The Wallace Stevens Journal

Special Issue: Stevens and Politics

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Special Issue: Stevens and Politics

Edited by John N. Serio
With an Introduction by A. Walton Litz

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Announcing Two Wallace Stevens Society Programs
at MLA in Washington, DC

I
Wednesday, 27 December 1989
7:00-8:30 p.m., Arlington-Alexandria, Sheraton

Radishes and Flowers: A Wallace Stevens Feast

A choreographed embodiment of nine of Wallace Stevens' poems
Performed by Mary-Averett Seelye and the Kinesis Collaborative
Presiding: Edward Kessler, American University
Program:
"The Place of the Solitaires"
"Bantams in Pine-Woods"
"A Fish-Scale Sunrise"
"Metaphors of a Magnifico"
"Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule, et Les Unze Mille Vierges"
"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"
"The Hand as a Being"
"So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch"
"The Idea of Order at Key West"

II
Saturday, 30 December 1989
10:15-11:30 a.m., Dover, Sheraton

Teaching Wallace Stevens

Presiding: John N. Serio, Clarkson University
"Making Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand Man," Marie Borroff, Yale University
"Containing Chaos," Robert Pack, Middlebury College
"The Ways of Pleasure," Helen Vendler, Harvard University

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Introduction

A. WALTON LITZ

THE REMARKABLE THING about this issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*—other than the unusually high quality of the papers—is that one cannot conceive of its having been formed ten or even five years ago. It represents, to adopt the title of a recent book on Virginia Woolf, one of the major efforts in contemporary literary scholarship: relocating the great modern writers in the "real world" that they inhabited and wrote about. The Stevens of the New Criticism was, depending on the critic's taste, either a precious aesthete who willfully remained aloof from contemporary culture, or a master of language who drew his greatest strength from this self-absorption. As Jacqueline Brogan points out in a footnote to her paper, this attitude lingers on in the recent Harper anthology of American literature, where in her introduction to the Stevens section Helen Vendler says that his attempts to "treat social issues, including the war in Ethiopia and World War II . . . achieved no real stylistic success," and that Stevens "remained, for the rest of his career, preeminently a poet of the inner life."

The myth of Stevens as a totally self-reflexive poet took another form during the "turn to theory" over the past quarter-century. Stevens had a passionate desire for theory, and in many ways anticipated—in terms such as "decreation" and "difference"—the theoretical preoccupations of structuralism and poststructuralism. Thus his poems have provided many of the sacred texts for recent theoretical criticism, the same passages and the same few poems quoted over and over again. What these critics ignored was the counterbalancing impulse—and in Stevens' world there is always a counterbalancing force—to press away from theory in a skeptical search for "that good sense we call civilization."

The contributors to this issue are fully aware that the New Critical and poststructuralist attitudes toward Stevens were based on undeniable, and important, aspects of his life and art: his remoteness in human relationships, his fastidious dislike for doctrinaire arguments, his need to deflect the occasion for a poem into its "cry," its linguistic equivalent. What they are up to—and I take it to be one of the most exciting developments in current criticism—is an exploration of the "other" Stevens, the poet who lived in the real world and was profoundly affected by the most traumatic public events of his life: two World Wars separated by the Great Depression. Stevens' poetic life was a long dialogue between his private and public selves, between imagination and reality, the theoretical and the practical. Studies such as these help us to give equal weight to both terms in the dialogue.

The long-range results of this "new historicism" can only be guessed at, but one thing is certain. The canon of Stevens' major poems will be much larger, and much more diverse. Most of the poems in *Collected Poems* have been neglected in favor of a few that serve the purposes of the New or the theoretical

critic. When *all* of his poems are taken into account, Stevens may look much less like the supreme poet of poems-about-poetry, and more like—to mention two names that would have been unthinkable a few years ago—Tennyson or Yeats. There is a partial truth in Heidegger's dictum that "language speaks, not men"; the counter-truth is that all great writers, even those as complex and conflicted as Stevens, live in a particular culture, reflecting it while they reshape it. All criticism is partial, and we should always remember that no aspect of a writer or a work of art is as important in fact as it appears to be in discussion. Criticism lurches from one extreme to another, since it can never contain all the diverse and rambunctious energies that drive a great poet. We should welcome the present attempts to restore Stevens to the "real world," while remembering that those other critical traditions were also responding to "something there" in his poetic life.

Princeton University

The 'Fellowship of Men that Perish': Wallace Stevens and the First World War

JAMES LONGENBACH

I

WALLACE STEVENS AND POLITICS. If this conjunction ever occurs to readers of modern poetry it is usually to wonder if Stevens had any. Pound had lots of them, that's clear, and everyone knows Auden had them, even when he said that poetry makes nothing happen. At least that statement implies the existence of a world where things do happen. Stevens, after all, was the poet who said that "Poetry is the subject of the poem."[1] But most of his readers know that Stevens could make that statement in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937) because this poem followed "Owl's Clover" (1936), where Stevens took on all manner of social and economic questions raised in the political climate of the thirties. Late in 1936, when Stevens read from "Owl's Clover" at Harvard, he composed "The Irrational Element in Poetry" to go along with it. Half a gloss on the long poem, half a defense of poetry, this essay has provided a paradigm on which most readings of the shape of Stevens' career are based: after the lovely world of *Harmonium* (1923) disintegrated (with the help of Stanley Burnshaw's Marxist review of *Ideas of Order*), Stevens worked to leave that world behind and confront, however tentatively, the sorry verities around him.

> The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion. For a long time before the war nothing was more common. In those days the sea was full of yachts and the yachts were full of millionaires. It was a time when only maniacs had disturbing things to say. The period was like a stage-setting that since then has been taken down and trucked away. It had been taken down by the end of the war, even though it took ten years of struggle with the consequences of the peace to bring about a realization of that fact. People said that if the war continued it would end civilization, just as they say now that another such war will end civilization. It is one thing to talk about the end of civilization and another to feel that the thing is not merely possible but measurably probable. (*OP* 224)

Despite our sense that the Great Depression was the crucial turning point in Stevens' career, notice that in this passage from "The Irrational Element in Poetry" he dates the fall fifteen years earlier—at the Great War. To Stevens himself, *Harmonium* seemed as much a product of social conflict as "Owl's Clover." And his reading of the war's place in modern culture is close to that of Kenneth Burke in *Counter-Statement* (1931): "Disciples of Art for Art's Sake

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might advocate art as a refuge, a solace for the grimness about them, but the spirit of social mockery could no longer fit the scene. One can mock death, but one cannot mock men in danger of death. In the presence of so much disaster, there was no incentive to call art disastrous."[2]

This statement describes Burke's own development, for it was the First World War that shook him out of his early aestheticism and made him explore the social implications of art; *Counter-Statement*, beginning with essays on Pater and de Gourmont and moving on to Burke's later essay on "The Status of Art," is a kind of autobiography. The war similarly knocked Stevens out of the comfortable aestheticism that allowed him to compose the "June Books" of 1908 and 1909. Written for his wife, some of these poems would meet a public audience when Stevens selected them for "Carnet de Voyage" (1914), his first adult publication. This sequence begins with a poem that sings of the wonder of the "odor from a star," "Sweet exhalations, void / Of our despised decay." But just as Thomas Hardy saw Shelley's high-minded skylark fall to earth and die, Stevens could not sustain this transcendental longing, and the remainder of "Carnet de Voyage" examines our despised decay from a decidedly unambitious point of view.

> Here the grass grows,
> And the wind blows.
> And in the stream,
> Small fishes gleam,
> Blood-red and hue
> Of shadowy blue . . .[3]

When he began a new century's year in 1900, Stevens gave a passage from Keats's "Dear Reynolds" a page to itself in his journal: "'But my flag is not unfurl'd / On the Admiral-staff, and to philosophise / I dare not yet'" (*SP* 29). More diffident even than the young Keats, Stevens cultivated a poetry of diminished particulars. "Carnet de Voyage" avoids "philosophy." Its music lurks around the corner of the *fin-de-siècle*, and its humble lines in no way prepare us for the majestic power of "Sunday Morning," which would appear just one year later, as if from nowhere. What happened between "Carnet de Voyage" and "Sunday Morning" was the First World War, and if we are to understand the mystery of Stevens' poetic development, we must look to his relationship to the world outside the poems. The Stevens who toyed unperturbed with "our despised decay" surely came to learn from William James's *Pragmatism* that "the earth of things, long thrown into shadow by the glories of the upper ether, must resume its rights"; and Emily Dickinson certainly taught him that "Death sets a Thing significant / The Eye had hurried by."[4] But the war drove these lessons home and changed Stevens' life in a way that his reading could not. When Stevens revised "From the Journal of Crispin" to make "The Comedian as the Letter C" in the summer of 1922, he cut passages that faithfully expressed his own aesthetic in order to dissociate himself from Crispin, his persona. And these lines, originally near the end of

"Approaching Carolina," the poem's third canto, describe the war's presence in *Harmonium* even better than "The Irrational Element in Poetry."

> If poems are transmutations of plain shops,
> By aid of starlight, distance, wind, war, death,
> Are not these spoils of starlight poems in themselves,
> These trophies of wind and war?[5]

II

Paradoxically, one way to witness the war's effect on *Harmonium* is to see how much of the argument of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" or "Sunday Morning" is latent in Stevens' pre-war letters and journals. It would seem natural that Stevens would have penned "Sunday Morning" immediately after this meditation of May 2, 1909.

> To-day I have been roaming about town. In the morning I walked down-town—stopping once to watch three flocks of pigeons circling in the sky. I dropped into St. John's chapel an hour before the service and sat in the last pew and looked around. It happens that last night at the Library I read a life of Jesus and I was interested to see what symbols of that life appeared in the chapel. I think there were none at all excepting the gold cross on the altar. When you compare that poverty with the wealth of symbols, of remembrances, that were created and revered in times past, you appreciate the change that has come over the church. The church should be more than a moral institution, if it is to have the influence that it should have. The space, the gloom, the quiet mystify and entrance the spirit. But that is not enough. — And one turns from this chapel to those built by men who felt the wonder of the life and death of Jesus—temples full of sacred images, full of the air of love and holiness—tabernacles hallowed by worship that sprang from the noble depths of men familiar with Gethsemane, familiar with Jerusalem. — I do not wonder that the church is so largely a relic. Its vitality depended on its association with Palestine, so to speak. (*L* 139-40)

One would like to know whose life of Jesus Stevens was reading (Pound was reading Renan's at about the same time) so that his own thoughts could be anchored more firmly in theological modernism; his redefinition of Jesus' immortality in "Sunday Morning" would appear to have grown from his response to work of Strauss or von Harnack or Renan: "People doubt the existence of Jesus—at least, they doubt incidents of his life, such as, say, the Ascension into Heaven after his death. But I do not understand that they deny God" (*L* 140). But even more striking than the way this early meditation anticipates the substance of "Sunday Morning" is the way its second sentence forecasts the poem's final Keatsian tableau: "three flocks of pigeons circling in the sky." It seems that by 1909 Stevens had most of his intellectual equipment in place,

and though it is tempting to see his early prose as the springboard for the poetry, I think we need to ask why "Sunday Morning" did *not* come into the world in 1909.

In "Our Attitude Towards Death," a paper of 1915, Freud predicted that the war would sweep away civilized people's conventional treatment of death: "Death will no longer be denied; we are forced to believe in him. People really are dying, and now not one by one, but many at a time, often ten thousand in a single day. Nor is it any longer an accident. To be sure, it still seems a matter of chance whether a particular bullet hits this man or that; but the survivor may easily be hit by another bullet; and the accumulation puts an end to the impression of accident."[6] As Freud surmised, the unprecedented slaughter of World War I put an end to what Anne Douglas has called in *The Feminization of American Culture* the nineteenth century's "domestication of death." To take only one example from many, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's best-selling novels, *The Gates Ajar* (1868) along with the sequels of the 1880s, offered a strong denial of death as a different (and therefore fearful) state of being. The protagonist of *Beyond the Gates*, one of the sequels, finds in heaven "much of the familiarity of a modest home"; her long-dead father has been waiting for her there, and upon greeting her, says (in what Douglas calls a tellingly bourgeois phrase) how good it is to have "somebody to come home to."[7]

In contrast to this domestication of death, Freud maintained that the war restored a primitive, uncomprehending horror at the afterlife, and as an American civilian, Stevens suffered from a wartime anxiety about death that belies ominously this remark in the "Adagia": "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (*OP* 158). It was one of the peculiarities of Stevens' own psychology that historical events often exercised his imagination far more strenuously than personal crises, and it is not an accident that the phases of his career as a poet coalesce around the two world wars and the depression. The sentence Stevens copied into his commonplace book from E. M. Forster's "Liberty in England" (1935) signals a meeting of like minds: "'I am worried by thoughts of a war oftener than by thoughts of my own death.'"[8]

Of course Stevens was no stranger to mortality before the war, but judging by the lack of evidence in his letters and journals, the death of his father in 1911 elicited little response. A year later, the death of his mother caused him to return to his journal—the pages he had originally titled "The Book of Doubts and Fears." These entries, lovely for the way Stevens avoids a direct emotional response in favor of quiet observation of his mother's house, end with the comment, "After all, 'gentle, delicate Death,' comes all the more gently in a familiar place warm with the affectionateness of pleasant memories" (*L* 174). Seen in the larger sweep of his life, however, Stevens' earliest response to death begins to feel less lovely than creepy for its detachment—evidence of the implacable coldness that Stevens recognized in himself even as a boy of twelve, the same quality that would make him wonder on his own deathbed if he had

"lived a skeleton's life" (*OP* 117). In sharp contrast to his journal entries on his mother's death stands this 1918 letter to Harriet Monroe.

> I've had the blooming horrors, following my gossip about death, at your house. I have not known just what to do. I had hoped to set things right, personally; but find that I am not likely to see you in Chicago for some little time. Accordingly, so that you may not think I am unconscious of the thing, nor indifferent, I write this to let you know that I have been sincerely regretful and hope that you and your family will forgive me. The subject absorbs me, but that is no excuse: there are too many people in the world, vitally involved, to whom it is infinitely more than a thing to think of. One forgets this. I wish with all my heart that it had never occurred, even carelessly. (*L* 206)

What happened to Stevens between 1912 and 1918 was what Freud predicted in "Our Attitude Towards Death." The journal entries of 1912 offer a portrait of an utterly domesticated death; Stevens' mother approached "her end . . . with the just expectation of re-union afterwards; and if there be a God, such as she believes in, the justness of her expectation will not be denied" (*L* 172-73). Yet in 1918, for no personal reason, Stevens found himself absorbed in the subject of death, the concept of death; judging by the uncharacteristic fervor of his letter to Monroe, it was not only his obsession but the fact that he had revealed it that gave him the blooming horrors. (One is tempted to speculate that the Monroe family saw nothing macabre or uncivil in Stevens' gossip until they received the apology.) Stevens even recognized that his obsession was anchored to no vital attachment with death, yet his comparison of his own detachment with the men and women facing death in the war reveals the source of his anxiety. As Freud suggested, death could no longer be domesticated or denied, and for Stevens the war unearthed a medieval horror of mortality. T. S. Eliot voiced a similar wartime fear when he confessed that the protracted suffering of his personal life seemed paltry when compared to the daily paper: "Everyone's individual lives are so swallowed up in the one great tragedy that one almost ceases to have personal experiences or emotions, and such as one has seem so unimportant!—where before it would have seemed interesting even to tell about a lunch of bread and cheese. It's only very dull people who feel they have 'more in their lives' now—other people have too much."[9]

Like Stevens, Eliot became much obsessed by death during these years, and for both poets, their distance from the war was as important as their knowledge of it: that lack of "vital involvement" with death made the longing for a soldier's active life more urgent and the pressure of death's penumbra more acute. In the autumn of 1914, just a few months after Britain declared war on Germany, Stevens wrote "Phases," a sequence of war poems that Harriet Monroe published in the special war number of *Poetry* magazine; these are the only poems that stand between the juvenilia of the "June Books" and "Sunday

Morning." One reviewer found Stevens' war poems "nauseating to read": "we read enough about the war in the newspaper."[10] To such ears, war poetry was unforgivably gritty stuff, but Stevens himself felt the need to acquire a more intimate knowledge of the war. In February 1915 Germany declared a war zone around the British Isles, warning that even neutral ships would be subject to submarine warfare, and on May 7th a German submarine torpedoed the *Lusitania*, killing 128 American citizens. In the months that followed, as President Wilson crafted his responses, the possibility of an American declaration of war seemed imminent, and during the summer of 1915, Stevens read the *London Times* in order to follow the events of the war more closely. At the beginning of each month, the *Times* published a review of the war's progress, and after reading these pages himself, Stevens sent them to his wife, who was vacationing at a resort in Woodstock, New York; during the *Lusitania* crisis he also sent his copies of *The New Republic* along with a subscription to the *New York Tribune*.[11] The "Roll of Honor" for the June 1st *Times* listed 80 offices and over 1,600 soldiers, their names divided into various categories: missing, killed, accidentally killed, died of wounds, died of gas poisoning, wounded, wounded and suffering from gas poisoning. Such statistics offered an accounting of the "public" side of the war, but Stevens required a more intimate knowledge of the fighting. In the summer of 1917, when he joined his wife at Woodstock, he read Eugene Lemercier's *Lettres d'un Soldat*, the letters of a young French painter who was killed in 1915. Like the accounts of the fighting that Ezra Pound received from Henri Gaudier-Breszka and T. E. Hulme, these letters offered Stevens the materia poetica he required, and that summer he wrote his own "Lettres d'un Soldat," a sequence of war poems that begin with epigraphs from Lemercier's correspondence.

Stevens never saw Lemercier's France, but after 1914 France came to Stevens' New York and brought the war with it. Refugees from the Parisian art scene retreated to American shores, and from the likes of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, Stevens received an even more immediate sense of the wages of war. The American painter and organizer of the 1913 Armory Show, Walter Pach, was also driven home by the fighting, and through him Stevens became directly involved in an expatriate effort to rebuild what the war had destroyed, to make some corner of a foreign town forever Paris. In February 1918 Pach published "Universality in Art" in *The Modern School*, a lament for lost culture that sounds the same alarm Pound was ringing in London.

> One cannot think without a shudder of the artists of great talent still in the trenches. Derain, Braque, de la Fresnaye, and Guillaume Apollinaire among painters and poets of creative power have been severely wounded, but have returned to the field eager to continue the work they look on as the most important at present. "There is no gainsaying the fact that the sight of a battle-line is impressive" writes Duchamp-Villon, the sculptor, who entered the war with the hope that it bring in an era when war should be impossible, and who seemed as much concerned over the safety of a German pupil

> of his as he was over his own relatives. "I am sorry for the man who has not seen this war," writes Jean Le Roy, the poet.[12]

Stevens felt himself such a man, and he worked to penetrate the experience of Jean Le Roy. In October 1918 Carl Zigrosser, editor of *The Modern School*, organized a special issue "as a tribute to Paris." Along with drawings by Odillon Redon, Aristide Maillol, and André Derain, the issue included an essay on "Paris in Wartime" by the art critic Élie Faure, a tribute to Jean Le Roy (who had just died in combat) by Walter Pach, and Le Roy's own "Moment of Light"—illustrated by Redon and translated by Wallace Stevens. "With Jean Le Roy," wrote Pach, ". . . we come to one of the most grievous individual losses that France, or indeed the world has suffered in the war."[13]

> My flesh alone, for the moment, lives,
> my heart alone gives,
> my eyes alone have sight.
> I am emblazoned, the others, all, are black.
> I am the whole of light!
>
> (*OP* 119-20)

So did Stevens render the finite Le Roy's moment of infinite vision. Pach admired the poem for its expression of "that rising above the tyranny of things, that right of place in the mind which is indeed the mark of Le Roy's generation."[14] Stevens was also known to lament the tyranny of things, but even as he preserved the dead soldier's vision in translation, the poem's final address to "My fellows" spoke an irony that overshadowed the mind's victory over things.

> And are you not surprised to be the base
> to know that, without you, the scale of lives
> on which the eternal poising turns
> would sink upon death's pitty under-place?
> And are you not surprised to be the very poles?
>
> (*OP* 120-21)

By the time Stevens translated these lines, he had already undermined such idealism in his own war poems. Neither art nor vision saved Jean Le Roy from death, and Eugene Lemercier suffered the same fate, despite a similar scorn for the tyranny of things. The experience of the soldier taught Stevens two things: that death would invade the palaz of Hoon as it infiltrated Prospero's castle in "The Masque of the Red Death"; and that the effort to avert such an inevitable end is worth preserving. In "Lettres d'un Soldat" Stevens was ambitious enough to heed both imperatives.

Still, the posthumous voice of Le Roy himself, saying "I am sorry for the man who has not seen this war," confirmed Stevens' own insecurities, and before he wrote those poems he sought first-hand experience of a soldier's life. After the sinking of the *Lusitania*, Wilson had declared that "there is such a thing as a

man being too proud to fight," but events conspired to make that statement appear beside the point.[15] Early in 1916 Germany reinstated submarine warfare, and in March an unarmed French vessel was sunk, causing Wilson to issue an ultimatum to the Kaiser. At the same time, the United States was faced with the possibility of a war with a politically volatile Mexico: to undermine the Mexican government, a revolutionary faction killed eighteen Americans at Santa Isabel and then raided Columbus, New Mexico, where seventeen Americans were killed. Wilson sent 12,000 troops into Mexico, and though no war was declared, the signs of military development were everywhere. Stevens was traveling on an extended business trip in Minnesota. "The Mexican mess attracts great attention here," he wrote his wife from the Minnesota Club in St. Paul. "Every morning there are squads of recruits drilling in the square which this club faces. I see them as I walk on my way to the office. This is [a] capital place for young men and the recruits are husky fellows. I hope to see them in camp at Fort Snelling, but I have so much work to do that there is little time to spare."[16] These drilling troops gave Stevens a new kind of contact with the war effort, unmediated by the printed page. Despite the work load, he found the time to visit Fort Snelling, an army post near Minneapolis, and a few months later he watched the troops drilling in Canada: "Toronto is full of soldiers. They wear uniforms that make boot-blacks look like wild-cats or bullocks or something savage, although, after all, they can't be such tremendous warriors. I hope they are better than the Germans, at all events."[17] As he idealized these soldiers, Stevens saw in their lives the urgency and authenticity his own experience lacked, and visits to army camps became a standard part of his business schedule. He had one particularly moving experience when he visited an army camp in Johnson City, Tennessee. Many of the soldiers were black, and although Stevens remained infected by the provincial racism of his youth, his feeling of camaraderie with these soldiers overwhelmed his feeling of distance from their race: "the truth is that I feel thrilling emotions at these draft movements. I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white. The noise when the train pulled out was intoxicating" (*L* 209).

A year later, while Stevens was on a business trip in Wisconsin, the war hit closer to home, forcing him to recognize more clearly that it was the imminent threat of the battlefield that made these sights so exciting. Catharine Stevens, the poet's youngest sister, had been working with the Red Cross at Saint-Nazaraire in France when she died suddenly of meningitis. "I am completely done up by the news of Catharine's death," Stevens wrote his wife. ". . . How horrible it is to think of the poor child fatally ill in a military hospital in an out-of-the-way place in a foreign country, probably perfectly aware of her helplessness and isolation!" (*L* 212). Stevens had not seen his sister for years, and the only way he could grieve was to lose himself in the nation's wartime sorrow at large. He was involved in a particularly difficult and protracted case for the Hartford, and when the courts closed for Memorial Day, he took a long, solitary walk along the shore of Lake Michigan: "The lake was so calm that there

was scarcely a sound of water to be heard. The air was clean and soft and warm." But it was only when he returned to Milwaukee at the end of the day that he was able to vent his sorrow. Joining the crowds along the street, he watched the Memorial Day Parade march past: "in my present state of mind on account of Catharine," he told his wife, the parade "affected me deeply. There was a group of women, war-mothers, each of whom carried a gold-star flag, which it was impossible to continue to look at."[18] A few months later Stevens acquired a copy of the *Harvard Class of 1901 War Records* so that he might discover the fates of old friends. And when Catharine Stevens' effects were shipped home, her journal revealed the horrors that awaited soldiers drilling in the camps of Minnesota, Tennessee, and Toronto.

> Never as long as I live will I forget that ride along the Menin road. It was raining to be sure, and the mud was feet thick—our car was splashing along at a great clip. To the right, to the left of us, ahead of us and behind us was nothing but shell-gutted fields—these holes now filled with water. By the side of the road, lying just where he fell I suppose, was the grave of some brave soldier—a bare white cross marked his grave. As we went on passing high piles of ammunition at either side of the road, and passing here and there a tank, we came to the dug-outs. It was here we got out of the machine, and too full for utterance we each wended our own particular way over this Flander's field. How gruesome it was. I kept wondering why I went on, and yet just ahead of me was another white cross. This time with an American helmet tied to it. I just had to go to it to see if I could read the name. As I came upon it I discovered that the mere bones and uniform were just scantly covered with earth, and the skull, hands and feet were plainly discernible, but no name could I see. As I turned from that I nearly fell over a boot out of which projected a long white bone—. Oh, how horrible—all about me lay these signs of human sacrifice—a skull or a vertebra, and all about me as far as I could see was just so. Nothing to break the skyline except the charred tree trunks and a bit of barbed wire.[19]

As important as Stevens' effort to know the war intimately was his feeling of distance from the war: this was an experience he did not share. "I am sorry for the man who has not seen this war," said Walter Pach's soldier; "You do not know the lesson taught by him who falls," said Eugene Lemercier.[20] Behind all Stevens' strained efforts to understand the war and its attendant consciousness of death—his reading of war news, his visits to army camps, his war poems themselves—lurked the proviso he voiced to Harriet Monroe: he himself was not *vitally involved* in this war, he himself was not in danger of dying, and yet the war wrenched him as the death of his parents had not. When Stevens opened his copy of the *Harvard Class of 1901 War Records*, it told him that 337 of his Harvard colleagues had contributed to the war effort, but even

more importantly, it told him that he himself had done nothing. Even Lyman Ward, with whom Stevens had attempted to establish a law practice, had a brief entry in the book: "Applied for voluntary induction as a private into the Motor Transport Corps. The application was granted, and I was admitted to the service on October 21, 1918, at Camp Johnston, Florida, being ultimately commissioned 2d Lieutenant. . . . Before entering the service of the Motor Transport Corps I had organized and placed on a secure basis the Four Minute Men movement, and was its first chairman. After this task had been completed I became a member of the Legal Advisory Board. All of this work took many months of time to the exclusion of my profession."[21] Many years later, after Ward's death, Stevens would remember him as a fine person who had no talent for making money; but Ward, unlike Stevens, had been willing to sacrifice his profession for a larger cause. And Catharine Stevens, the poet's younger sister, had been willing to sacrifice her life.

Like the nameless soldiers Stevens admired, Lyman Ward and Catharine Stevens were involved in the war as the poet was not, but the insurance man found a mirror to his distanced anxieties in a business associate who visited Hartford in August 1914, just a week after the war began. Stevens reported that Heber Stryker "has been ill—no: nervous, sleepless, full of the war, and wanted to forget it." The cure for this anxiety was found in a Sunday afternoon walk through a Hartford cemetery (the very cemetery, as it would turn out, where Stevens would be buried). "On Sunday evening," Stevens told his wife, "we sat at the edge of their meadow until one o'clock in moonlight and dew."[22] The antidote for an abstract and unanchored fear of death lay in a confrontation with the natural evidence of mortality. One wonders if they watched the undulation of a flock of pigeons, descending to darkness.

Faced with poems like "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "Cortège for Rosenbloom," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," or "Sunday Morning" itself, readers have often noticed that death infects the lovely world of *Harmonium*, that a consciousness of mortality keeps that lovely world alive. But death does not invade *Harmonium* the way its shadow pierces the glass coach in the eleventh section of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."

> He rode over Connecticut
> In a glass coach.
> Once, a fear pierced him,
> In that he mistook
> The shadow of his equipage
> For blackbirds.
>
> (*CP* 94)

For Stevens, such an invasion occurs only when we foolishly attempt to survive in something like Prospero's castle or a glass coach—the glassy essence of the mind—whose equipage itself reminds us of what we attempt to avert. Rather, death exists in the whole of *Harmonium* more as the corpse lies in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream": as an unavoidable aspect of being.

If her horny feet protrude, they come
To show how cold she is, and dumb.
Let the lamp affix its beam.
The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.
(*CP* 64)

In a justly well-known essay on "Wallace Stevens' Ice Cream," Richard Ellmann says that the point of this poem is the deliberate acceptance of death with life; but it seems to me that such acceptance is not easily won for Stevens.[23] During 1916 and 1917 Stevens wrote three plays, each of which offers a vulgarization of the more esoteric matters of *Harmonium*. "Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise" centers on death: the primary stage-prop is a corpse, around which the three Chinese travelers sit and offer their consolatory wisdom. But the travelers equate the corpse with a porcelain water bottle which may be "one thing to me / And one thing to another" just as "Sunrise is multiplied, / Like the earth on which it shines, / By the eyes that open on it" (*OP* 143). This is not the deliberate acceptance of death but the bland ignorance of its horror, a victory over a thing whose tyranny is not so easily ignored. The three travelers are like the "Secretary for Porcelain" (*CP* 253) that Stevens would name in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (1940), and they do not understand that the world at large is less susceptible to metaphor than a tea-cup is. The corpse was a young man who hanged himself in front of his lover, Anna. Though she dressed in Hoon's purple and wore gold earrings, "he wanted nothing. / He hanged himself in front of me" (*OP* 141). Stevens' sympathy lies not with the aesthetes who sit for hours without noticing the corpse; rather, it lies with Anna, who sits quietly through the night staring at the dead body of her lover—she "felt the evil." While the third traveler believes "There is a seclusion of porcelain / That humanity never invades" (*OP* 130), the second more knowingly concludes that because of its seclusion, the court from which they came had knowledge of neither love nor wisdom.

When the court knew beauty only,
And in seclusion,
It had neither love nor wisdom.
These came through poverty
And wretchedness,
Through suffering and pity.
[*He pauses.*]
It is the invasion of humanity
That counts.
(*OP* 132)

Poverty, wretchedness, suffering, pity. If the only emperor of *Harmonium* is the emperor of ice-cream, he rules in consort with the corpse of the woman whose horny feet protrude when we attempt to cover her with her own embroidery.

Harmonium is the second book of doubts and fears that Stevens wrote, and if death is the ground-bass of *Harmonium*, what remains to be seen is how that melody is a variation on a theme that ran throughout the war.

Of all the poems of *Harmonium*, Harold Bloom has named "The Death of a Soldier" as the first "emergence of the poet's most characteristic voice."[24]

> Life contracts and death is expected,
> As in a season of autumn.
> The soldier falls.
>
> He does not become a three-days personage,
> Imposing his separation,
> Calling for pomp.
>
> Death is absolute and without memorial,
> As in a season of autumn,
> When the wind stops,
>
> When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
> The clouds go, nevertheless,
> In their direction.
>
> (*CP* 97)

Here indeed is an early manifestation of Stevens the reductionist. As a poem about death, these lines call for no pity, they call for no metaphor and little meaning. The dead soldier does not partake of the grandeur of Jesus' rebirth; the death calls for no pomp, either in the rituals of culture or the gaudiness of language. Even the one rather weak metaphor offered for the death ("As in a season of autumn") is protracted into meaninglessness when it is repeated in the third tercet, not to enlarge the single death by locating it in a natural cycle, but to reveal that this seasonal decline is utterly unaware or indifferent to human sorrow. In "The Need of Being Versed in Country Things" Frost says that one would need to work had "not to believe the phoebes wept" at the charred remains of a house; but Frost also shows those birds rejoicing "in the nest they kept."[25] That humanizes these birds who have no human values. More stringent still, Stevens offers even less consolation, causing Bloom to remark that "the human in us demands more of a poem, for us, and where *pathos* is so excluded a death-in-life comes which is more that of the poem's shaper, speaker, reader than it could have been of the fictive soldier before he fell."[26]

Stevens' poem is this stern because he is not writing, say, about the death of his mother but the death of a soldier—and not an unambiguously "fictive" soldier but Eugene Lemercier. Although "The Death of a Soldier" nestles comfortably among the other fictive musings of *Harmonium*, it is like "Negation" or "Lunar Paraphrase" a poem that began its life as part of "Letters d'un Soldat." And its utter bareness derives from the fact that Stevens was writing not about natural death (the single death of a loved one that, however terrible, can be located in the seasons' rise and fall) but about a new kind of unnatural death, the

daily death of thousands of soldiers on French battlefields. In "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" Stevens would codify this opposition between good and evil death, between the mass death of war and the individual death of a loved one.

> It is death
> That is ten thousand deaths and evil death.
> Be tranquil in your wounds. It is good death
> That puts an end to evil death and dies.
>
> (*CP* 253)

In the thirteenth and final poem of "Lettres d'un Soldat" Stevens worked from this passage in Lemercier's letters: "From time to time the pickaxe strikes some poor dead body which war thus torments, even in a humble grave."[27] To speak in metaphor, Stevens knew, is inevitable, but he also recognized, like Frost, that the most important thing about metaphors is that they break down. Stevens' poem on this passage begins by rejecting old metaphors for death as "symbols of sentiment" that have no power over such a brutally materialistic confrontation with mortality: "Death was a reaper with sickle and stone . . . Or Death was a rider beating his horse." Then he instructs the "Men of the line" to

> take this new phrase
> Of the truth of Death—
>
> Death, that will never be satisfied,
> Digs up the earth when want returns . . .
> You know the phrase.[28]

The men of the line know the phrase but the poet will not utter it; whatever it is, the new metaphor will be punctured by the same pickaxe that strikes the dead. Eleventh in the sequence, "The Death of a Soldier" shows Stevens resisting new metaphors. The poem used as its epigraph the final sentence from this passage in Lemercier's letters.

> How harmonious death is in the ground, and how much more genial it is to see the body returning to mother earth than to see it the victim of the human paltriness of our conventional funeral ceremonies. But yesterday I would have felt that those poor abandoned dead were wronged, yet now, after attending a few hours ago, the formal burial of an officer, I am convinced that nature has a more tender pity for her children than has man. Yes, indeed, the death of a soldier is almost a natural thing.[29]

Since it looks forward to the rejection of the conventional pomp of funerals in "Cortège for Rosenbloom" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," this passage probably seemed honest to Stevens. But he could not agree that nature has "more tender pity" for the dead: Lemercier says that the death of a soldier is al-

most a natural thing, and Stevens' poem, with its manipulation of the seasonal metaphor, opens up the trouble latent in the *almost*.

Stevens' ironic turn on Lemercier in "The Death of a Soldier" is not nearly so violent as in "Negation," where Stevens responds like an enraged pragmatist to Lemercier's belief that "we must confide in an impersonal justice which is independent of all human influence"[30]: "Hi! The creator too is blind," says Stevens in "Negation," "Struggling toward his harmonious whole" (*CP* 97). But Lemercier's mood was not always that of what Stevens called the "vague idealist." Beginning with the sensibility of Jean Le Roy's "Moment of Light" or the travelers of Stevens' own play, Lemercier progresses from a sorrow easily consoled by faith in a Christian afterlife to a recognition of the utter materiality of death that even nature cannot dignify. Stevens' sequence of poems follows the same trajectory, and the stark vision of "The Death of a Soldier" is closer to the following passage from Lemercier's letters than to the one Stevens chose for his epigraph: "nature is indifferent to all that we are doing. The dead will not stop the coming of spring."[31]

Given his growing skepticism, it is not surprising that Lemercier sat in the trenches reading what Stevens had absorbed in 1909: nineteenth-century challenges to the ahistoricity of Christian doctrine. Somehow Lemercier obtained an issue of the *Revue des Deux Mondes* from 1886, where he found Renan's essay on "The Origins of the Bible." A fashionably skeptical Lemercier told his mother that the scriptures owe their "beautiful and poetical philosophy" to "their affiliation with the old philosophies": "You get the impression that all religions, as they succeed one another, hand down the same stock of symbols, to which our ever young and poetic humanity gives new life each time."[32] These letters occupy the same moment in intellectual history as "Sunday Morning," but even if Stevens first read Lemercier (as he probably did) when the letters appeared in the August 1915 issue of the *Revue de Paris*, these meditations on nature, death, and divinity could not have found their way into Stevens' poem; "Sunday Morning" was complete by June. Juxtaposing these texts nevertheless highlights the historicity of "Sunday Morning" itself and emphasizes that for Stevens as for Lemercier, a wartime consciousness of death gave the higher criticism's challenge to Christianity an urgency that demanded a response as never before: if death is no longer explained by the consolation of an afterlife, how do the survivors of mass death carry on? The answer to this question that Stevens offered in "Sunday Morning" is suggested by a letter from the front that Walter Pach quoted in "Universality in Art": "This life has an irresistible attraction for any man who has once tasted it; everything back of the fighting line seems to you mean and miserable; the nearness of death gives a powerful savor to life and makes you enjoy every aspect of it."[33] The wisdom of "Sunday Morning," in other words, is as close to a soldier's lot as Stevens could get.

Although "The Death of a Soldier" was written two years after "Sunday Morning" (*CP* 66-70) there are, as Robert Buttel first noticed, important continuities between "Sunday Morning" and "Phases," the sequence of war

poems Stevens wrote in 1914—the only poems, barring a few minor pieces, that stand between "Sunday Morning" and the "June Book." "Phases" begins by declaring that "There was heaven" before the war, an aesthete's heaven, "Full of Raphael's costumes"[34]; in antique language that both mocks and eulogizes the heaven that has been lost, the fourth stanza of "Sunday Morning" takes this post-war condition for granted.

> There is not any haunt of prophecy,
> Nor any old chimera of the grave,
> Neither the golden underground, nor isle
> Melodious, where spirits gat them home,
> Nor visionary south, nor cloudy palm
> Remote on heaven's hill, that has endured
> As April's green endures; or will endure
> Like her remembrance of awakened birds,
> Or her desire for June and evening, tipped
> By the consummation of the swallow's wings.

By contrasting the permanence of April's green with the ephemerality of any absolute mythology for death, Christian or pagan, however, Stevens begs the question raised by both a chastened Lemercier and "The Death of a Soldier": do we fall for an even thinner prophecy when we accept nature's apparent benevolence as consolation for our human demise? The second section of "Phases" approaches that question with a portrait of café-dwellers attempting to remain aloof from the soldier's knowledge of death; for them, "The season grieves. / It was silver once, / And green with leaves." The opening stanza of "Sunday Morning" is marked by the same tension between an uneasy enclave and an impending invasion of suffering and wretchedness. But in the later poem the stakes are raised: instead of café-dwellers we have the even more private and tenuous (since not communal) world of the peignoir; and instead of soldiers marching to their death we have a visionary "procession of the dead."

> She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
> Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
> As a calm darkens among water-lights.
> The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
> Seem things in some procession of the dead,
> Winding across wide water, without sound.

Here April's green does not endure for long, since nature's bounty is not merely eclipsed by encroaching death: that bounty, the oranges and bright green wings, becomes the harbinger of death itself. The second stanza asks why the cloistered woman may not find comfort in "pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else / In any balm or beauty of the earth," and the answer has already been given. That is why in stanza three the vision of Jove, who (unlike Jesus) "had his inhuman birth"—"No mother suckled him"—is so attractive.

Although he entered the natural world, "moved among us," he did not see the mirror of his own mortality in ripening fruit.

In "Phases" a time of peace is imagined as just what will not suffice in "Sunday Morning": nature's fecundity—"delicious valleys," "Rivers of jade, / In serpentines, / About the heavy grain." That world of peace is insufficient because illusionary, and in the sixth stanza of "Sunday Morning" Stevens discards a vision of eternal ripeness for the same reason.

> Is there no change of death in paradise?
> Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs
> Hang always heavy in that perfect sky,
> Unchanging, yet so like our perishing earth,
> With rivers like our own that seek for seas
> They never find, the same receding shores
> That never touch with inarticulate pang?

In "Phases" these images of eternal peace ("all things, as before") pale beside the beauty of wartime mortality: "Death's nobility again / Beautified the simplest men" in a way that the eternity of all things as before could not. As Pach's soldier put it, "the nearness of death gives a powerful savor to life." Or as Freud remarked, the wartime consciousness of death made life "become interesting again; it has regained its full significance."[35] The Stevens of "Sunday Morning" said it better, of course, and said it twice: "Death is the mother of beauty." This is his response to both the antique vision of April's green and the last-ditch effort to locate paradise in a nature glazed to unchanging if peaceful perfection.

As final as this statement is, however, "Sunday Morning" does not end with it. After the repetition of the phrase in stanzas V and VI, stanza VII offers a vision of the men who understand the price incurred in this lesson, men who "know well the heavenly fellowship / Of men that perish." That Stevens appears to celebrate in a vision of male camaraderie that excludes the solitary woman should not be taken as an untroubled expression of his sexism.[36] Trying to convince his friend Kenneth Burke to join him in the American Ambulance Service, Malcolm Cowley said that the war was "the great common experience of the young manhood of today, an experience that will hold the thought of the next generation, and without which one will be somewhat of a stranger in the world of the present and the future."[37] Burke did not share that experience, and neither did Stevens (who, as we've seen, felt a charged distance from the fellowship of men that perish). More than any other part of "Sunday Morning," the seventh stanza marks the poem as the product of this wartime anxiety: like the woman, Stevens is excluded from this fellowship—he felt extraordinary anxiety over the war's new threat of undomesticated death, but he could not trust his feelings because he was not "vitally involved" in that terror as soldiers were.

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
> Not as a god, but as a god might be,
> Naked among them, like a savage source.
> Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,
> Out of their blood, returning to the sky . . .

Imagined in the world of 1915, this is not so much hedonism as desperation, not only an expression of Stevens' desire but of his worst nightmare, the hyperbolic chant of mortal men for whom the beauty of the earth is not consolation enough. Kenneth Burke could write that he knew "nothing of a life without a war"—without following Cowley to the trenches. He told his friend that there was a peculiar value in "the ruthless denial of action": it "fosters that feeling of incompleteness in us which makes us turn to art"; but at the same time, "people who don't do things are invariably thrown into a state of agitation which is not healthy."[38] "Sunday Morning" is a product of such denial; and it records the anxiety such denial produces.

"Sunday Morning" does not end with stanza VII because not everyone, certainly not Stevens himself or the woman of the poem, may participate in its ritual, in the experience of young manhood shared by Cowley, Lemercier, and Walter Pach's nameless soldier. Consequently, the poem returns to the less desperate consolation of death as "the mother of beauty," something known not only by the fellowship of men that perish but by girls who "sit and gaze / Upon the grass" and boys who "pile new plums and pears / On disregarded plate." The final stanza of "Sunday Morning" suggests that even Jesus himself was no three-day personage, but the final tableau does not strand us with that potentially disheartening realization by offering a vision of the hushed, indifferent nature of "The Death of a Soldier" or the seductive but finally stingy ripeness of April's green; instead, we are given an image of natural decline in which we are allowed to join and see ourselves—a sky, as stanza III has it, that is friendly precisely because it is "A part of labor and a part of pain."

> Deer walk upon our mountains, and the quail
> Whistle about us their spontaneous cries;
> Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
> And, in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as the sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.

To use the terms Stevens developed in "Extracts From Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" during the Second World War, this is a good death taking the place of evil. Even Lemercier—a willing victim of evil death, a member of the "fellowship / Of men that perish" who saw that "nature is indifferent" to death—could be comforted (if not placated) by the same vision. In one

of his last letters he described to his mother "the wild ducks which turned their wings northwards. They formed various patterns as they flocked together in the heavens and then disappeared on the horizon like a long floating ribbon." He might have been paraphrasing the last lines of "Sunday Morning" when he said that the migrating birds were like "a dove from Noah's ark; not that I dissimulate the dangers which remain, but these ambassadors of the air brought me a more visible assurance of the universal calm which prevails in the midst of our human frenzy."[39] Finally, nature's indifference is not a threat but the most reliable source of consolation for soldier and civilian alike.

Stevens may have discovered that lesson when he and Heber Stryker sat in the meadow beside a suburban cemetery until after midnight, assuaging the abstract fear of death with the natural evidence of death. But if I had to hypothesize the moment at which "Sunday Morning" came to be, I would choose April 4, 1915. This particular Sunday was an Easter Sunday, the first Easter since the war had begun. The following year, Stevens would wonder "[w]hy a man who wants to roll around on the grass should be asked to dress as magnificently as possible and listen to a choir" (*L* 193). But on April 4, 1915, neither of those alternatives was possible. The *New York Tribune* reported that church attendance hit a record high on Good Friday, and due to the war, the Easter crowds were predicted to be even larger. Billy Sunday's service was expected to draw thousands to Paterson, New Jersey. (William Carlos Williams recorded one of the evangelist's speeches: "Come to Jesus! . Someone help / that old woman up the steps."[40]) But the crowds did not appear. In the very early hours of that Sunday morning, almost two feet of snow fell on New York City, as if from nowhere, the greatest blizzard of the year. Few people could travel anywhere. Among those who did, over seventy died in accidents on land and sea. And the following day, the editors of the *Tribune* offered thoughts that no doubt occurred to men and women everywhere on that particular Sunday morning: "A sunny Easter, resplendent with gay apparel, an Easter which ushered in spring as a thing of joy, would have been an incongruity in such a year. Better the bleak dirge of wind and snow and rain. For here in New York, notwithstanding our peace and security, we can share in the dread of Will Irwin's English companion, who supposed 'that the spring was never before so unwelcome in this world. Before the wheat is ripe a million fine, tall fellows will be underground.' No wonder Nature protests at the celebration of such a season."[41]

Stevens once said that he had "avoided the subject of death with very few exceptions" (*L* 349). Reading his thoughts about death in "Sunday Morning" through its historical moment, however, I have ignored what is perhaps most obvious about the poem. No matter how we approach it, suggests A. Walton Litz, "Sunday Morning" remains "somewhat aloof, probably because it is the only truly great 'traditional' poem that Stevens wrote." To take only the most obvious instance of this debt to the tradition, the final tableau of "Sunday Morning" is clearly a rewriting of the ode "To Autumn." And as Milton Bates has quite properly demonstrated, the poem owes a larger debt to all manner of

aesthetes who cogitated on the conjunctions of death and beauty.[42] If Stevens is giving us Keatsian or Paterian wisdom in these lines, then, how can they be claimed as the poet's response to the world as he found it in 1915?

I've said that Stevens began his career as a self-consciously limited poet, one who lived by Keats's reminder that "to philosophise / I dare not yet." But a letter of 1909 reveals that Stevens had begun to chafe at these limitations. He was reading Paul Elmer More's *Shelburne Essays*, admiring the critic's "tendency to consider all things philosophically": "that, of course, gives his views both scope and permanence." Scope and permanence: Stevens wanted to philosophize himself, offering "principles of moral conduct that should guide us in every-day life—as distinct, say, from the peculiar life of Sundays" (*L* 133). Stevens mulled over the philosophical program of "Sunday Morning" for years, but his poetry remained decidedly unambitious, an echo of Ernest Dowson's miniature world rather than Wordsworth's music of humanity. Reading an essay on Lafcadio Hearn in the second series of *Shelburne Essays*, Stevens offered a paraphrase of More's philosophy: "It is considered that music, stirring something within us, stirs the Memory. I do not mean our personal Memory—the memory of our twenty years and more—but our inherited Memory . . . in which we resume the whole past life of the world, all the emotions, passions, experiences of the millions and millions of men and women now dead" (*L* 136).[43]

These sentences once again seem an uncanny preview of the mind that would produce "Sunday Morning" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (*CP* 89-92) six years later. Seated at the clavier, the bumbling carpenter invokes a spiritual music that not only reaches to the woman in the room but conjures up "the strain / Wakened in the elders by Susanna." Stevens began philosophizing in this poem, but the verse of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" itself embodies his hesitation. Parts I through III are cast in contrasting forms, but the melodies are delicate and the language more imagistic than philosophical, Dowson rather than Wordsworth. Only in the final section does Stevens suddenly open all the stops to make a statement of scope and permanence.

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

These lines are the rehearsal for the music (and the philosophy) of "Sunday Morning," but "Peter Quince," in its combination of verse forms, reveals the struggle to make that music as the opulent pentameters of "Sunday Morning" do not. The great singing lines of that poem, which do sound like a mighty act of ventriloquism, could consequently be seen as Stevens' substitution of the Keats of the Hyperion poems and the odes for the Keats of "Dear Reynolds." Yet as Frank Lentricchia has justly pointed out, "the literary historicity of 'Sunday Morning' is no autonomous alternative to its economic materiality," and the key to the literary mystery of the provenience of "Sunday Morning" is not

exclusively literary.[44] If the music of this poem does seem to come out of nowhere, without precedent in Stevens' career, it is because his philosophy, given urgent substance by the war, could no longer go unspoken or constrained in a diminished verse. In "Sunday Morning" Stevens turned to the great sonorous voice of the tradition as the only music vast enough to express the blooming horror that the war aroused in him. The war turned Stevens into a poet of ambition, one who could take on the major voice of Keats instead of heeding that poet's injunction against precocious philosophizing.

The result of this watershed in Stevens' career was an effort to make an ambitious poetry out of a diminished world. In "Sunday Morning" he does not leave the world of Keatsian particulars behind, but they are treated in a manner completely different from "Carnet de Voyage." If death is the mother of beauty, then earthly things are not images of "our despised decay" but the fruit of a philosophy that will guide us outside the peculiar life of Sundays. As Helen Vender has suggested, the natural objects offered in the final lines of "Sunday Morning" are allegorical instances of the philosophy offered in the opening lines of that stanza: the deer walk in "solitude," the quail are "unsponsored," and the pigeons undulate "in an old chaos" that leads to "inescapable" demise.[45] Unlike Vendler, though, I am not so troubled by the presence of ideas in Stevens' verse, since it seems to me that the commingling of objects and ideas enacted in the close of "Sunday Morning" is throughout the whole of *Harmonium* Stevens' answer to the threat of mortality. Without this allegorizing of the world's bounty, nature would always appear as stoic and severe as the impenetrable autumn in "The Death of a Soldier," and all human beings would die the inconsolable death of the battlefield. As "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" has it, the world must be magnified "if in that drifting waste / You are to be accompanied by more / Than mute bare splendors of the sun and moon" (*CP* 56).

Given the complete success of "Sunday Morning" it seems natural that in his next major effort Stevens' ambition would rise even higher. As "Sunday Morning" took on Keats and Whitman, "For an Old Woman in a Wig" (*PEM* 12-14) took on Shelley and Dante, but here the challenge of terza-rima proved greater than the challenge of the great English line, and the poem was left unfinished. Yet "For an Old Woman in a Wig" extends the lessons of "Sunday Morning" by suggesting that an afterlife in heaven or hell is barren when contrasted to "those old landscapes, endlessly regiven, / Whence, hell, and heaven itself, were both begotten." Here the spirits of the dead are drawn by "conscious yearning" back to earth, their mission to wander "the green-planed hills" seeking "maids with aprons lifted up to carry / Red-purples home." As in "Sunday Morning" the pressure of death makes flowers and plums more lovely, and "For an Old Woman in a Wig" is an even more explicit attempt to sing a grand song of diminished things. The final lines of the fragment explain what the final stanza of "Sunday Morning" demonstrates by its structure: that although we must look to the poetry of the earth, not the false grandeur of some world

beyond, we must seek the revelation in the commonplace and not settle for a simple naturalism.

> *O pitiful lovers of earth, why are you keeping*
> *Such count of beauty in the ways you wander?*
> *Why are you so insistent on the sweeping*
>
> *Poetry of sky and sea? . Are you, then, fonder*
> *Of the circumference of earth's impounding*
> *Than of some sphere on which the mind might blunder,*
>
> *If you, with irrepressible will, abounding*
> *In . . wish for revelation,*
> *Sought out the unknown new in your surrounding?*

To find the unknown new in the mundane is Stevens' way of surviving in the shadow of death. And although this ambitious lesson proved too much for him in "For an Old Woman in a Wig," it is sustained in a score of less expansive but more finely finished poems in *Harmonium*. One sees it allegorized in "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" or tucked away in "The Apostrophe to Vincentine," a deceptively casual poem in which the "Monotonous earth" becomes "Illimitable spheres" when the poet sees the lovely Vincentine walking the earth "In a group / Of human others" (*CP* 53). In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," a grander poem whose title suggests that it began as a reworking of "For an Old Woman in a Wig," Stevens explains that his method of redeeming mortal human beings is similar "in principle" to the old woman's; while she begins with "the moral law" and from it builds "haunted heaven," Stevens begins with the physical world to build his "hullabaloo among the spheres" and "project a masque / Beyond the planets" (*CP* 59). Yeats made it clear in the first version of *A Vision* (1925) that he was charting the heavens to replace a world-view that "German bombs" had destroyed: "why should we complain, things move by mathematical necessity, all changes can be dated by gyre and cone."[46] In his own way, Stevens was doing much the same thing. And *Harmonium* is as much a World War I book as *The Tower*, *The Waste Land*, or *A Draft of XVI Cantos*.

III

Extending the historical speculations of "The Irrational Element in Poetry" in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1940), Stevens remembered "the comfortable American state of life" that marked "the eighties, the nineties and the first ten years of the present century." With the rise of the first war, "Reality then became violent and so remains" (*NA* 26). The comfortable American state of life? Stevens' first book of doubts and fears shows otherwise, and yet whenever he returned to thoughts of World War I in later life, whether in these essays or the poems of "Owl's Clover" and "Two Tales for Liadoff," he was blinded by a myopic nostalgia. Stevens himself lived in anything but "happy oblivion" in the years before the war, and in emphasizing the importance of

the war in his career, it would be wrong to turn his earliest years into a world unsullied by politics, just as it has been wrong to see *Harmonium* as an unfallen paradise. Between 1900, when he left Harvard, and 1914, when the war began, Stevens failed as a newspaper reporter and several times over as a lawyer in both private and group practice. These were years of economic striving protracted beyond any reasonable tolerance. In November 1900, when Stevens was covering the presidential election (McKinley vs. Bryan) for the *New York Tribune*, he recorded this conversation in his journal.

> I was speaking to a Tammany Hall man tonight. He had a remarkably comprehensive view of things—I remember his saying—
> "Well, we are all human beings. Money is our object. Hence—"
> Politics, I suppose.
> "We all get down to that sooner or later," Stevens added. "I won't cross this out either" (*SP* 90).

Just before he left Harvard, Stevens attended a lecture by John Jay Chapman, the political activist and literary critic of whom Edmund Wilson would say that "no writer of his generation had dealt at once so realistically and with so much clairvoyance with the modern American world, and has in consequence so much to say to the younger generation."[47] As editor of the *Advocate*, Stevens wrote an editorial on "Political Interests," praising Chapman's lecture on the virtues of "practical agitation" (Chapman's book of that title would be published shortly) and suggesting that Harvard should form a "Political Union" so that students would "have some opportunity of becoming more readily acquainted with political conditions than is now possible by any means at present existing in the University."[48] This interest in public events was from the start an essential aspect of Stevens' sensibility, and public events would help to determine the shape of his poetry from beginning to end.

Kenneth Burke remarked in *Counter-Statement* that even though all art is political, "one cannot advocate art as a cure for toothache without disclosing the superiority of dentistry."[49] Stevens would have agreed, and his effort to isolate the place of poetry was not the product of a willful aestheticism but an effort to understand both the strengths and limits of artistry in a world of finance, economics, and politics. When the *Partisan Review* asked him about the conflagration looming on the horizon of 1939, Stevens conceded that despite the uses of poetry, "a war is a military state of affairs, not a literary one."[50] That is not so much the remark of the aesthete as of the prudent citizen, of a poet who knew that like most of us, he was not "vitally involved" in wars as soldiers are. Unlike Auden, Stevens would not say that poetry makes nothing happen because he did not expect more than what poetry was capable of doing in the first place. More clearly than Pound, he saw the danger of substituting poetry for politics rather than isolating the specific ways in which poetry and politics interact. In "Sunday Morning" or "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" Stevens records not only his involvement with politics but his distance from that world; to ignore the distance would have been dishonest. And it seems to me that in gauging a poem's place in history, a recognition of

a poet's sense of the limitations of his craft is as important as his sense of its strengths. As the coda to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" suggests, Wallace Stevens' poet does not replace the soldier or statesman, but stands beside them, each reminding the other of the necessity of his or her world.

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Notes

[1]*Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 176. Further references to this source will be cited in the text as *CP*. The following abbreviations will be used for other references: *OP* for *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957); *SP* for *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1977); *L* for *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); *PEM* for *Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972); and *NA* for Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage, 1951).

[2]Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 65.

[3]"Carnet de Voyage" appeared in *The Trend* 7 (September 1914); I quote from the text reprinted in the appendix to A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 302-304. This sequence (along with "From the Journal of Crispin" and the full texts of "Phases" and "Lettres d'un Soldat" cited below) will appear in Milton Bates's new edition of Stevens' *Opus Posthumous*.

[4]William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 62; *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Jackson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1966), 170-71.

[5]The text of "From the Journal of Crispin" may be found in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 30-45.

[6]Sigmund Freud, *Character and Culture*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier, 1963), 124.

[7]Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 225.

[8]*Sur Plusiers Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book*, ed. Milton Bates (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 41.

[9]*The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 1, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt, 1988), 214.

[10]"Chicago Poets and Poetry" [unsigned review], *Minaret* 1 (Feb. 1916): 26.

[11]Stevens to Elsie Stevens, 21 and 25 July 1915 [WAS 1960, 1961]. All of the previously unpublished materials in this essay are from the Wallace Stevens Collection at the Huntington Library, and are quoted with permission.

[12]Walter Pach, "Universality in Art," *Modern School* 5 (Feb. 1918): 52.

[13]Walter Pach, "Jean Le Roy," *Modern School* 5 (Oct. 1918): 296.

[14]Pach, "Jean Le Roy," 296.

[15]See Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 350.

[16]Stevens to Elsie Stevens, 23 June 1916 [WAS 1978].

[17]Stevens to Elsie Stevens, 15 October 1916 [WAS 1985].

[18]Stevens to Elsie Stevens, 31 May 1919 [WAS 2015].

[19]Catharine Stevens' journals are held in the Wallace Stevens Collection at the Huntington Library.

[20]Jean Lemercier, *A Soldier of France to his Mother*, trans. Theodore Stanton (Chicago: McClury, 1917), 22. Stevens recommended this translation to Harriet Monroe.

[21]*Harvard Class of 1901 War Records* (Norwood, Mass.: Plimpton, 1920), 111-12. Stevens' copy of this book is in the Huntington Library.

[22]Stevens to Elsie Stevens, 11 August 1914 [WAS 1958]; part of this letter appears in the published volume of Stevens' correspondence (*L* 182).

[23]See "Wallace Stevens' Ice Cream" in *Aspects of American Poetry*, ed. Richard Ludwig (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1962), 203-22.

[24]Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 48.

[25]*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. E. C. Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehard, and Winston, 1969), 241-42.

[26]Bloom, 50.

[27]Lemercier, 163.

[28]I quote from the full text of "Lettres d'un Soldat" in the appendix to Litz, *Introspective Voyager*, 309-15.

[29]Lemercier, 146.

[30]Lemercier, 109.

[31]Lemercier, 104.

[32]Lemercier, 92-93.

[33]Pach, "Universality in Art," 52.

[34]I quote from the full text of "Phases" in the appendix to Litz, *Introspective Voyager*, 304-308. On the continuities between "Phases" and "Sunday Morning" see Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 230-41.

[35]Freud, 124.

[36]This is an interpretive crux that Frank Lentricchia, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have debated without appreciating fully its historicity. See Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1988), 136-99; Gilbert and Gubar, "The Man on the Dump versus the United Dames of America; or, What Does Frank Lentricchia Want?" *Critical Inquiry* 14, 2 (Winter 1988): 386-406.

[37]*The Selected Correspondence of Kenneth Burke and Malcolm Cowley*, ed. Paul Jay (New York: Viking, 1988), 50.

[38]Ibid., 99, 42.

[39]Lemercier, 155-56.

[40]William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), 173. Williams refers to Billy Sunday's 1913 visit to Paterson.

[41]"The Storm," *New York Tribune*, 4 April 1915, 10.

[42]See Litz, *Introspective Voyager*, 51; Milton Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 111-14.

[43]Stevens is paraphrasing Paul Elmer More's "Lafcadio Hearn," *Shelburne Essays*, second series (Boston: Houghton Miflin, 1905), 46-72.

[44]Lentricchia, 160.

[45]Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 48-49.

[46]*A Critical Edition of Yeats's* A Vision (1925), ed. George Mills Harper and Water Kelly Hood (London: Macmillan, 1978), xvi.

[47]Edmund Wilson, "John Jay Chapman," *New Republic* 59 (22 May 1929): 33.

[48]The editorial is titled "Political Interests" in the table of contents for the *Harvard Advocate* 69 (24 March 1900); the editorial appears on 17-18.

[49]Burke, *Counter-Statement*, 90.

[50]See Stevens' contribution to "The Situation in American Writing," *Partisan Review* 6, 4 (Summer 1939): 39-40.

An Interview with Stanley Burnshaw

ALAN FILREIS AND HARVEY TERES

INTRODUCTION

WHAT FOLLOWS ARE EXCERPTS from a wide-ranging interview with the poet, critic, teacher, translator and editor Stanley Burnshaw, now eighty-three. For over a half-century Mr. Burnshaw has made his contributions to American letters. His work as president and general manager of The Dryden Press (1939-58) and vice president at Holt (1958-65) is legend. Some of his recent publications include a critical biographical exploration, *Robert Frost Himself*; a third novelistic memoir, *My Friend, My Father,* with an introduction by Leon Edel, in the trilogy *The Refusers*; and new paperback editions of *The Poem Itself*, *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, *Robert Frost Himself*, and *The Seamless Web*, with an introduction by James Dickey. *A Stanley Burnshaw Reader* is forthcoming from the University of Georgia Press. Most recently he has been a visiting professor of English at the University of Miami. Stevens scholars, of course, will know Mr. Burnshaw for the pressure his October 1935 review of *Ideas of Order* exerted on Stevens. The review provoked the second part of "Owl's Clover," "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," and in a larger and perhaps more important sense contributed to Stevens' turn toward economic and political actuality during the thirties and, arguably, beyond.

The material below was chosen for its relevance to Stevens. It should be kept in mind that the entire interview lasted more than six hours, and that these selections make up a small portion of the whole. Much of the material not printed here pertains to Mr. Burnshaw's relations with the literary radicals of the thirties, a subject of interest to us no less than to him. Our exchanges on the subject of literary politics were the liveliest, and the transcription, especially at such points, speaks more to our desire to allow Mr. Burnshaw to respond on the record to anticipated counterarguments than to any doubts we ourselves felt about the original rationale of American literary radicalism. Whatever doubt does come across was meant to be meliorative in effect. It is certainly worth noting in this regard that the interview—an afternoon's conversation really—was characterized by a great deal of warmth, a fact we unhesitatingly credit to Stanley Burnshaw's patience and abundant good will.

The interview was conducted in New York City, on May 18, 1989.

ALAN FILREIS: We are interested to know what you think about the shift that occurred in Stevens' attitude toward his own poetry in the mid-thirties—before the Burnshaw encounter and after. Before your *New Masses* review, Stevens might have justified his poetry by saying he wrote it to become more himself, or that he had no idea why he wrote it. After the Burnshaw encounter he spoke of writing poetry to formulate his ideas about and relate himself to the world. Only after the brush with radical criticism, that is, did he begin to speak of his relationship to his world as interactive. Do you want to comment

on the suggestion that Stevens changed his attitude toward his own poetry because of your political response to it?

STANLEY BURNSHAW: Denis Donoghue certainly believes that's true. In a letter he sent to the editor at the University of Georgia Press, he wrote "Burnshaw's dispute with Wallace Stevens in the thirties led not only to a poem, 'Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,' but to an entire motif in Stevens' work."

FILREIS: Is that an overstatement?

BURNSHAW: No, I think this is a strand in his later work, and I do believe—and the published letters make this clear—that he did want to prove that he was of the world and that he was responding to what I was referring to as reality. I don't think there can be any doubt about it.

HARVEY TERES: When you looked at *Ideas of Order*, you saw a poet who was already moving North, as it were, from his South—toward the harsh climate of the Depression from balmy, luxurious Florida. How influential was your review? Or, alternatively, was this a development already under way in Stevens which you noted in the review?

BURNSHAW: No, I wasn't noting it. I didn't know about "The Old Woman and the Statue"[1] at the time I wrote the piece. If I had seen *that*, then I would have had a reason for thinking that here was a man who was ready to get "pushed"—which is what you're implying.

FILREIS: Was the review itself an example of a Popular Front strategy at work? The Popular Front had been officially announced in August of 1935, and your review came soon after, at the beginning of October.

BURNSHAW: Yes, but I was way ahead of the Popular Front advocates. I used to be called, half kiddingly, the Aesthete with the Golden Scales of judgment. I was writing reviews of poetry books and plays long before the Stevens book came along. I started to review plays in the fall of 1934.[2]

FILREIS: Is it accurate in your view to say that you wrote reviews the way you did not because you sensed a Popular Front strategy coming but because you felt all along it was natural to you?

BURNSHAW: I felt that the left-sectarian mode, the idea of simply slamming people was crazy. I thought of a book or a play: if it's good as art and is telling the truth, that's all we should ask. In theory, the slogan was: "The truth itself is revolutionary." In other words, conditions were awful and people should write about the way things were—that was enough. You walked the streets and you *saw*. A book that faithfully recorded what was happening was revolutionary.

FILREIS: It seems, then, that the way in which your review works—whether consciously part of the Popular Front mode or not—indeed does stand as a

good example of that strategy. Soon after the August announcement here's an October review urging Stevens to come over from right or center-right to left.

BURNSHAW: Nevertheless, I had written an article earlier, called "Middle Ground Writers"—a good while before the Popular Front idea was adopted.[3] Incidentally, Malcolm Cowley always objected to the idea of a Popular Front. He wanted to call it the "People's Front," which I felt made sense. I think you ought to guard yourself from making the timing too important. Remember, I received the Stevens book probably three or four weeks before my review appeared.

TERES: Do you remember reading the book?

BURNSHAW: [Laughs.] Rather, yes. I was fascinated. The idea that I would review a Stevens book! He hadn't published even one since 1923. As you know, I greatly admired what he had done in *Harmonium*. And I had heard stories from Alfred Kreymborg. He'd told me that Archie MacLeish wanted to go to see Stevens once and discuss certain problems of prosody in French literature with him, and Stevens was very standoffish.

FILREIS: Letters I've been able to locate, written by Willard Maas, then a communist, to Isidor Schneider at the *New Masses*, suggest that Maas and Schneider agreed that Schneider would review Stevens. Since Maas was Ronald Lane Latimer's associate at Alcestis Press, and so associated with Stevens, I've been curious to know if you remember why Schneider didn't finally review Stevens himself.

BURNSHAW: The exchange you've found [between Maas and Schneider] seems odd, for one thing, because I was the one reviewing poetry. Izzy simply gave Stevens to me. One day I found several books on my desk. There was the Haniel Long book, *Pittsburgh Memoranda*, and the Stevens book.[4] Izzy and I went over my review very carefully together. He was a very good editor, by the way.

FILREIS: Did Isidor Schneider or anyone go over the review for political correctness? What about Joseph North, whom you've described as the *New Masses'* "political watchdog"?

BURNSHAW: Nobody was a watchdog over me. Joe North was the *political* watchdog indeed. Incidentally, he knew more about poetry than anybody else in the editorial office.

FILREIS: There was no way that you as a reviewer would ever have explicitly undergone a test for correctness?

BURNSHAW: They didn't touch anything I wrote; that is, I never had anything blue-pencilled for political "correctness." Never! Nobody ever suggested that I make any changes, except, of course, that we all copyedited each other's work. As for correctness, would I have been made Managing Editor of the *New Masses* when Joe North was away if they didn't trust me politically? I

asked Joe, "How come they're giving me this responsibility?" He answered, "You've got a good political nose." Those were his very words.

FILREIS: When Alfred Kreymborg received Stevens' poem written in response to you, how did you find out?

BURNSHAW: Stevens sent the poem to the *The New Caravan*. I sent them a poem too, for the same issue.[5] Mine was a very Parnassian—not a class-conscious—poem. As soon as they received the poem from Stevens, Kreymborg telephoned, "You've just been immortalized." I was in the office of the *New Masses* when he called.

FILREIS: What was the reaction of the others in the office?

BURNSHAW: Oh, they didn't know much about Stevens! But I said to Kreymborg, "Gee, that's terrific. But is it a good poem?" He replied, "It's wonderful." I asked, "What does it say?" He laughed, "Search me!"

FILREIS: How did you feel?

BURNSHAW: I was delighted. I was amazed. I said to myself, "Stevens paid attention to what I wrote!" Here I was, just twenty-nine, and Stevens was a man whom I considered one of the very influential, important, gifted poets.

FILREIS: Even though you had read *Ideas of Order*, and written the review you wrote, wasn't there a moment when you thought Stevens had really accepted your invitation to come over, as it were—to be concerned with the actual world?

BURNSHAW: No, no. As soon as I realized the poem was written directly in reply, it was enough to indicate that this was a controversial response.

FILREIS: But you've indicated that you didn't consider your review to have been negative.

BURNSHAW: I thought my review was very forthcoming. Morris Dickstein [of Queens College], who studies the literary left, told me recently that he had just re-read it and thought I had been rather generous to Stevens. Compare what I wrote to what appeared in the *New Republic* at the time. I think I was more generous than they were.[6] I have come to conclude that maybe I did Stevens a disservice. And it raises the whole question of the legitimacy of the role of criticism. I happen to believe very much as Jarrell did about Stevens, with all that philosophizing, hemming and hawing in the poetry.[7] Of course, I don't think either of you will agree with me because you greatly admire Stevens' later work. I can't read it myself; my mind wanders away from the verse. Dudley Fitts once referred to him as "the great unreadable." I think maybe I should *not* have said to Stevens, "Come now, join the human race, people are suffering. You should be reacting to the world about you." I think that may have been wrong. I should have let him go and do things his own way, because I think his greatest gift is to be seen in *Harmonium*, and that gift

was to a great extent, at least as I judge it, perverted or warped or in some way injured, or in some other way affected adversely, by the pressure that that review must have exerted upon him to join in talking about—responding to—reality. I know in some of his letters he constantly speaks about reality and in a lot of the poems about the necessity of reality. Reality is all over the place. But what does he mean by reality? His reality is the imagination. Now for me, one trouble with Stevens' later poetry is that it's almost like mercury. That is, he uses a word such as "reality" but it means one thing to him one day and another thing to him another day. I think by all evidence, in *Harmonium*, Stevens was not very interested in actuality. And he didn't respond to actuality except by transfiguring it through his special kind of imaginative abilities. I would like to find something by Stevens, after *Harmonium*, that strikes me as wonderfully good—something I can't put down. I have a lot of trouble with the post-*Harmonium* poems.

FILREIS: Why do you think Stevens reacted to the review as he did?

BURNSHAW: Judging from what I read later—he had already written "The Old Woman and the Statue"—I think he was probably on his way to writing in response to actuality. If I had known about that poem, I probably would have written the review in a different way. But—really—"Marx has ruined nature"! I could have said harsher things about his title "Like Decorations in a *Nigger* Cemetery"! I thought I was pretty restrained. But by giving him a stiff push and challenging him by making him feel guilty about not responding to actuality, did I do him a service? I question whether criticism has the right to do this.

FILREIS: You've described the review as a stiff push and you've also described it as restrained.

BURNSHAW: Then a restrained push!

TERES: We've been talking about orthodoxy and independence, and about how one judges poetry when one has allegiances to a politics and when one has at the same time a certain regard for experimental poets. In the review you innovated and did not follow the line, but there are also parts of the review where you seem to be duplicating the Party dogma. Especially with the business about Stevens' "confusion."

BURNSHAW: "Confusion" meant unable to see what was going on. Or unable to make alliance with what we considered the forces that would make things better. You see, by the way, I didn't think in terms of Stalin. I must explain what my attitude was. I came to the leftwing movement as somebody who had been converted to communism after working in the steel mills, shortly after I graduated from college. I could see the ravages of industrialism. I was working in a company town, called Blawnox, Pennsylvania. It was a typical company town. The workers stored coal in their bathtubs and used the toilets as garbage disposals. I could see what a blight there was—what was

happening to the countryside, the land. I saw what the children would do when they went to the brink of the Allegheny River and wanted to go swimming in the hot weather and couldn't because it was such a polluted river. I became a conservationist within two weeks, and at the same time became a Communist—not knowing what Communism was, except for one thing: that the land, the whole world would belong to the people. I had never had any political ideas in my life. This was an overwhelming apocalyptic conversion, and once I had it there was just no question about it. Obviously if the earth belongs to the people, the people are going to preserve it—another example of simple logic, and its uselessness. To me, at the time, it was all perfectly obvious. Now, my first contact with the *New Masses* began by my sending them poems while I was still living in Pittsburgh. This was before 1927. Some editor replied—I don't know who it was, but it couldn't have been Mike Gold—saying, "If you're working in an industrial plant outside Pittsburgh, write poems about what's going on; don't write your own lyric concerns with your own reactions." Well, I didn't pay any attention to that because I wanted to go my own way. In my first published book of verse, called *The Iron Land* [1936], there are two kinds of poetry. There's the personal, lyrical, meditative sort of thing, which I called "Excursions," and then there are descriptions of the steel mill. Of course, I was divided. But I saw no problem with that. Why shouldn't I have been divided. One was a practical matter of saving the world from the evils of society—of poverty, misery, inequality. The other had to do with my private concerns, of another sort. This has continued with me without a stop, throughout my life. But working with the *New Masses* paralyzed my capacity to write meditative, personal lyrics, which is one of the reasons I left [in July 1936]. Poetry isn't something you *will* into existence. It's something that comes of itself. I felt that I was being aborted. And I was also tired of doing the hack work that was a necessary part of editing a weekly journal.

TERES: How conscious were you of this division within yourself during your most politically active phase, when you were doing reviews for *New Masses*? To what extent did you share this with others? How did you justify such a split?

BURNSHAW: I didn't have to justify it. There was no problem. I was two people. There were two parts of me. One had to do with my feelings and ideas about the nature of life and so on, and the other had to do with the everyday practical problems of starvation and improving society through trade union action and relief. I didn't see any conflict between those two things.

TERES: What did it feel like to have to toe the line publicly? You said before you were considered to have a "nose for politics." You weren't blue-pencilled, and that speaks to your discretion, but it also speaks to a certain willingness to conform.

BURNSHAW: I should say it speaks to a *desire* to conform. Or not so much that as a natural inclination to conform. I didn't force myself to do anything.

Really, nothing. And when they used to ask me—as Joe North did periodically—to join the Party, I said, "Don't be a damned fool. I'm the sort of person who can't do anything unless it's done voluntarily."

TERES: I'm curious to know whether you felt there was much about modern experimental literature that Party hacks at the *New Masses* didn't know. And to what extent did that knowledge get into your reviews?

BURNSHAW: I knew a lot about modernism. I had been reading poetry from the time I was about 16 or 17, insatiably. I had published in *Poetry* in 1928 a standard study of *vers libre*.[8]

TERES: Did you see yourself, then, as one of the few literary radicals attempting to bring together the advances of modernism and the new politics?

BURNSHAW: I didn't consider free verse such a revolutionary thing. I wrote a review and published it in 1925 in *The Forum* on E. E. Cummings.[9] Was I pro-modern? Yes! I thought it was marvelous. I thought Cummings was great. My book on André Spire is still being used. And then Harriet Monroe published these two articles on Spire in *Poetry*—by an unknown kid of 21. So you see my orientation was clear; I had no problem with modernism; this was part of the given for me.

TERES: All of these concerns were formed before your radical days. If you had reviewed a Spire poem for the *New Masses* in the early thirties, you probably wouldn't have reviewed it favorably. This pertains to what you wrote about *Harmonium* in your review, a volume of poems you admired.

BURNSHAW: I admired *Harmonium* when it came out. I admired it when I wrote the review. I admire it today.

TERES: Here, however, is what you said about it in 1935: "It is remembered for its curious humor, its brightness, its words and phrases that one rolls on the tongue. It is the kind of verse that people concerned with the murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in tiny doses."

BURNSHAW: That's right, yes. Because to people alert to the world of 1935, *Harmonium* couldn't fail to appear as "escapist" both in subject matter and in attitude.

TERES: Yet your sole emphasis—not just yours but of most of the critics on the left—was with subject matter. Why was there no greater attempt to explore some of the formal matters that you yourself had explored earlier in your career?

BURNSHAW: I can answer that simply. What mattered for the pragmatic position of anybody who was working on the left was substance, subject matter, attitude toward social conditions.

TERES: Did you fully accept that emphasis at the time? Were you aware of the fact that there were dimensions of poetry that were lost here—to which you were not responding?

BURNSHAW: One had very limited space for a review. This review was relatively a long one, although I had published a lengthy, two-page essay on Shakespeare. And Shakespeare was a little more important than Wallace Stevens. The review of Stevens was very condensed. You'll notice it's very tightly written. In a review of this kind what strikes you in a book called *Ideas of Order* is the message more than anything else. The message is in terms of its subject matter and its attitude toward its subject matter. That attitude is indicated by "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." It's also indicated by the line about Marx ruining nature. When you have limited space and you're not so concerned with the formalities of poetry—as you couldn't be unless you were writing a rather long review—you wrote the review I wrote. I don't know any review of Stevens of the time, of this book, that dealt with the formalities. Ted Roethke's certainly didn't, and I know Ruth Lechlitner's didn't.[10] I don't think anyone would have bothered; we were too concerned with what art was doing—the "Art as a Weapon" kind of thing.

FILREIS: But you were a poet and critic already expert in formal matters, and yet your job was obviously to evaluate new poetry coming your way for its content—

BURNSHAW: —not for its "content" but for its general effect—

FILREIS: —well, for its relation to "the actual world," the phrase Stevens used—

BURNSHAW: —that's all right.

FILREIS: So it will be helpful to compare your assessment of Stevens' poetry with your evaluation of poems submitted for publication in the *New Masses* itself. I've located a rejection letter you sent to a young Communist poet who had sent poems in June of 1934. The poet again was Willard Maas, who, as I've said, was a member of the Communist Party, and who had published or would publish with the *New Masses*, and who, with Latimer, was just then publishing Stevens. In saying you did not like the poems Maas had sent—and you asked him if he had any more poems he could send—you wrote, "They seem to us too chockful of startling imagery, and so we can't use them." What did you mean by that?

BURNSHAW: I meant simply that they were at fault technically.

FILREIS: But surely you also meant that they were too much the kind of poetry for *Poetry*. I would think that a rejection stated in such a way—and to a fellow Communist, after all—would be designed to send a signal that "startling imagery" gives too much pure pleasure at a time when the people felt none?

BURNSHAW: It meant that instead of its being realized as a poem, it concentrates on arresting the attention, by its technical feats. That's quite a different matter from the one you're suggesting. I don't know what the substance of the poems was. But obviously they were, we thought, flawed works. Self-conscious, contrived.

TERES: Doesn't that kind of rejection in fact support the *New Masses* line?

BURNSHAW: No. What you're suggesting is that a poem aesthetically faulty, a poem technically faulty—if it focuses on form is necessarily worth considering. I'm saying, on the other hand, that if it were a better poem we would have been be glad to print it.

TERES: Regardless of content?

BURNSHAW: A communist poet wouldn't have submitted it to us unless the poem's content—its subject matter and its attitude—had been congenial. If its subject matter and attitude were not congenial to the *New Masses* at that time we never would have considered it. We would have said, "Please, if you have any other poems that you think might interest *our* readers, let us see them." So I would have been saying, implicitly, "Everything is fine about your content but there's something wrong in the way the poem is realized, because it's too arresting; it's as though you're too much in love with the language."

FILREIS: It "rolls on the tongue." Now the poet whose poems were rejected by you decided, as he wrote to Jack Wheelwright, also a friend of the left: "It's too bad, but the radicals do not understand poetry." I suppose my point is that that is what many in the poetry world thought about the *New Masses'* attitude toward poetry.

BURNSHAW: Well, I would expect that. That would be their natural reaction. On the other hand, parenthetically, I'm fairly certain we did publish a poem by Maas.

FILREIS: But you know what he meant by that. He's saying, "They rejected my poetry because—"

BURNSHAW: "—because it was too good as poetry—"

FILREIS: —"because the *New Masses* is too busy looking for something else and they can't see good poetry."

BURNSHAW: Or: "They're insensitive to poetic innovation."

TERES: Could you have written a more positive review of Stevens—say, by offering an appreciative reading of his poetic technique—and gotten away with it? You raised the possibility that Stevens could become an ally, that Stevens would have to come in the direction of the Party. Could you have suggested not that Stevens change but that the Party change?

BURNSHAW: It's misleading to say "in the direction of the Party." My review pretty much says this: let him face the actualities and let him write about the actualities rather than retreating from them or attacking those who *are* concerned with the actualities. I think the characterization I offer in the review of *Harmonium* pays tribute to his technical abilities.

TERES: Had you given a reading of the poems of *Ideas of Order* stressing technique as much as ideological content, and had you written that kind of review consistently, would you have been asked to leave the *New Masses*?

BURNSHAW: They never would have asked me to leave. I think that should be fairly obvious in view of all we've discussed.

TERES: Do you know of anyone who was let go?

BURNSHAW: Because of deviation from the line? No. Let me add one thing here. In my review—"Turmoil in the Middle Ground"—I could have taken the poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" and talked about the beauty of it, but I think it would have so derailed the piece, that the main point that I was making would have been lost in a review which after all was about two books, not one; I don't see how I could have managed it. I thought "The Idea of Order" was a lovely poem. I don't think it as great as people think it is, but I like it. I think it's one of his best poems. But I thought that the phrases that I used in appreciation of *Harmonium* were certainly very positive and they certainly imply a formal mastery which I found very enjoyable. I suggested that one ought to think of *Harmonium* as words that "roll on the tongue." What's a better tribute than that?

FILREIS: Leaving aside what you yourself thought then or think now you were praising in Stevens, do you think these phrases about *Harmonium* would have been understood by your radical readers as damning—that "words that roll on the tongue" would have been taken as a back-handed compliment? As not the sort of poetry one could write during "a murderous world collapse"?

BURNSHAW: They would have said it's escapist.

FILREIS: And is that not what you wanted them to think? Didn't you mean that *Harmonium* was fine for its time but that we can't read that sort of thing anymore?

BURNSHAW: Absolutely. I said this was great for its time. And I still believe that. And I still can't understand that a man as sensitive as Stevens was could not have spontaneously—and without any prodding by anybody—responded to the actualities around him, because after all he knew what was going on.

TERES: You said earlier that the later poetry was inferior, and that you did him a disservice by forcing him to confront actuality and that *Harmonium* is his greatest achievement. Can you add to that now?

BURNSHAW: Yes, that's my view now, in the perspective of seeing what he did after 1935. I just wonder whether in that sense I did him a service or a disservice. You couldn't share my view because you think so well of his later poetry.

TERES: What were some of the pressures or issues surrounding your decision to explain yourself in 1961 in the *Sewanee Review*, to write the essay in which you finally explained your own view of the by-then famous Burnshaw review.[11]

BURNSHAW: I led a very solitary literary life for a long time after I left the *New Masses*. For one thing, I was too busy earning a living. And there was a terrible personal tragedy, the death of my first child. I didn't write any verse until 1942, when *Accent* published my poem addressed to Whitman, called "Poetry: The Art." When one doesn't feel affirmative about life, one doesn't write poetry. All this had occurred so long ago, that until 1960 or so I considered the Stevens controversy something that had happened long, long ago. I had gained some perspective on that past.

TERES: What were some of the responses to the piece in *Sewanee*?

BURNSHAW: Frost's reaction was very strong. He thought it was marvelous. Allen Tate was in seventh heaven. I got telephone calls from Horace Gregory, from John Ciardi. Gregory was wildly enthusiastic: "You're the only one who could have written that." And Philip Rahv! I have a letter from him dated 1961, saying: "It's about time someone put the record straight."

FILREIS: What do you think Rahv meant by using the phrase "put the record straight"?

BURNSHAW: People didn't understand what the situation had been in the thirties.

FILREIS: So he and others who had endorsed versions of the old left were saying, in effect, "Thank goodness the silence was broken."

BURNSHAW: That's right. The telephone was ringing! And on the other side, Dudley Fitts sent me a letter regretting his behavior during the thirties—he had been very anti-left. He wrote: "When Stanley Burnshaw burned Shaw, so to speak, / I wrote another line of Greek." Frost was also very interested. He talked a lot about Stevens. He asked me if I ever met Stevens. I said, "No." He asked, "Didn't you ever want to?" I said, "No."[12] Because really I didn't. Here was a man quite mad about all things French and yet he never dared visit France. I'd have felt this embarrassing.

FILREIS: You knew that kind of detail about Stevens' life in the thirties?

BURNSHAW: There was a lot of gossip. I think we knew generally about his domestic situation, and how "great" he was in dealing with insurance claims. He didn't have the most savory reputation.

FILREIS: Did the gossip come from Stevens' old friend Kreymborg? What did Kreymborg tell you about Stevens?

BURNSHAW: Oh, he admired him. And in the thirties he admired him very much.

FILREIS: Even though Kreymborg was then politicized—

BURNSHAW: —a red-hot Communist! He was one of the hottest.

FILREIS: And he had nothing negative to say about Stevens' recent poetry?

BURNSHAW: No. He just thought, as I did, that one should publish poems that might have some influence in bettering the world as it was at the time.

FILREIS: And yet as a Communist he put into print a rejoinder to you, his political ally and friend.

BURNSHAW: He thought it was wonderful—the whole idea that *The Caravan* received a long poem by Stevens that had to do with a controversy with the *New Masses*. And it was, let's face it, an interesting event of which I am the curious—what?—victim, beneficiary? The last *Caravan* was the one in 1936. That's the one that contains Stevens' poem about me. Just for your interest take a look at my own poem in there. It is so un-Left it will amuse you. And I remember saying to Joe Freeman[13] at the time, "Stevens' poem about me is going to appear in *The New Caravan*, and I have a poem in there, too, but it isn't at all what we would call a proletarian poem." He said, "Let me see it," and after he'd read it he said, "That's wonderful. It's a Parnassian poem!"

TERES: I would think that the McCarthyite atmosphere had something to do with the way your review was treated in the fifties.

BURNSHAW: I think that's exactly right. I waited twenty-five years. A Stevens critic [Frank Kermode] put words in my mouth and was going to perpetuate this kind of misunderstanding of what really happened. People would tell me, "You've been attacked by so-and-so, you've been attacked by such-and-such." One day in 1958 or 1959 somebody came to me with the piece that Louis Martz had written, and suddenly the tide seemed to turn. He had given a speech at the English Institute and M. H. Abrams was in charge of it; so Abrams sent me a copy of Martz's essay. I thought, Well maybe they're getting some sense. In the *Yale Review*, Martz says that Burnshaw's criticism of 1935 is "so largely true" and "left the mark," as I've mentioned elsewhere.[14] And so I wrote my *Sewanee* essay because I thought that people interested in the controversy might care to know something of its genesis. Well, now you know something about that.

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Notes

[1]*The Southern Review* 1, 1 (Summer 1935): 78-81.

[2]The first was "The Theater," *New Masses* 12 (September 18, 1934): 29. Some of these reviews appeared under the pseudonym, "George Willson."

[3]*New Masses* 15 (April 30, 1935): 19-21.

[4]Burnshaw reviewed Long's book with Stevens'.

[5]Kreymborg, editor of the annual *The New Caravan* with Lewis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld, published "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" in the 1936 volume (72-77). Burnshaw's poem, "The Driving Song" also appeared in this volume (362).

[6]Theodore Roethke, *The New Republic* 87 (July 15, 1936): 304-305.

[7]Randall Jarrell, *Poetry and the Age* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 124-36.

[8]"Vers-Libre in Full Bloom: A Note on the Prosody of André Spire," *Poetry* 32, 6 (August 1928): 277-282; 32, 6 (September 1928): 334-341. Reprinted in Stanley Burnshaw, *André Spire and His Poetry* (Philadelphia: Centaur Press, 1933).

[9]Review of *Tulips and Chimneys*, *The Forum* (April, 1925): 605.

[10]"Imagination as Reality," *New York Herald Tribune Books*, December 6, 1936, 40.

[11]"Wallace Stevens and the Statue," *The Sewanee Review* 69 (Summer 1961): 355-366.

[12]The conversation with Frost is reproduced in *Robert Frost Himself* (New York: George Braziller, 1986), 166.

[13]Joseph Freeman was a founder and editor of the *New Masses*; with Mike Gold, Freeman was one of the established cultural leaders of the American Communist movement when Burnshaw joined the journal in the early thirties.

[14]See "Reflections on Wallace Stevens," in this issue. Kermode's misunderstanding is also discussed there.

Reflections on Wallace Stevens

STANLEY BURNSHAW

SINCE WE KNOW THAT I was invited here[1] because of my 1935 review of *Ideas of Order* and the poem it evoked, "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," I suppose I should start by telling you something about my reply. One morning in 1961 a young man came into my office with a book called *Wallace Stevens* by Frank Kermode. Pointing to page 63, he cried, "You can't *not* answer *this* attack! The man never read your review!" I had waited 25 years—enough was enough. That night I began to write my reply and five days later mailed it to the anything-but-leftwing *Sewanee Review*.[2] To my great surprise, Monroe Spears answered by airmail special, calling the piece "extremely important, valuable," and so on; it would lead off the very next issue. By chance, when it appeared, Kermode was visiting Harvard. I learned about its effect on him first from Harry Levin, soon after from Kermode himself, who sent me two letters. I quote the relevant part from the one addressed to me: "What I need to say is very simple—that I clearly owe you an apology for misrepresenting you, and my readers another for not doing the job properly." The other letter, that he hoped would appear in the *Sewanee Review*, lauds the essay for "putting an end to a tradition of error"—adding that "there can no longer be any misunderstanding about his [Mr. Burnshaw's] part in *Owl's Clover*."

But I'm sure there *can*—for I doubt that the so-called reading public of Stevens has read my reply, and this must include some of you here—*understandably*, for a 1961 issue of a scholarly review is at best a chore to obtain. On the other hand, many of *Stevens'* words on the subject are and will be quoted again and again. One of these, which speaks of "this grubby faith [that] promises a practicable earthly paradise" (*NA* 143), is a sorry example. And in the light of what was going on inside the *New Masses* office, it is also laughably off the mark.

But how could *he* know? How could Stevens know that Robert Frost had been twice invited to be the magazine's poet? How indeed could anyone know who had not been there—who hadn't heard our anything-but-pious jokes about Communist leaders, cultural commissars included—who hadn't witnessed the disputes, the arguments, the challenges, as well as our admission that we as editors of this Communist weekly were "the blind leading the blind"? My *Sewanee Review* essay mentions those "writers on the Left who were wrestling with their private angels"—including, and I quote, "the reviewer of Stevens. He [I] would confront his own misgivings about the glory of the life-to-come in the stateless utopia. It would be ushered in by the Goddess of Industrialization" whose handiwork he had already observed as an employee in a grim Pennsylvania mill-town. Little wonder he couldn't thrill to a poem on a new Russian hydro-electric plant, with its climax "billions and billions of kilowatt hours." Or that he would not join the chorus in praise of Stakhanovism, which he scorned as a Soviet euphemism for "speed-up." One

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point he kept making: that our weekly *New Masses* should confront the large questions, such as what is to be the nature of existence after the struggle was won and the factories built, the farms industrialized? None of his fellow editors wished to deal with such "escapist" subjects! Yet, of one thing he was certain—which would be a book years later[3]—that in the long run economic improvement could do very little for human beings unless a comparable change took place in the *spirit* of people. So much then for Stevens' remark on "this grubby faith [that] promises a practicable earthly paradise." So much also for my attempt to provide a capsule context for my *Sewanee Review* reply and, by implication, for the confident remark in Stevens' letter about Mr. Burnshaw's having "applied the point of view of the practical Communist to IDEAS OF ORDER" (*L* 289).

As I stand here, I wonder what you who are Stevens experts would say of that book if it came out today and you (just as I many years ago) had no knowledge at all of his poems that would follow. Is my question academic? I think not, for the basic point of my review of 1935 has proved to be strangely true. I said that *Ideas of Order* was a book of "speculations, questionings, contradictions"; that it "formed a considered record of agitated attitudes"—"the record of a man, who having lost his footing, now scrambles to stand up and keep his balance." I am not, of course, claiming credit for what Louis Martz said in his 1957 English Institute essay: that my "critique, being so largely true, left the mark, as *Owl's Clover* [issued one year later] shows." To claim credit would be senseless, since what matters to you as to me is the change that took place in Stevens' work—the striking difference marked by *Ideas of Order* and *Owl's Clover* of which all of us are aware.

One might even call it the great divide and, as all of us know, the effect can be read in the words of numerous critics. For Yvor Winters, Stevens' post-*Harmonium* work shows "rapid and tragic decay." Alvarez finds "many of the long poems unreadable": "you work down to what he is saying on *this* topic only to find that it is much the same as he has always said about everything else." For Randall Jarrell, "the habit of philosophizing in poetry—or of seeming to philosophize, of using a philosophical tone, images, constructions, of having quasi-philosophical daydreams—has been unfortunate for Stevens." Now I hardly have to cite the words of those on the opposite side, which is where, I know, you belong, or quote your reasons which, no doubt, are many and strong. Is this great divide, as it were, a matter of taste? Possibly, or to some extent, but taste in itself is never an adequate touchstone. There is much, much more to the problem, as you know and as I've come to learn over many years.

Perhaps my own response you may find of interest. It will not take long to sketch it, nor does it stem from lack of sympathy for Stevens' plight. For this poet no longer could rest with what we may call the "answers" he found in his published work. He was bent on finding what he named "satisfactions of belief," which entailed a deep change. In my view it's unfortunate that in numerous places which refer to this change we hear him using words that invoke deliberateness and willing. For example, he talks of "any deliberate work of

art" (*NA* 147). Even in the beautiful "The Idea of Order at Key West" we find this preoccupation. The person who is celebrated is no less than "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang" (*CP* 129)—the constructor, the inventor, the human consciousness that is presumably capable of controlling and, in an endless striving, somehow of mastering the world, or perhaps a world. I begin to wonder, "which world?" But then I learn the answer in "Man with the Blue Guitar." For the world outside, which is to say the nonhuman universe, is a "monster." I quote the words you know well—of the human mind's endless striving to control *within* itself the *outer* monster:

> That I may reduce the monster to
> Myself, and then may be myself
>
> In face of the monster, be more than part
> Of it, more than the monstrous player of
>
> One of its monstrous lutes, not be
> Alone, but reduce the monster and be,
>
> Two things, the two together as one . . .
>
> (*CP* 175)

He is striving to find or create, among other things, "the major man"—and this major man "comes from reason" and not from "some incalculable *vates* within us" (*NA* 61). Reason here is the reason of calculation, willing, voluntary thought, which he claims will set him free from creative dependence on what he now calls "the false conception of the imagination" which in plain English means "inspiration" (*NA* 61). Moreover, in a piece of prose chopped into lines that presumably entitle it to be regarded as a poem, which he names "Of Modern Poetry," he states what the poem must do. Not only must it "face the men of the time and . . . meet / The women of the time," but—much more important—"It has / To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage" and "speak words that in the . . . delicatest ear of the mind, repeat, / Exactly, that which it wants to hear" (*CP* 240)—which is to say in equally plain prose that it has to speak the words that the mind has been *thirsting* to hear. Now to any student of mystical experience, this amounts to the final stage at which the imagination projects the desired fulfillment. But to speak of mystics—I happened to write my graduate thesis on the relationship between poetry and mysticism—by no means implies religious belief. I am talking only of process, and as you know Stevens touched on it in *Opus Posthumous*.

In *The Necessary Angel* he called "imagination" "the sum of our faculties" (*NA* 61), which in *The Seamless Web* I define in speaking of creative writing as utilizing "all the processes of the mind."[4] But then, alas, we part company, as those of you who have read my book would expect. The first reason I've already dealt with in speaking of Stevens' stress on calculation, will, deliberateness, for in company with an endless number of artists and scientists I hold the process of creativity to be *involuntary*. Not that I think for an instant that all the

post-*Harmonium* poems were born of an act of will. As Shelley said in his famous *Defence*, no poet can *will* a poem into being, not even the greatest poet—to be seconded by too many writers to name, from Eliot's "The idea, of course, simply comes" to Paul Valéry's "*we must simply wait until what we desire appears, because that is all we can do . . .* [for] when our will, our expressed power, tries to turn the mind upon itself and make it obey, the result is always a simple arrest." Marianne Moore said it briefly: "Conscious writing can be the death of poetry." But I must not go on, for our second parting of ways is a good deal harder to explain—unless you've heard or read my essay on "A Future for Poetry," which is published only in England.[5]

My second difference with Stevens rises out of the *implications* of what he had sought to attain. They are plain for all to see—in the elevation of humanity above all other creatures and in the "war between the mind / And sky" (*CP* 407). Quite typically he builds a highly involved superstructure upon what is clearly the anthropocentric base. This is, of course, the polar opposite of all I avow in "A Future for Poetry," which I subtitle "Planetary Maturity." By no means is mine the prevalent view, yet by no means does it lack adherents, and not only in philosophy and science but also in poetry—and not only among poets of our time. On an early page of my essay, I quote the last eight lines from the much anthologized "Affliction" by Sir John Davies:

> I know my soul hath power to know all things,
> Yet is she blind and ignorant in all;
> I know I am one of nature's little kings,
> Yet to the least and vilest things am thrall.
>
> I know my life's a pain and but a span,
> I know my sense is mocked with everything;
> And to conclude, I know myself a man,
> Which is a proud and yet a wretched thing.

I go on to ask: "Is there nothing more to be said about being human? Not if one's view is circumscribed by the culture, which makes man the center of all." Faced with our decade's menaces, a good many people approach the world from a vantage point *outside* the culture, which reveals human beings as being, above all else, *creatures*; and despite their spectacular gifts and works, as much in thrall to the laws of existence as all other creatures. The awesome burden that fell upon us when we made ourselves capable of killing all life upon earth compels us now to look at *all* life with responsible eyes. It is forcing on us, even against our wishes, the humbling condition of "planetary maturity." As they gaze from a kind of planetary vantage point, human beings no longer appear as Nature's king, the center of all. Having accepted their quintessential creatureliness, they know that they share with the whole of creation a common ground of elemental being.

Each person, of course, who seeks a solution for the need to "make truce with necessity" (to paraphrase Carlyle) does it in his or her own way. Stevens'

way entailed a kind of solipsistic man whose mind was his salvation. So be it, though we're all, as I wrote in a poem many years ago, "Caged in an animal's mind."[6]

One question: would we be here tonight if *Harmonium* had never been published?

New York, NY

Notes

[1]The occasion is The Wallace Stevens Society Program, "Stevens in History," organized by Alan Filreis at the 1988 MLA Convention in New Orleans. Although his name did not appear on the program, Mr. Burnshaw served as respondent. [*Ed.*]

[2]Stanley Burnshaw, "Wallace Stevens and the Statue," *The Sewanee Review* 69 (Summer 1961): 355-366.

[3]Stanley Burnshaw, *The Bridge*, a play in verse with an introduction by John Gassner (New York: Dryden Press, 1945).

[4]Stanley Burnshaw, *The Seamless Web* (New York: George Braziller, 1970), 67. Although currently available, the book is to be reissued with an introduction by James Dickey in 1990.

[5]"Stanley Burnshaw Special Issue," *Agenda* (Winter-Spring 1983/4): 45-70; to be published in *A Stanley Burnshaw Reader*, with an introduction by Denis Donoghue, University of Georgia Press, 1990.

[6]Stanley Burnshaw, *Caged in an Animal's Mind* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 21. See also *In the Terrified Radiance* (New York: Braziller, 1972), 87.

Figuration and Society in "Owl's Clover"

> The aesthetic order includes all other orders
> but is not limited to them.
> —Wallace Stevens, "Adagia"

ROBERT EMMETT MONROE

I

IT IS NOT ALTOGETHER SURPRISING that, until recently, comparatively little attention has been paid to the political aspects of Wallace Stevens' work. The interiority, philosophical mode, and abstraction of his poetry have tended to draw critics away from its immediate social context. Yet, in some ways, Stevens seems the most promising major poet of his generation for a cultural analysis, the most representative poet of his society. His native culture remained more central to him than to the expatriate Eliot and Pound, and, as a lawyer with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, he was closer to the heart of the modern financial structure than Frost or Williams.

Those who recently have discussed how Stevens fits into his larger societal setting often browbeat him for alleged blindness or escapism. Even critics sympathetic to Stevens charge him with irresponsibly omitting reference to global events such as the Second World War, having no clear ideological line, and arrogantly ignoring other people. Many other readers inclined to forgive such sins of omission nevertheless agree that Stevens' poetry displays "a willingness to uphold the barrier between aesthetic and material production."[1] I contend, however, that this commonly accepted view of Stevens is blinded by its own adherence to the sort of rigid categorization which it proscribes. Calling a work escapist or aestheticist because it does not foreground political content ignores the possibility of finding social resonance in art's formal aspects, thus enforcing a barrier between politics and aesthetics. Much richer interpretive models exist: for instance, in Adorno's treatments of Schoenberg, another modernist too often considered coldly formalist, arrogant, and aloof to the real problems of people.[2]

If we haven't found a clear engagement with politics in Stevens' poems, it may be that we haven't been looking in the right parts of them. By studying a group of poems which concerns itself in an explicit way with political realities, I hope to show how these concerns are worked through in the terms of a more formal problem. Helen Vendler notes that "the movement from mimetic, or historically specific, writing to the writing of allegory is one of the most decisive a writer can make."[3] "Owl's Clover" is Stevens' major experiment with specific historical reference; yet, it is also a work strewn with highly allegorical figures. I propose to explore the movement from one pole to the other not as an abandonment of historical reference, but, precisely, as a re-figuration of it.

The formal problem which "Owl's Clover" obsessively works through is the problem of how to create figures, human and otherwise, in decorum with the

matter which the poet addresses. The question of proper figuration, however, is also an enactment, on an aesthetic plane, of political debate. The fine commentaries on this poem tend to treat these aspects separately. Litz reads the poem as a dialectical debate about political ideologies in somewhat the same way as I will, but without my particular degree of focus on the problem of figuration; while Riddel can write, "Portent against statue, then—this is Stevens' argument," but often contends that Stevens is "arguing on nonpolitical or prepolitical grounds."[4]

The figures proposed and tinkered with by Stevens, however, stand for positions in a discussion about the possible and proper relations of art and ideology to the needs of real people. The success of these figures is evaluated on aesthetic grounds; but this aesthetic judgment implies a moral critique of the ideologies with which they are associated. Michael North connects the figures of this poem to political ideology, but considers that the central figure, the statue, represents a failure of the artwork to fulfill its social function.[5] I mean to show, however, that the statue is the figure which Stevens finds most adequate to its audience, an emblem of art's social usefulness. The statue is an allegorical and fanciful one, composed of Pegasi and the "celestial paramours," and this conclusion in favor of abstraction points the way for much of Stevens' subsequent poetry. "Owl's Clover," therefore, effects a crucial step in Stevens' career, for in these poems he develops a method of transforming political realities into abstract figures, a method which will become habitual. A look at "Owl's Clover" thus finds a justification of Stevens' *oeuvre* in the very features of stylistic abstraction which have given political offense, and suggests ways to trace in his other, less obviously topical works, how his poetic flowers grow from political roots.

II

"Owl's Clover" comprises five poems which turn over the question of high art's relation to the audience of the thirties, a constituency portrayed as needy and in ideological turmoil. In each poem appears a magnificent statuary group, which I propose to be based on the Observatory Fountain near the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris.[6] Other kinds of figures are juxtaposed with the statue. These include a destitute and bitter woman in "The Old Woman and the Statue," spokesmen for various sorts of socialism such as Mr. Burnshaw of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" and "the Bulgar" and "Basilewsky" of "A Duck for Dinner," and, most abstractly, figures of myth such as the American "buckskin, crosser of snowy divides" and "the subman" and "sprawling portent" of "Sombre Figuration." The statue is pictured in various relations to working people who use the park in which it stands. Transporting the statue to a foreign locale, "The Greenest Continent" imagines the statue in Africa, and contrasts it with an indigenous god of death, defamialarizing European notions of war, mortality, heaven, and angels. A transposition to the future is also imagined, in which the statue is compared to a monument in a Marxian utopia.

"Owl's Clover" appeared in a small edition of 1936, in a reduced version in *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, and was not widely distributed in its entirety until *Opus Posthumous*. The reason Stevens omitted it from the *Collected Poems* is telling: he considered it too "rhetorical."[7] This consciousness of the poem's tendency towards political *sententia* is mirrored in Stevens' earlier idea of entitling it "Aphorisms on Society." He also comments that "'Owl's Clover' is a good title, in the sense that, in spite of the owlishness of the poems, there is still enough poetry in them to justify that title."[8] Stevens felt that their focus on society distinguished these poems—he called this "the element that is common to all the poems"—and he evidently conceived of the socially analytic or "owlish" as a contrasting category to the aesthetic or "poetry." What these discordantly populated and uneven poems show, indeed, is a wealth of quick and lucid thinking on the relation of these categories, with direct reference to contemporary events. Here we can follow the lead of Riddel, who calls the thirties "the most revealing single period in [Stevens'] career" (105). What we find in this topical collection, written at the depth of the depression, is a poet testing various positions on social issues in the same gesture with which he experiments with a variety of styles of figure.

"A Duck for Dinner" deftly considers the political ideologies which appeared to be the major alternatives in the world of the depression: Soviet communism, various types of socialism, fascism, and a populist version of natural-rights individualism. Milton Bates describes 1935 as "the high-water mark" in "the leftist episode in American literature," and Stevens confronts communist aesthetics head-on.[9] Stanza IV begins:

> Then Basilewsky in the band-stand played
> "Concerto for Airplane and Pianoforte,"
> The newest Soviet reclame. Profound
> Abortion, fit for the enchanting of basilisks.[10]

Stevens judges Soviet ideology by its aesthetic product. A forced attempt to integrate modern machinery into art produces clumsy discord: "Airplane" is squeezed between "Concerto" and "Pianoforte," and the use of the archaic term for the piano emphasizes the lack of fit between residual forms and modern matter. Stevens indicts the aesthetic of tractor-farm films by implying that new machines cannot gracefully appear in art which has not reorganized its own formal technology; merely varnishing technological objects with artistic cliché won't do. Socialist realism is found inadequate to the needs of its human audience, for it places objects which, albeit modern, are dumb as basilisks at the center of a quaint effort to "enchant." The necessary and absent converse, perhaps, is a totally reorganized (non-enchanting) mode, yet one aimed at people. Interestingly, the tone Stevens chooses to skewer socialist realism is whimsical satire. Odd agents, clunking sounds, and oxymorons collide in a scene of farce which is worthy of the Marx Brothers.

In the next lines, Stevens amplifies his doubts about the communist theory of history, and situates it in the larger perspective of other trends past and present. "They chanced to think," he ironizes dryly.

> Suppose the future fails.
> If platitude and inspiration are alike
> As evils, and if reason, fatuous fire,
> Is only another egoist wearing a mask,
> What man of folk-lore shall rebuild the world,
> What lesser man shall measure sun and moon,
> What super-animal dictate our fates?
>
> (*OP* 63)

Having disenchanted the Marxist utopia, Stevens turns to another looming nexus of political and aesthetic promises—or threats—for the modern world, the Nietzschean legacy.[11] Like Marxism, the position explored here rejects the conventional comforting platitudes of nineteenth-century culture, and denies any inspiration that implies a god beyond the human. But it also claims to unmask rationalism, of which the Marxist science of history is considered a form in these poems, as a cover for the more fundamental act of ego-assertion. If the Marxist utopia fails, one alternative is an appeal to folk-culture and to the overcoming will of a "super-animal."

The passage climaxes in authoritative epigram: "As the man the state, not as the state the man, / Perennial doctrine and most florid truth" (*OP* 63). An idea of "the state" should not be imposed on people by a central committee, Stevens orates, with the expectation that they as individuals will conform to the established pattern. On the contrary, it is the shape of the representative man who gives the pattern to the state. Stevens sometimes seems to conceive of this man along the lines of the Nietzschean super-man, as an elite individual of surpassing mind and will, a figure whom Stevens would broaden and generalize into the "major man" of subsequent works.[12] In "Adagia" he writes, "The world is at the mercy of the strongest mind in it whether that strength is the strength of sanity or insanity, cunning or good-will" (*OP* 174).

But the thinking through in this poem continues; for while he was sometimes swayed by the myth of the great man or overcoming individual, here he adds that this "doctrine" must be envisioned in its full "floridness." It is not the single elite individual, for "man means more, means the million and the duck." With this Stevens begins to construct a way which is an answer to the first possibility of communism. Yet this way of drawing the state's pattern from its citizens is also an alternative to Nietzsche's single paradigmatic individual, the super-man model appropriated by Nazi ideologists to support Hitler.

> It cannot mean a sea-wide country strewn
> With squalid cells, unless New York is Cocos
> Or Chicago a Kaffir kraal. It means this mob.
>
> (*OP* 63)

The import of the lines alluding to Australia and South Africa is that there must be a national culture. We cannot get by with only the culture of the elites gathered in scattered cities, for New York is no autonomous archipelago nor is Chicago a self-reliant village, but each draws on the entire motley conglomerate of nationwide difference. "It means this mob." The honesty of this thumpingly bathetic sentence is delightful, and it shows how clear-eyed Stevens could be in comparison with other literary figures who, if they chose not to abandon their American setting, felt compelled to eulogize and idealize it in defense. No one was more innovative in finding out new forms to fit the naked material of American life, nor in bringing the continent's landscapes into English poetry.[13] But Stevens shows himself entirely alive to the daunting challenge, and humor, of giving order to the country he was stuck with, so to speak, a country as sprawling and florid as the Tennessee of "Anecdote of the Jar." Taken out of context, the references to mobs in this poem imply snobbery or worse; but the context is one of trying to find a meaningful integration of a people and their artworks, without ignoring or euphemizing their rougher and more comical features.

As the poem continues, Stevens keeps in view the possibilities of populist or fascist leaders:

> The man in the band-stand could be orator.
> It may be the future depends on an orator,
> Some pebble-chewer practiced in Tyrian speech . . .
> (*OP* 63)

When the poet wrote these lines Mussolini was at the height of his prestige, Hitler had seized control two years earlier, Stalin had consolidated his personal authority, and, for that matter, Roosevelt was using the radio effectively on a weekly basis.[14] The future was indeed hanging on the words of fascist, communist, and populist orators. Yet Stevens throws a subtle wrench of skepticism into the machinery of a seemingly inevitable movement. The allusion to Demosthenes, the pebble-chewing orator, implies a high standard by which to measure contemporary rulers. Stevens regrets at the time of these poems that "the merely violent" has "a strong chance of prevailing in the long run, because what now exists is so depleted, and because the other things are all that there are to look to" (*L* 309). "It may be the future depends on an orator" does not prophesy a hero thrust to command by the *zeitgeist*, but makes a skeptical prediction about what the present situation in Europe seems likely to produce.

The section concludes with a certain amount of praise for the historically influential man:

> Yet to think of the future is a genius,
> To think of the future is a thing and he
> That thinks of it is inscribed on walls and stands
> Complete in bronze on enormous pedestals.
> (*OP* 64)

This praise, however, is notable for its faintness, its tentative and qualified tone. This genius is a "thing," with both the certainty and the limitations of the squarely material. Interestingly, the achievement of the man of action is estimated by commemorative inscription and statuary—by artistic representation.[15] This rather crude sort of statue commemorating a political leader is immediately contrasted with the central statue of these poems. The next stanza begins, "The statue is white and high, white brillianter / Than the color white and high beyond any height / That rises in the air." In this dazzling description, the more allegorical statue possesses a feature Stevens associated with the most effective aesthetic achievements, the superlative as applied to qualities—white beyond white, height beyond height. The sublimity of the statue highlights the grossness of the political memorial, which is described only in terms of material and quantity: "bronze on enormous pedestals."

The absence of any qualitative description of the political monument implies that it is not richly experienced by anyone. The pedestal, an "enormity" in the sense of being out of balance with its surroundings, looms over empty space: we see no spectators or other people near it. In contrast, the graceful equine statue is surrounded by "The sprawlers on the grass" who

> feel
> The central of the composition, in which
> They live. They see and feel themselves, seeing
> And feeling the world in which they live.
> (*OP* 64)

The white statuary functions in a social capacity, fitting in with and even making more vivid the lives and world of the people in the park. And these people are workers; as "The Bulgar" at the poem's outset describes, "The workers . . . rise a bit / On summer Sundays in the park" (*OP* 60). The statue reveals to these people a "central." The poem's grammar illustrates the nature of the artwork's transformations: an adjective, "central," representing description and quality, transubstantiates to a noun, "The central," representing substance and object status. "[C]omposition," for its part, can refer both to the art object and to the processes which make it. The artwork objectifies processes of seeing and feeling, the sculptor's processes of composition. This objectification makes visible to other spectators the traces of these processes. And these people, thus presented with the visible traces of the artist's ordering processes, gain insight, through their acts of reception (another set of seeing and feeling), into their own analogous processes of structuration, into how they figure themselves and constitute the world in which they live. In this vision, the work of art is an epistemological gift to its spectators, and this is its socially beneficial function.

In these poems, Stevens evaluates political ideologies by the aesthetic objects they produce, and the artworks are judged by how well they meet the needs of the people who use them. The aesthetic functions as a critique of the political. This does not seem a soft criterion to me, nor is it an evasive or weak

move on the part of the poet. On the contrary, it is an empowering move, and an appropriate one, for an artist to take ideologies to task for the ugliness they produce. The poet stands as a guardian of qualities of life which he understands well, which are easily brutalized and dismissed as peripheral, but which he claims are central, are constitutive foci of both individual and social identity. Far from keeping the aesthetic order and politics separated, Stevens implies that they are inextricably related: a fully effective work of art cannot spring from inhumane ideology, and a political system which cannot produce a convincing artistic representation lacks vital force.

III

Bates calls Stevens' ideology "confused," noting that he "labeled the leftist program variously a 'magnificent cause' and a 'grubby faith,'" and called fascism "'a form of disillusionment with about everything else,' yet described himself in an unguarded moment as 'pro-Mussolini'" (183). The letters of this period, however, show not so much confusion as an active process of critical thinking, of continuous revision and testing. Indeed, the pragmatic qualifications of his social thinking mark its maturity. The apparently contradictory evaluations of leftism can be found in a single paragraph:

> MASSES is just one more wailing place and the whole left now-a-days is a mob of wailers. I do very much believe in leftism in every direction, even in wailing. These people go about it in such a way that nobody listens to them except themselves; and that is at least one reason why they get nowhere. They have the most magnificent cause in the world. (*L* 287)

Stevens sees the cause of human liberation as a great one, and in this sense believes in leftism. But he knows that a political program must be voiced effectively, and objects to the feeble manner in which current factions represent it. His assessment of Mussolini also shows a politician's awareness of how real circumstances mitigate ideal hopes.

> While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors. However, ought I, as a matter of reason, to have sympathized with the Indians as against the Colonists in this country? A man would have to be very thick-skinned not to be conscious of the pathos of Ethiopia or China, or one of these days, if we are not careful, of this country. But that Mussolini is right, practically, has certainly a great deal to be said for it. . . . Fascism is a form of disillusionment with about everything else. I do not believe it to be a stage in the evolution of the state; it is a transitional phase. The misery that underlies fascism would probably be much vaster, much keener, under any other system in the countries involved at the present time. (*L* 295)

We must condemn the racist terms, and may disagree with these views. But his position is consistent and practical; one might be appalled by a certain regime, yet conclude that circumstances admit only worse alternatives. This is worldly theory, similar to what Jeanne Kirkpatrick advocated as ambassador to the U.N. No wonder *New Masses* targeted Stevens as among those writers considered "potential allies as well as potential enemies."[16] And despite the racist terms, Stevens seems slightly ahead of his ethnocentric times when he compares American colonialism to that in Africa.

In "The Greenest Continent," a poem dealing with European imperialism in Africa, Stevens further extends his method of enhancing political perception by contrasting aesthetic figures. Here the figures are more highly allegorical, and collide with each other more violently. An African image of Thanatos is elaborated, in which "Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne." But this god is attacked by figures from European Christianity.

> Forth from their tabernacles once again
> The angels come, armed, gloriously to slay
> The black and ruin his sepulchral throne.
>
> (*OP* 55)

The idea of wrathful angels is not an extraneous or eccentric one, as the Bible, Milton, or the rhetoric of the Crusades reminds us. But Stevens ridicules the ugliness of the oxymoron "gloriously to slay / The black."

> Hé quoi! Angels go pricking elephants?
> Wings spread and whirling over jaguar-men?
> Angels tiptoe upon the snowy cones
> Of palmy peaks sighting machine-guns? These,
> Seraphim of Europe?
>
> (*OP* 55-56)

The French ejaculation and the mention of Europe indicate a critique of European colonialism as a whole. Stevens commented that the poem concerns "the white man in Africa," and was written in response to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (*L* 307-08). Litz even deems this section aesthetically unsatisfactory because too mired in its specific historical subject (219). This seems to miss the mark nearly, though; for it is precisely the aesthetic ludicrousness of angels "sighting machine-guns" which most effectively unmasks the contradictions of colonialist ideology. The clash between pretensions to Christian divinity and the historical facts of technological slaughter is driven home by aesthetic problems, by incongruities involving figure, scale, realism, and levels of style: you can't have an angel toting a machine gun.

Angels, those sublime imaginative creations which Stevens invoked often in his poetry and prose, are grand enough to walk over mountain peaks and operate at a level of style as fine as the phrase "cuirassiers against / The milkiest bowmen" (*OP* 56). But this epic grandeur of scale and style becomes the

high term in the contrast necessary for mock heroic, as soon as a low term appears, which posits them

> Combatting bushmen for a patch of gourds,
> Loosing black slaves to make black infantry,
> Angels returning after war with belts
> And beads and bangles of gold . . .
>
> (*OP* 56)

The focus is on the triviality of the prizes fought for—the hill or grove gained in a battle, the token booty of plunder. The incompatibility between such meanness and angels constructs a gritty image of colonialism, an enterprise foolish enough to price baubles at a higher value than the human spirit.

The contrast finally brings a more direct cry of disbelief and indignation:

> This must
> Be merely a masquerade or else a rare
> Tractatus, of military things, with plates,
> Miraculously preserved, full fickle-fine,
> Of an imagination flashed with irony
> And by a hand of certitude to cut
> The heavenly cocks, the bowmen, and the gourds,
> The oracular trumpets round and roundly hooped,
> In Leonardo's way, to magnify
> Concentric bosh.
>
> (*OP* 56)

How can one represent such a moral debacle? It could be a self-conscious travesty, "merely a masquerade." Or one could take the approach, more whimsical yet ultimately more piercing, of mordant satire. The latter method would combine the grandeur of Leonardo and the elaboration of a Tractatus together with Swiftean manic irony, the better to cut "bosh" to the quick. Stevens explicitly raises the problem of how to represent political struggle in art, and suggests mock heroic figuration which embodies a clash between levels of style.

The problem of figuration is a focusing trope for the larger issues of how a poet gets the world, and people, into poetry, to put it in terms cruder than Stevens merits. "Only a noble people evolve a noble god," Stevens writes in "Adagia"; how to invent images for the people around the poet is a central question of "Owl's Clover." In 1935 Stevens had written to Latimer that he was more likely to be "abstract" than "didactic" (*L* 302). In these poems his abstraction—in the sense of drawing out representative figures *from* society—saves him from didactic statements *about* "society," a word which he said he found difficult to use "without some feeling of repugnance" (*L* 290). For the figures of these poems are polysemous enough to comment on social issues in several ways at once, their presences irreducible to a flattened message. Stevens' method is analogous to those employed by Ben Jonson and Samuel Daniel,

whose allegorical, baroque, and abstract figures commented equivocally yet piercingly on court issues. We find more personages here than Stevens is wont to show us, and it may be because he has found a satisfactory way of mapping the diverse complexity he perceived in society onto variously interpretable figural emblems.

IV

"Owl's Clover" presents a Puttenham's catalogue of types of figure. We may order them from bottom to top in terms of dignity, moving from Basilewsky to the statue. As we glimpsed, Basilewsky's techno-musical contraption wouldn't fly, and the globe he invented "bulged before it floated, turned / Caramel and would not, could not float" (*OP* 63). This is the material of farce, and Basilewsky could be thought of as a cartoon character without losing much. "The Bulgar," the voice who speaks immediately before Basilewsky appears, tips us off to the mode employed here when he says, "'If you caricature the way they rise, yet they rise'" (*OP* 60). The larger context of caricature suggests that Stevens is working within a decorum of types of figure. For caricature is closely associated with pointed political comment—the grotesques of nineteenth-century journalism, Uncle Sam, John Bull, the donkey and elephant, caricatures of the capitalist, even Marx's "spectre." By using a cartoonish figure as the spokesman for a Soviet aesthetics, Stevens pairs its ideological inadequacy with oversimplified figuration. For Stevens, any aesthetic platform as rigidly programmatic as the Stalinist one cannot accede to levels of representation more complex than that of caricature; the cartoon is the authentic expression of the forced and distorted program it propounds.

Not much more dignified or complex is "Mr. Burnshaw," of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," a comparison by which the first figure suffers. "Mr. Burnshaw" refers to Stanley Burnshaw, who had reviewed Stevens' *Ideas of Order* for *New Masses*. The poem is thus a surprisingly direct response, enjoining a public political debate.[17] "Mr. Burnshaw applied the point of view of the practical Communist to IDEAS OF ORDER," Stevens writes to Latimer, "I have tried to reverse the process: that is to say, apply the point of view of a poet to Communism" (*L* 289).

The Mr. Burnshaw of this poem is little more than a mouth-piece for a satirically condensed version of Marxism:

> Everything is dead
> Except the future. Always everything
> That is is dead except what ought to be.
> All things destroy themselves or are destroyed.
> (*OP* 46)

This burlesque of revolutionary millenarianism, and of the dialectic's generation of antitheses, degenerates further into cant. "These are not even Russian animals," Mr. Burnshaw scoffs at the statue, and goes on to compare it to such bourgeois consumption as good cooking and shopping. He ranks it "much

below / Our crusted outlines hot and huge with fact," a description which suggests the vivid lines and bombastic scale of posters erected in Red Square. What would this ideologue put in the place of the statue, the artwork which is the superlative by which qualities are judged?

> The stones
> That will replace it shall be carved, "*The Mass*
> *Appoints These Marbles Of Itself To Be*
> *Itself*." No more than that, no subterfuge,
> No memorable muffing, bare and blunt.
>
> (*OP* 48)

This is the entirety of stanza III. Its spareness, so ungenerative when compared to the lushness and color of the longer stanzas, stands in sharp contrast to a qualitatively different kind of figure, the statue's "celestial paramours." The "celestial paramours" are invoked in the previous stanza to "chant sibilant requiems" for the statue Mr. Burnshaw consigns to the trash-heap of history. They make "Long autumn sheens and pittering sounds like sounds / On pattering leaves." The Tennysonian lushness of this poetry, even as it ushers out the old era, shows up the sterility of what is proposed for the new.

The "mortal lullaby" of these angelic figures is "like porcelain," and in the high pitch of the last section their cry is associated with "porcelain" three times. In contrast to the blunt materiality of the inscribed stone, their artifact is material, yes, but of the lightest and most fragile plastic substance. This Parnassian delicacy may not be Stevens' ultimate aesthetic goal in itself, but it points out something the monument lacks. While the mass programmatically appoints the stones to be itself, the song of the celestial paramours seems to actually achieve an incarnation, by bringing "the speech of the spirit" and the "air" into "the breathing earth." Their "feelings" have been "changed to sound," a more fluid and effective transformation than any decreed by dictatorial appointment.

After the lullaby of the celestial paramour, a rather Victorian song, a different voice clashes with Mr. Burnshaw from the side of the future. "A solemn voice, not Mr. Burnshaw's," presents an apocalypse more severe and complete than any contained in the Marxist view of history, describing a trash heap where history itself is junked. At this "trash can at the end of the world,"

> buzzards pile their sticks among the bones
> Of buzzards and eat the bellies of the rich,
> Fat with a thousand butters, and the crows
> Sip the wild honey of the poor man's life,
> The blood of his bitter brain . . .
>
> (*OP* 49)

The ultimate leveling, as Stevens imagines, is not that Ozymandias falls to obscurity, but that even the pain, production, and justified indignation of the

poor man dissolve to bland interchangeability with all other material. The long view of history presents an anti-figure, a chaotic heap.

Stevens' response to materialism, then, is that material is dead, and to give it life requires a re-shaping of the stuff of particular history. This is not by any means a conventional *contemptus mundi* or Christian stance, though, for the rising somehow has to do with a re-merging with "younger bodies," "rose-breasted birds," and other living material.

> There even
> The colorless light in which this wreckage lies
> Has faint, portentous lustres, shades and shapes
> Of rose, or what will once more rise to rose,
> When younger bodies, because they are younger, rise
> And chant the rose-points of their birth, and when
> For a little time, again, rose-breasted birds
> Sing rose-beliefs.
>
> (*OP* 49-50)

To transform the junkyard's vague shapes of "rose" into "rose-points" and "rose-beliefs," the noun which designates this material twice becomes an active verb, "rise." This activity is connected with chanting, and together rising and chanting produce artifacts. These artifacts embody the linguistic substance both of the material which began as non- or anti-figural ("shades and shapes of rose"), and of the activity which itself sprang from the name for that senseless material ("rising"). Stevens' attempt to respond adequately to the random totality of history is not a turning away from matter, nor a glorification of the material in itself, but a desiring re-approach to it through "sing[ing] rose-beliefs," that is, through an active process of imaginative structuration.

One step up from Mr. Burnshaw on the scale of representation is "the Bulgar," a kind of avuncular and practical tradesman's socialist. He is something of a type, as his impersonal title suggests, but he is capable of reflective thought on the questions at hand. His language sounds clownish at times, but it is amiably inclusive: "Again the Bulgar said, 'There are more things / Than poodles in Pomerania'" (*OP* 62). More observantly than the other socialists, he tries to find a fit between art and the quotidian demands of his neighbors. The flight of a rhetorical question takes him to the heights of communist and futurist utopias, in which, "'for once,'" all men might be "'thinking a single thought, / Disclosed in everything, transcended.'" But the Bulgar seems to be more of a realist, skeptical of such complete unifications between an ultimate pattern and the diverse facticity of people as they live and think. He demurs from the totalitarian future:

> "But that
> Apocalypse was not contrived for parks,
> Geranium budgets, pay-roll water-falls,
> The clank of the carrousel and, under the trees,

> The sheep-like falling-in of distances,
> Converging on the statue, white and high."
> (*OP* 62)

His is a more modest and placating form of socialism, unwilling to sacrifice the pleasures and proportions of middle-class life to an absolutist revolutionary future. That apocalypse is out of scale with the budgets and payrolls of ordinary people, and its ideational unification is found wanting in comparison to the qualities of the statue, "white and high." The Bulgar is not a merely farcical or cartoonish character, for he poses a centrally important question: how might the ordinary people in the park feel the strength of an artistic creation and be a part of it? More capaciously conceived, his cause might be "the most magnificent cause in the world" (*L* 287). His lines sometimes clunk and rattle clumsily, as they move from the figure of "'Venus [rising], / Out of a violet sea'" to that of "'a duck / To a million, a duck with apples and without wine'" (*OP* 60). His awkwardness is not the sign of ineptitude, though, but an indication that he is facing a difficult conflict. "The Birth of Venus" was one of the most ubiquitous and clichéd subjects of nineteenth-century painting; the Bulgar's use of it points the question of how to transform residual aesthetics into fare which fits an earthier working constituency. It may be that some headway is made in response to that challenge even here, for along with the awkwardness, there is lyric power in the forceful recombinations of "'Geranium budgets'" and "'pay-roll water-falls.'" The "'sheep-like falling-in of distances'" under the trees adds a sort of movie-camera pastoral, at the same time that it expresses the herded quality of life in the modern city.

Side by side with the Bulgar is another national type, a more abstract figure of American myth, which Riddel identifies with "the democratic secular self" (131). Section II begins, "O buckskin, O crosser of snowy divides." By the end of the stanza, though, the object of Whitmanian apostrophe has moved from the perpetual present to the past tense: "O free, / O bold, that rode your horses straight away" (*OP* 61). The mountain man can no longer inhabit the world of the present, for a stanza of skeptical analysis has shown that this figure of etiological legend little resembles people on the streets of twentieth-century cities. These "men were to be ends in themselves"; but the present indicative progeny of these past subjunctive men live in a "hacked-up world of tools" (*OP* 61). The "thoughts" of real people in the contemporary world are "squeezed into shapes," and "the sun" with its imaginative potency is "stoked and engined wrick-a-wrack," in a powerful vision of industrial confinement. The all-consuming valuations of a fully commodified economy have turned the source of all life into "A penny sun in a tinsel sky, unrhymed, / And the spirit writhes to be wakened." Monetary value and cheap industrial products seem the only imaginative poles here, and rhyme appears an anachronism which has no part in this modern landscape. Thus, Stevens' figure of the individualistic American frontiersman dissolves to contradictions of capitalism.

Stevens locates a discrepancy between American ideology and social conditions, by showing that reason as the enlightened ordering of political life is

bound up with the rationalization of capitalist efficiency. That men should be "ends in themselves" recalls the language of Paine's abstract rights of man. The freedoms promised were to be codified in and guaranteed by "The scholar's outline that you had, the print / Of London, the paper of Paris magnified / By poets." These documents evoke the enlightened air and abstract codification of the constitutions devised in Paris and Philadelphia. Yet such documents ease the sufferings of real contemporaries no more than "gaudy bosh."

The trouble is that the rational documents entitle very well the abstract man they create, but the correspondence between this figure and the people it claims to represent is hardly a fact of nature. Writing a figure on paper does not necessarily change social conditions any more than carving a message in stone necessarily achieves aesthetic transformation. Stevens traces the inadequacy of this figure to a naive and poorly observed sort of abstraction:

> The civil fiction, the calico idea,
> The Johnsonian composition, abstract man,
> All are evasions like a repeated phrase,
> Which, by its repetition, comes to bear
> A meaning without a meaning. These people have
> A meaning within the meaning they convey,
> Walking the paths, watching the gilding sun . . .
> (*OP* 65)

This is a concise and telling description of the enlightenment's patching together of heterogeneous parts into the construction of human nature. This calico collage of different things comes to have a meaning through its place in language, but the people from whom it was nominally abstracted cannot participate in this "civil fiction." Their varied facticity impedes assimilation to the patch-work ideal subject which is taken to figure them. An abstraction of this kind cannot sufficiently represent them, let alone entitle them.

The outlet for these people comes in the park, where their walking partakes in the lines of meaning laid by the architect. Here they circulate around the statue, which has just been described in superlatives, in the previous section. As Stevens writes elsewhere, we crawl out of our offices to come alive at the opera, and here the social role of the artist seems to involve a healing of the splits and false re-unifications of bureaucratized rational capitalism. That Stevens imagines such an assuagement, however, may not make him the platitudinous apologist of some of his critics; for we have seen that he dissects the American myth in a toughly unillusioned way. Indeed, he connects the abstract individual of American myth to current miseries in a way critics of American culture are only now beginning to do.

The hero of American individualism is thus measured against the statue, as are the lesser farcical or typed figures representing other ideologies, and he too leaves something to be desired. The only figures which approach the grandeur of the equine group are the "Fatal Ananke" of "The Greenest Continent" and

the brooding "subman" and "sprawling portent" of the last poem, "Sombre Figuration"—a title which further emphasizes that the problem of figuration is central to these social poems.

The "subman" is "The man below the man below the man" (*OP* 66), seeming to underlie every possible conception of a figure. He subsumes rationalism's abstract man, for instance:

> Green is the path we take
> Between chimeras and garlanded the way,
> The down-descent into November's void.
> The spontaneities of rain or snow
> Surprise the sterile rationalist who sees
> Maidens in bloom, bulls under sea, the lark
> On urns and oak-leaves twisted into rhyme.
> (*OP* 67-68)

The subman dwells in an underworld of artistic imagination, a chaos of surprising combinations (bulls under sea) from which representation in urn painting or verse is created. The man below "Imagines" (*OP* 66), unlike the man above who thinks, and the subman's potency produces rhyme, which could not be found above in the "tinsel sky, unrhymed" (*OP* 61) of rational capitalism. In comparison with the creations of the subman, the "calico idea" of abstract man appears absurdly limited. The rationalists are called "Barbers with charts of the only possible modes"; they attempt to foist codification onto the fluid possibilities of human form. The "man below the man below the man" may be a play on the gangster slang of "the man behind the man behind the man." Most importantly, he sounds like an archetypal proletarian, the one no one else is under, the one everyone else stands on. What is posited as the substratum in the problem of poetic figuration turns out to be identical with the human basis of material production. In this way, even Stevens' most fanciful figures are sometimes coded by social hierarchy.

The "sprawling portent" is a sublime figure, so much so that "this we cannot see." This brooding shape

> is the form
> Of a generation that does not know itself,
> Still questioning if to crush the soaring stacks,
> The churches, like dalmatics stooped in prayer,
> And the people suddenly evil, waked, accused,
> Destroyed by a vengeful movement of the arms . . .
> (*OP* 68-69)

Characteristically for these poems, historical detail—the modern buildings, the threatening violence of the mid-thirties, the decline of religion—is juxtaposed with a sublime and absolute scale, the "total wrath" of something like a vengeful Jehovah. This sort of mythologizing, with its disjunctions in scale, can lead to obscurities. The portent, which begins as the allegorical vehicle for

a "generation," becomes unmoored from its tenor, turning into a hostile other acting on the people which it originally symbolized. Abstract figuration, then, need not simplify political issues, and can enact self-circling and paradoxical conflicts.

As the "subman's" green descent into the void suggests, he is involved in both creation and death, and this is true of "The Greenest Continent's" "Fatal Ananke" as well, who hovers in the venereal/funereal south of Stevens' polarized globe of the imagination. It would be a fertile project to consider Stevens' geography of the imagination in relation to the actual political economy linking northern society to developing southern continents. Stevens' north by no means decisively masters or is independent of the imagination's third world. Whatever northern art draws from the imaginative sources of a mythical south, it cannot impose its European statue on the recalcitrant local character of "The Greenest Continent." Ultimately, the creations of colonial expansion fall prey to an African Thanatos. "Fateful Ananke is the final god," and the *telos* he enforces is identical "in Madrid," "in Rome," or "in Bogotá," making modern death "a medieval death" (*OP* 59). The similarly destructive presence of the sprawling portent hangs over the end of the work, which imagines that "Even imagination has an end" (*OP* 71).

But the statue is there as well at the end, and it is this figure which is the greatest and most convincing achievement of "Owl's Clover." In the last stanza the statue is "scaled / To space." "To space?" the poem asks. What would this mean? The answer is a scale "massive as the thrust / Of that which is not seen and cannot be" (*OP* 70). This begins to sound like the dimensions of the "subman" or "sprawling portent," but these lines are specifically prohibited: "Not the space in camera of the man below, / Immeasurable." For all their grandeur, these Blakean titans of the imagination remain unsatisfyingly vague and, like the wilds of Tennessee, sprawling. A conclusion is reached here concerning the poem's quest for the most effective relation of artistic scale to human stature. "The statue stands in true perspective," even "In hum-drum space." It does not dwarf human dimensions, but partakes of a quotidian environment. It fits, and fits in with, the citizens strolling on the walks and sprawling on the grass. The statue fulfills a social role without bombast, familiar with the lives lived in its neighborhood. As Stevens himself glosses the conclusion, it "is a normal object that of itself brings everything back into true focus" (*L* 374).

North finds the final scene "an expression of defeat," but I think this makes a *telos* of what is one in a series of moods in which the statue is cloaked. North writes, "Here 'the statue is not a thing imagined, a stone / That changed in sleep'" (218-19). But rather than an irrevocable failure of the artist or object, this may describe a temporary incapacity for imaginative perception by an audience which is as worried as the "old woman" who regards the statue. The full line reads:

> Even imagination has an end,
> When the statue is not a thing imagined, a stone
> That changed in sleep. (*OP* 71)

The "When" here indicates that this incapacity is one temporary state among others; as soon as the door opens again into the timelessness of the subconscious, new transformations can occur. Stevens writes that one of his concerns in "Owl's Clover" was "the effect of the depression on the interest in art." In his lecture "On the Irrational Element in Poetry," he says, "If I dropped into a gallery I found that I had no interest in what I saw. The air was charged with anxieties and tensions" (*OP* 219). Yet even in the bleakest moment, there are portents of the statue's dormant powers: "let be what it may become," we are instructed. At other moments in the poem, even in the presence of the needy old woman, who in part symbolizes the depression, the statue is portrayed as effective and freshening.

The statue embodies a powerfully abstracting force, not only in Leggett's sense of Stevens' abstraction as perception, but also as abstraction from history.[18] The horses ascend into the night in "a smooth domain, / Untroubled by suffering, which fate assigns / To the moment" (*OP* 46). They exceed the limits of time, space, and quality which constrain everything nearby:

> white brillianter
> Than the color white and high beyond any height
> That rises in the air. The sprawlers on the grass
> See more than marble in their eyes, see more
> Than the horses quivering to be gone, flashed through
> With senses chiseled on bright stone. They see
> The metropolitan of mind, they feel
> The central of the composition, in which
> They live.
>
> (*OP* 64)

I continue into lines already quoted to focus on the juxtaposition between the transcendent force of the statue and its immanent social role. In this conjunction, I think, lies Stevens' vision of the social responsiveness of his work and a justification for his subsequent turn away from the explicit historical reference these poems experiment with.

The connection between transcendence and utility is a causal one. The form of the statue serves its public to the extent that it transforms the exclusively local elements structuring their perception into something more flexible. Here is how the sculptor is described in section V of "A Duck for Dinner":

> Exceeding sex, he touched another race,
> Above our race, yet of ourselves transformed,
> Don Juan turned furious divinity,
> Ethereal compounder, pater patriae,
> Great mud-ancestor, oozer and Abraham,
> Progenitor wearing the diamond crown of crowns,
> He from whose beard the future springs, elect.
>
> (*OP* 64)

Promiscuous as Don Juan, Stevens races through a panoply of mythological lexicons—Greek, Latin, modern European, Hebrew, and protozoic—creating a construct for the future which is bounded by no particular one of these traditions. In this reading I follow Altieri's suggestion that Stevens "turns to the constructive powers of the mind, hoping to be abstract enough to separate powers in which one can believe from the specific contents that history undoes."[19] It is in a discussion of the meaning of "Owl's Clover" that Stevens allows, "a poem consists of all the constructions that can be placed upon it," an extremely open-ended vision of the hermeneutic spiral.[20]

The objects most central to many of Stevens' poems will be in existence as long as there are people to read the poems. In remaining attached to such simple and omnipresent objects as the sun, light, colors, snow, the sky, birds and other animals, or the sea, Stevens provides a sort of erector set for the reader to construct his poems. He writes of "Owl's Clover," even "poetry that is to have a contemporary significance" will be best, he thinks, if it is not "merely . . . a collection of contemporary images" but instead attempts "to deal with the commonplace of the day" (*L* 308). The refusal of immediate local footholds in favor of more fluid counters is a kind of abstraction which helps make Stevens' poems initially puzzling to many readers. But in a powerful way, his method admits the specificity of history, though in an inverse form from poems steeped in contemporary details. For it allows that times will change, fictions will decline, and some of their content will become irrelevant or incomprehensible. The first poem has to do, after all, with what the sculptor could not forecast or control: "But her he had not foreseen" (*OP* 44).

Stevens often pictures art cutting against the grain of a particular time. He once likened the artist's perception to taking the varnish off an old painting. Surprisingly, the object here is not a natural one, but a representation. The verbal analogue of this unseeable painting would be the Johnsonian "repeated phrase, / Which, by its repetition, comes to bear / A meaning without a meaning" (*OP* 65). Cleaning up the verbal situation involved in perception, then, would mean removing from one's eyes, to the extent possible, the scales of socially instituted clichés. Stevens suggests an element of historical specificity in this reduction when he writes that "modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers."[21] I suggest that the rich vein of criticism dealing with Stevens' "reduction to the first idea" could be applied to cultural structures of meaning, in addition to individual epistemology.[22]

Communist aesthetics, contends Stevens, precisely by paying too minute attention to historical moment, disserves the people of that moment. The stone appointed by the mass is too rigidly solid, and "The solid was an age," while the "subman" of imagination "Lives in a fluid, not on solid rock" (*OP* 68). The solidity of the stone relates metonymically to its fixity within time: it is appointed once and for all, never changing. In contrast, Stevens claims, in a discussion of Marxism, that "The only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing" (*L* 291-92). Yet, he praises the statue for having

captured an age: "The statue is the sculptor not the stone. / In this he carved himself, he carved his age" (*OP* 64). Apparently, the age will show itself best through an individual self. In its initial phase then, responsible art is anti-social, decreating as best it can the local traffic of contemporary cliché, and plumbing the depths of an individual psyche for access to more fluid designs.

The individual self brings us to the only significant woman in these poems, the compelling wanderer of "The Old Woman and the Statue." She seems a self-figuration of Stevens' own longing and vulnerability, more comfortably displayed as an anima or female mask. She is almost an allegorical figure of pure human need, "So destitute that nothing but herself / Remained and nothing of herself except / A fear too naked for her shadow's shape" (*OP* 44). In this figure Stevens achieves something of the emotional power of his late poems. "[T]he bitter mind / In a flapping cloak," the "chalky brow scratched over black / And black by thought that could not understand"—she is at once commonplace, concretely imagined, yet highly abstract or translatable. She becomes translated, in fact, into the more abstract phrasing of stanza V, "The harridan self and ever-maladive fate" (*OP* 45). Here we can see developing the sort of solution to the problem of figuration which Stevens would expand in his later poetry, its diction even anticipating the "in hall harridan" of "The Auroras of Autumn."

The kind of impersonal lyric in which Stevens excels, in which the self is displaced into a second- or third-person frame or even onto objects, seems aptly embodied by the image of these two figures circling round one another. The needy, desiring self seeks some form of self-transformation in the artwork. For the old woman the statue is the "path" which "could lead apart from what she was" (*OP* 44). It includes elements of the human figure in a process of thrusting away from its spot of earth:

> the haunches low,
> Contorted, staggering from the thrust against
> The earth as the bodies rose on feathery wings,
> Clumped carvings, circular, like blunted fans,
> Arranged for phantasy to form an edge
> Of crisping light along the statue's rim.
> More than his muddy hand was in the manes,
> More than his mind in the wings.
>
> (*OP* 43)

The statue incorporates the sculptor: body, mind, and more. Pegasus, the winged horse of poetry, is presented in a poetry of vital inventiveness, with its "crisping light along the statue's rim," and of play, turning "fans" to "phantasy." It is this figure, among all those in the work, which can hope to offer "comfort" to the self's "sudden sense" of "certain solitude" (*OP* 44). Yet the statue also depends on solitude, for the artifact is mined not only from stone, but from the artist's solitary agony. The straining horses present a decorous image, in fitting scale, of the effort to produce more than "rotten leaves," to

"search for clearness all an afternoon" (*OP* 43-44), as the Old Woman is said to do.

The poverty of the Old Woman makes her seem partly an emblem of the destitute times, particularly when Stevens writes of "The Old Woman and the Statue" that it is a "confrontation of reality (the depression) and the imagination (art)" (*L* 368). The dance of this pair, then, makes claims to being a defense of art's role in the face of poverty. One facet of this role is the freshening of perception, the statue acting as "a normal object that of itself brings everything back into true focus," adding to the experience of everyone in the park, even the poor. A problem with this image arises when we realize that, as North suggests, a public statue differs markedly from poetry: it is much harder to imagine any effective encounter between the destitute and a volume of *Ideas of Order*. The contribution of poetry to the collective is largely mediated through those free enough to develop an extensive intellectual life.

In accepting this limitation, though, Stevens' argument gains force. If poetry can do little to materially change immediate conditions, then the most it can do is what Stevens' poetry claims to do well. One of these things is to give a culture materials for the construction of new myths, new arrangements. Indeed, this is a central concern of many of Stevens' poems: finding the "banjo's twang" or the ordering lines which articulate for a place or group of people its possible meanings. In Stevens' work, what art can give a society is entrée into the symbolic realm of meaning-making. Compared to what others were claiming in the thirties, in the name of the ideologies which Stevens investigates in this poem, this is a more limited and mediated view of art's efficacy. Partly because he recognizes the overwhelming, obliterating power of immediate political and economic forces, Stevens argues that the artist serves his audience better by providing it with a freely maneuverable set of vital symbols, figures, and perceptions, than by trying to register history in a more topical way. Stevens' response to the more activist aesthetics of the thirties, then, is something like Adorno's response to Lukács' championship of epic realism. The most fully representative artist produces an aesthetic experience which allows the construction of something meaningful from elements which might otherwise remain imprisoned by the tyranny of habitual social forms.

V

How can this discussion of "Owl's Clover" inform our reading of Stevens' poetry in general? I think that this work's hand-to-hand combat with the politics of the thirties makes visible how Stevens wrests his figures, even some of the most abstract ones, from immediate historical circumstance. A method of figural abstraction is honed here which underlies much of his subsequent work; but in other works the immediate political origins of these processes are more often erased. The unusually complete cycles of transformation revealed in "Owl's Clover" give hints about how to trace back from the abstract figures of other poems to the social realities in which they were generated. Stevens considered the statue sometimes "a symbol for art," and sometimes a symbol for "society" (*L* 290). The flexibility which allows a figure to move between

these two poles enables Stevens' imaginative creatures to be both rooted in circumstance and highly abstract.

Later poems extend central figures of "Owl's Clover": as various statues, as "major man," as "harridans." Certain poems argue with the method of abstract figuration honed in "Owl's Clover," in doubt or guilt ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" or "The Motive for Metaphor"). "Esthétique du Mal" and "Description without Place" briefly resume political debates probed in "Owl's Clover," employing similar means, including caricature, vividly named characters, and satire. More generally, in "Owl's Clover" and other poems of the thirties, Stevens lets his lyric voice become more socially generalized. Even self-figurations come to figure not only the poet, but often a representative self which works through central problems of American individualism.[23]

Readers of Stevens often choose the most abstract possibilities offered by a poem; but a great deal of meaning lies in the interference pattern set up between abstraction and the most local handles we can find. In discussing the political resonance of Stevens' poetry, we must not forget this *oeuvre's* highly developed vision of the mutually informing dialectic of imagination and reality, a vision which critics have so richly explored. "The Greenest Continent," for instance, shows how Stevens could hold in conjunction an abstract mythology of imagination involving "Fatal Ananke" and a gritty critique of residual colonialism. Many other poems associate Africans or African Americans with decay, sickness, or death, including "O Florida, Venereal Soil," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," and "The Sick Man." The often fanciful or casually presented figures of these poems tap significant issues of race in America; to explore them we need only keep in view the full mythical or imaginative dimension of Stevens' figures, along with their immediate social coefficients.

Stevens' vision of art and society as mutually constituting processes is embodied by the statue. On the one hand, it is set apart from and higher than its constituency, mixing elements in new combinations. Yet the statue functions within a context of quotidian pleasure and use, as part of a park. The park is a distinctively open and democratic site for art, compared to a museum or symphony hall. The park near the Observatory Fountain, in fact, was once the grounds of the palace of Marie de Medici, widow of Henri IV; after the Revolution it was made a public park, and the palace was converted to house the Senate. Stevens describes citizens moving freely here; yet they are also part of a pattern, walking among the paths laid by the architect. The statue gives a center, both to the architect's paths and to the activity of the "sprawlers." The work of art focuses a coherent arrangement to which the citizens' use contributes, an arrangement which brings the architect's plans and predictions into play with what he couldn't have predicted, with elements of chance and the particular wills of the citizens who use this space.

Stevens is a lucid political thinker, but he tends to work out social problems in the terms of aesthetic ones. In "Owl's Clover," he conducts incisive critiques

of communism, socialism, and American individualism, through a debate about suitable methods of figuration. Aesthetic decorum and reception become the criterion of the political. That criterion is embodied in the statue of Pegasi and "celestial paramours," by which figures representing various ideologies are measured. By experimenting with different levels of figure and contrasting them, Stevens elaborates a decorum of types which bears the traces of real social hierarchy. His aesthetic of abstract figuration is not in itself a denial of politics, but provides opportunities for incorporating politics into supple and freely maneuverable forms. Understanding this method of figuration instructs us to look for political representation in the very features of abstraction which have led some to consider Stevens' work merely reactionary.

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Notes

[1]Michael Davidson, "Notes beyond the *Notes:* Wallace Stevens and Contemporary Poetics," *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 157.

[2]Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Music*, trans. A. Mitchell and W. Blomster (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

[3]Helen Vendler, "On Three Poems by Seamus Heaney," *Salmagundi* 80 (Fall 1988): 67.

[4]A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Joseph N. Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 133, 127.

[5]Michael North, *The Final Sculpture: Public Monuments and Modern Poets* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca, 1985).

[6]Stevens was an avid amateur of many kinds of French art, and several of his poems are informed by particular pieces from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in France, pieces he saw in museums, photographs, and books. The Observatory Fountain, designed by Davioud and Carpeaux, was erected in 1873. Given the poem's concern with socialist ideologies, it is relevant that this artwork dates from a critical period in the history of European socialism, two years after the Paris Commune. Like the statue in the poem, it comprises the unique combination of a ring of horses thrusting towards the sky and a ring of dancing women, who uphold concentric celestial spheres—"the celestial paramours." The dancers are allegories representing four continents, which corresponds with the concern in these poems with ways of representing national, political, and cultural totalities in America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. The setting is as Stevens describes: in a grassy park with symmetrical walkways, surrounded by a ring of deciduous trees, facing an open plaza. The materials are bronze and marble, as Stevens indicates, and certain passages in the poems suggest that the statue has water around it or over parts of it. The horses "thrust against / The earth" towards the sky and appear ready to ascend. By giving them wings Stevens makes his figures more allegorical; they represent Pegasus, the winged horse who stands for poetry. Stevens was quite familiar with representations of Pegasus from another source: he had been president of the *Harvard Advocate*, issues of which prominently featured Pegasus as its logo. A cast of the dancing "celestial paramours" is also displayed in the Gare d'Orsay Museum.

[7]Samuel French Morse, "Introduction," *Opus Posthumous* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957), xxiii.

[8]*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 311.

[9]Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), 170.

[10]Wallace Stevens, "Owl's Clover," *Opus Posthumous*, "A Duck for Dinner," 62-63.

[11]Litz also identifies this passage with the Nietzschean "super-man" (222). As Bates discusses, Stevens had looked into at least four volumes of Nietzsche as early as 1917 and would read his works more extensively in the 1940s (247-65).

[12]Bates connects the super-animal to the "major man" of several poems of the forties (262-65).

[13]Donald Justice, for instance, has credited Stevens with the evolution of a distinctively American pentameter ("The Free-Verse Line in Stevens," *Antaeus* 53 [Autumn 1984]: 51-76).

[14]In "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens comments, "Does anyone suppose that the vast mass of people in this country was moved at the last election by rational considerations? Giving reason as much credit as the radio, there still remains the certainty that so great a movement was emotional and, if emotional, irrational" (*OP* 225).

[15]North appears to make the crucial error of not realizing that the poem here distinguishes between the political monument and the statue of horses, and he thus attributes to the former the positive description of the latter; this may help explain why he considers the statue a failure (215).

[16]Stanley Burnshaw, "Turmoil in the Middle-Ground," *New Masses* (1 Oct. 1935): 41-42.

[17]For a further response in the Stevens-Burnshaw debate, see Stanley Burnshaw, "Wallace Stevens and the Statue," *The Sewanee Review* 69, 3 (July-September, 1961): 355-366, as well as the other pieces in this issue.

[18]B. J. Leggett, "Why It Must Be Abstract: Stevens, Coleridge, and I. A. Richards," *Studies in Romanticism* 22, 4 (Winter 1983).

[19]Charles Altieri, "Why Stevens Must Be Abstract, or What a Poet Can Learn From Painting," in Gelpi, *op. cit*., 88.

[20]Letter to Stevens T. Mason, 10 Dec. 1936, reprinted in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 4 (1980): 34-36, quoted in Bates, 127-28.

[21]Wallace Stevens, "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Vintage, 1951), 175.

[22]I am thinking of such works as: Frank A. Doggett, *Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Roy Harvey Pearce, ed., *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Riddel, *The Clairvoyant Eye, op. cit*.; Eric Sellin, *Valéry, Stevens, and the Cartesian Dilemma* (New York: State University College of New York, 1975).

[23]North connects the statue of "Owl's Clover" to various statues and marble figures of subsequent poems, while Riddel discusses Stevens' movement, in the thirties, from the isolated Crispin to figures representing any person involved in imagination (North 207-27; Riddel 104-07).

Notes Toward the Supreme Soviet: Stevens and Doctrinaire Marxism

HARVEY TERES

> Theoretically a period of attempts at a world revolution should destroy or endanger all stationary poetic subjects and words and be favorable in the highest degree to the recording of fresh experience. But the vivification of reality has not yet occurred in spite of the excitement. Only the excitement has occurred.
>
> —Wallace Stevens, 1948

I

THE SUBJECT OF WALLACE STEVENS as political poet has not inspired many critics over the decades, except to provoke resistance. Certainly Frank Lentricchia is right to have called attention to Stevens' critics' lack of comfort with the idea, not to mention Stevens' own.[1] But it remains for those interested in Stevens' political meanings to explain fully what the word "political" might mean in his poetry. Clearly Stevens is no political poet if we insist on the traditional meaning of that word, which stresses matters of public policy and governing. But it is equally true that were we to apply a more contemporary understanding of politics, in which issues broadly pertaining to questions of social power and authority are involved, Stevens' poetry still would not be well-served, for even his most socially engaged poems of the thirties are more broadly political than this. In fact, these poems imply that both these views of politics share a fundamental instrumentalism which obscures the relation of politics to essential areas of subjective and intellectual experience.

Unarguably many continue to see Stevens as an intensely personal poet who by and large remained aloof from politics. If at times he did address himself to the pressures of social actualities, as in the poetry of the early and mid-thirties, it is often said that such responses were reluctant and self-distancing. To the degree that Stevens explicitly engaged with social problems and even social movements, as in "Owl's Clover," critics have most often maintained that his poetry suffered as a result, its subtle meditative tones giving way to stridency and its minutely textured meanings succumbing to "ideology." But I submit that such judgments, although alive to recognizable formal and aesthetic issues within Stevens' engaged poems, often neglect the central question of what politics, and hence what political poetry, could and should be. We will see later that this is itself a subject about which Stevens had much to say in some of the very poems of the thirties most widely considered to be inferior.

I have already touched on another reason critics have neglected Stevens' strengths as a political poet: their unacknowledged or unconscious assumption that politics must be something largely instrumental—that above all it must be objective and expedient, and sometimes narrow, hard, and crude. That is to say poetic acts and political acts have for some time now been thought to be mutually exclusive, save in those extremely rare cases when a poet's genius is conjoined with a sensibility unusually equipped to survive politics intact. As for the leftist politics which Stevens chose to discuss in the thirties, these were accused not only of evincing these characteristics, but were "ideological" as well—that is, were uniformly based upon systematic and utopian beliefs coercively maintained.[2]

Such assumptions about the corrupting effect of politics had strong precedents in nineteenth-century American cultural life, but the cold war's containment of political life in this century very much strengthened these tendencies. In short, many post-war realities, like Stalinism itself, combined to foster the belief that mainstream politics must be realistic, tough, and pragmatic (therefore anti-poetic) in order to survive the constant threat of "ideology." Few literary critics or political analysts were ready to admit that their notion of authorized party-politics might also be "ideological" in some sense, and fewer still were interested in the possibility of reestablishing the politics of the left so that it might express more open and democratic values. Critics left and right writing in the two decades after the war were simply not well-disposed toward Stevens' political poetry of the thirties, in which he attempted to revise leftist political discourse through his trenchant but patient and relatively sympathetic critique of orthodox Marxism. Academic critics and doctrinaire Marxists alike responded to postwar conditions by assuming that since politics was war by another name, no poet could by definition explore politics in poetry, especially a poet so insistently individual and self-reflexive as Stevens. Where Stevens wandered onto political terrain, as in "Owl's Clover," his critics agreed that the results made for poor poetry.[3]

If, in contrast to the generation of critics and analysts I describe, we acknowledge that "ideology" may inform all political discourses (possibly, but not necessarily equally); if we admit that the "ideological" does not contaminate so much as describe modern society; if we entertain the possibility of forming a union between politics and the imagination, to use Trilling's phrase, by making politics respond to philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic issues; then we can, I believe, reassess our understanding of Stevens' political poetry. In what follows, my purpose will be to show how far Stevens was able to carry out this project in the poems of the thirties, focussing upon the undervalued "Owl's Clover."

My own political subtext arises out of the belief that in significant ways Stevens has preceded those who currently wish to revitalize our understanding of politics in general and leftism in particular. Indeed others have noted the large degree to which doctrinaire Marxism has been superseded by significant sectors of the left in the West. For example, Stanley Aronowitz

writes in the opening paragraph of his aptly titled *The Crisis In Historical Materialism*, "We live in a time when all the old assumptions about politics and history appear enfeebled. Throughout the Western industrial societies, both of the capitalist and the state socialist types, the theory and practice of workers, intellectuals, women, and ecologists have, in different ways, questioned the adequacy of Marxism as a theory of the past and present and as a guide to the future."[4] Writing nearly a decade ago, Aronowitz could not have known that the crisis in Marxism would soon go well beyond the West and include Marxist governments and movements in the second and third worlds. For many, these developments represent the triumph of capitalism and the official death of an idea which for all intents and purposes had expired long ago, the idea of socialism. But this view fails to account for the continued and quite extraordinary vitality of leftist political thinking, which has drawn not only upon feminism, theories of race, and environmentalism, but also upon the critique of doctrinaire Marxism coming from within the Marxist tradition itself—for example, in the work of Lukács, Korsch, Gramsci, Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht. The assault on orthodox Marxist views of nature, history, causality, class, race, gender, culture, and so forth has been both intricate and productive, and one can only expect this critique to gain in influence. It is against the background of revision of classical Marxism that I wish to examine Stevens' insights into politics in general and Marxism in particular during the thirties.[5]

None of this is to suggest that Stevens, though named after a politician, possessed political beliefs we could call remotely Marxist or even progressive. We need only examine some of his often inconsistent, sometimes rash, and sometimes offensive political statements to know this and to see what Irving Howe meant when he suggested that modernist writers would have been better off had they kept clear of politics. The inconsistencies and ambiguities of Stevens' politics have been conveniently and succinctly reviewed by Milton Bates in *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*.[6] Stevens variously referred to the leftist program as "a magnificent cause" and a "grubby faith" (*L* 287, *NA* 143); he claimed to be "headed left" and "extraordinarily stimulat[ed]" by his encounters (*L* 286, 296), yet maintained that "the whole left now-a-days is a mob of wailers" (unaccountably he attempted to resolve this contradiction by adding that "I do very much believe in leftism in every direction, even in wailing" [*L* 287]). Stevens also described "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" as a "poetic justification of leftism" (*L* 295), albeit a "vague[]" one, yet went on to remark that "to the extent that the Marxians are raising Cain with the peacocks and the doves, nature has been ruined by them" (*L* 295). He referred to fascism as "a form of disillusion[]" (*L* 295), but nonetheless informed Ronald Lane Latimer that he was "pro-Mussolini" (*L* 289). He hardly cleared up this last matter in his letter to Latimer three weeks later where, commenting on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, he wrote "While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors" (*L* 295). This sort of thing is painful to recall, especially because there is no evidence that Stevens was playing devil's advocate or was

in any way testing Latimer, as Joan Richardson has claimed.[7] Painful too are the passages which reveal a disdain for ordinary people: the "butcher, seducer, bloodman, reveller" of "Ghosts As Cocoons," the child-like and insect-like pallbearers of "Cortège for Rosenbloom," the "sudden mobs of men" of "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz." And there are the passages that patronize women, which Sandra Gilbert and Jacqueline Brogan, among others, have called attention to.

It is nonetheless worth recalling that as questionable as these responses to the historical crisis of the thirties seem, Stevens' *description* of this crisis—he called it "the drift of incidents" (*NA* 19)—could be surprisingly discerning. In several rarely-quoted passages of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1941), for instance, he offered a physiognomy of social life by describing, among other things, the "intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic" (*NA* 17) arising out of the deadly combination of ubiquitous force—threatened and real—and the absence of widely-recognized authority which could limit that force. In this connection Stevens briefly discussed the importance of mass education, mass housing, mass communication, narcissism ("'the generally heightened awareness of the goings-on of our own minds, *merely as goings-on*'" [*NA* 18]), and alienated labor ("[workers] have become, at their work, in the face of the machines, something approximating an abstraction, an energy" [*NA* 19]). According to Stevens, what was unique about the era he described was the degree to which these "incidents," or this "weather," failed to elicit the expected reciprocal and creative response of its subjects. The "news"—of capitalism's collapse, of new societies being constructed, of war—was exerting so great a pressure on the consciousness of individuals that it tended in Stevens' view to exclude "any power of contemplation" (*NA* 20). It is worth observing that here Stevens anticipated a central issue in the current debate over postmodernism by suggesting that the era beginning in the thirties was threatening to end the more or less consistent ability of artists to transform the recalcitrant material of history into imaginative art. He spoke of the pressure of reality being "great enough and prolonged enough to bring about the end of one era in the history of the imagination and, if so, then great enough to bring about the beginning of another" (*NA* 22). He also remarked—and this is relevant to the subject at hand—that it was this very achievement of art, suddenly jeopardized, that had hitherto belied the strictly materialist viewpoint.

It would seem that whatever one may think of Stevens' miscellaneous and frankly inconsistent political positions, his meditations on the consequences of an increasingly administered society for subjective experience and art remain compelling. Leftists or anyone else may wish in the end to dissent from Stevens' politics as he expressed them overtly or implied them, but this ought not to deflect attention from his perceptive identification of crucial social developments which have shaped the postwar era; nor should it prevent us from taking seriously his related critique of Marxist orthodoxy. Stevens' ideological vicissitudes cannot be the last word; if we insist that they are, we repeat

the mistakes of the dogmatic leftist critics of the thirties whom Stanley Burnshaw, in his famous review of *Ideas of Order*, quite properly assailed some fifty years ago.[8] This is not to suggest, however, that Stevens' intervention onto the political scene was independent of his own political and ideological positions; it is only to say that these positions were not necessarily determinate, nor in any way an equivalent to what resulted from what I believe was a productive encounter with the left. One final word: to the extent that we take advantage of the fact that the cold war curtain between culture and politics has been swept aside only by insisting upon carrying politics into culture, we will have little of value to say about writers like Stevens who wished, for a time at least, to carry culture into politics.

II

Far from evading, fleeing, or otherwise resisting politics in the poetry of the early and mid-thirties (from *Ideas of Order* [1935] to *The Man With the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* [1937]), Stevens made his way steadily to the heart of the political crisis which by the mid-thirties had become global. Having said his farewells to Florida, he sailed his shaky craft north, not merely in order to relocate the solitary artist or argue at closer range for the exemplary power of the transcendent imagination, but to undertake the more formidable and infinitely more difficult task of intervening in the political struggle and determining how a place within it might be made for autonomous poetry and the unencumbered imagination. In part the difficulty can be measured by the extent to which Stevens was forced to interrogate his own understanding of the imagination, his relationship to romanticism, and ultimately his role as poet.

In *Harmonium* the poems of starkness, "The Snow Man" and "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad," had been offset by Hoon's affirmation of empowered imagination: "I was myself the compass of that sea: / I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw / Or heard or felt came not but from myself; / And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (*CP* 65). In the poems of the thirties, however, Hoon fights to be heard, and is heard above the din, but only fitfully. It is his diminished voice which speaks at the end of "Sailing After Lunch," when, laboring under "This heavy historical sail," he finds it sufficient "to give / That slight transcendence to the dirty sail" (*CP* 120)—a far cry from the confident, unqualified transcendence of "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." In "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," Hoon is explicitly invoked, and here too his world is altered. He is as much the outcast as the chosen isolate, his powers apparently undermined: "And then / There's that mountain-minded Hoon, / For whom desire was never that of the waltz, / Who found all form and order in solitude, / For whom the shapes were never the figures of men. / Now, for him, his forms have vanished" (*CP* 121). It is not that for Stevens Hoon is expendable—far from it—only that he can find no form of expression because suddenly his isolation is more burden than boon.

A key toward understanding the poetry of the thirties is that Stevens both refused to turn away from Hoon *and* refused to turn away from political actualities. He was intent on resettling Hoon, finding him a voice, and placing him

within earshot of a hostile audience so that they would be forced to hear. Of course, Hoon too would have to adapt. Stevens' poetry of the thirties offers a fascinating record of a poet struggling to find a form of expression that could argue for—or rather embody—this necessary arrangement, in which the poetic imagination has a home within the everyday world. At times a self-mocking Stevens despaired of ever contributing to making such a community. In the poignantly repetitive lines of "Anglais Mort à Florence" he laments the loss of the old solitude: "A little less returned for him each spring. / Music began to fail him. Brahms, although / His dark familiar, often walked apart. / His spirit grew uncertain of delight, / Certain of its uncertainty" (*CP* 148). And later in the poem: "He stood at last by God's help and the police; / But he remembered the time when he stood alone. / He yielded himself to that single majesty; / But he remembered the time when he stood alone, / When to be and delight to be seemed to be one, / Before the colors deepened and grew small." Yet, in the thirties Stevens persisted in confronting his world, sometimes quite sharply and directly, as we see in "Owl's Clover."

The directness and specificity of Stevens' struggle to find a place for poetry amid the social dislocations of the thirties becomes evident when we focus on his critique of Marxist orthodoxy, one of the most important motifs in "Owl's Clover." In the remainder of my essay I shall first look briefly at Stevens' philosophical critique of doctrinaire Marxism. I will then consider the sometimes obscure passages of "Owl's Clover" in which he takes on orthodoxy for its historic failure to deal productively with modern subjectivity, especially its inability to incorporate imagination, sensuality, the unconscious, the appeal of authoritarianism, and, of course, poetry, in either its social diagnoses or prescriptions.[9]

"Suppose," wrote Stevens of the future revolution, "instead of failing, it never comes, / This future, although the elephants pass and the blare, / Prolonged, repeated and once more prolonged, / Goes off a little on the side and stops" (*OP* 63). Here, in "A Duck For Dinner," Stevens supposes a scenario which has, of course, come to pass, in which the planned procession of History leading to communism loses its way, sputters, and terminates in disarray. This is the historic failure of socialism in the West, in which the revolutionary process ends or is at least delayed by virtue of the fact that the agent of revolution, the working class, has opted for reform rather than revolution. To quote Stanley Aronowitz once again, the "spectre haunting Marxism since the first world war" has been the likelihood that "the practice of the workers' movement in reforming capitalism already constituted a new configuration for a future without revolutionary consequences."[10] Spectral because for many during the time of the Second and Third Internationals Marxism meant orthodox Marxism, whose doctrine promised the inevitability of capitalist crisis and its ineluctable collapse. The failure of the revolution to occur was no small miscalculation—for many it meant that the entire philosophical and intellectual edifice of orthodoxy was severely shaken if not destroyed, because the future was itself to be the ultimate justification of a teleological scheme of history

rife with the strong foundational tendencies of determinism, rationalism, positivism, and scientism.[11]

Stevens opposed these systematic views in the name of continuous change, stressing desire's responsive and constitutive counteraction upon reality and upon schemas designed to remake reality according to a totalizing vision. "It is not enough," replies the normative voice in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," when faced with this future, "that you are indifferent, / Because time moves on columns intercrossed / And because the temple is never quite composed, / Silent and turquoised and perpetual, / Visible over the sea. It is only enough / To live incessantly in change" (*OP* 50).[12] This particular Marxist revolution will change little, Stevens suggests, or certainly will not change enough. The indifference it engenders results from its fatalistic belief in eternal truths; its telos, representing a modern equivalent of the division of heaven from earth, endlessly defers joy. "Everything is dead / Except the future," proclaims Stevens' ideologue, "Always everything / That is is dead except what ought to be" (*OP* 46). Orthodoxy's unmediated materialism promises a future of things, things that compose "Parts of the immense detritus of a world . . . that moves . . . out of the hopeless waste of the past / Into a hopeful waste to come" (*OP* 49).[13] In addition, the insistent positivism which shapes this vision of the future betrays a palpable fear of art, the imagination, and the unconscious: "The statue seems . . . a thing / Of the dank imagination, much below / Our crusted outlines hot and huge with fact" (*OP* 47).

In this last passage Stevens' critique settles on what was for him the most egregious flaw of Marxist orthodoxy: its historic indifference to the problems of human subjectivity and culture, the result of a long-standing and not unproductive emphasis on objective social structures. It is this issue which in my view informs a good deal of "Owl's Clover," each poem dealing with a different aspect of it. Indeed in remarks to Latimer concerning the overall theme of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," Stevens raised the general issue of subjectivity by implying that Marxists must become fully aware of the degree to which imagination and pleasure redound upon the structural changes wrought by revolution. "You will remember," he wrote, "that Mr. Burnshaw applied the point of view of the practical Communist to IDEAS OF ORDER; in MR. BURNSHAW AND THE STATUE I have tried to reverse the process: that is to say, apply the point of view of a poet to Communism" (*L* 289). Several days later he added: "The . . . question is whether I feel that there is an essential conflict between Marxism and the sentiment of the marvellous. . . . My conclusion is that, while there is a conflict, it is not an essential conflict. The conflict is temporary. The only possible order of life is one in which all order is incessantly changing. Marxism may or may not destroy the existing sentiment of the marvellous; if it does, it will create another" (*L* 291-92).

It should be pointed out that Stevens' relatively sanguine assessment of what the future holds for Marxism's relation to imagination is in part based upon his own claims for material reality, claims that are much more generally acknowledged today than they were in 1935: "I am what is around me," he de-

clares in the poem "Theory." "All of our ideas come from the natural world" (*OP* 163), goes the adage. But, of course, included in the natural world is that most transformative of powers, imagination, whose marriage to physical reality results in a planet replete with endless argument—especially where the imagination is abused—and only partial recuperation. Ironically, within the Marxist tradition the reciprocal relationship between being and consciousness had been adumbrated nearly a hundred years earlier by Marx himself in *Theses On Feuerbach*, specifically in the first, third, and fifth theses.[14] But the Stalinist version of Marx which Stevens confronted produced nothing so subtle, insisting on subordinating both willful and spontaneous acts of the imagination to "the recognition of necessity" (Engels' phrase)—necessity defined at once as material necessity and as the necessary laws of historical development. In the orthodox version revolution is always "two-staged," wherein the problems of the quality of labor, personal relations, sexuality, imaginative life, and culture are endlessly deferred as their "solution" awaits the defeat of capitalism and the transition to the new society.[15] For doctrinaire Marxists the new "order" entailed all of the austere limitations upon self-expression which its equation of individuality and bourgeois individualism implied. In contrast, Stevens' emerging idea of order amid the economic and political ferment of the time would invest authority in poetry to guarantee the provisionality of any order arising out of this chaos.

"Politic man ordained / Imagination as the fateful sin," wrote Stevens in "Academic Discourse at Havana," and in "Owl's Clover" he interrogated a politics whose suppression of spontaneity, joy, difference, and imagination was only much later acknowledged by the left. Marchers in the parades of the masses are "Morbid and bleak," Stevens sadly observes in "The Drum-Majors in the Labor Day Parade." "The banners should brighten the sun. / The women should sing as they march. / Let's go home" (*OP* 37). Similarly in the playful but quite serious "The Revolutionists Stop For Orangeade" (1931), Stevens has his soldiers appeal to their leader to stop subordinating song to the rigors of the class war: "Ask us not to sing standing in the sun, / Hairy-backed and hump-armed" (*CP* 102). Instead, they claim, he must realize the radical incompatibility between music and what is narrowly defined as the real, according to which "There is no pith in music / Except in something false" (*CP* 103). Transform your notion of struggle, they implore him, open yourself, open politics to frivolity; let your altruism arise out of the wish to spread pleasure, not destroy injustice: "Hang a feather by your eye, / Nod and look a little sly. / This must be the vent of pity, / Deeper than a truer ditty / Of the real that wrenches, / Of the quick that's wry" (*CP* 103).

The Bulgar in "A Duck For Dinner" is another leader—a labor leader and likely either a fellow-traveller or party member—who makes the mistake of trivializing culture by legitimizing it only as an ancillary part of the overall movement toward liberation. Thus in part one of the poem he quite wisely puts forward the case for the gradual improvement of the quality of life for workers: "'after all, / The workers do not rise, as Venus rose, / Out of a violet

sea. They rise a bit / On summer Sundays in the park, a duck / To a million, a duck with apples and without wine'" (*OP* 60). Yet, as the poem soon makes clear, the idea of culture in this appeal for acculturation is much too narrow in scope—in fact, it has an uncanny resemblance to culture as defined by the society which needs to be replaced, with its emphasis on distraction, relaxation, and creature comforts: "'They rise to the muddy, metropolitan elms, / To the camellia-chateaux and an inch beyond, / Forgetting work, not caring for angels, hunting a lift, / The triumph of the arcs of heaven's blue / For themselves, and space and time and ease for the duck'" (*OP* 60). What results from this conception of culture is socialist realism, the commercial art of communism, satirized later in the poem as Basilewsky's "'Concerto for Airplane and Pianoforte.'"

But the poem is not simply a condemnation of socialist realism. Stevens acknowledges the profound material changes which have taken place in America since the nineteenth century, causing the older myths to become superannuated: "O buckskin, O crosser of snowy divides, / For whom men were to be ends in themselves," he queries of the American Adam; "Are the cities to breed as mountains bred, the streets / To trundle children like the sea?" (*OP* 61). Clearly not, replies the normative voice: "For you, / Day came upon the spirit as life comes / And deep winds flooded you; for these [the masses], day comes, / A penny sun in a tinsel sky, unrhymed, / And the spirit writhes to be wakened" (*OP* 61). Stevens echoes Emerson here even as he updates him. "Go out of the house to see the moon," Emerson tells those who see fit to hunt natural beauty down, "and 't is mere tinsel; it will not please as when its light shines upon your necessary journey."[16] In the remainder of "A Duck For Dinner" Stevens speculates on what it might mean for beauty to accompany the masses on their journey, rather than become the desperately pursued object of their well-earned leisure time. Clearly the relationship between audience and work of art, audience and artist, must be integral, dynamic, and transformative for all three: "They [the masses] see / The metropolitan of mind, they feel / The central of the composition, in which / They live. They see and feel themselves, seeing / And feeling the world in which they live" (*OP* 64). The artist is given privileged status within the movement by Stevens, but in an interesting twist on Lenin's justification for the vanguard based on its standing above the masses and seeing further into the future, Stevens' vanguard artist, though something of a seer himself, is somewhat shorter, as much impresario as prophet, more magician than militant—in brief, to Lenin's scientific socialist a "worshipper of spontaneity," a quack: "Exceeding sex, he touched another race, / Above our race, yet of ourselves transformed, / Don Juan turned furious divinity, / Ethereal compounder, pater patriae, / Great mud-ancestor, oozer and Abraham, / Progenitor wearing the diamond crown of crowns, / He from whose beard the future springs, elect. / More of ourselves in a world that is more our own, / For the million, perhaps, two ducks instead of one" (*OP* 64-65).

Put another way, the difference between the Bulgar and the artist with his statue is that the one organizes the masses to seize a future already divined and the other organizes the masses to fashion one. Unlike the Bulgar's, Stevens' idea of order can be said to describe a state of mind, or rather a process of becoming, in which change is expected, encouraged, absorbed, and sought after anew. Radicals must realize that even after the revolutionary negation of bourgeois society, if it should come to pass, unruly desire rises once more, intermittently perhaps yet irrepressible, a constant reminder to the negation of the negation that it must always affirm change. In the post-revolutionary scenario described in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," desire provides the basis for permanent revolution. Moreover, it involves shades of red not normally attributed to socialism: "There even / The colorless light in which this wreckage lies / Has faint, portentous lustres, shades and shapes / Of rose, or what will once more rise to rose, / When younger bodies, because they are younger, rise / And chant the rose-points of their birth, and when / For a little time, again, rose-breasted birds / Sing rose-beliefs" (*OP* 49-50).

The eroticism of this passage clearly indicates that for Stevens sexuality lends its energy to change, and I think it fair to say that passages such as this implicitly rebuked doctrinaire Marxism for its puritanism. More than puritanism was at stake, however, in other portions of "Owl's Clover," and in a poem such as "Life on a Battleship" (strategically published in the independent leftist magazine *Partisan Review* in 1939), where Stevens rather courageously challenged the doctrinaire Marxist cult of virility. As Paula Rabinowitz amply demonstrates in her introduction to *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940*, the ideology of gender pervaded the proletarian literary movement in spite of the fact that the communist movement did a great deal to politicize and empower women, especially in comparison to the conventional alternatives available to them at the time. A brief quotation from Mike Gold, one of the "founding fathers" of the movement, should suffice by way of example. In his 1926 article "America Needs a Critic," Gold wrote, "O Life, send America a great literary critic. . . . Send a soldier who has studied history. Send a strong poet who loves the masses . . . a man of the street. . . . Send no coward. Send no pedant. Send us a man fit to stand up to skyscrapers. A man of art who can match the purposeful deeds of Henry Ford. . . . Send no saint. Send an artist. Send a scientist. Send a Bolshevik. Send a man."[17]

Stevens brought to this milieu a more equivocal stance toward masculinist ideology, which allowed him to make his critique despite certain assumptions he may have shared with Gold and others. Thus the poem "Life on a Battleship," a withering critique of totalitarianism, begins as follows: "The rape of the bourgeoisie accomplished, the men / Returned on board *The Masculine*" (*OP* 77). In the poem the battleship's name becomes an emblem for authoritarian modes of behavior and thinking: "'*The Masculine*, much magnified, that cloud / On the sea, is both law and evidence in one'" (*OP* 78). Throughout the poem the linkages between masculinity and an aggressive, even ruthless

rationalism, an ersatz science, and unrestrained power and violence are continually implied when not asserted. In spite of the fact that the poem does not end with an image of woman, or of a feminized male, but rather ends with a chastened male wielding new, albeit diminished power ("Our fate is our own. The hand . . . must be the hand / Of a man, that seizes our strength" [*OP* 81]), the force of the critique as it pertained to the masculinist left must nonetheless be acknowledged.

In "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" Stevens directed a more formidable challenge to the masculinist left through his extraordinary depiction of revolutionary, sensual, feminized passion. Despite Stevens' acceptance of a hypostatized equation between sensuality and femininity, he turned his own idealizations against the more dangerous ideals of an aggressive, insistently misogynist masculinity which at the time had great currency on the left. In the poem, it is arguably Stevens' muses, acting as his alter ego or perhaps even as the alter egos of the revolutionaries, who become a radiant ring of women; in either role they clearly represent an alternative to the poem's dour proletarian critic, whose earlier praise for the statue's lack of "subterfuge" served to suppress the kind of joy that can be legitimized by art, and is described by the poem's aroused narrator:

> Dance, now, and with sharp voices cry, but cry
> Like damsels daubed and let your feet be bare
> To touch the grass . . .
> . . . . . .
> Be maidens formed
> Of the most evasive hue of a lesser blue . . .
> . . . . . .
> Let your golden hands wave fastly and be gay
> And let your braids bear brightening of crimson bands.
> . . . . . .
> Speaking and strutting broadly, fair and bloomed,
> No longer of air but of the breathing earth,
> Impassioned seducers and seduced, the pale
> Pitched into swelling bodies, upward, drift
> In a storm blown into glittering shapes, and flames
> Wind-beaten into freshest, brightest fire.
>
> (*OP* 51-52)

This orgiastic dance is an altogether remarkable fantasy, not least for what it tells us about the "pulse pizzicato" of Stevens' own voyeuristic and objectifying imagination; but also because such a passage possessed genuine critical force given the virulent masculinity of the sexual politics Stevens was opposing. By presenting the doctrinaire left with its repressed, bodily other, Stevens affirmed the need for a new openness to personal and sensual modes of transformation. Whether one agrees that the poem deserves the kind of generous praise Adrienne Rich gave to "The Idea of Order at Key West"—that the

poem's unconscious celebrates the life, power, and energy of the female principle[18]—it is nonetheless significant that in the face of incessant demands for restraint and discipline, Stevens insisted on putting fantasy and the unconscious into play. Whatever we may think of the ideological content of the material manifested as a result, we must remember that the passage is in the imperative—its content is not presented primarily as an act of personal disclosure but rather as a direct challenge to his inhibited addressees to act out, and act on, the full range of their desires.

In other poems of "Owl's Clover" the importance of the unconscious becomes paramount, and I would like to explore this emphasis in terms of Stevens' implicit critique of Marxism's refusal to take the unconscious—indeed psychology in general— into account. Sounding extraordinarily up-to-date, Stevens asked in "The Irrational Element in Poetry" (1936), "Does anyone suppose that the vast mass of people in this country was moved at the last election by rational considerations? Giving reason as much credit as the radio, there still remains the certainty that so great a movement was emotional and, if emotional, irrational" (*OP* 225). Before 1968 few Marxists and certainly no orthodox Marxist would ever have asked such a question, much less supplied an answer. Marxism simply gave no priority to developing an understanding of the psychological dimensions of social change. Indeed barely a year before Stevens began work on "Owl's Clover," Wilhelm Reich had been expelled from the German Communist Party for his attempt to unite Marx and Freud in an explanation of fascism's psychological appeal.[19] For his part Stevens devoted much of "Sombre Figuration" to an exploration of individual and social psychology, their relation to current historical developments, and the consequences of this relationship for art.

To begin examining these matters in "Sombre Figuration," it is necessary to be clear about the meaning of the confusing but very important image of the portent. Some critics have taken it to be a symbol of the Jungian collective unconscious, while others define it more vaguely as a death-like presence. But at least in this case it seems wisest to begin with Stevens' own explanation, offered to Hi Simons in a letter written in 1940 which contained a gloss of the poem:

> When we were facing the great evil that is being enacted today merely as something foreboded, we were penetrated by its menace as by a sub-conscious portent. We felt it without being able to identify it. We could not identify what did not yet exist . . . It was, after all, ourselves, all of us, all we had reason to expect from what we knew. The future must bear within it every past, not least the pasts that have become submerged in the sub-conscious, things in the experience of races. We fear because we remember. (*L* 373)[20]

I take this explanation to be both an historical and a social psychological one, the portent being a metaphor not for war and fascism, but rather for the subjective experience which these historical phenomena gave rise to, the feelings of

fear and foreboding that had become widespread and constitutive enough in their own right to comprise what Raymond Williams might have called a "structure of feeling."

The poem is quite specific on this count: "It is the form / Of a generation that does not know itself, / Still questioning if to crush the soaring stacks, / The churches, like dalmatics stooped in prayer, / And the people suddenly evil, waked, accused, / Destroyed by a vengeful movement of the arms, / A mass overtaken by the blackest sky" (*OP* 68-69). This passage indicates that Stevens, although certainly attuned to the historical moment, was not mainly interested in determining the "objective" historical reasons for the crisis. By focussing upon the subjective response to war and fascism rather than on events themselves, the poem suggests that the orthodox definition of fascism was, at the very least, incomplete. This definition, codified in Dimitrov's famous formulation adopted by the Comintern in the summer of 1935 as Stevens labored over "Owl's Clover," was well-publicized at the time: "Fascism in power," it asserted, "is the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, the most chauvinistic, the most imperialistic elements of finance capital."[21] Stevens, rather than explain the rise of authoritarianism as the outcome of class struggle carried out under conditions of extreme economic crisis, was interested in the cultural and psychological dimensions of authoritarianism. He explored the connections between the social disaster at hand, sterile rationalism ("We have grown weary of the man that thinks" [*OP* 66]), and the unconscious, irrational, transformative impulses of "the man below," or the "subman" (*OP* 66). From these he sought to determine what the function of the statue, or art, might be under such trying circumstances.

Not unlike Adorno and Horkheimer in their analyses of fascism and "administered" societies, Stevens implicates insistently rational modes of thought in the social disaster, modes whose destructive power derives from the obsessive exclusion of the irrational. He maintains that "the man below," though "ogre"-like, is neither wholly destructive nor alien: "It is not that he was born in another land, / Powdered with primitive lights, and lives with us / In glimpses, on the edge or at the tip, / Playing a crackled reed, wind-stopped, in bleats" (*OP* 66-67). On the contrary, the unconscious is a powerful source for emancipatory change: "The man below / Imagines and it is true, as if he thought / By imagining, anti-logician, quick / With a logic of transforming certitudes" (*OP* 66). Moreover, not only is the unconscious integral to individual experience, it is also a constellation of moving shapes and sounds that help to constitute the memory of the many we give the name history, as well as constitute individual memory, which operates synecdochically to bind the individual to a past and to a community. "He dwells below," Stevens explains, "the man below, in less / Than body and in less than mind, ogre, / Inhabitant, in less than shape, of shapes / That are dissembled in vague memory / Yet still retain resemblances, remain / Remembrances, a place of a field of lights, / As a church is a bell and people are an eye, / A cry, the pallor of a dress, a touch" (*OP* 67). The subman, or the unconscious, is intimately connected to the re-

sponse to war and fascism ("The man below beholds the portent poised, / An image of his making" [*OP* 69]); thus the current crisis is not to be explained principally in terms of the bourgeoisie's assault upon the masses. Any such historical explanation is dangerously incomplete without an understanding of how the subjective experience of social dislocation can deepen or ease that dislocation. If the latter is to occur, Stevens seems to suggest, it will be because committed attention to subjective experience, particularly to the protean, dynamic unconscious, lessens the claim which monolithic social structures have on the mind. The portent, therefore, is poised, "but poised as the mind through which a storm / Of other images blows" (*OP* 69). The mind does not experience a given crisis as immutable because it constantly generates alternative images which countervail the dominant structure of feeling.

But how are we to preserve the capacity for diverse imaginings, given the debilitating social developments that have narrowed the way we think about our social and personal possibilities, curtailing the old romantic vision of self-actualization and social transformation? Stevens compares the current situation unfavorably to the one Shelley faced in the wake of the failure of his revolution: "images of time / Like the time of the portent, images like leaves, / Except that this is an image of black spring / And those the leaves of autumn-afterwards, / Leaves of the autumns in which the man below / Lived as the man lives now, and hated, loved, / As the man hates now, loves now, the self-same things" (*OP* 69-70). Formerly change had run its course naturally, and imagination was exercised, not exorcised, by advocates of social change. For this reason Stevens portrays the future as ominous and he ends "Owl's Clover" accordingly. Instead of insisting upon hope, he sternly measures the final embodiment of the statue as monument to the ordinary against his embattled claims for the renovating imagination. In the poem's final section, the statue looms as a *cordon sanitaire*—surrounded by black but itself sanitized white, stately, neatly proportioned, eminently sane and normal. It is the outward manifestation of an inward passion, or perhaps it gives rise to the passion roundly felt, to flee imagination and its seemingly illimitable, destabilizing uncertainties: "Even imagination has an end, / When the statue is not a thing imagined . . . / Even the man below, the subverter, stops / The flight of emblemata through his mind, / Thoughts by descent. To flourish the great cloak we wear / At night, to turn away from the abominable / Farewells and, in the darkness, to feel again / The reconciliation, the rapture of a time / Without imagination, without past / And without future, a present time, is that / The passion, indifferent to the poet's hum, / That we conceal?" (*OP* 71). In the face of the social crisis, art officially designated to alleviate misery and promote solidarity merely provides a sense of risk-free, palliative immediacy which its desperate audience has come secretly to desire. Anything that threatens this equilibrium—memory, history, the unconscious, imagination— is consigned to night.

III

The basis for perhaps the most astute critique of Stevens' utopian politics was made by Irving Howe in a 1957 review of *Opus Posthumous*. "Stevens' in-

sistence upon human possibility," he wrote, "can itself become mechanical, a ruthlessness in the demand for joy." But instead of demonstrating why this was so in light of the needs of the polity or of actual political movements, Howe retreated to the conventional and in my opinion false view of Stevens: "Perhaps the greatest weakness in his poems is a failure to extend the possibilities of self-renewal beyond solitariness or solitary engagements with the natural world and into the life of men living together." For whatever reasons—I suspect the constriction of cold war politics may again have played a role—Howe turned his back on the riches in "Owl's Clover," calling the poem "unfortunate . . . an assault upon a subject which as a poet Stevens was not prepared to confront."[22] Today, however, our political and ideological inventory includes new possessions, whose sources are in the larger historical and intellectual currents cited at the beginning of the essay. These new acquisitions enable us, I think, to take a more sympathetic look at Stevens' political poems. Although I have had little or nothing to say concerning such implied matters as Stevens' critique of the Dialectic, Marxism's domination of nature, cultural imperialism, and identity theory, I hope I have managed to make a contribution toward a change of attitude and approach to these poems. For the poems I have explored are not failures, not as political or non-political poems. They are no more commonplace denunciations of communism than they are the self-absorbed utterances of an aesthete out of his element. Commentators who have emphasized the displeasing polemical, sometimes caustic tone of "Owl's Clover," have tended to encourage these views by drawing attention away from the substance of the poems. On the contrary, the author of "Owl's Clover" has always struck me as being intent on resisting his own occasionally impatient tone with an effort of persistence. He often seems, in other words, to check his stridency with a solicitude that constantly returns him to a careful consideration of the doctrinaire position. He takes due cognizance of the materialist position which argues that the self, and even the self that desires and imagines, is not prior to but is constituted by its relationship with others. Indeed "The Greenest Continent" is nothing if not an anti-imperialist attempt to show how the European and the African imaginations are culturally specific, historically constituted, and therefore fundamentally incompatible (this is not to gainsay Stevens' reliance upon stereotypes in his analysis). At the same time, Stevens was never willing to *equate* self and what Marx called the ensemble of social relations. Though Stevens in the poetry of the thirties rejected the radical division between the private world of the poet's imagination and the public world, he was not willing to subordinate the former to the latter by agreeing that the free development of the self could only be realized through the free development of all. The imagination is too unruly to be asked to wait so long. In "Sombre Figuration" Stevens wrote of "Each man in his asylum maundering, / Policed by the hope of Christmas" (*OP* 68). At the end of "A Duck for Dinner" desire is called "that old assassin" (*OP* 66). If the social environment becomes hostile, desire rebels; the poetics of the self become destructive, no matter how ostensibly revolutionary the regime.

A. Walton Litz once called Stevens "a capitalist of the imagination"—a *laissez faire* capitalist at that—because he is "the partisan of individuality, privacy, spontaneity."[23] True enough, Stevens' highly personal imagination makes cultural capital out of fugitive, fortuitous impulses. But I would argue, along with Stevens, that this need not be fatal to a leftist politics willing to settle for a mixed economy of the mind, in which poetic currency is valued for its depiction of desire that can meet the collective need. Stevens' challenge to the left in the thirties has yet to be met: let us see, he proposed, "How easily the blown banners change to wings . . ." (*CP* 508).

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Notes

[1]See his *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 217, and passim. Lentricchia suggestively elaborates upon the politics of Stevens' post-"Owl's Clover" poetry in Chapter Three, Part Two, entitled "Penelope's Poetry—The Later Wallace Stevens."

[2]Needless to say I have paraphrased Daniel Bell's highly influential definition from *The End of Ideology* because it accurately reflects the assumptions of Stevens' critics from the forties through the seventies. There are, of course, broader and in my view better definitions of ideology which effectively link unsystematic and unconscious thought to behavior and to a range of social determinants.

[3]Some of the characteristic tropes and polarities of cold war discourse are evident in this passage from Joseph Riddel's *The Clairvoyant Eye* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965): "Stevens' *distraction* by Marxist criticism and radical *ideology* . . . is as much poetic strategy as individual pique. The Marxist program becomes for him only the most recent of a long line of conceptual failures to provide a rationally ordered society. Though Stevens understood the dangers of putting poetry at the service of politics, he was not so alert to the consequences of trying to subsume the practical in the ideal. It was he, not his critics, who *made the error of deserting a defensible position to contend with the enemy on its own terms.* Cummings had more wisely ignored the argument; Frost had consistently avoided 'ideas.' Neither did Stevens have the political acumen of an Auden, who knew full well how far poetry could go in the service of a cause, and to what degree it had to be impersonal, aloof from causes and action" (121-22; my italics). I do not mean to single out Riddel—on the contrary, my point is that he was sharing with many other critics, too numerous to mention, certain widespread beliefs about leftism, and an ideological language that reinforced them. Of course, doctrinaire Marxist critics on the other side of the barricades possessed their tropes and polarities, which they too deployed in order to diminish Stevens' poetry. In the last analysis the only question which divided Marxist and mainstream critics had to do with Stevens' non-political poems: Could a poet so aloof be interesting?

[4]Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics, and Culture in Marxist Theory* (New York: Praeger, 1981), 3.

[5]Lack of space prevents me from making detailed comparisons in this essay; I trust those familiar with the work of revising Marxism will recognize the similarities with Stevens' project as I describe it here. For surveys of these efforts, see Perry Anderson, *Considerations On Western Marxism* (London: Verso, 1979) and *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1983); Stanley Aronowitz, *The Crisis In Historical Materialism*; Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Martin Jay, *Marxism & Totality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[6]I am assuming the reader's general familiarity with the leftist and particularly the communist milieu of the thirties into which Stevens intervened. For a general review see Bates, Ch. 5. Also useful are Daniel Aaron, *Writers On the Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961); and James Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1968).

[7]See *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 110. Richardson argues correctly that in his poems Stevens was interested in exploding polarities within politics, as well as between political and other kinds of experience. Such a project, however, need not have precluded the poet's own manicheanism, especially where issues of acute controversy and historic insensitivity were concerned, such as race, class, and gender.

[8]"Among the handful of clichés which have crept into left-wing criticism," began Burnshaw, "is the notion that contemporary poets . . . have all tramped off to some escapist limbo where they are joyously gathering moonshine" ("Turmoil in the Middle Ground," *New Masses* 17, 1 [October 1, 1935]: 41-42; reprinted in *Wallace Stevens, The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle [London: Routledge, 1985], 137-140). As many readers are doubtless aware, not only baleful social developments but also the left's cool response to Stevens' poetry provoked him into reassessing and reshaping his work during the thirties. I refer not only to Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order*, but also to the leftist reviews of Ruth Lechlitner ("Imagination as Reality," *New York Herald Tribune Books* [December 6, 1936]: 40; reprinted in Doyle, 156-160) and Geoffrey Grigson ("The Stuffed Goldfinch," *New Verse* [February-March 1936], 18-19), both which Stevens read and remarked upon (see *L* 309, 313, 332). Burnshaw, whose influence was greatest, made the claim that the heightened class struggles of the depression period had disoriented Stevens, and that his latest poetry had expressed confusion about the poet's proper relationship to economic deprivation and social conflict. Because of the swiftness and vehemence of Stevens' response, it is still generally assumed that the review must have expressed a doctrinaire Marxist position by attacking Stevens for his alleged aestheticism, decadence, or elitism. But Burnshaw's review, although it shared important assumptions with doctrinaire Marxism, was less dogmatic than the usual leftist fare. His judgment of Stevens was based partially upon the then-familiar model of class struggle, in which the momentous battle between labor and capital at first disorients middle class artists, and eventually forces them to choose sides as their class—the petty bourgeoisie—gradually erodes and finally disappears. But three factors distinguished Burnshaw's review from doctrinaire Marxism. First, his specific remarks concerning Stevens' poetry, although attenuated, were unusually sensitive; they demonstrated reading habits easily distinguishable from those of the often benumbed critics of the left during the thirties (this was especially telling with regard to their reading of modernist texts). Second, as I have already shown, Burnshaw began his article by assailing precisely this kind of critic. Indeed Burnshaw's effort compares favorably to that of Grigson, the usually-reliable British poet, critic and editor of *New Verse*, a magazine Stevens otherwise admired. In his review Grigson displayed all of the clichés Burnshaw was alluding to: "In *Harmonium* we had a delicate man, an ironist, an imagist, a modern, a thin-fingered undemocratic American. Here we have fewer melons and peacocks but still the finicking privateer, prosy Herrick, Klee without rhythm, observing nothing, single artificer of his own world of mannerism, mixer-up of chinoiserie." In sum, wrote Grigson, "Too much Wallace Stevens, too little everything else." The most important reason Burnshaw avoided dogmatism was that he posed the very interesting possibility that Stevens might become an ally of the left, depending upon how this poet of the middle ground turned out. We must remember that only a minority of leftist critics in the thirties held out this possibility for such difficult and apparently self-absorbed writers as Stevens. Nonetheless, it must be remarked that the operating assumption was that any such alliance could be made possible only by the *poet* changing. The need or the possibility that the *left* change was not entertained, except only remotely in Burnshaw's disapproving statement about sectarian critics. Self-criticism and change, especially when it came to examining theoretical roots, operating assumptions, habits of mind, attitudes, and the like, was never carried out by the CPUSA—and throughout the century has been an extremely rare commodity among major socialist parties East and West (see Aronowitz, 133).

[9]I am not committed to the belief that Stevens necessarily intended "Owl's Clover" to be a systematic critique of doctrinaire Marxism. I have strong doubts that Stevens would ever have conceived of doing such a thing in a poem, believing Elder Olson right when he observed that Stevens didn't argue, he meditated, and that in his poetry there is no such thing as a connected argument. I am quite comfortable with the idea that in the course of imaginatively exploring broad philosophical and aesthetic issues, Stevens invariably dealt with orthodoxy explicitly and implicitly. I

also think that it is worthwhile to draw out the consequences of his exploration of these issues for orthodoxy even where no link, explicit or implicit, exists in the poem.

[10]Aronowitz, xvi. Within the Marxist tradition Eduard Bernstein, the author of the much-maligned *Evolutionary Socialism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), has come to be seen as the chief spokesperson for the reformist perspective.

[11]To be a bit more clear about what I mean by doctrinaire Marxism as Stevens encountered it during the thirties, I am referring to the body of political and philosophical thought promulgated by the Comintern and its American affiliate the Communist Party (CPUSA). This body of thought has been codified in Stalin's "textbooks" of Marxism, *The Foundations of Leninism* and *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. See *The Essential Stalin*, ed. Bruce Franklin (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1972), 89-186, and 300-333, respectively.

[12]One is reminded of "Sunday Morning's" "silent Palestine . . . Over the seas," the religious analogue to orthodox Marxism's faith in eternal truths.

[13]Elsewhere, in his remarks to Simons concerning "The Old Woman and the Statue," Stevens distinguishes his own view of change and difference from that of orthodox dialectics: "When I was a boy I used to think that things progressed by contrasts, that there was a law of contrasts. But this was building the world out of blocks. Afterwards I came to think more of the energizing that comes from mere interplay, interaction. . . . Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimitable. They make things inter-dependent, and their inter-dependence sustains them and gives them pleasure" (*L* 368).

[14]It may be worth pointing out that though the relationship between being and consciousness is characterized by reciprocity in these formulations, elsewhere Marx gave priority to the material factors associated with being, even if only "in the last instance," as Engels put it. No doubt this is ultimately the nub of the difference between Stevens and most varieties of Marxism and materialism.

[15]See Aronowitz, 225.

[16]*Nature* (New York: Library of America, 1983), 16.

[17]*Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, ed. Michael Folsom (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 139. Gold was at least modest enough not to have added "I am that man."

[18]See Adrienne Rich, *Poetry*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: Norton, 1975), 116, and passim.

[19]See Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933; rpt. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1970). It goes without saying that Adorno, Horkheimer, Fromm, Marcuse, and others associated with the Frankfurt Institute also sought to develop a materialist understanding of fascism which incorporated an understanding of the unconscious and subjectivity. For a summary of these efforts see Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, Ch. 3.

[20]If this subjective experience is collective and even somehow racial as is indicated, in the earlier poem "The Greenest Continent" Stevens makes it clear that the transhistorical character of "what we knew" is not at all immune from culture and history. In fact, Stevens is interested in gauging the extent to which certain more or less constant features of human experience can be modified. However, he does not minimize nature's intractability, and thus he differs from Marxist orthodoxy which subordinates nature to the social process, to conscious, revolutionary society, and to the material needs of society. Part of the reason orthodoxy avoided coming to terms with the unconscious and "the feminine principle" as defined by its own masculinist culture is simply because these named realms of human experience were thought to be relatively constant and not subject to immediate change. Thus "nature," and "human nature" became reified as absolute and unchanging categories completely outside the parameters of Marxist thought.

[21]G. Dimitrov, *The United Front: The Struggle Against Fascism and War* (London: L. Lawrence & Wishart, 1938), 9.

[22]"Another Way of Looking At A Blackbird," *New Republic* 137, 4 (November 1957). Reprinted in Doyle, 443-44, 444, 439.

[23]*Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 196.

Stevens in History and Not in History: The Poet and the Second World War

JACQUELINE VAUGHT BROGAN

FOLLOWING THE LEAD of one of Wallace Stevens' most despairing wartime poems, "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion," and thereby positioning Stevens as finally being responsive, even deeply responsive, to the politics and reality of his times, I would like to offer two versions of the same story—i.e., Stevens in History and Not in History, with particular attention to his responsiveness or lack of responsiveness to the Second World War. It is obviously the second of these with which we are more familiar. With only a few exceptions, from Stanley Burnshaw's review in *New Masses* (1935) to Marjorie Perloff's "Revolving in Crystal" (1985), there is an unbroken tradition regarding Stevens' poetry as socially irrelevant, socially unconcerned, and even (most damningly) socially irresponsible.[1] Even if we are not willing to go as far as Perloff in criticizing Stevens for trying to create a certain aesthetic order—even truth and beauty—in the actual arrangement of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" ("one poem per page, ten poems per section, seven tercets per poem, the three group titles on separate pages") while Americans were losing heavily in the Battle of Bataan or gaining victory in the Battle of Midway, while the whole world was at war once again,[2] there remains a relatively large consensus that Stevens was finally an aesthete—removed, often ironic, and (worse) rich.

If we want to support this particular version, we can find ample evidence (even ammunition) in his poetry and prose. What are we to make of a poet who, as the Second World War began and then intensified, could write "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun," "Desire & the Object," "Holiday in Reality," or "God Is Good. It Is a Beautiful Night"—this last one written as the entire male population of the Czech village of Lidice was being exterminated, the women shipped to camps, and the children dispersed, nameless, or while in the French town of Oradour all the men were shot and the women and children herded into a church where they were burned, while Hitler stalled in his slaughtering advance toward Stalingrad, while Eisenhower began his attack on the beaches of North Africa? Perhaps we must conclude that Stevens was serious, even maniacally so, in his insistence that "Ethics are no more a part of poetry than they are of painting" (*OP* 163), that "Poetry is not personal" (*OP* 159), and certainly not political. From *this* perspective, if Stevens really meant that "Poetry increases the feeling for reality" (*OP* 162), the kind of "reality" he meant must be utterly removed, encased, from the reality then felt by the world. "Revolving in Crystal," as it were.[3]

In addition to such poems and excerpts from his "Adagia," one can find ample evidence of his apparent social irresponsibility in both public essays and private letters. For example, in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," which was written during the middle of World War II, Stevens claims

that he does "not think that a poet owes any more as a social obligation than he owes as a moral obligation," adding that "if there is anything concerning poetry about which people agree it is that the role of the poet is not to be found in morals" (*NA* 27-28). It seems even more damning that Stevens would write Oscar Williams in December of 1944 that

> A prose commentary on War and Poetry is out of the question. I wonder if the war has not ceased to affect us except as a part of necessity, as something that must be carried on and finished, with no end to the sacrifice involved. But I think that even the men in the Army etc. feel that it is no longer anything except an overwhelming grind. (*L* 479; December 4, 1944)

It might well be argued that the actual members of the Army would not have agreed that the war had "ceased to affect" them. And, since Stevens goes on to add that

> The big thing in the world today, the thing that really involves the future, is not the war, but the leftist movement,

which he then equates to "the labor movement" (*L* 479), one could conclude that the only thing which affected Stevens in any political sense was his pocketbook.[4]

It could seem, precisely, that Stevens preferred luxurious indulgences to any specific consideration of a "reality" he so frequently named, but *only* as a name, when he writes just four days after World War II had ended that

> Sitting there [in his garden at home], with a little of Kraft's Limburger Spread and a glass or two of a really decent wine, with not a voice in the universe and with those big, fat pigeons moving round, keeping an eye on me and doing queer things to keep me awake, all of these things make The New Republic and its contents (most of the time) of no account. (*L* 512; July 26, 1945)

I wish to add, looking forward to the next version of this story that most of the contents of *The New Republic* in 1945 were specifically focused on the war and not on literary reviews, such as Jean Wahl's review of John Crowe Ransom,[5] which prompted this particular letter. It is difficult to imagine a statement more exactly at odds with what Stevens actually felt during World War II, so that it suffices to reverse the terms—that is to say, that the parenthetical "repression" announces precisely that "most of the time" the contents of *The New Republic* were very much of "account" in Stevens' imagination. This reading of the letter is indicated, even demarked, by the paragraph immediately preceding the one just cited. There, in response to whether or not he had seen the review, Stevens answers, no, with the following explanation:

> I am going through a period in which I am inexpressibly sick of all sorts of fault-finding, and if Wahl has been finding fault with Ran-

> som, I don't want to know anything about it. I suppose this state of mind comes from reading what the British say about the Americans and what the Americans say about the Japs, and so on. (*L* 511; September 6, 1945)

I will come back to this journal, and to a number of articles published in it during World War II, as a specific context for revising our understanding of Stevens' war-time poems.[6] But, for now, it seems tempting to conclude that Stevens intentionally played the part of the ostrich, sticking his head in the sand, willfully and persistently. As late as 1954 he writes, "I cannot say that there is any way to adapt myself to the idea that I am living in the Atomic Age and I think it a lot of nonsense to try to adapt oneself to such a thing" (*L* 839). We are forced to consider, if not to conclude, that when Stevens explains in a 1940 letter that he makes "no reference in this letter to the war," that "It goes without saying that our minds are full of it" (*L* 356), that he is uttering a nearly insidious "fiction," as it were—that he is virtually oblivious to the war, enclosed in some "revolving crystalline" (*NA* 88) sustained by imaginative musings and economic security.

If, because finally we *like* Stevens' poetry, we want to see this "version" of Stevens and World War II in a less condemning light, it is possible to find many writers during this period espousing the same kind of aesthetic distancing noted in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words."[7] Allen Tate, for example, sounds as forceful as Stevens when he says,

> The success or failure of a political idea is none of my business; my business is to render in words the experience of people, whatever movement of ideas they may be caught up in. An artist who gets into a political movement because he thinks it is the coming thing, is a weakling. (*PR* 29)

Similarly, in response to the question, "What do you think the responsibilities of writers in general are when and if war [the Second World War] comes?" James T. Farrell replies, "It is difficult for me to answer your last question because the real estate business has never been my *metier*. Personally, I have no economic interests in Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil . . . Iceland, Finland, Greenland . . . not to mention the Suez Canal, Ethiopia, or the Island of Yap" (*PR* 33). To the same question, Katherine Ann Porter answers that the writer's "prime responsibility 'when and if war comes' is not to go mad," although she goes on to clarify that she means not being deceived by propagandistic rhetoric which would argue that "present violence" will end in "something new and blissful" (*PR* 39). As Stevens would put it succinctly one year later (with reference, I think, to the propaganda of World War II, as well as to that of the war before—"the war to end all wars"), "The good is evil's last invention" (*CP* 253).

Similarly, although with more ambivalence, Lionel Trilling argues that "however legitimate and laudable" is the "intention" of "literature of social

protest" in "arousing pity and anger, in actual fact, because of its artistic failures, it constitutes a form of 'escapism'" (*PR* 109). And Louise Bogan complains most bitterly about the pressure on the artist to be socially "responsible":

> [T]he American "cultural" background is thick with ideas of "success" and "morality." So a piece of writing which is worth nothing, and means nothing (*but itself*) is, to readers at large, silly and somewhat immoral. "Serious writing" has come to mean, to the public, the pompous or thinly documentary. The truly serious piece of work, where a situation is explored at all levels, *disinterestedly, for its own sake*, is outlawed. (*PR* 106; my emphasis)

Bogan, it would appear, would prefer Stevens to Pound.

The context of all these remarks is "The Situation in American Writing," published in two parts in the *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1939 before the Second World War began and, ironically, in the early fall of the same year, after it had. All the responses were written before another world war had become a reality. Interestingly, the possibility of aesthetic distancing which the journal was supporting is ironically challenged in the second of these two issues, which concludes, in big block letters, with "WAR IS THE ISSUE!" as the exclamatory title of the final editorial which both announces the war and, with the pun on "Issue," provocatively intimates a profound relationship between politics and words, or literal action and literature.[8]

In this same series, Stevens replies, with what seems to me a nearly perfect Stevensian enigma: "The role of the writer in war remains the fundamental role of the writer intensified and concentrated" (*PR* 40). Only earlier, in response to a very different question ("Do you think of yourself as writing for a definite audience?"), is there any clue to what this "role" may be. There he answers, "I do not visualize any audience. To me poetry is one of the sanctions of life and I write it because it helps me to accept and validate my experience" (*PR* 39). The version of this story which would insist that Stevens was "Not in History" would attend to his admission that he does not envision any audience. The second version, which argues that Stevens was, very much, "In History," will focus on this embryonic formulation of poetry as a sanction—possibly even a redemption—in the violence and poverty of life, a formulation which would expand, with great rapidity once a second world war began, from a private to a public sanction, one deeply concerned with the *polis*.

However, before turning to *that* version of the story, I offer one other fairly damning statement from Stevens. Just prior to his assertion that the writer's role is "intensified and concentrated" in war, Stevens writes the following in response to the same question:

> I don't think that the United States should enter into the next world war, if there is to be another, unless it does so with the idea of dominating the world that comes out of it, or unless it is required to

> enter it in self-defense. The question respecting the responsibility of writers in war is a very theoretical question respecting an extremely practical state of affairs. *A war is a military state of affairs, not a literary one*. (*PR* 40; emphasis added)

Given the turn of historical events—our entering the war in actual self-defense after Pearl Harbor and our later use of two atomic bombs—Stevens' either/or formulation here proves ironically constitutive of the kind of thinking that encourages military violence. However, at the end of this version of the story, it is critical to say that my overriding thesis is that during World War II Stevens came to conclude that *war is a literary state of affairs* rather than a separate state of affairs, that "War *Is* the Issue"—and of our words. This critical change explains why much of his poetic production during this period can be seen as a subversion of and resistance to the political descriptions of his world that had increasingly come to dominate it in escalating violence. "Resistance," he would later clarify, "is the opposite of escape" (*OP* 225). Not "revolving in crystal" at all.

Given the evidence marshalled above, it may seem almost perverse to insist that there is another version of this story and one which is, ultimately, far more accurate to Stevens both as a person and a poet. Yet the myth of a Stevens "Not in History" can be sustained only through utter repression of his overwhelming response to and interaction with history at this moment.[9] As early as September 20, 1939—in other words, three weeks after Hitler had begun his invasion of Poland and was bombing Warsaw—Stevens writes, "As the news of the development of the war comes in, I feel a horror of it: a horror of the fact that such a thing could occur," and goes on to call it an "unbelievable catastrophe" (*L* 342-43).[10] His "horror" is not, I think, due to merely personal reasons, but to deeply-felt ethical reasons which he would instantiate in his poetry over the subsequent years.

In fact, we must immediately revise our possible (mis)reading of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" as espousing aesthetic *irresponsibility*. In that 1942 essay, Stevens is also careful to explain that when he defines poetry, the imagination, and the mind as a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (*NA* 36), he means by "the pressure of reality," a "pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation." After saying that "the definition ought to be exact," he goes on to describe "a whole generation" and "a world at war," news of "Europe, Asia and Africa all at one time" (*NA* 20-21). As the contents of contemporaneous issues of *The New Republic* well testify, the news was indeed of Europe, Asia, Africa, all at one time, not only in the journals and the newspapers, but also on the radio. In fact, during the month Stevens was composing this essay (February 1941), one disturbing article, "What Can We Defend?," makes the alarming point that "over half a world" is of immediate and pressing consequence to the United States, constituting "danger zones" to future American security (104, 8 [February 24, 1941]: 267). It is against this "coming of *total war*" (my emphasis), as the editors term it in that article, that

Stevens sets himself—and the creative act of the imagination—in both "The Noble Rider" and many poems of this period.

Yet, in spite of the stated need for internal protection against this external and overwhelming violence, Stevens also insists in his "Two Theoretic Poems" of 1940 ("Man and Bottle" and "Of Modern Poetry") that because the "theatre was changed / To something else" (*CP* 239) in this modern world, a new poetry "has to content the reason concerning war" (*CP* 239), and "It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice" (*CP* 240).[11] As Melita Schaum has observed, in 1940 the modern "theatre" had come to include *theaters of war*—the Pacific theater, the European theater.[12] (In fact, the *Supplement* to the *OED* lists the expression "theatre of war" as being used for the first time by Winston Churchill in 1914. By World War II, knowledge of this new connotation of "theatre" was simply presumed when speaking of the "Pacific theater," etc.) In another poem of this time, "Forces, the Will & the Weather," by which Stevens means, among other things, military forces, he argues that this "shift / Of realities" in the most critical sense "could *be wrong*" (*CP* 229; my emphasis). There are many more such poems.

Only a few months before World War II actually began, Stevens published "Life on a Battleship" in the *Partisan Review*, a journal which self-consciously advertised itself as "A Quarterly of Literature and Marxism." In that poem Stevens ironically condemns the "rape of the bourgeoisie" as a manifestation of a certain mind-set—not so much an ideology—that he describes metonymically by naming the battleship *The Masculine* and that he that he attempts to counter logically by suggesting that although "The whole cannot exist without / The parts," still "The gunman of the commune / Kills the commune" (*OP* 80). Stevens did not, as we know, support communism, although that fact does not make him apolitical for all that. A conservative stand is still a political stand. And, given what we know about the various economic underpinnings and interests in the wars of this century, perhaps we can look at his concern over the economic situation of his time with at least some sympathy. His point—or more accurately, his fear—in that poem appears to be that the "war between the classes" would result in a real war in which everyone would become "assassins" (*OP* 77). In other words, the commune of a *true* world war.

Even if we have an ideological disagreement with Stevens here, the number of poems he wrote after World War II began that specifically refer to *war* indicates the degree to which it occupied both his poetry and his thought. In addition to "Man and Bottle" and "Of Modern Poetry," by early 1940 Stevens had already published "Martial Cadenza," which calls for "living" time, rather than the impoverished "world without time," "full / Of the silence before the armies" (*CP* 237). In the same year Stevens also published "Yellow Afternoon," an extremely moving poem in which personal despair has not, merely as a backdrop, but as a cause, the "life of the fatal unity of war" (*CP* 236).[13]

But if we are inclined to disparage Stevens, we might argue that all these instances are *merely* theoretical speculations on the question asked in the *Partisan Review*—what is the writer's responsibility in a time of war?—that in these

poems he is deliberately "musing the obscure" by avoiding, effectively, his actual times. However, after Pearl Harbor, in other words, after the war had become a reality for Americans, rather than an abstraction, Stevens' responses become much more specific, with previously unrecognized loci in the events and atmosphere of the time—resonating with a voice that speaks prophetically at times, publicly, and certainly politically. World *events*, I should clarify, with emphasis on the plurality, increasingly informed his verse throughout the war. It was not the case that *one* Jewish person was killed, or that *one* country fell to the Axis powers, or that even *one* continent (with something like an identifiable front-line) defined the realm of violence, so that Stevens' specific responses to the events of his time necessarily take on something of the abstraction that the sheer magnitude of the horrors in World War II inevitably meant, especially for those Americans who remained on American soil. The danger of trying to offer such a context, since the quintessentially ironic provocation for such historical contextualism is grounded in the inevitable slippage of knowledge which this temporal predicament reiterates, is the danger that has allowed one critic to argue (incorrectly, I believe) that the aurora borealis in "Auroras of Autumn" refers to the atomic bomb and the same danger that, from a totally different perspective, encourages the pairing of Stevens' letters with a "Checklist" of calamitous world events while he arranged "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."[14] And, given a poet who would continually struggle with the difficult line between art and reality, it is almost inevitable that we would alternately find Stevens being either more referential or less responsive to his times than perhaps he really was.

Despite this warning, I think it is possible to see that Stevens did write in response—and resistance—to the events of this time, including one small poem which I think *does* refer to the atomic bomb, and others located in the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the destruction of European cities (by Americans as well as Axis powers), in the fear of being at war here, in the escalating horrors of Hitler's slaughter. I would like, therefore, to consider a few of these responses before turning to the context of his most consistent and ethical response to the war—that is, his realization that a military state of affairs *is* a literary state of affairs—that "the theory of description matters most" because "what we say of the future must portend" (*CP* 345-46), because what was being said of the present was being actualized in the present war. My specific context for describing this larger historical context will be *The New Republic*, which the letter cited above indicates that Stevens was reading (even if he obviously wants to repress what he was reading there) and which he seems to have been in the habit of reading for some time (see *L* 184-85).[15]

In the fall of 1941, Stevens had already produced many of the more "theoretical" war poems mentioned above, some of them (like "Of Modern Poetry") frequently recognized as seminal, though not necessarily as political poems, and others not yet mentioned, such as "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," in which he anticipates what may well be his finest antiwar poem, "Description without Place."[16] But in December of 1941, as we all

know, Japan chose to bomb Pearl Harbor. What is of particular interest in establishing the context of his next published poem, "Montrachet-le-Jardin" (which appeared only three months later, February 1942) is the reminder that even before Pearl Harbor, it was the Japanese (the "Asians," as Stevens would term it in his poetry, following the contemporary phraseology that would refer to "Greater East Asia" or "What Next in Asia?")[17] and neither the Germans in general nor Hitler in particular that posed the most immediate threat to America. During the summer and fall of 1941, the government was preoccupied with "appeasement." Yet, in *The New Republic* at least, the rhetoric began to get more violent. The fall issues in particular contained articles or editorials that repeatedly urged America to "Call Japan's Bluff!" to "Stay Tough with Japan," to "Hold the Pacific!"[18] The belated attempts to create some sort of "appeasement" or compromise between the United States and Japan certainly failed. Yet even before the actual bombing of Pearl Harbor, the American people and American press began to regard the Japanese as something akin to monsters. There was the myth (or fictional "theory") published at this very time that the Japanese "gestated for only six months in the womb."[19]

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the reaction was intense. In the very first issue of *The New Republic* to go to press after the bombing, William Harlan Hale writes in "After Pearl Harbor," that whereas Hitler's aim has always been "total"—i.e., the "*annihilation of the enemy*" (emphasis mine)—Japan can only seek "to drive us out of the Western Pacific"; and that whereas Japan's objectives are therefore "limited,"

> Our objective, on the other hand, is total: it is to destroy Japan as a military power. We are committing our forces for an entire victory over the aggressor.

And the defeat of Japan's fleet, he adds, "is the end of Japan."[20] He does not seem to mean this in any figurative way. His explicit comparison of what the American aim should be toward the Japanese to Hitler's "aim" must inevitably seem, after Hiroshima, or at the very least after the *second* bomb, profoundly disturbing.

Stevens' first published poem "after Pearl Harbor"—which notably appeared in the *Partisan Review* once again—evokes the "hero's being, the deliverer / Delivering the prisoner *by his words*" (*CP* 261; emphasis mine) in lines which anticipate the well-known coda to his major poem written the same year, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," and which certainly suggest the possibility of a "social obligation" carried out poetically. Yet from an historical context, perhaps the most telling lines of "Montrachet" are these:

> Consider how the speechless, invisible gods
> Ruled us before, from over Asia, by
> Our merest apprehension of their will.

Yet, and this is important, Stevens does not indulge in either racial or ethnic condemnation. The next crucial stanzas of the poem appeal to the possible common good in humanity:

> There must be mercy in Asia and divine
> Shadows of scholars bent upon their books,
> Divine orations from lean sacristans
>
> Of the good, speaking of good in the voice of men.
> All men can speak of it in the voice of gods.
> But to speak simply of good is like to love . . .
>
> (*CP* 262)

For a man and a poet who has so often been characterized as being essentially a WASP, these lines at this time resonate with a particular generosity, something more than tolerance, with a tone approaching prayer—and it is a tone no longer seeking personal validation of experience. "There must be mercy" has the same fictional quality, but specific ethical and political appeal, as "It Must Be Abstract," "It Must Change," and "It Must Give Pleasure," all of which evoke what Drucilla Cornell has called the ethical world of the "not yet" as a possibility we have the power to create.[21] As the coda to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" makes clear, the context of all these imperatives *is* the world at war, where the real war of the soldier and the war of the poet "are one" (*CP* 407). However much we may criticize Stevens for his conservatism and sometimes undeniable racism at other instances, "There must be mercy in Asia" at this particular moment is ultimately an intensely political—and ethical—statement, and one that I much prefer to those that ended in the internment of American Japanese.

Another poem of the same year, "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," has as its context the bombing of European cities, which, beginning with the total destruction of Warsaw, had spread either as a reality or as a threat from Stalingrad to London, but which was also being engaged in by the Americans who were then bombing, quite heavily, the Axis European cities. (A subsequent issue of *The New Republic* would ask whether this strategy were necessary and if it would not alienate our own allies.)[22] Although the poem is quite long, three particular passages prove salient here. The first is the beginning of Section II:

> The Got whome we serve is able to deliver
> Us. Good chemistry, good common man, what
> Of that angelic sword? Creature of
> Ten times ten times dynamite, convulsive
> Angel, convulsive shatterer, gun,
> Click, click, the Got whom we serve is able,
> Still, still to deliver us . . .
>
> (*CP* 273)

Given what we know to have been the reality in Europe in 1942, given what Stevens knew to be the reality in 1942, the devastating irony of this prayer proves extraordinarily painful even as it once again evokes tolerance for all supposed "sides" of the war. As he would say in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," he is "thinking of life in a state of violence," not physically, as yet for Americans, "but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent . . . for everyone alive" (*NA* 26-27).

In addition, the consequence of modern technological warfare has been, as we all know, to create (ironically) a situation in which there is no "safe rear," to level the difference between the armed forces and civilians, as Stevens suggests in the seventh section of the same poem:

> *Gazette Guerrière*. A man might happen
> To prefer *L'Observateur de la Paix*, since
> The hero of the *Gazette* and the hero
> Of *L'Observateur*, the classic hero
> And the bourgeois, are different, much.
> The classic changed. There have been many.
> And there are many bourgeois heroes.
>
> (*CP* 276)

These lines also imply that this situation—and its possible cure—is a function of what we will choose to read, of how we will describe the world. And yet, despite the appeal to the "many bourgeois heroes," Stevens still very much wants to believe in the "hero" as a "feeling" (*CP* 278) in this poem: "Unless we believe in the hero," he asks, "what is there / To believe" (*CP* 275). In contrast with the perspective, the "belief," if you will, that prompted W. H. Auden's remarks in "The Poet & the City"—that the "Characteristic style of 'Modern' poetry . . . is the speech of one person addressing one person" since any attempt to speak for society "sounds phony"—and in contrast with Auden's statements that the characteristic modern hero "is neither the 'Great Man' nor the romantic rebel . . . but the man or woman" who "manages to acquire and preserve a face of his own,"[23] Stevens insists upon the possibility of a "hero" (not the "Got whome we serve") who can "save us":

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

> Of his brave quickenings, the human
> Accelerations that seem inhuman.
>
> (*CP* 278-79)

The genuine *need* for such a belief, even though proffered as a possible fiction within the poem, has as its specific context the more acute possibility of being, at any moment, a victim of violence, in any city, in any home, as well as the more generalized horrors of the war.[24] As Stevens explains in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," also written in 1942, the poet's "role is to help people to live their lives" (*NA* 30).

In that essay Stevens admits that the "poetic process" he is describing could be analyzed as an "escapist process," but he also insists that we cannot "suppose" that he is using the word "escapist" in a "pejorative sense" (*NA* 30-31). While using a quotation from Dr. Joad as his point of contrast, his following explanation of this "poetic process" is placed in contrast to the growing sense of the "Unreal city," a place of poverty and disillusionment—not just in literature, but *in reality*. If, Stevens says, "without elaborating this complete poverty, if suddenly we hear a different and *familiar* description of the place"—["'This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning, silent bare . . .'"]—"if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives" (*NA* 31; emphasis mine). The familiar, not the strange or "unreal" poverty and violence of the actual times, is a place where we can live; and, he adds, "This illustration must serve for all the rest" (*NA* 31).

Written only one year later, however, "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" makes it clear that it is war—not any symbol of order—that is taking dominion everywhere.[25] As in the preceding poem, Stevens again evokes modern technological warfare:

> Angry men and furious machines
> Swarm from the little blue of the horizon
> To the great blue of the middle height.
> Men scatter throughout clouds.
>
> (*CP* 290)

But the implication is that these "Angry men and furious machines" are in Bucks County, in America, either swarming across the skies in reality or invading the "great blue" of the imagination. In fact, this was a time when American cities were engaging in blackouts and when American children were receiving fighter-plane identification cards when they bought a coke at the drug store. The *felt* experience during this period of being actually threatened on American soil extended from the earlier fear of the "yellow horde" to a more insidious one signalled by "Hitler's Guerillas Over Here,"[26] published in *The New Republic* the preceding year.

More importantly, perhaps, in this poem Stevens names this military and psychic state of affairs as specifically "evil." Early in the year that Stevens produced this poem, Hitler made it clear that he was calling for the "extinguish-

ing" of all "traitors"—including Jewish, European, or even "Arayan" dissenters. As reported in the March 8, 1943 issue of *The New Republic*, "There will be no halt in the wholesale massacre of Jews," and furthermore "Hitler will destroy the culture and the very life of Western Europe before he surrenders."[27] In another article of the same issue, it is speculated that

> the Jews of Europe are being systematically murdered at the rate of at least seven thousand a day, and perhaps much more rapidly still. How many non-Jews are also being eliminated no one dares to guess.[28]

As Stevens would write to Henry Church toward the end of the war, "People in Germany must be in an incredible predicament, in which even correctness is incorrect" (*L* 494)—and here I think he means specifically the ethical "correctness" in resisting German occupation and the slaughtering of millions. In addition, as another critical part of the historical context, only one month after these disturbing articles about Hitler's atrocities appeared in *The New Republic*, another writer raises serious questions about the ethics of Americans bombing European cities where "large numbers of innocent civilians are being killed."[29] No wonder Stevens would write, in what seems to be a factual rather than a farcical statement, that "A little of THE NEW REPUBLIC goes a *long way with me*" (*L* 511; italics mine).

In the midst of this reality, Stevens writes this moving stanza in "Dutch Graves in Bucks County,"[30] part of which proves grotesquely prophetic:

> An end must come in a merciless triumph,
> An end of evil in a profounder logic,
> In a peace that is more than a refuge,
> In the will of what is *common to all men*,
> Spelled from spent living and spent dying.
>
> (*CP* 291; emphasis mine)

As he had argued in his "Prose statement on the poetry of war" the year before, "[I]n war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming. Nothing will ever appease this desire except a consciousness of fact as *everyone* is at least satisfied to have it be" (*Palm* 206; emphasis mine). Though obviously opposed to communism in the economic sense, throughout this period Stevens consistently appeals to a different common good as the only possible (even "supreme") cure for the actual, universalized "spiritual violence" afflicting the world.

Similarly, the entirety of "Esthétique du Mal" (and not just Section VII where the "soldier" is named) should be read as a *poetic* statement on the poetry (or aesthetics) of war, specifically the evil that defined this war.[31] Rather than merely alluding to Baudelaire, the "Mal" signals the war—and the whole mentality which had come to be the constant—at a far and painful remove from a "revolving crystalline" or the "diamond globe" (*CP* 251) he had naively wished for in "Asides on the Oboe":

> Life is a bitter aspic. We are not
> At the centre of a diamond. At dawn,
> The paratroopers fall and as they fall
> They mow the lawn. A vessel sinks in waves
> Of people . . .
>
> (*CP* 322)

As Stevens wrote to John Crowe Ransom, "The title is not quite right in the sense that anything of that sort seems to be not quite right now-a-days" (*L* 469). It is with something closer to desperation, if not despair, than to clownish levity that Stevens then declaims, "Natives of poverty, children of malheur" (which also means "of this evil hour"), "The gaiety of language is our seigneur" (*CP* 322).

"Esthétique du Mal" accounts, at least in part, for his writing Oscar Williams only a few months later that a *prose* "commentary on War and Poetry is out of the question" (*L* 479). But, in part, Stevens' refusal to write a prose commentary (when he had been willing to write his "Prose Statement" only two years before), as well as his previously-cited concern in the same letter with the economic conditions of the future rather than with the actual war, may be explained by the generalized feeling in 1944 that the war *was* virtually over—as early as May 22, 1944, George W. Norris was already writing about "Germany After Defeat"[32]—and by the consequently alarming Special Section of *The New Republic* which had appeared in March of 1944. Just as victory seemed imminent, *The New Republic* introduced the possibility, even probability, of

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in a special edition devoted entirely to this subject. The very first paragraph of this special twenty-page section begins by noting that although "People in all countries have been talking about an international government after the war," in reality, "there was before this war, there is now, and there bids fair to be on an even greater scale after it, an international government of a different kind," and goes on to give an ominous description of Hitler-like economic rulers who have been and will be controlling the world through "influencing the few rather than by giving an account to the many"—the natural rubber cartel, the chemicals cartel, the diamond cartel, and others, in tin, in steel.[33] Though Stevens' fear of the "leftist" labor may seem perversely right-wing after this issue, I think his sense of future *economic* chaos as the controlling future reality was genuine and something felt by many people at the time, especially after having already witnessed economic disaster in the form of the Great Depression following the Great War.

Many other poems written during the war could be fruitfully explored in the actual context of their times, among them, for example, "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit," also written in 1944. However, two poems written just after the war specifically indicate Stevens' political (and responsible) interaction with this moment of history. "Two Tales of Liadoff," published in the

Pacific only three months after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, may have as its context the many bombs that had so gruesomely characterized this war, including the "blockbusters," then the long-range rockets being developed at the end of the war, and possibly "the bomb."[34] The first "tale" begins with what appears to be a recasting of reality into a more "amenable circumstance" (*OP* 225):

> Do you remember how the rocket went on
> And on, at night, exploding finally
> In an ovation of resplendent forms—
>
> Ovation on ovation of large blue men
> In pantaloons of fire and of women hatched,
> Like molten citizens of the vacuum?
>
> (*CP* 346)

In addition to the specific reference given in the title to a contemporaneous composer, Stevens may also be referring to the "ovation" we have given to "the rocket's red glare," the celebration of "bombs bursting in air" in the form of more amenable fireworks. That *was* our tale, one which envisioned military victory as freedom, something to be celebrated with fireworks, for "the home of the brave."

But the second tale begins quite differently: "The feeling of Liadoff was changed," much as the "theatre" and the "classic" hero had changed. But *this* particular change, published in November of 1945, describes a fundamental revision of both the self and the public, of the poet and how Americans would see themselves, as a consequence of escalating violence. Even Liadoff (who stands for the poet) was changed:

> It is
> The instant of the change that was the poem,
> *When the cloud pressed suddenly the whole return*
> From thought, like a violent pulse in the cloud itself . . .
>
> (*CP* 347; emphasis mine)

What *was* the poem is no longer possible after this thought, which has turned on itself in such violence. The poem goes on to say that both "the town" and he, himself, now seek the sounds that would "soon become a voluble speech" (*CP* 347), concluding that such speech, if possible, will be "archaic and hard to hear." Perhaps also barbaric and hard to bear.

The possibility of this militaristic, as well as the aesthetic, context becomes more clear in "Burghers of Petty Death," published the following year in a series of twelve poems entitled "More Poems for Liadoff,"[35] in which Stevens writes with what I think is a clear reference to the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb:

> The grass is still green.

> But there is a total death,
> A devastation, a death of great height
> And depth, covering all surfaces,
> Filling the mind.
> . . . . . .
> Of great height and depth
> Without any feeling, an imperium of quiet,
> In which a wasted figure, with an instrument,
> Propounds blank final music.
>
> (*CP* 362)

This is neither aesthetic detachment nor the transformation of a painful reality into a merely metaphoric or placebic "crystal." The first part of this quotation, the "death of great height / And depth, covering all surfaces, / Filling the mind," would have been immediately recognizable in 1945 as an accurate description of the first atomic bomb and of its immediate impact not only on the Japanese who died but on the rest of the world who survived. The second part makes it clear that this new, devastating reality is a function of the imagination—that is, of the mind or minds who first thought of and then created this *catastrophic instrument*. (It is no wonder that Stevens would have written down as the possible title of a poem "Why the Poet Doesn't Smile" a couple of pages after "Words about Death"—as well as the desire for "Poetry As The Switzerland of the Mind.")[36]

Although some journalists referred to the bomb as the "miracle of Manhattan" (as in Bernard Jaffe's "How the Bomb Came to Be"),[37] the overwhelming response to the bomb was not a victorious celebration of the end of World War II but a pervasive sadness and anxiety—at least among the writers for *The New Republic*, as several articles in *The New Republic* of August 1945 testify. Only two weeks after the first atomic bomb was dropped, one reporter writes that

> The terrible moral decision to use the atomic bomb was made by a few people. I suppose its use was inevitable. Once you invest two billion dollars in a fire cracker you have to light it. Personally, I am sick and tired of decisions like this being made in secret, including those at Potsdam. . . . For the atomic bomb, it could justly be argued that in the short-range view it shortened the war and saved lives, though from the longer view we may all regret that it was ever employed. . . . Among my friends I find a curious new sense of insecurity, rather incongruous in the face of military victory.[38]

Or as Bruce Bliven puts it, "A report from Washington said the people of the capital have been plunged into gloom" by the "news of the atomic bomb." More ominously, he concludes, "Candor compels us to admit that nothing in the history of humankind justifies the hope that we shall be able to master this new weapon and exploit its possibilities for good and not for evil." And with an earnestness and an ethical appeal that matches almost exactly Stevens' "De-

scription without Place" (written only a few months before), Bliven introduces his article, "The Bomb and the Future" (which was also published only two weeks after the first one was dropped) this way:

> The coming of the atomic bomb is an event of such tremendous importance that all responsible persons will weigh their words in speaking or writing of its consequences.[39]

As Stevens had already concluded, only two months before the dropping of the bomb, in "Description without Place" (the poem he chose, significantly, to place immediately after "Debris of Life and Mind" and before "Two Tales of Liadoff" in both *Transport to Summer* and his *Collected Poems*), "Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne / Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon, / To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake" (*CP* 341-42). Or, as he writes in the following section of the poem, "The eye of Lenin kept the far-off shapes. / His mind raised up, down-drowned, the chariots. / And reaches, beaches, tomorrow's regions became / One thinking of apocalyptic legions" (*CP* 343). It is for these reasons that Stevens would also have argued that "any responsible person" would weigh his (or her) words: "Thus the theory of description matters most," Stevens concludes,

> because everything we say
> Of the past is description without place, a cast
>
> Of the imagination, made in sound;
> And because what we say of the future must portend . . .
> (*CP* 345-46)

Obviously, "the bomb" had not yet been dropped when Stevens was writing "Description without Place." Yet as he wrote in June of 1945, the week he delivered this poem as the Phi Beta Kappa speech at the graduation exercises for Harvard,

> The ordinary state of mind seems to be one of suspense. Shortly, when the Japanese war begins to mount in fury, we shall feel differently. . . . [T]he truth about Japan seems to be difficult for most of us to grasp. From our point of view here at home, America has never been on the make, or on the grab, whatever people may have said of us elsewhere. The Japanese war is likely to change all that. (*L* 506-07; June 25, 1945)

And not just for this generation, Stevens laments, but for the next generations as well (*L* 507). Six weeks after Stevens' letter, the first atomic bomb exploded over Hiroshima.[40]

However much this poem may have expressed the growing anxieties of the time, an additional, and I think conscious, provocation for "Description without Place" may well have been the various maps published in *The New Republic* (and other journals as well) in 1944 and 1945 that kept attempting to de-

scribe agreeable boundaries for a future Poland. It was exactly that dispute that had prefigured the war, as Germany and Russia variously described "Poland" in different ways. And at toward what appeared to be, and was, the end of the war, the world had still not settled upon a "satisfactory" description of Poland. Other maps showed the extent or retreat of various countries' boundaries changing every week. Underneath one map of eastern Europe, entitled "On the Borders of the Empire," we find, "Because we consider Germany as having a different set of boundaries, we ought not to overlook the fact that Hitler's own Germany follows the limits of the old German Empire before 1648" (112, 2 [January 8, 1945]). It was in this historical context, as well as within the realized increasing fury of technological warfare, that Stevens wrote to Henry Church, just prior to composing the poem, that

> It seems to me to be an interesting idea: that is to say, the idea that we live in the description of a place and not in the place itself, and in every vital sense we do. (*L* 494)

Given how powerful "descriptions" had proven to be—in reality—given that they can determine a place, and by dissent or consent, start or end an atrocious war, it seems to me that Stevens is ethically correct (rather than escapist) when he says that he finds it impossible to believe that he is living in the "Atomic Age" and that he thinks it nonsense to try to do so. Accepting the description of our world as "Atomic"—or now "Nuclear"—is suicidal. "Thought is an infection," he writes in his "Adagia": "In the case of certain thoughts it becomes an epidemic" (*OP* 158). As Stevens repeatedly makes clear, we must "resist" such epidemic thoughts or descriptions:

> We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this *in poetry as well as in politics*. (*OP* 225; italics added)

Collecting oneself "against all this" is "resistance." And, expanding on his earlier attempt to explain the importance of poetry in helping people to live their lives, he finally states, "Resistance is the opposite of escape. The poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. There can be no thought of escape" (*OP* 225).

Perhaps, then, we can conclude that the war did prey deeply on Stevens' mind, as he wrote in a letter cited earlier, that he was very much "In History" during World War II. Perhaps, too, we can understand the motivation for the following lines from "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (another poem written during World War II): "On a few words of what is real in the world / I nourish myself. I defend myself against / Whatever remains" (*CP* 308). "Politics," Stevens writes in his "Adagia," "is the struggle for existence" (*OP* 161). "War is the periodical failure of politics" (*OP* 164). In that "unbelievable catastrophe" (*L* 343), the strophes of poetry must offer themselves not only as a means of re-

sistance, but also as "a means of redemption" (*OP* 160), for "The great poem" is a "disengaging of (a) reality" (*OP* 169), and "The poet is the priest of the invisible" (*OP* 169).

The critical change in Stevens' aesthetics that occurred during World War II, from that of a relatively private poet to one with a public voice and conscience, can most clearly be seen by comparing Stevens' statement in "The Situation in American Poetry" (1939) to a relatively long letter of 1946, written only eight months after World War II had ended. In the first, as already cited, he writes that the writer's role in a time of war would be the same as any other time, only "concentrated and intensified," by which it appears that he means validating his personal experience. (This is also the article in which he had stated that "war is a military state of affairs, not a literary one," a statement that his subsequent poetry comes to contradict.) However, in the later letter of 1946, we find a Stevens with a deepened sense of the crucial, and even political, necessity of the poet, insisting also that the social role of the poet had never been more urgent. In contrast to offering a *private* sanction, Stevens argues at the end of the war that poetry (and the poet) very much offers a *public* sanction. It is consistent with his own rejection of what might be called propagandistic or dogmatic poetry that in the same letter Stevens rejects the political domination of the world, noting ironically that "Today, in America, all roles yield to that of the politician" (*L* 526). He continues to assert that the poet "must remain individual," by which he also means that the poet "must remain free." He goes so far as to pit the poet *against* the politician:

> The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. (*L* 526)

But then he clarifies that "This does not mean" that the poet is "a private figure":

> If people are to become dependent on poetry for any of the fundamental satisfactions, poetry must have an increasingly intellectual scope and power. This is a time for the highest poetry. We never understood the world less than we do now nor, as we understand it, liked it less. We never wanted to understand it more or needed to like it more. These are the intense compulsions that challenge the poet as the appreciatory creator of values and beliefs. *That, finally, states the problem*. (*L* 526; emphasis mine)

From my perspective, that makes the poet—and the critic—intensely political, though not politicians.

The "high poetry" that Stevens wrote after 1946, from "The Auroras of Autumn," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," to "The Rock," and the stunning lyrics, from "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," to "A Quiet Normal Life," testify to his persistent and successful attempts after World War II to "satisfy" this role, one which is finally committed less to the *polis*, per se, than to the *cosmopolis*. The world "we

make," "Out of this same light, out of the central mind" (*CP* 524), is a world which makes far more *sense* to me than the Nuclear Age. This is one of the many reasons that we are drawn so intensely to Stevens, despite his obvious and growing list of human failings. There is something of a satisfaction, even a religious sanction, in his finest verse. Well before the end of the Second World War, Stevens' attitude seems akin to Psalms 50, where God promises salvation to "him that ordereth his conversation aright." For Stevens, there remained the belief—and this, finally not a fiction—that we can save the world if he, or rather we, can order our words aright.

If we must have a more secular ending, Stevens has given us that as well, in the essay appropriately entitled "Imagination as Value" (1948). As opposed to the impoverished possibility of "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" that reality has been reduced to "All mind and violence and nothing felt" (*CP* 348), in that essay Stevens writes,

> My final point, then, is that the imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos. (*NA* 153)

The same point had been made by W. P. Southard two years before, only one year after the end of the war, in "Escape to Reality." Asking, again, what should the modern writer write about now, Southard remarks, "About love," explaining that "this would be simply the escape from the irremediably diseased to the relatively normal—escape *to* reality."[41] Just before the war began, William Carlos Williams had written that great art "liberates while it draws the world closer in mutual understanding and tolerance."[42] We come back to something like truth and beauty after all. That both Stevens and Southard could, *after* the horrors of World War II, sound so much like Williams before the war began is yet another facet, even fact, of our history that we should not cease to describe.

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Notes

[1]See Stanley Burnshaw, "Turmoil in the Middle Ground," *New Masses* 17 (October 1, 1935): 41-42; and Marjorie Perloff, "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 41-63. To be fair, Burnshaw's critique of Stevens is not so negative as our critical tradition has represented it. And Perloff's essay, which raises the important question about the value of humanistic ideals in our technological and violent world, represents Stevens as responding to the Second World War in his poetry and his politics, but in deeply disturbing ways. Nevertheless, as early as 1940 Cleanth Brooks had argued that few contemporary poets had "had to face so continually the charge that his work was precious"; *The Harvard Advocate* 127, 3 (December 1940): 29. This charge has continued to be levelled, with increasing vigor, against Stevens over the subsequent decades. Among the few that have made an argument for Stevens' poetry having a specifically political content are Joseph Riddel, "'Poets' Politics'—Wallace Stevens' *Owl's Clover*," *Modern Philology* 56 (1958): 118-32; Riddel, "Wallace Stevens' *Ideas of Order*: The Rhetoric of Politics and the Rhetoric of Poetry," *New England Quarterly* 34 (1961): 328-51; David Howard, "Wallace Stevens and Politics," *Renaissance & Modern Studies* 21 (1977): 52-75; Charles Berger, *Forms of*

Farewell: The Late Poetry of Wallace Stevens (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); my "Wallace Stevens: Poems Against His Climate," *WSJour* 11, 2 (Fall 1987): 75-93; Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); and most recently Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Finally, I should acknowledge my indebtedness to Roy Harvey Pearce, not only for his *Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), which lays the early groundwork for political readings of Stevens, but also for his sustained and personal encouragement.

[2]Perloff, 47, 43.

[3]The reference is to the title of Perloff's essay, cited above, which itself is borrowed from Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Subsequent references to Stevens' poetry, letters, and essays refer to the standard editions of these works (abbreviated *CP*, *L*, *NA*, *OP*, and *Palm*). It would be possible to add to Stevens' place, or lack of place, in history at this moment by noting that not only did he publish "Variations on a Summer Day" in the *Kenyon Review* (2 [Winter 1940]: 72-75) during World War II, but that he also wrote that he had deliberately "excluded" any genuine thinking about the war in that poem (*L* 346). However, as he also makes clear in the same letter to Hi Simons, his "own main objective" during that time "is to do" the "kind of thinking" that, for someone sitting under the Maginot line, would "make the situation reasonable, inevitable and free from question" (*L* 346).

[4]Again, we could buttress this interpretation of Stevens by noting that in his "Adagia" he writes, "Money is a kind of poetry" (*OP* 165).

[5]Holly Stevens identifies this review as Jean Wahl's review of Ransom's *Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1945), printed in *The New Republic* 113 (August 13, 1945): 196-98.

[6]Subsequent citations from *The New Republic* will include the publication date and page numbers in the text.

[7]In the following quotations, *PR* will be used as an abbreviation for the *Partisan Review*, in particular, the two successive articles on "The Situation in American Writing" (6, 4 [Summer 1939]: 25-51; and 6, 5 [Fall 1939]: 103-22). Admittedly, not all the writers responded with such aesthetic detachment as those cited in the text. Even so, Harold Rosenberg's one-line answer to what the writer's social obligation should be in war creates, with its ironic tone, something of the very detachment that the semantic content of his answer attempts to belie: "In time of war the writer has at least the obligation *not to find the 'good side' of it*" (*PR* 49).

[8]*PR* 125-26. This article, which takes the form of a letter signed by the League for Cultural Freedom and Socialism, argues that while "War has become *the* issue," still "Only the German people can free themselves of the fascist yoke. The American masses can best help them by fighting *at home* to keep their own liberties." It then calls "upon all American artists, writers and professional workers to join" in a "statement of implacable opposition to this dance of war in which Wall Street joins with the Roosevelt administration."

[9]One such "repression" can be seen in both the introduction to Stevens that Helen Vendler wrote for the new *Harper American Literature* anthology (where she observes that the attempt of his poems to "treat social issues, including the war in Ethiopia and World War II . . . achieved no real stylistic success" and that Stevens "remained, for the rest of his career, preeminently a poet of the inner life") and her choice of poems to be included in the anthology (a choice which notably excludes all the poems I will discuss here); see *Harper*. vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 1528. In fact, the only poems reprinted from this remarkably productive period of Stevens' career are "Arrival at the Waldorf" and "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters."

[10]Interestingly, as early as September 20, 1939 (the date upon which this letter was written), Stevens conveys his own understanding that a second war with Germany will affect everyone, in all places: "I hope that this war will not involve you in your far-off home, but even in Ceylon you are bound to feel some of the effects of this unbelievable catastrophe" (*L* 342-43).

[11]These two poems were first published as "Two Theoretic Poems," *Hika* 6, 7 (May 1940): 6-7.

[12]Melita Schaum, "'Seemings of History': The Political Poetics of Wallace Stevens," paper delivered at the session of The Wallace Stevens Society, MLA Conference (December 1987).

[13]Compare Stevens' sense of the "fatal unity of war" with an article published in *The New Republic* entitled "Global Strategy": whereas in World War I, "a common Allied front was a reality," "Today the Allied fronts are separated by thousands of miles and the goal of unified strategy is to coordinate the several fronts" (106, 2 [January 12, 1942]: 40). As this article suggests, one of the more confusing and catastrophic facts of the Second World War was that there was no longer an identifiable "front," but rather a "fatal unity" involving many fronts, at many places, all at one time.

[14]See Berger, 35 ff., and Perloff, 42-48. Something of a similar dilemma in interpreting Stevens can be found even in his annotations and markings in other books. For instance, the marginalia of Matthew Arnold's *Essays in Criticism* (New York: MacMillan, 1895), now held at the Huntington, reveals Stevens' interest in very *disinterested* criticism, since he has marked Arnold's assertion that "Criticism must maintain its independence of the practical spirit and its aims" (34); yet it also shows Stevens' interest in the political function of the "creative power," since he has also marked the passage in which Arnold praises Burke for bringing "thought to bear upon politics" (14).

[15]In addition, Stevens published his own poetry in *The New Republic* several times. The Huntington possesses three issues of the journal (all of which include Stevens' poetry) which were in his library: Sept. 14, 1921; Nov. 15, 1922; and April 16, 1930.

[16]In "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," Stevens writes within the context of "men in helmets, born on steel" that the priests of a new world "are preaching in a land / To be described. They are preaching in a time / To be described" (*CP* 259, 254).

[17]In "Call Japan's Bluff!" T. A. Bisson notes that at least from the perspective of Japan, "Greater East Asia" must now be, for economic and pragmatic reasons, "carved from territories now held by China, Britain, Holland, the United States and the Soviet Union" (105, 18 [November 3, 1941]: 579). However, the use of the word "Asia" to mean the equivalence of "Japan" is even more specifically indicated in "What Next in Asia?," an article singly focused on "What Sort of War" might happen between the United Stated and Japan in the "deadlock" at which the two countries had "arrived" (105, 23 [December 8, 1941]: 750). Ironically, the date of this issue of *The New Republic* was one day after Japan had actually bombed Pearl Harbor since, as with our current journals, it had gone to press before the announced newsstand date.

[18]In addition to Bisson's article above, see William Harlan Hale, "Hold the Pacific!" (105, 13 [September 29, 1941]: 394-96); and the editorial, "Stay Tough with Japan," (105, 11 [September 15, 1941]: 323). However, in the first edition of *The New Republic* to be printed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the editorial entitled "Our War" makes the point that "It is being widely said now that we must not forget that our real enemy is not Japan but Hitler. That is not true. Our real enemy is the coalition arrayed against us"; (105, 24 [December 15, 1941]: 812).

[19]In what I have found to be possibly the most bitterly ironic publication of this period in time, *The New Republic* of December 8, 1941 (again, the issue which had incidentally gone to press before the catastrophic events of December 7, 1941) printed a special section of several contemporary "Writers Under Thirty." For a nation that was in reality hearing of the bombing of Pearl Harbor over radio and that was declaring war against the Japanese on the actual date of this publication, George Barker's "Notes from the Largest Imaginary Empire" must have been perceived not with the irony I think he intended:

> [N]o one could understand the Japanese without knowledge of the fact that they gestated for only six months in the womb. "This . . . is why, when they travel in trains, first they remove their shoes, then they curl up on the seat in the posture of the embryo. . . . It also explains the public acts of urination and defecation. . . . And most of all it explains the fundamental sense of inferiority that vents itself in militarism, the cultivation of supercilious silences and the invention of tortures." (105, 23 [December 8, 1941]: 794)

In a similar fashion, at the end of the war, one week after the atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *The New Republic* was advertising a book by John F. Embree entitled *The Japanese Nation* (Farrar & Rinehart) this way:

> It tells where the Japanese came from; why the Japanese regard themselves as descendants of God; why the Japanese are one of the most regimented people on earth; why the Japanese are able to regard themselves as liberators, not aggressors.

And in bold type, the advertisement asks, "Are they [the Japanese] capable of democracy?" (113, 7 [August 13, 1945]: 195).

[20]William Harlan Hale, "After Pearl Harbor" (105, 24 [December 15, 1941]: 816-17).

[21]See "Poems Against His Climate," 87-88, for this reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"; and Drucilla Cornell, "From the Lighthouse: The Promise of Redemption and the Possibility of Legal Interpretation" (forthcoming in *Politics/Hermeneutics/Aesthetics*, ed. Gerald Bruns and Stephen Watson [Albany: SUNY Press]). Consider, in addition, that less than a month after Pearl Harbor, Quincey Howe blames authors and publishers, as well as the military, for America's unpreparedness on December 7, 1941: "Our books and authors as well as the people who publish and share them bear their share of responsibility" for not being alert to the actual danger that ensued ("Books About the War" 106, 1 [January 5, 1942]: 25). Within this context, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"—and the imperatives it declaims as a "must"—indicates the degree to which Stevens once again was waging his own fight against what he considered to be a naive, and finally wrong, sense of the responsibility of the writer in a time of war.

[22]See the editorial in *The New Republic*, "Bombing Civilians in Europe" (108, 16 [April 19, 1943]: 494).

[23]W. H. Auden, "The Poet & the City," rpt. *Modern Poetics*, ed. James Scully (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 178.

[24]The "change in realities," that "which could be wrong," about which Stevens had written in "Forces, the Will & the Weather," is made especially clear in this instance by comparing "Bombing Is a Quiet Business," written by a London reporter in 1941, to another London report, "Life Under the Robot Bombs," written in 1944. In the first, John Strachey gives a very eerie picture in which the bombing of London is not only peculiarly quiet—he writes that the bombs falling through the air make more noise than when they detonate on ground—but that in general the unaffected go on about their normal business (105, 19 [November 10, 1941]: 617-19). In the second, however, Michael Young exposes the dehumanization of living "Under *Robot* Bombs" by reporting that glass is the biggest danger in bombing. Quoting another article of *The New Statesman*, he writes,

> Powdered glass may be driven deep into you; doctors tell me that you may literally have to have your face cut right away to save your life. (111, 10 [September 4, 1944]: 271)

[25]In this regard, Lentricchia's reading of "The Anecdote of a Jar" in *Ariel and the Police* as signalling basically the background of imperialistic attitudes in the West is particularly provocative.

[26]See Michael Straight, "Hitler's Guerillas Over Here," *The New Republic* (106, 15 [April 13, 1942]: 481-83).

[27]In an earlier edition of *The New Republic*, one editorial explains that Hitler was managing to conquer Europe successfully because no one could take seriously Hitler's stated intention to eliminate the Jewish people and to "grade" the remaining conquered peoples according to race and blood, precisely because such an intention was so appalling. See "Germany's Plan for Japan," 105, 13 (September 29, 1941): 392. However, the editorial entitled "Hitler's Speech" not only announces that Hitler is, in fact, fulfilling that intention, but that he intends to extend this practice of "elimination" to all the peoples of Europe who stand in his way for gaining total domination (108, 10 [March 8, 1943]: 300).

[28]See "The New Zionism" (108, 10 [March 8, 1943]: 304).

[29]See Note 22, above.

[30]See Frank Doggett's discussion of this poem in *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 65-66, especially in conjunction with Dorothy Emerson Doggett's "Wallace Stevens' Sky That Thinks," *WSJour* 9, 2 (1985): 71-84.

[31]Eleanor Cook has recently given an extended reading of "Esthétique du Mal" in relation to World War II in *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, 189-213.

[32]See *The New Republic* 110, 21 (May 22, 1944): 703-05, in which Norris also says, "I think that it ought to be said that what I say about Germany, with certain modifications necessary under the differences in conditions, should serve as a model for both Japan and Italy."

[33]Special Section of *The New Republic* unnumbered (March 27, 1944): 427.

[34]Although he interprets the poem somewhat differently, Lloyd Frankenberg suggestively asks of this poem, "Do we repeat, *in mass disaster*, the tragic inspiration of the artist?" (italics mine), in a critical study published only four years after the end of World War II; see "Variations on Wallace Stevens," in *Pleasure Dome: On Reading Modern Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 254. Interestingly, the metaphor of the atomic bomb as a "firecracker" had been established, almost immediately after the bombs were dropped, in an article published in *The New Republic*.

[35]Published in the *Quarterly Review of Literature* 3, 2 (Fall 1946): 105-113. Among the other poems obviously concerned with war in this series are "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home," "Mountain Covered with Cats," and "Extraordinary References." The series ends, notably, with "Attempt to Discover Life."

[36]"Words About Death" is taken from p. 7 of the manuscript entitled *From Pieces of Paper* (dated 1955 by the Huntington Library), a page which also bears the title of the obviously political poem, "Asides on the Oboe." The other two titles are taken from pp. 10 and 12, respectively, of the same manuscript. Quoted with permission. George S. Lensing transcribes one of these phrases as "Why The Past Doesn't Smile" in his edition of *From Pieces of Paper* included in *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 180.

[37]See Bernard Jaffe, "How the Bomb Came to Be," 113, 12 (September 17, 1945), especially 347.

[38]T. R. B., "Atomic Anxieties," 113, 8 (August 20, 1945): 222. In this article, the writer notes with something of horror that only one month before he had concluded that the "'evolution of destructiveness is still accelerating, and the Japanese have something to learn'" (quoted from "After the Charter Is Ratified," 113, 4 [July 23, 1945]: 103). He then states that "the revelation, when it came was incomparably greater than anyone had expected" (222). The piercing irony of what this writer experienced in reflecting upon his own words seems to me very similar to what Stevens must have felt in thinking of his letter of June 25, 1945.

[39]Bruce Bliven, "The Bomb and the Future," 113, 8 (August 20, 1945): 210-212. Note that this issue begins with the editorial, "The Perils of Victory," which announces that instead of experiencing exultation at the end of the war, Americans were "strangely dazed": "Gladness for the safety of loved ones in the armed services, hopes for a more normal mode of living, did not quite shut out a sense that some of the greatest implications of the event had not yet become clear" (113, 8 [August 20, 1945]: 203). In this predicament, the editorial turns to "more practical considerations," noting with something that we, who have most recently experienced the economic "instability" after the Vietnamese War, must regard as a serious indictment of American prosperity in this century's "military state of affairs." After the war, at least according to this editorial, one of the perils of victory is that "We have no governmental commitment to maintain full employment" (203).

[40]As T. R. B.'s "After the Charter Is Ratified" makes clear, the expectation of calamity was in the air during the summer of 1945 (see Note 35, above). But as he also writes in "Atomic Anxieties," not only was "the revelation" more shocking "than anyone had expected," but "In a short week man learned that he had at last found how to blow himself up . . . The next big war may very well blow us out of the solar system. At any rate, we now have our choice" (222).

[41]W. P. Southard, "Escape to Reality," *Kenyon Review* 8, 1 (Winter 1946): 136-37.

[42]William Carlos Williams, "Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist" (1939); rpt. *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), 199.

Lyric Resistance: Views of the Political in the Poetics of Wallace Stevens and H.D.

MELITA SCHAUM

> A generation ago we should have said that the imagination is an aspect of the conflict between man and nature. Today we are more likely to say that it is an aspect of the conflict between man and organized society.
> —"Imagination as Value" (*NA* 150)

ONE OF THE OFFSHOOTS of the "new pluralism" in contemporary literary criticism is the tendency to locate texts in new, involved, even reciprocal relationships to a sociopolitical world. While the change suggests a welcome complexity in literary analysis, actual practice seems at times to devolve into reductive readings of literature or an equivocal understanding of political response. The impulse to place literature within the world of "real" events is capable of yielding strikingly contradictory products, leading us to reflect again on the complex links among aesthetics, history, and politics.

Two examinations of significant poems written during World War II illustrate the difficulties of such study: Marjorie Perloff's "Revolving in Crystal: The Supreme Fiction and the Impasse of Modernist Lyric" in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism* (1985) and Alicia Ostriker's "No Rule of Procedure: The Open Poetics of H.D.," delivered at the June, 1986 H.D. Centennial Conference in Orono, Maine. Both Wallace Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and H.D.'s "The War Trilogy" are long poems composed around 1942, a time of accelerating wartime involvement and thus hypothetically a time fruitful for analyzing the interrelations between history and art. Yet both poems are examples, seemingly incongruous during this time of international upheaval, of lyric preoccupation, balanced form, artistic perfection, and the meditative, personal voice. As such, they constitute almost a sub-genre of the contemplative, lyrical neo-epic in a time of war. But what is more striking than their structural similarity or their apparent historical incongruity is the discrepancy of responses given to these texts today—a difference which on the surface suggests a latent double standard in critical reception, but which more fundamentally questions the equivocal definition of "politics" in literary study.

Marjorie Perloff's analysis of Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" seeks to relocate the modernist lyric within its particular sociopolitical context, and in so doing relegate Stevens' poetics to a safe margin. Using a combination of correspondence, biography, publishing history, and an outline of wartime events occurring during the months of Stevens' composition of "Notes," Perloff indicts Stevens for his retreat from the monumental political events of his day. She calls this major poem "a kind of antimeditation, fearful and evasive, whose elaborate and daunting rhetoric is designed to convince both poet

and reader that, despite the daily headlines and radio bulletins, the real action takes place in the country of metaphor" ("Impasse" 42). By contrasting "the dark summer of 1942, when the Germans were pressing against the eastern front and the fighting in the Pacific was heavy" with Stevens' finicky design of the "perfect geometric whole" ("Impasse" 47) of "Notes," Perloff implies Stevens' removal from "the pressure of reality" in favor of the rhetorical "purity" of poetry—a dilemma she broadens to represent the general "impasse of Modernist lyric."

Perloff invokes Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic imagination to discriminate between the closed, "monologic," lyric authority attributed to Stevens and other High Modernist "aesthetes" and the "rupture in the lyric paradigm" demonstrated by such collage-like poetry as Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. In "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin had employed his concept of literature's inner drama of dialogue to distinguish between the style of the novel and the lyric—more specifically, to quote Bakhtin, between "artistic prose" and those genres which are "poetic in a narrow sense" (*Dialogic Imagination* 284). The former, in Bakhtin's paradigm, is identified by writing which puts to use the "sense of the boundedness, the historicity, the social determination and specificity" of language through an interaction with "alien discourse," allowing the entry and play of multiple "languages" within the work. Such narrative's effect of equalizing discourse sets it against more narrowly "poetic" writing, which presumes the direct, unmediated power of the artist's language to assign meaning. The traditionally unified, "monologic" voice elevates poetic language as authoritative, "a pure and direct expression of [the author's] own intention" (*Dialogic Imagination* 285).

Despite Bakhtin's discrimination among genres, Perloff asserts that "today we can apply this distinction to poetry itself" and appropriates Bakhtin's complex terms "monologic" and "heteroglossic" to segregate what she terms the single-voiced "'straight lyric'" of such poets as Stevens from the multi-vocal "collage poetry of the Pound tradition" ("Impasse" 61). Pound and company, by inviting the entry of other "impure" discourses into poetry, undermine the polarity between "art" and "life" to move their work beyond the stylistic "impasse" and closed, monologic autotelism of Stevens' lyric voice. In the end, the concept of the Supreme Fiction—and Stevens' poem itself—is subject to severe political censure as a vehicle, however unsuccessful, by which to evade history.

The contemporary fascination with the poet's involvement—or lack of involvement—with the world touches a poet like H.D. as well. Like Perloff, Alicia Ostriker also attempts to define the connection between prosody and politics, but with remarkably different results. In her analysis of H.D.'s "breakthrough" epic, "The War Trilogy," Ostriker draws on Pound, Whitman, and Olson to establish a "politics" of open, improvisational poetics in which the lyric "I" is not erased, but asserts itself in stylistic opposition to cultural expectations. Literary structure and its deviations here function as the artist's re-

sistance to the social, psychic, and institutional restraints imposed by a dominant culture.

Ironically, in Ostriker's investigation the very elements which Perloff indicts in Stevens become commendations to the woman poet's craft and strength in a dissolute time. Treating "Trilogy" as a modern long poem by definition "philosophical, discursive, narrative, ultimately visionary," Ostriker points to its strategic difference from the works of other (male) artists. Unlike the "disorder" of *The Waste Land*, the *Cantos*, or *Paterson*, "Trilogy" reflects an older tradition with its fixed form, and its aim toward closure and coherence announces a "confidence in the poetic process" in antithesis to prevailing modes. The geometric verse-patterns of the poem represent, for Ostriker, "beauty and coherence," yet constant variation tempers the whole: devices such as cadence, enjambment, and off-rhyme achieve the elusive effect of the poem's being "neither fixed nor free."

H.D.'s tone is described, along the same lines, as not "authoritative" like that of her male contemporaries in the long poem genre, but "light" and "intimate." The momentum of her verse is one of "lightness and hesitation"; her form is dubbed a "slender-lined epic" both in an echo of the dictum to "write the body" and to show H.D.'s resistance to the long poem's tradition as "public," doctrinally "authoritative" poetry. Even H.D.'s imagery bespeaks a feminine "poetics and politics of openness," consisting of repeated visions of womb-like enclosures opening from their apparent limits to a sense of the infinite. Ostriker points above all to the more "intimate" relationship of H.D. to her audience through the lyric voice: The sense of inclusion in the repeated use of "we" is balanced by the poem's general drive to be "exemplary, but not determinate," and the lyric "I" evades the strictures of authority and objectivity, as it "invites us to trust our own vision, ourselves" ("No Rule of Procedure"). In the end, H.D.'s technique of patterned repetition leading to intense universal insight parallels the move from personal rumination to independent vision which manifests the woman poet's political utterance against the stress of cultural oppression and the chaos of war.

To what can we attribute this virtual point-for-point discrepancy in analysis between the wartime "lyric long poems" of these two writers? Is there a qualitative difference between the "geometric precision" of a male poet which renders his endeavor a finicky escape from politics and the "impure" real world, while a similar formal patterning of a woman's verse becomes an assertion of coherence, insight, and expression? Can the meditative lyric "intimacy" of the former be indicted as monologic authoritarianism, while the very same quality in the latter is read as an outcry *against* the authoritative and a remedial intrusion of the personal and relative? Moreover, the implicit suggestion that a woman poet's personal vision *may* be an adequate response in a time of political upheaval, while a male poet's equally contemplative poetry is judged to be irresponsibly escapist throws us back into the stereotypic binarism of male activity versus female passivity, implying that women need have no "legitimate" political "vision" at all. But perhaps this apparent rupture is not merely a ques-

tion of misdirected critical favoritism or double standards; rather, it forces the acknowledgement that poetics and politics involve each other in ways not yet fully examined.

One problem may lie with the term "politics" itself, often facilely taken to be synonymous with "events" in the "real" world. Perloff lists the battles of Midway, Bataan, and the Coral Sea to provide the historical "context" for the composition of "Notes," and offers such vaguely condemnatory juxtapositions as "On June 5, *the day after the Battle of Midway*, Stevens [writing to his publisher] adds, 'I shall be greatly pleased to have the unbound copy . . . done on handmade paper if you have it'" ("Impasse" 47; italics added). Her emphasis on the neglected urgency of "radio bulletins" and "headlines" in Stevens' poetry and correspondence seems to propose that an artist's explicit recognition of specific current events is a necessary factor for his work to be "political."

Here Perloff's analysis of "Notes" is consistent with a larger agenda, made evident in her collection *The Dance of the Intellect*. This work champions the prescient postmodernism of Poundian collage-poetry in contrast to the aesthetic isolation of the High Modernist lyric and the subsequent "extinction" of that neo-Romantic "species." For Perloff, postmodernism's salvation lies in its accommodation of the materials of the "real" world, in "the urge to return the material so rigidly excluded—political, ethical, historical, philosophical—to the domain of poetry" (*Intellect* 180). In contrast to "straight" lyric poetry's presumed removal from "actual" history, the Pound tradition "wants to open the field so as to make contact with the *world* as well as the *word* " (*Intellect* 181). Two premises clearly underlie Perloff's position: 1) the concept of politics as *material* for poetic inclusion, and 2) the possibility of separating *word* and *world*.

Strictly speaking, however, one finds that "politics" covers a much broader, ultimately more abstract field than the inclusion of topical subjects or the reportage of international affairs. Events may be political in nature—symptoms of ideology, results of the momentum of international relationships—yet events do not in themselves constitute "politics." War itself is not "politics" but the outcome of politics—or, as Stevens writes, "War is the periodical failure of politics" (*OP* 164) and further, "war is only a part of a war-like whole" (*NA* 21).

Here too the interrelationship of word and world elaborated by New Historicism bears reiteration. Such theories as Dominick LaCapra's unity of event and discourse, Hayden White's view that history is only a text, or Fredric Jameson's perspective that history is a limit manifested textually contribute to a view of history which emphasizes its discursive, interpretive nature. If ideology is rhetoric (and history, in the Burkean paradigm, a kind of "conversation"), then the focus of our examination must involve the complex relationships between word and world, language and power. To become truly politicized, the critic and writer must recognize the field of political action as most fundamentally a "rhetorical war."

Subsequently, it is the metaphors which underlie our culture that help constitute our "politics"—the fabric of ideological consensus in society—and it is

to these images and the concept itself of social consensus that we must "respond" when we engage in political response deeper than a mere commiseration over headlines or a general "keeping up with the news." Ideology at its root is language, is rhetoric—from the casual euphemism of the speechmaker to the semiotics of propaganda to the sinister dualism of "Us" and "Them" which makes us the figural backbone of military politics. The "poetic acts" of media and government create the fictions without which war could not exist: the images of heroism and service, the "good death," the hypostatization of countries, the bird's-eye view from the board room of international victory or defeat, war itself becoming truly "an abstraction blooded." Contrary to Perloff's antithesis of the "real" war versus Stevens' "country of metaphor," the two are intimately involved: politics is a cultural image-making which directs, interprets, rationalizes, and abstracts the "events" of (in this case) military action. In its most basic sense, the theater of war *has always been* a "Theatre / Of Trope" (*CP* 397).

In terms of the relationship between politics and art, a clearer denominator emerges between the forces of cultural troping and the resistance or compliance of individual trope—a battle fought on the field of the image. This understanding of the intersection of language and politics has strengthened and refined, for example, the best of feminist writing, in which "political" response frequently consists of unveiling and examining social metaphors themselves and the motives implicit behind cultural image-making. For feminist writers and critics, aware of the particular historical situation of women within a hegemonic discursive network, the very act of writing is a "political" act, a riot of the individual against a dominant discourse which silences. Art is a type of resistance which at its most powerful employs subtle textual strategies to "steal the language," undermine monolithic conceptions of form and expression, exercise the "politics of style." Literature seen on this level becomes a scrutiny of ideology through a subversion of its medium, a rupture of consensus, a sabotage of the patriarchal "universal" which questions the strictures of doctrine and subverts the notion of authority. Most important, an address to specific events or the inclusion of narrowly identified "political" material becomes secondary: a novel by Virginia Woolf about a woman organizing a party can be as integrally political as a statistical study by Kate Millet or a tract on comparable worth.

The revisionist challenge issued by feminism, which goes beyond literary style to address the definition of politics itself, has shaped and influenced in a prototypical way the critical reception of H.D. Like Stevens, H.D. is a High Modernist poet difficult at first to assimilate into traditional views of "the political," but her changing fortunes might afford a new perspective through which to view other modernist poets, including Stevens. H.D.'s cryptic lyrics, her aversion to mass movements and her avowed distrust of public politics during two world wars made it initially easy for critics to dismiss her as "not of this world" (Hughes), a "poet of escape" (Bush) who either "avoided politics

of any kind" (Guest) or practiced a type of political "indifferentism" (Watts). Remarks like C. H. Sisson's of 1975 were common:

> In her essence H.D. is a slight, extremely feminine figure, whose battles are all inward, and who scarcely sought to link her thought with the public preoccupations of the age. She lived obscurely with the illusion . . . that if the artist gets on with his art all will be well. (qtd. in King 436)

No major overview was needed to motivate Susan Stanford Friedman's sardonic summary a decade later of H.D. perceived by the literary establishment as an "escapist dryad too delicate for modern life" ("Modernism" 93). Those critics of the 1980s who wished to re-examine H.D.'s unique orientation to the turmoil of her day found they needed to dismantle the narrow definition of the political as a touchstone for literary study. As Friedman and others clearly saw, the re-evaluation of H.D. demonstrated that "the concept of 'politics' itself needs re-vision" ("Modernism" 94).

That revision took a number of directions in H.D. scholarship, but all were grounded on the inseparability of word and world (the power of discourse) and on the subsequent political motivation behind the individual's relationship to language (the power of the contextualized "I" to re-direct rhetoric). For Friedman, the traditional concept of politics as "public activism" directed toward international issues and conforming to mass movements perpetuated the trivialization of women and other marginal members of society by failing to recognize the more intrinsic politics of gender and culture. As an alternative to the narrow view of political involvement, Friedman saw a "larger gender-based pattern" demonstrated by certain modernist women writers in which they

> expressed a progressive politics originating in an exploration of the power structures underlying the personal. The private domain of the individual self in relationship to others . . . served as the point of political origins. How far each woman took her political analysis as expressed in her life and work—particularly how much she made connections between gender and issues of race, class, religion, sexual preference, and state power—is a matter of individual variation. ("Modernism" 94)

In the case of H.D. in particular, the structure and themes of her work represented a critique of oppressive sociopolitical structures on a world-wide level and a challenge to the "madness of the mainstream" ("Modernism" 95). By realigning the power of the word with "worldly" action, "H.D.'s writing itself constituted her action against the dominant culture" ("Modernism" 94).

Rachel Blau Du Plessis further elaborated ways in which the political struggle takes place in a rhetorical arena for H.D. and other women writers, a drama of verbal power and revolution which Friedman elsewhere calls "textual entrapment and liberation" ("Palimpsest" 65). Du Plessis saw H.D.'s

escape from rhetorical "thralldom" as representative of the larger struggle involving human identity and resistance. To survive in the face of a culture which negates her (both as woman and as poet), H.D. must gain "cultural control of her own story," must "struggle with . . . the voices of culture to retain control," must resist being reduced, defined, and thereby "colonized" by a patriarchy "which would appropriate her" (Du Plessis 75, 84). And H.D. must address this challenge to selfhood on its most basic textual level: "She must destory the old story, lift the weight of the accustomed tale so she can tell her own. Destroy."

> This is the central struggle of the woman writer. For every word, each cadence, each posture, the tone, the range of voices, the nature of plot, the rhythm of structures, the things that happen, events excluded, the reasons for writing, the ways she's impeded, the noises around her, vocabularies of feeling, scripts of behavior, choices of wisdom, voices inside her, body divided, image of wonder.
>
> all must be re-made. (Du Plessis 74)

This revisionist use of story and myth, moreover, moves beyond personal actualization to the arena of cultural change—from literary structure to social structure. Alicia Ostriker studies ways in which H.D. and other women poets pursue a feminist antiauthoritarianism expressed through aesthetic technique and aimed at subverting oppressive cultural and political structures. For Ostriker, H.D.'s long poems dismantle and invert the myths of heroism and patriarchy, and attempt to reclaim the power of history and story for the "altered ends" of "cultural change." H.D.'s long poem "Helen in Egypt," for instance, both in theme and in structure "assails fascism and hero-worship" and gives form to an "uncompromising inwardness, [a] rejection of all authority" ("Thieves" 81). On the one hand, the poet's creative gesture stands as a "response to the chaos of history" (qtd. in King 486)—a shaping, a healing of the "spiritual diaspora" endemic to a time of war. But in addition, and constituting perhaps its most political move, it insists upon breaking down imposed structures of thought, language, and social attitude by centralizing the marginal; displacing hierarchies of race, religion, and gender; effecting a return to the heterodoxy of reality and "truth."

Focusing on politics as the remedial intrusion of personal reality onto cultural abstraction and as the recapture of the vocabulary of that reality sets the lyric voice centrally in the sphere of political relevance. Moreover, the "struggle not to be reduced" or negated by a dominant culture is not only a concern of women, but comprises perhaps the central concern underlying all individual political action and resistance. The feminist move from object to subject—escaping the dehumanization of being the passive object of language by reclaiming the active and "forbidden female identity as speaking subject" ("Palimpsest" 62)—can be extended to the situation of human beings in general silenced and depersonalized by sociopolitical abstraction. The asser-

tion of individual reality and the imposition of standards of accountability and humaneness on the collective abstract may well constitute political engagement at its most intrinsic level. Against the false "determinism" of war, inwardness becomes not escape but resistance; subjectivity is revealed to be not solipsism but rebellion, the remedial intervention of human agency.

This concept surfaces in Robert Duncan's *H.D. Book*, itself a work in contention with the doctrinaire critical establishment and one which represents the affective search for relevance by a poet and activist in the politically taut decade of the 1960s. Reading Duncan, we can begin to merge the female struggle against the oppressive "voices of culture" with the individual political struggle to retain independence of thought, to resist being "colonized" by "official culture." For Duncan, "personal politics" is the central—perhaps the only—politics to be feasibly enacted; it represents, in brief, "the consensus of authority versus the heresy of the individual experience" (II: 4, 52). Analyzing H.D.'s sense of military and cultural evil in "The War Trilogy," Duncan defines the agonistic equation:

> Where we cannot identify with the will of powerful groups in the society we live in, we feel their power over us as an evil. The word *evil*, the *OED* suggests: "usually referred to the root of *up, over*", may then be whatever power [is] over us of outer or inner compulsion. As the power and presumption of authority by the State has increased in every nation, we are ill with it, for it surrounds us and, where it does not openly conscript, seeks by advertising, by education, by dogma or by terror, to seduce, enthrall, mould, command or coerce our inner will or conscience or inspiration to its own uses. (II: 4, 46-47)

Such power on a rhetorical level—the seductive "conscription" by means of advertising, education, dogma—takes on sinister but admittedly familiar contours in a time of war:

> "Rails gone (for guns)", the poem ["The Walls Do Not Fall"] begins, with the officers of the State, in the name of the War Effort, taking over all the conditions of personal reality into their own use . . . With the declaration of war in the modern state, which claims to represent the authority of the people, the means and ends of the war become the ultimate reality. (II: 5/1, 336)

At issue for H.D. in the face of her detractors (both the fictive adversaries in the poem and the real-life critics of her poetic "escapism") are the survival of self and the centrality of language in shaping our realities. In a time of war, survival of the self is of immediate concern—not only physical survival but spiritual and intellectual endurance against the narcotic of group opinion and the national appropriation of personal realities and lives. As a woman in a patriarchial culture, a poet in a literal, utilitarian age, and an introspective individual in a time of mass ideology, H.D. faces negation through charges of

irrelevance levelled at her from many directions by a powerful "official" culture:

> "So what good are your scribblings?" the partisans of the Sword demand in *The Walls Do Not Fall*. The immediate contention means "of what good for the War Effort?", but the accusation gives rise to answers in the poem that it is her very way of life, her ultimate individuality that is under question. . . . This putting-away of allegiance that obstructs the poetic or religious reality is an inner psychic as well as an outer social struggle for life-space, for the identity of the poet and the way of poetry to create itself and find its true community, that is, its freedom, within the mass of a populace where forces rule that care nothing for or are hostile to its existence. (II: 5/1, 343, 345)

To her adversaries' contention that the Sword "fights for life," H.D. responds "that Writing too is part of the fight for life" (II: 5/1, 344).

The first phase in H.D.'s offensive is to reveal not only the relationship between particular uses of language and a culture which valorizes military action, but the *primacy* of discourse over event, its ability to create a self-fulfilling "reality." Duncan sees it as the interaction of "wish" and "world"—fiction and actuality—in the creation of our distinctively human lives, which are contoured around such abstractions as history, identity, society, ideology, war. He recognizes that "all of human history appears to H.D. as if it were a Creation or fiction of reality, involving wish as well as world in its works—and here, the war as much as the writing is wish" (II: 5/1, 337). Moreover, "H.D.'s sense [was] that ultimately the War was to be subject to Writing itself as a higher prime of reality" (II: 5/1, 336):

> . . . remember, O Sword,
> you are the younger brother, the latter-born,
>
> your Triumph, however exultant,
> must one day be over,
>
> *in the beginning*
> *was the Word*.
> . . .
>
> Without thought, invention,
> you would not have been, O Sword,
>
> without idea and the Word's mediation,
> you would have remained
>
> unmanifest in the dim dimension
> where thought dwells . . .
>
> (H.D., *Collected* 519)

Acknowledging rhetoric's power to manipulate or to unveil the illusions that guide our actions divests political "reality" of its seamless, unimpeachable potency. At the same time, it warns of the danger of unexamined language, a danger which the poet, in her drive to challenge official discourse, can reveal and alleviate:

> . . . if you do not even understand what words say,
>
> how can you expect to pass judgement
> on what words conceal?
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . idols and their secret [are] stored
> in man's very speech
>
> (H.D., *Collected* 517)

The project of the poet, representative of the individual disenfranchised by the dominant culture, is to recapture the integrity of self by continually recapturing the discourse of personal reality. As Duncan summarizes, "The problem throughout is one of translation between the individual experience which is repressed in the official culture or banished to the realm of madness and the body of what is taken as authoritative" (II: 5/1, 341). This paradigm of resistance defines the politics of gender and culture frequently expressed in the writings of women. Yet the insight that politics can and often must be addressed at the level of discourse, by the individual voice in rebuttal to cultural consensus, seems not to have extended to the consideration of general poets' response to international politics and the workings of official culture in a time of war.

Here some statements of Stevens might be allowed to demonstrate how his own distrust of mass movements and avoidance of public politics point to a more sophisticated concept of autonomy as political gesture, and how his scrutiny of language reveals an awareness of the complex ways in which discursive and socio-historical events interact. Critics have long seen in Stevens the epitome of the modernist poet's removal from the sphere of political engagement. What is assumed in much literary analysis is that the High Modernist preoccupation with lyric interiority always signifies an escape from history and the world: a type of navel-gazing solipsism at odds with an era of world-changing events. But what has been overlooked in Stevens' preoccupation with poetry and the poetic is that far from illustrating a "guilty aestheticism" removed from history, it provides startling insights into the fictions of history, the rhetorical "illusions" by which we as social beings live and act.

In an address delivered at Bard College in 1948 titled "Poetic Acts," Stevens examined a fundamental communal phenomenon: the engagement with the "unreal" which makes up a central part of all social, economic, religious, and political thinking. Much like H.D.'s conflation of wish and world, this "projection of poetry into reality," the creation of fictions or generalizations which dominate our opinions and actions, is revealed to be both a fundamental drive

of communal man and a simplification which must be repeatedly unmasked. Stevens explains the pervasiveness of imaginative projection in everyday life:

> When we go to the corner to catch a bus or walk down the block to post a letter, our acts in doing these things are direct. But when we gather together and become engaged with something unreal our act is not so much the act of gathering together as it is the act of becoming engaged with something unreal. We do this sort of thing on a large scale when we go to church on Sunday, when we celebrate days like Christmas or the much more impressive days of the end of Lent. . . . [We also] find the poetic act in lesser and everyday things, as for example, in the mere act of looking at a photograph of someone who is absent or in writing a letter to a person at a distance, or even in thinking of a remote figure . . . Just as in space the air envelops objects far away with an ever-deepening blue, so in the dimension of the poetic act the unreal increasingly subtilizes experience and varies appearance. The real is constantly being engulfed in the unreal. But I want to be quite sure that you recognize that *I am talking about something existing, not about something purely poetic . . .* (*OP* 239-40; italics added)

Stevens goes on to provide examples from social interpretation, our fictive projection into the nature of class which often determines social action: "The act of thinking of the life of the rich is a poetic act and this seems to be true whether one thinks of it with liking or with dislike. The same thing may be said of the act of thinking of the life of the poor. Most of us do not share the life of either the one or the other and for that reason both are unreal" (*OP* 240). These "lives"—imagined but not directly known—become the foundation from which our opinions evolve and our prejudices often emerge. As Stevens says elsewhere, "if one collected instances of imaginative life as social form over a period of time, one might amass a prodigious number . . . [S]ocial attitudes, social distinctions and the insignia of social distinctions are instances . . . [P]eople turn to the imagination without knowing it in life" (*NA* 145, 147).

Other abstract areas of life can also be seen as "poetic" projections, perhaps "necessary" fictions for social existence, but nonetheless subject to the same dangers of reductiveness and unreality. Duncan has pointed out that "[m]oney and war are also fictional entities, for men believe in them, as they believe in elves and gods, to make real their lives" (II: 5/1, 338). Stevens, too, has called money "a kind of poetry" (*OP* 165), and in "Poetic Acts" he goes so far as to label modern national economy a "poetico-economy"—a term we can undoubtedly appreciate today. Elsewhere, Stevens identifies the irrational nature of the electoral process (*OP* 225) and culminates his examples with the ultimate "poem" of military action: "surely for millions of men and women the act of joining the armed forces is measurably a poetic act, since for all of them it is

a deviation from the normal, impelled by senses and necessities inoperative on the ordinary level of life" (*OP* 240). And finally:

> One wants to consider the imagination on its most momentous scale. Today this scale is not the scale of poetry, nor of any form of literature or art. *It is the scale of international politics* . . . [W]e live today in a time dominated by great masses of men and, while the reason of a few men may underlie what they do, they act as their imaginations impel them to act. (*NA* 142-43, 142; italics added)

In the midst of this constant engagement with unreality, the poet paradoxically best embodies the individual's duty to return to "reality," as the man of imagination who nonetheless "commits himself to reality, which then becomes his inescapable and ever-present difficulty and inamorata" (*OP* 241). The poet, for Stevens as for H.D., here becomes the individual who through scrutiny has cultivated an "immunity to eloquence" (*NA* 10), who "has strengthened himself to resist the bogus" (*OP* 241).

Stevens' concept of resistance—personal, poetic, and political—finds further analogues to the politics of recapturing personal reality. In his essay "The Irrational Element in Poetry," Stevens deals directly with the responsibility of the writer, clarifying the antithesis between poetic engagement and "escape":

> The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion. . . . We are preoccupied with events, even when we do not observe them closely. We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as in politics. If politics is nearer to each of us because of the pressure of the contemporaneous, poetry, in its way, is no less so and for the same reason. (*OP* 224-25)

Reiterating the connection between the "irrational" impulse in social and political action as well as in poetry, Stevens points to this time of upheaval, when "the greater the pressure of the contemporaneous, the greater the resistance." But rather than an evasion of the real, for the man of responsible imagination,

> *Resistance is the opposite of escape*. . . . Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance. (*OP* 225; italics added)

While superficially the "conversion" of circumstance can be misread as precisely that poetic "escape" which Perloff and other critics indict—the "falsify-

ing" of reality toward a more favorable vision—instead, the move toward engagement and accountability here must be appreciated. With characteristic lexical precision, Stevens chooses the word "amenable" as the goal of human "conversion" of circumstance, as that word denotes making circumstance "answerable," "responsible," "accountable," "able to be tested," "responsive to examination." Elsewhere, Stevens makes scrupulously clear his definition of the "pressure of reality" as the force of contemporary events which overwhelm and evade us, which seek to "conscript":

> By the pressure of reality, I mean the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness *to the exclusion of any power of contemplation*. The definition ought to be exact and, as it is, may be merely pretentious. But when one is trying to think of a whole generation and of a world at war . . . the plainest statement of what is happening can easily appear to be an affectation. (*NA* 20)

It is the difficult *contemplation* of events—converting or translating political irrationality and cultural abstraction back into a morally answerable set of concrete actions, assumptions, motives—which constitutes "resistance" at its most fundamental level. Again, the recapture of the integrity of self in the face of outer compulsion is at issue. In antithesis to the fictive soldier's "final aphorism" in Stevens' early "Lettres D'Un Soldat"—"No introspective chaos . . . I accept: / War, too, although I do not understand" (*OP* 11)—Stevens pits the "great modern faith . . . faith in the truth and particularly in the idea that the truth is attainable" (*OP* 235).

On a broad level, it can be argued that the examination of such "truth" preoccupied Stevens' entire poetic career, with the understanding that it is in the interplay between imagination and reality that truth perhaps abides. On the one hand, Stevens recognized the empty yet powerful inventions pervading history, severed from the real and the particular, yet breeding through repetition their own "actuality"—

> The civil fiction, the calico idea,
> The Johnsonian composition, abstract man,
> All are evasions like a repeated phrase,
> Which, by its repetition, comes to bear
> A meaning without a meaning.
>
> (*OP* 65)

These are the "descriptions without place," "the invention of a nation in a phrase" (*CP* 345), Stevens' "seemings" of history. At the same time, although the tendency toward invention of this nature continually evokes the poet's near-obsessive scrutiny and suspicion, and often calls forth his despair, his truth-seeking attitude must allow for the beneficent illusions necessary to our being in the world, resulting in a carefully complex relationship to the powers of inventive abstraction. Abstraction is a tendency to which we capitulate because we must, but which we must also recognize for what it is and for the

power it has in our lives. As Stevens ominously declared for his time: "The world is at the mercy of the strongest mind in it whether that strength is the strength of sanity or insanity, cunning or good-will" (*OP* 174). Yet equally, "If the mind is the most terrible force in the world, it is also the only force that defends us against terror. . . . [I]t is the only force that can defend us against itself" (*OP* 173-74).

Given the intimate connections between politics and language, such literature which studies the workings of language, human desire, and the imagination in a time of war becomes centrally political, becomes a force (as it were) defending us against itself. Within this context Stevens rightly saw, "the theory of description matters most. / It is the theory of the word for those / For whom the word is the making of the world" (*CP* 345). The lyric itself—indicative of subjectivity, perspective, and the singular voice—takes on new relevance, denoting the resistance of the individual sensibility against an age which acts as "a barricade against the singular man / By the incalculably plural" (*CP* 340). The lyric voice assumes a determined autonomy, not of the elitist artwork, but of the self in a time when the pressure of contemporary ideology and mass action is at its most extreme.

In a reply to *Yale Literary Magazine's* query concerning the greatest problem facing the young writer in America of the 1940s, Stevens most clearly articulated this necessary battle fought by the individual against the pressures of political conformity:

> The role of the poet may be fixed by contrasting it to that of the politician. The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. It is the personal in the poet that is the origin of his poetry. . . . This does not mean that he is a private figure. On the other hand, it does mean that he must not allow himself to be absorbed as the politician is absorbed. He must remain individual. As individual he must remain free. The politician expects everyone to be absorbed as he himself is absorbed. This expectation is part of the sabotage of the individual. . . . [T]he poet's problem, then, is to maintain his freedom . . . (*L* 526)

In a paradigm of politics which not only includes but mandates the individual's recapture of the integrity of self through affirmation of the discourse of personal reality, the lyric voice becomes a central and relevant artistic vehicle of the modern age. Postmodernism's advocates, frequently self-congratulatory in their avoidance of the lyric I's authority and "autonomy," may themselves be masking a nostalgia for a pure, unmediated presentation of the discourses of the "actual" world, an implosion of the mediating self into an innocence which is simply unavailable. Such poets as H.D. and Wallace Stevens, with their more difficult focus on the complexity and power of the lyric, on the rhetoric of history and politics, and on the directed language of resistance, pre-

sent the lyric "I" in a subtler and ultimately more "political" light: as "the irrepressible revolutionist . . . the intelligence that endures" (*NA* 152, 52).

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The Politics of Reality, 1948: Wallace Stevens, Delmore Schwartz, and the New Criticism

PAUL BAUER

> The will to conformism, which is now the chief prevailing fashion among intellectuals, reveals its true nature: it is a flight from the flux, chaos and uncertainty of the present.
>
> —Delmore Schwartz, "Our Country and Our Culture," *Partisan Review* (1952).

I

ON MARCH 17, 1948, RESPONDING to accelerating tensions between the Western allies and the Soviet Union, Great Britain, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands signed the Brussels Pact, a precursor of NATO; on the same day in Washington, President Harry Truman went before Congress to argue for the passage of the European Recovery Program, the official title of the Marshall Plan. A note Truman attached to a memorandum from General Marshall captures the urgency of the moment: "Will Russia move first? Who pulls the trigger? Then where do we go?"[1]

The day after Truman's address to Congress, March 18, Wallace Stevens traveled from his home in Hartford to Yale University to deliver an address of his own, the lecture "Effects of Analogy." Afterwards Stevens was fêted at the house of Norman Holmes Pearson, and there he had an encounter with Cleanth Brooks, which though less famous than Stevens' "fistfight" with Hemingway, is more illuminating with regard to his poetry and the politics it implied. Brooks tells the story this way:

> We talked about John Ransom, we talked about Delmore Schwartz. We talked about the good estate of letters, what was wrong and what was right about it. I think he indicated at the time that Delmore Schwartz represented a kind of hope for modern poetry. I don't think he was emphasizing Schwartz's actual poetry so much as the general stance he took. I may be elaborating what was not in the situation, but I think it was the matter of: here is a person living in New York and facing the difficulties and facts of American life. We don't need anything escapist or remote, something of the sort. . . . There was a sequel to this pleasant meeting. I began to hear stories around that Wallace Stevens thought he had mortally offended me. I really was completely shocked and surprised. We had had a very pleasant conversation: I think he teased me about some of my friends, John Ransom and others, but it was all light-hearted teasing. I found nothing offensive . . .[2]

Brooks goes on in an affable manner to describe Stevens as "a true poet as well as a gentleman" whose "memory of that evening was completely out of kilter with my memory of it or, I would say, the facts of the situation." Stevens' most exhaustive biographer, Joan Richardson, accepts Brooks's interpretation of the incident as the critic's "perceptive" recognition of "Stevens' living in the imagining of what had occurred rather than in the reality of it," and goes on to explain Stevens' drinking that night as the result of his embarrassment at public speaking and insecurity regarding his personal appearance.[3]

In this essay I argue that it is Brooks and Richardson who fail to understand the "facts of the situation"; that Stevens knew exactly what he was doing and what he had done; and that his "mortification" at his "imagined rudeness" that Richardson describes measures, not his paranoid insecurity, but his consciousness of the political implications of his divergence with Brooks and the literary establishment he represented at a moment when news of the developing Cold War dominated Americans' thoughts. What had happened, that is, was not merely a social *faux pas*, and not even primarily a literary dispute pitting the author of *The New Criticism*, Ransom, and the poetry editor of the *Partisan Review*, Schwartz, but finally a *political* disagreement thoroughly enmeshed in the issues of the day. Stevens did dislike academic New Criticism as represented by Ransom and lesser figures such as William Van O'Connor.[4] And Stevens did identify with the urbane, more journalistic criticism of Schwartz and his cohort at *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv. But in the process of that literary identification Stevens co-opted not the left-wing politics of the *Partisan Review*—Stevens was far too much a man of the "vital center" for that—but the idiosyncratic attitude saturating its pages, which equated a vigorous anti-communism with an equally vigorous condemnation of the New Criticism.[5] For Stevens, I'll argue, as for Schwartz and Rahv, the anti-modern conservatism of Ransom and the communism of Stalin converge as types of utopian desire, and Stevens' lecture, "Effects of Analogy," composed at a moment in which both the New Criticism and communism seemed to be gaining hegemony, explicitly and implicitly attacks both. At the time of the incident Brooks was the most prominent New Critic in America, former editor of the *Southern Review*, editor of the anthology *Understanding Poetry*, author of the 1947 landmark *The Well-Wrought Urn*, and a prominent figure in Stanley Edgar Hyman's 1948 book *The Armed Vision*, a book that simply identifies "modern criticism" with the New Criticism, and a book Stevens, not coincidentally, was reading that spring.[6] Stevens would have known exactly to whom he was speaking when he began lauding Schwartz. Brooks, the preeminent close reader, was, in other words, not such a close listener.

II

Stevens was, by nature and by profession, a reticent man, endowed with both middle-class politesse and lawyerly tact. To understand his evaluations of his contemporaries thus requires microscopic attention to nuances of his rhetoric in correspondence and not a little bit of educated conjecture. Stevens didn't much admire John Crowe Ransom or the New Critics, but that didn't

keep him from publishing in the journals they edited, nor tempt him to overt criticism of their poetics. Yet at times Stevens does allow himself muted gibes in their direction, though only in letters to his closest friends, particularly Henry Church, expatriate editor of the Paris literary magazine, *Mesures*. When Ransom proposes in 1940 to share editorial responsibilities on *Kenyon Review* with the wealthy Church in exchange for his financial support, Stevens reacts with considerable acerbity: "This seems to me very much as if Ransom was giving you a chance to wear his old clothes in order to keep himself going" (*L* 365).[7] Three years later, while allowing that Ransom "is probably very decent," Stevens lumps him with the "panhandlers" who swarm around wealthy patrons like Church, and goes on to assert that "I don't think THE KENYON REVIEW of great value, any more than anyone could possibly think Ransom a great spirit" (*L* 450-51). In July 1945, writing about his friend José Rodríguez Feo, Stevens laments to Church that Ransom is "diffused" along with the *Readers' Digest* into Cuba through a kind of cultural imperialism; later in the letter he notes that reading a review by R. P. Blackmur in Ransom's *Kenyon Review* left him "longing for sex and politics" (*L* 508-09). Two months later, responding to Allen Tate's query regarding a negative review of Ransom's *Selected Poems*, Stevens does admit that he has "the greatest respect for Ransom," but he immediately modifies it: "I mean, as a poet" (*L* 511). *Not*, that is, in his capacity as a New Critic.

Stevens does offer intermittent praise of Ransom. In a letter to Church, for instance, Stevens describes Ransom as "very American and, therefore, most valuable" (*L* 518). But in a brief, solicited "homage" in the Summer 1948 issue of *Sewanee Review* entitled "John Crowe Ransom: Tennessean," Stevens is more circumspect, weaving a rhetoric of acclaim which is also replete with suspicious turns of phrase (*OP* 259-62). To the poet who writes "there is nothing in the world greater than reality" (*OP* 177), Ransom becomes a poet who makes "a legend of reality."[8] To the poet who cautions Church's widow against "the pathos of looking back" while "our world goes on and carries us with it" (*L* 592), Ransom becomes a poet rendered pathetic with nostalgia, one of those for whom "the sight of an old berry patch . . . [has] an emotional power . . . more than [they] can control." To the anti-utopian Stevens who, in the same letter to Barbara Church, a letter of April 1948 written at the height of Cold-War tension, only two months before the beginning of the Berlin Blockade, writes that "we have to live in the world as it is—that is to say: face it, not back away from it," Ransom becomes an anti-modernist poet who "turns with something like a ferocity"—an odd choice of words—"toward a land that [he] loves," a land transformed from Appalachia to "Jerusalem."

What Stevens thought of Delmore Schwartz is another matter entirely. Admittedly Schwartz, despite the biographical exertions of James Atlas and fictional dissection by Saul Bellow, is, relative to Stevens, a minor figure today most notable as a "type" of dissipated genius.[9] As Bellow writes in *Humboldt's Gift*, he "never became the radiant center of his age."[10] But if it is hard today to reconstruct Schwartz's prestige, it is harder still to overestimate the force of

that prestige forty years ago. Although Schwartz is much younger, the relationship is not at all one of an older poet dominating a young ephebe. On the contrary, in the years before a spate of awards and the publication of his *Collected Poems* would elevate Stevens to canonical status and begin generating what would become the Stevens industry of the 1960s, Schwartz would probably have been perceived by many as the more powerful cultural figure. The impact of his first volume of poetry, *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*, was such that when Schwartz collected his work in 1958 under the general title *Summer Knowledge*, the poems from the earlier volume dominated a book which would make Schwartz in 1960 at forty-seven the youngest winner ever of the Bollingen Prize. In 1948, as poetry editor of the *Partisan Review*, author of acclaimed poetry and short fiction, prolific essayist and reviewer, he might well have seemed to Stevens the portrait of a young artist as a man on the move, a man precisely at the "radiant center" of the political and intellectual agon of his times. Stevens' attitude toward Schwartz is one of sincere admiration, not inconsiderable affection, and perhaps some mature and unself-pitying nostalgia for the poet he himself might have become (and still would become, though only retrospectively), the poet who, Stevens believes, Delmore Schwartz might just be: the voice of modernity.

It is Stevens, in fact, who recommends Schwartz to the editors of *Partisan Review* for the first issue of the magazine after its reorganization in 1937. Under Philip Rahv and William Phillips, *et al*., the new *Partisan Review* would serve the anti-Stalinist left, focusing on modernist writers in opposition to the American Communist Party's demand for proletarian literature. "Best of all is the *Partisan Review*," Schwartz writes. "They wrote to Wallace Stevens and asked not only for poems but to recommend a young poet and to my extreme pleasure he sent them my name."[11] Schwartz to that time had published a note in the *Marxist Quarterly* and two short reviews in *Poetry*; a verse play in Alfred Kreymborg, Lewis Mumford, and Paul Rosenfeld's prestigious *The New Caravan*; one longer poem in the earlier incarnation of the *Partisan Review*'s January 1937 issue, "The Ballad of the Children of the Czar"; two sonnets in the February 1937 issue of *Poetry*; and two poems in the October 1937 issue of *Poetry*, one of which was the great "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave." Stevens himself was published in the 1936 edition of *The New Caravan*, but, for reasons which I'll address later, it was probably this latter poem, accompanied in the October *Poetry* by Stevens' own "A Rabbit as King of Ghosts," which piqued Stevens' interest in Schwartz as a poet whose politics would fit *Partisan Review*'s new ideas. The editors obviously agreed: *Partisan Review* would publish Schwartz's story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" as the first piece in the issue of December 1937; Stevens' poem "The Dwarf" followed immediately, framed suggestively between Schwartz's story and an essay by Edmund Wilson on the politics of Flaubert.

Instances of Stevens' praise for Schwartz multiply; his opinion of Schwartz and his work never wavers. In 1938 he calls Schwartz's review of *Man with the Blue Guitar* "the most invigorating review he had ever had."[12] In 1940 he sends

Leonard van Geyzel, his "buyer" in Ceylon, a copy of Schwartz's translation of Rimbaud after an earlier correspondence in which Stevens had recommended the *Partisan Review* as "the most intelligent thing I know of" (*L* 332). In 1949 at a lunch with the poet Richard Eberhart, Schwartz is the only poet Eberhart remembers Stevens mentioning.[13] Samuel French Morse similarly recalls Stevens' generosity with Delmore Schwartz in the context of a discussion of Stevens' general skepticism towards and lack of interest in other poets' accomplishments.[14] In 1954 Stevens writes Alfred A. Knopf to thank the publisher for the party he had thrown in honor of the publication of Stevens' *Collected Poems*. In a short thank-you letter, really just a "record," in Stevens' own words, of the poet's appreciation, Stevens singles out Schwartz: "It was a special pleasure to see Delmore Schwartz who now lives in the country and whom I should not be likely to see casually" (*L* 848).

A more important instance of Stevens' regard for Schwartz occurs in 1940, when Stevens recommends Schwartz, along with Philip Rahv, to Henry Church for a series of lectures Church was sponsoring at Princeton on "The Theory of Poetry." The title was Stevens' suggestion; the purpose of the lectures was "to create a perspective for poetry . . . to give it a bearing and a position" (*L* 382). Stevens had been corresponding with Church regarding the possibility of Church endowing a Chair of Poetry at Princeton and that exchange expands on his conception of what the "position" of poetry might be. The purpose of his Chair would be an exploration of the cultural functions of poetry rather than its techniques—in short, the politics of poetry:

> One does not intend a literary course . . . The intention is not to read poetry . . . What is intended is to study the theory of poetry in relation to what poetry has been and in relation to what it ought to be. Its literature is a part of it, and only a part of it. For this purpose, poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. It does not mean verse any more than philosophy means prose. The subject-matter of poetry is the thing to be ascertained. . . . It is the aspects of the world and of men and women that have been added to them by poetry. (*L* 377)

"What poetry has been" is associated with the narrowness of cultural function Stevens ascribes to what can only be understood as New Critical practice: a focus on literature to the exclusion of the larger culture, on the "language" of poetry, on form. "What poetry ought to be"—a complement to philosophy, a subject-matter, a new "aspect" of the world—is something else entirely. Stevens' language, as always, has a lawyer's precision: aspects of the world are less parts of the world than views of the world *from a particular direction*; poetry provides, not a representation, but an orientation, necessarily contingent. Rather than address the poem as an ahistorical object for dissection and scrutiny, Stevens would situate poetry in history and consider the poet as willing subject.

That history, the letter continues, is the history of modernity as a "movement away from the idea of God," and Stevens' conception of modern poetry is to be a force for adapting the idea of God, creating a substitute for it, or rendering it unnecessary.[15] But "the intention" of the Chair of Poetry and of poets generally, he makes a point of stating definitely, "is not to foster a cult": the Chair would not be a substitute prophet, but "a dynamic mind . . . an original force." As an illustration he suggests George Santayana, then rejects him as too dominated by "the religious and the philosophic." More importantly, Stevens goes on to reject T. S. Eliot as "a negative rather than a positive force." In so doing, Stevens rejects not merely the New Critics for whom Eliot is the major modernist, but also the strain of anti-modernist, religious modernism which Eliot represents.[16] Eliot's nostalgia for an integral pre-modern world before the "wasteland" becomes a politics of despair; such an "aspect" cannot be positive in the way Stevens intends the theory of poetry to be. Instead, Stevens sees the function of the Chair of Poetry in specifically political terms that look both backward and forward in time from a vantage securely and pragmatically in the present: "if it is objected that this is carrying humanism to a point beyond which it ought to be carried in time of so much socialistic agitation, the answer must be that humanism is one thing and socialism is another, and that the mere act of distinguishing between the two should be helpful to preserve humanism and possibly to benefit socialism" (*L* 378). To preserve and to benefit, to adapt the old and create the new, to add an aspect to contingency, to be a positive force in a matrix of forces—it is in the context of this conception of the role of the theory of poetry, then, that we must understand Stevens' recommendation that "there is no one in whom I believe as much as I believe in Delmore Schwartz" (*L* 382).

III

I've argued that, for Stevens, Delmore Schwartz had a better answer than John Crowe Ransom for American poetry and, by implication, for American politics in the Cold War forties. But what is that answer? The reticent man praises in others what he prizes in himself: what is it about Schwartz's "stance" that Stevens shares? Stevens tells us little about what the substance of that stance might be; Schwartz is a responsible dreamer, but what his dream is and to whom it is responsible remain unclear. But perhaps Stevens' lack of elaboration already tells the tale: what he values in Schwartz, and in himself, is the rejection of totalizing "rage to order," a willingness to live in contingency that distances both men from the utopian nostalgia of the conservative right and the utopian propaganda of the Stalinist left. To move toward this understanding, we must now turn to the poetry of Schwartz which would have inclined Stevens toward the younger poet, specifically Schwartz's great and archetypally modernist poem, "In the Naked Bed, in Plato's Cave."[17]

While a graduate student at Harvard, Schwartz had introduced friends to Stevens' *Ideas of Order*.[18] One might as easily say that the volume introduced the young Schwartz to poetry, to what modified would become the voice of *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. Schwartz's poems in that volume partake deeply

of Stevens' purposeful ambivalence toward ideas of order, his critical refusal of totalizations and rejection of anti-modernist nostalgia. The resonances with Stevens' poetry in the following passages from "In the Naked Bed . . ." locate Schwartz with Stevens as poets articulating the great dilemma of modernity, what Marshall Berman has called "the tragedy of development."[19] The poem begins:

> In the naked bed, in Plato's cave,
> Reflected headlights slowly slid the wall,
> Carpenters hammered under the shaded window,
> Wind troubled the window curtains all night long,
> A fleet of trucks strained uphill, grinding,
> Their freights covered, as usual.
> The ceiling lightened again, the slanting diagram
> Slid slowly forth.

The affected sibilance of the diagram of lights as it slowly slides onto the narrator's ceiling contrasts sharply with the harsher sounds outside: hammering, straining, and grinding are transitive verbs of the material world of society which invades the poet's pastoral one of the mind. That Schwartz's ideal is visual, his real aural is instructive: sight is the sense of structures in space, hearing the sense of motion in time; the poet can look away but cannot turn away from the real world and its history. Throughout the book, in fact, Schwartz emphasizes the impossibility of "turning away for solace" from the dynamic "bouncing ball" of the world.[20] Schwartz articulates social change in specifically economic terms as the transformation from use values to exchange values, subsumed in his image of the covered freights, the undifferentiable products carried by modern capitalism's "fleet of trucks." The winds of capitalist modernity bring trouble, interrupt the poet's dreams. Like Adam in the garden, however, he cannot help but hear:

> Hearing the milkman's chop,
> His striving up the stair, the bottle's chink,
> I rose from bed, lit a cigarette,
> And walked to the window. The stony street
> Displayed the stillness in which buildings stand,
> The street-lamp's vigil and the horse's patience.
> The winter sky's pure capital
> Turned me back to bed with exhausted eyes.

The poet arises and walks to the window to gaze out at the city below. Could there be a more typical modernist moment? Windows are always Faustian, Spengler tells us via Berman: for Berman, Faust is the archetypal modern man, the developer doomed to failure because doomed to too much success. It is thus no accident that Schwartz's volume contains a monologic poem entitled "Faust in Old Age," in which Faust demands judgment from the young poet for the violences of his totalizing vision: "see in me the obscene . . . the ego

bloomed into an octopus."[21] It is also no accident that the Stevens who energizes Schwartz is always looking out windows and down from towers, imagining the total vista and himself its Faust, only to discover the tragedy of totalization, the loss of freedom. As Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C" he plans and projects a colony, a "comprehensive island hemisphere," only to discover that in his colony "novitiates" became "clerks of our experience"; that his "bland excursions into time to come" were truly romantic, "backward flights," anti-modernist reimpositions of "doctrinal" power (*CP* 38-39). In the opening poem of *Ideas of Order*, "Farewell to Florida," Stevens explicitly rejects the "rage to order," as an anti-modern anachronism which would force stasis on a world ceaselessly in motion.[22] The movement of the poem is from the south to the north; from a romantic, Edenic embowerment in the imagined integral community of Key West to an obviously urban scene of "a slime of men in crowds"; from the natural to the social; from the past to the present and future; and, not incidentally, from bondage to freedom, however imperfect, an erotic freedom "shoving and slithering . . . turbulent with foam" (*CP* 118).

This is the modernism that informs Schwartz's vision in "In the Naked Bed . . ." as the poet goes to the window. The city streets, somehow momentarily cleared of workers, "display" a static picture, "the winter sky's pure capital." It is a complex image representing a complex political sensibility. Elsewhere in the volume, in his reimagining of the tragedy of Coriolanus as the fate of a modern tyrant, Schwartz writes that the sky is the "greatest natural object," the state the "greatest artificial object."[23] Here the sky's "pure capital" becomes simultaneously the state purified ("capital" as exemplary city), re-imagined as a classical *polis* ("capital" as the top of a column bearing the entablature of the winter sky), yet internally subverted by its own modernity ("pure capital" as economic oxymoron) in which the dream of future purity always implies violence to the present ("capital" as deadly force, as state-endorsed punishment). The fate of totalitarianism exhausts the poet's eyes, just as it had for Stevens' Crispin: "Can one man think one thing and think it long? / Can one man be one thing and be it long?" (*CP* 41). The answer, for Stevens and Schwartz, is no:

> Strangeness grew in the motionless air. The loose
> Film grayed. Shaking wagons, hooves' waterfalls,
> Sounded far off, increasing, louder and nearer.
> A car coughed, starting. Morning, softly
> Melting the air, lifted the half-covered chair
> From underseas, kindled the looking-glass,
> Distinguished the dresser and the white wall.
> The bird called tentatively, whistled, called,
> Bubbled and whistled, so! Perplexed, still wet
> With sleep, affectionate, hungry and cold. So, so,
> O son of man, the ignorant night, the travail

> Of early morning, the mystery of beginning
> Again and again,
> while History is unforgiven.

Schwartz's poem climaxes with a reiteration of the dilemma to which modernity's most astute critics always return: its subjection to change endlessly constructive and destructive, to time itself. Central to this passage, of course, is the famous vision of modernity by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*: "all fixed, fast-frozen relations . . . are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air."[24] In the modernity Schwartz shares with Marx, all objects become estranged, visible only in reflected light, sensed only in motion, as a waterfall "increasing, louder and nearer." But the modernity he shares with Stevens is irreducible to Marxist teleology: the lower-case "mystery" of life as change cannot become capitalized "History." Human history for Schwartz cannot be forgiven, completed in what another strong critic of modernity who would become a victim of totalitarianism, Walter Benjamin, would call in 1940 the "Messianic cessation of happening."[25] Schwartz rejects utopianism for realism, Marx the polemicist for Stevens the poet: for the modern son of man in the valley of the dry bones that is the modern city, all prophesies of New Jerusalem must remain unfulfilled. For Schwartz, as for Stevens, the poet cannot play the "airy dream of the future, / The unclouded concerto," but must "Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cacchination" (*CP* 131). In a world in which dreams of nations purified require the nightmares of Auschwitz and the Gulag, a world of Fausts, confusion becomes salutary, uncertainty a virtue, skepticism a moral stance, pragmatism a program. As Stevens tells us in "The Comedian as the Letter C" in the section entitled "A Nice Shady Home," which follows the section entitled "The Idea of a Colony," "Whoever hunts a matinal continent / May, after all, stop short before a plum / And be content and still be realist" (*CP* 40).

IV

"Effects of Analogy," the paper that set the stage for Stevens' "confrontation" with Cleanth Brooks, is a curious document in many ways. Stevens' recondite allusions, rhetorical indirection, hermetic humor, and the essay's awkward structure as a survey of modes of analogy—"still another mode of analogy is to be found in . . ." (*NA* 124)—conspire to make the poet's discourse difficult to read and, as it turned out when exacerbated by Stevens' weak voice, nearly impossible to understand as a public lecture.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the paper, however, is simply its title. From the author of "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," "Effects of Analogy" seems strangely barren. The title appears even more peculiar in its context. Although Wimsatt and Beardsley's landmark essay, "The Affective Fallacy," would not be published until the following year, Stevens would have understood as New Critical the position that essay would codify.[26] At the very least Stevens would have been aware of its thesis via Hyman's synopsis of

Brooks's 1947 volume, *The Well-Wrought Urn*. Brooks's conclusion, the famous essay "The Heresy of Paraphrase," preemptively argues much the same position as that of Wimsatt and Beardsley: "the common goodness which the poems share will have to be stated, not in terms of *content* or *subject matter* . . . but rather in terms of structure."[27] More clearly foregrounded, Brooks's point in "The Heresy of Paraphrase" is to forestall the political "uses" of poetry: after citing as an opponent of the "new formalism" Alfred Kazin, the Marxist critic and author of the 1941 *On Native Grounds*, Brooks attacks "theories which frankly treat the poem as propaganda." By focusing on analogy Stevens already implicitly criticizes Brooks's formalism: analogy as a rhetorical figure conveys meaning only *outside* the form of the text, and precisely through the hermeneutical operation of "heretical" paraphrasing. But, by further focusing on the *effects* of analogy, Stevens immediately highlights precisely the aspect of poetry that the New Criticism would excise, its capacity as rhetoric to *affect* readers; he reinserts the political dimension of poetry. His title is a gesture that could not have been unintentional, and could hardly have been misinterpreted.

As the essay begins, Stevens' challenge to the New Critics present and his desire to reinject a political aspect of poetry should have become immediately clear. Stevens begins with an ironic rehearsal of the moment in the second part of *Pilgrim's Progress*—to Stevens "the supreme example of analogy in English" (*NA* 107)—when Christiana and Mercy stop at the house of the Interpreter. Although Stevens offers little direct explication, the passage itself stands as a commentary upon the proceedings at Yale:

> *The Interpreter then replied, This robin is an emblem very apt to set forth some professors by; for to sight they are as this robin, pretty of note colour and carriage. They seem also to have a very great love for professors that are sincere; and above all other to desire to sociate with, and to be in their company, as if they could live upon the good man's crums. They pretend also that therefore it is that they frequent the house of the godly, and the appointments of the Lord; but when they are by themselves, as the robin, they can catch and gobble up spiders, they can change their diet, drink iniquity, and swallow down sin like water*. (*NA* 107-08)

On one level, Stevens undoubtedly considered this anecdote an apt way to break the ice: the humor of the depiction of professors as superficially "pretty" yet surreptitiously profligate could not have been lost on his audience. Stevens goes on in his introduction to quote a tale from the *Fables* of La Fontaine (the "supreme example of analogy" in French) involving a vain crow seduced by a flattering fox. The moral of the story functions as Stevens' own demurrer to the audience: "'Learn, sir,' said [the fox], 'that flatterers live on those who swallow what they say'" (*NA* 108). Stevens' opening examples thus would seem chosen for the purpose of disarming an audience that Stevens in his reticence might have considered to be somewhat less than receptive.

Yet Stevens' opening has a darker meaning as well. For Stevens the anecdote from *Pilgrim's Progress* produces a "double sense" of analogy, one literal, one allegorical, which distracts the ideal reader: the "solid matter" of the scene recedes behind the foregrounded allegorical meaning. La Fontaine's fable of the crow and the fox, on the other hand, produces "prismatic crystallizations" in which literal and allegorical fuse and to which the ideal reader responds without distraction: "the solid matter is the story." For Stevens the contrast between the two examples evinces a "national difference" between English and French literature (*NA* 109-10). The simplest sense of Stevens' distinction, that a literature is intrinsic to its nation, already sunders New Critical formalism. But Stevens is after more than merely distinguishing between national literatures. In contemporaneous letters to the young poets José Rodríguez Feo, Thomas McGreevy, and Peter Lee, Stevens connects the poet's vocation to "disengage" a national identity (*L* 495) from the homogeneity of modern, international society with the poet's political function of dissent—the true poet's call is "to be at the heart of his time" (*L* 596). It is this politicization of poetry that gives Stevens' differentiation between English and French literature its force. Stevens' preference for French poetry, and indeed for French things in general, particularly French painting, is well known. The poet was the consummate Francophile. But in choosing to derogate *Pilgrim's Progress* as his example of analogy in English, Stevens selects not just a work intrinsic to the Anglo-American literary tradition, but also the source of a central vision of America, John Winthrop's "shining city on a hill." What specific criticism of American society and politics, then, does Stevens imply by his distinction?

A note Stevens wrote in 1949 for the catalogue of an exhibition by the French painter Marcel Gromaire lends some insight (*OP* 290-92). Known as "the Rubens of the coal mines," Gromaire deals, as Stevens himself would hope to, "with what faces us and concerns us directly . . . the problem of reality" (*NA* 116). Stevens makes it clear that to him the contemporary American literary academy had simply elided the problems of reality the Frenchman engages, in exchange for a barren formalism. With an audience of the urbane clientele of a New York gallery, Stevens voices his anti-academicism more forcefully than in his Yale lecture: "[Gromaire] speaks of the human spirit seeking its own architecture, its own '*mesure*' that will enable it to be in harmony with the world. It is from the intensity, the passion, of this search that the quality of works is derived, not from the codes and manuals of painting compiled by doctrinaires and conformist pedagogues." Opposing these "codes and manuals" Gromaire offers an "*art directement social*," an explicitly *affective* art: Gromaire's art is "social in the sense of something that affects the march of events, fixes the ephemeral sensation and makes it possible for this sensation . . . to act on the future and on human behavior. This is not the language of the individual escapist." Stevens thus reiterates through Gromaire his own constant denial of escapism as a motive of his poetry, and indeed Stevens throughout describes the painter in terms which could as easily be self-descriptive. (Stevens' description of Gromaire's paintings as "hallucinatory tableaux," for instance,

could just as easily describe "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the poem he is working on as he prepares the Gromaire introduction.) Most importantly, the politics he ascribes to Gromaire represents his own pragmatic alternative to dogmatisms of the left and right: it is a politics "seeking its own architecture," a continuous "search" and a "constant giving," a heterodoxy "rugged with realism . . . [and] endowed with the strength that comes from participation in life's struggle." Political action to Stevens/Gromaire is not the articulation of a static plan for society but a constant engagement: "Being rebellious is being oneself and being oneself is not being one of the automata of one's time."

It is appropriate, then, that Stevens turns in the second section of "Effects of Analogy" to the example of an American writer, Kenneth Burke, for whom "rhetoric and poetic are interwoven" (*NA* 110). Stevens was certainly aware of Burke, as any compulsive reader of small literary journals would have been. In fact, in a humorous note of January 1945 to Henry Church regarding Allen Tate's newly inaugurated *Sewanee Review*, Stevens observes that "if you [edit a review] in Ethiopia you get communications from Kenneth Burke" (*L* 482). Moreover, Burke's general position, explicitly opposed to those of the New Critics, would have been known to Stevens via Hyman.[28] When Hyman describes Burke's primary method of "perspective by incongruity" as "the switching of a term from its natural context to another where it is revealing," he might easily be describing the mode of Stevens' later poetry, "its tracing / Of an unfamiliar in the familiar room" (*CP* 458). When Hyman recounts Burke's memory of "first reading Santayana and dreaming 'of a tourist life in white flannels along the Mediterranean,'" he might be reading Stevens' own deepest desires, translated into his 1952 tribute to his old Harvard mentor, "To An Old Philosopher in Rome" (*CP* 508-11).

Stevens also would have responded to Hyman's extended analysis of Burke's *Attitudes Toward History*, as a work "[concerned] with grounding literature in society," but whose politics takes the form, not of a program, but of "the comic," a strategic dialectic of acceptance and rejection regarding the present "situation." Burke's politics, of course, were much further to the left than Stevens', yet in Hyman's reading he is at pains to note that while Burke "has drawn heavily on Marxism in all his books," he nevertheless "[criticizes] its mechanical simplifications . . . noting its covert 'god-function.'" For Hyman, Burke's mode of "acceptance-rejection" thus places him with Stevens in the pragmatic middle of a contemporary political scene dominated by dogmatisms of the right and left: "the name 'comic' . . . was probably chosen as Burke's ironic observation that being an accepter-rejecter in a world of ravening accepters and ravening rejecters is a pretty funny thing to be." Most importantly, Stevens would finally have responded to Hyman's analysis of Burke's politics as an unceasing dialectic of anti-modernist impulses with "a kind of 'Neo-Stoic resignation'" regarding the "development of technology": on the one hand Burke offers "an agrarian, backward-looking ideal that he shares with Thoreau"; on the other, Burke "is prepared to find some good in technology . . . Somewhere in the middle he himself lives . . . combining the simple,

immobile and agrarian life with the technology necessary to get him by car, train, and subway to the New York Public Library." Burke's schizophrenic attitude toward the modern city thus mirrors Stevens' own since his earliest days in Manhattan: "New York is so big that a battle might go on at one end, and poets meditate sonnets at another" (*SP* 89). The affinities between the two writers are such that, upon receiving an honorary degree from Bard College in 1951, Stevens laments to the poet Theodore Weiss that "the only drawback was that I had been unable to hear K. Burke" (*L* 712).

The passage in "Effects of Analogy" in which Stevens quotes from a Burke review is thus a little masterpiece of ironic criticism. Ostensibly a specimen of "emotional analogy" considered as a trope characterized by the "effect it produces," the passage instead offers an acid portrait of the New Criticism which, again, it would have been hard to miss:

> Kenneth Burke, in the course of a review . . . referred to the introduction of rhetoric into the analysis of imagery. He said that it gave a clear picture of the ways in which logic, rhetoric and poetic are interwoven
>
> *in contrast with the doctrines of those who would confine logic to science, rhetoric to propaganda or advertising, and thus leave for poetic a few spontaneous sensations not much higher in the intellectual scale than the twitchings of a decerebrated frog.* (*NA* 110-11)

Via Burke, Stevens attacks on a number of fronts. That the book in question, Rosemond Tuve's *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, is a reading of the rhetoric of the metaphysical poets so glamorized by Eliot and the New Critics as masters of form sets the tone. By sundering the distinctions between logic, rhetoric, and poetic Burke criticizes the founding move of the New Criticism to constitute itself as a discrete discipline complete with the objective methodologies of a mature "science," a position announced most forcefully in Ransom's 1937 essay, "Criticism, Inc."[29] Burke's "analogy," then, does more in Stevens' subtle rhetoric than the poet allows in his subdued analysis, becoming a cutting satire on the New Criticism's interpretive operations as a kind of soulless dissection. When Stevens relates Burke's antipathy to the "doctrines" of the (unnamed) New Critics as "a way of characterizing those doctrines as at once futile, ugly and ludicrous" (*NA* 111), the poet thus finds his own way, once-removed, of making the same commentary.

When Stevens moves immediately to analyze passages from the poetry of Tate and Ransom, that commentary becomes comparatively overt. With a flourish of black comedy, Stevens looks at poems by both which present macabre images of young women lying dead in their beds; perhaps images of fecundity reduced to inert form struck him as particularly apt for his purposes. Stevens' response to Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" is typical. The poem presents a pastoral idyll of "orchard trees," "lazy geese," "green grass," and "apple-dreams," only to depict that idyll shattered, a fate not un-

like that imagined by Ransom to have been inflicted on the modern South. Stevens' comment on the conclusion of the poem seems to ridicule Ransom's maudlin tone:

> What is it that Mr. Ransom feels at the sight of John Whiteside's daughter, dead, except the same quizzicality that he felt at the sight of her alive? He communicates this in a quizzical image of death as a brown study, but as a brown study vexing in the case of one that lies so primly propped. Neither Mr. Tate nor Mr. Ransom is an emotional poet. Nor with such men is it a question of degree. Rather, their sensibilities have large orbits. (*NA* 113)

For Stevens the question is one of "emotional authenticity" (*NA* 113); in this sense, to say that Tate and Ransom have sensibilities with "large orbits" is to accuse them of emotional *inauthenticity*, of Olympian formalism disengaged from the human issues of life, death, choice, commitment, desire—"quizzicality" as intellectual primness, abstracted, desensitized, unsexed. Stevens' criticism thus offers a striking synecdoche, bringing the sexless primness of Ransom's quizzical tone into an equation not merely with the analytic technologies of the New Critics, but also—and herein lies his political thrust—with the utopian nostalgia of the Southern agrarians.

Stevens' contrast of Kenneth Burke and the two New Critics, Tate and Ransom, thus plays out with different actors the agon implied in his opposition of Delmore Schwartz and Ransom. Beyond just contrasting rhetorical and anti-rhetorical modes of criticism, the terms of his dichotomy reiterate one of the fundamental axes of modern social thought: the axis of country and city, which opposes anti-urban or pastoral visions that become finally utopianism, and urban or anti-pastoral visions that reject utopianism for pragmatic political engagement. It is significant, then, that Stevens' example of an "apposite" analogic figure which immediately follows is an image drawn from a specifically urban rhetoric of particular poignancy:

> When St. Matthew in his Gospel says that Jesus went about all the cities, teaching and preaching, and that
>
> *when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they . . . were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd,*
>
> the analogy between the multitudes scattered abroad and the sheep having no shepherd is . . . a choice based on the degree of the appositeness of the image. (*NA* 113)

Ransom's 1930 book, *God Without Thunder*, proposed a religious traditionalism akin to the social traditionalism of his contribution to the collection *I'll Take My Stand*: "With whatever religious institution a modern man may be connected let him try to turn it back towards orthodoxy."[30] Stevens' image, then, of Christ as rhetorician, gently persuading the scattered multitudes toward faith, turns

this militant Christianity back on itself, giving a new twist to the dialectic of country and city: where Ransom understands the capitalist city as source of all social evils and hence as something to be exorcised through "God the Thunder," Stevens offers a vision of a compassionate religion which would ameliorate the urban. Christ the teacher in Stevens' image becomes a kind of urban rabbi, an "exceedingly attractive" figure to Stevens of "a man devoted in the extreme to scholarship and at the same time to making some use of it for human purposes" (*L* 786). To note that the yiddish word for rabbi is "rahv" perhaps belabors the point. But clearly Stevens' description portrays a more substantial mission for intellectuals than the decerebration of frogs.

Stevens' critique of anti-modern nostalgia in all its synecdochical forms echoes in his analysis as the essay continues, with his excoriation of anti-urbanism taking center-stage. Turning to a passage from Virgil's *Georgics*, Stevens describes the poet's pastoral panegyric as

> considered elaboration, a prototype of the considered elaborations with which in the eighteenth century, say, English poets were accustomed to embellish their pages. It does not click. If it is apposite at all it is only after we have thought about it and by that time we have lost interest in it. It is one of the multitude of figures of speech that are merely idle. It does not raise any question of taste. Nothing in Virgil could. (*NA* 117)

Stevens' rhetoric regarding Virgil and the figures of the eighteenth-century "pastoral war" is uncharacteristically harsh: their poetry "does not click." The New Critics Stevens is attacking throughout the essay, of course, also generally devalued eighteenth-century poets precisely on the grounds of the dissociated sensibility inscribed in their refined language, elevating instead seventeenth-century, "metaphysical" poets like Donne to the canon. Yet in Eliot's classic essay regarding the metaphysical poets, they are described much in the same way Stevens describes eighteenth-century poets: "[they] employ a device which is sometimes considered characteristically 'metaphysical'; the elaboration (contrasted with the condensation) of a figure of speech to the farthest stage to which ingenuity can carry it."[31] Where Eliot wants to salvage the metaphysical poets for the canon as models of undissociated sensibility who "feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose," Stevens finds his way subtly back to a criticism which can subsume both seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets—and the tradition of the New Criticism following Eliot—by understanding them alike as forms of nostalgia for "disalienation."

Stevens turns in the next section of "Effects of Analogy" to the other side of the equation, considering poets specifically concerned with the urban. The contrast Stevens draws between two nineteenth-century poets—one British, James Thomson, the other American, Walt Whitman—is striking, but perhaps more striking are his introductory remarks to the section:

> Another mode of analogy is to be found in the personality of the poet. . . . This mode proposes for study the poet's sense of the world as the source of poetry. The corporeal world exists as the common denominator of the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants. (*NA* 118)

Stevens' remarks regarding the importance of the poet's personality simply could not be more distant from a New Criticism permeated by Eliot's famous dictum that the critic should focus on the "mind that creates" rather than the "man who suffers." Its most celebrated elaboration, Wimsatt and Beardsley's "The Intentional Fallacy," had appeared in 1946 in the *Sewanee Review*, which, under Tate's editorship from 1944 to 1946, had published Stevens' own essay, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," as well as his poems "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" and "Description without Place."[32] Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay, of course, argued that the poet's intention (or, in Stevens' terms, his "personality") remains unavailable to the critic: "There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem." Instead, interpretation rests upon "public evidence," the "habitual knowledge of the language" which Wimsatt and Beardsley oppose to the "private or idiosyncratic." By proposing an integral relationship between the poet's personality as his sense of the "corporeal world" and as the source for his poetry, then, Stevens moves toward a materialist poetics that, beyond simply diverging from the formalism of the New Criticism, would also seem to have political ramifications: the idiosyncratic poet is the dissenting minority voice of "abnormality" opposing the "standards of normality"—the "habitual"—supplied by the majority.

Following this analysis, Stevens presents passages from Thomson's "The City of Dreadful Night" and Whitman's "A Clear Midnight" which, though offered without commentary, make the political dimension of his ideas regarding poets' "personalities" clear. Thomson's poem is a savage attack on the urban landscape of Victorian London as a nightmarish "Venice of the Black Sea," through which flows a "River of Suicides," and over which broods the figure of Durer's Melancolia—he is, to Stevens, "a melancholy person [who] gives us a melancholy sense of our world." Whitman, on the other hand, is to Stevens "a stronger man," a man receptive to joy and courageous enough in the passage Stevens cites to venture upon a "'*free flight into the wordless . . . pondering the themes thou lovest best, / Night, sleep, death and the stars*'" (*NA* 119). Clearly, Stevens—himself a great walker in the city—aligns himself with Whitman's joyous affirmation of the urban scene of nineteenth-century New York despite its inevitable distance from Utopia. Whitman, of course, was a poet not held in great esteem by the New Critics. In fact, Leslie Fielder reports that for the New Critics "not just Whitman but all his followers . . . were 'away from the tradition' . . . which is to say, are outside the revised new canon, American-style."[33] Fiedler finds Whitman excluded from the canon because of his refusal to "be high-toned, learnedly allusive and obtrusive enough to put off the ordinary reader . . . to *épater la bourgeoisie* by challenging their preconceptions about

what is 'poetic.'" In the context of Stevens' complete argument in "Effects of Analogy" and in comparison with Thomson's dreadful city, it should now be possible to understand that exclusion in political terms as a rejection of Whitman's *argument*. However couched in a rhetoric of the irrational, that argument positions Whitman against the anti-urbanism then (and in the moment of Stevens' essay) dominant in Anglo-American letters. Whitman's openness to the orgiastic, to urban life as sensory flux, is simply too frightening: it is an image of a world incapable of submission to any normalizing models, "a world forever without a plan / For itself as a world" (*OP* 76).

As Stevens' essay moves towards its conclusion, the implications of his argument for contemporary politics, implicit throughout, become explicit. Arguing that "the poet manifests his personality, first of all, by his choice of subject" (*NA* 120), Stevens again directly opposes any brand of formalism, a mode of critique he immediately associates with an "ivory tower" academia he characterizes as "a kind of lock-up in which our intellectual constables are the appointed wardens" (*NA* 121). But now Stevens sees this academicism explicitly in relation to the Cold War political scene:

> Recently, a very great deal has been said about the relation of the poet to his community and to other people, and as the propaganda on behalf of the community and other people gathers momentum a great deal more will be said. But if a poet's subject is congenital this is beside the point. Or is it? The ivory tower was offensive if the man who lived in it wrote, there, of himself for himself. It was not offensive if he used it because he could do nothing without concentration, as no one can, and because, there, he could most effectively struggle to get at his subject, even if his subject happened to be the community and other people, and nothing else. It may be that the poet's congenital subject is precisely the community and other people. If it is not, he may have to ask Shostakovich and Prokofiev and their fellow musicians and such writers as Michael Zoshchenko what to do next. These men, who backslide once in so often, should know. They are experienced. (*NA* 122-23)

Stevens' 1937 essay, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," had spoken of the role of the poet in balder terms: "In this area of my subject I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none" (*NA* 27). But by 1948 and "Effects of Analogy" Stevens' attitude and approach has grown much more dialectical—"or is it?" Where in the earlier essay he had been at pains to resist or evade what he called the "pressure of reality," the historical context within which a poet writes, offering instead a poetry which would transform readers into "epicures" (*NA* 30), Stevens now offers a middle term, an engagement with "the community and other people" which rejects both the role of propagandist and the (non-)role of escapist. Stevens' litany of Russian surnames still identifies the dangers, tangible in 1948, of a poetry of propaganda, its tendency to become a dogmatism

from which the poet may not deviate or "backslide." But Stevens finds flight to an ivory tower where the poet would write "of himself for himself" an equally "offensive" alternative. "The measure of the poet," Stevens goes on, "is the measure of his sense of the world and of the extent to which it involves the sense of other people" (*NA* 123-24). That measure, that sense of other people, the possible middle term, is rhetoric, the "effects of analogy."

V

At the very end of "Effects of Analogy," Stevens evokes a characteristic figure, not the utopian "major man" of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," but the figure of "the man for whom reality is enough" (*NA* 129). For this man the tangible, the visible, the "imageless" world that "exists as a world" is one of fluid and dialectical change, irreducible to any fully integrated and static "pictorialization." For this man, in that world, life is an "intense choosing," an ongoing and unceasing process of choice. For this man, life "exists as life," ever changing, dangerous, imperfectible, an eternal oscillation between ephemeral sadness and perhaps more ephemeral happiness, between the tragic and the "comic." The "man for whom reality is enough" is ultimately, of course, Wallace Stevens himself.

It is with this understanding that one can now return to the incident between Stevens and Cleanth Brooks on March 18, 1948. When Stevens writes a year later to ask Allen Tate to mediate his apologies to Brooks, he describes the point of offense as his argument "that Louisiana was not a part of the United States at the time of the Revolution" (*L* 634). It is an innocuous comment indeed until put in its context—the elevation of Schwartz—a connection which Stevens understood and which Brooks overlooks. In "teasing" Ransom and extolling Schwartz, Stevens offers as values nearly everything Brooks and the New Criticism stands against: the urban opposing the rural; the northern opposing the southern; the industrial opposing the agrarian; the Eastern European immigrant opposing the Anglo-Saxon; secular "rabbis" opposing not-so-secular priests; an urbane, engaged culture opposing the remote and aristocratic "good estate of letters"; hope opposing despair of change embodied in the New Critics' favorite, Eliot; the modern present and the future opposing an anti-modernist nostalgia for the past; and, not incidentally, political commitment opposing an academic escapism which becomes *de facto* conservatism.

Stevens' comment on Louisiana—recalling that LSU was a center of New Criticism—thus becomes a move in the oldest American argument, Hamiltonian federalism versus Jeffersonian agrarianism. But, beyond this, it becomes a move in the oldest political argument of all, between the pragmatic and the utopian. For the revolution Stevens evokes was, to his mind, different in kind than the revolutions imagined in his century, a revolution not away from reality toward some imagined ideal, but a revolution forming a *nation* for which reality would be "enough." Ransom's anti-modernism, that is, which is also an anti-capitalism, equates in Stevens' mind with Stalinist anti-capitalism, which is also an anti-modernism—both are visions of what Stevens had called

in 1937 "inaccessible Utopia" (*CP* 179). In opposition Stevens places the anti-Stalinist politics of the *Partisan Review* in the late 1940s and the celebratory modernism of Delmore Schwartz, a poetry, like Stevens' own, not of utopian desire, but of "accessible bliss" (*CP* 395). Brooks doesn't get the point, or getting it, doesn't want it. Stevens isn't being "delightful," no matter how courteous he is: he's arguing over what for him are the most essential questions in the world, what shape modern society should take and how the poet can help. For Stevens, Delmore Schwartz has the better answer, a "politics of reality."

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Notes

[1]Quoted in Robert J. Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis: The Presidency of Harry Truman, 1945-48* (New York: Norton, 1977), 359.

[2]Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), 173-74.

[3]Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 307. Richardson's psycho-analytical approach leads her throughout her biography of the poet to exaggerate Stevens' insecurity as chronic, and results in misreadings of innocuous asides by the poet, notably a joking reference to feeling like an "elephant" when mounting the Yale podium (306).

[4]Stevens' relationship to William Van O'Connor plays out a similar dichotomy. In the spring of 1948 both O'Connor and Schwartz corresponded with Stevens regarding his theory of poetry, Schwartz asking for a contribution to a *Partisan Review* symposium, a request the poet honored; O'Connor for a chance at editing Stevens' collected essays, a request he did not. When O'Connor's book on Stevens, *The Shaping Spirit*, appears in 1950, Stevens describes it as "just a book by a youngish critic looking around for a subject not too hackneyed" (*L* 676), and allows to Barbara Church that the book had "not set the Hudson River on fire" (*L* 683). For Stevens' response to Schwartz, see "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* 15 (August 1948): 884-86.

[5]See William Barrett, *The Truants* (New York: Anchor, 1982). Barrett reports that Rahv's "principal subjects" in the post-war years "were either Stalinism and Soviet expansionism or the *Kenyon Review* and the evils of the New Criticism" (6). Schwartz, meanwhile, makes a similar connection in his contribution to the symposium, "Our Country and Our Culture,"*Partisan Review* 19 (September-October 1952): "Mass culture and the New Criticism, different as they are, both make more acute the need of the intellectual as a critical non-conformist" (595). Among other articles published in the magazine during the period which attacked the New Criticism was a suggestively titled essay by Newton Arvin, "Report from the Academy: The Professor as Manager," *Partisan Review* 12 (1945). Stevens, needless to say, shared their anti-communism more than other elements of their politics; in a letter to Barbara Church of October 15, 1948, he admits that while the *Partisan Review* is "a group well worth helping . . . I do not share that group's politics" (*L* 620). Stevens' own anti-communism emerges most clearly and repeatedly in his letters to Mrs. Church.

[6]See Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The Armed Vision: A Study in the Methods of Modern Literary Criticism*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1955). In a letter to William Van O'Connor of May 19, 1948, Stevens writes that he "had expected something on [the theory of poetry] in Hyman's new book . . . but little or nothing develops" (*L* 598). Stevens goes on to add, in a note which might have stung the ears of a young, American New Critic like O'Connor, that "the great source of modern poetics is probably France."

[7]I use the following abbreviations of Stevens' works: *L* (*Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1966]); *CP* (*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* [New York: Knopf, 1954]); *OP* (*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse [New York: Knopf, 1957]); *NA* (*The Neces-*

sary Angel [New York: Knopf, 1951]); and *SP* (*Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1977]).

[8]See Delmore Schwartz, "Instructed of Much Mortality: A Note on the Poetry of John Crowe Ransom," *Sewanee Review* 54 (Summer 1946): 439-48. It is quite probable that Stevens' description of Ransom's poetry as making a "legend of reality" derives in part from Schwartz, who, in comparing Ransom and Stevens, describes Ransom's characteristic form as that of an "objective fable," a term Schwartz himself borrows from Robert Penn Warren. It should also be noted that Schwartz is utterly sincere in his praise of Ransom, and would go on to dedicate *Summer Knowledge* to him, while Ransom for his part would credit Schwartz with the "ethical-logical approach" of *The New Criticism* (Atlas 145). The opposition of the two men in Stevens' mind, in other words, describes more about that mind than about the more complex reality of the literary history of the Cold War years.

[9]See James Atlas, *Delmore Schwartz* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1977); and Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift* (New York: Viking, 1975).

[10]Bellow, 6.

[11]*Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, ed. Robert S. Phillips (Princeton, N.J.: Ontario Review Press, 1984), 34.

[12]*Letters of Delmore Schwartz*, 42.

[13]Brazeau, 146.

[14]Brazeau, 154.

[15]See Richardson, 58-62, for the impact upon Stevens of Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928). Freud, of course, explicitly connects the religious impulse to both Soviet communism and German nationalism.

[16]It is interesting to note that, upon receiving a complimentary copy of O'Connor's *The Shaping Spirit* in 1950, Stevens writes to complain about the critic's mistaken attribution of a quote by Allen Tate to him regarding Eliot's poetic mastery (*L* 677).

[17]Delmore Schwartz, *Summer Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 25.

[18]See Brazeau, 162-64. One of Schwartz's friends at Harvard was the composer Arthur Berger, who would go on in 1952 to set *Ideas of Order* to music.

[19]See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1988), 37-86.

[20]Schwartz, "All of Us Always Turning Away for Solace," *Summer Knowledge*, 63.

[21]Schwartz, *Summer Knowledge*, 49-50.

[22]In the first edition Stevens placed "Sailing After Lunch" first. In the second edition he moved "Farewell to Florida" to that position, making the political intent of the volume clearer, perhaps because of Stanley Burnshaw's negative review in *The New Masses* 17 (Oct. 1, 1935): 41-42.

[23]Schwartz, "Coriolanus and His Mother," *Summer Knowledge*, 93.

[24]Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto," *Marx* (Chicago: Great Books, 1971), 421.

[25]Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 263.

[26]See W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Affective Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

[27]See Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947).

[28]See Hyman, 327-85.

[29]See John Crowe Ransom, "Criticism, Inc.," *The World's Body* (New York: Scribner's, 1938).

[30]John Crowe Ransom, *God Without Thunder* (New York: Scribner's, 1930), 327.

[31]See T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 3rd ed., (New York: Norton, 1974), v.2, 2205-13.

[32]See W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

[33]See Leslie Fiedler, *What Was Literature?* (New York: Touchstone, 1982), 89-91.

Reviews

***Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects:* Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book.**
Edited and introduced by Milton J. Bates. Stanford and San Marino: Stanford University Press and Huntington Library, 1989.

Opus Posthumous.
By Wallace Stevens. Revised, enlarged, and corrected edition by Milton J. Bates. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.

Readers of Wallace Stevens are doubly blessed with the publication of *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects: Wallace Stevens' Commonplace Book* and a new and much expanded edition of *Opus Posthumous*, a collection of poems, plays, aphorisms, essays, speeches, notes and interviews by Stevens. Milton J. Bates has edited both volumes with punctilious care and thoroughness. When he published his *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* four years ago, Bates established himself as one of our foremost biographical critics of Stevens. His new work expands the range of his scholarly dedication to the poet.

Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects is the final major notebook of Stevens to be published. Drafts of a few early and unpublished poems at the Huntington Library are included in the new edition of *Opus Posthumous*. Some unpublished letters, mostly to Elsie Kachel in the years before their marriage, remain at the Huntington, as well as a vast collection of data and correspondence surrounding the poet's consuming interest in family genealogy. However, with the publication of these new volumes, the readers of Stevens now have access for the first time to all the important primary material left by the poet. I want to argue, however, that such a welcome and wealthy bestowal only signals the need to begin the process of gathering all of Stevens' work into a carefully edited and annotated edition of his works, much like what Macmillan is currently doing with the works of Yeats. The logical publisher of such an edition is Alfred A. Knopf, whose devotion to the careful and attractive publication of Stevens goes back to his first volume, and I can imagine no candidate better suited to undertake the general editorship of such a project than Bates.

Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects consists of two small notebooks in which Stevens copied out quotations from his reading in books and periodical literature from 1932 to 1953. While a small number of the entries are apparently of his own invention, most of the 104 entries consist of excerpts from favored topics he had encountered in his unsystematic and catholic habits of reading. One finds entries, for example, from sources such as a review of William Robinson's *The English Flower Garden*, a discourse on Descartes, and the Book of Genesis. Bates estimates that some 22 of the entries made their way directly into poems, essays, lectures, and letters. The epigraph to "Evening without Angels," for example, is a quotation from Mario Rossi: "the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking." Stevens not only copies out the quotation from an essay in *Life and Letters* but adds Rossi's response to an inquiry Stevens had sent him about the words describing Swift. Stevens then appends a quotation from an Horatian ode about "Inexorable Necessity," a topic raised by Rossi's letter. It is hardly surprising for a reader of Stevens to discover evidence of the poet's interest in the "voluptuousness of looking." Similarly, other topics like the social role of the writer, the figure of the hero, the nature of reality, and the uses of religious faith recur often in his quotations selected for the notebooks. Bates rather shrewdly rec-

ognizes in its pages "a plot to be cultivated and jealously guarded against intrusion by any idiom or idea he could not appropriate wholly for his own purposes."

Bates has scrupulously checked Stevens' copyings against their sources and, in some cases, unearthed sources not otherwise provided by Stevens. For example, in entry #61 Stevens himself has apparently misplaced his source; he adds at the end of a paragraph that he has copied out on Italian painters, "No note of the source of this." Bates has located the source in an essay that appeared in *Apollo* in 1940. I wish to add to his list one further item, entry #21 in Bates's numeration: "Ex Divina Pulchritudine esse omnium Derivatur" ("From Divine Beauty is derived the existence of all things"). The words are Thomas Aquinas' and appear in his *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus* (caput quartum, lectio V). After the citation Stevens characteristically adds his own adaptation of Aquinas' words: "If happiness is in our selves, divine pulchritude is in our selves and poetry is a revelation or a contact."

The first edition of *Opus Posthumous* was edited by the late Samuel French Morse and was published two years after Stevens' death. It collected earlier poems by Stevens that had not been included in the *Collected Poems*, as well as newer poems, two plays, a collection of adagia, and several essays and reviews not included in *The Necessary Angel*. The collection has been a standard source for more than thirty years, even though it has been an unreliable text in many ways. Morse included an essay entitled "On Poetic Truth" that he had found written out in Stevens' hand. Joseph Riddel later pointed out that H. D. Lewis and not Stevens was its author. (Stevens himself quoted from the essay in "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems.") While the inclusion of Lewis' essay as Stevens' was perhaps the most egregious error in the first edition, there were others as well, and with the discovery of new materials by Stevens since 1957, the need for a revised and expanded edition of the book became increasingly apparent.

Over twenty new poems or poems in substantially different forms are added to the new edition—including the first draft of "The Comedian as the Letter C," entitled "From the Journal of Crispin." Stevens submitted this draft in a national competition in 1921; failing to receive the prize, he deposited it in his trash can where it was clandestinely retrieved by his landlord and donated to the Beinecke Library at Yale in 1974. The very early "Carnet de Voyage" suite, with which Stevens launched his career as a modernist in 1914, was not available in the Morse edition but is added in the new edition. Bates correctly restores the sequences of poems—"Phases," "Lettres d'un Soldat" and the "Primordia" poems—as Stevens originally organized them, reinserting, in some cases, parts that were later removed and published as separate poems. From my own marked corrections to *Opus Posthumous* over the years, I note Bates's corrected punctuation of "Peter Parasol," the corrected "compulsive harmony" for "convulsive harmony" in stanza II of "Red Loves Kit," and, in "Of Mere Being," the correction replacing "distance" with "decor" in the last word of the first stanza. The word "air" in the second-last line of "The Course of a Particular" has been changed to "ear." The latter two restorations were earlier made by Holly Stevens in her edition, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Bates makes several other important corrections, especially in punctuation.

Bates's *Opus Posthumous* also adds the play *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* that was previously available only in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*. Several of the "Adagia," unaccountably omitted by Morse, are restored *in toto* here, as well as other smaller

collections of apothegms. The two notebooks, "Schemata" and "From Pieces of Paper," containing listings of titles and phrases, are not included here, though they have been published elsewhere. As far as I can ascertain, Bates has included all the otherwise previously uncollected essays, lectures, and notes written after the Harvard years—including statements by the poet that appeared on dust-jackets and notes he composed on various aspects of the insurance business. Six questionnaire responses given by the poet between 1934 and 1950 are also added to this edition. The easy accessibility of all this material will be welcomed by all readers of Stevens.

In some ways, however, *Opus Posthumous* remains an unsatisfactory compromise with the *Collected Poems*. For example, it includes a number of minor exercises that Stevens rightly omitted from his collected volume, but it also includes a dozen or so important poems written in the year between the publication of the *Collected Poems* and the poet's death. An earlier poem, "The Course of a Particular," was omitted by Stevens from the *Collected Poems* simply as the result of an oversight (*L* 881). The two volumes of Stevens' poetry are still incomplete: "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" and "Of Ideal Time and Choice" can be found only in "Three Academic Pieces" in *The Necessary Angel*. The poems from the Harvard years, including the groundbreaking "Ballade of the Pink Parasol," are not included in the new *Opus Posthumous*; neither are the 1908 and 1909 "June Book" poems. Bates's correction of Morse's dating of the poems in the collection is a notable improvement in sorting out the material, and his notes at the end of the text are useful. But *Opus Posthumous* as a grab-bag of poetry not included in *Collected Poems* leaves the poems indiscriminately strewn—and this brings me back to my original point about the need for a new, comprehensive *Complete Works of Wallace Stevens*. Holly Stevens attempted to redress the problem of the poetry in her 1971 edition *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, wherein she included poems from both *Collected Poems* and *Opus Posthumous*, but she was unfortunately compelled to omit poems like "Blue Buildings in the Summer Air," "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight," "The Bouquet," "The Common Life," "Holiday in Reality," "Homunculus et la Belle Étoile," "Martial Cadenza," "The Red Fern," "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside," "Tattoo," "Vacancy in the Park," "The Weeping Burgher," and many others.

Holly Stevens rendered an important service in her edition by correcting errors in the texts of poems from *Collected Poems*, though such errors have not been corrected in subsequent printings of *Collected Poems*. The eighth line of "Autumn Refrain" ("The stillness that comes to me out of this, beneath"), for example, is absent in *Collected Poems*, though it was included in the original version of the poem in *Hound and Horn*, and there is no evidence that Stevens intended to delete it. Holly Stevens also corrects the word "prickling" to "pricking" from "The Comedian as the Letter C." It occurs in the third line of Part V, "A Nice Shady Home." In my own reading of *Collected Poems*, I have found two errors. The word "scrurry" in the fourth stanza of "The Paltry Nude Starts on a Spring Voyage" should be "scurry"—as it appeared in the poem's first publication in *Poetry*: *A Magazine of Verse* in 1919 and in the manuscript draft submitted by the poet. Similarly, in "The Stars at Tallapoosa," line 6 should read, "There is no moon, no single, silvered leaf" instead of "There is no moon, on single, silvered leaf." The *Collected Poems* is a less reliable text than many have supposed.

Knopf is about to allow *Letters of Wallace Stevens* to go out of print. *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*, containing Stevens' early journals, is already out of print. This occurs ironically at a time when some of the materials edited by Bates are gaining a first publication. The readers of Wallace Stevens in the twenty-first century will deserve access to all his works in reliable texts and with accompanying annotation. It is not too early to begin organizing such a project.

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Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature.
By William W. Bevis. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989.

William W. Bevis' *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature* explores the relationship of Wallace Stevens' poetry to Zen Buddhism. Only a few scholars have investigated this link: Bevis first documented the crux of his argument in a 1974 article, and both Robert Aitken in 1982 and Robert Tompkins in 1985 published short comparative essays on this topic. But beyond these introductory studies critics have paid scant attention to this possible subject of comparison. Of course, the lack of attention can easily be fathomed. Stevens does not overtly express Zen Buddhist principles, and, though his letters show familiarity with Chinese poetry, he had little knowledge of Eastern religions. Thus, an attempt to relate Stevens to the esoteric subject of Zen Buddhism will likely be met with suspicion and perhaps even indifference. However, Bevis does not argue that Zen Buddhism influenced Stevens; indeed he goes to considerable lengths to show that Stevens could not have had accurate knowledge of it. Instead, he argues that Stevens wrote certain poems to reflect a state of consciousness that can best be discussed within the context of Zen Buddhism.

The following paragraph from the introduction fairly summarizes Bevis' argument:

> One of Stevens' most distinguishing and pervasive characteristics, his detachment, is meditative and therefore experiential in origin, and difficult to perceive from within our culture. If I outline the argument from a logical rather than a critical point of view, it takes this structure: meditative consciousness exists as a possible mode of operation of the central nervous system with fairly stable characteristics across cultures; reports of meditative consciousness repeat certain qualities, points of view, and psychological assumptions; the meditative model, once defined, fits very well a number of Stevens' poems, passages and attitudes—precisely those which have most puzzled or dismayed readers and which have spawned the least convincing interpretations. Many of Stevens' problem passages, his enigmatic interest in *nothing*, are very well explained by a meditative paradigm. His life, and especially his long walks, offer plausible evidence of meditative experience.

Bevis devotes the first half of the book to defining this meditative paradigm to explain detachment and nothingness in Stevens' poetry. When Bevis speaks of meditation, he refers to an "aconceptual" state of consciousness that involves the lack of a sense of self, a feeling of nothingness and detachment. Because the West emphasizes only ordinary consciousness and conceptual thinking, most people

believe that the meditative experience involves annihilation and find it either distasteful or untrue (how can someone become nothing?). Bevis corrects this misinterpretation by drawing from a number of sources: Buddhist writings, Zen koans, Zen poems, and, perhaps most significantly, recent experiments performed on both monks and Westerners. Electroencephalogram (EEG) readings of experienced Zen masters and of novice practitioners of transcendental meditation (TM) support the claims of an altered, aconceptual state of consciousness. In the early 1960s, Arthur Deikman, a research psychologist, instructed Westerners with no knowledge of Zen to meditate. After only a few sessions, their written records of the event described a state of consciousness that Bevis compares with the *Visuddhimagga*, a Buddhist text that details eight stages of meditation. The Zen Masters, TM practitioners, and Deikman's subjects all reported a feeling of loss of selfness, the stopping of discursive thought patterns, and heightened awareness. The EEG readings support the reduction of cortical activity, and the reports of heightened awareness belie thoughts of annihilation. Or, as Bevis phrases it, "one feels one has not seen not nothing, but *the* nothing."

Bevis argues that Stevens experienced a meditative consciousness and that it influenced his poetry. He reads a number of poems using his meditative paradigm to explain them, and draws from a number of sources to show how someone unfamiliar with Zen Buddhism could achieve this state. Thoreau's *Walden* and Admiral Richard E. Byrd's South Pole journals figure prominently in the argument and offer the most convincing evidence. Bevis shows how isolation and relaxed perception of an object lead to a state of meditative consciousness, which is exactly the method Deikman used to get Westerners to experience the state in his experiments. Drawing on Stevens' published letters and notebooks, Bevis points to Stevens' long walks as the probable occasions for his experience of this consciousness. He relies on a phenomenological method to make his arguments; he compares the descriptions of Stevens' walks and Thoreau's and Byrd's isolation with descriptions of the Zen monks and of the Western participants in the psychological experiments of their state of consciousness. The similarities are apparent, but, of course, nothing can be *proved*; only the *possibility* that Stevens experienced this state can be suggested.

The value of Bevis' thesis depends on how well it can be applied to Stevens' poems. It certainly will not work on all of Stevens' poems; indeed, Bevis argues that Stevens alternated between an imaginative and meditative consciousness (effecting a Copernican revolution on the reality vs. imagination critical dialogue). Bevis' reading of "The Snow Man" can serve to illustrate his approach. Typically, critics interpret the "nothing" in the poem as the opposite of "being," concluding that the poem reflects how the imagination works on reality to produce *something*, so to speak. However, as Bevis points out, the snow man "beholds . . . the nothing that is [there]." Unintelligible when viewed from the usual Western interpretation of "nothing," but read in the light of Bevis' meditative paradigm, the poem becomes much clearer. Reading "nothing" as Stevens' attempt to describe a meditative experience, Bevis sidesteps the standard logical arguments about the poem's meaning and sees the poem as a poet's report of a profound, moving experience. In doing so, he avoids the intellectual reasonings about "nothing" and "being" that critics usually advance. As Bevis points out, Stevens, unlike philosophers, did not think logically; thus, philosophical readings of Stevens' poetry get entangled in his contradictions. By sidestepping intellectual arguments and presenting the poem as

an experience, Bevis achieves a convincing reading, one that accounts for the apparent contradictions between "being" and "nothing" in the poem.

The first three sections of the book discuss all of the above issues in great detail. The fourth section tries to account for Stevens' long poem with a theory of "the comedy of consciousness," and I use the word "tries" advisedly. Discussing types of artistic forms, Bevis lists three types of form commonly recognized: narrative, associative, and episodic. He then introduces a fourth form, meditative, which he says underlies the comedy of consciousness. It will be worthwhile to quote Bevis' definition in full:

> A true fragmentation, made of an endless series of associations that follow one from another but which fail to progress, to maintain a single principle, or to form a coherent picture of the speaker. This form reflects the flow of consciousness as seen from the meditative point of view. Examples: Beethoven's Quartet op. 130, no. 13; Emerson's "Experience"; and Stevens' "Esthétique du Mal."

Suddenly Bevis includes Beethoven and Emerson in his meditative paradigm. Perhaps it is not surprising that Emerson would be linked with meditation, but including Beethoven seems extreme. Soon Bevis includes many other artists: Cézanne, Faulkner, Beckett, Proust, and Joyce. Although Bevis has a noble cause—to develop a unifying theory to explain the development of modern art—he manages instead to call his entire thesis into question. Earlier statements that seemed credible become dubious, if only by association. One wishes that he had stopped writing at the third section of the book.

Although Bevis does compare Stevens' writings with descriptions of the meditative state of consciousness in various Buddhist writings, he ignores an important source: the large body of poems written by various Chinese and Japanese Zen practitioners. Admittedly, the cultural differences cannot be ignored, but Bevis has available a body of literature *known* to be influenced by the meditative experience. If Bevis' thesis has validity, there should be significant correspondences between Stevens' poems and the Zen poems. To me this seems an elementary requirement of this type of criticism, but on the whole Bevis ignores it. As I said earlier, Bevis does make some comparisons, but these are done to develop his description of the meditative paradigm, and therefore prove nothing. Section four might have been more effective if Bevis had applied his paradigm to Zen poetry and then provided a comparative study with the poems of Stevens.

Overall, Bevis does an excellent job of discussing a difficult subject, an aconceptual state of consciousness for which the West lacks a decent vocabulary. He revises the polemics of Stevens criticism, especially by seeing the old reality vs. imagination dichotomy in an entirely new way. Having recently read a significant amount of Stevens criticism, I have rarely come across more sensitivity to Stevens' late poems. Even the fourth section, despite my disagreement, remains fascinating reading. As must be expected from this type of study, nothing has been proven beyond doubt, but a new critical dialogue has been voiced, and it deserves attention.

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What I Cannot Say: Self, Word, and World in Whitman, Stevens, and Merwin. By Thomas B. Byers. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

In his chapter on Wallace Stevens, which is arguably the most crucial to the larger argument of *What I Cannot Say: Self, Word, and World in Whitman, Stevens, and Merwin,* Thomas B. Byers argues for an epistemological reading of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Reading the first five cantos of the poem, Byers notes that, for Stevens, "simple experience must precede self-conscious image-making." The problem for poets since the Romantics, of course, has been how to discover "simple experience," which turns out to be anything but simple. In the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth, paraphrasing Aristotle, wrote that "poetry is the most philosophic of all writing," by which he meant that poetry—real poetry—is concerned with Truth. And truth, in most poetry written since the early nineteenth century, has been inextricably tied to epistemology—with the poet's ability to know the world through the process of poetic composition.

Byers' study, as its subtitle indicates, treats one specifically American strand of this epistemological tradition. Beginning with a close reading of Whitman's "Song of Myself," the author establishes the terms and methodology he will employ throughout his subsequent discussions of Wallace Stevens and W. S. Merwin. For Byers, Whitman's poem occurs at the last moment of philosophical optimism, at a point in history when the Poet as described by Emerson and Wordsworth was still capable of embracing the world with his language—when "simple experience" was still a possibility. From the perspective of postmodernism, of course, there never could have been such a time, and Byers is certainly aware of this, but Whitman was not burdened with such knowledge and so was free to proceed toward transcendence.

Wallace Stevens, in Byers' book, represents a much more troubled response to the problem of knowledge-through-language. For Stevens, especially in his late philosophical poems "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," such knowledge must always remain fictive—invented, no matter how beautiful or convincing. "In general," writes Byers, "both poems indicate a desire to overcome the distance between speaker and subject as an approach to bridging the related gap between self and world. Yet even as Stevens longs to be another prophetic celebrant, he finds himself a skeptic, one who can believe at all only because he accepts the difficulties and limitations of doing so." Byers is successful in demonstrating, again through close readings, both Stevens' skepticism about language and his descent from Whitman. The connection to Whitman is seldom made, and is perhaps Byers' most original insight. While Stevens' view of the world is bleak, even desiccated, in comparison to Whitman's oceanic optimism, both poets used words in an attempt to grasp the world of the senses. In Stevens' poems, such a grasping of *things* must always be paradoxical, with the poet creating a fictive world in which to act out a model of transcendence safe from the impossibilities of reality.

The last poet taken up in *What I Cannot Say* clearly comes at the end of the arc defined by Whitman and Stevens as Byers has presented them—that is, as poets of epistemological doubt. W. S. Merwin in *The Lice*—a book from fairly early in this poet's career—wrote poems that seem to retreat from language. Whereas Walt Whitman was able to write poems as if his language were capable of infusing the very objects of his personal experience, W. S. Merwin writes in *The Lice* as if the power of language to distort the truth was so great as to make the act of writing it-

self a kind of betrayal. And though this would seem to bring him into opposition with Whitman's vast happiness in the face of language, the underlying belief in a connection between words and physical reality remains the central concern of the poet as he tries to find words that will fit somehow the world of experience. In Merwin's poems, however, the polarity of the relationship between self and world has been reversed.

Thomas B. Byers convincingly demonstrates his thesis that Whitman, Stevens, and Merwin are poets especially concerned with the ways in which language can be used toward an understanding of the world. With each of these poets, the *what* in "What I cannot say" becomes increasingly problematic. So there is also an historical argument implicit in Byers' arrangement: romantic, modern, and postmodern attitudes toward poetry represented in turn by Whitman, Stevens, and Merwin. Byers' concerns are not, however, primarily historical, but philosophical.

Byers has kept the scope of his study relatively modest by focusing on close readings of specific texts. A graceful writer, Byers uses the tools of poststructuralist critical theory effectively without allowing the tools themselves to obtrude into his discussion. The importance of a critical study ought to be measured by how it affects the reading of the texts it has undertaken to examine. *What I Cannot Say*, in its collocation of these three poets of Truth, in Wordsworth's sense, will certainly suggest new readings of all three poets, and perhaps of modern and postmodern poetry generally.

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Hints and Disguises: Marianne Moore and Her Contemporaries.
By Celeste Goodridge. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989.

Marianne Moore's centennial year was heralded in with the publication of several excellent critical books, the reprinting of her *Complete Poems* and most important for the work under review, the publication of her *Complete Prose*, edited by Patricia Willis. Moore is now recognized as a major figure in Modernism, not a merely peripheral or anomalous one. And, as Celeste Goodridge makes clear in *Hints and Disguises: Marianne Moore and Her Contemporaries*, Moore was involved with the new not only as a poet, but as an observer of and commentator on her contemporaries through many decades of their work. Her reviews of and extensive private correspondence with Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and T. S. Eliot form perhaps the best account we have of modernist poetics in the making. They also demonstrate a self-conscious stylistics and a penetrating intelligence that would command our attention even if the poetry had never been written.

Goodridge has carefully studied the correspondence and argues that it should be valued equally with Moore's public offerings. Many judgments which remain covert or indirect in the reviews appear without qualification in the letters. The author defends Moore's public indirection in terms of an aesthetic of concealment and subtle disclosure shared with her contemporaries. She also argues that Moore's talent for parody informs her prose, that she pays homage to her subject and competes with him in this way.

Moore's greatest affinity was with Stevens (not, as convention has it, with Williams). Goodridge's chapter on Moore's reviews of Stevens details this affinity and

its limits. Moore began commenting on Stevens' work as early as 1916. Between 1924 and 1964 she published eleven pieces of criticism about him. Goodridge's title comes from one of these reviews and it is indeed his habit of disguising and distancing himself in poetry that Moore repeatedly comes back to. In a letter thanking Stevens for a copy of *Owl's Clover*, she applauds him for it: "an unkilled and tough-lived fortitude is a great help to us, conveyed as it is by your disguises." Her reviews confirm her confidence in his practice: "It is remarkable that a refusal to speak should result in such eloquence and that an implied heaven could be made so definite." If Moore later expressed some reservations about Stevens' elusiveness, these never amounted to condemnations, even when, as Goodridge notes, the elusiveness became figured in her mind in the image of a snake. Other critics have seen Stevens as the implicit subject of "The Plumet Basilisk," but Goodridge goes much farther in exploring this ambivalent link.

What is missing from this discussion is any careful gauging of Stevens' poems against Moore's commentary, let alone against her poetry. Moore sometimes claimed ignorance of fairly transparent passages (while at ease in more obviously difficult ones). One would like to know what she meant about the subterranean ogre in "Apostrophe to Vincentine" or what Goodridge means by Stevens' "gratuitous cruelty." Goodridge also sometimes misreads Moore's remarks in order to fit them to a reading. Other minor oversights mar this useful book. Too much relevant criticism goes unmentioned (such as Jeredith Merrin's fine work on Moore's affinities with Seventeenth Century prose writers; Taffy Martin's discussion of Moore's *Dial* years; my 1983 article "' "Polished Garlands" of Agreeing Difference'" about Moore's quarrel with Williams; John Slatin's article on Moore and Williams). One regrets that the general comments on Moore's prose style are subsumed by the concern with her stance. The book would be enriched by some comparison of Moore's poetry to that of her contemporaries. Overall, however, this is a valuable and often illuminating study, a welcome addition to our understanding of High Modernism.

Bonnie Costello
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News and Comments

The late Peter Brazeau's collection of tapes and transcripts of interviews with persons acquainted with Wallace Stevens arrived at the Huntington Library in June. It includes 108 cassettes and a corresponding number of transcripts of some 150 hours of conversations between Brazeau and Stevens' relatives, friends, and business associates. Substantial selections from the interviews appeared in Brazeau's *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York, 1983). The collection is now being processed and is expected to be fully available to scholars in March, 1990.

The Huntington's manuscript catalogue notes 16 letters in the Conrad Aiken collection which allude to Stevens. Because of the substantial size of the Aiken correspondence archive, it is likely that alert Stevens scholars will find additional pertinent references there.

Supplies seem scarcer and prices moderately higher in the market for Stevens' first editions and letters. Waiting for Godot Catalogue 18 (June, 1989) offered *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, Edelstein A 4a, a fine copy in second issue d.j., for $325, and a very good copy of *The Necessary Angel* (Edelstein A 17), some wear to the d.j., for $100. Argosy Catalogue 772 (July, 1989) had *Parts of a World*, fine in a d.j., at $275, and *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, Cummington Press, 1942, one of 190 numbered copies in a slightly defective glassine jacket, at $500. *'Lives of Works That Matter': A Catalogue of Inscribed Books, Letters and Manuscripts*, with an introduction by Richard Wilbur, Randy F. Weinstein, Bookseller, Inc., lists four typed, signed letters from Stevens to Allen Tate (September 23, December 4, 1944, July 6 and August 27, 1945) for $1800.

Stevens scholars who have worked at the Huntington since last year's report include Jacqueline V. Brogan (Notre Dame), on Stevens and World War II; T. Price Caldwell (Mississippi State), on Stevens' letters; Mary J. Egan (Slippery Rock State), on Stevens' unpublished letters; James Longenbach (University of Rochester), on Stevens and politics; Kia Penso (University of California, Santa Barbara), an essay on Stevens; Nancy D. Sanders (Loyola-Marymount), on Stevens and nineteenth-century women writers; and Joan E. White (Citrus College, retired), on Stevens and Borges.

An article by John N. Serio dealing with the use of a desktop publishing system to typeset *The Wallace Stevens Journal* received the 1989 Outstanding Journal Article Award by the Society for Technical Communication. The article, entitled "Maximizing Desktop Publishing Software: High Resolution at Low Cost," appears in the November 1988 issue of *Technical Communication.*

"Wallace Stevens and the Question of Genre" will be the topic of the Stevens program at the Northeast Modern Language Association Convention, which is scheduled to meet in Toronto on April 4-8, 1990. Eleanor Cook will serve as Chair.

Daniel Woodward
The Huntington Library