

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



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# The Wallace Stevens Journal

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## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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## Variations on a Theme in "Peter Quince at the Clavier"

MICHAEL O. STEGMAN

Air, with subjects in counterpoint, on a theme by Meyer and Baris

**P**ETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER" may not only revel in the Baroque musical sources and Renaissance garden images that Kinereth Meyer and Sharon Baris read in their article as the poem plays out "an early but complex example of the 'act of the mind' which Stevens sees at the center of the creative process";<sup>1</sup> the poem may even draw on its own contemporary American milieu. This essay will play out through a series of variations my own improvisatorial realization of the figures recorded in the tablature of Stevens' poem. This improvisation will counterpoint two related subjects: material surrounding the poem's genesis drawn from events on Broadway, at Carnegie Hall, and in the pages of *Poetry* magazine; and the poem's argument itself.

### First Variation: On All Subjects

Peter Quince's theatrics, because of their unintentional burlesque of a tragic love story, neatly echo the rest of Shakespeare's play as it also burlesques human love. In both cases, however, the laughter rests on death. Only through forgiveness has death been temporarily forestalled and have Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius survived their midsummer night. If we sustain the farce of Peter Quince's character in Stevens' poem, the parallels between "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* continue. Again a character named Peter Quince has chosen the wrong vehicle to advance himself. To seduce the woman in the "blue-shadowed silk" he selects a story of a woman's constancy: Susanna and the Elders. That the poem ends by seeming to transmute lust into art hints at its echoes of Shakespeare and, further, at the ironic key of the work.

During the winter of 1915, two events may have also contributed their lines to the counterpoint that cleverly informs the music of Stevens' poem: Granville-Barker's Broadway staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in February as well as the premiere in Carnegie Hall of Scriabin's symphony "Poem of Fire: Prometheus" in March. The New York press reviewed and discussed both widely and the April 1915 issue of *The Musical Quarterly*, to which Stevens subscribed, devoted several articles to critiquing the Scriabin symphony and Futurist music.<sup>2</sup>

The role in Stevens' first efforts at publication of Harriet Monroe and her magazine, *Poetry*, may have also added its voice to the poem's music. Possibly encouraged by Harriet Monroe's enthusiastic acceptance of Stevens' poems in November of 1914, Stevens sent her more poems in late 1914 or early 1915. Monroe tartly rejected these poems in January, but indicated that she wanted him to continue to send poems.<sup>3</sup> When Stevens next did so, no later than early June 1915, he sent her "Sunday Morning."<sup>4</sup> *Poetry's* April 1915 issue published

an essay by John Gould Fletcher titled "Miss Lowell's Discovery: Polyphonic Prose" which praised the "orchestral quality" of Amy Lowell's poetry. Fletcher himself was famous for writing poems he called "color symphonies."<sup>5</sup> During the June 1915 exchange between Monroe and Stevens concerning the revisions for "Sunday Morning," *Poetry* published T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," another poem about a bumbling lover who mentions another Shakespearean buffoon (Polonius) with a poor memory for Biblical stories (Jephtha and his daughter).<sup>6</sup>

A discussion of these subjects alone can produce a commentary on the poem that offers a different realization than that proposed by Meyer and Baris. However, the final section of this performance, grounded in the poem's milieu, suggests the poem, by lampooning the aesthetic debates of its time, may arrive at a comic cadence as its "act of the mind."

#### Second Variation: Peter Quince and Broadway

During March of 1915, articles and reviews of Granville-Barker's radical production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* filled the New York papers. In this staging the fairies were all painted silver or gold and wore headpieces that looked like "tin shavings." Instead of the standard Mendelssohn accompaniment, Cecil Sharp had arranged and composed a series of songs based on 17th Century English music from the *Fitzwilliam Virginal*.<sup>7</sup>

While no published journal entries or correspondence records that Stevens ever attended a performance of this particular production, Stevens, an avid theater and concertgoer, more than likely read of it in the newspapers. The coincidental performance of this play near the genesis of Stevens' poem is not the primary reason, of course, for Peter Quince's appearance in the poem, but a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which set out to be deliberately modern and jettisoned Mendelssohn does suggest why a musical Quince may have been on Stevens' mind.

#### Third Variation: Peter Quince and Music

The early issues of *The Musical Quarterly*, begun in 1915, discussed the newest music on the scene—that of Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Scriabin, whom the magazine called the Futurists. Stevens himself subscribed to the magazine. The articles of the April 1915 issue each attempted to define the new music, and, as a result, the larger definition of music itself. All of the authors appear to have had a difficult time with the "Futurists" because their music appeared to violate a sense of beauty that the critics in these issues of the magazine associated with Beethoven, Chopin, and Debussy. In one, "Judgment of Paris or What Worth Beauty," the author discriminates between a practical and an aesthetic attitude toward a work of art. A second, "Music and Material Expression (A Plea for Aristotle)" by Cyril Scott, argues against programme music and concludes that since "to have certain emotions associated with a thing is surely not to express that thing[,] . . . music does not truly and actually express, beyond the few things that it really can mimic, those which many literateurs and musicians would fain make it express." Scott continues that if

"music can express only what it can mimic, how can an abstract, soundless thing like Love be expressed by a noise?" More than these two, a third article concerning Scriabin, "Noises, Smells, and Colours" by John F. Runciman, develops several ideas that seem to have some bearing on Stevens' "Peter Quince."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, a quick glance at some random reviews from *The New York Times* for concerts around the time of the premiere in March of 1915 of Scriabin's "Prometheus" Symphony reveals that its writers consistently felt that programme music was often "more interesting to read about than to hear."<sup>9</sup>

At the time of the poem's composition (1915), both programme music and its derivative, the symphonic tone poem, had just about run their courses—Scriabin, Mahler, and Stravinsky would make them irrelevant for understanding music—and insofar as the programme continued to preface the music, it became a source of "exasperating literary pretensions rather than of genuine musical ideas."<sup>10</sup> Soon Satie would begin to lampoon programme notes with his own outlandish parodies of Debussy and others.

Runciman's cutting essay, "Noises, Smells and Colours," reviews Scriabin's "Poem of Fire: Prometheus" Symphony and satirizes the Futurist movement in music as well as Scriabin's association with Schoenberg and Stravinsky whom Runciman groups together as a parody of the three B's. He sustains the pervasive mockery with an extended metaphor of moonshine and lunacy that savages the mathematical exactness of Scriabin's algebra of the senses and Scriabin's claim of "the relation of music to colour and the connection between perfumes and music."<sup>11</sup> Scriabin had merely extended the meaning of the word chromatic to include its other meaning, color, and invented a chromatic scale for colors that matched the chromatic scale of tones in music. The result of this new music theory, Scriabin's "Poem of Fire: Prometheus," included a line in the score for an instrument built to allow a musician to play the colors: the *clavier à lumières* or color-piano. Runciman responded to Scriabin that "if a means can be found of producing upon the brain, by colour through intermediation of the eye, a precisely analogical effect to that which is produced by sound through the medium of the ears, if these means can be registered and the action set down in terms of cold arithmetic, so that a *clavier à lumières* can be tuned as accurately as a piano—then indeed it will be time to begin rhapsodising about colour-symphonies: then, but not till then."<sup>12</sup> However, Peter Quince, with his own synesthesia, probably would not have found Scriabin's claim too far from his own that "Music is feeling, then, not sound" (CP 90) nor would he have found much to disagree with in Runciman's conclusion that the traditional composers "knew the soul could only manifest itself through the body."<sup>13</sup>

While critics of the poem point out that the *clavier* Quince plays could be almost any keyboard instrument, they neglect this more contemporary *clavier*. In addition to Runciman's essay, *The New York Times* and other New York papers also touted the performance of Scriabin's "Prometheus" Symphony

and its use of the especially built *clavier à lumières* meant to provide the light show which the symphony's score called for.

With the "Prometheus" Scriabin not only claimed that music could express feeling, but that each note of the musical scale could be matched with a particular color that could also express a feeling. Furthermore, the lights and sounds could be combined into new harmonies of light and sound and played together as a symphonic tone poem. Several previous attempts to achieve this feat with the "Prometheus" had failed for lack of a suitable instrument to "play" the colors on. In New York, the ingenuity of the Edison Testing Laboratories, funded by "a number of influential ladies" and the Russian Symphony Society, created a working "color organ" or, as the *Times* called it, a *clavier à lumières*.<sup>14</sup>

This *clavier*, which operated like a modern mixing panel for theatrical lighting, was provided with a keyboard (a *clavier*) and two pedals to control the lights. At the Carnegie Hall performance a musician "played" the instrument as it projected the various colors onto two gauze strips that hung behind the orchestra. The lights were moved across the gauze and faded from one color to the next according to Scriabin's score which had a part specifically written for this instrument. In spite of the expense needed to make the *clavier à lumières* work, those who attended an early tryout of the instrument in New York, including Isadora Duncan and Pavlova, felt that "while the emotions of color are not always in harmony with the music or understandable, yet . . . the attempt ought to be made to make an initial public appearance of the device." The *Times's* reviewer of the concert was not as circumspect:

If we may believe all we are told, Mr. Scriabin's purpose is to expound various philosophical matters in his composition. . . . As music the composition is on the level with some of the most recent developments of cacophony and impotent invention. Only the barest outline of thematic material is to be discerned, and that of a quality that bears little relation to what has hitherto been understood as musical. The composer has invented a scale of his own, of which he makes great use. The harmonic substance is of the same order, and is, even to ears inured to modern practices, practically unintelligible throughout. To the composer's meaning it is impossible to find a clue, if there is one. . . . The composer's clue was not intrusted to the lights, and to the first bewildered beneficiaries of the new art it seemed to be a sealed book.<sup>15</sup>

Stevens places Peter Quince at an instrument that he labels a *clavier*. Though Quince's instrument does not necessarily have to be the *clavier à lumières* of Scriabin's music, the prominence of the word so close to the time Stevens was writing the poem offers the possibility that Stevens may have been drawn to the word. Additionally, Scriabin's transcendental speculations on synesthesia parallel the poem's own punning references to synesthesia: touch redefined as sound.

While this poem has been likened to everything from a clavier sonata to a Baroque opera, part of Stevens' humor in the poem may still derive from his own lampooning of the symphonic poem in a poem that uses a number of instruments from the orchestra and seems to have four movements each with a different tempo. The poem's beginning may also slyly parody Scriabin's insistence on a direct and almost algebraic equivalence between color and music and the emotions that music evokes. Finally, the poem's series of interlocking equivalences that spin off into an analogy where narrative imitates musical forms all suggest that in the end Peter Quince does not feel constrained by a logic of form—musical or narrative—when it comes to making the best out of his impromptu on seduction.

Nevertheless, the humor of the poem does not solely depend upon a reader's knowledge of the critical battles being fought over Futurist music, since choosing a story with a theme of constancy (Susanna and the Elders) to effect a seduction suffices.

#### Fourth Variation: Peter Quince and *Poetry* Magazine

Add to this musical milieu another reference to music from the April 1915 issue of *Poetry* (the same month as *The Musical Quarterly's* second issue previously discussed). There, in an article titled "Miss Lowell's Discovery: Polyphonic Prose," John Gould Fletcher lauds the discovery of a new poetic form—polyphonic prose—and its discoverer, Amy Lowell.<sup>16</sup> The article excessively praises this discovery as one that exceeds the importance of the First World War and the discovery of radium. Fletcher, famous at the time for his own "color symphonies" in poetry instead of music, precisely defines polyphonic prose using terminology from music and one reference to "the colors of the chromatic palette." His celebration of Amy Lowell's "orchestral quality" laments that a poet of today "who feels he has a new music to express" is stymied by the tired remnants of a three-hundred-year-old tradition of rhyme gone threadbare. For Fletcher, this poet is like "a man who would try to play Richard Strauss or Debussy, or any of the modern composers, on a harpsichord."<sup>17</sup>

As Meyer and Baris point out in their article, critics of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" almost invariably note at some point that the poem suggests either a piece of music or some musical form.<sup>18</sup> While these critics often credit the persona of Peter Quince with irony, they do not extend this irony to the poem's "musical" structure and its "orchestral quality." Stevens may have shaped this comic aspect of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" as his response to Fletcher's pretentious claim that Lowell had discovered that "poetry is music" and, further, that "she has found it possible to vary the rhythm and meter of these strange new poems of hers almost at will, following the inner emotion of the things she has to say."<sup>19</sup>

Stevens had reason to toy with *Poetry*. In January of 1915, he had received a postcard from Harriet Monroe, the editor of *Poetry*. In it she rejected a number of his poems which Monroe thought were "weirder" than the war series and she didn't like them. She did, however, leave him an opening to send more



verse and wrote that Stevens "will surely catch [her] next time if he will only uncurl and uncoil a little—condescend to chase his mystically mirthful and mournful muse out of the nether darkness."<sup>20</sup>

This postcard, coming as it did just as Stevens had begun to send his poems off to be published, must have hurt since these poems were probably, like "Phases" for the "Poems of War" issue of *Poetry* (November 1914), newly written.<sup>21</sup> The other two groups of poems Stevens published in 1914 ("Carnet de Voyage" and "Two Poems") were clearly old ones drawn from the June Books and they were printed in a magazine—*Trend*—edited by one of Stevens' old Harvard friends, Pitts Sanborn. Though the *Poetry* rejection did not completely deter him, for he published five other poems during 1915, Stevens sent all of these poems to magazines edited by his New York friends.<sup>22</sup> The next poem he sent to *Poetry* was "Sunday Morning."

In June 1915, the same month that Stevens and Monroe were corresponding about which version of "Sunday Morning" would appear, *Poetry* published T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Stevens may have refrained from sending "Peter Quince" to *Poetry* at this time because it too closely paralleled the general outline of "Prufrock," especially in its use of Shakespeare and the subject of failure with women. Then again, the comic tone of "Peter Quince" suggests a parody of Eliot as well as of Fletcher and Amy Lowell. While it would be risky to say that Stevens' poetry at this time was written exclusively to avenge Monroe's criticism of the "weird" poems he sent her at the end of 1914, the rebuke must have lingered since the reconstruction of this group of rejected poems indicates that the poems were written in the same imagist mode as those of Fletcher and Lowell.<sup>23</sup>

#### Fifth Variation: Peter Quince and the Poem's Argument

While Peter Quince plays his clavier, he improvises an argument whose theme is seduction. Quince may not intend to be so blunt about what he wants; nevertheless, he arrives at an impromptu exemplum replete with voyeurism, autoeroticism, deceit, and death: the elements of his retelling of Susanna and the Elders. For a story that traditionally extols Susanna's constancy and not her beauty, the emphasis on beauty in the poem's concluding section seems just the wrong exegetical focus. Further, the poem's narration breaks off just at the point where Susanna will be vindicated and the elders punished with death. There Quince improvises a discussion of aesthetics that belatedly mentions the elders' deaths in passing as it focuses, absurdly enough, on Susanna's death, thus burying Quince's fears of rejection and transfiguring his own lust into a sacrament to Susanna's death. At this same juncture (the start of section IV) critics substitute Stevens as the concluding voice of the poem and neglect Quince altogether.<sup>24</sup> In following this course, they enter into the hush of "Sunday Morning" and neglect Quince's buffoonery.

The sublimation of lust into aesthetics thus safely skirts the poem's dangerous emotions even as it suggests that art may be a form of licensed voyeurism. Just what we ought to expect of a character from a Shakespearean comedy. Further, Stevens' choice of the Susanna episode suggests an awareness of the

dangers of such desires, as the tragedy of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* suggests the terror of death that Shakespeare intimates may hover near any wedding. Whatever dangers do reside in Quince's admission of his lust are also successfully parried by the poem's running joke about the confusion between music and emotions.

To develop this theme, the poem's first three lines take advantage of the natural confusion between considering music as euphonic sounds and as a "spiritual impulse" or emotion. The "sounds" ("music") that Quince's fingers make by playing on the clavier's keys themselves "make a music" (an emotion) on his "spirit." These concurrent meanings of music drift naturally from one to the other, but the use that Stevens makes of this elision becomes clear in the poem's next line: "Music is feeling, then, not sound." Having created the sense that this statement concludes the poem's initial equivalency ("Just as . . . so . . ."), the "then" establishes, as if it were logic, the identity of music with emotion, a "feeling." The line also puns that while feeling—as touch—is "not sound," it is music. A clever tautology, especially since the fingers touching on the clavier's keys produce Quince's feelings (emotions).

A further development of this pun could conclude that fingers which touch or feel certain keys of an instrument directly produce an emotion, a feeling, and not sound at all. The line "Music is feeling, then, not sound" creates a kind of sly synesthesia where music can be touched as well as touching. The joke goes on since what Peter Quince "feels" (emotion or sense?) while desiring this woman is music (sounds, an emotion, or something touched?) which has been prompted by thoughts of her "blue-shadowed silk." He can yet only desire (a feeling) and not feel (touch) this woman which his musical bagatelle may remedy. No wonder then that Quince's bathetic exemplum for his desires, the elders' lust for Susanna in her bath, continues these musical terms. The elders wish to touch Susanna with something more than the music they are feeling. Indeed, the person who seems to come closest to touching Susanna is Susanna herself: she has searched "The touch of springs" in her bath which causes her to sigh "For so much melody." Not only do these lines echo Quince's own mention of music, they intimate a moment of autoeroticism. This last extension suggests that Peter Quince's entire activity, including writing poetry itself, has its own onanistic overtones.

And so, while Susanna may be touched by some "melody," clearly the elders do not touch her. The closest they get—a breath on her hand—becomes magnified into the "roaring horns" of Susanna's shock and their deaths. A fear of death and, more appropriately, a fear of failure hovers near Quince's retelling of Susanna's tale, and her shock may reflect Quince's own worst fears of this woman's rejection of his desires as well as reveal the comic disproportion of an example that portrays him as an aging voyeur and not as a romantic lover wooing with his music.

With Susanna's discovery of the elders, Quince's reasonably accurate retelling of Susanna's story abruptly ceases, ending also the narrative development of Susanna's story which has inexorably linked each of the first three sections

of the poem. If part of the poem's comedy comes from Quince's inept choice of a story to further his seduction of the woman, then the comedy might also be furthered by dropping the Susanna story in favor of a discussion of beauty that begins with a startling claim that reverses the Platonic conception of beauty at the very moment when the story would have to confront the elders' death. To continue the Apocryphal story would lead Quince to the traditional celebration of Susanna's constancy and successful resistance of the elders' advances which inform conclusions of the story that Quince would want to avoid, along with a fate which could also be, like that of the elders', a catastrophe, though not necessarily one involving Quince's actual death. Instead, Quince breaks off his narration of the Susanna episode with the discovery scene and proceeds without any transition to a discussion of an aesthetics which deflects lust toward art and transmutes all of the poem's puns on sensory experience and music into a "constant sacrament of praise": a phrase that further suggests that "Death's ironic scraping" can also transform praise, however fatuous or self-serving, into a sacrament.

Though Quince may never touch the woman either, he concludes that she has affected him and his clavier music and its "feeling[s]," just as "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders." While the elders may suffer death for their desires, "Death's ironic scraping" does not finish off Quince. What he does have if not her is his music: the clavier piece, his feelings, even the memory of her "blue-shadowed silk" which has been the source of his desires for her. With these he can immortalize Susanna and the woman with music, including poetry's, and thus achieve immortality for himself. If Beauty must become flesh to become immortal,<sup>25</sup> then Quince's music, his feelings, too, become immortal through the poem's language that moves it back and forth between the figurative and the literal, between the momentariness of the mind and the flesh of the poem. Quince triumphs over the woman, but his triumph, another ironic scraping, is that he is condemned to poetry about the woman and not the woman herself.

Not exactly the end that Quince may have desired at the outset, but one that suits a Peter Quince who also has no success at choosing plays for wedding celebrations either. And so, when commentators read this last section without any intervening sense of its comedy, they see only a statement of Stevens' aesthetic and neglect to consider the mad scramble of someone, given Quince's natural ineptness, trying to bluff his way to the conclusion of a seduction gone awry.

Critics of "Peter Quince" who acknowledge the latent comedy of using Shakespeare's Quince tend to read the poem's concluding section as one not spoken by Quince, but by Stevens himself without any intervening mask or irony. Without a directive altering the poem's opening dramatic premise (and none is obvious), they neglect the bumbling character of Peter Quince who continues to misplay his hand. Instead, the poem's critics consistently read section IV out of context and without any of its own comic possibilities as evi-

dence of the theme explored in "Sunday Morning" that "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP 69).<sup>26</sup>

Section IV begins, as does the poem's first section, with a strong reliance on copulative verbs to produce a sense of inevitability. The poem opens by claiming that "Music is feeling" and that "what I feel . . . Is music," and concludes with similar syntax that "Beauty is momentary" and that "it is immortal." Further, the opening's use of correlatives ("Just as . . . so") to conjoin its claims returns in the final section with the use of a "But" and a semi-colon as coordinating conjunctions. In both the beginning of the poem and its conclusion, these copulative and coordinating relationships establish bonds between music and feeling or between the transitory and the immortal as if they were an inevitable dialectic.

The supporting exempla that follow each of these two pseudo-syntheses run counter to their supposed purpose. The story of Susanna, meant to reinforce Quince's thoughts on the capacity for music to express or be an emotion, can only thwart the larger purpose of Quince's purpose—to reveal his desires. In section IV, the development of the evidence that "The body dies; the body's beauty lives" gradually slips toward an ambiguity that undermines rather than clarifies the anti-platonist conclusion that "Beauty is momentary in the mind . . . But in the flesh it is immortal" (CP 91).

The series of couplets introduced by the conjunction "so" each presents evidence to support Quince's aesthetic theory and each has problems. They each should have two elements to them as they mimic their support of the line "The body dies; the body's beauty lives." All three easily repeat the first half of the proposition ("The body dies") with their repetition of "die": "evenings die . . . gardens die . . . maidens die." Such a distinct use of grammatical parallelism leads us to expect that the remainder of each example's sentence will reveal the ways in which "the body's beauty lives"; and yet, these second elements do not fully sustain such an expectation.

Although the evenings of the first couplet die and become a flowing wave, the absence of a verb or clear punctuation to signal the expected correlation intimates an improvisatory link even weaker than the semi-colon of the original proposition. Nevertheless, the consistent use of the present tense in all of the examples and participles in two, stresses a timelessness that does not place limits on the extension of the state throughout the present time to the past and future. This "interminably flowing" wave ought to reveal how the evenings' beauty lives, but the contextual association of the word "interminably" with the previous use of "immortal" utterly ignores the sense of the word that implies "impatience or disgust at the length of something" (OED). The cognate for "interminably," "eternally," would seem to be the more appropriate word here were it not for Peter Quince's own troubles whenever he opens his mouth. And so, while the poem's commentators may conclude that these evenings support the poem's "glorification of the transitory but redemptive moment of artistic perception," Stevens might also be burlesquing this "continuous cycle of sensuous embodiment, . . . decreation, and re-embodiment in

the mind [that] result in immortal harmonies" not only as an "interminably flowing" wave, but as interminable one.<sup>27</sup>

In the second couplet, the gardens die and then, since their "beauty lives," they go on to scent winter with their "meek breath." This couplet fulfills the proposition easily except for the phrase "done repenting." A parsing of the sentence could allow the phrase to modify either "die" (adverbially) or, adjectivally, "The cowl of winter" or "winter" itself, but parsing would not reveal what needs repenting. Possibly, the winter repents for killing off the garden or possibly the garden dies after having finished its repentance. An association of the word "cowl" with penitential religious orders provides another convenient though not explicatory connection.

And finally, that the maidens in the third couplet may die their deaths accompanied by a celebratory song already suggests a problem. In the first of the three couplets, some implied identity completes the relationship between evenings and a wave. The connection in the second is made explicit: the "meek breath" of the gardens that die are "scenting / The cowl of winter." In each of these cases the examples are meant to echo how, although "The body dies," "the body's beauty lives." In the third couplet, relying on the repetition of the word "maiden," we are to understand that through this celebration in song the maidens live on. The momentum of the first two couplets leads to such a reading; and yet, the prepositional phrase can also function adverbially, in which case it stresses how the maidens die and not how their death functions as an example of the original proposition. Further, the easy personifications associated with the evening (death) and with the garden (repentance) lose their ease when the death of maidens ends in an "auroral / Celebration."

Quince's examples mimic the two-part structure of the original proposition: "The body dies" (part 1); "the body's beauty lives" (part 2). Further, the first part of each example moves closer to the corporeal (evenings—gardens—maidens) as the predication within each couplet becomes more abstract (going and flowing—scenting and repenting—no participles). In the last couplet, the predication vanishes as well as the possessive pronoun "their" which assists in clarifying how evenings and gardens continue. Considering the "Celebration of a maiden's choral" as Quince's statement of how the maidens "live[]" after their bodies die omits the one aspect the two previous couplets claim for their subject: their own unique connection to their own continuing immortality.

These difficulties interfere with the poem if this section only explicates Stevens' aesthetic and not Peter Quince's efforts to deflect the course of the Susanna story away from its catastrophe. Quince's scramble to improvise an aesthetic ends not with the death of the elders, but with choral music, a convenient segue to the poem's final stanza and its mention of Susanna's music.

The punning references to music, sound, feeling, and touch that fueled the poem's opening also return, and we are left to consider that if "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders," then that music may have been the "melody" she found in her "Concealed imaginings." While Bloom refers to this music as "narcissistic self-absorption,"<sup>28</sup> the onanistic

overtones of Susanna's melody may enrich and broaden the humor of this concluding stanza as it elevates Susanna's beauty beyond the lust of the elders to a "constant sacrament of praise."

Susanna's music has led the elders to their deaths, though she and her music, whatever that is, have "escape[d]." "Death's ironic scraping" proves the assertion that although Susanna has died, her beauty—her music—lives. This is as it ought to be except that Quince ends by downplaying that "Susanna's music," now labelled her beauty, led the elders to their deserved deaths. Similarly, the thoughts about the woman in "blue-shadowed silk" that awakened in Peter Quince a "strain" like that "Waked in the elders by Susanna," which may also have led him to his own failure, have been played through his improvised clavier music and not his actions to conclude as a sacrament of praise and not, as it began, as lust.

#### Coda

Themes from the worlds of music, theater, and poetry in the air that winter and spring of 1915 as Stevens prepared to write "Peter Quince at the Clavier" could be a natural source for him to draw on. Considering the themes in this way, and especially his difficulties with *Poetry*, may even help to explain part of the exaggerated tone of secrecy and daring that Alfred Kreymborg, editor of *Others*, breathlessly recollects when he describes how Stevens "suddenly stuffed a package into his editorial pocket, with the hasty proviso: 'I must ask you not to breathe a word about this. Print it if you like, send it back if you don't.' It was the manuscript—in the most minute handwriting—of the now famous poem, *Peter Quince at the Clavier*."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, while "Peter Quince at the Clavier" stands well enough on its own lines, the literature, theater, and music that surrounded its appearance still serve to remind us of the redefinition of art that changed this era and of Stevens' own comic contribution to this milieu.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Kinereth Meyer and Sharon Baris, "Reading the Score of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Stevens, Music, and the Visual Arts," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12, 1 (Spring 1988): 56-67.

<sup>2</sup>"Folk Music for Shakespeare's Drama—Mr. Cecil Sharp's Interesting Experiment in the 'Midsummer Night's Dream' Production," *New York Times* 7 Feb. 1915: VII, 3. "Mr. Barker Gives Some Shakespeare," review, *New York Times* 17 Feb. 1915: II, 3. "Shakespeare: New Style," *New York Herald* 17 Feb. 1915: 7. "A Midsummer Night's Dream," review, *New York Tribune* 17 Feb, 1915: 9. "Music by Colors Made by Machine," *New York Times* 19 Mar. 1915: I, 15. "'Color Music' in 'The Poem of Fire,'" *New York Times* 21 Mar. 1915: II, 12. "'Color Music' Tried Here for the First Time," *New York Times* 28 Mar. 1915: V, 15. John F. Runciman, "Noises, Smells and Colours," *The Musical Quarterly* I, ii (April 1915): 149-165. Sidney Feshbach, "Wallace Stevens and Erik Satie: A Source for 'The Comedian as the Letter C,'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* XI (Spring 1969): 818. Throughout this essay quotations from "Peter Quince at the Clavier" will be taken from Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 8-10, which rectifies the error in the final section of the poem as published in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 187.

<sup>4</sup>The first mention of "Sunday Morning" occurs in a letter to Harriet Monroe dated June 6, 1915, regarding her selection of numbers from the poem. In Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 183.

<sup>5</sup>John Gould Fletcher, "Miss Lowell's Discovery: Polyphonic Prose," *Poetry* VI, 1 (April 1915): 32-36, and David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 341-42.

<sup>6</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Poetry* VI, iii (June 1915): 130-135.

<sup>7</sup>"Brass Beard for Oberon," *New York Times* 7 Feb. 1914: V, 3, and 7 Feb. 1915: VII, 3.

<sup>8</sup>Charles H. Farnsworth, "The Judgement of Paris or The Worth of Beauty," *The Musical Quarterly* I, ii (April 1915): 162-168. Cyril Scott, "Music and Material Expression (A Plea for Aristotle)," *The Musical Quarterly* I, ii (April 1915), 183 and 184. Runciman, 149-161.

<sup>9</sup>"The Boston Orchestra," *New York Times* 19 Mar. 1915: 10.

<sup>10</sup>Roger Scruton, "Programme Music," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1980), XV, 286.

<sup>11</sup>Runciman, 149.

<sup>12</sup>Runciman, 156.

<sup>13</sup>Runciman, 160.

<sup>14</sup>*New York Times*, 28 Mar. 1915: V, 15.

<sup>15</sup>*New York Times*, 28 Mar. 1915: V, 15.

<sup>16</sup>Fletcher, 32-36.

<sup>17</sup>Fletcher, 35.

<sup>18</sup>Meyer and Baris, 58.

<sup>19</sup>Fletcher, 34.

<sup>20</sup>Buttel, 187.

<sup>21</sup>Buttel, 186-188.

<sup>22</sup>George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 64-65 and 91-93.

<sup>23</sup>Litz, 27-43.

<sup>24</sup>Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 110. Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 37-38. Michel Benamou, "Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination," *The Act of the Mind*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965), 114. Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 36. Robert G. Goulet and Jean Watson Rosenbaum, "The Perception of Immortal Beauty: 'Peter Quince at the Clavier,'" *College Literature* 2, (Winter 1975): 70-71. A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 43. Kinereth Meyer and Sharon Baris, "Reading the Score of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Stevens, Music, and the Visual Arts," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12, 1 (Spring 1988): 64. Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 75.

<sup>25</sup>Riddel, 75.

<sup>26</sup>Bloom, 37; Litz, 44; Riddel, 76.

<sup>27</sup>Meyer and Baris, 64.

<sup>28</sup>Bloom, 36.

<sup>29</sup>Alfred Kreyborg, *Troubadour—An Autobiography* (New York: Liveright, 1925), 187.

## ‘Sepulchres of the Fathers’: ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction’ and the Ideology of Origins

PAUL MORRISON

I am, to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father [*als mein Vater bereits gestorben*], while as my mother, I am still living and becoming old [*als meine Mutter lebe ich noch und werde alt*].

—Nietzsche, “Why I Am So Wise”

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?

—Stevens, “Sunday Morning”

**I**N EMERSON’S *NATURE*, the simplest of all possible observations, “the sun shines to-day,” assumes the urgency of an injunction:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs? . . . The sun shines to-day also. . . . There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship. (3)

Like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, who is “too much in the sun,” too intensely a son burdened by his inheritance or the sepulcher of his father, the “new man” of Emerson’s “new world” is bound to a disabling genealogy. The promise given this new man, however, the literally “pre-posterous” promise of American poetry, is release from this belatedness, from a filiation that is but the inheritance of the grave. If the new world is necessarily second in order after the old, the historically belated can yet become the imaginatively original; if the son is necessarily second in order after the father, the new man can yet negotiate an original relation to the sun. The “sun shines to-day,” however, only when the son assumes the burden of this “pre-posterous” newness, when he effectively wills the sun, that most familiar of revelations, to shine anew.

It is this burden of “pre-posterous” newness that the “ephebe” of Wallace Stevens’ “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Emerson’s “new man” newly formulated, is enjoined to assume:

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



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

(CP 380)<sup>1</sup>

To see the sun anew is here to see it "abstracted" (the first section of "Notes" is "It Must Be Abstract," from *abstractus*, "to separate out from") the accumulated burden of names, the inheritance of the fathers that mediates the relation of son to sun. "But do not use the rotten names," Stevens writes in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (CP 183); "When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of man . . . you shall not hear any name," Emerson argues in "Self-Reliance" (68). The "new man" or "ephebe" inherits a sun sullied by *vestigia*, a sun already inscribed with and by the names of his precursors. If, however, the ephebe is "to have life in himself," if he is not, as Stevens writes in "Sunday Morning," to give his "bounty to the dead" (CP 67), he must "cleanse" the sun of a disabling nomenclature, "nomanclatter" as Joyce names it in *Finnegans Wake*, nomenclature as clutter:

Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was  
A name for something that never could be named.  
There was a project for the sun and is.

There is a project for the sun. The sun  
Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be  
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

(CP 381)

An "old world" poetics remains complicit with the inheritance of patronymics and proper names: in Milton's "Ad Patrem," for example, it is precisely through the proper name "Phoebus" that father and son, precursor and ephebe, share in the "possession" of genealogical continuity ("Ipse volens Phoebus se dispertire duobus, / Altera dona mihi, dedit altera dona parenti, / Dividuumque Deum genitorque puerque tenemus" [64-66]). For "new world" poetics, however, the perpetuation of the name of the father reduces the son to a *revenant*, someone who, as his father, is already dead. For life to inhere in the son, the son must efface the names of the fathers: like that most rebellious of sons, Milton's Satan, the son must become self-fathered to see "The sun shine[] to-day."

Yet if "The sun shines to-day" assumes a hortatory urgency, it remains bound to its status as declamatory utterance: "The sun shines to-day *also*"; dawn is a "revelation" repeated every day, everywhere. (Thus the first line of *Murphy*, Beckett's first published novel: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.") And if "The sun shines to-day also" is the nothing new, the desire to see the sun anew, to negotiate an original relation to the sun, is also nothing new: "Why should we not *also* enjoy an original relation to the universe" inscribes the desire for origins or originality within the history of

that desire, and hence as the nothing new.<sup>2</sup> Emerson rails against the inheritance of the sepulchers, the tyranny of the fathers, because inheritance reduces nature to text, insight to reading. Yet Emerson's own text, which enjoins the "new man" to see nature without the mediation of textuality, is itself called *Nature*, and the very words in which he celebrates a previously unmediated relation to the universe, "The foregoing generations beheld . . . nature face to face," echoes that most canonical of old world texts, the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face." It would seem that Emerson is never more deeply implicated in textual filiation than at the very moment in which he enjoins his new man to eschew filiation. For governing Emerson's polemic against the dominion of the fathers is clearly the familiar drama—the highly imitable, much repeated and rehearsed drama—of patricide, the filial fantasy that takes its name from an old world text by Sophocles.

Now the virtual reiteration of Emerson's injunction in the opening moments of "Notes" would seem to locate the latter in this history of the nothing new: "Begin, ephebe" potentially reads as "begin again" or "begin also," which makes of Stevens' poem, no less than Emerson's essay, a kind of "Beginnegans Wake." Indeed, to direct the injunction toward an ephebe, a young man of the once new but now old world of the Athenian city state, can only exacerbate the tension latent in a belated newness. In *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Nietzsche maintains the "man of action [is] . . . without knowledge; he forgets a great deal to do one thing" (11-12). In "It Must Be Abstract," the ephebe who does one thing is also without knowledge; he becomes "an ignorant man again" in order to "see the sun again with an ignorant eye / And see it clearly in the idea of it." Sight is here contingent on a form of willful blindness, a knowledgeable and active forgetting of the past. Yet if the ephebe is enjoined to forget, the word "ephebe" itself, if only by virtue of its conspicuous "Greekness," remembers a beginning prior to this "Begin, ephebe."

Remembers a beginning, in fact, prior to the history of beginnings as patricide, the beginning that is itself forgotten in the constant reiteration of the patricidal drama. For the Freud of *Totem and Taboo*, the origins of "religion, morals, society and art converge" in the name of "Oedipus" (156); the founding gesture of human culture is the murder of the Father by the primitive horde of his sons. For Luce Irigaray, however, Freud's myth of origin forgets a more ancient murder, that of the "femme-mère," the woman-mother, the violence directed against Clytaemestra by her son Orestes (15-16). The thematization of history as a constantly reiterated patricide, the inheritance of the name of Oedipus, strategically displaces the name of Clytaemestra, the legacy of the murdered mother. Yet if the Oedipal thematization of history begins by forgetting this beginning, Stevens' poem begins by recuperating the forgotten: to enjoin an ephebe to begin, a citizen of the once new but now old world of the Athenian city state, is necessarily to recall that Athens itself begins, is symbolically founded on, the murder of a mother and the subsequent acquittal of her son. As a new man engaged in an Oedipal struggle with Phoebus—a god worshipped by the Greeks as "paternal" (*patroios*), a status he still enjoys in Mil-

ton's "Ad Patrem"—the ephebe is effectively already dead, already a *revenant*, a near anagrammatic return or form of the father he would slay. And as a poem engaged in an Oedipal struggle with the burden of poetic fathers, the priority of the precursor, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" is no less a *revenant*, a beginning already implicated in the inheritance of Emerson's *Nature*, which is itself already implicated in an entire thematics and history of Oedipal struggle. But as a poem that recuperates what the Oedipal thematization displaces, that remembers what Oedipal history chooses to forget, "Notes" lives in the recovered heritage of the maternal name: "There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete" (CP 383). To begin in Stevens' new world is to rescue from old world texts—in terms of the present discussion, primarily Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Genesis, or Milton's redaction of Genesis—the beginnings old world texts themselves displace.

Yet "Notes" at first appears highly conventional in its beginning, deeply implicated in an Oedipal ideology of beginning:

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

(CP 380)

Deeply conventional, because the "inconceivable idea of the sun" suggests, by virtue of the homonymic play of "sun" and "son," an "inconceivable" origin for the son, and hence the son as he has been conventionally construed:

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.

("The Eumenides" 658-60)<sup>3</sup>

These are the words of the "paternal" god of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: Phoebus maintains that Orestes is innocent of matricide, not legally responsible for the death of Clytaemestra, because the son bears no inheritance from the maternal body, an argument Athena, the goddess whose very existence argues the redundancy of maternity, accepts. The judgement on the Acropolis, Athena's acquiescence in the cause of patriarchy and the logic of parthenogenesis ("There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth" [736]), is the founding gesture of Hellenic Athens, the ephebe's original "new world." In the ephebe's new "new world," Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the gesture is essentially repeated. For in enjoining the ephebe to turn against Phoebus, the god who once defended Orestes against the Furies, the chthonic forces Irigaray characterizes as "insurgents against patriarchal power" (17), "Notes" nevertheless rehearses the ideology of Aeschylus' Phoebus: begin, begin again, by defining the son as patrilineal, if only by virtue of an Oedipal struggle with the father; begin by eliding inheritance of the maternal body.

Athena's address to the citizens of Athens, her judgement in favor of Orestes and the logic of parthenogenesis, finds an explicitly Christian analogue in

Paul's address to the Athenians, in which he quotes the Stoic poet Aratus of Soli: "For we are indeed his [Zeus's] offspring" (Acts 17:28). The approval with which Paul quotes a "pagan" source or "godless myth" (1 Tim. 4:7) suggests that the specific referent of the personal pronoun is of less significance than its gender specificity: Paul's relation to the claims of rival or precursor myths is not generally characterized by syncretism, yet here the Christian sky God unproblematically assimilates the offspring of his Olympian counterpart. Indeed, the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel," the prophecy Matthew places at the center of his own account of the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:22-23), posits yet another "inconceivable" son, another beginning innocent of conception, as the fulfillment that is Christianity. The generative Word of God passes through but is never of the body of Mary: like the classical sun god who declares the "mother is no parent [to the] . . . child," the Christian sky God begets his son without even the effective mediation of the maternal body.

The birth of a son through annunciation or divine nomination finds its inverse reflection in the opening moments of "Notes," in the celebration of the death of a sun god through denomination ("Phoebus is dead, ephebe. But Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named"). Or, the death by denomination celebrated in the opening moments of "Notes" is the inverse reflection of the birth by renomination celebrated in the *Oresteia*, the transference of the name "Phoebe" from earth to sun:

I give first place of honor in my prayer to her  
who of the gods first prophesied, the Earth; and next  
to Themis, who succeeded to her mother's place  
of prophecy; so runs the legend; and in third  
succession, given by free consent, not won by force,  
another Titan daughter of Earth was seated here.  
This was Phoebe. She gave it as a birthday gift  
to Phoebus, who is called still after Phoebe's name.  
(*"The Eumenides"* 1-8)

The voluntaristic nature of this renomination or transference, which is articulated by the Pythia, the priestess of Phoebus Apollo, belies the violence directed against the mother that is at the heart of the *Oresteia*. Yet even in this highly idealized myth of origin (the Pythia admits of an attenuated connection between Phoebe and Phoebus, the "mother's place" and the son's inheritance, that Phoebus himself utterly denies), the conventional ideology of beginnings, be they construed in classical or Judeo-Christian terms, is abundantly clear: the son is defined precisely in terms of his distance from earth, from matter, from the inheritance of the maternal body. To begin, then, by positing the "inconceivable idea of the sun [son]" is to begin again with yet another "immaculate conception," what Joyce calls an "immaculate contraceptive," inception as literally *contra* conception, the beginning as the elision of the mother.<sup>4</sup>

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud argues that the compulsion to worship an “invisible god” who is also a father “signifies above all a victory of spirituality over the senses—that is to say, a step forward in culture, since maternity is proved by the senses whereas paternity is a surmise based on a deduction and a premiss” (144-46). The ideology of origins as *contra* conception could not be more explicit; Freud’s concession that the poets were there before him could not be more obvious: the “new world” of psychoanalysis is indeed the good son of a literary tradition that genders the sensible as female, the better to place it in opposition to an intelligible male soul. Indeed, the logic of Freud’s argument implicitly serves to render literature itself gender specific, as the opposition between conscious “word representations” (*Wortvorstellungen*) and unconscious “thing representations” (*Sachvorstellungen*), the intelligible and the sensible, is itself clearly homologous with, if not already structured by, the opposition between an intelligible male soul and a sensible female body. Aristotle places metaphor at the heart of literary experience, which he defines as “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy” (*Poetics* 1457 b 6-9). Etymologically, the *phora* of this *epiphora* or “transfer” suggests only a “change with respect to location” (Ricoeur 17); in terms of the practical dynamics of literary tradition, however, *phora*, metaphor, tends to involve a “transfer” that is gender specific, indeed a transfer from gender to gender. In the Pythia’s myth of origins, for example, the transference of the name, the movement upward from the chthonic Phoebe to the sky god Phoebus, reads very much as a metaphor for metaphor, or metaphor in its explicitly gendered context, indeed as a synecdoche for the sexual politics of the *Oresteia*. For the chthonic forces within the play, the Eumenides, demand blood for blood, a repetition of the primal scene of violence, whereas Phoebus and Orestes strategically advocate re-presentation, *Wortvorstellungen*, a “talking cure”:

Orestes:

I understand  
the many rules of absolution, where it is right  
to speak and where be silent. In this action now  
speech has been ordered by my teacher, who is wise.

(“The Eumenides” 276-79)

The point here is not simply that Orestes will ultimately be judged innocent of matricide, but that judgement itself, the “talking cure” or resolution, already represents the effective defeat of the Eumenides and the cause of Clytaemestra; *Wortvorstellungen* rather than *Sachvorstellungen* is already construed as the elision of maternal or material origins.

Already construed, moreover, and still construed (we are, at least in this respect, still Greeks), for if Athena excuses matricide in the name of her father (“I am always for the male / with all my heart, and strongly on my father’s side” [737-38]), Lacanian psycholinguistics, yet another of the good sons of the west-

ern literary tradition, posits the elision of the maternal as the precondition of language, of *Wortvorstellungen*, which it identifies with “the name of the father,” “le nom du père.” Indeed, for Lacan, it is precisely the father’s prohibition against incestuous contact with the maternal body, the *non* latent in the paternal *nom*, that governs the conditions under which desire can be spoken: the child, the son, is necessarily given to metonyms, meta-names, figurative substitutes for the interdicted maternal body.<sup>5</sup> And while it is precisely against the name of the father, or the names given to the sun by the fathers, that “Notes” first directs its attack, denomination remains continuous with the ideology of origins as “immaculate” or “inconceivable,” with the desire to be self-fathered, and hence with the ideology of origins as posited by the fathers.

The sun is “begotten” in “Notes,” however, uttered into “pure” existence through denomination, only to fall to and into matter:

The death of one god is the death of all.  
Let purple Phoebus lie in umber harvest,  
Let Phoebus slumber and die in autumn umber . . .  
(CP 381)

The “intelligible” world of the opening tercets, the beginning that is pure “idea” or “invention,” suffers a free fall into the “sensible” world of cyclical process, the “death” that is also “harvest.” For the Freud of *Moses and Monotheism*, the fall of Phoebus could only represent a step backward for culture, a retreat from intelligibility, a resurgence of the maternal and hence “the evidence of the senses” (a resurgence reflected in a poetic medium that has itself grown denser, that has come to delight in the contours of sound as sound). For the poet of “Notes,” however, the free fall is properly a recuperation, a beginning that is not governed by the ideology of the immaculate, and hence not conscripted to the cause of the fathers. “Notes” first rehearses the conventional ideology of beginnings, appears to satisfy what the poem itself calls “Belief in an immaculate beginning” (CP 382), but only to displace the displacement involved in immaculate conceptions. Certainly the Phoebe of the Pythia’s myth of origins might find satisfaction in the return of her name to and into earth. Or if not Phoebe, then the Tiamat of the Sumero-Babylonian epic *Enuma elis*, the goddess whose name is displaced in the myth of origins advanced in Genesis:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.  
(Genesis 1: 1-3)

The male sky God who speaks this world into existence (“And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was”) is deeply invested in the ideology of beginnings as *contra* conception: creation is here *ex nihilo*, asexual, without recourse to pre-existing matter. In the very act of positing an originating and transcendent act of nomination, however, Genesis paradoxically inscribes the rem-

nants of a name that questions both the priority and transcendence of the act: the Hebrew word for "abyss," *tehom*, the word used to describe cosmic nothingness prior to the form giving intervention of the divine Word, is etymologically related to the proper name Tiamat, the mother of the gods in *Enuma elis*, the goddess from whose slaughtered body the triumphant Marduk fashions the universe.<sup>6</sup> Genesis begins with an ideologically motivated displacement of a goddess, a material or maternal origin, by a male sky god. "Notes" displaces this displacement with the fall of a male sky god to and into matter. In the beginning, it would seem, was not the Word, an originating act of baptism, but an ideologically motivated and gender specific "battle of the proper names" (Derrida, *Gramm.* 107).

Genesis is not, then, *the* beginning, but a beginning, a beginning in fact no less reactive or decreative than Stevens' own: "God made the two great lights, the greater to govern the day and the lesser to govern the night, and with them he made the stars" (Gen. 1:16). Here the sun bears no name (although a star is a star and elsewhere the light is called "day" and the darkness "night") because the common Semitic word for the sun was also a divine name. The author of Genesis, or at least the "Priestly" author of the creation hymn, is intent on positing a transcendent God, a divinity beyond and prior to the physical universe he speaks into existence. Yet even here, in the beginning, there already is and always was "a project for the sun"; even here creation cannot be distinguished from decreation, the purging or cleansing of the sun of names that are no longer or that never were proper. Emerson's dream of a new world poetic accepts as fact the belatedness of the American enterprise, even as it seeks to transform the historically late into the imaginatively original. Stevens' far more radical project, however, is to subvert the opposition between early and late, creation and decreation. Be it "In the beginning" or "Begin, ephebe," the beginning is always decreative, already "onomatoclastic" (Hartman 16).

Subvert the opposition, it must be emphasized, not simply reverse the terms of a hierarchy: the fall of Phoebus to and into earth does not simply recuperate, does not reinscribe in photographic negative, the opposition between an intelligible male soul and a sensible female body. Indeed, literary tradition is invested not in the specific form of this opposition, male soul to female body, but in the simple association of the devalued term in any opposition with the feminine. Thus Phoebe is to Phoebus not only as earth to sky, matter to spirit, but as reflection to source, image to substance: the *Oresteia* characterizes the goddess as chthonic, but she is also lunar, a secondary form of the presence or light that is Phoebus, and hence illogically subject to denigration as both matter and shadow. Or, to substitute a Judeo-Christian for a classical text, Phoebe is to Phoebus as Eve is to Adam, as Stevens' redaction of Genesis, or Stevens' redaction of Milton's redaction of Genesis, suggests:

The first idea was not our own. Adam  
In Eden was the father of Descartes  
And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her sons and of her daughters. They found themselves  
In heaven as in a glass; a second earth . . .

(CP 383)

The allusion is to *Paradise Lost* IV, which in turn alludes to the story of Narcissus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Milton's Eve peers into a "Smooth lake" only to see "another sky" ("Eve made air the mirror of herself"), as if earth and sky were continuous, not structured by the hierarchical divisions posited in the creation hymn of Genesis. A divine voice intrudes upon this dyadic relationship—Eve is "warned" of the error of her self-regarding vision—and the mother of humankind is spared the fate of Narcissus by turning to the Adam "Whose image" she is. Indeed, Adam's fatal mistake will be to turn to his own reflection in Eve and away from the God "Whose image" he is. The famous Miltonic hierarchy—"He for God only, she for God in him" (IV. 299)—posits Eve as a form of Ovidian *umbra* or *imago* to Adam's *corpus*; the turning of Eve toward her own reflection can only be read as the turning of *umbra* toward *umbra*, the meeting of shadow and shadow ("What thou there see'st fair Creature is thyself"). And as the downward glance that reflects what is already shadow is the apparent antithesis of the upward movement toward a "remotest . . . heaven / That has expelled us and our images," the initial movement of "Notes" would seem to define itself in opposition to both the "female" principle of matter, chthonic or corporeal origins, and the "female" principle of figure, imperfect states of mediation.

Now as matter or mother, woman is traditionally excluded from the space of representation; like the Tiamat of Genesis, she is known only by virtue of her effacement or disfiguration. As image or *umbra*, however, woman is traditionally superseded, tolerated within representation for but a temporally limited prospect; like Milton's Eve gazing at her reflection in the pool, she exists only as a secondary or provisional form of presence, only to be displaced by the one "Whose image" she is. Excluded from representation, the danger that is figuration: it is precisely this contradiction that Stevens exploits, out of or beyond which he constructs his poetic. Part of the despair of Milton's Adam is that his sin will not die with him, that it is visited upon his sons. In Stevens' poem, the legacy of the first father, the Adamic bequest, becomes the disastrous inheritance of Cartesian dualism: "Adam / In Eden was the father of Descartes." The mother of humankind, however, delights in the unbroken circuit of earth and sky, what "The Idea of Order at Key West" calls "ghostlier demarcations" (CP 130) rather than rigid delineations: "And Eve made air the mirror of herself, / Of her sons and of her daughters." It is within this inheritance, the undifferentiated circuit of Eve's gaze and not the binarism of Adamic or Cartesian origin, that Stevens constructs his supreme fiction.

For the downward gaze that reflects what is already *umbra* is not the symmetrical opposite of a sun seen "in the remotest cleanliness" or clarity of "a heaven / That has expelled us and our images": the cleansing of tropes, names that are no longer or that never were proper ("Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named"), only serves as a testimony to the in-



eluctability of tropes. Properly speaking, Derrida argues, language can never be either clear or obscure, the appeal to the criterion of clarity being itself metaphorical or non-proper ("Mythology" 252). Properly speaking, the ephebe might add, the sun cannot be clean when cleansed of the proper name Phoebus, for as the ephebe would well know, *Phoibos*, the Greek form of the name Phoebus, means, among other things, clean or pure. Plutarch assures us that Phoebus is indeed clean, that the proper name is in fact proper: "Phoebus, as is well known, is a name that men of old used to give everything pure and undefiled, even as the Thesselians, to this day, I believe, when their priests, on prohibited days, are spending their time alone outside the temples, say the priests 'are keeping Phoebus [*phebonomize*]'" (*De E apud Delphos* 20 393c). The professorial voice that opens "Notes" assures us that Phoebus is not clean, and that to clean objects one must begin by eradicating tropes, names that are no longer or that never were proper. Yet to the ephebe the appeal to the criterion of the *phoibos* over and against Phoebus can only serve to expose as metaphorical the entire notion of a "remotest cleanliness," a realm unmediated by image or *umbra*: "dis[-]jillusion" or dis-imaging remains as but the "last illusion" (*CP* 468), a metaphor for the absence of metaphor. The author of Genesis cannot posit a transcendent and originating act of nomination without inscribing at least the remnants of a name (*tehom*/Tiamat) that questions both the priority and transcendence of that act. The poet of "Notes" cannot cleanse the sun of metaphors without reinscribing the metaphoricity of cleansing. The author of Genesis posits an act of creation as differentiating or dividing: "God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night" (Gen. 1: 4-5). The poet of "Notes" posits an act of decreation as differentiating or "abstracting": the proper sense of the object or referent must be abstracted from, cleansed of, the not quite proper name Phoebus; *sens propre* must be distinguished from *nom propre*. The not quite proper name, however, already means to "separate out from," *phebonomize*, "to keep Phoebus"; the not quite proper name already means clean (the *phoibos* of *Phoibos Apollôn* is an epithet transformed into a proper name).<sup>7</sup> "It Must Be Abstract" thus reads as to separate out from the separated out from, to clean the clean, which suggests that the "It" of "It Must Be Abstract" can have as its object or antecedent only binary opposition itself, the Cartesian bequest of our first father. "I am, to express it in the form of a riddle, already dead as my father."

The "remotest cleanliness" of heaven cannot, then, be differentiated from figure, *umbra*: the injunction "It Must Be Abstract" remains within the undifferentiated circuit of Eve's gaze, even as it seems to rehearse a conventional opposition between "male" transcendence or intelligibility and "female" mediation. The fall of Phoebus into matter, moreover, cannot be distinguished from figure, *umbra*, even as the fall seems to rehearse a contradictory but equally conventional opposition between "male" utterance and "female" matter: Phoebus falls into "autumn umber," "umber harvest," *umbra*, figure; the fallen sky god becomes the spectacularly figurative "gold flourisher," a "ghostlier demarcation" between earth and sky ("flourisher" is etymologically

linked to flower: a sunflower?) that is again within the nonbinary circuit of Eve's gaze, the nonbinary "mundo" of Stevens' new world Eve:

Fat girl, terrestrial, my summer, my night,  
How is it I find you in difference, see you there  
In a moving contour, a change not quite completed?  
(CP 406)

"[I]n difference," not difference from, characterizes the "fluent mundo" (CP 407) of "It Must Give Pleasure," the most triumphant form of Stevens' new Eve in a new "Civil" or secular mundo. Or, better, "in difference" characterizes this new world Eve because she has been differentiated from her old world counterparts, differentiated from the sexual politics of the *Oresteia* or the creation hymn of Genesis, from a poetic in which the "fluent" or figurative is constructed on the ruins of a female "mundo" or matter. Differentiated also, however, from the contradictory but no less conventional devaluation, for if the "Fat girl" is fat, a substantial female body, she is also "fluent"; if she is "terrestrial" or chthonic, she remains "the more than natural figure":

Bent over work, anxious, content, alone,  
You remain the more than natural figure. You  
Become the soft-footed phantom, the irrational

Distortion, however fragrant, however dear.  
That's it: the more than rational distortion,  
The fiction that results from feeling. Yes, that.  
(CP 406)

The "Fat girl" is found "in difference" because she has been differentiated from the Miltonic redaction of Genesis, differentiated from a poetic in which the "feminine" principle of *umbra* ("phantom") or figure is tolerated for but a temporally limited prospect. The feminine is here neither the danger of figuration nor the materiality that endangers figuration: for Stevens' new world poetic, it is not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony.  
(CP 403)

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Quotations from Stevens' poetry are from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* and will be cited in the text with page number in parentheses.

<sup>2</sup>This paradox has been suggestively explored by Paul de Man, "Literary History and Literary Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 142-65.

<sup>3</sup>For a suggestive reading of the association of the feminine with the material in nineteenth-century fiction, to which my own paper is much indebted, see Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup>Strictly speaking, the "immaculate conception" refers to the virgin birth of Mary, not Christ or the "son." I have, however, deliberately misused the term, or used it in its popular rather than theological sense. My reason for doing so is, perhaps, obvious: the immaculate conception, the belief that Mary too was born without sin, is yet another effacement of a maternal origin, the body of Anne. The popular misuse of the term, which effaces Mary, thus replicates the effacement of the maternal that is the theological meaning of the term.

<sup>5</sup>See Jacques Lacan, "Du *Treib* de Freud et du désir du psychanalyste," in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 851-54.

<sup>6</sup>Biblical scholars disagree about the strength of the etymological connection that binds *tehom* to Tiamat and the extent to which Genesis depends on the Mesopotamian text. E. A. Speiser, for example, places Genesis in an allusive and systematically critical relation to *Enuma elis*; Cassuto, on the other hand, minimizes the dependence of the former on the latter. E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964); Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, pt. 1, tr. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961). For a helpful survey of the relevant scholarship and a suggestive reading of Milton's reading of Genesis, see Mary Nyquist, "Gynesis, Genesis, Exegesis, and Milton's Eve," in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, Selected Papers from the English Institute, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 147-208. It seems to me that Nyquist is right in discussing the difference in scholarly opinion as an essentially ideological dispute: commentators such as Cassuto, for example, are anxious to avoid any suggestion that our most canonical myth of origins is in fact derivative or secondary. This is, however, precisely the suggestion of the opening moments of "Notes."

<sup>7</sup>On the history of the name "Phoebus" and the ambiguity of the god, see Marcel Detienne, "Apollo's Slaughterhouse," *Diacritics* 2 (Summer 1986): 46-53.

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## Wallace Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal" and the Evils of Aestheticism

HENRY WEINFELD

WALLACE STEVENS' "Esthétique du Mal" is a poem that is both on the subject of the sublime and in the mode of the sublime. It is a poem of striking ambivalence (and one about which I confess myself to be ambivalent), but nevertheless, among the two or three greatest poems that Stevens ever wrote. In its finest passages, it demonstrates that Stevens is one of the greatest masters of the blank-verse sublime mode in English poetry, the legitimate heir to Milton and Wordsworth. "Sunday Morning," to which it is thematically related, and which in certain respects is its precursor in Stevens' development, is a more perfectly unified poem; but "Esthétique du Mal" is a poem of greater complexity and greater compass. In the course of the poem, Stevens enters into a dialogue with what may seem the entire *dramatis personae* of literature and philosophy—but most immediately, perhaps, with the trio of Baudelaire, Nietzsche, and Wordsworth: Baudelaire in the title, Nietzsche in the early sections especially, but really throughout the poem, and Wordsworth in its magnificent conclusion. Stevens' dialogue with the illustrious dead is so completely suffused—indeed sublimated—in the texture of the verse that his confrontation with pain and evil becomes a kind of Descent into the Underworld—as comprehended, however, from a lyric rather than an epic standpoint. This, in part, is what accounts for the extraordinary richness of his blank verse.

Stevens' *agon* in "Esthétique du Mal" is the age-old conflict between ethics and aesthetics. These two are in conflict for Stevens because, from his point of view, "evil" (the ambiguous *mal* of his title) is not merely an epiphenomenon of human history but, in its aspect of pain or suffering, is embedded in the very nature of Being, of life itself. Consequently, to attempt to detach "evil" from everything else in the world—whether from the standpoint of Christianity, communism, or any other ideology—is to shut oneself off from the richness and diversity of life, and hence to consign oneself to sterility, which Stevens regards as, in a way, the worst evil of all, since, among other things, it is destructive of poetry. This point of view is informed by Nietzsche and by certain transcendentalist overtones in Romanticism generally. Although it is not without its moment of truth, it raises a number of ethical problems; for to conceive of evil in such all-encompassing terms is ultimately to render the concept meaningless by dissolving it in the "soup" of ontology. Evil, so conceived, becomes a distinction without a difference whose human (i.e., ethical) specificity is lost. This, of course, is what makes Nietzsche so dangerous a thinker, however compelling and even liberating he may be in other respects. And even from a purely aesthetic point of view, it can lead to serious lapses of taste. When Stevens descends from the heights of the sublime to contemplate purely human matters of life and death, he is sometimes as false as false can be, pre-

cisely because of his desire to sweep *everything* up into the sublime. The most obvious case in point occurs in Section VII, which begins "How red the rose that is the soldier's wound," and in which the poet informs us that the wound "is good because life was"—information we could easily dispense with. Nevertheless, within a certain *limited* sphere (paradoxical as this may seem), Stevens' exploration of the sublime is articulated with extraordinary dialectical power.

Let me expand on these remarks in a somewhat oblique fashion by suggesting that Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* has been consistently mistranslated as "Flowers of Evil"—as if Baudelaire were some kind of dandy, an Alastair Crowley or J.-K. Huysmans bent on aestheticizing evil in order to *épater le bourgeois*. *Mal* in French, of course, can mean both "pain" (or "sickness," with its ambiguities) and "evil"; for pain is an evil, and perhaps the first evil. But since English is unable to conjoin these meanings in the same way, translation would do better to settle for the lesser of the two evils, which in this case is "pain." The book should be translated as "Flowers of Pain." Poetry, lyric poetry, can grow out of suffering (*patheuma* in Greek has given us "pathos")—and Baudelaire's poetry certainly did—but not out of evil. Nothing grows out of evil. Evil, as Christianity learned from Plato, is merely the absence of good. In Baudelaire, the suffering arises from the confrontation with evil, and the tears of this suffering are what water the flowers. But this is very different from saying the flowers are *of* evil. If we see evil as generating beauty, it is a short step to equating beauty with evil, and from there to seeing evil as beautiful—in which case, poetry becomes a kind of fascism.

Now, as Harold Bloom points out, Stevens was himself worried about the implications of his title. In a letter to John Crowe Ransom, he remarked: "I am thinking of aesthetics as the equivalent of *aperçus*, which seems to have been the original meaning."<sup>1</sup> But the very fact that Stevens' title is in French shows that his remark to Ransom was an attempt to dodge the issue. Bloom, however, takes him at his word, as his comment reveals:

I suspect his uneasiness about the title came from the Baudelairean implications of *mal*, implications mostly irrelevant to a poem in which what is perceived is not so much willed or chosen evil as necessary evil, the pain and suffering inseparable from a consciousness of self in a post-Christian or Nietzschean world.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the Baudelairean implications of *mal* are not at all irrelevant to the poem, as we shall see, and Stevens' title is more honest than his explanation of it—or why would he have given it to us in French? The problem is that in Stevens evil is not confronted head-on as it is in Baudelaire; for the most part, it is *aestheticized*—which is to say, *anaesthetized*—and this, as we shall see, almost renders the poem comatose at certain points, until that good physician Wordsworth intervenes to restore the homeostatic balance between ethics and aesthetics.

Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal"

As a sequence-poem, "Esthétique du Mal" develops through a series of ironic juxtapositions; and this technique (which nobody handles more adroitly than Stevens) is immediately apparent in the opening section:

He was at Naples writing letters home  
And, between his letters, reading paragraphs  
On the sublime. Vesuvius had groaned  
For a month. It was pleasant to be sitting there,  
While the sultriest fulgurations, flickering,  
Cast corners in the glass. He could describe  
The terror of the sound because the sound  
Was ancient. He tried to remember the phrases: pain  
Audible at noon, pain torturing itself,  
Pain killing pain on the very point of pain.  
The volcano trembled in another ether,  
As the body trembles at the end of life.<sup>3</sup>

Nietzsche is already a presence here, and Bloom helpfully reminds us of his injunction in *The Gay Science* to live dangerously: "Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!"<sup>4</sup> But Vesuvius is off in the distance, while the "he" (another distancing mechanism) is sitting in a café with a drink. In other words, at the same time as the sublime is invoked, it is distanced—or sublimated—by comic irony. The "sultriest fulgurations" (which is to say, the tendency for Stevens' language to be drunk on itself) act as a *pain-killer*, an anodyne against the ensuing litany on pain. The "terror of the sound" is not heard or even described but merely noted as something the "he" *could* describe. And yet, as the stanza concludes, there is an accumulation of "pain"; and the final simile is shocking enough.

More shocking is what follows the stanza-break:

It was almost time for lunch. Pain is human.  
There were roses in the cool café. His book  
Made sure of the most correct catastrophe.  
Except for us, Vesuvius might consume  
In solid fire the utmost earth and know  
No pain (ignoring the cocks that crow us up  
To die). This is a part of the sublime  
From which we shrink. And yet, except for us,  
The total past felt nothing when destroyed.

(CP 314)

"Pain is human." Stevens' relationship to "humanism" is exceedingly complex, and nowhere more so than in "Esthétique du Mal." In one sense, of course, the "human" carries with it a kind of slapstick irony or bathos that reflects back upon "It was almost time for lunch." (Or, as Oscar Wilde would say, "God take care of the physical pain and I'll take care of the spiritual.") To be human, in this sense, is to be something less than a god, and something less

than the heroic Zarathustra on his mountain; it is to pertain to comedy rather than to tragedy. But notice that almost immediately, Stevens' comic gestures turn sour, revealing the grim underside of Nietzsche's slogan that "God is dead"; so that in the end, the sublime erupts in molten lava. "This is a part of the sublime / From which we shrink"—because it means that we are alone in Nature, confronted not by an inexorable or a malignant deity but by the *deus absconditus*. (But what of those "cocks that crow us up / To die" which we are instructed to ignore? Can it be that Socrates—who owed a cock to Asclepius for healing him of life—has somehow put in an appearance?)

There is another part of the sublime from which we do not shrink, but which sadly shrinks from us. Because only man knows pain (this is the part of the sublime from which we shrink), man is separate from Nature, which perpetually shrinks from him in the way the fruit shrinks from Tantalus. We cannot return to that primordial totality, which is both beneath and beyond the threshold of our experience; and therefore, in a paradox, we give both that totality and our yearning for it the name of the sublime (*sub limina*—beneath the threshold). This is the Keatsian sublime of "Ode to a Nightingale," and it is the second stage of Stevens' dialectic:

At a town in which acacias grew, he lay  
On his balcony at night. Warblings became  
Too dark, too far, too much the accents of  
Afflicted sleep, too much the syllables  
That would form themselves, in time, and communicate  
The intelligence of his despair, express  
What meditation never quite achieved.

(CP 314)

Those warblings that are "Too dark, too far" for human apprehension are the same "plaintive anthem" that Keats hears fading at the end of the ode, when he wonders whether he wakes or sleeps, knowing that in neither state will he be able to grasp the Nightingale's experience (though by then the poem has somehow concluded its work of grasping—but onto what?).

The moon rose up as if it had escaped  
His meditation. It evaded his mind.  
It was part of a supremacy always  
Above him. The moon was always free from him,  
As night was free from him. The shadow touched  
Or merely seemed to touch him as he spoke  
A kind of elegy he found in space . . .

(CP 314-15)

Here the pain is in relation to not being able to grasp hold of what is above one; and yet, in the remarkable turn of the next stanza, Stevens tells us that the pain itself keeps us from the sublime and is thus implicated in our sense of un-freedom:

Stevens' *'Esthétique du Mal'*

It is pain that is indifferent to the sky  
In spite of the yellow of the acacias, the scent  
Of them in the air still hanging heavily  
In the hoary-hanging night. It does not regard  
This freedom, this supremacy, and in  
Its own hallucination never sees  
How that which rejects it saves it in the end.

(CP 315)

I suggested earlier that Stevens' confrontation with pain and evil represents an abstract version of the Descent into the Underworld. In contrast to Eliot and Pound, modernists for whom the Descent into the Underworld remains a primary myth that can still be dramatized directly (Eliot being a Christian and Pound a "pagan"), Stevens, whose own very different relationship to modernism is derived from his humanism, has no interest in so direct a treatment of the theme. In this, as in so many other things, he resembles Wordsworth, who, in the "Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, had announced his intention to eschew all theological "fictions":

Paradise, and groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?<sup>5</sup>

But like Wordsworth, too, Stevens is able to maintain an abstract hold on the myth by making the poetic process itself an allegorical representation of it. This is made abundantly clear in the third section of "*Esthétique du Mal*," as the simile in the opening tercet indicates:

His firm stanzas hang like hives in hell  
Or what hell was, since now both heaven and hell  
Are one, and here, O terra infidel.

(CP 315)

In Stevens' Descent into the Underworld, moreover, the illustrious dead enter the poem not as dramatic presences but lyrically, as part of the poem's many-voiced texture, or (in Bakhtin's terminology) its polyphony. The voices of the dead (poets and philosophers) resonate through Stevens' "firm stanzas," as he weaves dialectically through the many phases of his theme.

In this third section, the poet's blank verse is clipped into tercets that obviously recall Dante; but as the explicit statement is conveyed by Nietzsche, there is an ironic juxtaposition of form and theme that foregrounds (and in a certain way reverses) the basic conflict between ethics and aesthetics. The beautiful line concluding the previous section, "How that which rejects it saves it in the end," returns us to Nietzsche, whose concept of *health* (as developed in *The Gay Science* and elsewhere) was conceived in the utmost spir-



itual pain, since it involved the repudiation of pity and self-pity, and hence Christianity. But the meeting of Dante and Nietzsche testifies to an ambivalence of the most painful kind; for if that which rejects it (i.e., pain and the soul in pain) saves it in the end, then what is involved in this saving is the loss of a transcendental horizon, and hence the loss of the very notion of redemption or *saving*. What saves it in the end is the end of thinking in terms of either being saved or lost—which means that the “honey of common summer” has to be enough, which in turn means that aesthetic hedonism has to be enough. In the final three tercets, Stevens expresses this as a kind of tender hope, and the passage gives the same feeling of opening-out that we have at the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*:

A too, too human god, self-pity's kin  
And uncourageous genesis . . . It seems  
As if the health of the world might be enough.

It seems as if the honey of common summer  
Might be enough, as if the golden combs  
Were part of a sustenance itself enough,

As if hell, so modified, had disappeared,  
As if pain, no longer satanic mimicry,  
Could be borne, as if we were sure to find our way.

(CP 315-16)

But the yearning in these beautiful lines (as well as the poet's use of the subjunctive) suggests that indeed it is not enough.

Indeed, in the remaining sections of the poem, Stevens loses his way and periodically rediscovers it, only to lose it once more, “Spent in the false engagements of the mind” (CP 317). In the first three sections, Stevens had been dealing with evil in its aspect of pain or suffering—which is what Bloom maintains he is doing throughout the poem. Ironically, however, the problematic aspects of both *esthétique* and *mal* emerge at precisely the point at which the poet's Nietzschean orientation is made explicit; and when they emerge, they emerge with a vengeance. The tautness of the poem begins to unravel, and hereafter passages of rather weak writing will be interspersed with passages of the most extraordinary poetry. The irony of the situation is that although Stevens is often at his best when he is leaving Christianity behind, if he loses contact with it entirely he is simply lost. Given his predilection for the sublime, and having now committed himself to a Nietzschean orientation in which the theological underpinnings for ethical constructs have been stripped away, Stevens faces the danger of succumbing to sentimentality and triviality, on the one hand, and to callousness in the face of evil, on the other. He has too fine an intellect not to recognize this danger, but he is not always successful in avoiding it.

Already in Section IV, the cleavage between ethics and aesthetics has begun to take its revenge. We can divide this section between what precedes the ellipsis and what follows it. What precedes it is mere nonsense, the sort of nonsense

critics profess to admire in Stevens, but nonsense nevertheless. Whether B. plays all sorts of notes or merely one, and whether the hot-blooded Spaniard foregoes the nakedest passion for barefoot philandering, are questions that need not detain us. "That's the sentimentalist" in Stevens, as he partly acknowledges. But what follows the ellipsis is great poetry:

The genius of misfortune  
Is not a sentimentalist. He is  
That evil, that evil in the self, from which  
In desperate hallow, rugged gesture, fault  
Falls out on everything: the genius of  
The mind, which is our being, wrong and wrong,  
The genius of the body, which is our world,  
Spent in the false engagements of the mind.  
(CP 316-17)

What Stevens confronts here is the possibility that the "honey of common summer" may not be enough, because the genius of the mind, however wrong, demands something more. What he confronts, in other words, is our tragedy—not the tragedy Nietzsche embraces but the one he rejects.

It is in Section VII, however, that the latent conflict between ethics and aesthetics reaches a point of crisis proportions. When so great a poet can bring himself to write "How red the rose that is the soldier's wound," we know that something is very wrong indeed. But at the same time, we should recognize that Stevens is in deadly earnest in these lines, and in fact is willing to risk everything by posing his aestheticist doctrine in the most radical way that it could be posed. Although the poet's blank verse is divided into elegiac quatrains in this section, Stevens is actually jettisoning the elegiac mode. For if the soldier's wound is "good because life was," then the significance of death itself is "transcended" in a conception of Being (linked also to Beauty) that sweeps everything up into itself—but alas, too easily to be believed. Helen Vendler comments on Stevens' metaphor of the wound as a rose that it is a "self-conscious, sentimental, and repellent 'devotional' conceit";<sup>6</sup> but this seems to me to mistake Stevens for Crashaw and his aesthetic hedonism for mystical Catholicism. When he affirms "the sleep / Of time's red soldier deathless on his bed," Stevens is undoubtedly anticipating our outraged reaction. But what can we say? He has obviously boxed himself into a corner in which the submergence of ethics in aesthetics has the opposite effect of producing real ugliness. If this tendency is taken to its most extreme conclusion, we have the notorious situation of the "beautiful" lampshade made out of the skins of Jews. Is it unfair even to locate Stevens' lines on this continuum? Of course it is; but there is a sense in which we have to do so anyway, even at the risk of falling into bad taste; for Stevens himself, radical poet that he is, defiantly insists that we go to the root of the matter. One can applaud him for his audacity, and one can affirm the poet's need to experiment with different possibilities; but this is the point at which the homely Socrates (remember the

"cocks that crow us up / To die" in Section I?) turns up as an uninvited guest to mar the festivities by reminding us of why the poets were thrown out of *The Republic*. One has to ask (and in a way Stevens is forcing us to do so, whatever his explicit attitude might be) whether something really ugly, whether some deep sickness and evil, is not to be found on the other side of the mirror. Stevens' "rose that is the soldier's wound" is less akin to Baudelaire than to Dorian Gray.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Satan, who had been banished as early as Section II, now makes a Second Coming in Section VIII. If all that can be said of the soldier's wound is that it is like a red, red rose, then clearly something is woefully impoverished in our poetry, whatever Harold Bloom might say—impoverished, even from an *aesthetic* point of view. Hence, "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (CP 319). And as a matter of fact, images of destitution will dominate the remaining sections of the poem. They keep proliferating even as the Master of luxuriance and sensuality mobilizes his forces against them—and the two kinds are not only locked in combat but perhaps in a symbiosis as well. Stevens is always at his strongest when he is leaving Satan behind, and the Nietzschean affirmation that concludes Section VIII is very strong:

The tragedy, however, may have begun,  
Again, in the imagination's new beginning,  
In the yes of the realist spoken because he must  
Say yes, spoken because under every no  
Lay a passion for yes that had never been broken.  
(CP 320)

But the problem is that there is a built-in redundancy quotient in "the imagination's new beginning"; for Satan is still the "necessary angel" of the Stevensian sublime, as much as he is for Milton and the Romantics. Consequently, in order to leave Satan behind on Sunday morning, Stevens has to resurrect him on Monday afternoon.

This inability to take the problem beyond its static antinomies results in a kind of "Panic in the face of the moon," in which "nothing is left but comic ugliness / Or a lusted nothingness" (CP 320). True to his aestheticist commitments, Stevens locates that poverty in the ethical or logical sensibility that "disposes the world in categories" (CP 323) and that, in doing so, rejects the multifarious plenitude of existence in favor of some definite system:

To lose sensibility, to see what one sees,  
As if sight had not its own miraculous thrift,  
To hear only what one hears, one meaning alone,  
As if the paradise of meaning ceased  
To be paradise, it is this to be destitute.  
(CP 320-21)

In itself, this is very powerful; but given a situation in which nothing is left but comic ugliness or a lustred nothingness, it is hardly persuasive. By now, Stevens has made us painfully aware of the extent to which aestheticism breeds its own poverty and destitution; and therefore, his "paradise of meaning" has begun to wear a little thin (much as the "endless play of signifiers" of the Deconstructionists is prone to do). And when, in the eleventh section, our poor soldier of the seventh is reincarnated ("At dawn, / The paratroopers fall and as they fall / They mow the lawn" [CP 322]), we have come to the end of the line, as Stevens himself is now ready to admit: "Natives of poverty, children of malheur, / The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (CP 322). Nietzsche's gaiety, which was supposed to liberate us from the "slave morality" of Christianity, looks pretty meager from this perspective: it seems to have become the slave-master it was intended to overthrow.

The result, then, is that in the concluding sections of "Esthétique du Mal," ethics and aesthetics have become so dichotomized as to leave no room for any but the bleakest vision of our condition. Having taken over the world, these dichotomies are translated, on the political level, as the sterile opposition between American consumerism and Soviet-style communism. Thus, on the one hand, we are given a cartoon of pure *kitsch*—a "ship that rolls on a confected ocean, / The weather pink"—which the "man of bitter appetite despises" (CP 322); and on the other, the revolutionary "lunatic of one idea / In a world of ideas, who would have all the people / Live, work, suffer and die in that idea" (CP 325). Faced with this unalterable impasse, Stevens adopts an attitude of rather grim resignation, in which Freud and Nietzsche are about equally implicated:

It may be that one life is a punishment  
For another, as the son's life for the father's.  
But that concerns the secondary characters.  
It is a fragmentary tragedy  
Within the universal whole. The son  
And the father alike and equally are spent,  
Each one, by the necessity of being  
Himself, the unalterable necessity  
Of being this unalterable animal. (CP 323-24)

Yet somehow, and this is the marvel of the poem, Stevens is able to bring his meditation to a triumphant conclusion, not by resolving the antinomies he has invoked but by affirming what he had in his power to affirm, and with full generosity of spirit. Section XV, the poem's final section and one of the most resonant passages in his entire poetry, begins with the well-known lines:

The greatest poverty is not to live  
In a physical world, to feel that one's desire  
Is too difficult to tell from despair.  
(CP 325)

Paradoxically, prior to this conclusion, Stevens *had* in fact arrived at a position in which desire is too difficult to tell from despair.<sup>7</sup> And yet, somehow he is now able to offer “the thesis scrivened in delight, / The reverberating psalm, the right chorale” (CP 326).

What has happened is that although Nietzsche has been the primary philosophical influence on “*Esthétique du Mal*,” Stevens has at last been able to work himself free from Nietzsche’s influence, not so much by rejecting him as by renewing contact with Wordsworth. Stevens’ roots are in Wordsworth more than in any other writer, more even than in Keats, although through Keats we arrive at Wordsworth as well. Wordsworth provides Stevens with his greatest source of inspiration and also with the power and resonance of his own blank verse. Now, although the Nietzschean sublime and the Wordsworthian share many points in common, they ultimately lead in opposite directions; for whereas Nietzsche’s rejection of Christianity takes him “beyond good and evil,” Wordsworth’s humanism leads him to affirm an ethical spirit within Nature itself. There is no discrepancy between ethics and aesthetics in Wordsworth’s poetry, and although we sometimes sense that this position is an overly idealistic one, it also has distinct benefits as far as the question of “health” is concerned.

The final ten lines of “*Esthétique du Mal*”—and they are the greatest in the poem—contain a number of striking echoes of the “*Prospectus*” to *The Recluse*, to which I referred earlier. This is particularly interesting because the “*Prospectus*” is not only the poem in which Wordsworth announces his intention to render the Miltonic sublime in humanistic terms, but, in the power and density of its blank verse, it is also, along with “*Tintern Abbey*,” the most triumphant example of that rendering in Wordsworth’s entire corpus. Thus, whether or not the author of “*Sunday Morning*” was conscious of echoing the “*Prospectus*” at precisely this moment in “*Esthétique du Mal*,” it is wonderfully appropriate that he should have done so. I would like to cite two brief passages of the “*Prospectus*” in particular. In the first, Wordsworth speaks of the poet’s obligation

to travel near the tribes  
And fellowships of men, and see ill sights  
Of madding passions mutually inflamed . . .  
(73-75)<sup>8</sup>

And in the second, expressing the hope that his vision will lead to “More wise desires, and simpler manners” (104), he proclaims his intention to describe

the Mind and Man  
Contemplating; and who, and what he was—  
The transitory Being that beheld  
This Vision; when and where, and how he lived . . .  
(95-98)

Stevens' *'Esthétique du Mal'*

These lines come back to Stevens, at the end of his odyssey, and they enable him at last to regain his balance.

One might have thought of sight, but who could think  
Of what it sees, for all the ill it sees?  
Speech found the ear, for all the evil sound,  
But the dark italics it could not propound.  
And out of what one sees and hears and out  
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make  
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,  
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming  
With the metaphysical changes that occur,  
Merely in living as and where we live.

(CP 326)

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Cited by Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), 226.

<sup>2</sup>Bloom, 226.

<sup>3</sup>*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973), 313-14. Further references to Stevens' poetry are to this edition and will hereafter be cited as *CP*, with page numbers in parentheses.

<sup>4</sup>Bloom, 229. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 228.

<sup>5</sup>*The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 5: 47-51. Further references to the "Prospectus" will hereafter be cited by line number in the text.

<sup>6</sup>Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), 209.

<sup>7</sup>Bloom argues that Stevens composed "Esthétique du Mal" partly as a diatribe against Eliot (226-28). This may be correct, and in any event, Eliot would seem to be the modern exemplar of Hegel's "unhappy consciousness," for whom "desire is too difficult to tell from despair." But what Bloom fails to perceive, in my view, is that Stevens' aesthetic hedonism arrives at the same result by another road. I do not say that I am "deconstructing" Stevens in making this assertion, for it seems to me that in the course of the poem Stevens has done this himself; but the distinction is nevertheless an important one.

<sup>8</sup>Wordsworth in these lines is himself echoing a passage from Gray's "Elegy":

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;  
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

(*The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, ed. Herbert W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966], 73-76.)

## Stasis Versus Continuity: Mallarmé and Wallace Stevens

DU-HYOUNG KANG

**I**N HIS 1946 ESSAY "Wallace Stevens and Mallarmé," Hi Simons discussed the influence of French Symbolism on Wallace Stevens and concluded by placing him in the direct Mallarméan tradition.<sup>1</sup> Yet the exact influence of French Symbolist poetry on Stevens is rather difficult to determine: though many motifs and images found in Stevens' poems show a remarkable similarity to those of the Symbolists, especially those of Mallarmé, the underlying philosophy in Stevens' poetry is clearly different from that of Symbolist aesthetics. This essential difference develops continuously throughout Stevens' poetic career and reaches its culmination in the poems of his later period—the long, meditative poems which are often grounded in an abstract, often highly original, world-view. My intention here is to analyze the convergences and divergences between Mallarmé and Stevens in order to understand the fundamental principles of their respective poetics.

Symbolist poetry finds its aesthetic justification in Baudelaire's "Correspondances": the theory that the poet can perceive the realm of the Ideal and make it available to other people through poetry. The purpose of Symbolist poetry is to express the Ideal, to expand its territory toward the Infinite. What is meant by the Ideal here is the ultimate source of beauty and truth, the origination of the pure thought that exists beyond the realities of everyday life. To Mallarmé, as to Plato, it is the Ideal which is truly real, the "real real" according to Robert Cohn (Cohn 349).<sup>2</sup> In "Crise de Vers" Mallarmé claims that the language of poetry should be refined out of all the elements which are personal or particular so that it might describe the universal more effectively:

A quoi bon la merveille de transposer un fait de nature en sa presque disparition vibratoire selon le jeu de parole, cependant; si ce n'est pour qu'en émane, sans la gêne d'un proche ou concret rappel, la notion pure.

Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets. (OC 368)

[Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word, if not to divorce that object from the direct and the palpable, and so conjure up its essence in all purity?

When I say: "a flower!" then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual

calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets.]<sup>3</sup>

The “real” flower is not a physical object but “la notion pure” which is infinite in its possible manifestations—it is something which transcends our contingent reality.

In Stevens this dichotomy between the Ideal and the Real doesn’t exist. Reality is something which is definitely there, beyond our perception and cognition, somewhat like the Kantian “Ding-an-Sich.” Yet in the very moment of our perception of reality, we transform it because our faculties are involved. In “The Snow Man” Stevens demonstrates this process and in so doing foreshadows the major themes of his later poetry. In this poem the “listener,” after being subjected to the winter cold for a long time, finally becomes “nothing himself” and beholds “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 10). In the stark winter landscape, the listener is gradually assimilated to the surrounding natural phenomena. In identifying himself with the negativity of the physical world, he recognizes its essential inhumanity. “Nothing that is not there” means he is isolated from his own memories and past experience. However, by perceiving this absence of human qualities in the outside reality and conceptualizing the idea of nothingness, he initiates an automatic process of composition which cuts him off from reality and places him in an abstract world (“the nothing that is”). Therefore, the nothingness of the outside reality is annihilated or “decreated” and replaced by the nothingness of the listener’s inner consciousness. Consequently, the possibility of the external reality as an “object of direct connatural knowledge” is eliminated in the very act of perceiving it (Macksey 199). In its place the poet conceptualizes an abstract idea, and this process of decreation and abstraction will enable a re-creation of reality. From abstract nothingness, a new kind of reality will rise:

the theory  
Of poetry is the theory of life,  
  
As it is, in the intricate evasions of as,  
In things seen and unseen, created from nothingness,  
The heavens, the hells, the worlds, the longed-for lands.  
(CP 486)

And this process of decreation and re-creation, by which reality is being constantly renewed, is a never-ending cycle in Stevens.

In contrast to this, Mallarmé conceives of the Ideal as something absolute and, therefore, unattainable. In his earliest poems Mallarmé uses blueness or “azur” as a metonym for sky and endows it with an ideal beauty. “Azur” remains to the poet ultimately inaccessible, cruel and indifferent, yet he aspires to it incessantly. In “L’Azur” the poet is overwhelmed by the “sereine ironie” of the blue sky and is forever haunted (“hanté”) by its beauty (OC 37-38). In “Les Fenêtres,” “azur” represents to the invalid in a hospital an image of unattainable freedom (OC 32-33). The fervent desire of the decrepit invalid



("moribond") who hungers for the beauty of the "azur" is later reflected in the poet's own conflict between his tormenting desire for "azur" and his awareness of the supremacy of the contingencies of everyday existence ("Ici-bas est maître"). The result is a deep spiritual anguish. Stevens seems to have been very much aware of Mallarmé's use of "azur." The color "blue" is one of the most common colors in Stevens' poetry, and it often has a profound symbolic meaning. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens imagines the consequences of the humanization of God, which will end in the unity of heaven and earth:

The sky will be much friendlier then than now,  
A part of labor and a part of pain,  
And next in glory to enduring love,  
Not this dividing and indifferent blue. (CP 68)

The blue sky is seen as a demarcation between earth and heaven, and like Mallarmé Stevens regards it as being invariably frigid and dispassionate. Yet even at this early stage of his poetic career, Stevens' conception of the unity of heaven and earth diverges sharply from Symbolist aesthetics: the merger of heaven and earth signals the triumph of earth over heaven, or the absorption of heaven by earth. As Stevens reaches his mature period, he progresses beyond the simple dichotomy between the Ideal and the Real. He refuses to accept the notion that one can exist in the realm of the Ideal, a realm of absolute stasis. In "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," Stevens adds the category of Questioning to the original Kantian categories of Understanding and asserts that continuous searching is essential to the idea of poetry, thereby refuting the Mallarméan view that poetry should attempt to reach the world of the Ideal, the world of "azur": "To be blue, / There must be no questions" (CP 429). The constant process of decreation and re-creation in Stevens' poetry frees it from the immobility or stasis found in Mallarmé, which rises from the poem's inability to express the Ideal.

Therefore, poems like Mallarmé's famous "Le vierge, le vivace" essentially represent a different type of poetics than Stevens'. Though Cohn suggests that Mallarmé's poem is much in the same spirit as "The Snow Man" (Cohn 345), there remains an irreducible distinction between the two poems. At the outset of "Le vierge, le vivace," the beginning of a new day brings to the poet a fresh promise of poetic activity. The concept "dawn" or "today" ("aujourd'hui") is represented by a bird trying to escape from the transparent glacier in which he is trapped. In the second stanza, the bird is named as a swan which had surrendered himself to the ice in the past. Then the scene shifts abruptly to the struggle between the swan and the ice, a struggle against the forces of immobilization which ends ultimately in defeat:

Fantôme qu'à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,  
Il s'immobilise au songe froid de mépris  
Que vêt parmi l'exil inutile le cygne.  
(OC 68)

[Phantom whose pure white dooms it to this place,  
swathed in futile exile with a chill  
dream of contumely, the swan is still.]<sup>4</sup>

The swan, now completely immobilized, becomes a “fantôme” because his shape fades into the surrounding white landscape. Thus, in this poem the poet’s original hopes for new artistic creation suffer an enormous defeat; the phrase “l’exil inutile” is imbued with a pessimistic feeling about the swan’s future. The ascent toward the Ideal in Mallarmé is almost always incapacitated by hostile forces—this is a pattern which occurs frequently in his poetry. On the other hand, Stevens never encounters such nihilistic agony. The notion of abstract “nothing” at the end of “The Snow Man” is just a part of the movement toward continuous re-creation and decreation.

In spite of such fundamental differences between Stevens’ poetic approach and Mallarmé’s version of Platonic idealism, it is widely believed that Stevens was affected by the Symbolist method, if not by its ideology. This is true to some degree—Stevens shares with the Symbolists a penchant for frivolity and word-play, especially in his early poetry. This unusual “gaiety of language” (CP 322), combined with his skillful use of evocative, allusive diction, “calls attention to that aspect of Stevens’ poetics which concentrated on the sound and rhythm of poetry, the unusual or uncommon word, and the fabulous, opulent quality of his imagery as it is apprehensible through his difficult diction” (Wilde 42). Yet there remains a noticeable disparity between Stevens’ concept of poetic language and that of the Symbolists. Mallarmé’s view that the vocation of poetry is to ascend toward the Ideal has its theoretical foundation in his idea of poetic language. Like most Symbolists, he believes in the magical quality of poetic language. His quest for the Ideal is inevitably connected with the attempt to formulate a poetic language that would be able to express this Ideal. Poetic language should be the supreme language, capable of manifesting the truth itself. And as such, it should be forever alluding to, forever suggesting, the world of the Ideal. However, the question is whether language can be separated from its permanent association with worldly experience in order to express “la notion pure.” This is exacerbated by an opposition between verticality and horizontality in Mallarmé: the ascent toward the Ideal is hampered by the horizontal movement of contingent reality.

In “Prose pour des Esseintes,” we are given a narrative of a mysterious journey to a paradisaic island. What makes such a journey possible is the power of language. The poem begins with an invocation to the “hyperbole” which rises from the memory of the poet to transform the age-old collective unconscious (“grimoire”) so that one might leap beyond reality and perceive the Ideal:

Hyperbole! de ma mémoire  
Triomphalement ne sais-tu  
Te lever, aujourd’hui grimoire  
Dans un livre de fer vêtu:

(OC 55)

[Hyperbole! from my memory  
triumphant can you not arise,  
today from a book bound with iron  
as cabalistic gramaries:]<sup>5</sup>

Once again, as in "Le vierge, le vivace," the poetic act is described as that of ascension, almost magical in its defiance of the laws of probability and contingency. What follows afterward is a kind of *peripatetic* in silence of the poet and his companion, who is called *la soeur*. They go to the island and witness mysterious events taking place there. The island is an Edenic garden where flowers grow immense, surrounded with halo of light ("lacune") which separates them from the garden. The flowers, or irises, are the ideas themselves which rise organically from the ground:

Gloire du long désir, Idées  
Tout en moi s'exaltait de voir  
La famille des iridées  
Surgir à ce nouveau devoir . . .

(OC 56)

[Glory of long desire, Ideas  
all in me with great elation  
saw the family Irides  
arise to this new consecration . . .]<sup>6</sup>

Here the phrase "des iridées" is incredibly suggestive; it is connected to the earlier phrase, "désir, Idées," both in meaning and sound. Through an almost magical use of language Mallarmé succeeds in transforming the Platonic idea into a concrete particular. The iris is a physical flower as well as "la notion pure" of its iridescence. However, this kind of radiant suggestiveness cannot be sustained for long. Mallarmé is able to create a perfect unity of meaning and sound, of content and form, only momentarily. Since this is his primary objective in "Prose," the rest of the poem must be by necessity anticlimactic. In "Prose" the vertical growth of the "flower-ideas" proves to be too much for our minds and it surpasses human capacity for understanding: "de lis multiples la tige / Grandissait trop pour nos raisons." After watching the climactic growth of the flowers, the poet suddenly finds himself walking alone by the river-shore and is relentlessly told by the waves that the island did not exist. The vertical growth of the flowers is displaced by the horizontal movement of the waves which represent the flux of the natural world. In "Prose," as in many Mallarmé poems, the attempt to advance beyond reality ends in a failure. The central dilemma in Mallarmé is that the poet can never quite attain the world of the Ideal, since "la notion pure" which is his objective for poetry can only be expressed in language. This is clearly an impossible task because language passes into the realm of nothingness before it can be absolutely purified or abstracted. Mallarmé's attempts to capture the Ideal in his poetry and to express its "perfection" through the medium of language are faced repeatedly with the

problem that no poem can ever be absolutely “perfect” or “pure.” After all, no written word can be more perfect or beautiful than the nothingness of the blank page, as Mallarmé himself admits in “Brise marine”: “Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend” (OC 38).

On the other hand, Stevens totally rejects the idea that the function of poetic language is to represent the transcendent beyond. For him, language itself is “the material of poetry not its mere medium or instrument” (OP 171). In Stevens’ major poems “words are tangled inextricably in the event they describe” (Miller 276). And since the events that Stevens’ poems describe undergo constant transformation, he has to use various linguistic strategies to capture this motion. Stevens’ poems have a strong sense of movement due to his deliberate use of fragments, convoluted syntax, and incantatory rhythm. In addition, his images often go through dazzling metamorphoses: “People fall out of windows, trees tumble down / Summer is changed to winter, the young grow old” (CP 357). The result is a highly unique style which dramatically illustrates that “the genius of poetry” is “the spirit of visible and invisible change” (OP 239).

Unlike Mallarmé, Stevens doesn’t endeavor to reach the transcendent beyond, the realm of ultimate stability and fixity. Therefore, he has no need to feel threatened by the power of nothingness. To Mallarmé, nothingness is “the other side of a partition which the poetic act must penetrate” in order to reach the Ideal (Benamou 75). Mallarmé’s failure to do so supplies him with a master-problem that he cannot quite solve. Stevens, however, regards nothingness as a stage that his poetic imagination must pass through in its journey of constant decreation and re-creation. Stevens is also aware of the dangers of abstraction when it encounters nothingness. In Canto VI of “It Must Give Pleasure” of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Canon Aspirin’s flight of imagination is blocked by the void of nothingness:

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.

He had to choose.

(CP 403)

Through imagination Aspirin had managed to leave behind the world of factuality. But now he has arrived at a point beyond which thought, or imagination, cannot progress because of its own limitations. Therefore, he has “to choose”—but it is not a choice between fact and thought but a choice to combine them both (“It was not a choice / Between, but of”) in order to bring about a harmonizing totality. His decision to combine fact and thought is wise because thought relies on a reality of facts for its existence, and our perception of reality is in turn conditioned by thought. Therefore, Canto VI ends:

He chose to include the things

That in each other are included, the whole,

The complicate, the amassing harmony.

(CP 403)

The outside reality and imagination are integrated and the resulting harmony finally overcomes the power of nothingness. Again, we can observe the interdependence of reality and imagination in Stevens.

It is this kind of mutual interaction between reality and imagination that sustains Stevens' poetic vision. Symbolist poetry regards art as an alchemical force by which nature or reality can be overcome. In "L'Après-Midi d'un Faune," the fawn is depicted as a kind of archetypal musician who, through art, re-creates reality. The sound of his flute transforms the landscape and asserts its superiority over material substances: "Le visible et serein souffle artificiel / De l'inspiration, qui regagne le ciel" (OC 50). But this kind of enterprise can never be entirely successful. The fawn, in a state of exuberance, frolics with a couple of nymphs but, at the point of achieving his bliss, is faced with their vanishment. He is left wondering whether the experience he just had was real. The illusory nature of the whole episode keeps haunting him ("ou si les femmes dont tu gloses / Figurent un souhait de tes sens fabuleux!"). The symbolic vision shared by both Baudelaire and Mallarmé, often shrouded in allusive and mysterious language, never completely loses its illusory quality. Reality, as the disrupting force of their vision, cannot be defeated through art. Symbolist hermeticism presupposes a confrontation between art and reality—the failure of art to actualize the evanescent Ideal becomes a frequent theme. Yet this tendency brings with it the danger of stasis; reality is often considered as profane, as marginal to the poetic activity. In Stevens, one does not find this type of binary opposition. His poetry can be best described as being in a dialectical mode, since the interaction between reality and imagination never completely stops.

Stevens himself claimed that the Supreme Fiction "must change"—this is in striking contrast to Mallarmé, who endeavors to construct an absolute poetic principle that will reveal the ultimate truth, and in so doing protect the Ideal from the challenge of the world of ephemerality, the world of change and flux. Stevens, on the other hand, views the cycle of decreation and re-creation as an endless process:

Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night.  
(CP 407)

The mind subjugates reality and is being subjugated by it. As he says in "The Noble Rider and the Sounds of Words," it is "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36).

The cyclical process of decreation and re-creation is reflected in the seasonal changes in Stevens' poems. Winter, as in "The Snow Man," is the season of decreation; spring, the season of re-creation. Summer reveals the overwhelming force of naked reality, e.g., the "essential barrenness" of the "gold sun" in "Credences of Summer." Autumn serves as a transitional period when the forms of reality that had been re-created in spring and celebrated in summer are shown to be inadequate, and thus in need of decreation. Perhaps no poem

illustrates the cyclical nature of Stevens' poetry better than "The Auroras of Autumn." This is an intensely lyrical poem where the image of the *aurora borealis* is described as the *ouroboros* of the ancient creation myth. *Ouroboros* is the world-serpent, which completely encircles the earth; it is often depicted with its tail in its mouth, thus symbolizing the notion of circularity or continuity. In the beginning of the poem, Stevens declares the existence of the *ouroboros* as a cosmic image:

This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.  
His head is air. Beneath his tip at night  
Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

(CP 411)

What is so striking about the *ouroboros* or *aurora borealis* is that it incessantly changes; it has a dynamic quality. The snake casts off its slough and constantly moves:

This is form gulping after formlessness,  
Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances  
And the serpent body flashing without the skin.

(CP 411)

We can see the process of decreation in motion: the progress of the *aurora borealis* in the sky becomes by virtue of our imagination the relentless movement of the serpent as it casts off old notions and ideas. The *aurora borealis* is the "perfect figure to express the natural and psychic shifts that are the subject of [Stevens'] poem" (LaGuardia 129). It sets the stage for the series of decreations to follow—the abandonment of traditional ideas and customs which had comforted us in the past. In the following three cantos which begin with "Farewell to an idea . . ." the various ideas which have supported or comforted us are said farewell to. It is time to discard the traditional "themes" which have supported us, and to confront the changes occurring in reality. Mere adherence to the antiquated forms of social behavior will no longer suffice because the forms themselves have grown stale. The destruction of our previous understanding of reality is heightened by the dazzling transformation of the auroras:

With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps  
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,  
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

(CP 413)

This intensely lyrical passage, with its central image of *aurora borealis* undergoing violent natural change, reminds one of the description of the "constellation" at the end of Mallarmé's "Un Coup de Dés." Certainly, the similarity is there: the constellation, like the aurora, looks down at the observer from its indomitable position in the sky.

However, a major difference emerges. The constellation is at best an incomplete image to demonstrate Mallarmé's purpose, which was to produce the Ultimate Poem that would abolish chance (*hasard*) or contingency and thus provide the universe with a definite order. It is only our imagination which endows the random grouping of stars with meaning to form them into a constellation—the stars don't have any logical order themselves. There is almost an ascetic feeling associated with the vision of frigid, cold stars which remain suspended in the sky above this world of continuous flux. In his last major work Mallarmé seems to suggest that it is only our imagination or thought which can provide us with any semblance of an inherent order in the universe.

"Un Coup de Dés" is probably the only poem by Mallarmé that Stevens mentions directly in his works. In "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens criticizes the influence of the poem in modern poetry in which "the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations" (NA 168). Whether it was his intention or not, Stevens minimizes the significance of the poem. "Un Coup de Dés" is clearly Mallarmé's greatest work. Though the poem utilizes various anagrams and even the blank space of the page as instruments to convey the poet's innovative creativity, the main virtue of the poem lies in the central Mallarméan conflict between the vertical ascent toward the Ideal and the horizontal movement of the world of chaos. The poetic act or the creation of a poem is regarded as being like "a throw of the dice" (Un Coup de Dés) and the question is whether this will succeed in establishing a state of order and harmony in the universe. The answer is given in the strongest negative possible: "UN COUP DE DÉS / JAMAIS / N'ABOLIRA / LE HASARD." In the shipwreck scene, which is the climactic moment of the whole poem, "LE MAITRE" (the Master, the Pilot) is about to make the crucial dice-throw (OC 462-63). He is inside a boat which is being tossed incessantly by the waves. Before he can make the throw, however, he hesitates and is drowned by the overflowing waves. The vertical ascent (dice-throw) is once again negated and overwhelmed by the horizontal movement of the fluctuating reality (waves). What makes this a cosmic tragedy is that the Master is pictured as the generic man, the representative of all humanity. His fate is that of all artists, and of every human being. The Master's drowning becomes a ritualistic pattern that reoccurs throughout the poem. A few pages later, the castle of Hamlet ("faux manoir") dissolves into the bubbles of the sea (OC 471). The waves, the bubbles represent the constant flux or chaos existent in reality which defeats the poet's heroic enterprise by reminding him of his mortality. Reality remains indifferent to the poet's aspirations: "la neutralité identique du gouffre" (OC 473). Finally, everything is washed away by the primary life-force, the waves ("vague en quoi toute réalité se dissout"), except maybe the constellation ("EXCEPTE UNE CONSTELLATION"). However, the constellation offers vague hopes at best and is an ineffective consolation. Mallarmé's description of the human condition appears to end on a pessimistic note. Up to the very end, Mallarmé's efforts to reach the Ideal end in a

failure. What is remarkable, however, is the way he decreates the notion of an inherent order in the universe. In this poem Mallarmé progresses beyond the main Symbolist tradition and comes close to the decreative mode of Stevens' poetry.

Yet an unbridgeable gulf between the two poets still remains, for Mallarmé never quite acquires the re-creative capability of Stevens. Mallarmé's message at the end of "Un Coup de Dés" establishes chance (*hasard*) as the dominating force in reality without showing us the way to incorporate it in our lives or in the poetic vision. In this poem the poetic act turns against itself, demonstrating its serious limitations against the fluctuating world of chaos. Thus poetry becomes a kind of game, the "Jeu suprême" (OC 74), where the poet tries to endow reality with a sense of order and beauty, fully knowing that his project can only be temporarily successful at best. This kind of pessimism is catastrophic intellectually, for it assumes poetry scarcely matters in the real scheme of things. To Stevens, who claims that "The theory of poetry is the theory of life" (OP 178), such an attitude is simply unacceptable. Stevens is fundamentally grounded in the Adamic tradition of American poetry which, according to Roy Harvey Pearce, "portrays the simple inwardness of man as that which at once forms and is formed by the vision of the world in which it has its being" (Pearce 187). In Adamism, reality itself is pure because it is being constantly renewed and changed. For Stevens, poetry must embrace change. And this is the message that is consistently emphasized in "The Auroras of Autumn."

Stevens, like Mallarmé, describes the destruction of traditional or ancient ideas in "The Auroras of Autumn": "The house will crumble and the books will burn" (CP 413). All the items and modes of knowledge that were formerly considered reliable are now shown to be inadequate. They, like a mother "grown old," will be assailed by forces of temporality and spatiality, and be destroyed:

A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round  
And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.  
(CP 414)

The traditional rituals, including poetry, have become outworn and need to be changed. The musicians play in a tragedy where "there are no lines to speak" (CP 416). There is a demand for a new stage, a new theater. Then we learn that the aurora is a "theatre floating through the clouds" which is being transformed ceaselessly, "the way / A season changes color to no end." The aurora represents the changes going on in nature, and its transformations are infinite in scope and variety. The human imagination, as it traces the progress of the aurora in the sky, is entranced by its magnificent colors: "yellow," "gold," "opal," "fire" all combine together to create a vision of the auroras which is forever fluctuating and forever evolving (CP 416). In contrast to Mallarmé and other Symbolist poets, Stevens is unafraid of the notion of change. He welcomes it and celebrates its reinvigorating power. Yet change not only regener-



ates but also destroys. “*Destruam et aedificabo*” might be the dictum of Stevens; he is fully aware of the price we have to pay in order to witness a regeneration of our exhausted faculties—the total destruction of our conventional forms of knowledge.

However, the aurora itself is nothing unless humanized by our imagination; unless it is decreated and contained by human thought, it simply remains as a mass of kinetic energy:

This is nothing until in a single man contained,  
Nothing until this named thing nameless is  
And is destroyed. He opens the door of his house

On flames. The scholar of one candle sees  
An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame  
Of everything he is. And he feels afraid.

(CP 416-17)

This famous and much-quoted passage describes the typical human dilemma for Stevens. The aurora is a symbol of decreation and, in its changeability, signifies the flux of reality. Yet the aurora itself is nothing unless humanized by the poetic imagination. Stevens appears to be saying that the poetic act is the act of decreation and then re-creation, an effort to internalize the violent force of reality, in order to control it. The auroras have to be humanized by our consciousness, otherwise they would remain essentially alien to us. Since the destruction it causes is willful, without justification, and ultimately illogical, a human being faces the danger of being a passive and helpless creature in the universe, being entirely subject to what Mallarmé calls *hasard*. This is a calamity that Stevens wants to escape from, and, in saying that the auroras themselves have to be decreated, he seems to be pointing a way out of this tragedy of cosmic proportions. The auroras are “nothing” because they are not human; when they have been decreated and thus humanized, they become everything. However, such a process demands great sacrifice from the poet who attempts to internalize the volatile reality. The poetic mind must face the reality of the decreated—the decreation and humanization of the auroras would necessarily mean that the poet’s consciousness has to alter in order to withstand their terrific force. And that would probably involve the destruction of his existing ideas about order and harmony: “He opens the door of his house / On flames.” Ultimately, he is forced to abandon his specific biological, historical self and to confront the boundless energy of nature. The traditionally-minded poet, “The scholar of one candle,” was satisfied with his limited consciousness based on a single mode of thinking. Now he “feels afraid” because reality transforms him, just as he attempts to absorb it. The result is nothing less than the conjoining of the poet’s mind and reality, where his imagination comes to resemble the auroras: “An Arctic effulgence flaring on the frame / Of everything he is.” The poet’s mind, by decreating the merciless vision of the auroras, opens a new avenue toward re-creation. By disengaging itself from the defunct

forms of cognition and cogitation, and accepting the idea of change as a necessary condition of its existence, it no longer has to feel threatened by the flux of reality. The poetic imagination is now liberated from the constraints of the poet's previously limited consciousness and joins the auroras in the sky. Therefore, the mind behind the auroras, the human imagination, takes on the qualities of the auroras themselves: "And do those heavens adorn / And proclaim it, the white creator of black" (*CP* 417). In many versions of the *ouroboros*, its body is depicted "as half-black (symbolizing earth and night) and half-white (symbolizing heaven and light)," which emblemizes the successful "counterbalancing of opposing principles" (*A Dictionary of Symbols* 247). The serpent's totalizing function can never cease because decreation leads ultimately to re-creation—reality causes imagination to act but imagination transforms reality.

Throughout "The Auroras of Autumn" Stevens reiterates the fact that imagination and reality are interdependent. In order for the imagination to be really free, it has to join the forces of decreation in the cosmos. Therefore, it must be in perpetual motion, just like the reality which continuously fluctuates. All of these signify that the human imagination cannot be static; it, like the auroras, must be constantly moving, ceaselessly decreating and re-creating. It cannot be satisfied with dogmas, real or ideal. At this point, Stevens' poetry truly progresses beyond the boundaries of Symbolist poetics. The highest achievement in Mallarmé, as shown in "Un Coup de Dés," illustrates the break-down of all absolutes in human life, which leaves the flux of reality as the governing force of our existence. Mallarmé's poetry shows his efforts to rebel against the domination of chance or *hasard* in his life. The fact that he fails in this fatal attempt demonstrates that it is ultimately futile. Yet the poet, because he is alive, must strive against the delimiting power of contingent reality. In this respect, every Mallarméan poem is an example of heroic tragedy where the poet repeatedly attempts to challenge the decreative forces in his life. Poetry becomes an eternal ritual where the poet's efforts to endow the universe with meaning inevitably fail, only to be taken up by his successor. This is Mallarmé's message in "Un Coup de Dés" where the Master's drowning enables the birth of a son—the union of the Master and the Sea produces an offspring ("son ombre puérile") which will repeat the process (*OC* 464). Consequently, the drowning of the Master becomes an unaging ritual which is necessary for the preservation of the race, as in the ritualistic drowning of the Phoenician fertility god in "The Waste Land." But the ritual always conforms to a prefixed pattern, and poetry, by being subject to that pattern, faces the danger of stagnation. In Stevens, we do not find such stasis; his poetry breaks free from the constricting pattern of Mallarmé because it not only accepts but celebrates change. The mind behind poetry, the imagination, must appropriate the power of the auroras for its own use; like them, it must become versatile, moving from decreation to re-creation with swiftness, and be prepared to accept the extinction of man's former ideas without trepidation. And Stevens warns that we must be willing to do all this without seeking the consolation of the idea of

correspondence between nature and the human mind (CP 417-18). There is no absolute destiny in reality that imagination must obey. In Stevens' mind, there is simply no mystical or divine authority that controls the process of poetic composition.

Stevens wrote in his letter to Bernard Heringman about Simons' essay that "this made a very great deal out of little" and declared that he was never a student of any of the Symbolist poets (*Letters* 635-36). We should be careful about taking Stevens' words at their face value. Even he himself observes in the same letter that Mallarmé had a lot of impact on his generation and admits that he might have "absorbed more than I thought." As we have seen, his poetry clearly shows the influence of Symbolist poets like Mallarmé in the use of imagery and theme. Yet Stevens is correct in saying that he was never their student: his poetry advances beyond the main Mallarméan dichotomy between the Ideal and the Real and indeed surpasses the Symbolists in its scope and the variety of the subject matter. His interpretation of the poetic act as a cyclical process of decreation and re-creation rescued him from plunging into Mallarmé's spiritual anguish and pessimism. Symbolist poetry never quite recovers from the death of God; both Baudelaire and Mallarmé are theists in that they seek to substitute a kind of orphic mysticism for religion in order to compensate for the decline of religious absolutes. Stevens states, however, that "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption" (*OP* 158). Poetry is not simply a means to represent the evanescent Ideal but itself a power which *fashions* the world we live in. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens says that the poet "creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and . . . gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (*NA* 31). Poetry, or imagination, is indispensable to our lives because only it can endow reality with meaning. This is because our perception of reality is inevitably dependent on our imagination—it is our point of view which determines how we understand reality. And since the number of possible perspectives we can take in each act of perception is almost unlimited, any efforts to reach absolute fixity are doomed to certain failure. Thus, according to Stevens, the Symbolist attempt to find the unchanging essence of stability or purity can never be successful because there is no single mode of understanding common to everybody: "The mode of the person becomes the mode of the world" (*OP* 108).

In this sense, the philosophical differences between Stevens and Mallarmé should be regarded in the light of the historical space which separates the two poets. Throughout his poetry Mallarmé struggles to maintain a nineteenth-century "metaphysic of correspondence" (Kermode 125) which tries to reconcile the material world with the spiritual. However, Stevens' poetry is generally characterized by the absence of the spiritual; God only exists as "a postulate of the ego" (*OP* 171). Instead, his poetics seem at home with the relativistic, skeptical climate of twentieth-century science and metaphysics which suggest "hesitation or fluctuation was part of the world" (Steinman 21).<sup>7</sup> In Stevens,

the position of the poet vis-à-vis reality can never be fixed because reality itself is changed by his act of observation.

Ultimately, Stevens' understanding of the relationship between mind and reality proves to be far superior to that of Mallarmé and other Symbolist poets. Because the process of decreation and re-creation is dynamic, Stevens escapes from falling into an abyss of negation like Mallarmé. In Mallarmé, the conclusion of the linear progress toward the Ideal signifies the beginning of complete negation. The best his poetry can hope for is to become a kind of marker, a boundary stone pointing to the beyond ("le au-delà"). This seems to be the final message of many of his poems which end with the image of the *tombeau* standing at the border between the Real and the Ideal. Compared to this, Stevens' quest for reality never stops, for there will never be a revelation which can illuminate the ultimate truth: "After the final no there comes a yes" (CP 247). There is no real beginning, nor end—like the figure of the *ouroboros*, the cyclical process of decreation and re-creation is self-perpetuating:

Alpha continues to begin.

Omega is refreshed at every end.

(CP 469)

In this respect, Stevens is not a Symbolist. Despite many surface similarities, Stevens' theory of poetic composition differs substantively from that of the Symbolists because it abandons the quest for an absolute principle in the universe in favor of a method by which changes in reality can be incorporated into the poetic mind. He was certainly influenced by the Symbolists' concern for that unity which would reconcile the poetic vision with the unstable phenomenal world, but he approaches it from a different angle. Stevens doesn't seek to enforce an arbitrary sense of order upon reality but instead revolutionizes his system of understanding to adapt to the continuous changes in reality. The result is that his imagination is refreshed by every fluctuation in our real world: "The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world" (CP 397-98).

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>In his article, Simons focuses on "seven specific parallels" and "seven more general likenesses" between Stevens and Mallarmé, and reaches a conclusion that Stevens' poetry was a continuation and development of Mallarmé's symbology (258). Despite his rather thorough analysis of various symbols and themes in Mallarmé and Stevens, Simons never addresses the fundamental differences between Stevens' "dialectical mode" and Mallarmé's Symbolist aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup>Cohn's essay is interesting because it argues that Mallarmé had anticipated modern linguistics (348). He tries to illustrate the modernity of Mallarmé's thoughts concerning language in "Crise de Vers" by connecting them with, among many other things, the theory of Saussure.

<sup>3</sup>*Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 42.

<sup>4</sup>*Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*, trans. C. F. MacIntyre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 83.

<sup>5</sup>*Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*, 63.

<sup>6</sup>*Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*, 65.

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<sup>7</sup>For a more detailed discussion of Stevens' relationship with twentieth-century science, see Steinman.

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## A Primer of Possibility for "The Auroras of Autumn"

FRANK DOGGETT AND DOROTHY EMERSON

### I

**W**ALLACE STEVENS IS A MASTER of intimation, of a latency that in effect is a wordless language within language. He shows awareness of his bent for what is tacit when he says of a canto in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" that it "depends a good deal on its implications" (L 364). That could be said of most of his poems, especially "The Auroras of Autumn." Implication begins with a hint that something more may be surmised than what is given, leaving for that surmise a semantic yearning, evocative rather than indicative—yet a realizable possibility. Although both what is said and what is only feasible are subject to variability, the stated is restricted by its core of communal significance, the possible (which in conjecture must always be feasible) by its responsibility to what is stated. Their obvious difference is lexical: the given is a verbal presence, the possible an expressive absence. Any intimation of the possible, if it is to be more than an excrescence, should seem a verbal equivalent of the wordless resonance of the poem's intimations.

Evading the denoted, Stevens writes within a rhetoric of semantic deferment, his discourse segmented and elliptical within segments, the given appearing to be a series of more or less discrete passages, as though the possibilities, if adequately conceived, would articulate the disjunctive discourse. Such possibilities, as the wordless part of metonymic, allegorical, tropal, elliptical implications, hold in silence the inner secrecy of "The Auroras of Autumn." The nature of its secrecy is the overall subject of this study.

A thematic concept usually relates Stevens' sequential poems. For example, he explains that the cantos of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are about realization: "I have been trying to see the world about me both as I see it and as it is. This means seeing the world as an imaginative man sees it" (L 316). The unifying theme of "The Auroras of Autumn" is suggested in the final canto: the notion that humanity is unhappy in a world innocent of intent and happy in appearance. As each canto presents some aspect of the unhappy people—the figure of a solitary self, the female and male archetypes, the world in realization, a person waking to a sense of individuation and pending mortality—it seems reasonable to infer that the poem as a whole is a version of an essay on man.<sup>1</sup> Stevens had already revealed his fascination with the subject ten years earlier:

Men and the affairs of men seldom concerned  
This pundit of the weather, who never ceased  
To think of man the abstraction, the comic sum.

(CP 156)

By the time of "The Auroras of Autumn," man has become the tragic sum, as seen in view of the title's symbol. "These lights symbolize a tragic and desolate

background" (L 852), Stevens affirms, explaining that his reference is to the aurora borealis and not the autumn dawns. Since Stevens gives no other explanation, the symbol must be approached by the poem's account of it as a phenomenon.

The first description is given in Canto II from the point of view of a lone figure by the sea, who sees its fluctuations as continual process:

He observes how the north is always enlarging the change,  
With its frigid brilliances, its blue-red sweeps  
And gusts of great enkindlings, its polar green,  
The color of ice and fire and solitude.

These lines offer an indication of what the auroras symbolize; for change is not only descriptive of the aurora borealis, it is also the essence of fluxion. The decreative phase of the universal flux is manifest in the colors—ice and fire—symbols of finality. The word "solitude" has an emotional impact that transfers to the human observer who turns to see the mutations in the northern sky. This solitary figure is emblematic of the separateness of a self who, amid relics of past presences, faces the symbol of mutability that is "a tragic and desolate background." The given enhances its suggestiveness and restricts its variability in that the descriptive elements of the given attach with symbolic effect to the possible and thus tend to define it.

As the cantos continue, other symbols and images disclose the flux in its unfolding devastation. For example, at the close of Canto III the wind is the inexorable force of time: "The wind will command them with invincible sound." The omnipotent flux is again the wind at the end of Canto IV: "What company, / In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?" In Canto VI the aurora borealis is contrasted with the tiny candle light of the imagination of an observer who looks from his security of present being at the vast mindless effulgence "flaring on the frame / Of everything he is." This quotation suggests a realization of the symbolic northern lights as portent of the extinction of his single candle light: "And he feels afraid." Another play upon the symbolism of the aurora borealis occurs in Canto VII where Stevens asks if there is an enthroned imagination that embraces contraries: grim-benevolent, just-unjust, summer already foretelling winter. This deity is depicted as possibly seated in the time and place of the aurora borealis—winter, the northern sky, night—and as also sharing its luminosity:

When the leaves are dead,  
Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,  
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting  
In highest night? And do these heavens adorn  
And proclaim it . . . ?

Thus, the northern lights are considered as adornments and proclamations of this spirit, now seen as a personification of the flux with its contraries, its creative, decreative nature. This seventh canto, like the whole poem, discourses mainly on the decreative phase of universal change and proposes this spirit as one that obliterates everything except the northern lights. “[H]eavens” and “planets” are metonymic, signifying illusions and anticipations of fate, thus indicating mental structures by which we have shaped our lives. The decreative process, extinguishing these, destroys all mutuality,

Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where  
We knew each other and of each other thought,  
A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,  
Except for that crown and mystical cabala.

The “of where” is synecdochic for the time-place where people living in an ethos that pervades their epoch “knew each other and of each other thought”: a time-place-ethos erased by decreative change leaving “A shivering residue,” an observer, perhaps, cold in the autumnal air, already fated to bear his own effacement. There remains the embellishment of universal change, “that crown and mystical cabala,” the phenomenon of the auroras. The poem declares that the deity of flux “dare not” decreate itself—“leap by chance in its own dark”—and yet as a fiction, a personification, it must be destroyed in the course of change by the caprice of skepticism.

Canto VIII discourses as if the previous cantos have made known the significance of the auroras:

So, then, these lights are not a spell of light,  
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.  
An innocence of the earth and no false sign  
Or symbol of malice.

Thus Stevens forestalls any reading of the boreal lights as grounded in hostility or the will to harm.<sup>2</sup> The plain speaking of these lines asserts that the physical universe, with continual creating, decreating, is only what it is—mindless activity and therefore a “tragic and desolate background” for humanity.

## II

It should be discernible from the preceding that this extended semantic duality of a continuous given, with its continuous possible grounded in that given, is a form of allegory. The verbal presence of a poem of Stevens is often enigmatic and thus not only the possible but the stated itself may require elucidation. In “Effects of Analogy,” Stevens says he prefers a symbolic discourse that “is interesting in itself” and without obvious implication. “The other meaning does not dog the symbol like its shadow” (NA 109). Yet holding to the shadow image, he says of “the other meaning,” “It is like a pleasant shadow, faint and volatile.” He desires a possible meaning that is open to con-



jecture: "It is like a play of thought, some trophy that we ourselves gather, some meaning that we ourselves supply."

Such a play of thought engages "reflections and refractions" (NA 109) of culturally familiar symbols, testing unsaid significances, and proving divinations of meaning by discovering a relative consistency in Stevens' use of a symbol or image. When there is a resolution of appropriate possibility then the stated is illuminated. It is this interrelation of symbol and "other meaning" that is the basis for any hermeneutics valid for reading Stevens' poetry. It is this that assures a continuous activity between the poem and the mind of the reader searching for the evasive abstract content, thus prolonging the life of the poem in the reader's interest. In Stevens' conception of the normal process of mental activity, the images or figures hold in latency idea: "The momentum of the mind is all toward abstraction" (OP 179). In the allegorical structures that Stevens prefers, the mind must work with an enigma and what it works toward is idea.

The first canto of "The Auroras of Autumn" confronts us with an enigma: a serpent that is bodiless, yet has a body and skin, that has existence in the sky but has its nest on earth. It is a serpent that casts its skin. The momentum toward the abstraction of an idea as subject of this image is quickened by turning back to prior poems where the serpent image occurs. For example, in "Farewell to Florida," "the snake has shed its skin upon / The floor" (CP 117), an analogical correspondence not only to a change or shedding of time, but to a change of mind. "The Bagatelles, The Madrigals" has several elements that recur in "The Auroras of Autumn": a thinking serpent, an unhappy people, the bitterness of poison as parallel to the bitterness of thought. "Where do you think, serpent," this earlier poem asks, and then "where is it, you, people, / Where is it that you think, baffled / By the trash of life . . .?" (CP 213). This poem sets up an analogy of a thinking serpent in a crevice of earth tasting his poison and the unhappy people tasting the bitterness of their thoughts in the crevice of their bodies, their earth. The analogy creates an implicit nexus of poison and thought.

In "The Auroras of Autumn" analogies of serpent and human, bitter poison and thought, are contracted into a symbol with the serpent as given and the human mind as possibility. The poison of the serpent and the bitter thought of the human merge and become the poison of skepticism that denies an afterlife in paradise. This conjecture as to the possible meaning in Canto I is supported by the given as it unfolds in a careful reading. The reference to Plato's cave in the second stanza and the reference in the sixth stanza to the essential attributes of consciousness evinced by the serpent as "master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images"—these are enough to foreshadow the other meaning of the symbol. "[F]orm gulping after formlessness" suggests that the mind is a unity formed by identity that engulfs amorphous reality which in turn becomes shaped by realization. The evidence grows firmer when the last stanza assures us that it is in the head of the serpent that perception takes place: "We saw in his head, / Black beaded on the rock, the flecked

animal, / The moving grass, the Indian in his glade." The past tense in these lines strengthens the interpretation that the serpent is mind and its continuum of experience.

In view of its symbolic meaning as mind or consciousness, the opening serpent-sky image is a variation of the "sky that thinks" trope, one of Stevens' major figurations.<sup>3</sup> The second stanza suggests that the serpent-sky concept belongs with other ideas of the mind: that consciousness is created through organic development symbolized by an image of a snake emerging from an egg; that images given in perception are removed from reality like the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave; that consciousness is a continual flowing and is supported by a physical brain. The serpent casting its skin may be seen as the psychological flux in its decreative aspect. There is nothing to associate the serpent with the brilliant display of the northern lights until the lines—"Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances / And the serpent body flashing without the skin"—confirm that our consciousness, as symbolized by the serpent, like all the changing universe, must continually shed experience in the time-flow.

"Body" and "skin" suggest the physical, but this serpent is real only in the sense that a dragon in an old allegory is real; and these terms point to a serpent that is bodiless in the way that the mind is bodiless when considered as apart from brain. The body of the serpent intimates the sense of personal stability, identity beneath the skin that is continually shed as experiences pass away in the continuum—"wished-for disappearances" because of desire for the new. Psychological flux is also suggested by "the height emerging and its base," for "height emerging" points to the constant coming-on of mental experience, its base the necessary physical self that is the ground of subjectivity. Significantly, in the fifth stanza, the serpent and the auroras are shown as distinct symbols, for "These lights" at midmost midnight where they have never been, at the end of time, might discover there the serpent in paradise, "Relentlessly in possession of happiness":

In another nest, the master of the maze  
Of body and air and forms and images,  
Relentlessly in possession of happiness.

This is his poison: that we should disbelieve  
Even that.

The heaven where the human consciousness might be happy is "another nest," another earth, a fictive place for mind; belief in such a nest is destroyed by the mind's skepticism, the serpent's poison.<sup>4</sup>

### III

The "Farewell to an idea . . ." which opens three cantos of "The Auroras of Autumn" offers no indication of the nature of the "idea." Ideas exist only subjectively, and these adieus seem to be to three conceived aspects of humanity: self, mother, and father. The farewells express a conscious relinquishment of a place with these, and, therefore, tell of a farewell to life itself. Canto II, unique

among all the other cantos for presenting its theme in verbal pictorialization, shows a scene suggestive of times foregone. A solitary man faces the symbol in the sky—a representation that contains its meaning in what it shows. In this place, the cabin, the clouds, the beach are all white, and hence, “being visible is being white.” White is the usual color of a cabin on a beach; thus, this white may result from choice of the customary, or from the habit of ancestors, or from the consequence of fading with the passage of time. Dried flowers against the wall are remnants of a life of sentiment, even, perhaps, of an expectation of a certain permanency, a white different from the freshness of bloom. The wind blowing the sand is a time image, faintly suggestive of the movement of sand in an hour glass. The “aging afternoon,” the darkness that “gathers though it does not fall,” the failing light, are adumbrations of the diminishing life of the lone man. Standing within a scene of relics, the solitary man facing the boreal lights is an extended ideogram of an individual turned toward the symbol of “a tragic and desolate background.” In “Imagination as Value,” an essay composed close in time to the writing of “The Auroras of Autumn,” Stevens says that the imagination of the poet “tries to penetrate to basic images, basic emotions, and so to compose a fundamental poetry even older than the ancient world” (NA 145). Archetypes are older than the ancient world and are basic images, eidetic abstractions that play the part quite fittingly of imagined persons in this fundamental poetry. The solitary self of Canto II bears the double nature of the personal and archetypal paradigm. The creation of self must be looked for in an earlier cause, the female and male that together compose and engender humanity.

In Canto III Stevens is not concerned with Jung’s theory that the real mother receives enhancement from “the archetype projected upon her, which gives her a mythological background and invests her with authority and luminosity” (*Four Archetypes* 17);<sup>5</sup> rather, he is concerned with a mother archetype that receives enhancement from conceptions gathered from recollected experiences with the personal mother. A reciprocity of tenderness between the mother’s actions and the emotions of those who remember her is evoked by Stevens’ poignant rhetoric. Memory of her focuses feeling and intent; thus, this elegy says: “The mother’s face, / The purpose of the poem, fills the room.”

Rather than a vision of the mother’s face, the essence of her presence is given in the poem. Like the solitary observer of Canto II, the mother seems to be both a person, and an archetype. The omniscient point of view adopted in Canto III is that of one who has experienced a great span of universal change and thus through retrospect can report that a simple trust in being safely at home in the world is deceptive. “They are together, here,” in a remembered room, not thinking of futurity. But the omnipotent perspective gazing at those gathered tells us what has already occurred: in effect, this will be the destiny of those trusting ones.

Already the house they shared is “half dissolved,” for memory’s half remains, “Still-starred” and that half, too, must vanish as the skies change. Memory is an abstraction of the past and “Only the half they can never

possess . . ." In the room, they possess the mother and her gifts of peace and gentleness, but the omniscient view sees that the mother, too, is helpless against the time-flow. Her necklace, not a symbol but a reminder of her femininity and desire, is laid aside not to touch, in her closeness, her loved ones again: "she has grown old." She is already but a memory for "the house is of the mind and they and time, / Together, all together." The omniscient view narrating what will happen is looking backward at those who are together in the room, and now all are together "at ease in a shelter of the mind." It is a story of those who could not be saved by the mother, those who could not save the mother, from mortal process.

The phrases, "Boreal night" and "The windows will be lighted, not the rooms," suggest that the aurora borealis, symbol of time's creation and decreation, will cast irresistible fatality upon these gathered here, through the wind that, too, is a symbol of decreation:

A wind will spread its windy grandeurs round  
And knock like a rifle-butt against the door.  
The wind will command them with invincible sound.

The female, as basic image, is traditionally associated with earth and fertility, and with conditions that ensure fruition. Canto III, by the indirection of a retrospective view of a family, imbues the mother with such qualities, "older than the ancient world" (NA 145), bringing forth and giving care. Drawn to the farthest limit of meaning, the human mother, like nature, assures that life continues despite the relentless decreation of time. Yet the nostalgic theme of Canto III overrides its archetypal ground and offers a likely reading of a personal elegy. Still there is a seeming reference to the archetypal earth-mother "Who gives transparence to their present peace," for in giving life she has arranged that humans *see* the world *through* a sense of their place in the world: in Canto III, a sense of security in the presence of the mother.

The possible earth-mother reference is strengthened by the passing on of Canto IV to the father who "sits / In space, wherever he sits," a figure obviously drawn from a tradition that places the symbolic father as transcendent to the earth-mother. His activities might be subsumed with that of other archetypes, the quester, the wanderer. The given activity imposes a possible reading of "space" as described in another poem: "the light-bound space of the mind" (CP 436). When, as here, the personification is of a human faculty, the given offers a performance illustrative of the faculty rather than a description of the image. "[B]leak regard" and "As one that is strong in the bushes of his eyes" symbolize traits necessary to the father's cold judgements and visionary insights. His mental life is displayed in a sequential, almost allegorical structure, with verbal pictorialization and cerebral adventures, an unformulated whole that leaves the poem's possible readings floating parallel like a descant beside the given. "[N]o to no and yes to yes," "yes / To no; and in saying yes he says farewell" adumbrate decision making and departure from some thought. "He leaps from heaven to heaven," for many heavens exist in the transcendental.

The creativity of the archetypal father is denoted when the lowest ear, the listening body, hears its own "supernatural preludes" (feelings of exalted music) as "the angelic eye defines / Its actors," a possible reference to the father's theological vision of the divine personifications approaching in their masks as supernatural beings. The poem asks the father, master of the transcendent (whose cognition has its own time-flow) whether these actors singing their "preludes" can sing in harmony with "the naked wind," that destroying force of universal change, naked without a fictive covering. Here the word "preludes" takes on an ominous meaning not evident in the first sense of a musical term: for "prelude" indicates that which comes before and here it takes on a sense of a choral singing of hope against death as absolute, even while reality's time-flow assures in the voice of the wind that all must perish.

The master in the transcendent, "yet in space" and "yet the king and yet the crown," is modulated in Canto V to the host offering diversion and spectacle to humanity. After a brief reference to the earth-mother who "invites humanity to her house / And table," confirming the two-fold physical needs of earthly man, the poem portrays the father in the guise of one giving gracious entertainment. It is an analogical fiction of the imagination bringing forth all the creations of the arts, the theater, carnivals, fairs, ceremonies, including those of primitive peoples, even the play of children. It is the imagination bestowing an enrichment and gaiety so that "We stand in the tumult of a festival." Suddenly the canto turns to a disillusioned view. In reality all falls by happenstance. Humanity is brutish. The musicians play a tragic drumbeat; for the actuality within which we live has no plan, is not planned. Canto V closes with the notion that "There is no play." The image emerges from the abundance of Stevens' stock of tropes and vocabulary of symbols, available to him and as spontaneously used as ordinary words. An earlier occurrence of the theater-play image, for example, is in the first canto of "Repetitions of a Young Captain" where the crash of civilization in World War II is described in "A tempest cracked on the theatre" and "The ruin stood still in an external world" (CP 306).

#### IV

It is this external world that is the subject of Canto VI, this outer world becomes a subjective world, one that, by what Stevens calls "The Platonic resolution of diversity" appears to "the mind of a man of strong powers, accustomed to thought, accustomed to the essays of the imagination . . ." In such a mind, "The world is no longer an extraneous object, full of other extraneous objects, but an image" (NA 151). With the essence of "All the world's a stage" (II.vii.139), Stevens opens Canto VI with the world as an image: "It is a theatre floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud." Here, again, the troping of the sky as mind, the clouds as thoughts drifting there, manifests his meaning. Describing the thinking in the poems of his new book, *The Auroras of Autumn*, Stevens seems to have had in mind the movement of clouds when he said, "What underlies this sort of thing is the drift of one's ideas" (L 636).

The contents of these clouds of Canto VI have undergone a mutation from what can be discerned by the physical senses to what can be continually improvised by rumination. Thus the theater as cloud is composed of "misted rock / And mountains running like water, wave on wave, / Through waves of light," "misted" suggesting a misty cloud-like quality, and "light" a troping of intelligence as it muses "idly, the way / A season changes color to no end, / Except the lavishing of itself in change." "The cloud drifts idly through half-thought-of forms," for the scene (seen) of the theater of the mind is ever-changing, unfolding in a creation, decreation of its eidetic seeming without regard to the witless universal change of our actuality, except to make it realizable and be a submissive part. Birds fly in and then away, cities rise and fall as the play the imagination writes for comprehension continues in this theater of the mind. "The denouement has to be postponed . . ."

Yes, the denouement has to be postponed, for the end of the creative, decreative cycles of the world's changes has not yet come; and the canto pauses at the word. An objective view is taken of what has been essentially an analogical fiction of the universal time-flow through all the realities. The canto declares, "This is nothing until in a single man contained," for this is true of all fictions. "Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed," for this naming of a theater "floating through the clouds, / Itself a cloud," is only a fiction written by metaphor. It must be destroyed; for the fictions of language obscure reality.

Its destroyer, a scholar wresting himself from language, "opens the door of his house / On flames," an act symbolic of the human confronting the decreative phase of reality's time-flow. He sees the magnitude of the "Arctic effulgence" as against his one candle of imagination, for which these flames are "a tragic and desolate background." "And he feels afraid." It is a canto of the fictional as measured against an experience of the real. At times, as here, the given is enough to indicate almost inevitably what the possible must be. The theater that is a cloud in a sky of clouds, a theater with rock and mountains and a capital that may be emerging or has just collapsed, with other forms of earth's scenes "half-thought-of," must foretell a concept of the world in the imagery of reverie as a resolution of its possibility.

Leaving language and reverie, the "scholar of one candle" of Canto VI is afraid when he faces the flaring of the aurora borealis which is a fact of nature, an occurrence which so far in this discussion of the poem has been read as a symbol of the mindless universal process that carries man to death. In Canto VIII, Stevens does not undo this characterization of the poem's paramount image, but, in effect, mitigates it with the truth that in this natural process there is no intent to harm. The canto opens with a consideration of that which exists outside of nature, idea, specifically the idea of innocence, as "pure principle," for which the natural world provides no time or place. "Its nature is its end," for as an essence, innocence is not subject to change as is the world of matter that constantly confronts us in the life of the sensuous or empirical. Yet, the

poem concedes, as an afterthought, innocence may exist in time during the ruminations of an "oldest and coldest philosopher." Thus,

There is or may be a time of innocence  
As pure principle. Its nature is its end,  
That it should be, and yet not be, a thing

That pinches the pity of the pitiful man,  
Like a book at evening beautiful but untrue,  
Like a book on rising beautiful and true.

These lines indicate that the realm within which the idea of innocence exists is an area where ideas are "not / Less real": where ideas have power to affect man's experience and feeling, where the idea of innocence can be "a thing / That pinches the pity of the pitiful man." Words of a "book," and concepts such as "beautiful," "untrue," "true," like innocence, all are native to man's mind for which the natural world has no use.

The canto breaks into an exaltation of innocence "like a thing of ether," a principle, an essence not part of the time-flow, that may complete the meaning of existence, "Almost as predicate. But it exists, / It exists, it is visible, it is, it is." What is visible is the aurora borealis which the canto now reads as innocence, intending no harm. This later reading does not erase the earlier reading of the lights as a symbol of the creative, decreative process but rather superimposes its truth upon the earlier truth about the fatality of time-flow so that their conjunction in a single symbol manifests the belief that the natural world's process is intentionless, simply the innocent goings-on of a purposeless course of actuality. The auroras are "An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice." False signs and symbols of malice are properties of the intelligence, but the earth is void of any meanings.

The canto now moves into the making of a fiction with such words as "like" and "as if," paralleling the age-old habit of men to tell a tale of death's cosmology. Here is a story of the children of earth returning to their mother and for them, awake in that dark of the grave, it is as if she created "the time and place in which we breathed . . ." The canto flows over into Canto IX:

And of each other thought—in the idiom  
Of the work, in the idiom of an innocent earth,  
Not of the enigma of the guilty dream.

It is a comforting story of the earth-mother letting us re-live our lives in recollection as if we were part of the innocence of earth, without the "enigma of the guilty dream," without any quandary of sin, punishment, or belief in the fall of man. An inference here is that so strong is our subliminal trust in living on, so unable are we to imagine nothingness for ourselves, that we must think of death as if we were going to live.

"The guilty dream" is certainly a reference to the biblical legend of Adam's fall and the possible salvation of man from death with a return to the divine

Father. The major images of the biblical story are in "The Auroras of Autumn": the serpent of man's life in the mind modified from the knowing serpent of Genesis but without any moral significance; the mother and father images that in themselves suggest erotic love generating family; time and death, consequences of the fall of Adam and Eve. In opposition to the story in Genesis, "The Auroras of Autumn" is telling a tale of man as an earthly creature living in a metaphysical situation from which he returns to the holiness of the earth-mother. It is a return of the human separated in life from the natural world by mind, consciousness, imagination, which we see symbolized in "The Auroras of Autumn" as a serpent. It is that separation which is man's misfortune; for with mind comes the realization that man's ultimate destiny is death. This unsaid theme may be the crux of meaning for the whole poem.

This poem, which we have suggested is an essay on man, although not allegorical in the traditional sense, in Canto IX shows more of the qualities of narrative that can be read as holding continuous subterranean meanings in its figurative tale than the other cantos. Its account of man, as in a family likeness, awakening to "This sense of the activity of fate" is sufficiently abstract to be read as a quasi-allegory of all human life; for its elliptical progress invites a parallel improvisation. When the possible is as unattached to what may be called public meanings as it is here, then it is doubly important for conjecture to be appropriate to the given and to the poet's verbal individuality. The reading of possibilities that follows is an attempt to hold conjectures to this admonition.

The canto opens with the holdover stanza from Canto VIII. The emphasis is on language as a unifying factor in the human circumstance and a suggestion that the "idiom of an innocent earth" pertains more to the particulars of living together than to philosophical or religious contemplation. It is the simplicity and confidence in life held by the human family in its ordinary pursuits that is the subject of the comparison: "We were as Danes in Denmark all day long / And knew each other well, hale-hearted landsmen." Such are the simplicities of the human in ordinary living that "Sunday," with its upholding of faith in the human tale of life after death, is to them of less consequence than other "outlandish" days. The simplicity and unity of thoughtless day-to-day life is likened to that of childhood's:

We thought alike  
And that made brothers of us in a home  
In which we fed on being brothers, fed  
  
And fattened as on a decorous honeycomb.  
This drama that we live—We lay sticky with sleep.

These lines offer a reminiscence of being young with a sense of safety and sweetness of life. The sudden intrusion of "This drama that we live—" foreshadows some coming change, something to which we cannot fully waken, for "We lay sticky with sleep."



"This sense of the activity of fate" is what wakens these childlike brothers. "She" who comes is of double significance. She is the anima which wakens each brother to his own individuation and she is his fate:

The rendezvous, when she came alone,  
By her coming became a freedom of the two,  
An isolation which only the two could share.

The sense of individual self according to Jung comes as a consequence of the entering into maturity and the emergence of the anima. Jung says "a passionate exclusiveness therefore attaches to the man's anima" (*Two Essays* 221). This is the isolation which only the two could share.

This tracing of maturation from a childish togetherness to adult individuation is a quasi-allegory paralleling that of men in the ordinariness of contented daily living, waking to "This drama that we live" in which each man confronts the knowledge of the certainty of death. "[D]rama that we live" suggests that we are personae in a play that is of some consequence in its finale, something more than the ordinary:

Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?  
Of what disaster is this the imminence:  
Bare limbs, bare trees and a wind as sharp as salt?

The stars are putting on their glittering belts.  
They throw around their shoulders cloaks that flash  
Like a great shadow's last embellishment.

Thus it is that men aware of death begin to read the things of the universe as a vocabulary that can foretell an imminent fatality. The last three lines of the canto are a reconciliation with death as part of nature, part of her innocence. And, indeed, they express an acceptance of death that at times exists, but is seldom recorded in literature:

It may come tomorrow in the simplest word,  
Almost as part of innocence, almost,  
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part.

Death coming "tomorrow in the simplest word," suggests that it is only in language that death exists, a word to be spoken by the living.

The dread of extinction is given from another point of view in Canto X, its beginning thin, almost bereft of possibilities. With the resolution that humanity is "An unhappy people in a happy world," the musing becomes richer though its tone continues pseudo-seriously. "The spectre of the spheres" of this canto is not the imagination enthroned in a new guise. This spirit meditates "The full of fortune and the full of fate," for he is the contriver of the life experience of the unhappy people. The passage about the fictive specter can be assumed to mean that if there were a deity presiding over human life experience, it would be an unhappy deity without any heaven, his prescience of

mortality like the foreboding of all the unhappy people. It would be as if this knowing took place

In hall harridan, not hushful paradise,  
To a haggling of wind and weather, by these lights  
Like a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick.

The meanings of "these lights," the auroras of autumn, defined by Stevens as the symbol "of a tragic and desolate background" and as a visible sign of the "innocence" of earth, and which we have been reading as an image of the creative, decreative continuum, would seem to resist reconciliation within the basic image. However, the phrase, "As if he lived all lives," suggests that the specter's knowledge would be at one with the knowledge of humanity, experiencing the bleak necessity that is the lot of the "unhappy people" buffeted by inclement weather, a synecdoche that expands to all conditions adverse to humanity. To know humanity's dread observation of mutability and fatality, this specter would have to foresee his own certain extinction, the span of illumination for him, as for them, lasting only as long as the seeming of a life-span in the creative, decreative flow: "a blaze of summer straw, in winter's nick." Thus the meanings of "these lights" become reconciled.

V

A reader of "The Auroras of Autumn" wishes to discover the significances that Stevens secretes in his implicative language. He confronts a sequence of cantos each of which seems a fiction related to the human world in which he lives and to the reality familiar to his senses. He recognizes at once that the discourse requires conjectures of what seems a semblance to Stevens' meditation as the poet renders it. Hindered by his own limitations of what he shares with Stevens in a common cultural tradition—current, literary, religious, philosophical—the reader must surmise import for the symbols and tropes that speak a language that is evasive within a language that progresses in a course that is recognizably readable. He must speculate a direction for the indirection of elliptical disclosures. Involved in a constant testing of what he determines to be a persuasively "true" meaning, the reader must base his suppositions on the fact that the figurations, like words in a language, exist in a context in which the parts elucidate the whole, and the whole elucidates the parts.<sup>6</sup> None of these figures, symbol or trope, even the ellipses, can signify when standing alone in a simple reference. The wind that will "knock like a rifle-butt against the door" (*CP* 414) invokes a significance that is different from that of a wind addressed: "What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep?" (*CP* 113). It is the context that is the larger image and speaks in a complex, interrelated symbolization and troping; the reader who considers the image in isolation and as a meaning in itself ignores that interrelatedness and fails to read this enigmatic language as continuous discourse. The cantos of "The Auroras of Autumn" must be brought into a unity with a reasonableness that gives a sense of a concordant meaning or symbolization. Unstable

though the author's significance may be in other than the original language, what the reader speaks from a reading of the cantos, his resolutions, must appear to be a fulfillment of the desire of the poet. The years of critical attention which have been devoted to a divination of Stevens' "true" meanings would suggest that meaning is more than a gratification thrown to the reader to enjoy while he is seduced by the poetry. Rather it is the search for meaning that seduces the reader into his heroic adventure through the marvelous seductions of the enigmatic language of Stevens' poetry. In constant departings from and returns to the language that is all that is given us, we speak of a possible reading of "The Auroras of Autumn."

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Notes

<sup>1</sup>Stevens quoted from Ernst Cassirer's *Essay on Man* in "Imagination as Value" written shortly after "The Auroras of Autumn"; therefore he may have been thinking about the subject, although Stevens' version is definitely his and not Cassirer's.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Berger, for example, has recently read the aurora borealis of "The Auroras of Autumn" as a symbol for the atomic explosion in *Forms of Farewell* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 34-80. This reading, however, is completely at odds with Canto VIII, which defines the auras as "An innocence of the earth and no false sign / Or symbol of malice." We are sympathetic with B. J. Leggett's discussion of the similarities between the poem and Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art*. Leggett also regards the auras as symbolic of the flux.

<sup>3</sup>See Dorothy Emerson's essay on this major trope that permeates Stevens' poetry.

<sup>4</sup>Stevens, a year later in "Saint John and the Back-Ache," speaks of a serpent "Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one" (CP 437).

<sup>5</sup>We find no mention of Jung by Stevens, although next to Freud, his name was a byword in Stevens' day. However, it is significant that he praises an article by Howard Baker that is a Jungian account of the nature of Stevens' poetry. Stevens says, "No one before has ever come as close to me as Mr. Baker does in that article" (L 292). Baker associates Stevens' poetry with Jung's concept of archetypes and says that Jung and Stevens follow similar paths to similar goals. See *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens* (91).

<sup>6</sup>This is the hermeneutic circle described by Paul B. Armstrong (341).

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## Poems

### Quince, On Susanna's List

They dined on mince, and slices of quince.

—Edward Lear

"And," Susanna laughs, "there will be leftovers forever." She dances, not to music, but Moon's light; her elders fled in disarray.

Bottom notes, relentless from Phoenix City: "One of the stranger places for a banjo is one's knee." Susanna remembers how like a loon, or owl-eyed in his innocence that Quince had strayed. The wrong spoon taken from the hors d'oeuvres tray . . .

"Runcible," she murmurs. Remembers crackers with small jellies, and paté: "That trio— Bottom, Moon and Quince of better days—

The runcible spoon is not for rarebit. Blobs slip from its three broad tines, remain like watermarks left, ring-a-leavy where he set his drink down." and caviar on the keys.

Still, she sways. "Beauty is momentary in the mind . . ." She purrs: "I shall have him here again, to play."

Ruth Moon Kempher  
St. Augustine, Florida

### A Gratitude to Mr. Stevens

Certain epiphenomena of sound,  
The soprano's shattered champagne glass, say,  
Or the barely visible vibration  
Given one guitar string by another,  
Have nothing more to offer their Lover  
And Cause than their complicity and debt.  
But if an echo is the sincerest  
Form of elegy, then let these words be  
The ripples in a brandy long ago  
Left standing on your grand grand piano.

H. L. Hix  
Kansas City Art Institute

**Worlds of Pleasure**

Evanescent as a mind of winter  
buzzing toward meaning—  
crystal focusings of the self,  
closest, amid the sounds of snow.

And yet, under the shagged surfaces,  
far beneath the mirror pools,  
memories spill as brilliant as suns—  
hottest paradise in bloom.

Words rise and skate and tilt,  
etching rightnesses not yet sounded,  
keenest twangs attentive in air—  
but not yet rain, not yet heard.

It must be smoother than  
the movements of swans,  
fresher than summer contours—  
soft-footed, fine-spun, roundest—  
transporting acts of finding  
into fragrant, faithful speech  
filling fluent worlds of pleasure.

David P. Rosen  
Hoboken, New Jersey

**A Body Turbulent with Time**

Sea creature. Flung out to earth and air!  
That was my birth. A pent wave spilled me.

Once in a metamorphosis in water,  
Like a Noah's ark in a flood,  
I took on a multiple of primeval natures  
On their journey through the millennia,  
From and toward.

Hidden and prowling my veins  
More tangled than jungle vines,  
They landed with me. Sea creature,  
Flung out before I could think!  
My eyes blurred.

The strangers who lifted me  
All seemed to be gathered in a tear.  
They gave me a name so I seemed known.

Dorothy Emerson  
Atlantic Beach, Florida

**The Protocol of the Parakeet**

Poppies grow in the thymic grasslands,  
Paprika dust at a distant view;  
The paracentric eye closes in—  
A gentle wind pressing on  
The phenomenon of red, of green.

Alice waits in the marsupial bed.  
She strokes the paraclete of parakeets,  
Mustard feathered, mascaraed, mannered—  
His urbanity is blinding.  
He asks her, quite rhetorically,  
“Did you know evolution occurs in the god-head?”  
Under his levered wing a sprig of cinnabar—  
Plucked like tempered peony, the tuft drifts.  
Alice presses the tilled field of feathers  
To her lips. It is an answer.  
At his breast, her lips hear  
The ineluctable measure of eternity.

He blinks his embered eye; then,  
A flight of verdure, circling round,  
He finally settles on her head—  
He says, an afterthought,  
“There can be change in heaven.”

Alice lies in the grass, pouched in lawn.  
This is all she wants to know of Paradise.  
The absinthe bird makes stylized strides  
Upon her rolling body; on parade,  
He knows the protocol of visitation.

Suddenly the poppies are motionless,  
The grass stiffens:   O Dainty Ravisher,  
                                  O Voluptuous Ounce,  
Earth no longer labors on her axis.

The parakeet bows, flourishes his paramount  
And august self; the feathers ruffle  
Green and vermilion, expand and expand.  
He is the volume of the universe . . .  
Engulfer, Paradigm of nests.

Alice muses,  
In time to ecstasy. In the ear, wings  
Waving, he whispers, “Adieu, adieu, adieu.”

Diane M. Borden  
University of the Pacific

**Alleys in Snow**

A gray cat, or, in the proper light,  
a black cat,  
crouched quietly in the dominion  
of an alley in Virginia,  
as if he were mousing  
or preparing to mouse.

This is just as it was.  
A gray cat sometimes black  
does not admit of metaphor.  
He is real and spectacular.  
There was a black cat,  
or a gray one.  
It was winter.

And throughout that cold night,  
the gray cat, not black now,  
crouched in its corner  
waiting sphinxlike for mice.

In one house a man dozed off by the fire,  
dreaming of solace and endless snow.  
In another a woman  
pushed scraps from her plate.

The black cat, unaware in the alley,  
yowled.

**On a Metaphysician's Matchbook**

One must study these matters:

The day was wet like a pane in Havana  
or a gush of guava.  
The night was wet, and wetter, too.  
No simile would do.

And at dawn, dry flamingos  
took wing for Guyana,  
like the dry birds that flew  
to Guyana's dark glades  
hour by hour the whole day before.

Gregory McNamee  
Tucson, Arizona

**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackboard**

I

Among twenty silent chairs,  
The only moving thing  
Was the chalk on the blackboard.

II

I was of three minds,  
Like a classroom  
In which there are three blackboards.

III

The blackboard whitened with chalk dust.  
It was a small part of the predication.

IV

A teacher and a student  
Are one.  
A teacher and a student and a blackboard  
Are one.

V

I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of gerundial infinitives  
Or the beauty of adversative conjunctions,  
The blackboard waiting  
Or just after.

VI

Chalk dust filled the window  
With a powdery snow.  
The shadow of the blackboard  
Crossed it, to and fro.  
The student  
Traced in the shadow  
An unparsable clause.

VII

O meager men of Academe,  
Why do you imagine silver scholars?  
Do you not see how the blackboard  
Crumbles about the feet  
Of the students around you?

VIII

I know copulatives  
And murky, inexplicable syntaxes;  
But I know, too,  
That the blackboard is involved  
In what I know.



*The Wallace Stevens Journal*

IX

When the blackboard flew out of the window,  
It marked the end  
Of one of many clichés.

X

At the sight of a blackboard  
Painted green,  
The grammarians of customary  
Moan in parenthetical phrases.

XI

He rode to his classroom  
On a bicycle.  
Once, a fear paralyzed him,  
In that he mistook  
The shadow of his head  
For a blackboard.

XII

The students are muttering.  
The blackboard must be filling.

XIII

It was afternoon all morning.  
It was raining  
And it was going to rain.  
The blackboard hung  
In the empty classroom.

William L. M. H. Clark  
University of Wisconsin,  
Stevens Point

**Accessible Fraicheur**

These pods are part of the growth of life within life:  
Part of the unpredictable sproutings . . .  
—Wallace Stevens

In Elizabeth Park the poet eyed us first,  
then, striding these same paths began to paint:  
  
prolific nuns, we drew the city's water-lilies  
into bloom. Visions startled open  
  
on the pond in clear imagination's light.  
Secretly he shaped us in the matrix of his mind,  
  
in supernatural words fleshed out our quick conceptions.  
Transfigurer of barren forms, he made  
  
a subtle partner in the splurge of birth.  
Ah, firm Earth's undulant, elastic tissue; its heft  
  
that mates with quivering halos, silhouettes of saints on wind!  
Strange geneses are inside all our queer chapeaux,  
  
as unexpected worlds within these wimples teem.  
He found hard *no*, that constant, bursts  
  
in ecstasy to our obscure, unfurling flowers:  
ours is fierce, if never certain, labor toward releasing *yes*.

Rachel Gupta  
Washtenaw Community College

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## Reviews

### Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955.

By Joan Richardson. New York: William Morrow, 1988.

What were the sources of Stevens' greatness, the greatness, especially, of the later poetry? What qualities of mind and character, what sensibility formed the groundwork of his mature poetic achievement? Joan Richardson has attempted, with very limited success, to penetrate the mystery of Stevens' creativity. In some respects volume two is an improvement over volume one: although the style is far from attractive, it is less turgid, less weighted with numerous outright solecisms. But in other ways it is not as successful, partly because the events of Stevens' early years are intrinsically more interesting than the later, but also because Richardson's interpretations of Stevens' behavior were more arresting and enriching than they are in the present work. In this volume insight is often replaced by a demand for coherence, not only coherence in Stevens' art but in his life as well, where the biographer insists on giving us a life worthy of the poetry.

For example, in volume one she illustrated "how poetry functioned for [Stevens]" with a citation from a youthful sonnet sequence in which he described a robin singing "to allay / Her wild desire." She reminded us that he later called "poetry a 'health,' a 'completion of life,' since it was in imagination, rather than in reality, that he fulfilled his desires." How useful this simple perception was in helping us to take a first step towards closing the gap of understanding between man and artist! But we are left wondering how to integrate it with such later remarks as the following from volume two: "His purpose was not 'to be a poet' but to teach 'how to live, what to do.' For that he had to live and do what was necessary in the face of the real. Only in that way could his words resonate."

The basic purpose of volume two is to show how Stevens resolved his major personal conflicts and attained maturity in both his life and his art. But to verify achieved integration is more difficult than to uncover failures of adjustment. Richardson is not successful with the former because she is either not knowledgeable about what should count as evidence, or does not weigh the factors properly, or does not consider alternative interpretations.

Other reviewers have remarked that Richardson omits most of the material from Brazeau's *Parts of a World* dealing with Stevens' relationships at the office. This is especially true of the relationships with his superiors and his peers where Stevens had so many difficulties. How interesting it would have been to check (period by period, if possible) her hypothesis of progress in Stevens' psyche against behavior at the office. *Prima facie* observation would indicate very few improvements, although more subtle changes within the larger pattern are possible. What is clearly *not* helpful, even embarrassing, are comparisons between Stevens in the office and Socrates in the agora or the Buddha returning to the world from his wanderings in the wilderness. Richardson sees Stevens as the playfully serious Greek questioner of unexamined assumptions and the enlightened sage teasing his "associates and office workers into questioning what he meant by one of his gnomic asides."

Richardson deals thoroughly and interestingly with the vicissitudes of Stevens' physical health, including his eating problems. But unlike the sensitivity to the meaning of food that she displays in volume one, Richardson here isolates Stevens' physical from his psychological health. At about the same time (1925-26) that Richardson finds Stevens making progress in psychic health—his ego, she declares, showing significant mastery over his id—she reports on a crisis in his physical health: blurred vision,

sclerotic changes in the retinal vessels as a result of hemorrhages, slight atrophy of the heart, very high blood pressure, moderate hypoglycemia, mild diabetes, a pituitary disturbance, and heaviness. Because, perhaps, she is impressed by his quickly "taking himself in tow" and correcting most of the problems in a relatively short time, Richardson fails to encourage the reader to evaluate the whole person, body and soul, with Tolstoyan comprehensiveness. Her attempt to separate out the strengthening of Stevens' mind—what she terms "the [mastery] of his being"—from the weakening of his whole body prevents us from considering the likelihood of hidden emotional problems represented by those symptoms.

Richardson is so upbeat about Stevens at this point (and, indeed, for most of the rest of his life) that she fails to consider that apparent signs of improvement may point to the reverse. "With the birth of his child [in 1924] Stevens had learned how to love, and it seemed that as she grew, so did his capacity for this most necessary of human emotions." Would it were so! If Richardson could have been more restrained in her judgment of Stevens' learning capacity, we would be less puzzled about the difficulties that he ran into when Holly reached the age of eleven. His detachment returned with a vengeance and "he seems to have shifted between treating Holly as the adult in the family on whom he could depend for understanding and treating her as a child, younger than her actual years." If Stevens had truly "learned how to love" Holly during the first ten years of her life, how could he have completely lost that capacity in her early puberty? He was probably overly attached to his daughter in the early years but no danger signals flashed then, either for Stevens or for his biographer.

Similarly, Richardson argues that in composing "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens was working through "his still-unresolved relationship to his mother and his past." She also asserts that he was reactivating his identification with the feminine aspect of his being in a more open and positive way than formerly. But again it is one thing to *experience* the irrational and quite another to control and sublimate it. Richardson's at times uncritical enthusiasm for Stevens allows her to claim that composing an essay on the irrational and writing poetry that expressed identification with the irrational were equivalent to performing psychotherapeutic work. She fails to prove that he reached a point in his life where the "extreme self-consciousness of his youth had been totally purged of its romantic affectations and been transformed into an analytical tool."

Her optimism leads Richardson to overlook, or at least downplay, Stevens' conflict about mysticism, a conflict that was with him until his last day. Perhaps that is why she fails to understand the distinction he draws in "Effects of Analogy" between the "mystical" and the "central," arguing, as she does, that central poetry is poetry with a "personal voice," while mystical ("marginal, subliminal") poetry is poetry that subordinates itself to some large social purpose. Stevens, however, is not concerned there with the dangers of losing his true self to a poetry for the public welfare; he is arguing for a civilized and moral poetry that resists indulgence in mere self-gratification, which he links with mystical poetry. She fails to see that mysticism was Stevens' continuing temptation, the temptation of imagination without a sufficient ground in reality, and the *reverse* of that "unified self" Richardson keeps proclaiming Stevens achieved in the last fifteen years of his life, but then has to keep denying. ("His dwelling on 'potency,' 'virility,' 'vigor,' no less than his desire to create a substitute for God . . . reflected that the deep insecurity about his maleness was still there.") She even writes that (in 1950) "Stevens entered death before dying" and asserts that "From this point on Stevens lived as one of the heroic shades in Hades," only to backtrack a few pages later when she de-

clares that, with several invitations to receive honorary degrees, "The poet seemed to recover his old living self."

No wonder Richardson interprets Stevens' putative death bed conversion as, very likely, "his final prank." She is unwilling to see the seriousness of the mystical alternative even at the end. How in character she thinks it was that the "comedian had led both Father Hanley and Holly to believe two different things, that the poet did, in fact, ask for Communion and Extreme Unction as part of the final act of his comedy without telling Holly, so that we now still wonder how he resolved the greatest problem of his age, the will to believe." Why would he want us to wonder about it if his own mind were not in deep confusion about the problem? She ignores the fact that conversion is not merely "quietly meditating in the sweet darkness of St. Patrick's Cathedral." It entirely eliminates Stevens' cherished concept of a fiction. It betrays a will towards literal belief that cancels out any possibility that Stevens was satisfied "to believe in a fiction . . . knowing that it is a fiction and believing in it willingly." How can Richardson quote these characteristic lines of Stevens' as the epigraph to her final chapter without noticing that they contradict his final symptomatic religious act? It calls into question her judgment (and the judgment of Richard Poirier) of Stevens' triumphant maturity. How desperate she must be to find "equanimity" in Stevens' last days on earth by calling his conversion a "prank," a witty way of "celebrating even total annihilation" by falling into the arms of the church.

As I've indicated, Richardson's basic problem in volume two stems from her need to see Stevens' life as successful in the same way as his poetry. She is unable to live with perfection in the art without finding perfection in the life. Now it does seem to me quite likely that Stevens matured in *some* respects as he grew older. The dazzling directness of his poetic line during his last years certainly indicates some increasing capacity as a human being. But not necessarily increasing capacity absolutely. And a gain in poetic power may also have been accompanied by a *loss* of realization in other respects. If we insist on "equanimity" to the end, without fear and trembling, then we have lost the real Wallace Stevens. Although one is grateful for the many contributions of this biography to our understanding of the poet, there is still a wide gap between the human being and the consummate creator that has not been spanned.

C. Roland Wagner  
New College of Hofstra

## News and Comments

The Huntington Library has made an agreement to acquire the tapes and transcriptions made by the late Peter Brazeau when he interviewed friends, associates, and acquaintances of Wallace Stevens. Some but not all of this material was published in Brazeau's *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983). The collection is expected to be available to scholars by midsummer, 1989.

Daniel Woodward, Librarian  
The Huntington

### Wallace Stevens in Italy

Wallace Stevens made his Italian debut in 1954 in Renato Poggioli's well-known selection, *Mattino Domenicale ed Altre Poesie* (Turin: Einaudi), which pleased the author a lot and elicited a puzzled review from Eugenio Montale. Also in 1954 the late Glauco Cambon published a translation of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" in *Letteratura* 11-12, and followed it with an interpretation, included in his *Tematica e Sviluppo della Poesia Americana* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1956).

In the following twenty years, while American poets were frequently published, Stevens was passed by except for selections in anthologies and poetry magazines. Finally, in 1986, I edited the first major Italian collection of Stevens, *Il Mondo Come Meditazione: Ultime Poesie 1950-1955* (Palermo: Acquario-Guanda). This bilingual volume is unusual by American standards in that it collects all the poems of Stevens' last six years, that is, "The Rock" section of *Collected Poems* and the later verse (from "The Sick Man" on) of *Opus Posthumous*. Textual and explanatory notes are provided. This time reviewers were ready, and a weekly even ran a feature on "The Kant of Poetry."

In 1987, a new translation appeared of "Notes" as *Note Verso la Finzione Suprema* (Venice: Arsenale), prepared by Nadia Fusini, a well-known scholar and writer, who added an intricate quasi-philosophical Introduction and apparatus (both footnotes and endnotes). This commentary is a little forbidding with its constant play on Heidegger, Nietzsche, and the like, but the translation is fresh, indeed a recreation, that takes considerable license.

Another major Stevens volume appeared in 1988, my edition of *L'Angelo Necessario* (Milan: Coliseum), a translation (by Gino Scatasta) of the essays to which is added an Introduction and a documentary section on the writing and the reception of these papers. There are also endnotes identifying sources and references.

Thus, a sizeable portion of Stevens' work is now available in Italy in annotated editions that would be hard to match elsewhere. And more is to come.

Massimo Bacigalupo  
Rapallo, Italy

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