large Red Man Reading" (1948; *CP* 423-24),[1] one of his own favorites (*L* 778), deserves more critical and theoretical attention than it has yet received. It deals with the relations between text and voice and between writer and reader, relations of whose problematic character we have recently been made acutely aware. It also both allegorizes and exemplifies the phenomenon that Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, calls "*Apophrades*, or the return of the dead" (*AI* 15).[2] In this poetic haunting, which "is most evident in poems that quest for a final clarity, that seek to be definitive statements [or] testaments" (*AI* 140),

> [t]he later poet, in his own final phase, already burdened by an imaginative solitude that is almost a solipsism, holds his own poem so open again to the precursor's work that at first we might believe the wheel has come full circle, and that we are back in the later poet's flooded apprenticeship, before his strength began to assert itself. (*AI* 15-16)

Bloom himself does not, however, describe "Large Red Man Reading" as a product of Stevens' final phase, as so solitary as to be almost solipsistic, as held open to the past, as a quest for final clarity, or as a would-be definitive statement or testament—though it is all these things—in his brief discussion of it in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. This is not the only context in which Bloom declines to discuss what (unless I am misreading him) are the most interesting implications of his own theory. He does not even explore thoroughly the implications of the names of his six revisionary ratios; "Large Red Man Reading" provides an opportunity to explore the implications of "apophrades." (Such an exploration is complicated by the system of concentric synecdoches which allows the sequence of ratios to summarize the plot of a poem, or of a whole poetic career, or even of the whole of literary history. In treating "Large Red Man Reading" as a late and generally apophradesic text, I privilege the second or biographical level. Bloom himself privileges it in such theoretical works as *The Anxiety of Influence*, though for rhetorical reasons he privileges the first or textual level in such exercises in practical criticism as *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*. In this essay, it is impossible to deal, except indirectly, with the large assumptions about the structure of history on which the triple alignment depends.)

Bloom describes "Large Red Man Reading" as "an American poet's defense" which "finds its ultimate ancestor in Emerson's strongest poem, *Bacchus*," because Emerson refers to "tablets blue" and the large red man reads from "great blue tabulae." When, later in the poem, the tabulae turn purple, Bloom finds a proximate ancestor, Stevens' own "Tea at the Palaz of

Hoon" (*CP* 65), because that poem begins with Hoon's descent in purple through the western sky. In the later poem, Bloom concludes, Stevens "passes beyond irony to a pure celebration of his own poetry" (*WS* 295-96).

The ancestry that haunts "Large Red Man Reading" does include Emerson's "Bacchus" and many of Stevens' own poems—especially his early poems, so that a wheel does seem to have come full circle—but it also reaches back far beyond Emerson's time, and far outside American space. It is full of ancestral voices, but the dominant voice is that of Homer, who has been seen since at least the Enlightenment as both the "ultimate ancestor" and the covering cherub of the whole Western literary tradition, the figure standing between poetry and nature—or, in Stevens' terms, between the imagination and reality. Thus Pope's *Essay on Criticism* (1711) includes the ironic parable of a Vergil determined to draw his inspiration directly from nature, only to find that at every point, "*Nature* and *Homer* were . . . the same";[3] and Johnson's preface to Shakespeare (1765) complains that "nation after nation, and century after century, has been able to do little more than transpose [Homer's] incidents, new-name his characters, and paraphrase his sentiments."[4] In our time he has also come to be seen as standing between writing and speech, as the first literate poet and the last oral bard.

The blue and purple of Stevens' poem do not only reveal the influence of other poems; they articulate what Bloom considers the motive for all influence, "the greatest of all human illusions, the vision of immortality" (*AI* 9).

> There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
> As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
> They were those from the wilderness of stars that had
> expected more.
>
> There were those that returned to hear him read from the
> poem of life,
> Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips
> among them.
> They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into
> reality,
>
> That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the
> frost
> And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
> And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was
> ugly
>
> And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple
> tabulae,
> The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its
> law:

> *Poesis*, *poesis*, the literal characters, the vatic lines,
>
> Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
> Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
> And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had
> lacked.
>
> (*CP* 423-24)

The large red man culminates a Stevensian sequence of nocturnal readers, most of them haunted by death or actually dead. The narrator and title character of "The Reader" (1935; *CP* 146-47) tells *his* reader that he has been reading, "as if in a book," the falling stars in the autumn sky; what he has read there is a prophecy of the coming of winter, of universal death. The title character of "Phosphor Reading by his Own Light" (1942; *CP* 267) cannot be his own narrator. He cannot address his reader directly, and it does not matter whether he is trying to read a book or the sky. "It is difficult to read," the poem begins, but this is an ironic understatement. For Phosphor, it is impossible; all he can see is the reflection of his own green phosphorescence—the glow of his own decay: his imaginative solitude is a solipsistic death, and he has begun to rot. He likes it; at least "he knows what it is that he expects." The second half of the poem is a direct address to its own reader, whom it calls, by contrast with Phosphor, a realist, and whom it exhorts to look "not knowing what you expect." In this way, the reader of the poem will not only avoid the fate of the reader (Phosphor) in the poem, but profit by it, seeing unexpected things by his light.

The reader in "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night" (1942; *CP* 285) is also dead and decayed: all that is left are a head, a book, and some other detritus. The poem addresses the moon, and exhorts it to look at the remains of the reader. In its light, the past is restored: the head returns to life, speaks, reads the book, becomes a scholar, and seeks a celestial rendezvous—presumably with the moon that has revived it. "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" (1945; *CP* 358-59) is set in this restored past. (Unlike "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night" and "Phosphor Reading by his Own Light," but like "The Reader," it is in the past tense.) The rendezvous sought in the earlier poem has been achieved. There is a book between the reader and the night (as there is not in "The Reader"), but it only brings them together. Death is temporarily banished. So, however, are the reader of the poem and its narrator: like "Large Red Man Reading" it is in the third person, and is not addressed to anyone. Thus the rendezvous it celebrates takes place within an imaginative solitude.

As one would expect from the place of "Large Red Man Reading" in the sequence, it too deals with prophecy and death, the reader in the poem and the reader of the poem, external reality as portrayed in the poem and the question of a reality external to the poem. It does so in a way that complicates

the phenomenological moralism of "Phosphor Reading by his Own Light" and the phenomenological nostalgia of "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" by combining them.

Red is one of the commonest colors in Stevens' poetry, and is commonly agreed to be one of the most significant, although not everyone agrees on what it signifies.[5] Red men, however, are rare. One of them is Berserk, in "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" (1922; *CP* 57-58). "'Why are you red / In this milky blue?'" the narrator asks him. "'Why sun-colored, / As if awake / In the midst of sleep?'" His red is the color of the sun and of wakefulness, as blue is the color of moonlight and sleep—and of peacocks. His name, though its etymology is uncertain, is probably equivalent either to "bear-shirt" or "only a shirt": the berserkers fought without armor.[6] Berserk, then, is unusually awake, conspicuously unprotected—or, in Bloom's phrase, held open.

Berserkers were dangerous men, however unprotected, and Stevens' Berserk answers the narrator by warning him that he sets traps in the midst of dreams. He does not say what he does with or to the denizens of dreams after trapping them, but his answer makes the narrator know "the dread / Of the bushy plain." Berserk's full answer, however, is worth considering: "'You that wander . . . / On the bushy plain, / Forget so soon. / But I set my traps / In the midst of dreams.'" The bushy plain of dreams, not Berserk himself, is dreadful: it is a place of oblivion. Berserk opposes his traps to it, to oblivion ("'You . . . Forget . . . But I set my traps'"). He is an alarming figure, but only as any sudden awakening is alarming. He traps the dream-creatures to save them from the oblivion to which they are wandering, the oblivion that the cry of the peacocks heralds in another early poem, "Domination of Black" (*CP* 8-9).

Another red man appears in a place of oblivion in the later "Recitation after Dinner" (1945; *OP* 86-88), as a symbol of tradition: Aeneas bearing his father Anchises out of the ruins of Troy, "The ruins of the past": "The son restores / The father. He hides his ancient blue beneath / His own bright red." Blue (the color of the large red man's tabulae) is here the color of what is saved from the past, from oblivion, the color of the father, the precursor. Red is the color of the savior, the son, the inheritor. The ironic picture of tradition as repression should appeal to Bloom: the son carries his father with him, but keeps his ancient blue concealed beneath his own bright red. (Bloom does discuss the poem, but not this aspect of it [*WS* 311].) In "Large Red Man Reading" the blue shows through the red; the two colors blend into purple. Showing through Aeneas, for Stevens as for Vergil, is another wanderer (the ultimate ancestor both of Aeneas and of the large red man): Homer's Ulysses.

Most of the occurrences of "blue" listed in Walsh's *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* refer either to a guitar or to the sky, which is, among other things, the abode of ghosts, from which they return to earth to hear the large red man read.[7] In "Cortège for Rosenbloom" (1921; *CP* 79-81), the mourners carry the dead Rosenbloom up a wooden scaffold into "a region of frost."

There, presumably, Rosenbloom joins "the dark comedians" who "range the gusty cold" of "their icy Élysée" in "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb" (1921; *CP* 56), and another comedian, Crispin, whose fate is sketched out in "Anecdote of the Abnormal" (1919-20):

> Crispin-valet, Crispin-saint!
> The exhausted realist beholds
> His tattered manikin arise,
> Tuck in the straw,
> And stalk the skies.
>
> (*OP* 24)

This exhausted realist anticipates the "genuine realists" of a cryptic rhetorical question that Stevens later asks about "Cortège for Rosenbloom": "Why not fill the sky with scaffolds and stairs, and go about like genuine realists?" (*L* 223). Filling the sky with scaffolds and stairs—like watching tattered mannequins take flight—is not the sort of project usually considered realistic: "genuine" must be an ironic intensifier, not too different in tenor from "exhausted." Both must refer to the end or *reductio ad absurdum* of realism. The attempt to describe heaven realistically is absurd, because heaven is outside the province of realism, outside reality. The ghosts in "Large Red Man Reading" would weep with happiness to step barefoot back into reality, but they are forever cut off from it. They are "the non-physical people, in paradise, / Itself non-physical," who have discovered that "The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world" ("Esthétique du Mal," XV, *CP* 325-26). And so they are disappointed by paradise, by the wilderness of stars—they had expected something better than this poverty.

Their ultimate ancestors are the ghosts of classical antiquity. Stevens' eschatology, as Bloom remarks, is "in a tradition that goes back to Homer yet never has gone beyond Homer" (*WS* 49). The Nietzschean implication is that the afterworld has never been more than a negation of this world; death is beyond the reach of the imagination just as reality is beyond the reach of the ghosts. Their longing to shiver in the frost, to run their fingers over thorns, to seize on what is ugly, recalls the famous complaint of the ghost of Achilles, in the eleventh book of *The Odyssey*:

> O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.
> I would rather follow the plough as thrall to another
> man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on,
> than be a king over all the perished dead.[8]

Homer's word for "ghost" is *psukhe*, which has been anglicized as "psyche," but does not, in Homer, refer to anything psychical or mental in the modern sense. The precise meaning of the word as he uses it is disputed. It may come from the verb *psukhein*, to breathe;[9] *psukhe* is usually glossed as

"breath."[10] There are other Homeric words for "breath," however; it might be better to think of the *psukhe* more precisely as the *last* breath, the principle of life that leaves the body at the point of death.[11]

The *psukhe* also leaves the body, however, during sleep, to become an image in the dreams of others; after death it is also sometimes called an image or *eidolon*.[12] (Thus the dream creatures trapped by Berserk and the dead souls attracted by the large red man and conjured up by Ulysses may be, ultimately, kin.) Precisely what kind of image an *eidolon* is is also unclear. It may be a shadow; the *psukhe* is also called a *skia*, a shade. Shadow, in turn, is not thought of simply as the absence of light, but as an independent substance, a vapor (*OET* 95); this corroborates the identification of the *psukhe* as a kind of breath.

As a kind of breath, the *psukhe* might be expected to find its natural destination in the air rather than under the earth; early Greek eschatology vacillates between the two. Souls are sometimes thought of as dwelling in the winds,[13] and sometimes as possessing or dwelling in such chthonic creatures as snakes.[14] A version of this vacillating eschatology persists in popular belief. Stevens adopts it, in order to parody it, in "The Worms at Heaven's Gate" (1916; *CP* 49-50), where the classical snakes have dwindled into worms who bear the poem's heroine up into the sky in their bellies. In "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" (1936), he adopts it again, with equally parodic effect:

> Under the mat of frost and over the mat of clouds.
> But in between lies the sphere of my fortune
> And the fortunes of frost and of clouds,
> All alike, except for the rules of the rabbis,
> Happy men, distinguishing frost and clouds.
>
> (IV, *CP* 151)

In this earlier, ironic phase, Stevens dismisses "the rules of the rabbis"; later, he celebrates them in the form of the law that the large red man reads from his tabulae. *Tabula* is not the usual Latin word for reading matter, though it can mean a writing tablet—or a drawing tablet, as in Emerson's "Bacchus"—and so by extension a writing. It can also mean one of the Twelve Tables, the Tables of the Law; the tabulae in Stevens' poem accordingly contain the syllables of the law of being.[15] The rabbis themselves, condescendingly dismissed in the earlier poem as "Happy men," return as the large red man (whose size serves partly to recall his earlier collective status). In 1918, the middle-aged speaker of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" (XII, *CP* 17-18) finds himself turning into a rose rabbi as he first confronts death; thirty years later, he has deepened (passing beyond irony) into a red one. Five years later still (though in reference to a poem of 1930, "The Sun This March," *CP* 133-34), Stevens writes: "the figure of the rabbi has always been an exceedingly attractive one to me because it is the figure of a man devoted in the extreme to

scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes" (*L* 786). (Even in his earliest phase, Stevens already associates Homer, not surprisingly, with scholarship. "Homer's only a little story—and so are all the others," he writes in his journal in 1906; "and yet men have not memory enough even to remember a little story. It is a tremendous mark of scholarship to know a little story" [*L* 87].) Certainly the large red man is a figure devoted in the extreme (with his whole being, or non-being, as a poetical character) both to a kind of scholarship and to a human purpose.

The red man's kind of scholarship, or reading, is necromancy. In *The Odyssey*, Tiresias becomes a prophet again after Ulysses has given him blood to drink. The large red man's tabulae become vatic, or prophetic, after they have turned from blue to purple, after he has given them (and the ghosts in them) his own redness, his own blood. In *The Odyssey*, the dead *psukhai* cannot speak because they lack what Homer calls *phren* and *thumos* (*OET* 59). The meanings of these words are also disputed. *Phren*, the root of such modern English words as "schizophrenia" and "phrenology," seems to refer to the seat of consciousness; in Homer, where it usually appears in the plural, as *phrenes*, it may refer to the lungs (*OET* 23-28).[16] The *phrenes* contain the *thumos*, which is consciousness itself, the spirit, the breath (*OET* 44-46). The *thumos* is a very different type of breath from the *psukhe*. It is definitely the breath of the living. It is breath conceived of as the vapor of blood, the function of the *phrenes* being not to aerate the blood but to bloody the breath (*OET* 46-48).

Death destroys the *thumos* (*OET* 95), and the funeral pyre destroys the *phrenes*, so that they can never restore it; before they have drunk blood, the dead *psukhai* Ulysses meets are, with two exceptions, spiritless or unconscious, mere images, *eidola*, objects without subjectivity (*OET* 60-61). The two exceptions are Ulysses' unlucky comrade Elpenor, apparently because he has not yet been cremated and so still has *phrenes*,[17] and Tiresias, whose *phrenes* have remained firm by the special favor of Persephone,[18] so that he retains the power of thought, although he still needs to drink blood to regain the power of prophecy.[19] Pound uses the Homeric episode as an allegory of translation, at the beginning of *The Cantos*. Andreas Divus, whose Latin gloss he needs to make Homer accessible to him, becomes the sacrificial victim whose blood makes the ghosts speak.[20] The great classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff makes the allegory more general and more grim; he does not need another's gloss, and he knows that no sacrifice but self-sacrifice, no blood but his own, will suffice:

> The tradition is dead; our task is to revivify life that has passed away. We know that ghosts cannot speak until they have drunk blood; and the spirits which we evoke demand the blood of our hearts. We give it to them gladly; but if they then abide our question, something from us has entered into them; something alien, that must be cast out, cast out in the name of truth![21]

Such allegorizations do have something of "the uncanny effect" Bloom ascribes to apophrades: returning to Homer after reading Pound or Wilamowitz, one does feel almost "as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work" (*AI* 16). One reads the later allegory back into the precursor—one feels a little like Ulysses raising the ghosts as one reads about him.

Stevens makes the allegory grimmer still (with an uncanny effect on Pound and Wilamowitz in their turn): the blood one has given the ghosts cannot be cast out without their falling silent again; the large red man must read his tabulae aloud in his own voice. He is reading himself to himself, and the ghosts in the sky-blue pages, to whom he gives his blood, are ancestral ghosts, to whom he owes it. The wheel has come full circle, like the circulating blood (the red and blue of the poem also suggest arteries and veins). Phosphor is reading by his own light. Caught within this circle, the precursor is cut off from giving, doomed only to take; the inheritor's openness is futile, for he is open only to himself. The vision of immortality has become the curse of death-in-life.

No wonder Stevens was so anxious about influence.[22] No wonder he expressed the desire *not* "to have written a book in which / One is already a grandfather" ("The Lack of Repose," 1943; *CP* 303); no wonder he felt ancestral ghosts denying him repose, "as if one's grandfather lay / In one's heart and wished as he had always wished, unable / To sleep in that bed for its disorder" ("The Bed of Old John Zeller," *CP* 327). As Denis Donoghue remarks, "in Stevens the past is not only dead but deadly."[23] He retains a late and literary version of the primitive belief that (in Freud's words) "*all* of the dead were vampires, all of them had a grudge against the living and sought to injure them and rob them of their lives."[24] The literary version of the belief carries the additional anxiety that the literary dead, like everything else that has passed through consciousness, are never really killed, only repressed. As Freud says of the repressed contents of the unconscious mind, "They are not dead in our sense of the word but only like the shades in the Odyssey, which awoke to some sort of life as soon as they had tasted blood."[25] Freud's "gray ghost," Stevens allows, "may meditate / The spirits of all the impotent dead" ("Mountains Covered with Cats," 1946; *CP* 368). His allegorization of Homer also haunts Stevens' poem; none of these ghosts is as impotent as their inheritor prefers to suggest.

Apophrades is an attempt to break the circle. It is a denial of paternity, of the name of the father:[26] the literal meaning of *apophras* (of which *apophrades* is the plural) is "not to be spoken."[27] And one meaning of *poiesis*, the Greek word for creation that the large red man chants over and over, is (as a synonym of its derivative *eispoiesis*) "adoption."[28] Hence Bloom's repeated cryptic allusions to the Freudian concept of family romance (*AI* 8, 27, etc.): the essence of the family romance is the child's fantasy that he or she is adopted.[29]

The original purpose of adoption among the Greeks was not to provide someone to care for orphans during their childhood, but to provide someone

to care for the childless after their death, by making ritual offerings at their graves.[30] The most important time for these offerings was during the three days of the Anthesteria, which took place early in spring, and was also a wine festival, at which the first jars of the last year's wine were opened in honor of the chthonic Bacchus.[31] As a festival of Bacchus, the Anthesteria was also a fertility festival; the dead themselves, as chthonic spirits, were, if properly cared for, fertility spirits, who cared for the seeds that were planted soon after the Anthesteria. The Hippocratic treatise *On Regimen* states that "from the dead come nourishment and growth and seed."[32] This includes human seed, for the *psukhe* was associated with, and supposed to be transmitted in, semen (*OET* 110). Wine, the gift of Bacchus, was also associated with semen, because it was pressed from the seed of the vine (*OET* 218).

The three days of the festival were *apophrades hemerai*, "dismal or unlucky days," as Bloom translates the phrase (*AI* 15), or, more simply, days on which no business could be transacted: they were reserved for festivities.[33] This taboo anticipates the new-critical dogma that a literary work should not require any business, any immediate action on the external world, from its reader. One of the meanings of *poieo*, the root of *poiesis*, is to perform a ritual or celebrate a festival;[34] and *poiesis* and *praxis*, "business," are antonyms.[35] As Ernst Cassirer puts it, in *An Essay on Man*, which Stevens read in the year that he wrote "Large Red Man Reading":[36] "in art we leave behind us our immediate practical needs in order to give our world a new shape."[37]

The *psukhai* who speak to Ulysses in Hades tell him nothing about Hades; except for Tiresias, they are all people he knew on earth, and they are all without exception interested only in the earth: Elpenor asks him for a funeral, Tiresias advises him about his voyage, and his mother Anticleia tells him her worries about Penelope and the state of Ithaca.[38] The *psukhai* celebrated at the Anthesteria made the earth fertile. Stevens' poetic ghosts do give the living reader something in return for his or her blood, but it is not a direct exchange, for that, however fair, would only close the circle. They do not give the reader anything of their unreal selves, but turn him or her back toward reality.[39] In "Large Red Man Reading," they speak (in the red man's voice) of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them. The red man, a realist, sees reality by their phosphorescent light. Only in the ghosts' sight does the red man see the earth again; only in their ears and in their thin and spended hearts does it take on color, shape, and size, so that being is given an outline. (As Stevens wrote in his "Adagia": "The great well of poetry is not other poetry but prose: reality. However it requires a poet to perceive the poetry in reality.")[40] The process is analogous to the learning of language as Cassirer describes it in *An Essay on Man*:

> By learning to name things a child does not simply add a list of artificial signs to his previous knowledge of ready-made empirical objects. He learns rather to form the concepts of those objects, to come to terms with the objective world. Henceforth the child

> stands on firmer ground. His vague, uncertain, fluctuating perceptions and dim feelings begin to assume a new shape. They may be said to crystallize around the name as a fixed center, a focus of thought.[41]

Insofar as poetry extends the language, or purifies it, or describes something new, or describes something old in a new way, it gives the world—or part of it—a new shape, as Cassirer says. Syllables, as Stevens puts it, give being an outline and a law.

What the ghosts lack, and what only the red man can supply, is feeling, or experience: a content to be formed—a *thumos*, a living voice for the text.[42] The poem endorses the attitude towards the voice that Derrida has spent much of his career exposing, that "My words are 'alive' because they seem not to leave me: not to fall outside me, outside my breath."[43] As Bloom argues, Stevens conforms to the tradition of "valorizing eloquence, the inspired voice, *over* the scene of writing" (*MM* 176).

Implicit in the tradition is a sexual metaphor according to which all writers (*psukhai*, patrons of seed) are masculine and all readers (even large red men) are feminine; or, insofar as anyone is a writer, he is masculine; insofar as she is a reader, she is feminine.[44] The writer transmits only a form, a seed; he needs the reader to nourish him with life, but the reader needs him too, to give a form to her life. The metaphor denies the mother's contribution to the heredity of the child (and the reader's to the form of the poem); it is based on the genetics that Apollo propounds in *The Eumenides*:

> The mother is no parent of that which is called
> her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed
> that grows. The parent is he who mounts.[45]

Apollo's speech is a defense of matricide. The repression of the maternal effected by the literal gender of the reader in Stevens' poem is scarcely less drastic than it is in Bloom's theory, where the "drastic spirit of Kierkegaard's maxim: 'He who is willing to work gives birth to his own father'" (*AI* 26), makes poetic influence an exclusively masculine affair, "Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads" and Jocasta nowhere (*AI* 11). Bloom's term "strong" is basically a euphemism for "masculine"; Stevens is franker in an early journal entry identifying Homer as the first of "your man-poets"; that is, of the only ones who matter (*L* 26).

Ghostly or invisible figures use language to recall the living to the earth throughout Stevens' poetry. The speaker (or rather writer) of "A Postcard from the Volcano" (1936; *CP* 158-59) looks forward to becoming such a ghost. The poem manipulates person and tense much as the sequence of reader poems does: it involves its own readers by using the first person plural, but (at its very opening) distances them by using the future tense, referring to a

future from which they seem to have been effectively excluded: "Children picking up our bones / Will never know . . ." Then it shifts into the past, apparently excluding its readers even from themselves but actually setting up a construction in which the future can be put in the present tense, so that they can be present and active in it, through their speech: "with our bones / We left much more, left what still is / The look of things," such as "the shuttered mansion-house," because "what we said of it became / A part of what it is . . ."[46] Their expressings of being have provided outlines of it for the children of the future: they have given them the terms in which to order their reality, the syllables of its law.

At the end of "The World as Meditation" (1952; *CP* 520-21), one of Stevens' great meditations on the Ulysses theme, speech brings about a final clarity that both separates the living self from the earth forever and brings them constantly together (*WS* 363):[47]

> She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
> Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
> Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.

Penelope talks to herself as the large red man reads to himself, repeating the syllables of Ulysses' name as the large red man repeats those of *poesis*—of the law of being. Ulysses himself has become a ghost, whom Penelope conjures up and feeds by repeating his name, and who in return leads her toward reality: the self she has composed to welcome him with is the self she welcomes the day with. As a ghost, he lives in the sky; as a spirit of reality, he is identified with the sun, like Berserk and Hoon.

The red man's color is that of the morning sun, as well as that of blood. As a character in a poem, he is also a ghost, a *read* man. The grammatical form of the poem confirms his ghostliness: the past tense and the third person place him behind his readers, reading over their shoulders, in their voices. Even Penelope becomes ghostly when "The World as Meditation" shifts from present to past tense, in its third stanza.

Thus the large red man both fulfills his human purpose—to deny his own paternity, to exclude his readers from the poem, to turn them away from himself toward reality, to give to being an outline that they can adopt as their own[48]—and denies the vision of immortality that makes such a fulfillment conceivable. For the vision depends on what Freud and Bloom call narcissism and Derrida calls "phonic auto-affection" (the size of Stevens' reader is also a figure for his narcissism); such a narcissism presupposes the living or "purely temporal" character of speech (which is dramatized by the play of tense in the reader poems); and the temporality of living speech precludes pure narcissism. Time, Derrida points out, "cannot be . . . conceived on the basis of a present and the self-presence of a present being."[49]

The difference from Derrida is explicit in Bloom and pretty clearly implicit in Stevens. But the Americans' invocation of Freud is ultimately self-decon-

structing. Freud remarks: "At the most touchy point in the narcissistic system, the immortality of the ego, . . . security is achieved by taking refuge in the child."[50] The inversions of gender and generation in apophrades attempt to achieve that security for the child by turning him into the parent of his parents. But the family romance of apophrades, its trope of adoption, blocks the refuge off.

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Notes

[1]The works of Wallace Stevens are referred to by the following abbreviations: *CP*: *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *L*: *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, sel. and ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); *OP*: *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957).

[2]The works of Harold Bloom are referred to by the following abbreviations: *AI*: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); *MM*: *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); *WS*: *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

[3]Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* 135, *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope 1, gen. ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1961), 255.

[4]Samuel Johnson, "Preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare*," *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Brady and William K. Wimsatt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 300.

[5]See George McFadden, "Probings for an Integration: Color Symbolism in Wallace Stevens," *Modern Philology* 58.3 (February 1961): 189, for a reading opposed to mine.

[6]C. T. Onions, *et al*., eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 90.

[7]Thomas P. Walsh, *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), 37-38.

[8]Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer*, tr. and intr. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 180: XI.488-91. I shall continue to call Odysseus "Ulysses," as Stevens always does.

[9]Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new ed. rev. and aug. Sir Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 2: 2028-29.

[10]Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, tr. W. B. Hillis (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1925), 5.

[11]David Claus suggests that the most precise translation may be "life-force." *Toward the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of* ψυχη*Before Plato*, Yale Classical Monographs 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 7.

[12]Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate: New Interpretations of Greek, Roman, and Kindred Evidence, Also of Some Basic Jewish and Christian Beliefs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 94-95. Further references to this work are included in the text, after the abbreviation *OET*.

[13]Rohde 171.

[14]Claus 63.

[15]Charlton Thomas Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 1832. Stevens was fond of Lewis and Short's dictionary; he once gave a copy to Robert Frost (*L* 275).

[16]Claus rejects Onians' organic interpretations of Homer's quasi-psychological terms: *phren*, he argues, probably means simply "thought" (Claus 16-17). But he does not refute Onians in detail,

by re-interpreting the passages Onians cites; and he concedes that the form of the word suggests it originally referred to a part of the body, though he does not specify which part (Claus 20).

[17]Homer 170: XI.71-78.

[18]Homer 165: X.492-95.

[19]See Eric Robertson Dodds, *The Greeks and The Irrational*, Sather Classical Lectures 25 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 136.

[20]Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 3-5.

[21]Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Greek Historical Writing and Apollo: Two Lectures*, tr. Gilbert Murray (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 25.

[22]Bloom cites some anxious and unconvincing denials of influence from Stevens' letters (*AI* 6-7).

[23]Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in American Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 194.

[24]Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, *et al*. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), 13: 59.

[25]Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition* 4: 249.

[26]Richard Ellmann speculates that Stevens had to deny his own father, or at least his father's poetry. "How Wallace Stevens Saw Himself," *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 154.

[27]Liddell and Scott 1: 227.

[28]Liddell and Scott 2: 1429.

[29]Freud, "Family Romances," *Standard Edition* 8: 237-44.

[30]Rohde 172.

[31]Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908), 32-76.

[32]Quoted in Dodds 119.

[33]Harrison 49-50.

[34]Liddell and Scott 2: 1428.

[35]Liddell and Scott 2: 1429. Jane P. Tompkins gives a detailed and often convincing account of the rise of this dogma in "The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response," *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 201-32. But she does not discuss the extent to which the major forms of Greek poetry were festive, written for celebrations or religious festivals, and so removed from the sphere of *praxis*. Stevens' myth of origin seems closer to the analysis of poetry and magic in Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press, 1982), 25.

[36]At least, he quotes it in an essay of the same year, "Imagination as Value." Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), 136.

[37]Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), 164.

[38]Rohde 33-34.

[39]Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 177.

[40]Quoted by A. Walton Litz, "Particles of Order: The Unpublished *Adagia*," Doggett and Buttel 71.

[41]Cassirer 132.

[42]As Jonathan Culler puts it, "the poem offers a structure which must be filled up." *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 126. See also Frye 226.

[43]Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison, Preface Newton Garver, Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, gen. ed. John Wild (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 76.

[44]Alan D. Perlis points out that the figures he calls "readers-of-the-world" in such poems as "Sunday Morning," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," and "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" are feminine. "Wallace Stevens' Reader Poems and the Effacement of Metaphor," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 10 (1986): 70.

[45]Aeschylus, *The Eumenides* 658-60, *Aeschylus I: Oresteia*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, *The Complete Greek Tragedies*, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), 172.

[46]A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 200.

[47]Riddel 246-47.

[48]Riddel 225.

[49]Derrida 86.

[50]Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *Standard Edition* 14: 91.

Accent for Greek Word: é é é

Stevens' "Last Poem" Again

TIM ARMSTRONG

WE WILL NEVER be sure that "Of Mere Being" was Wallace Stevens' last poem, but that is the way in which it has been treated in most recent discussions of his work, such is its strength as an evocation of the poet on the edge of the void. But its status as the "canonical" ending is relatively recent. Most of the earlier books on Stevens fail to mention it, as do a number of later ones like Richard Blessing's *Wallace Stevens' "Whole Harmonium"* (1970) and Thomas Hines's *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (1976). Harold Bloom's *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977) was, significantly I will suggest, the first book to give the poem a full reading. Obviously, one factor in the poem's perceived centrality is the decision of Holly Stevens to entitle her 1971 selection of her father's poems *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. In this article, I will attempt to provide some justification (and qualification) of that treatment by placing the poem in the context of other candidates for the title of Stevens' "last" poem. I will also argue that the question of the reading of the word "decor" for "distance" in line 3 of the poem, widely accepted since it was incorporated into *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, should be reopened, important as it is to our understanding of the poem.[1]

The question of what a writer's "last" work is is a delicate one; often, as Lawrence Lipking points out, a matter of negotiation between writers and their posterity, where there is uncertainty about intentions and a range of possible candidates.[2] Considered abstractly, there are three requirements which writers or readers might apply to the literary "ending": that of confronting the moment of death, that of addressing posterity, and that of situating the poet with respect to her or his whole career (either in terms of summation or palinode). We can call these three perspectives the immediate, the prospective, and the retrospective. Stevens himself encourages us to see the moment of ending in such terms in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," where we can read the three allegorical figures as loosely related to these three moments (what follows is not intended as a reading of the poem; merely a suggestion about its structure). At the point of death, the poem seems to imply, there is an imagined splitting of the poetic body into two separate selves: the person who dies and the corpus or body of his poetry; each of these states is involved in one of the "two brothers" of the poem. The first brother, "sleep," represents the "ultimate intellect, / A diamond jubilance beyond the fire" (*CP* 433); he signals a final state of being in death, a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment, a "calmest unity."[3] His view is retrospective; he is described as an achieved massiveness like a "moving mountain," that is, in terms which anticipate the depiction of poetic achievement in "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain." The second brother, "peace," is prospective and something like a figure for poetic tradition, with the "Generations of the imagination" stitched into his robes, and with the "thousand begettings of the broken bold" (*CP* 434) adorning it (a figure which reminds some readers of the

doomed poetic quests of Keats and Browning). Alternatively, "peace" is like the poetic corpus itself as it survives in the future, within tradition: he is "formed / Out of our lives to keep us in our death, / . . . In a robe that is our glory as he guards" (*CP* 434-35). The third figure in this poem seems, as a number of critics have argued, to represent the moment of death itself, "There on the edges of oblivion."[4] Her gesture is the gesture of death:

> O exhalation, O fling without a sleeve
> And motion outward, reddened and resolved
> From sight, in the silence that follows her last word—
> (*CP* 435)

The poem ends with that gesture and the casting aside of the garments of the poet, so that he is naked before death (the final figure is "tall in self not symbol" [*CP* 435]). We can thus read "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as providing an itinerary for the final moments of the poet: a splitting of the poetic corpus from the human self, a divestment, and a confrontation of death; in total a "mythology of modern death" (*CP* 435), as Stevens put it.

Stevens wrote a number of poems in his last years which we might see as addressing one or more of the questions raised by these figures. Among them, some seem to suggest a late clarity, a state of being like that described in "On the Way to the Bus" and "A Clear Day and No Memories." As such, they seem preparatory to an ending rather than representing ends in themselves; they are (as Harold Bloom comments) a final clearing of the ground.[5] Moreover, both these poems are retrospective; they look back over Stevens' career to "The Snow Man" and to all the poems about soldiers, and to the considerations of "knowledge" and the seasons in the poems of Stevens' middle period. Other of Stevens' late poems seem to move the poet further on from this state, in order to meditate on his being in death. "Banjo Boomer," a poem not included in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, is one such poem, a darkly obscure piece which seems not to accord well with the transcendentalist reading of late Stevens (it was first published in March 1955). The poem addresses the mulberry tree, "a double tree" (*OP* 114). The mulberry seems to be double because of its dark leaves and proverbially dark fruit, but white and pink flowers (if, indeed, it is the mulberry which Stevens refers to, *morus rubra* or *negra*; in the United States the raspberry is sometimes called a "mulberry"). It represents both fruition (a harbinger of spring, according to the herbals), and is "A churchyard kind of bush as well, / A silent sort of bush, as well" (*OP* 114). The nursery rhyme lingering in the background of the poem itself helps construct a sense of an ending: instead of the "Here we go round the mulberry bush" of childhood the old poet rests in its silence and shade. Stevens describes the tree in paradoxical terms as "a shape of life described / By another shape without a word" (*OP* 114); that is, as pure symbol, as a tree which stands over the dead outside language. It exists as a pure potentiality in which there is a freedom from the final form of the literary

monument, "With nothing fixed by a single word" (*OP* 114). The mulberry is thus rather like "sleep," the first allegorical figure in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," which is both a "whiteness" and of a "vanishing-vanished violet" (*CP* 433), which can only be described in terms of a series of metonymic displacements, by shapes described by other shapes. A further undertone in the poem is the association of the mulberry with the silkworm and weaving, perhaps reminding us of the robe of the second figure in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," and suggesting a rebirth in tradition through the metamorphosis of the silk-worm and the re-weaving of the thread. The mulberry is a peculiarly poetic tree, and the poem manages to both invoke a vision of death and hint of a rebirth: the tree is to shade him "awhile." "Banjo Boomer" is thus a very late poem. It has a threatening wordlessness which links it with "The Region November" (published Spring 1956), with that poem's treetops which shake with an effort "so much less than speech" (*OP* 115). Both these poems seem later in mood than the most overtly summational and retrospective of Stevens' late poems, which is, of course, "As You Leave the Room," with its reference to a range of poems written across his whole career. But that poem too includes an implicit death, and a division of the self like that in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." Its splitting of the poet's voice into two voices initiates a withdrawal: the poet addresses himself, and then moves outside his career, as one who is "leaving," before referring to himself as "I":

> *You speak*. *You say*: Today's character is not
> A skeleton out of its cabinet. Nor am I.
>
> That poem about the pineapple, the one
> About the mind as never satisfied,
>
> The one about the credible hero, the one
> About summer, are not what skeletons think about.
>
> I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life,
> As a disbeliever in reality,
>
> A countryman of all the bones in the world?
> (*OP* 116-17)

The opening denial and return to the subject of skeletons suggests that Stevens' career, viewed from the outside, can too readily seem to be seen as skeletal, a structure of words stripped of its flesh. But for Stevens, this persistent questioning and divestment results (as for Descartes) in a moment of realization—though also of departure and, implicitly, death, signalled by a gesture like that which the third figure makes in the elegy for Henry Church:

> Now, here, the snow I had forgotten becomes

> Part of a major reality, part of
> An appreciation of a reality
>
> And thus an elevation, as if I left
> With something I could touch, touch every way.
>
> And yet nothing has been changed except what is
> Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.
> (*OP* 117)

"Snow" in Stevens' work usually refers to the coldness of reality. To write of the snow one has forgotten is to say that one has subsisted on that reality and made it human; that one has fleshed out the potential skeleton of one's thoughts and poetry with reality. In the earlier version of the poem, perhaps as early as 1947, Stevens had written "warmth" rather than snow. The revision in favor of the antithetical word suggests he is no longer referring to the metaphorical effusiveness of Florida and that aspect of his early career which he might have "forgotten." Instead, the external world is introjected and redeemed, made part of the poet's "appreciation of a reality." Here as elsewhere in Stevens, the word "appreciation" retains its commercial overtones, in that the poet has converted its poverty into his own richness—just as in "The Planet on the Table" the word "affluence" testifies to a triumph over "poverty." This accomplished, the shape of what he has achieved becomes "an elevation," something amenable to touch (at least, within the parentheses of metaphor). As in Stevens' "pre-elegy" for Santayana, the poet's structures are realized; but he achieves this as he "leaves," as he takes that realization with him. It is his satisfaction, his reward. The gesture carefully balances affirmation and monumental solidity with denial and withdrawal, exploiting to the full the simultaneous unreality and presence of the poet—or his hand—within his writings. Closure is hardly the issue, since it exists only in the "here, now" of the poem's own time. "As You Leave the Room" could be said to be a "backward gesture of the hand" (*CP* 435) (to borrow Stevens' phrase); it begins by being retrospective, and only then turns inward to the dying writer as he vanishes from his works, abandoning them to their future
. The last two poems printed in both *Opus Posthumous* and *The Palm at the End of the Mind* seem to abandon the retrospective. "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" considers the nature of the "image" of the creator within posterity—he is reborn in it in "a freshened youth," and becomes part of its "substance," though the claim is qualified by the opening assertion that "Here / In Connecticut, we never lived in a time / When mythology was possible" (*OP* 118). To die within a region is to come home to it, Stevens had suggested in the short prose piece "Connecticut" (1955) which gave the poem its title: "we live in the tradition which is the true mythology of the region" (*OP* 295). He concludes, "It is a question of coming home to the American self in the sort of

place in which it was formed" (*OP* 296)—a final declaration of his place within the New England tradition, and of his ability to see, as Emily Dickinson had put it, "New Englandly."

"Of Mere Being" was placed before "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" in *Opus Posthumous*. In *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, Holly Stevens both ends the volume with the poem and borrows one of its lines for her title. She also makes one of her few editorial interventions, noting that the "original typescript" reading of "decor" should be preferred to the *Opus Posthumous* "distance" in line 3 (*PEM* 404). On the question of order, there is no clear evidence of Stevens' intentions: as in the case of Morse's original placements, the order is necessarily conjectural, and therefore itself constitutes an interpretation of the sequence of the final poems. Many justifications of that decision can be offered—indeed, this article is partly an attempt to provide such a justification. We might also see a defense of Holly Stevens' title and reordering in Harold Bloom's book on Stevens (Bloom's recommendation appears on the paperback edition of her selection). Bloom makes "Of Mere Being" one focus of his argument, referring to it often and subjecting it to a detailed exegesis. Stevens' bird is, for Bloom, a final version of what Bloom calls "the First Idea," and thus the culminating image of his career. Bloom does, admittedly, end the argument of his book by quoting "A Mythology Reflects Its Region," but in doing so he reflects that poem's nature in converting it into a critical text, a re-contextualization of Stevens after his death, rather than a statement from the poet in life.

Certainly, "Of Mere Being" does close Stevens' career appropriately, from the point of view of the itinerary suggested by "The Owl in the Sarcophagus." It does not "sum up" in the way that "As You Leave the Room" does, neither does it consider the poet's tradition, as "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" does. It cannot really be said to represent a final state of being in life, as "A Clear Day and No Memories" seems to. Instead, it points, with all the uncanniness which its readers have noted, *beyond* the poetry to the abyss, to a final shimmering symbol "on the edge of space":

> The palm at the end of the mind,
> Beyond the last thought, rises
> In the bronze distance . . .
>
> (*OP* 117)

Or do we read "decor"? As critics of Stevens have failed to point out, the question is an open one. Holly Stevens does not examine the source of Morse's version in *Opus Posthumous*, simply reverting to the reading of the typescript which is now held at the Huntington.[6] There is no other version of the typescript in the Stevens Collection, but that does not preclude the existence of a variant which Morse may have seen when preparing the text of *Opus Posthumous*—it is difficult to believe that he simply made an error in transcription of this order. Stevens himself may have been responsible for

the change at some stage of transmission, as he seems elsewhere to have been where variations between typescripts and published versions occur. Holly Stevens' own examples in the brief "Notes" to her edition make it clear that Stevens made revisions both on the original typescript and, in at least one case, on the carbon typescript (though in the latter case, in "The Sail of Ulysses," she does not accept the revision). She herself amends in favor of the typescripts or earlier published versions in a few cases, and does not in others, without any clear criteria being offered which would explain why the typescript or earlier publication is preferred for one poem, but not for others. Obviously, *The Palm at the End of the Mind* is not offered as a definitive edition of Stevens' poems, and we lack an authoritative study of Stevens' typescripts, surviving proofs, and published texts. With the paucity of materials for such a study in the form of working papers we may never have one. But given the apparent lack of clear and conclusive bibliographical evidence in this case, we need at least to keep the question open and to ask what the interpretive issues are.

Charles Berger, accepting the reading "decor," has recently argued that "Much rides on whether or not 'the end of the mind' and 'Beyond the last thought' are synonymous, or whether Stevens implies that there is a space *between* the last thought and mind's end, a region that lies within the mind but beyond the range of thought."[7] This seems to me to blur the issue rather than clarify it (nothing in the syntax suggests that they are synonymous). Equally importantly, Berger's acceptance of the word "decor" tends to predetermine the answer. It implies that there is a last scene, a final piece of artifice which *is* within the range of Stevens' mind and elegant terminology. The whole poem is rendered rather static, and loses its liminal quality. At best, "decor" is consonant with Stevens' love of artifice, though hardly reconcilable with his late desire to be "a spirit without a foyer" (*OP* 111). On the other hand, if we retain the reading "distance," the poem is both more clear and more dynamic. "Distance" can be related to the "men growing small in the distances of space" (*CP* 508) of the Santayana elegy, who suggest a motion away from life. The palm rises in the distance as something towards which the poet progresses, at the edge of a void. The interval between "the end of the mind" and "the last thought" is measured by that "distance," so that the poem points across the abyss of death, perhaps to an existence in death. Another critic, Merle E. Brown, protests against the transcendentalist reading, commenting that "the words contain the bird within them, they do not point to some existent creature outside them."[8] But the point of the poem is, as it were, the "pointing," the gesture towards the "other," towards a state in which words might be thought to have an independent existence (in this respect the palm of the poem is rather like the more funereal mulberry tree of "Banjo Boomer"). That is why the bird sings "without human meaning, / Without human feeling, a foreign song." The vision is not of a mental state, even if it is a state with a certain kind of disembodied mentality: it is precisely its status as "foreign" which requires it to be across that threshold which "dis-

tance" suggests. It is revealing that while accepting the reading "decor," Harold Bloom refers the reader to the root meaning of "foreign" as "out of doors": hardly, one might think, the right place for a "decor." Bloom himself moves the bird over his metaphorical threshold, while ostensibly arguing that it is within it.[9] There is, to rephrase and reverse Berger's formula, a space which is not within the mind, but is within the range of thought. It is the space of writing, and particularly of writing as it relates to the death of its author, freed into "mere being."

In this, the poem makes a gesture like that of the figure of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus," who moves "Impassioned by the knowledge that she had, / There on the edges of oblivion" (*CP* 435). The problem with this figure was that she was too human, too clearly a person of poetry, in contrast to the bird in the later poem. The bird is indeed "beyond artifice" (and decor, one might add); it refuses association with any other symbol. It is sufficient unto itself, as the short, chopped sentences in which it is described suggest:

> The bird sings. Its feathers shine.
>
> The palm stands on the edge of space.
> The wind moves slowly in the branches.
> The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down.
> (*OP* 118)

Every image invoked here has its antecedents—bird, bright plumage, palm, wind—but each seems here to be cast loose, to lose its associations, so that the poem may end rather than summarizing. There is nothing of the testament about it.

It is possible, however, to compare the bird to those of earlier poems, if only to "place" this figure within Stevens' career. Antecedents of the bird and palm have been suggested in "Architecture," "Description without Place," and "Credences of Summer," among other poems. There is a hint of its theme in the notebook entry "Music at the world's end."[10] But a more useful juxtaposition seems to me to be provided by the early poem "Ploughing on Sunday," a poem which can be associated with the poet as virile youth. These are its opening stanzas:

> The white cock's tail
> Tosses in the wind.
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Glitters in the sun.
>
> Water in the fields.
> The wind pours down.
> The feathers flare
> And bluster in the wind. (*CP* 20)

The vocabulary, imagery, and short, clipped sentences all suggest the later poem, as does the static and uncanny character of the bird. There is also an interesting contrast to be made with the anti-Sabbatarianism of the middle section of the earlier poem:

> Remus, blow your horn!
> I'm ploughing on Sunday,
> Ploughing North America.
> Blow your horn!
>
> Tum-ti-tum,
> Ti-tum-tum-tum!
> The turkey-cock's tail
> Spreads to the sun.
>
> (*CP* 20)

This is the Sunday of the young Stevens, an escape from mundane business in the day of the imagination, with the savage strummings and ambitions of his early poetry. In the late poem there are no continents to be conquered, no horns, and the wind moves gently rather than blusteringly. In the early poem we are presented with a field of view, a silent panorama in which the poet's (phallic) horn is the imposed sound; while the "ploughing" implies another seed-time, the imposition of the poet's will on nature. In "Of Mere Being" it is the bird, the symbol itself, which has broken into a song for the poet—a song of a country beyond life. Though that country may well be a real country (simply the future), it is a country the poet will not see, since it is also the country of his death. But the work itself survives. The power of the "reason," the poem insists, is not what makes the poet happy; it is his own creations that now seem to do that. The space of the poet's entire career measures the distance between these two poems and two birds. "Of Mere Being" thus provides a final perspective on that career, from the point where it is abandoned in death, alienated from the poet. It provides a dynamic space—a distance rather than a decor—for the poet to die into.

"Of Mere Being" is a self-consciously late poem. It is possible that Stevens would have gone on, as other poets have (Hardy is a good example), to write more poems of "farewell" if he had lived longer. We have what appears to be the outline of such a poem in the plan for a piece called "Abecedarium of Finesoldier" which Samuel Morse reproduces in *Opus Posthumous*. The plan provides an evocative sense of a dialogue with heroic death and with the poet's role in posterity: "I am bound by the will of other men," "Invisible fate becomes visible," "The narrative stops. . . . Good-bye to the narration," "As great as a javelin, as futile, as old," "But did he have any value as a person" (*OP* xxiv, draft openings to sections I, IV, VIII, IX, X of an eleven-part poem; appropriately the final part is missing). The outline itself suggests a number of the topics of poetic endings: the poet's acceptance of a place in tradition,

fixed by the wills of "other men" and monumentalized; the moment of death itself, with its ellipsis ("The narrative stops. . . ."); perhaps a doubt about the poet as a "javelin" cast at futurity; and an assessment or defense of the "person" or human self, before the final silence. The plan can be read as yet another "last" poem, and its unfinished and fragmentary nature raises all the old questions about where the poet ends and our interpretation begins. Like so many of Stevens' late works, it has the poet's death as part of its fabric; it is, indeed, an *Opus Posthumous*.

Endings are always, of course, provisional and incomplete. Stevens had himself written an earlier (and stronger) ending in the "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," the poem which he used, at Marianne Moore's suggestion, to end the English edition of *Selected Poems*. We are surely right, as readers, in following Holly Stevens in wishing to see "Of Mere Being" as Stevens' "last" poem. As I have suggested, it is distinguished from the other poems around it by its sense not only of Stevens' work, but also of his life-cycle, and particularly of the moment of death itself, in which his work takes on an independent existence. But the reading "distance" is, I would argue, important to this claim. To have Stevens' bird existing merely in the "decor" is to lose the dynamic quality of the poem as ending, to dispossess it both of the gesture given to the final figure in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" and of its essential "otherness." It is to naturalize the poet's death as a repetition of his characteristic gaudiness. The poem does not merely present a scene; it is also an enactment of last things which challenges us to measure that "distance" which exists between ourselves and Stevens' well-won palms.

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Notes

[1]No critic has, so far as I am aware, contested this change in print. Frank Kermode, however, raised the question while delivering a series of lectures on Stevens at University College London in 1985.

[2]Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 183.

[3]Throughout this article I use the standard abbreviations *CP*, *OP*, *PEM* in referring to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), and *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971).

[4]The two fullest examinations of the poem are provided by Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 283-92; and Charles Berger, *Forms of Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 111-33.

[5]Bloom, 369-70.

[6]Huntington Library, call no. WAS 4205.

[7]Berger, 186.

[8]Merle E. Brown, *Wallace Stevens: The Poem as Act* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 182. This statement is partly trivial (the bird is not, of course, a real one), but Brown's point seems to be to deny any sense of the uncanny in such an indeterminate image. *cf.*, Robert Buttel, "'Knowledge on the Edges of Oblivion': Wallace Stevens' Late Poems," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 5 (1981): 11-16, who argues that the bird represents a vision of death as the "ultimate mystery of what lies beyond" (12).

[9]Bloom, 372.

[10]"From Pieces of Paper" (notebook), entry 33, in George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 168.

'The Idea of It': Wallace Stevens and Edmund Husserl

PAUL KENNETH NAYLOR

IN "THE NOBLE RIDER and the Sound of Words" Wallace Stevens points out that "no one is needed to tell us that poetry and philosophy are akin" (*NA* 30). But this admission certainly does not preclude the necessity for an inquiry into exactly how they are "akin." Indeed, since the "familial" relationship between poetry and philosophy is now so widely acknowledged, this might cause us to pass over as familiar that which genuinely warrants close attention. This kind of comparative inquiry requires, however, careful circumscription. Martin Heidegger, who devotes a good part of his later writings to an exploration of the "neighborhood" of poetry and thinking, provides an important clue that also serves as a warning for this type of study: "What we try to reflect upon under the name of the neighborhood of poetry and thinking is vastly different from a mere inventory of notional relations" (Heidegger 84). What I hope to uncover by a comparative study of the poetry of Wallace Stevens and the philosophy of Edmund Husserl is that the kinship between the works of these two writers extends beyond "a mere inventory of notional relations" toward a kinship of method and concern.

"Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction," Stevens' most influential long poem, has justifiably attracted the greatest amount of critical attention from Stevens' many exegetes; in fact, a critic's reading of this poem often provides a litmus test for that critic's reading of the rest of Stevens' poems. For good reason: a clear understanding of "Notes" creates an interpretive foundation from which to read the poems Stevens composed before and after it. And one of the first and most difficult tasks which confronts a reader who wishes to create such a foundation from which to read "Notes" and the rest of Stevens' poetry is to understand what Stevens means by "idea" in the first major section of "Notes." I propose, then, to focus this study on Stevens' use of that term by comparing it with Husserl's use of it in his book entitled *Ideas*. More specifically, I want to explore first the method by which one might arrive at such "ideas"; second, the ontological status of those "ideas"; and finally, the central concern on which this new method of uncovering "ideas" focuses. In other words, just what does Stevens mean when he instructs his "ephebe" to perceive the sun "clearly in the idea of it" (*CP* 380)?

A number of critical studies have pointed out the similarities between Stevens' poetry and the work of the continental phenomenologists, the most complete and incisive treatment being Thomas J. Hines's *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger*. Hines, in fact, devotes the longest chapter of his book to a careful, extensive reading of "Notes" that draws out the parallels between Stevens and Heidegger, yet it is a reading which omits a detailed account of the parallels with Husserl. The latter problem, I suggest, results from the approach and structure of the

book. Hines divides his study into two stages: the first treats the parallels between Husserl and Stevens' poetry in *Ideas of Order*, *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, and the first half of *Parts of a World*, while the second stage treats the parallels with Heidegger and the second half of *Parts of a World*, *Transport to Summer*, *The Auroras of Autumn*, and *The Rock*. The result is that Hines's reading of "Notes" relies almost completely on parallels with Heidegger, leaving the parallels between Husserl and the Stevens of "Notes" relatively untouched.

The bipartite structure of the book allows Hines to claim that the development of Stevens' poetry parallels the development of phenomenology from Husserl to Heidegger. In *Parts of a World*, Hines argues, Stevens discovers a new approach to poetry, an approach that parallels Heidegger's rather than Husserl's approach to philosophy. Hines claims that

> as Stevens turns his interest from the idea of a conceptual essence to the possibility of a nonconceptual essence, his poetic investigations will take on interesting affinities with the investigations of Martin Heidegger. The techniques are still basically like those of phenomenology but Stevens' use of those techniques will more closely approximate Heidegger's interpretation of phenomenology than Husserl's. (Hines 84)

Even if one agrees with Hines that such a development might take place in Stevens' poetry, this development does not, I would argue, take place as early as *Parts of a World*. I suggest that the Stevens of "Notes" is much closer to the type of phenomenology Husserl advocates than to Heidegger's. In fact, "Notes" seems to me the most Husserlian of Stevens' poems: the parallels between Stevens and Husserl show up more clearly and are more readily accessible in "Notes" than in any of his earlier or later poems. In particular, Stevens' notion of "ideas" lends itself more readily to a comparison with Husserl than to Heidegger, a point I hope now to demonstrate.

Although I contend that Stevens' use of the term "idea" in "Notes" can best be understood by comparing it with Husserl's use of it in *Ideas*, subtitled "General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology," I certainly do not contend that Stevens either read or was influenced by Husserl's philosophy. Nevertheless, there is a striking affinity between the "ideas" of these two writers working in such disparate mediums; hence understanding Husserl's concept of "idea" and, in particular, the methodology which leads toward insight into this type of "idea" opens up a new way of reading Stevens' poem. Even though a complete reading of "Notes" is beyond the scope of this study, a solid enough foundation for drawing out the unexpected and often uncanny parallels between the "ideas" of Stevens and Husserl can be established by looking at Stevens' use of "idea" in the first of the three sections of "Notes," the section entitled "It Must Be Abstract," and comparing it with Husserl's "ideas."

The primacy of the idea of "idea" in "Notes" is evident from the very first tercet of the poem:

> Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea
> Of this invention, this invented world,
> The inconceivable idea of the sun.
>
> (*CP* 380)

Here Stevens provides an important clue concerning his stance as poet and the rhetorical intent of his poem: the narrative voice of the poem is instructing an ephebe, a "pupil," in a new method or process of perception. So the poem begins with a clearly didactic intent, yet it would be a mistake to assume the "teacher," the narrative voice, intends to impart a completely resolved lesson to his ephebe. That Stevens considers his poem to be "notes" toward a supreme fiction and not dogmatic assertions toward it highlights the "preliminary" nature of his poetic inquiry.

Husserl presents his new method of inquiry in a similarly "preliminary" manner: *Ideas* is considered by Husserl to be an "introduction" to pure phenomenology. Calling his book an "introduction" has much the same effect as Stevens' calling his poem "Notes"—neither wants the reader to approach his work as a completed study but as a preliminary investigation. Husserl's book also has a "didactic" intent much like Stevens' poem, an intent Paul Ricoeur refers to as "the pedagogical procedure of *Ideas*" (Ricoeur 17). For Ricoeur, when one reads *Ideas*

> one gets the impression that the essential is not being said, that the effort is to impart a new vision of the world and of consciousness, rather than to say something definitive about the world and about consciousness, something which perhaps could not be understood without the acquisition of this new vision. (Ricoeur 14)

As with Stevens, the "pedagogical" intent of *Ideas* is not to instruct the pupil/reader by reciting definitive statements about the world but to "impart a new vision," a new mode of perception, and to help the ephebe acquire this new way—a new method—of perceiving.

The parallels between Stevens' "Notes" and Husserl's *Ideas* begin as early as the titles and subtitles of their respective works, although these parallels may not be immediately apparent: what, one might ask, does a "Supreme Fiction" have to do with "Pure Phenomenology." For Stevens a "supreme fiction" is not to be construed as a "falsehood" or as something that does not exist; in fact, just the opposite is true. Stevens—in a letter to Henry Church, to whom the poet dedicates "Notes"—writes that "It is implicit in the title that there can be such a thing as a supreme fiction" (*L* 430). So we know that a "supreme fiction" has more to do with possibility than impossibility, yet Stevens hesitates to define the "supreme fiction" precisely:

> I ought to say that I have not defined a supreme fiction. . . . I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean. The next thing for me to do will be to try to be a little more precise about this enigma. I hold off from even attempting that because, as soon as I start to rationalize, I lose the poetry of the idea. (*L* 435)

Note in the second sentence Stevens' attempt, in a sense, to define without defining by using double negatives; he ends up stating what he states elsewhere, that "of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction" (*L* 430), but the attempt not to say it leaves him in a paradoxical position, a position Stevens apparently desires. Stevens feels that a precise definition would force him to rationalize, which would cause him to "lose the poetry of the idea." And, since poetry is the "supreme fiction," it, above all, must not be lost. For Stevens, then, poetry is at once the method and the goal: poetry is the way to achieve a "supreme fiction" (the "first idea" as he also calls it) which itself would be a poem—the "ultimate poem."

Pairing a poet searching for a "supreme fiction" with a philosopher searching for a "transcendentally purified" science of phenomena seems, at first glance, inappropriate; after all, a search for "fiction" seems far from a search for "truth." Or is it?

> Hence, if anyone loves a paradox, he can really say, and say with strict truth if he will allow for the ambiguity, that the *element* which *makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetic science* is *'fiction ,"* that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of "eternal truths" draws its sustenance. (Husserl 184)

Before we can understand fully Husserl's contention in this passage, we need a working definition of "phenomenology." Taken in its simplest sense, phenomenology refers to the study or account of phenomenon, which, according to Husserl, is something that shows itself or appears to consciousness. In short, Husserl's inquiry concerns the way in which things appear to consciousness; his concern is with how consciousness is a consciousness *of* phenomena. Husserl, then, wants primarily to study the acts of consciousness through which phenomena give themselves to consciousness and not necessarily the phenomena themselves—or, as Husserl calls them, "facts."

With this working definition of phenomenology in mind, I want to focus on three crucial points in the passage previously cited from *Ideas*. First, Husserl presents his "truth" as a paradox, much as Stevens does. Second, "ambiguity" must be allowed for in order to state the "strict truth." Ambiguity is not something that "gets in the way" of truth—ambiguity is inherent in truth itself. Recall Stevens' fear of a precise definition of the "supreme fiction"—his "enigma." Finally, "fiction," for Husserl, not only "makes up the life of phenomenology," it is also the "source" of knowledge and truth. This "source,"

this "fiction," provides an axiomatic basis from which all subsequent philosophical insight arises in much the same way Stevens' "supreme fiction" provides the basis for all subsequent "fictions." Thus for Husserl, as well as Stevens, a fiction is not to be construed as a falsehood. Although this is a somewhat tentative treatment of an admittedly complex subject in Husserl's work, I intend to return to this important passage after I have established the more basic parallels between Stevens and Husserl; the similarities between their use of a term such as "fiction" will then be even more apparent and striking.

My claim here is not that the concepts of a "supreme fiction" and a "pure phenomenology" or that terms such as "fiction" and "ambiguity" are directly analogous in Stevens' poetry and Husserl's philosophy, but rather that these concepts and terms fill an analogous role in each thinker's search: they provide the method and the goal of that search. Even though neither writer chooses to define his master term too specifically for much the same strategic reason, they both concentrate on providing the reader with certain characteristics of these terms so the method and goal of their searches will stand out.

Stevens sets up his search for a "supreme fiction" by dividing his poem into three sections; each one explores and defines a major characteristic of the supreme fiction—"It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," "It Must Give Pleasure." The first of these sections outlines the method of inquiry the search will take, which is where the most striking parallels with Husserl occur. In a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens explains what he means by "abstract":

> The abstract does not exist, but it is certainly as immanent: that is to say, the fictive abstract is as immanent in the mind of the poet, as the idea of God is immanent in the mind of the theologian. The poem is a struggle with the inaccessibility of the abstract. First I make the effort; then I turn to the weather because that is not inaccessible and is not abstract. . . . There is a constant reference from the abstract to the real, to and fro. (*L* 434)

The "fictive abstract" exists only as something "immanent" "in" the mind; it, unlike the "weather," does not exist apart from the mind. But how do we get at that which is only immanent in the mind? By abstracting from the given world (the "weather") without losing sight of that given world. The process of abstraction leads toward a "fictive" insight into that which is "immanent" within the mind, yet there is always a "constant reference" to the given world—the "real."

For Stevens the "fictive" is reached by moving from the particular (the "weather") to the abstract; similarly, for Husserl the "fiction" that makes up "the life of phenomenology" is reached by a similar methodological move—a move he calls "bracketing." Perhaps the easiest way to understand what Husserl means by bracketing is to understand first just what he wishes to place in brackets, which is what he terms the "thesis of the natural stand-

point." For Husserl this thesis is roughly equivalent to the common sense view of the natural world which asserts that when one perceives an object one perceives something which is an entirely physical and material object. This object, according to the thesis of the natural standpoint, exists independently of our consciousness of it; the world we encounter, a world Husserl calls the "fact-world," is made up of many such "objective" objects: "This 'fact-world,' as the world already tells us, I find to *be out there*, and also *take it just as it gives itself to me as something that exists out there*" (Husserl 96).

It is the thesis of the natural standpoint, this common sense view of the objects we encounter, which Husserl wants to place in brackets. Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that he wants to doubt or deny the validity of this thesis. According to Husserl,

> *We do not abandon the thesis we have adopted, we make no change in our conviction* . . . And yet the thesis undergoes a modification—whilst remaining in itself what it is, *we set it as it were "out of action," "disconnect it," "bracket it."* It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket, like the disconnected outside the connexional system. (Husserl 98)

Although the thesis "still remains" in the brackets, it admittedly "undergoes a modification": it becomes "fictive" in the sense that Stevens and Husserl use the term—not as something false but as something fully immanent in the mind. By the act of bracketing, Husserl intends to isolate an "aspect" of the object we encounter in order to demonstrate that the assumptions of the thesis of the natural standpoint are incomplete. Just what remains of the object after bracketing will be explained shortly; for now it is enough to note that something "more" than the material or physical nature of the object presents itself to the consciousness that perceives it. Yet that which is "bracketed" always has its ground in an act of perception.

For Stevens the "abstract" is also grounded in perception, which is why the first act of the ephebe is an act of "perceiving the idea" in a new way. Stevens emphasizes throughout this first canto of "Notes" that one can perceive or "see" an "idea," which seems strange since common sense usually does not assign "ideas" to the realm of sensory awareness: traditionally, we "see" objects and "think" about ideas. This view is common to both realism and idealism—but to think in the terms of either idealism or realism misses the essential point of Stevens' and Husserl's insight into the nature of "ideas": that they can be and are perceived.

What exactly is it, then, that one "sees" when one perceives an "idea"? In order to avoid either a realistic or idealistic interpretation of perception, Husserl begins by replacing the terms "real" and "ideal" with "fact" and "essence" (Husserl 40). Husserl wants to dispose of the traditional notions of the real and ideal primarily so he can dispose of the traditional split between the real and ideal. Husserl hopes that by substituting fact and essence for real

and ideal he will be able to demonstrate the fundamental inseparability of fact and essence, a demonstration to which he devotes the second section of *Ideas*.

According to Husserl, when we perceive an object, a desk for example, we perceive something contingent and something necessary—Husserl calls the former a "fact" and the latter an "essence." When we perceive a desk, we perceive that it is made out of wood, that it is brown, and that it is of a given size and weight; yet we would still perceive the object as a desk if it was made out of metal rather than wood, if it was silver rather than brown, and if it was an entirely different size and weight. Hence for Husserl the characteristics we associate with the "factual," physical desk—color, size, weight—are contingent because they could be other than they are, yet we would still perceive a desk. Therefore, this "contingency is correlative to a *necessity*" which, argues Husserl, "has the character of *essential necessity*, and therewith a relation to *essential universality*" (Husserl 47). That which makes a desk a desk—apart from its contingent, "factual" characteristics—is its essence, a term that lends itself rather easily to misunderstanding. Erazim Kohak, in *Idea and Experience*, provides an excellent contrast between Husserl's use of essence (*Wesen* in German) and its typical use in English: "We usually think of 'essence' as a hidden inner core, which has to be abstracted by an operation of the active intellect, by a mystical intuition . . . By contrast, 'Wesen,' derived from the old Germanic verb for 'to be,' suggests something directly presented in experience" (Kohak 9). The essence of an object, for Husserl, is not something that is separate from the object as it is perceived: it is the necessary correlate to the contingent "fact."

Even though the factual and essential elements of an object are inseparable, Husserl does contend that we can focus our attention on one or the other, which is just what Husserl claims to do when he brackets the thesis of the natural standpoint: the thesis is bracketed in order to isolate the essence of that which is bracketed. Therefore, the essence of an object is that aspect of the object which remains after the act of bracketing. Recall that what Husserl refers to as the "fact-world" gets placed in brackets when the thesis of the natural standpoint gets placed in brackets, yet the thesis is not "abandoned" when the bracketing takes place: "It still remains there like the bracketed in the bracket."

Understanding "essence" in this manner helps explain Husserl's claim that

> *pure or transcendental phenomenology will be established not as a science of facts, but as a science of essential being* (as "eidetic" Science); a science which aims exclusively at establishing "knowledge of essences" and *absolutely no 'facts* ." (Husserl 40)

The "essence" is the part of the thing experienced (the "phenomenon") that gives itself to consciousness purely bracketed from the "facts," the particulars. Husserl calls the study of these essences "eidetic science," the science of "Eidos"—of "ideas." According to Husserl, the "idea" or "eidetic structure" of

anything experienced is given to consciousness by "empirical or individual intuition" (Husserl 48), and this primordial intuition of the world is the grounding presupposition of his phenomenological science: "we start from that which *antedates* all standpoints: from the totality of the intuitively self-given which is prior to any theorizing reflexion" (Husserl 78).

Husserl means to explore "primordial intuition" by placing the given world, the "natural" world, in brackets in order to perceive the pure eidetic structure of that given world—to perceive "the idea of it" in Stevens' terms. The parallel here between Husserl's method of gaining insight into "ideas" and Stevens' now becomes more apparent. In the first tercet of the poem the ephebe is not initially instructed to perceive either the world (the "sun") or the idea of the world. He must first perceive the "idea of this invention." "Invention" is best understood here in its primary sense of "to come upon" or "to disclose" and not in its derivative sense of "to fabricate" or "to construct." Like Husserl, Stevens' interest is in how consciousness "comes upon"—"invents"—the world as it is given as "idea," as "essence."

Stevens has his ephebe begin his search for the "supreme fiction" by a method of abstracting from (or "bracketing") the given world of "the weather" in order to grasp how it is we perceive that world in the first place, how we "invent" the world. And this method discloses the "idea" of the world—"The inconceivable idea of the sun." For Husserl this method of bracketing is an act of reduction: by placing a given presupposition in brackets, he claims that one can strip away all unnecessary propositions until one reaches "essential insight"—insight into the essence, the idea. Compare this approach with Stevens' explanation of what takes place when one attempts to be a "thinker of the first idea": "If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see it in its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea" (*L* 426-27). The image of stripping away layers of varnish until one gets at the essential "picture" or "world" is, I take it, a poet's way of describing a method analogous to Husserl's phenomenological reductions. The crucial point for both Stevens and Husserl is that one could reach a level of reduction at which consciousness is no longer affected by the sedimented propositions of traditional thinking—"the varnish and dirt of generations."

Husserl's attempt to attain a presuppositionless perspective by way of his new method of perception has its correlate in the second tercet of "Notes":

> 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)

I assume Stevens uses "ignorant" here in an ironic sense since the poet enjoins his ephebe to return to rather than overcome ignorance. I say "return

to" in light of Stevens' use of "again" twice in the tercet: it implies that the ephebe needs to return to a state of perception previously experienced—a state prior to having the "varnish and dirt of generations" layered over it. This "ignorant" state of perception provides the starting point in the search for a "supreme fiction," a point which recalls Husserl's claim that the phenomenologist starts out, as a result of bracketing, from a position "which *antedates* all standpoints . . . which is prior to any theorizing reflexion." From the stance of the "ignorant eye"—an eye ignorant of the varnish and dirt of philosophical presuppositions—the ephebe can perceive the world in terms of the eidetic structure of pure experience; the ephebe can see the sun again and "see it clearly in the idea of it." Yet neither Stevens nor Husserl claims to see "clearly" the given world, the world of "the weather," untainted by presuppositions; they claim to see the world as idea with clarity, with "apodeictic certainty" in Husserl's terms. For the act of abstracting, of bracketing, places the given world with all its contingency and uncertainty "out of action" so that the "pure" eidetic structure of the world can then be perceived: "How clean the sun when seen in its idea" (*CP* 381). Stevens uses "clean" in much the same way Husserl uses "pure" since both terms describe the pristine state of perception achieved by "abstracting" or "bracketing."

Once we grant Stevens' and Husserl's contention that this realm of "ideas" is potentially accessible through these new methods, the next question that arises concerns the ontological status of these "ideas": do "ideas" exist only in the mind of the particular subject who applies the method, or do they exist objectively "out there" in the given, "external" world? The answer for both Stevens and Husserl turns out to be that "ideas" are neither "in" the mind nor "out" in the world.

In the third tercet of the first canto Stevens instructs his ephebe, "Never suppose an inventing mind as source / Of this idea" (*CP* 381). By denying that the mind of an individual subject perceiving the "idea" is the source of that "idea," Stevens avoids a form of subjective idealism. Yet this does not mean Stevens denies that the mind plays a role in how the "idea" is perceived, which would then commit him to a form of realism. Recall that "invention" primarily means "to come upon" or "discover" and not to create ex nihilo; hence, to assert that the mind discovers "ideas" is not to assert that "ideas" reside or are constructed "in" the mind. Yet "ideas" do not reside "out" in the "external world," as if they are somehow a property of things in themselves. For Stevens the thing in itself would be the "sun-itself"; we perceive, however, the "idea" of the sun and not the "sun-itself," so the "idea" resides no more "out" in the external world than it does "in" the mind. If "ideas" are not understood as purely mental or physical properties, Stevens can avoid traditional dualistic notions of subject and object, inner and outer, mind and matter. But what exactly is an "idea" if it is not "in" the mind or "out" in the world?

Perhaps the best way of answering this question is by looking at how Husserl answers it since he too attempts to avoid interpreting the world ex-

clusively in terms of either the subject (idealism) or the object (realism). According to Husserl, when we bracket the natural standpoint we gain "essential insight"—insight into the essence or eidetic structure of the perceived, and this "*essence (Eidos) is an object of a new type*" (Husserl 49). Husserl names this new object an "intentional object," and to understand what this "intentional object" is we need to understand two other central Husserlian terms: "immanent" and "transcendent." "Immanent" refers to whatever "remains within" the sphere of the mind as such—including both that which is conscious (the *cogito*) and the acts of consciousness (the *cogitationes*). "Transcendent" refers to whatever "goes beyond" the mind, and he reserves this term for the objects to which the mind refers—for the world and what it contains. These objects "transcend" the mind of any individual subject because they could never be reduced to any aggregate or series of conscious perceptions: the sequence of appearances of an object could never be exhausted by the cogito perceiving it; there will always be a "residuum" left over. In Stevens' terms, then, an intentional object would be the sun seen "clearly in the idea of it." Husserl and Stevens both agree that "ideas," "intentional objects," are not fully "in" the mind of an individual subject—subjective—or "out" in the given world—objective. The ontological status of "ideas," therefore, is that they reside "in between" the subject and the object: in short, "ideas" are co-constituted by the subject and the object.

Now that the major parallels between the "ideas" of Stevens and Husserl have been drawn out, I want to return to the remarkable passage in *Ideas* in which Husserl reveals that "the *element* which *makes up the life of phenomenology as of all eidetic science* is '*fiction*'" (Husserl 184). This claim appears in the section of *Ideas* which deals with "The Privileged Position of Free Fancy." Unlike Coleridge, Husserl uses the terms "fancy" and "imagination" interchangeably, so in Husserl's work the imagination occupies the same "privileged position" as does the fancy. Acts of the imagination have this privileged position because they are free from the contingent element embodied in any "factual" perception. Imaginative acts are fully immanent in consciousness, and, according to Husserl, immanent perceptions are "indubitable" while transcendent perceptions are "dubitable" since the former do not contain a contingent, "factual" element as do the latter (Husserl 130-32). Therefore, the necessary essence of immanent, imaginative perceptions—their eidetic structure—is more clearly and easily perceived, which is why we "can draw extraordinary profit . . . from the gifts of art and particularly of poetry. These are indeed the fruits of the imagination" (Husserl 184).

The "fruits of the imagination" are the fictive elements which constitute, for Husserl, the "life of phenomenology." Husserl's fictions, much like Stevens' fictions, are not to be thought of as falsehoods: for both Stevens and Husserl fictions result from the acts of the imagination. And for both writers these fictions are fully immanent, hence "indubitable," perceptions. Recall Stevens' claim that the fictive abstract is "immanent in the mind of the poet" (*L* 434). From this it follows that the "ideas" which constitute the fictions in Stevens'

poetry are acts of the imagination fully immanent in the poet's mind. Yet all particular fictions stem from one "supreme fiction" or "first idea," which is, Stevens asserts, "an imagined thing" (*CP* 387). For both Stevens and Husserl, then, acts of the imagination and the fictions they produce are anything but fabrications or falsehoods: they are a rich, if not the richest, source of the "ideas" that make up the life of a search for either a "pure phenomenology" or a "supreme fiction."

Finally, I want to look briefly at the central concern on which these "ideas" of Stevens and Husserl focus—on what is, in short, their ultimate "idea": the idea of man. The opening lines of the last canto of "It Must Be Abstract" serve well as a summary of these explorations:

> The major abstraction is the idea of man
> And major man is its exponent, abler
> In the abstract than in his singular,
>
> More fecund as principle than particle,
> Happy fecundity, flor-abundant force,
> In being more than an exception, part,
>
> Though an heroic part, of the commonal.
> The major abstraction is the commonal,
> The inanimate, difficult visage.
>
> (*CP* 388)

The "idea of man" is the ultimate "idea" discovered, "invented," in Stevens' search for a "supreme fiction"; man is, in fact, the "supreme fiction" as expressed in the poetic act. And since one of the requirements of the "supreme fiction" is that "It Must Be Abstract," then any understanding of man would indeed be "abler / In the abstract." Here we have the core of Stevens' radical humanism, albeit an "abstract" humanism. Stevens once suggested, in fact, that were he ever to write a fourth section of "Notes" he would entitle this new section "It Must Be Human" (*L* 863). Similarly, one of the dominant concerns throughout Husserl's work is the attempt to establish the human sciences on the kind of firm foundation he felt "psychology" had failed to provide because it was not, in essence, "abstract" enough; his new "eidetic science" of phenomenology attempts to provide just such a humanistic foundation for this study of the human sciences, for the study of the "idea" of man.

Out of this desire to understand man more completely, hence more abstractly, Stevens and Husserl sought to create methods that would allow them to isolate and understand the "ideas" by which man "invents" himself and the world as perceived, as experienced. The "exponent" of this abstract humanism, "major man," though, is not a great, epoch-defining figure towering above his contemporaries; he is part of the "commonal," which makes

him much "more than an exception." He is neither the romantic "great man" nor the Nietzschean "overman," yet he is heroic precisely because he is the common, representative man. He is "The man / In that old coat, those sagging pantaloons" (*CP* 389). From this man the possibility of a "supreme fiction" arises; consequently, as Stevens asserts in the final lines of "It Must Be Abstract,"

> It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
> The final elegance, not to console
> Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.
>
> (*CP* 389)

This "final elegance," this abstract portrait of the human, is, I suggest, the ultimate goal of Stevens' search for a "supreme fiction" and Husserl's search for a "pure phenomenology." Not only is the goal of their search analogous, but the methods they use to discover the "ideas" which lead to this goal are also analogous: the methods of "abstracting" and "bracketing" allow Stevens and Husserl to isolate "ideas" in a manner that reveals the true "essence" of those "ideas." Despite the obvious differences, then, in genre and style, there remains a striking affinity between the works of these two writers—an affinity that gestures toward the greater affinity between poetry and philosophy which Heidegger alludes to when he writes of the common "neighborhood" shared by poetry and philosophy. Seeing the relation between the poetry of Wallace Stevens and the philosophy of Edmund Husserl more clearly gives us a way of seeing the relation between poetry and philosophy more clearly—a way, perhaps, of seeing it more clearly "in the idea of it."

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Reading the Score of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Stevens, Music, and the Visual Arts

KINERETH MEYER AND SHARON BARIS

ALTHOUGH WALLACE STEVENS' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (1915) has been called an "erotic grace note" to the greater music of "Sunday Morning,"[1] it in fact stands on its own as an early but complex example of the "act of the mind"[2] which Stevens sees at the center of the creative process. In its evocation of poetry as a sustaining and regenerative force, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is not a decorative grace note, but a major demonstration of grace through notes. Our intention in this essay is to employ an interdisciplinary approach to the relations in the poem between the immediate dramatic situation of the speaker, the musical texture, and the apocryphal content. Such a method illuminates Stevens' integration of themes and provides the reader with additional "Notes Toward" a richer understanding of "Peter Quince at the Clavier."

The poem is structured on the basis of two themes or keys combined in subtle harmony. The first is the apocryphal Susanna story, providing the narrative drive. Informed by a medieval garden pattern which traditionally evokes the interaction of sense and spirit, the story of the lovely woman in her enclosed garden unites all four sections of the poem. For in this garden the specific elements of fountain ("in the green water," "the touch of springs"), gate ("the fitful tracing of a portal"), and maiden (Susanna), serve both as sensual images establishing a physical reality, and as figures invoking higher spiritual significations.[3] The second theme derives from a carefully delineated musical texture; like the Susanna-garden pattern, the poem's orchestration blends sense and spirit, creating a world "in which more is heard than meets the ear."[4] It is the virtuoso performance of Peter Quince, however, that generates the poem's own coming into existence, as Quince's fingers on the keys of the clavier cause its themes to resonate. The poem evokes the interplay between the two elements of poetic creation, the silent origins in the emotions of the poet—"so the selfsame sounds / On my spirit make a music, too"—and the verbal and intertextual realization of his thoughts—

> Music is feeling, then, not sound;
> And thus it is that what I feel,
> Here in this room, desiring you,
> Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
> Is music.

Furthermore, the development of the poem suggests that the reader, too, participates in the ongoing process of realization ("the constant sacrament of

praise") with which he both concludes, and, in effect, "recommences" the act of reading.[5]

Together with the evocation of the realization process, however, Stevens warns us that the experience is both delicate and dangerous; thus while Stevens explores the musical and apocryphal possibilities of the scene evoked when Peter Quince sits at his clavier, he is also fully aware of the "noise" that may suddenly intrude. In both the apocryphal story and in the poem, the voyeuristic presence of the red eyed elders threatens to violate harmonic order:

> It is like the strain
> Waked in the elders by Susanna.

The *tour de force* of simultaneously exploring the process of poetic realization while at the same time recognizing its dangers directs our attention first to the role of Peter Quince. How does this performer bring us to a recognition of poetry as a redemptive force—the "constant sacrament of praise" in the final cadences of this poem? A partial answer may be found by recalling the original Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Although Shakespeare's Peter Quince is usually seen solely as the director of "a crew of patches, rude mechanicals" (III.ii.10), the fact that he knows how to write "ballets" (IV.i.218) and prologues (III.i.17) "in eight and six" (III.i.24) indicates that he is more than a "shallow thickskin"; he is a poet—a comic version, perhaps, but a poet nevertheless. Rude mechanical though he may be, he is still able to transform reality through his art, and his musings upon art are a fine example of what Stevens calls "the extraordinary references / Of ordinary people" (*CP* 369). Before rehearsing his play, for example, Quince declares: "This green plot shall be our stage" (III.i.3), effecting a "transposition into another medium,"[6] a movement into an entirely imaginative realm in which the artist suggests those significances and resemblances necessary to achieve his imaginative goal. It is because of this transposition that Quince rejects Bottom's commonsensical suggestion of leaving the casement open for the "moonshine," and instead insists that one must come in carrying a lantern in order, as he says, to "disfigure, or to present" what the artist requires.[7]

Clearly, both Shakespeare's Peter Quince and Stevens' Peter Quince use artistic means to effect a mental transposition: Shakespeare's Quince raises the wood near Athens to the higher register of the imaginative garden of Pyramus and Thisby, and Stevens' Quince raises the scene of his "desire for you" to the mental garden of Susanna and the elders. Indeed, a central feature of Stevens' poem is its presentation of an artist who creatively refigures or, as Peter Quince would claim, "disfigures" a given text in each performance. The artist's disfiguring, a kind of misreading or musical misprision, is yet a positive creative act despite its apparently negative nomenclature. It is a process both mental and sensual; while intellectually aware of previous

performances, the performer must at the same time vitalize prior texts or signs in each new and different rendition.

The movement in misreading from belatedness to priority[8] may also help to explain why Stevens chose to place Peter Quince at a musical instrument of the early Baroque period. An outstanding characteristic of Baroque music is the necessity for the performer to "realize" the minimal notation of the musical score through his own interpretation in performance (see fig. 1). In the process of realization the musician combines his awareness of the written score, his memory of previous performances, and his physical touch upon the instrument.[9] The themes of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" illustrate this process—the merging of particular performance with mental act—in both poet and reader.

Many readers have rightly acknowledged the musical effects of the poem ("pizzicati," "quavering," etc.), usually seeking to comprehend these effects within some possible specific form.[10] Such a focus on form, however, fails to appreciate a more broadly suggestive and significant musical feature, the texture constituted by the instruments chosen for this poem: the clavier, strings, and winds. The process of realization which is, as we have said, characteristic of the Baroque period, is particularly evident in this instrumental grouping of the trio-sonata (typified by clavier, viols, or winds), where the obligato or main voices sing independently yet in counterpoint against a given basso-continuo line.[11] In performance, the musician seated at the clavier combines the various elements of the composition: as his left hand retraces the given figured bass, his right hand freely fills in the required harmonies suggested by the passing notes. The figured bass, in other words, is a "form of shorthand" in which the figures placed over or under a given bass suggest the harmonies which may be filled in by the keyboard player.[12] It is the keyboard player who is aware of the relation between the given notes and his creative invention; it is he who realizes the music according to the bass line, but only by improvising his own middle ground in a continuum of mental and transitory creations ("Beauty is momentary in the mind"). At once described by the indicated figures, and yet imagined anew with every rendition, the composition is thus realized by each performance over and over again, in "fitful"—that is, musical, momentary, and variant ways.[13]

The basic principles of musical realization suggested by C. P. E. Bach in a 1762 essay on "Playing Keyboard Instruments" are similar to Stevens' view of the constantly shifting and changing nature of verbal creation. "No one can be content any longer," writes Bach, "with an accompanist who merely reads and plays figures in the manner of a born pedant, one who memorizes all of the rules and follows them mechanically. Something more is required." The performance required, continues Bach, is one in which the musician "must play . . . with discrimination often departing from the notation."[14] According to Stevens, the poet, too, must often depart from the notation; the imaginative reality which he creates is as fitful and as evanescent as the reality

which he perceives. The creation of poetry, says Stevens in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," is:

> Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet,
> A philosopher practicing scales on his piano,
> A woman writing a note and tearing it up.
> (*CP* 488)

In "Mozart, 1935," the "poet . . . seated at the piano" realizes the creative moment only when he can:

> Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,
> Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,
> Its envious cachinnation.
> (*CP* 131)

What characterizes musical realization and the action of Peter Quince seated at the clavier, therefore, is the need to fuse spirit and sense, or silence and sound. As a musician, Peter Quince realizes the text by working out the silent implications of the musical notation on his instrument; as a poet, he realizes the text by embodying his silent mental awareness of past literary texts and conventions in the words and sounds of a new text. In "Peter Quince at the Clavier" the silence is as resonant as the immediate sounds of the words:

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make a music too.
> Music is feeling, then, not sound . . .

The whole poem, then, is felt rather than heard; Susanna bathes in a soundless or "still" garden, and the red-eyed elders respond to her presence with the "strains" of silent music, feeling (not hearing)

> The basses of their beings throb
> In witching chords, and their thin blood
> Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

Susanna, too, feels, rather than hears, "so much melody" in the "concealed imaginings" of the spring in which she bathes. Like a silent note, she walks "quavering" upon the grass, until a sudden "breath upon her hand / Muted the night." Indeed, when the cacophony of the climax ("A cymbal crashed, / And roaring horns") assaults her ears, its intrusive dissonance only accentuates the mental music of the preceding silence.

To understand Stevens' suggestive creation of a finely tuned relationship between silence and sound, however, we must pursue his choice of the

clavier in this poem even further. There is a specific sense in which Quince's performance at the clavier may be more of a fitful mental exercise than readers of the poem have acknowledged.[15] In seventeenth and eighteenth century Germany, *Klavier* was a general term applicable to any keyboard instrument and even to the keyboard itself. In French and English, *clavier* may also refer simply to a keyboard, not to a performing musical instrument. In English it in fact sometimes designates a toneless keyboard used for practice.[16] Quince's clavier may be such a dummy keyboard—what performers call a "practice clavier"; when practicing upon such a clavier the performer touches the silent keys while his mind "knows" the sounds his fingers trace. Viewing the clavier as a dummy keyboard may help to explain the opening stanza of the poem:

> Just as my fingers on these keys
> Make music, so the selfsame sounds
> On my spirit make music, too.

Stevens, in writing the poem, Peter Quince, in touching the keys of the clavier, and the reader, in reading the poem, must all engage in a similar kind of mental exercise. As we hear the obligato line (or main voice) of this poem—Susanna in the garden—our minds play upon associations and evocations of portal, spring, and "old devotions":[17] the garden becomes a *hortus conclusus*, or sealed garden, the emblems of which, like the keys of a soundless clavier, can be known and felt as we realize the significances of the poem. The poem's green and shadowed blue colors shimmer forth, reminding us of those medieval paintings which, though silent, speak eloquently of the emblematic garden, walls, fountain, and portal in which Susanna was traditionally viewed.[18]

Yet a cacophony ("A cymbal crashed, / And roaring horns," "a noise like tambourines") disturbs the tranquil surface of this poem. Is this Stevens' warning of some modernist intrusiveness liable to destroy the controlled and figured scene? These strident sounds may, in fact, alert us to certain dangers inherent in the realizing process itself, a warning which further unites the apocryphal and musical themes. A fine line exists, Stevens suggests, between realization and wanton self-expression, between an embodiment of the spirit in sound and word, and its descent into base noise. As in true baroque harmonic progression, this dissonance is programmed into the musical text; yet its discordant sound must be resolved within the cadences that Stevens' controlling figures provide.

Susanna's garden is indeed fraught with this danger. As D. H. Robertson, Jr. has convincingly argued in his essay on "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens," most views of the garden in medieval literature and art "share the primary aim of Scripture, to promote Charity and to condemn its opposite, cupidity." Robertson has demonstrated that the basis for medieval renderings of the garden paradigm is the emphatic Augustinian distinc-

tion between *cupiditas*, or love of something or someone (including the self) "for its own sake," and *caritas*, the New Law brought by Christ to save fallen man.[19] Particularly during the Middle Ages, the garden pattern of fountain, trees, and doors was seen as containing both: while the garden was imbued with Marianic connotations (the sealed garden as a figure of the perpetual virginity of the Virgin Mary), and was typologically linked with the biblical gardens of Eden, *Canticles*, *Susanna*, and *Revelations*, it nevertheless also portrayed the luxuriance of the senses.

Other readers have also commented on the religious context of the poem: William Burney has noted that in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" Susanna is a "version of the Virgin," a "principle of plenitude" which gives rise to imaginative creation, and Adalaide Morris compares the woman of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" to Mary, in that she is wedded both to earth and to heaven, thus giving birth to "imaginative conceptions which must take the place of God."[20] Yet Burney and Morris have ignored the larger context which makes their observations significant—the garden with its dual theme of *caritas* and *cupiditas*, celebration and danger, realization and ravishment. Linking all of the variations of the garden motif is the double strain of sensual and spiritual, which made the garden a central concern of medieval exegetes, and, as poems such as "Cy Est Pourtraicte," "Extraordinary References," and "Auroras of Autumn" (to name just a few) would indicate, of Stevens as well. Like the richly allusive paintings and poems of the Middle Ages, Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier" "asks to be deciphered,"[21] and though it is clear that Stevens avoids a Christological or even moral reading, the iconography of the garden provided him with a known ("old"), but shifting, interpretable, and fitful paradigm for a poem playing upon both sense and spirit.

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens has substituted an aesthetic dimension for the moral and Christological emphasis in the theme of *cupiditas* and *caritas*. Although there is no evidence that Stevens intended a strict typological reading of the poem, his selection of the very details of the medieval pattern with all its ramifications provides a brilliantly apt framework for his views on the immortality of the aesthetic moment and the concomitant dangers inherent in its realization. Uniting musical and artistic themes, Susanna becomes the silent quavering note; like Keats's "still unravished bride of quietness," Susanna in her still garden expresses a flowery tale in silent "ditties of no tone." Her music may express her grace, *caritas* (the "auroral celebration of a maiden's choral," "the clear viol of her memory," "a constant sacrament of praise"), but the jarring sounds of scraping basses and roaring horns warn us that it is a grace constantly threatened by the *cupiditas* of those whose performance expresses only lewd self-interest.

The aesthetic emphasis in Stevens' interpretation of the garden paradigm is carried through not only on the level of music, but on the level of visual art as well. Stevens was familiar with the conventions of medieval and renaissance art,[22] and his way of foregrounding Peter Quince's experience in a room, then

drawing our attention to the richly suggestive garden beyond, reveals his educated perception:

> . . . thus it is that what I feel,
> Here in this room, desiring you,
>
> Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
> Is music. It is like the strain
> Waked in the elders by Susanna.
>
> Of a green evening, clear and warm,
> She bathed in her still garden . . .

In "Peter Quince at the Clavier," Stevens adds a secular twist to the religious subject of most medieval room-garden paintings. In these paintings, the virgin traditionally sits within a room and suggests the redemption of the *hortus conclusus* seen beyond. When artists like Van Eyck, Van der Weyden, and De la Pasture focus on the Annunciation or on the Adoration of the Virgin and Child, the garden that we see through the window (complete with wall, spring, and portal) thus functions as an emblematic reminder of all gardens, from Eden through the Heavenly Paradise (see fig. 2). Just as the dissonance in the poem is a warning against the possible disruptions of harmony, so too the lush garden is emblematic both of grace and of the fall into greed and egoism.

Yet Peter Quince, seated at the clavier in his room, addresses his "devotions" not to the Virgin, but to the "you" of the poem; it is his personal and artistic strain which moves us into the realm of mental music and sacred garden. The rich sensuality of the poem itself is evidence enough that even though a distinction is made in the poem between the harmony of Susanna's music and the ugly scraping of the elders, this does not mean to say that the stimulation of the senses leads inevitably to an aesthetic *cupiditas*—a dissolution into solipsism. After all, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" comes into being as a poem because of the speaker's (and perhaps Stevens') thoughts of a woman, which is "like the strain waked in the elders by Susanna." But whereas the elders' intent to ravish leads to anti-art, or "death's ironic scraping," the speaker's desire becomes artistically embodied and realized as an "auroral celebration of a maiden's choral" in a cycle of promise and redemption.

While medieval gardens point to the moral/theological theme of the mortality of the flesh (Garden of Eden) and the immortality of the spirit (redemption through Christ), Stevens' garden points to a cycle of aesthetic creation which achieves immortality through the recurrence of sensual perception and memory, giving rise to yet another performance. Such cyclicity and recurrence itself may offer a momentary resolution to the tension between spirit and sense, a resolution which is urged by the structure of the poem:

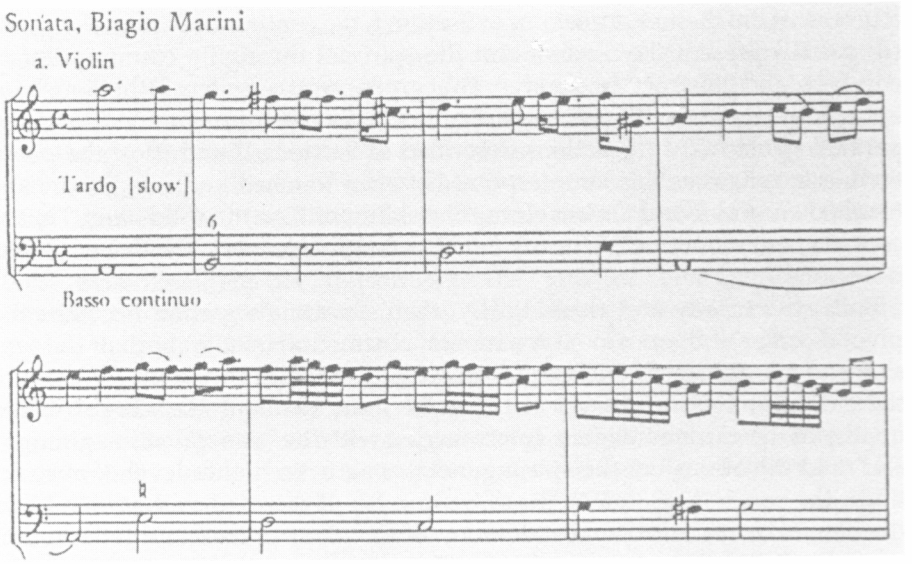

Fig. 1. In the second measure of this piece the figure above the bass line indicates the harmony to be realized by the keyboard instrument. Biago Marini, *Sonata*, 1629.

Fig. 2. The room in which the Virgin sits looks out upon a small garden, with a wider view of the world beyond. Jan Van Eyck, *The Virgin and Child Adored by Chancellor Rolin, ca.* 1426, The Louvre, Paris.

after the initial themes are set out in Section I, the central sections of the poem (II and III) present the sensual and the spiritual through a counterpoint of concrete and abstract imagery. The green warm water—"the touch of springs"—rhymes with the more abstract "concealed imaginings"; and the parallel structure of the actions described in Sections II and III of the poem further emphasizes this counterpoint between touched and imagined: "she touched . . . and found . . . imaginings"; "she stood" on the solid bank, "in the cool of spent emotions"; "she felt," on the tangible leaves, "the dew / Of old devotions."

Both structurally and thematically, then, Susanna's garden becomes the pivotal center of the poem. It is a mental abstraction (simile) born of the sensual and emotional experience of the speaker ("it is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna"); yet at the same time, the concrete, almost tactile quality of the garden imagery, intermingled with the "concealed imaginings" and "old devotions" of the spirit, generates an even higher level of abstraction—the concluding statements of Section IV. If the medieval garden leads the viewer or reader to a consideration of the glory of God and redemption through Christ, Susanna's garden in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" leads the reader to a glorification of the transitory but redemptive moment of artistic perception, vitalized in the celebration and the sacrament of poetry. Both music and poetry embody past and present, spirit and sense, silence and sound. Both are at once momentary, yet real and lasting through the acts of perception, memory, and realization:

> Beauty is momentary in the mind—
> The fitful tracing of a portal;
> But in the flesh it is immortal.
> The body dies; the body's beauty lives.

True to the poem's contrapuntal texture, Peter Quince concludes his performance by "figuring" the motifs of the garden once again:

> So evenings die, in their green going,
> A wave, interminably flowing.
> So gardens die, their meek breath scenting
> The cowl of winter, done repenting,
> So maidens die, to the auroral
> Celebration of a maiden's choral.

Like his Shakespearean counterpart, Stevens' Peter Quince has declared a green plot to be the stage of his artistic extemporizing. Raw emotion has been transposed, through the act of resemblance and the technique of simile (a prominent feature of the poem as a whole), into the green plot of Susanna's "still garden." But while Shakespeare's Peter Quince chose his garden story (Pyramus and Thisby) to illuminate the felicity of love, Stevens' Peter Quince

has chosen to orchestrate his garden story to illuminate the felicity of the poetic moment. Thus, like the metaphysician who twangs "a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses" (*CP* 240), Peter Quince creatively "disfigures" the motifs of greenness, water, and maiden; he realizes the garden and achieves "a kind of immortality." "Evenings die" and waves ebb, but both return within the "interminably flowing" cycles of nature; "gardens die" (both literally and in the poem), but live anew through the renewal of the seasons or through this poem's fitful tracings of old symbols. Even "maidens die" (Susanna, or the "you" of Peter Quince's desire), but they too ultimately achieve immortality through the silent music which evokes their memory, the "auroral / Celebration of a maiden's choral."

As in "The Idea of Order at Key West" where the "fragrant portals" of the final vision are but "dimly starred," the fitful tracings of the portal in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" can never provide us a clear entry into a finality of poetic felicity, but will offer instead "edgings and inchings of final form" (*CP* 488), the "present close, the present realized" (*CP* 238). As performers we "realize" the present by tracing and re-tracing old patterns ("old devotions"), even as Stevens does in this poem, thus offering new glimpses through the portal. The continuous cycle of sensuous embodiment ("in the flesh it is immortal"), decreation, and re-embodiment in the mind ("the body dies; the body's beauty lives") results in immortal harmonies which go beyond "Death's ironic scraping."

The "viol" or the memory of Susanna resonates clearly in the poem, providing a vial or sacrament of regenerative force for the reader able to hear (in both mind and sense) the multiple registers in which the performance is played—perhaps bestowing the only grace that we can know. Shakespeare's Peter Quince says, "And I hope here is a play fitted" (I.ii.55); Stevens' fitful performance is "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" (*CP* 239), an interminable quest for those notes which will yield:

> The infinite of the actual perceived,
> A freedom revealed, a realization touched,
> The real made more acute by an unreal.
>
> (*CP* 451)

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Notes

[1]Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 35.

[2]Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 240. References to "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (89-92) will be to this source; other references will be cited in the text as *CP* with page numbers in parentheses.

[3]The traditional medieval garden pattern included the *hortus conclusus*, or sealed garden; *fons signatus*, a well, fountain, or spring; and the *porta clausa*, or locked gate. See Alfred Kellogg,

"Susannah and the 'Merchant's Tale,'" *Speculum* XXXV (1960): 275-279, for a discussion of Susannah as a *hortus conclusus* tale. Kellogg notes the parallel between the Susannah story and the Song of Songs, saying "Both are walled gardens with a fountain, trees, and doors" (275). See too Stanley Steward, *The Enclosed Garden: The Tradition and the Image in Seventeenth-Century Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966), *passim*; and Kenneth A. Bleeth, "The Image of Paradise in the *Merchant's Tale*," in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 45-60.

[4]John Hollander, "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 255.

[5]See Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 166.

[6]See William Carlos Williams' comment on the relation between imaginative writing and music in *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 149-150.

[7]Peter Lynen, in *The Design of the Present: Essays on Time and Form in American Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), makes a similar observation, but focuses on the "essential absurdity" of Peter Quince's transformations (6-9). See too James Baird, *The Dome and the Rock* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), who sees Peter Quince as "the symbol of the poet-craftsman" (44). John N. Serio has cogently argued that in responding to "the music of genuine feeling" in the poem, the reader does not see Peter Quince as a fool, but rather as a "serious-minded poet/musician who, in the act of playing the clavier, has discovered a theory of art." See "Stevens, Shakespeare, and Peter Quince," *Modern Language Studies* IX (Winter 1978-1979): 20-24. Recently, Daniel Mark Fogel has offered the fascinating suggestion that Stevens "developed his image of the Shakespearean figure improvising a music of feeling . . . under the inspiration of a remarkably parallel trope in Henry James's Introduction to *The Tempest*" (1907). See "Imaginative Origins: 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' and Henry James," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* VIII (Spring 1984): 22-28.

[8]Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3, and Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 13-15.

[9]Realize—"[T]he sound ideal of the Baroque was a firm bass and a florid treble, held together by unobtrusive harmony . . . the bass was played on one or more *fundament* or *continuo* instruments (clavier, organ, lute), usually reinforced by a sustaining instrument such as a bass gamba or violoncello or bassoon; and above the bass notes the keyboard or lute player *filled in the required chords, which were not otherwise written out*. If these chords were other than common triads in root position . . . the composer could so indicate by little figures or signs placed above or below the bass notes . . . The *realization*—the actual playing—of such a *figured bass* varied according to the nature of the composition and the taste and skill of the player" (emphasis added). Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York: Norton, 1960), 272-73. See figure 1 for an example of the "figured bass" which must be "realized."

[10]"Peter Quince at the Clavier" presents a wide range of musical possibilities, including, perhaps, the folk song "O Susanna" ("don't you cry for me . . ."). In a more classical vein, Joseph Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), notes that the parts of the poem "are stretched casually upon the three part sonatina framework of exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda" (73). In similar, though more general terms, Ronald Sukenick, *Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), observes that each of the four sections of the poem "resembles a 'movement'" (69). John Hollander is the most specific: "'clavier' or no, the *poem* is playing Schumann" (235).

[11]The *trio sonata* texture evolved as instrumental music developed in the early seventeenth century, and was used by such composers as Corelli, Purcell, Couperin, and Lully, among others. See Grout, 272. It is of interest here to note that these same composers' names appear repeatedly in the record collection of Wallace Stevens; there are forty baroque and pre-baroque records listed. Although Stevens' records did not feature *trio sonatas* as such, there are several *concerto grossos* which employ the *trio sonata* texture. For a complete listing of Stevens' record collection see Michael O. Stegman, "Wallace Stevens and Music: A Discography of Stevens' Record Collection," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 3 (1979): 79-97.

[12]See Freda Dinn, *The Observer's Book of Music* (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1960), 126-127.

[13]*Webster's New World Dictionary* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1957), lists definitions of "fit" which support these multiple options: "Fit," n., "a short section of a poem, ballad, or song; canto." See also: "Fitting," as "that which accords harmoniously with the spirit, or tone of something"; "Fitful," adj., "characterized by irregular bursts of activity; intermittent; spasmodic; irregular"; "Fit," v., "to make or alter so as to fit." See also: "Fit," n., "any sudden uncontrollable attack," or, also: "a transient mood."

[14]C. P. E. Bach is quoted in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1954), VIII, 447-48.

[15]For a detailed analysis of the problematical nature of the verbal medium in "Peter Quince at the Clavier," see Mary Nyquist, "Musing on Susannah's Music," *Lyric Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 310-27. "Language, the poem seems to acknowledge," says Nyquist, ". . . is neither a system of simple notation nor a well-tempered clavier" (312). Although she focuses correctly on the connection between language and the poem's musical texture, Nyquist fails to explore the creative middle ground between her two extremes of "simple notation" and "well-tempered clavier." The performer's task, however, is precisely to fill this gap which Nyquist's comment ignores.

[16]See Ernest Hutcheson, *The Literature of the Piano* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1958), 6, and *Grove's Dictionary of Music*, Vol. II, 340, as well as *Webster's New World Dictionary*, "clavier."

[17]Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), quote from Jesuit Henry Hawkins' emblem book *Parthenia Sacra* (1633), where the enclosed garden is seen as "a central device for an elaborate set of devotional exercises" (116). For a more detailed discussion of the *Parthenia Sacra*, see Stewart, 44-45.

[18]On the blue and green colors of medieval gardens, see Pearsall and Salter: "beyond the garden wall, the intense blue of the sky alludes not simply to perfect weather, but to perfection; . . . cloudlessness . . . is as much a spiritual as a climactic condition," and "a pale green colour wash—proclaims the strongly cerebral and didactic intent of the writer and artist" (109, 70).

[19]D. W. Robertson Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens: A Topical Approach Through Symbolism and Allegory," *Speculum* XXVI (1951): 25.

[20]William Burney, *Wallace Stevens* (New York: Twayne's United States Authors Series, 1968), 40; and Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 149.

[21]Pearsall and Salter, 116. See too Steward, xi-xiv.

[22]In the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, selected and edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), 33n, we are told that in 1899-1900, while at Harvard, Stevens received an "A-" in a course entitled "The Fine Arts of the Middle Ages."

Poems[†]

Soliloquio finale dell'amante interiore

Accendi la prima luce della sera, come in una stanza
In cui riposiamo e, con poca ragione, pensiamo
Il mondo immaginato è il bene supremo.

Questo è dunque l'incontro più intenso.
É in tale pensiero che ci raccogliamo
Fuori da ogni indifferenza, in una cosa:

Entro una sola cosa, un solo scialle
Che ci stringiamo intorno, essendo poveri: un calore,
Luce, potere, l'influsso prodigioso.

Qui, ora, dimentichiamo l'un l'altro e noi stessi.
Sentiamo l'oscurità di un ordine, un tutto,
Un conoscere, ciò che fissò l'incontro.

Entro il suo confine vitale, nella mente,
Diciamo Dio e l'immaginazione sono tutt'uno . . .
Quanto in alto l'altissima candela irraggia il buio.

Di questa luce stessa, della mente centrale,
Facciamo un'abitazione nell'aria della sera
Tale che starvi insieme è sufficiente.

Del Mero essere

La palma al fine della mente,
Oltre l'ultimo pensiero, sorge
Nella scena bronzea,

Un uccello dalle piume d'oro
Canta nella palma, senza senso umano,
Senza sentimento umano, un canto strano.

Sai allora che non è la ragione
A farci felici o infelici.
L'uccello canta. Le piume splendono.

La palma svetta al limite dello spazio.
Il vento muove piano nei rami.
Le piume infuocate ciondolano abbasso.

[†]From *Il Mondo Come Meditazione: Ultime Poesie 1950-1955 di Wallace Stevens*. Ed. and trans. Massimo Bacigalupo. Palermo, Italy: Acquario Press, 1986. Quoted with permission.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools.
By Melita Schaum. Foreword by John N. Serio. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1988.

Like Gerald Graff's recent "institutional history," *Professing Literature*, Melita Schaum's *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools* not only demonstrates the broad critical changes that necessarily make for contention and debate in any particular area of American literary study, it also suggests the fundamental ideological split that has repeatedly fractured the profession in this century. The split to which I refer is one that animates all sorts of very different critics, and it is the split in reading that occurs between a focus on formal matters and a stress on larger meanings. And, as Schaum painstakingly shows, Stevens is, perhaps, the perfect poet to use in theoretical struggles over the question of the relation of form and meaning in literature and literary study. This is so because his early generally anthologized poetry foregrounds, for better or worse, its brilliantly playful artifice, while his later less popular long poems aspire to a captivating philosophical resonance often tantalizingly just beyond their grasp. The critical schools identified here—humanist and aesthetic, new humanist and young formalist, New critical and phenomenological, romantic visionary and postmodern, deconstructive and new historicist—all have sought either to claim Stevens as one of their own, or to condemn him as the great original of some critical enemy. And several major critics in the course of their careers have both made the claim to Stevens and condemned him. (This is a curious wrinkle apparently distinctive of Stevens studies.)

In any event, Stevens has thus become equally prize and weapon, scapegoat and muse, in the continuing debates over form and meaning that in ever-new guises preoccupy the succession of critical schools. Each of these schools deploys its own "Stevens" (as well as its own "Yeats" or "Joyce" or "Milton" and so on), in the endless contest for critical dominance in the profession renewed by every new generation of critics. It may be that Schaum's book modestly "aims . . . to identify and explore those conflicts and discontinuities which emerge in the ongoing debate over Wallace Stevens' place in American letters"; but it also outlines, as suggestively as does Graff's general history of the profession, the underlying continuity and sameness of things as they are. That is, what we discover in reading Schaum's fascinating study is the recurring division that subsumes all the schools in a civil war still persisting between critical humanists, historically, socially, and morally concerned for ideas and relevance, and textual specialists, devoted to form, technique, and strategy no matter how immediately irrelevant and "merely" aesthetic or "narrowly" professional. (This division even accommodates the arguments between feminists and poststructuralists.) In short, a subtitle for Schaum's book could very well be: "It must change—and so become more the same."

The value of this book lies in its comprehensiveness and comprehension. Not only does Schaum cover every major critical school as its members seize on Stevens during the course of the last seventy years, she also provides, when necessary, useful backgrounds to the particular school being discussed by presenting its general statements of first principles before analyzing how the school uses (and often as not abuses) Stevens. This is especially helpful when dealing with critics and move-

ments either long forgotten such as Paul Elmer More, Irving Babbitt, and Harvard humanism, or newly minted trends such as Yale poststructuralist anti-humanism.

One of her discoveries is really noteworthy, Paul Rosenfeld's psycho-aesthetic criticism which reads like a prophecy of Helen Vendler's latest work on Stevens (in *Part of Nature, Part of Us* and *Words Chosen Out of Desire*). I cite now at some length the relevant passages from Rosenfeld on Stevens that Schaum has discovered:

> "Scarcely ever is his attack a direct and simple one. Generally, it is oblique, patronizing and twisted with self-intended mockery. The measure is sometimes languid, sometimes mincing, almost invariably buffon-like. It tips, pirouettes, executes an hundred little foppish turns and graces. It rocks complacently like a preening water-fowl upon its perch; waltzes in grotesque fury; keens like a comic rabbi; begins a movement and lets it end in air. . . . The poet is perceived leaning in evident boredom against the corner of a mantlepiece, or adjusting his monocle with a look of martyrdom."

Schaum's comment on all this is perfectly apropos. In his obsessive focus on the Pierrot figure in Stevens, Schaum claims, "Rosenfeld dwells on the futility at the heart" of this sort of verse. And here is more Rosenfeld, both to confirm Schaum's point and to illuminate a possible source of some current critical positions:

> "Uncomfortably self-aware, the pitiable gentleman can never quite spend himself in living, and remains emotionally naive. O Horrors! as a romantic poet. To be sure, little in his mask betrays him. Pierrot is sophisticated, worldly, lettered, read in philosophical authors Greek and Germanic. He is excessively correct, partly from natural elegance and partly in protest against romantic dishevelment; and functions suavely as reader to an empress, teller of a London bank, or lawyer in Hartford, Connecticut. Nevertheless, his unprojected energies and nobilities and grandiosities are perpetually assuming shapes of self-pity, yearning for enveloping love, and woman-worship; and although Pierrot is entirely too aware to mistake them for cosmic pains or enchantments of the heart, his sentimentalities threaten shamelessly to overcome him, and add immeasurably to his embarrassment. Hence his ideal self, the cruelly murdered 'I-the-Magnificent,' incapable of revealing itself in all its princeliness, gains satisfaction in the shape of revenge. It takes the exaltations of the subject emotional self, and very archly turns them into parody. Of melancholy soliloquy and philosophical dudgeon it makes a silvery music signifying nothing."

In Rosenfeld's dramatization of the division in Stevens between a post-symbolist ironist alienated equally from the masculine business world he must work in and his own "sentimentalities," one can see foreshadowed both the emphasis on pathos in Vendler's recent work (in counterpoise to Bloom's stress on the sublime) and also the lineaments of the historical critique of Stevens' self-divided capitalist culture in Frank Lentricchia's latest study, *Ariel and the Police*. Schaum has thus provided a valuable service to Stevens studies and to the profession of literary study as a whole by her suggestive demonstration of the prevailing continuities, as well as the contentious disjunctions, of twentieth-century American criticism and theory.

John N. Serio, editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, asks in his foreword, "what is Wallace Stevens—dandy, hedonist, aesthete, modernist, romantic, metaphysician, phenomenologist, decreator, deconstructor, postmodernist, visionary, nihilist, affirmer?"—to which Schaum's first-rate scholarly study answers: "All the things his critics have made of him."

> Beyond literary politics, moreover, a genealogy of Stevens' fluctuating reception among the critical schools illustrates the prevalence throughout the twentieth century of many theoretical issues active today, including questions of artistic accomplishment and humanistic involvement, questions of philosophical aridity and political complacency in Stevens' once-lush "country of metaphor," of nominalism and hedonism, of artifice and the search for reality, and the general questions of the poet's place in a kaleidoscopic American literary canon which appears to rearrange itself for each new critical view. Reexamining Stevens' critical heritage in this way not only affords a glimpse of the critical enterprise in action but brings to light a palimpsest of opinion on which our current versions of the poet may be merely the latest and by no means the last inscription.

I would like to propose, in light of Schaum's perspicacious conclusion, that our leading critics attempt the experiment of reading Stevens in a different way: why not try attributing noble motives to this Other. That is, why not try the kind of comic magnanimity that the poet himself, despite his human frailties, nevertheless was capable of learning to perform so poignantly—and pointedly: "Good-bye, / Mrs. Pappadopoulos, and thanks."

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The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality.
By J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988.

J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton have a dual purpose. They seek to provide both an interpretation of Stevens' poetry and also a partial analytic survey—largely negative—of philosophic criticism on the poetry. These purposes are of course interdependent, and to some degree all scholarly criticism must engage primary and secondary texts simultaneously. What distinguishes this particular study from most others is that it gives no definite priority to either of its purposes. In the first four of its six chapters, the authors take various critical positions as their main topics, but they intermingle their critique of these positions with interpretive excursions on Stevens' poems. These excursions have a polemical function—to show how other critics have misread the poems—but they are also intended to contribute to the authors' effort to establish an independent critical position. The last two chapters are more straightforwardly interpretive. In chapter five the authors seek to demonstrate that Stevens' poems can be especially well illuminated through comparison with the works of Nietzsche and of Ernst Cassirer, and in the last chapter, "The Marriage of the Rest," they attempt to formulate a summary statement about the central meaning of the poetry.

Although the two purposes of this study are interdependent, they are not equally well realized. In criticizing other critics, the authors are often shrewd and cogent.

They summarize complex arguments concisely and fairly, and they display genuine critical tact in identifying those spots at which a given theoretical paradigm breaks down or fails to contain the primary poetic texts. Their basic philosophical orientation is phenomenological. They have an excellent grasp of Heidegger, and they are particularly acute in dismantling the critical constructs of readers such as J. Hillis Miller, Helen Regueiro, Thomas Hines, and Paul Bové. Moreover, their own best readings of Stevens' poems are those that are presented as a corrective alternative to the readings of other critics. In pursuing their second purpose, to establish an independent critical position, they show considerably less power. In their preface, which takes the place of an introduction, they articulate no distinct theoretical structure, and this lack makes itself felt throughout the book. In the place of a theoretical structure, they make use of a few formulas or catchphrases with variations: "fictional integration," "integrative thinking," "supreme fictionality," "symbolizing configurations," "The symbolizing process in general," "integrative transformations," and "vital composure of integrations." Their emphasis on fictional integration enables them to get a firm fix on critics such as Regueiro and Bové who exert a distorting pressure on the centrifugal aspects of Stevens' poetry. This emphasis does not, however, carry the authors very far toward a clearly defined and fully elaborated view of Stevens' whole poetic enterprise. Consequently, the last chapter—the only chapter in which they are left pretty much to their own devices of interpretive construction—is the weakest in the book. Their topic in this chapter is the "marriage" of male and female figures in the poetry. They argue that this marriage represents that "vital composure of integrations" that stands in place of any metaphysical absolute. This basic thesis is not unreasonable, but the authors identify male and female characteristics in such trite and banal ways that the thesis fails to excite any interest. We are told, for instance, that the male represents "thought" and the female "feeling." Stevens' fictive absolute is surely composed of elements more intellectually substantial than these.

The pattern for the four chapters devoted primarily to other criticism is provided by the dichotomy between reality and the imagination. In the first two chapters, the authors seek to discredit critical efforts to treat either pole of this dichotomy as a term of resolution. (In the first chapter they attack "decreative" approaches to the poetry. In the second chapter, "the Vocabulary of Romanticism," they associate Romanticism with transcendentalism and autobiography and assert that it is not very important for Stevens.) The obvious next step beyond these two forms of reductive resolution is to locate resolution in an "interdependence" of reality and imagination. This is the authors' own position, and to clear the ground for an original statement of this position they devote chapters three and four to the "limitations" of previous phenomenological criticism—criticism based on the ideas of Husserl and Heidegger rather than on those of Cassirer, their own chief theoretic authority. In chapter three the authors focus on the interpretive use of the basic abstract terms "being" and "nothingness," and in chapter four they focus on efforts to delineate strict parallels between Stevens' ideas and those of Husserl or Heidegger. In exposing the emptiness of "being" and "nothingness" as these terms are used by Miller, Regueiro, Hines, and Bové, the authors write in a fashion that is not just pointed but even humorous and almost elegant. In discussing the problems encountered by critics like Hines who effect "literal transpositions of technical philosophical terminology," they are again sure of their ground, and they speak with authority. Noting, for example, that at one point Hines bolsters his case by simply mistranslat-

ing a crucial word in Heidegger, they observe that "interpretation via idiosyncratic philosophical jargon invites faux pas of this sort, often compounding the obscurity of the poem with an obscuration of theory." Given the level of their discourse in chapters three and four, it is curious and regrettable that in the fifth chapter, on Nietzsche and Cassirer, the authors not only render themselves vulnerable to the same charges they level against Hines and others but also seem quite oblivious to the irony of their position. This irony is particularly acute in their treatment of Nietzsche, for they reduce his complex and highly problematic philosophical speculations to a lockstep three-stage movement, and they choreograph Stevens' poetry to fit this movement with no hint of doubt or hesitation. Even so, it should be said that they identify a few very interesting images and phrases from Nietzsche in the poems of the 1940s, the period in which Stevens was actually reading Nietzsche.

In their criticism of Stevens' poetry, Leonard and Wharton embrace the phenomenological presupposition that there is an "essential" Stevens who exhibits "a coherence and consistency within which seemingly disparate poems can be seen as a 'body of poetry.'" This principle of ultimate coherence undoubtedly contains a valuable kernel of truth, but if it is applied, as it is by Leonard and Wharton, without adequate flexibility, it presents three serious risks. The first risk is that it may be taken to exclude the very possibility of conflict or even local contradiction in an author's work. For example, Leonard and Wharton argue that "for Stevens the structure of reality confounds our usual categories of objective, subjective, and intersubjective." Given the hypnotizing influence these categories have exercised on much Stevens criticism, this is a significant proposition, and it is, I think, ultimately right; but "ultimately" is not the same thing as "always." Previous critics are not simply wrong in observing that Stevens frequently poses the ideal of an unmediated perception of pure reality. The second risk inherent in the principle of ultimate coherence is that it encourages the kind of critical exegesis that neglects the structural integrity of individual poems and supports its propositions by stitching together passages from many different poems. This method tends to flatten out the poems, to blur their distinctive features and thus to undercut their status as unique moments of utterance; that is, it deprives the poems of those very qualities that render them most valuable as poems. Moreover, critical conceptions that are merely illustrated through a series of expediently tailored fragments are likely to remain static, and the more they are repeated the more opaque they tend to become, no matter how ingeniously these repetitions are masked with verbal variations.

Finally, the third risk inherent in the principle of ultimate coherence is that it may be taken to imply the impossibility of any real change and development in a poet's work. Leonard and Wharton explicitly commit themselves to the proposition that Stevens' poetry does not develop, "that in clearly important ways the Stevens of the later writings is the Stevens of the earlier." It is possible that they are right in this contention, and many of Stevens' critics would in fact agree with them; but it is also possible that they are wrong, and the whole question is hardly settled, as they seem to assume, by demonstrating that Miller and others make no very persuasive case for "a decisive break between [Stevens'] earlier and later poetry." A decisive break is not a development but a new beginning. Whether or not there is any development in Stevens' work, Leonard and Wharton do not advance the critical debate on this issue. Their methodological preconception merely begs the question. Moreover, if they are mistaken about Stevens' lack of development (as I believe they are), their "generally nonchronological path through the poetry" would contribute still further to that flattening effect I have mentioned.

If we include the rather too bulky backnotes, it may fairly be said that there is no chapter in this book that does not contain at least some new information or some significant critical observations. As I have suggested, the best and most important part of the book is its unusually penetrating critique of the large and still growing body of phenomenological criticism on Stevens. While the authors might well have done more to advance our positive understanding of Stevens' poetry, it is no small achievement to have diminished our misunderstandings.

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Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens.
By Frank Lentricchia. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

Ariel and the Police introduces itself as "a dialogue with Marxism . . . on the issue of the personal subject." Throughout, determinism—historically or biologically conceived—worries Lentricchia, most specifically because of its effects, namely, cynicism or passivity. Both implicitly and explicitly, *Ariel and the Police* is an argument for the possibility of human agency and engagement, while also offering a celebration of a "politics of lyricism." In this context, the introductory chapter considers Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar," noting the way in which the poem resists our desire for closure, and rereading Stevens' poem in light of Foucault, Michael Herr (who invokes the poem in his 1970 book on Vietnam, *Dispatches*), and William James. The jar that "takes dominion" is allied, in a seven-page meditation on Stevens' anecdote, with Foucault's carceral city, imperialism, paternalism, formalism, and all forms, literary or literal, of control.

To place the author of "Anecdote of the Jar" in "a tradition of American anti-imperialist writing" is, Lentricchia tells us, "absurd." At the same time, Lentricchia's disclaimer draws on Stevens' own characterization of his verse writing as "absurd," by which Stevens, as Lentricchia convincingly argues in a later chapter, expressed his awareness of the ways in which his society defined the work of American males as practical (not poetic). To quote *Ariel and the Police* on how Stevens' poetry and poetics were embedded in "the political and economic materiality of Stevens' America": "Modernist poetics in Stevens is a feminization of the literary life motivated by capitalist values, and, at the same time, a struggle to overcome this feminization which (in our culture) is more or less equivalent to the trivialization of literature and the literary impulse." Lentricchia also offers a compelling argument that Stevens' struggle was both against and, in ways, an extension of the genteel critics and poets, whose own resistance to the marginalization of poetry ultimately served the very forces they tried to resist.

To view American culture in this way is not original; it is begun, among other places, in Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (which Lentricchia mentions) and in Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace* (which he does not mention). But, as I have already suggested, *Ariel and the Police* still has much of value to offer, including impressive explications of "Anecdote of the Jar" and, later, of "Sunday Morning" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," all poems on which we might have thought there was little left to say. Lentricchia's discussion of how Stevens'

poetry, his journals, and his collecting were all attempts to "live outside intention, because all intention is contaminated by a capitalist ethos to commodify for a general market," or his reading of "Sunday Morning," which draws on Stevens' relationship to New York and commodification, is likely to change the way we approach Stevens from now on.

At the same time, Lentricchia's insistence on, and adeptness at, embedding Stevens' writing in its (and our) culture rests oddly with his opening gesture—repeated in the chapter on William James—where he claims the right to shape his own sense of history by giving us the "constellation" of Stevens, James, and Michael Herr. If he then turns on himself to note his own "absurdity," his appropriation of Stevens' language is still, in ways, to try to have his Viennese chocolates and eat them too. That is, he wants to treat Stevens in terms of the economic and social realities of Stevens' America (including the cultural constructions of that America) even as he wants to carve out his own (perhaps even his own lyrical) role in shaping our sense of cultural history.

Stevens once wrote Carl Zigrosser, speaking of one of his short anecdotal poems, that there was "no symbolism" in the poem; there was, however, Stevens added, "a good deal of theory about it." To toy with ideas about why and how such poems might resist closure or to speculate "about" the poems—"about," both in the sense of "on the subject of" and in the sense of that which "surrounds" them—may be to discover, not to impose on, Stevens' writing. And this is the approach Lentricchia takes in much of his final chapter. Moreover, *Ariel and the Police* clearly consists of a dialogue or dialogues with self (again a form Stevens invites). But is not to place "Anecdote of the Jar" on the side of anti-imperialism either to impose or to indulge in a kind of "weekend" escape from the practical? Presumably this is why Lentricchia withdraws his "absurd" desire to replace an historical Stevens with an anti-imperialist, saying later in the book that "no one, [he] trust[s], will accuse [Stevens] of being a revolutionary writer."

More attractive, and more subtle, is the way in which the third chapter of *Ariel and the Police* reawakens our sense of Stevens' belief—especially after his encounter with Stanley Burnshaw—in the social responsibility of his poetry. Lentricchia's formulation is that Stevens is politically hopeful "in the idealist tradition running from Schiller to Marcuse in which the aesthetic is the antithesis to the totalitarian story Foucault narrates in *Discipline and Punish*." While Lentricchia warns that this antithesis "*may* well be one of the subtlest effects of an incipient totalitarianism and its culture" (emphasis added), it is clearly an antithesis toward which *Ariel and the Police*, as its title proclaims, is drawn. Moreover, while Stevens might have been surprised by the company in which he is placed here, and while the political rhetoric might have put him off, this is one side of Stevens, who wrote in "Adagia," that he thought aesthetic ideas "tantamount to moral ideas" or who said (as Lentricchia notes) that poetry "helps us to live our lives."

Then again Stevens—well after Lentricchia locates "the birth of Wallace Stevens as class-conscious and self-conscious economic man"—also wrote that he found his attempt to write poetry with "contemporary significance" to be "boring." Even later, Stevens proclaimed that the "poet is individual. The politician is general." This is, of course, part of Lentricchia's point: the poet and the personal subject, Ariel-like, are in dialogue with all "plots on behalf of discipline . . . [or] theory" (book jacket), including Lentricchia's own urge to tell *the*—rather than *a*—story of Stevens' poetry and poetics in Stevens' America. Indeed, although the chapter on

Jamesian pragmatism is the book's shortest, it is both literally and conceptually central in voicing a Stevensian warning against thinking the urge for order can be dismissed, rather than guarded against.

In light of this portrait of his own project, it is surprising to find that the first section of Lentricchia's chapter on Stevens ends with a passionate attack on Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's writings, especially on *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Most obviously, Lentricchia accuses Gilbert and Gubar of imposing a counter-order in the name of liberation. Also, the discussion of Stevens and essentialist feminism seems designed to form a symmetrical relationship with the discussions of Foucault and the new historicism, and of James and the new pragmatism, in the first two chapters. But the desire for symmetry seems to backfire in that Gilbert and Gubar are unlikely candidates for being new Stevensians.

True, Lentricchia accuses essentialist feminism of taking a biological rather than an historical perspective, and thus of reinscribing the very biological determinism it deplores. And Stevens—though *Ariel and the Police* does not mention this—toyed with the idea of the poet as "biological mechanism" at about the same time he wrote his most overtly political poem, "Owl's Clover," and confronted his own doubts (echoed in the reviews of his first two books) about poetry's public role. Stevens seems to have considered the idea of poets as biologically determined in part as a way of underlining the necessity of poetry, and so of changing, as he wrote, "the status of the poet." This appeal to biology does not persist in Stevens' writings, however. Neither is biological determinism theoretically embraced by Gilbert and Gubar, as Lentricchia notes.

Further, Lentricchia's desire to enlist Stevens on the side of the Ariels occasionally leads him to overstate his case in his corrective reimagining of Wallace Stevens. The Stevens whose lack of sentimentality for democratic myths is transformed, in *Ariel and the Police*, into a realistic identification with ordinary people does not seem like the same person who—asked in 1934 what distinguished him as poet from the ordinary man—said that he had an "inability to see much point to the life of an ordinary man." In 1904, having just been admitted to the bar, not yet making enough money to feel he could marry, Stevens, we are told, showed a "shocking solidarity with the poor." Lentricchia's point is well taken. But it might be emphasized that even in 1904 Stevens' recognition seems to betray more shock than solidarity. By 1934—the same year he answered the questionnaire cited above—Stevens had entered the upper middle class, making (as is pointed out later in *Ariel and the Police*) the rough equivalent of $200,000 a year, in sharp contrast to those affected by the depression. And one year later, Stevens wrote that it was hard for him to say what "would have happened to Crispin in contact with men and women, not to speak of the present-day unemployed," some of whom were presumably those ordinary men living lives to which Stevens the year before could see no point; the letter continued: "I think it would have been a catastrophe for him." Again, Stevens' own divisions of self and tacit acknowledgment of the ways in which his world made men ordinary and trivialized poetry can be read here. Still, I think we should not gloss over the fact that the catastrophe which engages Stevens' sympathy is Crispin's. Similarly, Stevens' later disdain for a colleague who bought tea from the A & P while Stevens sought out expensive Viennese chocolates suggests perhaps less of a yearning for "the values denied him in advanced capitalist society" than Lentricchia who includes Viennese chocolates on the side of Ariel on his book jacket wants to argue. In any event, such disdain might be characterized in other ways.

In the same vein, the first section of the chapter on Stevens ends questioning Sandra Gilbert's reading of "A Postcard from the Volcano," saying she ignores "the circumstances of [the poem's] production," which is to say 1936, when, Lentricchia argues, Stevens had no inherited real estate and had produced little literary work. If Stevens had no dower house or grand ancestral property, he had achieved affluence as well as standing in his profession, and whatever the cost of this achievement, however defensive or self-subverting Stevens' acceptance of the role, he increasingly played the role of patriarch. How else to explain his (bad) reaction to his daughter's desire to marry someone from another class? If he had no ancestral real estate, he spent a good deal of time and money in his old age attempting to establish an ancestral line back to the elite group of first Dutch settlers in America. In other words, Lentricchia's reading of Stevens' life and writings as a form of patriarchy against itself is both enlightening and, at times, incisive. But to label attempts to see Stevens as patriarch ahistorical, or to construct an image of Stevens as feminist critic (standing in relation to Gilbert and Gubar as William James stands to the new pragmatists) seems misguided.

At the same time, I should repeat that there is much to be said for Lentricchia's careful assessment of Stevens' double internalization of and resistance to the ways in which his society dictated an "ordinary man" must live. And, finally, I would call attention to Lentricchia's reading of "The World as Meditation," where he finds Stevens returning late in life, unself-consciously, to the figure of the poet as woman as a "way of saying 'no' to the life he felt forced to lead." This is tantalizing, for all that the argument drops some of the careful attention to circumstances provided elsewhere. I say tantalizing because I, at any rate, would like to know a bit more about the circumstances of this saying no. And I would also like to know, throughout, more about the other side of the coin, which is to say about the relationship between Stevens' life with his family and his internalization of the feminine. Lentricchia argues that Stevens' ability to proclaim his early ("lady-like") poetic impulses to Elsie Moll, his future wife, nourished his sense of himself as poet in a domestic sphere, and that Elsie felt betrayed when Stevens offered their private exchanges to the public; finally, Lentricchia speculates, the failure of his marriage made poetry Stevens' "final source of selfhood: his last resort."

I wonder if another story might not be told. It is in an early letter that Stevens tells Elsie he likes her best, because she is *his*, in his thoughts. He would also write, during their courtship, asking her to wear a certain dress, hat, ribbon, or slippers—composing her before he visited. And in the very earliest years of their marriage, when Stevens' "real work" (to quote his father) took him on the road, or Elsie visited her family, he would often write arranging things so that they would not be in the same place at the same time. So it seems that if Stevens was left with poetry as a last resort, he was in part the architect of his own isolation. And if he internalized the feminine, he was able to do so in some part by keeping the one biological woman in his life not only "safe," but at a safe distance, from the very start.

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