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Contents

"Satisfactions of Belief": Stevens' Poetry in a Pragmatic World — <i>Lyall Bush</i>	3
Crispin's Dependent "Airs": Psychic Crisis in the Early Stevens — <i>David R. Jarraway</i>	21
Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction: "It Must Give Pleasure" — <i>Glen MacLeod</i>	33
Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince at the Clavier" — <i>B. J. Leggett</i>	39
Wallace Stevens and the Cummington Press: A Correspondence, 1941-1951 — <i>Ron Klarén</i>	62
"A War Between the Mind and Sky": Bakhtin and Poetry, Stevens and Politics — <i>M. Keith Booker</i>	71
Poems	86
Reviews	90
Current Bibliography	95

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‘Satisfactions of Belief’: Stevens’ Poetry in a Pragmatic World

LYALL BUSH

I

BELIEF” IS LINKED EXPLICITLY with what could be taken to be its opposite, “fiction,” just four times in Wallace Stevens’ poetry. But the conjunction arguably inheres in any of the fifty-seven appearances “belief” makes, because of the peculiar ways the word gets used.¹ In the places where the two do come together, the words produce strange effects, which have to do with the habits of irony, which brings things together as it takes them apart. “The prologues are over,” Stevens declares at the opening of “Asides on the Oboe,”

It is a question, now,
Of final belief. So, say that final belief
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

(CP 250)

And in the “Adagia” he writes:

The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly. (OP 189)

The strangeness derives in part from the inherent contradiction between the words—belief in a “fiction” is not usually taken to be the mark of good psychic health—and in part arises from the solemn tone of the propositions, which disguises a very serene hilarity. There is a mockery of stoic resolution in “there being nothing else,” for example, and in lines like “The prologues are over,” and “It is time to choose” finely modelled ironizations of crisis.

But getting the humor is only half the point. For these strange assertions do more than tease the reader about the pleasure he or she may take in the melodrama of apocalypse, or make fun of flimsy aesthetic oppositions between “reality” and “fiction.” They argue that there is “nothing else” but fictions, and point to the overwhelming question: which one amongst the fictions will “you” attend to, or believe in? The words rhetorically enjoin the reader to “choose,” but then close off the possibility of freedom of will by tendering the paradox that the “exquisite truth” itself is a fiction that “you believe in willingly.” We enter quietly, as readers of a text about the world “out there,” into rhetorical quicksand. For the words point the reader beyond themselves at the same time that they appear to affirm their self-referring enclosure. Opposites (belief and fiction) adhere “naturally,” and the metaphysical resolutions they appear to hold together with their unity—having to do with “final belief” and the “exquisite truth”—are purely formal alternatives, albeit soaked at length in an ironical brine. It is difficult, in light of this, to take their pro-

posed efficacy as seriously as the undertone seems to urge. The passages grant a world “out there” where the injunctions to choose willingly between fictions matter, but intimate that the decision to be made, while important, is also rather casual, and perhaps finally of only a kind of cerebral “consequence.” If we read the passages for their utility, they are bound to disappoint. Yet there is a way in which their aestheticism and irony may aid, and that is by pragmatic example.

In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty defines the pragmatic attitude to language. It is not the subtle instrument of truth, but in its use represents an act that “just plain enables us to cope”: “the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment” (Rorty xvii, xviii). Rorty’s reference is to a community, to the people in it whose prime material or technique for being in the “world”—which may exist as “information,” consumer fantasy, or just riding the subway—is language. Might Stevens’ comic and strange verbal acts be described then as places where the mind has found a way of efficaciously coping with the world? If so, how pragmatic is that? What kind of world could purely mental efficacy dwell in, and, moreover, could “mental efficacy” ever be said to be a valid category of experience? The problem with comparing Stevensian to pragmatic utterance is that while each slips from kinds of solipsism to kinds of recuperation of referentiality (impulses embraced by the words “fiction” and “belief”), Stevens in practice distrusts his sliding movements of mind much more than pragmatic philosophers seem to do, distrusts the efficacy of the efficacy he finds.

The focal point in either case must reside in analyses of efficacy or use-value. What I hope to do in this paper is to write a short genealogy of “belief” from Nietzsche (in *The Gay Science*) back to Emerson, and down again to William James (in *Principles of Psychology*) and Stevens. While it is a narrative that for the most part works, it will arrive at last at a Stevens who senses amid tropes of relation and connection one that severs selves and their time in spite of the desire for efficacious pragmatic action.

Nietzsche’s antipathy to “belief” as a devitalizing habit of mind, focussed most famously in *The Gay Science* on the practices of Western Christianity, stems from his objection to anything that would weaken or disable intellectual vitality. Book V of *The Gay Science* opens under the subheading “The meaning of our cheerfulness,” and announces that the death of God generates a feeling “like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn” (Nietzsche 280). The elated performance of the list belies the “scarcely describable” feeling—each substantive supplements it, if imprecisely—but suggests that the pleasure of the open-ended text is contiguous with the decay of a monolithic metaphysics. Nietzsche, as Rorty says, thought his generation was the first “not to believe that they had the truth” (150), which lifted them from the repressive system of knowing that belief closes one into. Nietzsche’s idea of the *gaya scienza*, moreover, was meant to upset the tendency of a “godlessness” to supplant the old monolithic epoch with a renominated one. The *gaya scienza* is “the will not to deceive” (281), the

“Satisfactions of Belief”

agreement that what may be granted permission in the realm of knowledge are “regulative fictions” (280), or—Homer’s main epithet for Odysseus—“*polytropoi*,” the will to agree that what is believed in is hypothetical, transitional and bound shortly to be supplemented by another. In “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” Nietzsche asserts that what we call the real, what we find “out there,” is more or less a game of leap-frogging tropes:

[People] are deeply immersed in illusions and dream images; their eye glides only over the surface of things and sees “forms”; their feeling nowhere leads into truth, but contents itself with the reception of stimuli, playing, as it were, a game of blindman’s buff on the backs of things. (Kaufmann, *Portable Nietzsche* 43)

The Homeric epithet, *polytropoi*, holds a further figure for language’s central role in the process of immersion. The literal translation, “many turns,” which makes Odysseus “the man of many turns” or tropes, or inventions, reflects on the relation of language to knowledge: it suggests that any utterance is not only “many-turned,” but that its polytropic character plays a role in the deception that composes the collectively created consciousness. If language leads us to the water, it will be for reflection, not to drink—but reflection “deeply immersed in illusion.” And thus an attack on belief runs into an embrace of fiction, but fiction with, for Nietzsche, both disturbing and exhilarating consequences.

Nietzsche explains that the social nature of consciousness leads through language to ideas about what can be known. Self-consciousness, the awareness of separate individuation, is first the result of being a social animal: “My idea is, as you see, that consciousness does not really belong to man’s individual existence but rather to his social or herd nature” (Nietzsche 299). The limits of the “social,” therefore, or what he calls “a surface and sign-world” of “animal consciousness,” are the limits of knowledge, and reflect again on what is in the social, not “within.” Consciousness, developed “under the pressure of the need for communication” becomes an epistemologically darkened world in which one can know neither oneself nor interpret the signs of the world beyond a utility agreed upon by the herd.

Language-use thus is an analogy for “belief.” Both are mechanisms for using the information the world offers for social ends, both have their root in fear, and both are dangerous because they tend to propose “knowledge.” Belief, constructed around a divine center, differs from language only in that its works are more obvious. In section 355, Nietzsche establishes an inversion of the Emersonian notion of knowledge that he would use to explain the ironies of language-use and belief: “Look, isn’t our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover under everything strange, unusual, and questionable something that no longer disturbs us? Is it not the *instinct of fear* that bids us to know?” (300-01). But after positing the circumstances of their origin, Nietzsche shortly strips both language and belief of their pretense to having access to their centers:

Even the most cautious among them suppose that what is familiar is at least *more easily knowable* than what is strange, and that, for example, sound method demands that we start from the “inner world,” from the “facts of consciousness,” because this world is *more familiar to us*. Error of errors! What is familiar is what we are used to; and what we are used to is most difficult to “know”—that is, to see as a problem; that is, to see as strange, as distant, as “outside us.” (301)

Nietzsche takes pleasure in presenting his ironical vision of the conflict between the origin and ends of language and belief, of the pressured relationship of “outer” to “inner” in the mind, and in the contemplation of an impossibly contradictory world that is at once impoverished and fertile, a world that multiplies interpretations whose intuitions are that it is the acts of “knowing” they display which seem to be subtracting from knowledge (Nietzsche 328). It is a view that Stevens, whose own intellectual life ran a constant circuit between the two experiences (of fecundity and impoverishment), must have recognized. For both writers, the world could be at once impoverished of a source of meaning and enriched by the fertility of possible meanings that the receding of this source made way for. The final lines of “Esthétique du Mal” are as jubilant about the new relationship between self and world as anything in Nietzsche:

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

(CP 326)

But while with Nietzsche Stevens could reiterate that the new “freedom” was a joyful liberation into a polytropic world “swarming / With . . . metaphysical changes,” he could also be disturbed by the release from a burdensome fictive self into a plenitude of “So many selves.” Nietzsche would ask what the conscious self, or self-consciousness, was if not this erupting terrain of fictions, but Stevens, beginning to wonder about “Merely” living “as and where we live” could be rightfully anxious about the practical consequence of conflating belief and fiction so unreservedly.²

Stevens’ notion of belief owes a recognizably large debt to Nietzsche, as does his poetry in general. But he differs in important ways that I would argue belong to an American pragmatic philosophical tradition. In the essay “Two or Three Ideas” (1951) Stevens looks toward a poetry that may work “practically” in a world uncomplicated by *polytropoi*. These late “ideas” seem to argue against Nietzsche’s ironical solipsism:

In an age of disbelief, or, what is the same thing, in a time that is largely humanistic, in one sense or another, it is for the poet to

"Satisfactions of Belief"

supply the satisfactions of belief, in his measure and in his style. . . .
I want to try to formulate a conception of perfection in poetry with
reference to the present time and the near future and to speculate
on the activities possible to it as it deploys itself throughout the
lives of men and women. (*OP* 259-60)

Until recently students were instructed to read Stevens as the philosopher of subjective idealism, or the poet of "gorgeous nonsense," and this passage's liberal glance ahead to a "perfection in poetry" does not appear at first to annul that tradition. Its implicitly Horatian poetics—the poet supplies instruction and delight in the form of "the satisfactions of belief"—are offset by his insistence that his poetry circulate (though the word he uses, "supply," comes from economics, as though the poets were the warehouses of pleasure) "throughout the lives of men and women." But do these words really mean what they seem to be saying? What are the material satisfactions a poet like Stevens could give? How can he supply them to "the lives of men and women" if they are, most probably, not reading him? Can poetry be envisioned as an agency that "deploys itself" at all? Has the pragmatic voice undone the Horatian intent?

The questions are characteristically Emersonian ones, and might be paraphrased in this way: how can a person (a poet) be transcendent (or perfect) and still remain part of the populace? How does a poem, or any other piece of writing, move into a world to fulfill needs that have not been articulated as needs by the "world"?³ It is over questions like these that Stevens breaks with Nietzschean philosophy. For Nietzsche, belief and language-use are both devices for an oppressive epistemology that has no clear place of origin. But while their appearance and development can be traced to their degree of utility, these impulses quickly circle back on themselves and cancel their working value:

We simply lack any organ for knowledge, for "truth": we "know" (or believe or imagine) just as much as may be *useful* in the interests of the human herd, the species; and even what is here called "utility" is ultimately also a mere belief, something imaginary, and perhaps precisely that most calamitous stupidity of which we shall perish some day. (Nietzsche 300)

For Stevens, it seems, as for Emerson and James before him, utility is not the origin of a system of representation which could be singular enough in its effects to some day be "calamitous." It is the increasingly complex condition of conscious life that holds if perhaps not value, then enabling power.

Emerson, greatly admired by Nietzsche, finds in the world neither an elaborate "net of communication" (Nietzsche's metonymy for consciousness), nor a circular return of end to beginning that meets ironical cancellation. He writes that what is there is a "web of God . . . always circular power returning into itself" (*Essays and Lectures* 55). Between all things there is productive, if difficult, "relation," rather than conspiracy, negative contact, and death. And in

the material world the abstract circle of power is the Antaeus return to ground: "the individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his labor to embrace all other laborers" (54). He "embraces" them by becoming multiple; his "return" is to a desire lying along the mental pathways, shared by all men, which he must satisfy: to a desire for shared experience and the shared conviction that the embrace between laborers is a work, or *the* work, of meaning. And that it is articulate, and articulable, and commensurable with the speech of the mind. The essay holds that while "experience is converted into thought," "thought can never ripen into truth" without "Action" (60). But "Action," before truth, like the laborers, is multiple. "The stream," he writes, "retreats to its source. A great soul will be strong to live, as well as strong to think. Does he lack organ or medium to impart his truths? He can still fall back on this elemental force of living them" (62).

Emerson carries his figure of circuitry between intangible thought, tangible action, and ripe "truth" over into the later essay, "The Poet," where he argues that "the invention of nature" that we participate in "is a very high sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by the intellect being where and what it sees, by sharing the path, or circuit of things through forms, and so making them translucent to others. The paths of things is silent. Will they suffer a speaker to go with them?" (459). Nietzsche's answer to the question would be no, that there is a breach between the silence of things and one's eventual articulation of them that is the odd consequence of language's social origin. Emerson, and frequently Stevens, answers yes, the speaker "goes" with the paths of things and gives them language as a way of bringing the self to action and making the path "translucent to others." One of the implications of Nietzsche's argument is that where there is silence, "things" do not exist. Emerson's articulation of the problematic relationship between what knowledge is and how it can be known, between the "paths of things" and the speaker who can articulate the paths he has been allowed to "go with," between knowing, what is/can be known and its vocal dissemination, meets Nietzsche's cancelling reply, that essentially there is no interior to be known, by putting the issue of the interior and exterior knowing opposition in a figure that refuses to be either "in" or "out": the "paths of things" is located in no space. Emerson effectively makes no separation between mental facts and phenomena in the world: the intellect is "where and what it sees," both the place and the *topos*, the locale and the intellectual resource. Emerson's point, unlike Nietzsche's, is that the crucial act is making the paths of things "translucent to others," in always being and knowing with others. It is interesting that this American pragmatic attitude accepts an invented nature as a matter of course: the constructedness of the world, even of "nature," appears to be acceptable to them in a way that it is not for Nietzsche, who seems never to have fallen out of a shocked love for the subject of the receded center. The "paths of things"—ideas? events? words? thoughts? deeds? connections between points of temporary knowing?—compels us to consider Emerson's prescience of the

"Satisfactions of Belief"

supplement. A sort of transcendence, it also embraces the labor of relation, especially social relation, as "paths" indicates.

If Emerson accepted the imposition of human will on an inchoate nature, he also accepted the necessity for a constant change, both within the natural world and in the will responding to it. In the essay "Circles," he describes this acceptance in terms of belief; old beliefs over time, he says, are shaken, and replaced, by new ones. And whence arise the new beliefs? Through nature's own inclinations exercising her strengths, discharging her will: "there are no permanent fixtures in nature," he announces in the essay's third paragraph, having just written, "every action admits of being outdone. Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn; that there is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning" (403). The "truth" he speaks of here, as in the passage from "The American Scholar," is by this definition contingent; it is the center of any system of belief, but a center only for a time, and no one who works toward it can become its master: "our life is an apprenticeship to the truth." Any center is a path that leads to any other center, and is thus in the odd position of being also multiple. In one startling passage in "Circles" Emerson introduces his idea of the nearly vertiginous serial inchoation of nature and (more especially for him) of mind, and states that "truth" is like literature and belief:

In the thought of tomorrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures, of the nations, and marshall thee to a heaven which no epic dream has yet depicted. (Emerson 405)

Belief, like literature, or language, possesses in its structures what may be described as the capability of displaying its strength most in its ability to dissolve those structures, or more accurately perhaps, by allowing itself to be dissolved within a "series" of beliefs, a path. Long before Nietzsche, Emerson saw how rapidly the familiar might become the strange, and how, in a way, it always was. A subject, or speaker, too must be a story: also in upheaval, and also in flux. But like story, and Emersonian "work," always already in the world, however strangely in relation to itself.

II

I want now to look briefly at William James's conception of belief before I return to Stevens to measure the extent to which pragmatic philosophy opens up his poetry, and the extent to which his poetry confronts pragmatic relationality and connection in time with the non-relational and disjunctive. On April 30, 1870, after a year of severe depression, James recorded this well-known Emersonian passage in his journal, just after writing that he would assume that his "free will" was no illusion:

I will go a step further with my will, and not only act with it but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. My belief, to be sure, *can't* be optimistic—but I will posit life (the

real, the good) in the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world. (McDermott, *Writings of William James* 8)

With Emerson, James characterizes life as personal power, and finds it most essentially in “the self-governing *resistance* of the ego to the world.” This resistance, moreover, is based upon his assumption that he possesses a will free of other constraints, especially social and political ones (a good American, James retained the moral, spoke of cultivating “the feeling of moral freedom” [8]). James wrote these words in the months after a year-long crisis during which he had contemplated suicide, and it is safe to assume that what James means by the ego’s seemingly narcissistic “resistance” to the world is its resistance to being overwhelmed (or obliterated) by it. Just prior to his avowal of belief in his “individual reality and creative power” he wrote that “hitherto”—that is, before the end of his crisis—he was certain that real “daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into” (McDermott 8). He would eventually come to see the contradiction of his belief in himself. By 1890, when he published *The Principles of Psychology*, he would use the word “continuous” over “resistance,” arguing that being lies in continuous intercourse between self and world, though the boundaries between the two in his writing, as in Emerson’s, were to be continually and increasingly blurred. But a closer look at the journal entry in light of its Emersonian echoes reveals something of the same idea then.

By the terms of the journal entry, “belief” is an extreme act. It is a way not only of being alive in the world, but of staying alive in it. Like Emerson, James favored combative metaphors as a way of describing the life of the mind, and like Emerson felt certain that life, nature, and mind were in one way or another all end-directed. In *The Principles of Psychology*, he would argue that “the only meaning of essence is teleological, and that classification and conception are purely teleological conceptions of the mind” (*Principles* 961). In “The Stream of Thought” chapter he argues, in an odd thought-experiment, “annihilate a mind at any instant, cut its thought through whilst yet uncompleted, and examine the object present to the cross-section thus suddenly made; you will find, not the bald word in process of utterance, but that word suffused with the whole idea” (*Principles* 271). Coping with the environment, Rorty’s phrase, is being with it by *contest*: one root of coping is from the French word *couper*, to strike or slash. Classification and conception are “weapons” because the mind constructs experience by acts of attention and ordering. The mind becomes itself through what could be described as a metonymic violence on the world. In the context of James’s figure of phenomenological life as an unceasing stream, the metonymic slash needs to be brutal. The narrative here, of cutting the mind to reveal it cutting and slashing, invokes a Machiavellian pragmatism whereby the self is at bottom end-directed. By these terms a belief in the self must arrive, or seek to arrive, at a contemplation of its narrative closure, whether that be its demise (which thought calls for resistance), or just the hypothetical last member of a projected “series” of steps in speech or in action. A

“Satisfactions of Belief”

part of our pragmatic inquiry then must be: how can one deploy an end to the “story” of the self that satisfies, considering the Emersonian conviction in endless replacement over cessation. And, if we care to trace the genealogy of this question, how, in the light of Emerson’s description of language and belief dissolving in a “series,” can we understand James’s confidence in an utterly free will that can manage such a narrative?

The figure of teleology implies that a self is not a person’s birthright, but is rather over time chipped out of the stream of consciousness: a self that, like some kinds of comedy, is ad-libbed. Many chapters in *Principles* point to the same idea—“Attention” or “Habit” or “The Perception of Reality”—and illustrate how “minds” are formed against a rush of experience by the choice or selection of those parts of it that are considered to adhere. In *The Meaning of Truth* (1909), James explains that “the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience. The directly apprehended universe needs, in short, no extraneous trans-empirical connective structure” (McDermott 136). But he hastens to add in *Radical Empiricism* (1912) that “though one part of our experience may lean upon another part to make it what it is in any one of several aspects in which it may be considered, experience as a whole is self-containing and leans on nothing” (McDermott 305).

These ideas of an experience made “on nothing” are in keeping with Nietzsche’s polytropic *scienza*, except that James, like Emerson, wanted to find within his definition of life a saving “teleological” consciousness that would override the constant threat of experiential nothingness to break through and disperse him, both literally (that is, again, physically) and as the possessor of a will and a determining “self.” If Nietzsche’s epistemological irony was that each advance forward in knowledge, each attempt to use language to understand an “interior” self, was in effect a step toward opacity and the effacement of the self, James, by contrast, defined a subtilized self that could discover the proof of its existence in its implication with all other experiences in the world. Though leaning on nothing, the nothing was also not so existential. “Nothing,” to an extent, was for James a kind of good joke, not a cause for neurasthenic breakdown. The amazing trick was how nothing could be elaborated into a social world that could be so apparently continuous with the self—and so what about “nothing”: language-use could not by this insight then ironize or erase one, but only further implicate one with life, with what leaned out of the nothing. “Obliteration,” by this figuration, was rhetorically impossible, if biologically inevitable.

In “The Stream of Thought,” James formulated his idea of the continuousness of the “I” or consciousness. By this figure he could dismantle the Cartesian ego—the ego, that is, in Western metaphysics most defined by its lack of connection to an external world, and by its self-sustained, and hermetic, acts of knowing. The *cogito* formula guaranteed proof of existence by the internal conviction in a “self.” For James, as for so many writers and thinkers after him, the tissue of experience could not admit so firm a subject. He strove rather to do away with the binarism of the Subject-Object split because for him experience

tended to implicate all things with each other. James's eventual idea, that thought is "conjunctive and relational," merges with this idea of a loosened consciousness, in the sense that he argues that consciousness lies on a continuum with, and is formed by, objects that it suffers to come to its attention. When he says, therefore, that the "only meaning of essence is teleological," he suggests that the choice of material by which a person forms a self, and thereby the "real," must be part of an ongoing sense within his or her "feelings of relation" of what is to come, despite their lacking the agency to know. This is "knowing," however—the "function" of consciousness:

There is, I mean, no aboriginal stuff or quality of being, contrasted with that of which material objects are made, out of which our thoughts of them are made; but there is a function in experience which thoughts perform, and for the performance of which this quality of being is invoked. That function is *knowing*. (McDermott 170)

Knowing, part noun, part verb, makes things lean together; takes a disjunctive rush of experience in some of its parts and leans them into a "conjunctive" structure. Conjunction, bringing things together, is Emerson's self-reliant style, the making of oneself in apposition to the obliterating world. It is also James's belief in himself as a resistance, the efficacious building into and out of a world, which is "resistant" only within the larger frame of being relational. Conjunction therefore is efficacious; and language is conjunction's instrument of relations.

James's feelings about direction, or *telos*, are worth a closer look in this regard. His philosophy of coping, or cutting into things, is his philosophy of conjunction; a self therefore, so busy coping, is always in the process of composing itself, not cutting itself off from the world. James rarely writes of death, and where he does it is usually in the most sanguine tone. James's earliest biographer and critic, Ralph Barton Perry, however, records one instance in which the philosopher betrayed some anxiety about a world that may be finally "disjunctive." Confronted by David Hume's atomistic philosophy of experience as discontinuously successive and without direction, he wrote with a slight but significant inflation and with a religious diction that is revealing. Hume, he said, "had a tendency to enthrone mere juxtaposition as lord of all and to make of the universe what has well been styled a 'nulliverse'" (*Thought and Character of William James* 551). For James, Hume represented a nihilism that would negate the continuousness, and so the meaning, and the power, of consciousness by denying its coherent being in the world. Belief in the self's continuity with the world for James, as John McDermott writes, is a "view of the self" that "while understood as supremely active and intensely personal, is never cut off from the needs and obligations at work in the stream of consciousness." James would always point "to the realm of possibility as against a sheer nihilism." Belief was a way of making oneself, of being in experience and "of liberating dimensions otherwise closed to the agnostic standpoint" (McDermott xxix-

"Satisfactions of Belief"

xxx). Thus the efficacy of belief: the nature of conscious life is that its power resides in its dual obligation to the "intensely personal" and to the "stream." Stevens' concern for poetry's provision of the "satisfactions of belief" to "the lives of men and women" runs contiguous with this. Yet James's anxiety remains, especially visible in the figure of "stream" which is thought, but also life; and in Stevens' poetry it finds its most lucid and compelling literary coefficient.

III

We are in a good position at this point to return to Stevens and see how pragmatic versions of belief, and belief's work, can aid our understanding of his verse. I want to examine first two early poems, "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man" (1939) and "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun" (1940). Both Milton Bates and Harold Bloom put these two in a series, a narrative germane to my plot. I want to begin with the last four lines of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man," which speak of the possibilities of "the ignorant man":

It may be that the ignorant man, alone,
Has any chance to mate his life with life
That is the sensual, pearly spouse, the life
That is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

(CP 222)

In his useful study of Stevens, Bates says succinctly of these lines that, "thus wedded, the ignorant man enjoys a sensuous rapport with reality" (Bates 214). The figure of union, like Emerson's "relying," is an inarticulate condition in which a man can be with nature, and "life" perfectly, though the "rapport" is not static but "fluent in even the wintriest bronze." It is vital, that is, even in the season that would most constrict its movement. The "fluency" is thus fluidity as well as ability within language; it belongs to the ignorant man because he is as yet without direction, without an end, and it is the function of his ignorance to conditionally know ("It may be") "the life / That is fluent." Against the Cartesian *cogito*, the poem in effect declares, "I am because I don't think." Three years later, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens would make ignorance a requirement for embracing the world: "You must become an ignorant man again" (CP 380). The earlier poem's rather doubting conditional appraisal—"It may be that the ignorant man, alone, / Has any chance to mate his life with life"—is faintly cynical that "the weddings of the soul," as the first stanza finds it, which "Occur as they occur," can be either directed by a selecting will, or attained for more than a moment at a time. Yet the succession of these moments distinctly hold out the Jamesian conviction of relational experience: the series of moments, "One's grand flights, one's Sunday baths, / One's tootings at the weddings of the soul" relay in a comfortable grammar. They "occur," the poem asserts; and the four final lines enlist the Jamesian conception of a fluency between lives as the way that things join best, speak best, work best, though most barely.

In the poem he wrote a year later, "Of Bright & Blue Birds & the Gala Sun," the theme of belief surfaces explicitly. The last three stanzas here offer a wedding figure similar to that of "The Sense of the Sleight-of-hand Man," but somewhat complicate it:

It is there, being imperfect, and with these things
And erudite in happiness, with nothing learned,
That we are joyously ourselves and we think

Without the labor of thought, in that element,
And we feel, in a way apart, for a moment, as if
There was a bright *scienza* outside of ourselves,

A gaiety that is being, not merely knowing,
The will to be and to be total in belief,
Provoking a laughter, an agreement, by surprise.
(CP 248)

The last two stanzas further inscribe the idea about belief I have been describing: being "total in belief" recalls the earlier poem's "weddings of the soul." And in the third stanza's oxymoron, "erudite in happiness, with nothing learned," resides the thesis that an enlightened condition of the body may elevate one as much as great learning. But another reading gives us a poem that engages in a more emphatically Jamesian contest between a consciousness that is first a conjunctive then a disjunctive faculty that finally inscribes a circle wider than the one suggested by the Nietzschean *scienza* of the fourth stanza.

Recall that the gay science is the skeptical agreement "not to deceive," while the real is built on the ever-turning backs of things. The idea corresponds to Stevens' "gaiety that is being," which provokes a "laughter, an agreement, by surprise"—but "for a moment." So Stevens can seem to be enforcing the Nietzschean sense of belief as greatest illusion. In that case it would be necessary to read a line like "The will to be and to be total in belief" as part of a Nietzschean ironization of the mind's intercourse with "elements," and ultimately to underscore the feeling of the "gap" between self and world and knowing. But pragmatic belief draws a rhetorical circle around the Nietzschean: the last three triadic stanzas compose a single sentence, which ironizes the Nietzschean recognition of illusion by grammar.

Much of Nietzsche's philosophy of deception relies on the paradox that the familiar cannot be known, but against his ironical description of a self-knowing that draws toward opacity the more deeply it inquires, Stevens sets his shining ignorants in a "there" that is the clearest thing that can be seen. Being "outside," for Nietzsche, is the way in which a thing can be known; and so the *topos* of Nietzschean disjunction, so similar to the Humean nihilism that James made anxious fun of, is, in the gathering stream of this sentence's thought, ironized in a trope of continuousness that functions rhetorically as well as grammatically. There is the further intricate joke that within the poem's second sentence is our feeling "in a way apart, for a moment" which comments on the

"Satisfactions of Belief"

second stanza's "For a moment they are gay and are a part / Of an element . . . In which we pronounce joy." The sense of disjunction follows that of conjunction, but is articulated as a momentary substantive in a sentence otherwise guaranteeing the feeling of relation. There is, moreover, between the third and fourth stanzas the elaborate enjambment—"and we think / Without the labor of thought"—which must be read as the assured underscoring of the continuity of consciousness over transitional "gaps" (*Principles* 231-32), and ultimately an echo of Emerson's veneration of thought as the work most wedded to the webbed labor of nature.

One source of the philosophical belief in "ignorance" may be in a passage in "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" where James works once more to throw out subject-object binarism:

The things in this room here which I survey, and those in my distant home of which I think, the things of this minute and those of my long-vanished boyhood, influence and decide me alike, with a reality which my experience of them directly feels. They both make up my real world, they do not have to be introduced to me and mediated by ideas which now and here arise within me. (McDermott 176)

He refers to this complexly temporal habit of mind as "the immediate, primary, naïf or practical way of taking our thought-of world" (176); being ignorant in the world, in this way, becomes a way of sustaining at once the greatest number of possibilities for future direction.

James's friend and rival in pragmatism, Charles Peirce, formulates a model for this kind of activity of mind in *Values in a Universe of Change*, where belief fences with doubt in a "stadium of mental action," where doubt motivates thought, belief "appeases" it and is thus "thought at rest." "But, since belief is a rule for action, the application of which involves further doubt and further thought, at the same time that it is a stopping-place, it is also a new starting-place for thought" (96). Thus ignorance as a place, a "there," where thought relaxes between contests. James's metaphor of consciousness as "a bird's life" agrees with this. He calls the "perchings" the "substantive parts," and the places of flight "transitive," and concludes: "It appears that the main end of our thinking is at all times the attainment of some other substantive part than the one from which we have just been dislodged" (*Principles* 236). Any center is a pathway to any other center. In not very different terms, we re-encounter James's end-directed consciousness punctuated by conjectures of anxiety over movement, direction, and connection. Both Peirce's and James's ideas of rests punctuated in series by vigorous movements are Emersonian. Stevens accepts this account sometimes, but at others, it seems, he just cannot believe it.

Many of these questions of belief come home in "Credences of Summer," a poem about belief. I will be examining its first section, trying to pluck up all the termini about belief that I have been talking about. I will be most interested in the totality of belief, the way that the seasonal fullness represents a "substan-

tive" or resting place. But I will also be looking at how the teleological mind "worries" over its last end, and how that affects the seamless pragmatic story:

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
And spring's infuriations over and a long way
To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
The fidgets of remembrance come to this.
This is the last day of a certain year
Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
It comes to this and the imagination's life.

There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt
And this must comfort the heart's core against
Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,
These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.

(CP 372)

The poem opens, as Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom both point out, in the Keatsian seasonal fullness of midsummer.⁴ In Stevens' mythology of seasons, summer is the preeminent season of ignorance and belief. The season of belief in James's expression is the whole "field of consciousness" and in the poem amounts to a tropical exfoliation of "the will to be and to be total in belief." But the poem plays this totality of belief, an instantaneous, naive being in experience, off against the other credo of "I believe in myself." It presents the confrontation of a full and an empty self, a self within a theater of simultaneous possible directions, and the self in a temporal gap, in which a final doubt begins to irritate a final belief. The situation corresponds to a moment between belief and new doubt as Peirce defines it (*Values* 96) and also to James's configuration of a "transitive" feeling rubbing up against a "substantive."

Of the poem's first section, Harold Bloom comments:

Surrounded by a triumphant nature, the mind considers its own less triumphant comfort, the moment of sublimation that is held in the "this" of "It comes to this and the imagination's life." (Bloom 245)

Bloom makes the point that the mind swerves when its subject is the encounter with death, which in Bloom's rhetoric is the final crossing, of Identification (Bloom 403). Bloom accurately describes that as the swerve from a perceived final end, though the vocabulary of the pragmatists, which would name the moment doubt or "perching," is preferable. Bloom's reading of "this" as the

"Satisfactions of Belief"

sign of a (sublimated) anxiety without clearly identifiable antecedent is also right: the stress falls heavily on the word, and a significant caesura follows before the line proceeds. But Bloom does not account for the word's having been repeated twice already in the stanza, and having grown confusing with the repetition: "The fidgets of remembrance come to this. / This is the last day of a certain year."

These nervous demonstratives gesture to something both inside and beyond the sentences they complete and start. "This" itself is fidgeting with the place of final belief and with final being outside oneself. In "The Stream of Thought" James indicates that pointing between certainty and uncertainty is something of the point: "the truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought of which direction we nevertheless have an discriminative sense" (*Principles* 244). In Stevens' poem, while the gesture would be as roughly sure, the nervous repetition gives the lie to the mind's encounter with there being "nothing left of time." The signs of direction fail their last test, and thereby cast their previous efficacy into doubt. "This" is the fidgety perchings of the mind about to take flight. But into what? Into, or back into, the relational? The mind seeks metonymy, the metonymic moment of slashing, but has no "discriminative sense"; it wishes connection on itself but comes only to the place where connection does not do its work, where connection swings away into hingeless nothing.

But there are signs of new direction even earlier in the poem. In the first stanza the speaker says, "the roses are heavy with a weight / Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble." These last words he finds significant enough to repeat in the first line of the second stanza: "the mind lays by its trouble and considers." "[L]ays by" is difficult to read for a reason precisely opposite to how "this" could be read: because it is hard to decide where to lay the stress. "Lays" means placing in a resting position, as well as "allaying or suppressing"—or "appeasing," we might say, following Peirce, or "repressing," after Bloom. The colloquial expression, moreover, "lays by," means "to save or lay away."

The mind's "*signs of direction*" here are at odds. The mind rests beside its trouble, but also saves, or savors, the trouble of the intellectual season's fullness that is arresting its movement, as a way of swerving from it. In this nexus, therefore, we find much of the rhetorical energy of the poem, and also of pragmatic belief. Fully within "the barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more" (*CP* 373), it should be by now no surprise to find such a copiousness of anxious verbal direction. Belief is construction, and that gets established as efficacious "relation," but we are edging here onto a terrain where belief and fiction are equally useless for coping or working or knowing. (Section IV puts it this way: "It is / A land too ripe for enigmas" [*CP* 374].) James's "knowing" and "discriminative sense," his idea of imaginative *telos*, has come up against disquieted near-directionlessness. Stevens' poem is a refutation of James's primary supposition, that the mind is a skilled apprentice to life. In hot mental

summer the center is toolless and all the pathways overgrown and unrecognizable.

In the third stanza, the speaker says that "There is nothing more inscribed nor thought nor felt," and considers, at this fairly literal "end" of consciousness in plenitude, that

 this must comfort the heart's core against
Its false disasters—these fathers standing round,
These mothers touching, speaking, being near,
These lovers waiting in the soft dry grass.

(CP 372)

Yet the "lovers waiting in the soft dry grass" holds out the possibility for the engendering of something new. And with the fathers and mothers they form a trope for genealogical succession beyond the individual consciousness's lack of relation. What begins to move within these lines, then, is the rather disturbing possibility that in this apparently final substantive "something new" is predicted that is not connected but, like a Humean proposition about the disjunctive, lying nervously *outside*, waiting, and without significant, or signifying, transition. And with this creeping thought comes an intuition about the emptying constructedness of any connection.

Stevens' thought that "nothing more [is] inscribed nor thought nor felt," as often in his poetry, is a kind of ascetic's preemptive incantation against obliteration. It is James's necessary belief in his "individual reality" but now that "reality" would write him out altogether, wipe the slate clean of him. In the totalized landscape, the self, having in effect made it, is by irony's natural swerve, prevented from being in it; and so pragmatic belief shifts onto Nietzschean ground. The only trace that can be left, once the individual consciousness shuffles off the mortal coil of worldly ends and beginnings, these uneasy lines admit, lies in the generational narrative that will fill in the gap. Relation is an illusion that is an only ambiguously useful fiction, which the final stanza in section IV both denies and demonstrates:

 Things stop in that direction and since they stop
The direction stops and we accept what is
As good. The utmost must be good and is
And is our fortune . . .

(CP 374)

But the midline caesurae and nimble repetitions ("stop," "stops"; "good," "good"; "and is," "And is") are birds on wires: we accept what is as good in lieu of having the thought of it wipe us away.

Stevens' thought is poignant when we place it beside James's sanguine conception of final succession. Toward the last of "The Stream of Consciousness," James is talking about the mind as "at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities" (*Principles* 277). But this fecund thought-of world one lives in is erected in joint venture by the solitary self working within generations of

"Satisfactions of Belief"

choices past. However different our several views of the world may be, he reasons, there is a "primordial chaos of sensations" out there, and

We may, if we like, by our reasonings unwind things back to that black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms which science calls the only real world. But all the while the world *we* feel and live in will be that which our ancestors and we, by slowly cumulative strokes of choice, have extricated out of this, like sculptors, by simply rejecting certain portions of the given stuff. (*Principles* 277)

James's idea of an inherited consciousness that is hewn, not over a single lifetime, but from an origin in a "black and jointless continuity of space and moving clouds of swarming atoms" does not settle the question of the final end, as nothing can, or of the beginning, in spite of the implicit myth of origin the words lay out. The most significant moment one can know is the moment of transition, and that is the moment of effacement. In his typically hopeful way, James argues that individual consciousnesses do not matter as much as the "bright *scienza's*" outside of them connecting them, invisible to themselves, over time, and in that way making the "story" of the history of consciousness a satisfaction. It is a strange encouragement that a career effectively begun as a journal entry about self-reliance could eventually decide that the self is nothing outside of its connections in space and time to other objects and other selves.

Time as story is foregrounded in "Credences of Summer" as well. But there it constrains and limits; it arrests rather than helps one to move. The satisfactions that Stevens would have poetry offer to the lives of men and women are for the most part a Jamesian, and largely pragmatic, assurance of continuity between self and history. Pragmatism also brands Stevens' muted ideas of social action, which make doing and acting a part of being and thinking. But for Stevens, the life of the mind in the end is not so apparently wedged into the "stream." If it succeeds for the most part in satisfying itself with fictions of a conjunctive world of action, it perceives with a shock that the final belief must be in an ironical trope, that of final disjunction.⁵

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Notes

¹See Thomas F. Walsh, *Concordance to the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1963), 47.

²For an account of Stevens' growing interest in his genealogy and its effects on his writing, see Milton J. Bates, *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 173-94.

³In the formulation of these questions, as indeed in the essay in general, I am indebted to Richard Poirier's conversation and to his *The Renewal of Literature* (New York: Yale University Press, 1987); see especially "Prologue: The Deed of Writing," 3-66.

⁴In *Forms of Farewell* Charles Berger links the anxiety in these lines about fullness, or "peace" as he calls it, directly to the war—the lines, he argues, "celebrate the first full summer (of 1946) since

The Wallace Stevens Journal

the end of the war" (83)—an account which adds a further dimension to the pragmatic trope of "coping."

⁵Richard Poirier deserves much thanks for an invaluable reading of the original draft of this manuscript, as does Bill Galperin for judicious comments on Nietzsche and Pragmatism in a later version.

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Crispin's Dependent "Airs": Psychic Crisis in the Early Stevens

DAVID R. JARRAWAY

"At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright . . . the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an 'open sea.'"

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

THE YEAR 1923 WAS AUSPICIOUS, both for poetry and for psychiatry. For Wallace Stevens, it marked the publication of *Harmonium*, a collection of poems he had been at work on since 1913. In that same year, Sigmund Freud offered to the world *The Ego and the Id*, his formulation of the so-called "second topography" worked up from his earlier *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916-17) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). And for the remainder of the decade, Freud's productivity would be extraordinary, publishing his study of *Inhibitions* and the later *Civilization and Its Discontents*, to mention only two of his outstanding accomplishments. With Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, we have continued to be baffled by approximately six years of ominous silence which followed the trade-printing of *Harmonium*.¹ Now Stevens was never an avid reader of Freud.² Yet it is a curious paradox that even though he should write he would "probably not be able to stand up to Freudian analysis," that Freud's psychoanalytic theorizing helps most to fathom Stevens' several years of published silence, a reading most particularly invited by the longest piece included in *Harmonium*, "The Comedian as the Letter C," composed in 1922.³ One thinks, in particular, of an important passage in the penultimate section that engages both the therapist's preoccupation with sleep and the poet's with silence. The setting is one of Stevens' favorite, self-enclosed, womb-like rooms that we encounter repeatedly throughout *Harmonium* in texts such as "The Curtain in the House of the Metaphysician" (CP 62), "Palace of the Babies" (CP 77), and "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" (CP 88), to mention only a few:

So deep a sound fell down
It was as if the solitude concealed
And covered him and his congenial sleep.
So deep a sound fell down it grew to be
A long soothsaying silence down and down.
The crickets beat their tambours in the wind,
Marching a motionless march, custodians.
(CP 42)

What helpful insights, then, might a psychoanalytic view of the poem shed on the great enigma of Stevens' early career?

Paul Ricoeur's massive study of Freud, at an important juncture, points out a significant structural analogy between a patient's dream-work and a writer's artistic work that Freud enunciates in his writings on aesthetics. Specifically, Ricoeur draws attention to the analogy that Freud outlined between dreams and poetry in the life of unsatisfied humankind, and also to the "resistances" that Freud showed the unhappy individual had to overcome in order to interpret both of these.⁴ According to Freud, "A dream is a (disguised) fulfillment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish." Further, the so-called resistances are likely to occur where the psyche experiences the greatest amount of dissatisfaction, usually at the point of threatening contact between the aforementioned wish (or drive) and the process of rational socialization which the psyche experiences as an Ego.⁵ As we may know, it is ego-censorship which most clearly defines this point of contact. And the labor of repression undertaken by this censorship consequently produces all those "compromise formations"—dreams in the therapeutic context, or poems in the artistic—which are cleverly contrived to sneak past ego-censorship. Freud's famous "repetition compulsion" (XVII, 238) which is more clearly a signal of a return to repression shows how *qualified* a success these compromises actually are. Freud's theory is complicated, and we're fortunate to have a short-hand version of it in his favorite Oedipus myth (cf. V.v), in which the illicit unconscious desire is connected to the mother, the wakeful conscious reason to the father, and the compromise-formation manifested in Oedipus' unhappy sacrifice of mother-love to male authority and dominance at the threat of castration, which would be the exercise, again, of repressive censorship.

Taking a step back, we perhaps might see that there are two significant relations staked out by the Oedipal triangle in Freud's "family romance" above: an active one, in the psyche's instinctive pursuit of the mother; and a passive one, in its mindful capitulation to the father. When we turn from the purely theoretical statement of psychoanalysis to Stevens' "Comedian," we notice a simple structural analogy, as Ricoeur would say, in precisely the same active-passive dynamic that Stevens has constructed for his own "insatiable egotist" (CP 30). In the poem, this analogy is exploited in Stevens' conception of the writer's imagination or "Intelligence" (CP 27, 36).

As the whole ambiguous issue of artistic solipsism in *Harmonium* would suggest, Stevens was of two minds concerning the imagination.⁶ Of all the persona in his first collection of verse, surely none of Stevens' creations conveys this double-mindedness more than Crispin. Because "Poetry is the statement of a relation between a man and the world" (OP 172) and because "Poetry constantly requires a new relation" (OP 178), as two of the "Adagia" would have it, Crispin's whole journey throughout "The Comedian" is motivated by the desire to forego a *passive* relation to the world ("Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil" [CP 27]), and enact a more *active* one ("Nota: his soil is man's intelligence" [CP 36]). In a text especially relevant to the ethnographic ventures of Stevens' Comedian, Clifford Geertz's *Local Knowledge* would describe this as the substitution of a pluralistic "thought in the world" for a more unific

"thought in the head."⁷ The "snug hibernal" and the "bland complaisance" of "stale lives" (CP 28-30) rather reminiscent of "Sunday Morning" must therefore be exchanged for "the droll confect" and "rebellious thought" of the Carolinas, by way of the refreshment of flourishing tropics in Yucatan (and Havana [CP 40, 35]). As Stevens would write some years later to Thomas McGreevy, "One grows tired of being oneself and feels the need of renewing all one's thoughts and ways of thinking . . . [for the imagination] is not likely to be satisfied with the same thing twice" (L 680). And poetry, we may recall from the "Adagia," has to be a revelation of nature (OP 164). Crispin's general movement in the poem, then, from land to sea, or otherwise, from sun to moon, summer to winter, poetry to prose, or romance to realism ought perhaps to be thought not so much in terms of a shift between the vexed matrices of Imagination and Reality foregrounded in *The Necessary Angel*, as the canonical reading of the poem so often invites.⁸ Instead, it ought to be considered more in terms of the alternation of Imagination under the impress of Freud's Oedipal differential, that is to say, between "active force" and "inactive dirge" as the poem itself insists (CP 41), thus sustaining the solipsistic problematic of the Imagination that we spurn and crave, in a poem like "To the One of Fictive Music," for example (CP 88).

In its broadest sense, the saga of Crispin's voyage is a rigorous study in imaginative de-familiarization—the "word split up," as the poem puts it (CP 28). But what's at stake in the kind of "inverted egotism"⁹ required to make a new intelligence prevail (CP 37) is given rather late, in the hint of an actual program in section four, "The Idea of a Colony":

The florist asking aid from cabbages,
The rich man going bare, the paladin
Afraid, the blind man as astronomer,
The appointed power unwielded from disdain.
(CP 37)

Such riddling paradoxes are the torment of "fastidious [i.e., actively imaginative] thought" indeed, especially when placed beside the pine-spokesmen of an already pine-wooded Georgia, or beside the solemn señors who would insist on making their intricate Sierra scan, later on in this section. Here, Freud enters the poem in a very useful way to explain this rather complacent belatedness. For it is Crispin's wishful dream, his "wakefulness or meditating sleep" (CP 33), to seek a more active and responsible relation to his world, in contrast to the previously established idealist, perhaps even Transcendentalist, cognitive predisposition. Moreover, it is in this sense that de-familiarization in the poem actually constitutes *de-familialization*. We notice this particularly in how Crispin must forsake the fatherland, a stale Europe of etiolated art and culture (hence the pun on "Bordeaux" = bored), in preference to a desire for the energetic conquest of a more exciting Virgin Land, rendered incestuously in terms of the mother: "gold's maternal warmth" (CP 32). Harold Bloom is accurate, then, in viewing this work as "a poem 'about' the anxiety of influence."¹⁰

Yet more needs to be said specifically about the forms this anxiety takes within the text itself, and the kinds of repression that follow from it both in the life of Crispin and, risking the biographical fallacy, in the life of Stevens himself.

On the analogy of Oedipal de-familialization ensuing from the conflict between the active-mother and the passive-father relations, it may be said that Crispin's anxiety takes three significant forms, each dealing with an important loss. The first of these is the anxiety of identity. The son who suddenly exchanges his role of passive child for that of impulsive lover of the mother in the Oedipal triangle finds himself, like Crispin, very much "at sea," dissolved, annulled, "washed away by magnitude" (CP 27, 29). The loss of identity represents a major crisis for Crispin, for what it involves is not the happy prospect of constructing a "mythology of self" while Triton and Vulcan fade, as it does the circumstance of having one erased, "Blotched out beyond unblotching" (CP 28), an important qualifying phrase lost in so many readings of the poem.¹¹ Herein lies the key to the general ambiguity of Crispin's characterization. As a barber of old, is Crispin a surgeon, or merely a cosmetician? Is he the "lutanist of fleas" or merely the "auditor of insects" (CP 28, 31), is he asleep or only "halfway waking" (CP 31), or as a related poem more directly focussed on defamiliarization puts it, is he "Crispin-valet" or "Crispin-saint" (OP 24)?

Central to the question of Crispin's identity, of course, is that of his own masculinity, so that this first anxiety of loss quickly modulates into a second, an anxiety about castration. The transgression of relations in the family romance is focussed on the father's threat and the child's mortal fear of castration, a situation which Freud takes up most explicitly in his essay on "The Uncanny" ("*Das Unheimliche*," XVII, 217-56), linking the complex particularly to sleep and the loss of sight in his analysis of a story-within-a-story about a Sandman tearing out children's eyes. Yet is there not an analogy here to Crispin's own potentially transgressive imagination? The descriptions of what lies "beyond his baton's thrust" (CP 28) and "across his vessel's prow" (CP 35) in his uncanny voyaging are quite suggestively phallic, but surely not vulgarly so. After all, the poem does end with an image of castration, the relation which is "clipped" (CP 46), begins with "the Letter C," and exploits the Freudian dread several times in between: "stop short" (CP 40), "sharply stopped" (CP 44), "short-shanks" (CP 28), etc. Indeed, one of Stevens' most outrageous puns in the entire poem sums up precisely what Crispin risks if the analogy holds between the romance of defamiliarization, and that of defamilialization:

Severance

Was clear. The last distortion of romance
Forsook the insatiable egotist. The sea
Severs not only lands but also selves.

(CP 30)¹²

Stevens' pun on the sea in this passage indicates how Crispin's third anxiety, the anxiety of repression and repetition-compulsion, is more self-reflexive than the others. It is actually Crispin, the Comedian as the letter "C" who sev-

ers, because in circumventing sedimented cultural and aesthetic practices—"the visible, circumspect presentment" (CP 35)—there is no way for him to engage an active relation to the world without incurring some loss to his very own imaginative power. This point of maximum fear, hence repression, Stevens identifies early in the poem: "his vicissitudes had much enlarged / His apprehension, made him intricate . . . and difficult and strange / In all desires" (CP 31). Of course, we're reminded of Hoon and the Weeping Burgher in Crispin's "strange" repression of desire in this description: in the former case, "I was myself the compass of that sea: / I was the world in which I walked . . . And there I found myself more truly and more strange" (CP 65); and in the latter, "It is with a strange malice / That I distort the world . . . My hands such sharp, imagined things" (CP 61). And Stevens deliberately makes the title of the present poem—"C" for Crispin as well as Comedian—self-reflexive to underscore the point. This would also explain the image of the "sea-glass" in the poem's first section (CP 28), which besides conveying the idea of the sea as a mirror, in this context also suggests the idea of a telescope in which a comedian might peer and "be[hold] himself": a "C-glass" as it were. Ironically, Stevens in his letters will only speak of the significance of "the letter C" in his title in terms of the effects he hopes it will have on the reader's ear (L 294, 352, 778). But his exploiting a further pun on the word "see," for instance in his careful deployment of eye-imagery throughout the poem—"An eye most apt," "a barber's eye" (CP 27), "things within his actual eye" (CP 40), etc.—clearly shows that the poet has other, more thematic intentions: e.g., "It made him see how much / Of what he saw he never saw at all" (CP 36). Freud's particular version of Stevens' own comedic joke here is "displacement," what Freud calls a transvaluation of psychical values (V, 655) which has the effect of neutralizing any threatening material in the dream-work by disguising it in more palatable, that is, less censorious, forms. In the art-work, the net effect of such displacement, at least in its more self-reflexive moments, would be to empty out even the slightest hint of the indeterminate and unknown, to "conceal[.]" to "cover[.]" to make sleep "congenial" (CP 42), in more of Stevens' C-words. This would tend to explain, for example, Crispin's up-and-down fluctuation between sun and moon in the third part of the poem, where a "sally into gold and crimson forms" can be nullified by retirement: "a turning back / And sinking down to the indulgences . . . [of] habitude"—or, as Stevens puts it on the final page, "Sequestering the fluster" (CP 35, 46). If the Freudian theory of an anxiety of repression holds for Stevens' comedian, then several important implications appear to arise from it.

In the first of these, we ought to note how Crispin's project is doomed before he even begins. The exchange of "soil" for "intelligence" can establish no new relation between mind and world because the unfamiliar reality, if it is ever to see the light of day, must always be tricked out in some version of the old romance. This is what Crispin finds so frustrating:

These bland excursions into time to come,
Related in romance to *backward flights*,

However prodigal, however proud,
Contained in their afflatus the reproach
That first drove Crispin to his wandering.

(CP 39; emphasis added)

This passage also helps to explain all the directions in the poem: how forward is really backward, how upward previously is really down, and how the outward bound is so insistently inward: “introspective voyager” (CP 29), “bore the vessel inward” (CP 36), “infolded to the outmost” (CP 41, emphases added), etc. It further helps to explain how repression is so thoroughly fixated on the past—more souvenirs than prophecies, one tends to think (CP 37)—and for that reason, why it is so compulsively repetitive. In an important passage in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (XVIII, 36), Freud attaches the assuagement of sleep to the repetitive return of the repressed in the context of the unfamiliar, and Stevens manages to bring all of these ideas together in the lines which contain the poem’s most revealing word-play:

There is a monotonous babbling in our dreams
That makes them our dependent heirs, the heirs
Of dreamers buried in our sleep, and not
The oncoming fantasies of better birth.

(CP 39)

Once again, we are given the sense that if Crispin dreams of creating some “new reality” (CP 32)—the pun on “heirs” for musical airs straddles both the poetical *and* the psychological dimensions of their respective romances—it can only be with a view to recycling the same enervated mythology of self, for lack of “better birth.” “All dreams are vexing,” the passage goes on to say, “Let them be expunged.” This is perhaps so only because under such familiar/familial auspices, the fastidious thought referred to earlier grows slack (CP 37). Crispin, therefore, is a profitless philosopher: “beginning with green brag, / Concluding fadedly” (CP 46). On this point, we should remember the “Anecdote of Canna”: “Yet thought that wakes / In sleep may never meet another thought / Or thing” (CP 55).

A second implication of Crispin’s repressive anxiety is rendered by his dependent heirs if, following Freud, we read them more generally as a displacement for the presentiment of artistic failure. The import of such displacement gives the sense of an even greater sequestration and passivity than the comedian might have first experienced, and makes more plausible the two thoroughly domestic scenarios—“Crispin, magister of a single room” (CP 42)—with which Stevens ends the poem, unsatisfactorily for some.¹³ “Isn’t the destiny of American literature,” Deleuze and Guattari ask in *Anti-Oedipus*, “that of crossing limits and frontiers, causing deterritorialized flows of desire to circulate, but also always making these flows transport fascisizing, moralizing, Puritan, and *familialist territorialities*?”¹⁴ Of Crispin’s “moralizing” in the poem before these sections, there can be little doubt: first, the paradigmatic

discovers he has become (and the family-man he is about to become) working as a successful insurance company executive *circa* 1923, while at the same time attempting to establish a respectable reputation as a writer. Neither is it necessary to rehearse the various “anxieties of influence” which Robert Buttel, Michel Benamou, and A. Walton Litz, among others, have so well documented.¹⁶ Where comedian and poet, and indeed psychoanalyst, come so inextricably together is in the experience of the individual human psyche as a highly complex tangle of contradictory elements, both active and passive. For instance, while working on his “Comedian” in 1922, Stevens writes to Harriet Monroe that he elects “to regard poetry as a form of retreat” (L 230); yet in 1936, he says to Ronald Lane Latimer that he writes poetry in order “to relate [himself] to the world” (L 306), and to Hi Simons in 1940, describes how isolated he feels as a writer, and expresses his real desire “to get to the center,” “to share the common life,” “to achieve the normal” (L 352). In another context, to Latimer again in 1935, Stevens insists that “poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic” (L 277). But four years later, to Simons, he records that “[t]he ordinary, everyday search of the romantic mind is rewarded perhaps rather too lightly by the satisfaction that it finds in what it calls reality” (L 346). It’s this kind of contradictory aesthetic alternation which Stevens chooses to explore in detail in the life of his comic barber, a fluctuating between “sally” and “retirement”—the “Polyphony beyond [the] baton’s thrust,” as we’ve seen. Indeed, it may be true that in attempting to bring it all to some kind of forced resolution or “accord” (CP 45) at the end of the poem, the effort might have cost Stevens his writing career.

Fortunately, the letters just mentioned tell a different story, as do six later books of consistently accomplished though remarkably different verse. But this is Freud’s story, too: humanity’s perennial changefulness within what Stevens will later refer to as the “ancient cycle [of desire]” (CP 382). In his essay on Freud in *Writing and Difference*, Jacques Derrida observes that “Writing is unthinkable without repression.”¹⁷ Having grasped this lesson early, Sigmund Freud could continue to be endlessly productive, and even be inspired by it. Wallace Stevens, on the other hand, is frankly dismayed by this conundrum, as so much of the “variable, obscure” difficulty (CP 46) of “The Comedian as the Letter C” shows. Until he can think writing *and* repression simultaneously—“think one thing and think it long” (CP 41)—he must continue to be silent. As Clifford Geertz, once again, notes: “The problem of the integration of cultural life becomes one of making it possible for people inhabiting different worlds [as the first step] . . . to accept the depth and differences [of not wholly commensurable visions]; the second to understand what these differences are; and the third to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can be formulated.”¹⁸

The “long soothsaying silence down and down” which overtakes Crispin in his single room emphasizes the important metaphor of falling asleep not only in “The Comedian,” but throughout *Harmonium* in general. The metaphor is

Crispin's Dependent "Airs"

caught up in a very important way with the whole question of ontological and aesthetic belief that permeates Stevens' work in its entirety, the detailed elaboration of which we defer to a later time. It's perhaps only necessary to mention, in concluding, that in the trials of belief in Stevens' first book, we're confronted with two kinds of falling and two kinds of sleep that parallel the poet's psychic division concerning imagination and reality in so many of his poems. When the question of belief draws toward the former, the emphasis in the descent-image is usually on the fall *from*, and when drawing toward the latter, on the fall *to*. Thus, in two poems which Stevens adds to the second edition of *Harmonium* in 1931, the conventionally sacred imagery figures the fall-from transcendence of "Lunar Paraphrase" (1930):

When the body of Jesus hangs in a pallor,
Humanly near, and the figure of Mary,
Touched on by hoar-frost, shrinks in a shelter
Made by the leaves, that have rotted and fallen;
When over the houses, a golden illusion
Brings back an earlier season of quiet
And quieting dreams in the sleepers in darkness—
(CP 107)

"Anatomy of Monotony" (1930), on the other hand, features the fall-to immanence, figured in a more secular way:

The body walks forth naked in the sun
And, out of tenderness or grief, the sun
Gives comfort . . .
.....
So be it. Yet the spaciousness and light
In which the body walks and is deceived,
Falls from that fatal and that barer sky,
And this the spirit sees and is aggrieved.
(CP 108)

Obviously set down to help Stevens write himself out of his long period of silence, neither of the poems, however, can resolve the question of belief determinately. The metaphor of falling which is protentive and retentive at once extenuates longing, making the individual, in the previous poem's words, "covetous in desire / Of the still finer, more implacable chords" (CP 108). We have another fall in "The Death of a Soldier" (1918), where the soldier's demise is so absolute as to be beyond comparisons to ceremonious leave-takings as with Christ's "three-days personage" (CP 97). Yet the fall of pylon and pier to the cold and languid silence of swooning architecture in "The Public Square" (1931) seems cleared when the moon's "porcelain leer" cancels its earlier "coma" by the poem's end (CP 108-09). The overall effect of Stevens' falls, both from and to, then, in the last pages of *Harmonium's* 1931 inclusions, tend to register collectively as a general decline into a kind of nagging skepticism and in-

determinacy. Like the "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" written much earlier (1915), the decline "mirrors nothing" (CP 18). Yet like the ancient star, it calls forth a "strange courage" from the poet nonetheless. And Stevens' return to writing in 1930 is obviously the clearest sign of this.

Imagination, of course, situates itself at the center of this ambivalent descent, and the doubleness of sleep continues to extend the larger ontological indeterminacy in which it is situated. On the one hand, sleep will function as a gathering point for imaginative consolidation. In an early development of this theme, the houses that are haunted in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" from 1915 are bereft of the vivid colors that might induce their inhabitants to relieve the blankness of their lives by dreaming of baboons and periwinkles. They are victimized by Stevens' familiar red weather, except for a drunken sailor who, "asleep in his boots," erratically counters the twilight of disillusion by going after tigers (CP 66). This is that meditating sleep in which Crispin once saw the promise of new hope earlier. But through the fall to sleep which eventually buries the dreamer, that Stevens gradually begins to trace in poems like "Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" and "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion," we notice that sleep, on the other hand, can function as the source of displacement and alienation, the "shaken sleep" which is also a part of "The Comedian" (CP 44). Thus, in the later "Palace of the Babies" (1921), the disbeliever who can only imagine "humming sounds and sleep," magnifies his sense of loneliness and separation from the babies "Drawn close by dreams" inside, as he walks unnursed at night by the palace gates without. This has the effect of completely reversing the wistful tigers of innocent fancy previously, to replace them with something far more nightmarish and threatening:

Night nursed not him in whose dark mind
The clambering wings of birds of black revolved,
Making harsh torment of the solitude.

(CP 77)

Alienated by the very thing which ought to assuage, console, and affirm, the walker in the moonlight seems to have found only a greater purpose to disbelieve, and to continue blindly in that "broad-brimmed" resolve. We may sense that if there is a bottoming out of Stevens' theocentric hypostatizing of reality in his various efforts to demythologize God throughout *Harmonium*, we reach it at this level in the volume, or in the later sections of "The Comedian" that merely become extended in the add-ons of the book's later reissue. At that level, one invokes Plato's dictum of art as the dream for awakened minds, and awaits the great *fiat* that will end the fall to sleep in all its senses in Stevens' work, including the six years of prolonged silence, and wake it up to new levels of inspiration and faith. Around 1933-34, such a transfiguration was, in fact, visited upon the poet. For that was the period in which Wallace Stevens finally discovered the Idea of Order, and a time obviously, in a final pun from Crispin, "worth crossing seas to find" (CP 36).

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Crispin's Dependent "Airs"

Notes

¹Stevens' silence has been variously attributed to everything from the "anxiety of influence" in both historico-literary and politico-cultural contexts to the dissolution of the Walter Arensberg "Group" and the fact that Stevens was unable to secure life-insurance for himself well into his forties. On the former two, see note 10 below, and Frank Lentricchia's Chapter 3: "Writing After Hours," in *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 135 ff.; on the latter two, see Glen G. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years, 1913-1923* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 41, and Lisa M. Steinman, "The Houses of Fathers: Stevens and Emerson," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12, 2 (Fall 1988): 162-172, esp. 170.

²Only one of Freud's texts, *The Future of an Illusion*, goes recorded in Stevens' library. See Peter Brazeau, "Wallace Stevens at the University of Massachusetts: Check List of an Archive," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 2, 1/2 (Spring 1978): 50-54. Joan Richardson's recent biography records a productive reading of this text in the poet's continuing to probe the shortcomings of institutionalized religion (*Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923-1955* [New York: William Morrow, 1988], 58-62). Nonetheless, Stevens' dismissive attitude towards Freud in his *Letters* (ed. Holly Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1966]) may elsewhere be sampled in communications to Ronald Lane Latimer (10 January 1936, 305-06) and Harry Duncan (23 February 1945, 488), which carries over into some of the prose of *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 14-15, and 139-40.

³The quotation may be found in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, 488, hereafter cited in the text as *L*. Other works by Wallace Stevens cited in the text are abbreviated as follows: *CP* (*Collected Poems* [New York: Knopf, 1954]), and *OP* (*Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse [New York: Knopf, 1957]).

⁴Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 163-177, esp. 165-66.

⁵*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1973), vols. IV, 160, and XIV, 147-48. Subsequent references to the writings of Freud in the text will be given parenthetically by volume and page number(s) in the *Standard Edition*.

⁶On the first point, see Harold Bloom's comments on Stevens' "gorgeous capacity for solipsistic transport," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 28, 53 and 109, as well as Eleanor Cook's reference to Stevens' "fear of Mauberley-like triviality," in *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 165. Samuel French Morse reiterates the second point concerning the dividedness of Stevens' imagination, and suggests a very strong indebtedness to Pascal on the whole issue; see his "Wallace Stevens, Bergson, Pater," in Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, eds., *Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 59.

⁷Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 14, 48; cf. also 80, 152-53, 219. Ideas, Geertz further notes, ought to be "orienting notions, not foundational ones" (187). This makes for good Literary Anthropology, as Wolfgang Iser has written recently, the process of which should enable us "to see through the attitudes offered to us, if not imposed on us by our everyday world." See Wolfgang Iser, "Towards a Literary Anthropology," in Ralph Cohen, ed., *The Future of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 226. Or, as Stevens would have it, "[The] Imagination gives, but gives in relation" (*L* 364; emphasis added).

⁸The consensus reading would consequently privilege Reality over Imagination in Crispin's movement, as in the representative view of the early Riddel in *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 98, 96. In the non-canonical reading, on the other hand, the symbols of "sun" and "moon" throughout the poem become figures of imaginative activity and passivity respectively, in contrast to more frequent Reality-Imagination interpretations, e.g., Hi Simons, "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Its Sense and Significance," in Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller, eds. *The Achievement of Wallace Stevens* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1962), and a considerable expansion of Simons' view by Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 59-61.

⁹The phrase is taken from Samuel French Morse, *Act of the Mind*, 89.

¹⁰Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 72. Later in his study, Bloom attributes the halting of Stevens' poetry from 1922 until 1934 [sic] to "the anxieties of influence" (104).

¹¹For example, that of Denis Donoghue in *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry* (London: Faber, 1965), 194. The caution we ought to take with this passage is given by Stevens himself, in a letter to Renato Poggioli in 1953: "There is another point about the poem to which I should like to call attention and that is that it is what may be called an anti-mythological poem" (L 778). See also note 14 below.

¹²The sea-change anticipated here is marked specifically in Crispin's quest in the second section entitled "Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan," and it's difficult to avoid a comparison to a C-character in Kierkegaard, that of Constantin Constantius in *Repetition*, especially in the following: "What will be the effect of this thunderstorm? It will make me fit to be a husband. It will shatter my whole personality . . . It will render me almost unrecognizable to myself . . . I am doing my best to make myself a husband. *I sit and clip myself*, take away everything that is incommensurable, in order to become commensurable." See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 214, italics added. The image of the sea, consequently, comes to function for Stevens as it does for other Modernists, notably Eliot and Virginia Woolf, as an emblem, according to Ricardo Quinones, of the "consciousness of alienation . . . [that] no longer affords the answering image to the human condition," that is, "the privileged sense of oneness with nature that their forefathers had experienced." See Ricardo J. Quinones, *Mapping Literary Modernism: Time and Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 134.

¹³For example, Harold Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 82. Crispin's flight into the cathedral near the end of the second section of the poem (CP 32-33), in prospect of the thunderstorm "Proclaiming something harsher," is obviously a point of transition in his ultimately total withdrawal from the world. And again, we may be invited to view this retreat in relation to the castration-theme, as Jacques Derrida, glossing Nietzsche, notes: "The church fights passion with excision in every sense [*Ausschneidung*; clipping, castration]: its practice, its 'cure,' is *castratism* . . . It has at all times laid the stress of discipline on extirpation . . . the practice of the church is *hostile to life*." See Jacques Derrida, *Spurs/Éperons: Nietzsche's Styles*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 91-93.

¹⁴Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 277-78, italics added. Later, Deleuze and Guattari relate the passive representation of the family to the "molar" notions of "law" and to "mythic and tragic representation" (296-297), and we notice Crispin's own preoccupation with "a tragedy's testament" along with the propounding of "law" in these concluding sections, in a final resuscitation of the mythology of self. See Holly Stevens, ed., *The Palm at the End of the Mind: Selected Poems and a Play by Wallace Stevens* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 70, 74. ("Lap" [CP 45] is emended to "law" in this text.)

¹⁵Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 32. Alan Perlis' relating of Stevens' use of the letter "c" in "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself" to the idea of death, and his further connection of this idea back to the comedian of *Harmonium*, seems relevant to the point reiterated previously. See Alan Perlis, *Wallace Stevens: A World of Transforming Shapes* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976), 36.)

¹⁶Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); A. Walton Litz, *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); and also, Glen G. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Company*, in note 1 above.

¹⁷Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 226.

¹⁸*Local Knowledge*, 161.

Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction: "It Must Give Pleasure"

GLEN MACLEOD

THE LAST SECTION OF "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "It Must Give Pleasure," focuses on the irrational aspects of the supreme fiction. In this respect, it provides both a formal and a theoretical balance for the first section of "Notes," "It Must Be Abstract," which asserted the primacy of rationalism.¹ "It Must Give Pleasure" begins with the experience of particular "irrational moment[s]" that shake us like "things transformed" (CP 399)² and it ends with a broad vision of "the irrational distortion" that transforms the ordinary world into a marvelous "fluent mundo" (CP 407). I hope to show that Stevens' emphasis on the irrational in this section of "Notes" is closely related to his knowledge of the literary and artistic movement known as Surrealism.

The Stevens of 1942 had long associated the irrational with Surrealism. His 1936 essay, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," had been composed with Surrealism in mind. Stevens delivered this paper at Harvard on December 8, 1936, the evening before the opening of the Museum of Modern Art's much-heralded exhibit "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism." The loud publicity surrounding that event is what he refers to as "the din made by the surrealists and surrationalists" (OP 216) in his opening remarks. And he based part of this essay on a review of the "International Surrealist Exhibition" that had taken place in London earlier that year. Both Stevens' choice of topic—the irrational element in poetry—and his approach to that topic were consciously derived from his encounters with Surrealism. Except for his fear of being classified as part of any artistic movement, he might well have titled that essay not "The Irrational Element in Poetry" but "Surrealism in Poetry."³

When Stevens repeatedly invokes "the irrational" in "Notes," therefore, Surrealism is never far from his mind. He begins "It Must Give Pleasure" by recalling the concept of the "first idea" from the beginning of "Notes," but shifting his focus from an objective, intellectual apprehension of the first idea to the poet's subjective, emotional response to it:

the difficultest rigor is forthwith,
On the image of what we see, to catch from that

Irrational moment its unreasoning,
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.
We reason about them with a later reason.
(CP 398-99)

The poet's emotional reaction to these objective, external events turns out to be strangely close to his response to poetry: "These are not things transformed. / Yet we are shaken by them as if they were." This paradoxical notion fascinates Stevens, for he repeats it in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" when he refers to "things that seem to be poetry without any intervention on our part, as, for example the blue sky" (NA 59); and again in the same essay: "the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another" (NA 65). When we perceive something in the external world that is utterly distinct from us (i.e., perceive it in its first idea), and that, at the same time, seems invested with deep emotional significance, we are witnessing a momentary agreement between our subjective desires and objective fact:

few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it . . . —few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. (NA 65-66)

The pleasure we experience at such moments is an eruption of unconscious emotion associated with the thing perceived. We are confronting, in Stevens' words, "a particular of life that we have thought of often, *even though unconsciously*, and that we have felt intensely in those crystallizations of freshness that we no more remember than we remember this or that gust of wind in spring or autumn" (NA 65-66; my italics). In such irrational moments the real and the imagined, the conscious and the unconscious, are suddenly, effortlessly joined together. The troubling contradictions of our experience seem to be resolved, and we feel ourselves in harmony with the world around us.

By focusing on the spontaneous harmony of such irrational moments in "Notes," Stevens hoped to reduce the opposition between imagination and reality in his own poetic theory. And, as he surely knew, he was also embracing one of the basic tenets of Surrealism. André Breton, the high priest of Surrealism, considered this point so fundamental to Surrealist art theory, and so pertinent to the world situation in 1942, that he called special attention to it in a lecture at Yale, in December of that year, entitled "The Situation of Surrealism Between the Wars":

What I said in 1929, I believe now more than ever: "It is necessary to feel by all means, and to make known at all costs, the *artificial character of the old antinomies* . . . Everything leads us to believe that there exists a certain point of the mind from which life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictory." . . . For Surrealism—and I think this will be its glory someday—anything will have been considered good that could re-

Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction

duce these oppositions which have been presented as insurmountable.⁴

In "It Must Give Pleasure" Stevens sets himself the task of reducing precisely such oppositions, and this Surrealist strategy climaxes in the Canon Aspirin's resolution in Canto VI:

He had to choose. But it was not a choice
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

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

(CP 403)

The trouble with such harmonious visions is that they can easily degenerate into merely "mystical rhetoric," something Stevens could not abide (OP 228). This is the point of the next canto, where Stevens also seeks to establish his own distance from Surrealism:

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

To discover winter and know it well, to find,
Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,

It is possible, possible, possible. It must
Be possible.

(CP 403-04)

In making this crucial distinction, "to impose is not / To discover," Stevens was defining his central poetic aims in opposition to what he considered "the essential fault of Surrealism." This is clear from a notebook entry of 1940, which was published as part of Stevens' "Materia Poetica" in the Surrealist magazine *View* in 1942⁵:

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination. (OP 177)⁶

Here Stevens is voicing a common complaint against Surrealism—namely that, despite its veneration of chance and the irrational, Surrealist art is too often willful and calculating. As he puts it in "Notes," "To impose is not / To discover."

Ironically, in recording his apparent lack of sympathy with Surrealist art, Stevens was at the same time revealing his closeness to Surrealist art *theory*. He clearly shares the Surrealist belief that the irrational is central to artistic creation. Compare another entry in "Materia Poetica": "Poetry must be irrational" (OP 162). His only complaint is that Surrealism is not irrational *enough*. This criticism applies not so much to Breton's theory as to the mechanical application of that theory by his less talented or less scrupulous disciples—like the notorious Salvador Dali—who tended to mistake any bizarre juxtaposition for a revelation of the unconscious. In contrast to such deliberate contrivance, Stevens' own "irrational moments," like Breton's Surreal conjunctions, are by definition utterly spontaneous (or "automatic" to use the Surrealist term that Stevens himself often used [cf. OP 219-20; L 871]). They can not be imposed; they must be discovered.

One further danger threatens the success of such a solution to the imagination/reality conflict. Because it is based on subjective feeling, it may lead only to an empty solipsism. The continuation of Canto VII seeks to counteract this possibility by insisting on a goal of absolute realism:

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

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

The fiction of an absolute . . .

(CP 404)

The image of reality as a "beast disgorged" is typically Surrealist, and the seemingly paradoxical equation of "the real" with "an absolute" is not far removed from Breton's basic definition of surreality in the *First Manifesto of Surrealism*:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of *absolute reality*, a surreality, if one may so speak.⁷

This common search for an absolute led both Breton and Stevens to view aesthetic activity as equivalent to a mystical quest for the divine. Stevens consciously conceived of his supreme fiction as a substitute for God. And Breton's attitude is clear from the following passage:

[Surrealism] alone is the dispenser, albeit at intervals well spaced out one from the other, of transfiguring rays of a grace I persist in comparing in all respects to divine grace.⁸

Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction

Stevens' "irrational moments" at the beginning of "It Must Give Pleasure" are precisely equivalent to these Surreal "transfiguring rays of grace." Both are moments of subjective experience so profoundly moving that we are shaken by them as if by a manifestation of the divine.

Bearing in mind these parallels, we can see that Stevens' harmonious resolution of "Notes," in the beautiful concluding canto of "It Must Give Pleasure," also relates closely to Surrealism:

They will get it straight one day at the Sorbonne.
We shall return at twilight from the lecture
Pleased that the irrational is rational,

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.
You will have stopped revolving except in crystal.
(CP 406-07)

All of André Breton's Surrealist theorizing—at the Sorbonne and elsewhere—was an attempt to demonstrate that "the irrational is rational," to systematize the workings of the unconscious. But like Wallace Stevens, Breton was a poet, and he therefore recognized the necessity of communicating not only intellectual ideas but also emotional pleasure. He would have been gratified to leave an audience not simply persuaded but "*Pleased* that the irrational is rational," for that heightened emotional state is a necessary precondition for any genuine revelation.

Stevens' own prose description of his "mundo" represents a similar attempt to explain rationally an experience that is beyond the power of reason to conceive:

It is the mundo of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights and not the gaunt world of the reason. The pleasure is the pleasure of powers that create a truth that cannot be arrived at by the reason alone, a truth that the poet recognizes by sensation. (NA 58)

By opposing the "mundo of the imagination" to the "gaunt world of the reason," Stevens aligns his "mundo" with the irrational. The truth the poet recognizes by irrational "sensation" is the "fiction that results from feeling" which concludes "It Must Give Pleasure." In its simplest form it appears as the "irrational moment" of Canto 1; and that "irrational moment" provides the emotional analogy by which the greatest poet may ultimately recognize the supreme fiction. In this respect, the supreme fiction itself is essentially irrational, and therefore, in Stevens' experience, closely related to Surrealism.

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The Wallace Stevens Journal

Notes

¹"It Must Be Abstract" emphasizes the rational component of the supreme fiction: from the decreative apprehension of the "first *idea*" to the intellectual building-up of the "*idea* of man." (The word "idea" appears only in this section of "Notes.") For a fuller discussion of this point, see my "'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction' and Abstract Art," forthcoming in the *Journal of Modern Literature* (Summer 1989).

²References in the text to Stevens' writings are abbreviated as follows: *CP*—*Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954); *NA*—*The Necessary Angel* (New York: Knopf, 1951); *OP*—*Opus Posthumous* ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Knopf, 1957); *L*—*Letters of Wallace Stevens* ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966).

³For a fuller discussion of Stevens' interest in Surrealism during the 1930s, see my "Stevens and Surrealism: The Genesis of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar,'" in *American Literature* 59, 3 (October 1987): 359-77.

⁴Reprinted in Franklin Rosemont, ed. *André Breton: What is Surrealism?* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 245.

⁵*View* 2, 3 (October 1942): 28.

⁶The shift from "to *invent* is not to discover" in this notebook entry to "to *impose* is not / To discover" in the poem probably indicates no more than Stevens' greater attention to verbal accuracy in his poetry. "To *invent*" is strictly "to discover," as any dictionary will show.

⁷André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* tr. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962, 1972), 14 (my italics).

⁸Breton, xi.

Apollonian and Dionysian in ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’

B. J. LEGGETT

CONSIDERING THE DIVERGENCE of accounts of Wallace Stevens' career as a whole, there is surprising agreement as to its true beginning, which is generally seen as dating from the publication of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Sunday Morning" in 1915. Since "Peter Quince" appeared first, it bears the burden of launching Stevens' "mature" verse as his "first really noteworthy poem" (Riddel 73), of constituting "Stevens' point of poetic departure" (Stern 81). "Sunday Morning," with its meditation on themes that would occupy the poet for the next three decades, is as ideally suited for the role of a career-launching poem for Stevens as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is for Eliot. But "Peter Quince" is another matter altogether, and the attempts of Stevens' commentators to shape it to its role as Stevens' first great theoretical poem are instructive; they have, for the most part, transformed "Peter Quince" into a poem that *might have been* Stevens' point of departure had he had in mind a project closer to that of his early critics.

From the first it was evident that the commentary meant to ignore as much as possible the utter strangeness of "Peter Quince." Here is a poem, after all, that begins with a speaker in the throes of desire who indulges in a sexual fantasy involving autoeroticism and voyeurism. In quite suggestive language the speaker describes the nude Susanna (bearing little resemblance to her Apocryphal role as the devout wife of Joakim) as she "searched / The touch of springs, / And found / Concealed imaginings." Her performance at her bath is depicted as being observed by a group of men who have become sexually aroused by her sensuous display: "She bathed in her still garden, while / The red-eyed elders watching, felt / The basses of their beings throb."¹ The speaker also makes explicit the parallel between his own desire and the lust of the elders, and, to complicate matters further, he has appeared to some readers to desert Susanna in her naked shame without resolving her plight as he leaves her story abruptly to pursue in the final section a lyrical meditation on the nature of beauty and change. If we take the poem, as it has generally been taken, as the point where Stevens first found an authentic poetic voice, we must also recognize that it is, in its subject, its apparently disjointed structure, its undisguised eroticism, truly a bizarre beginning.

But that is not the sense one would receive in reading the commentary on the poem. With few exceptions, "Peter Quince" has been read as a rather conventional statement on form in art; its erotic episodes have been exorcised as mere symbols of aesthetic theory, and its structural irregularities have been explained as the poem's attempt to achieve the condition of music. This manner of reading the poem began with the earliest (1947) detailed explication, which argues that Stevens' interest is not in sexual desire but in beauty, art. The poem sees beauty as both sensuous and ordered, patterned: "True beauty (sense ex-

perience plus artistic form) is represented by Peter Quince, Susanna, and the art of music; pseudo-beauty (sense experience alone) is represented by the elders and sheer noise" (Stocking Item 47). The reading attempts to dismiss the poem's eroticism by making it a symbol of bad art and to suppress the link between the speaker and the elders by pointing to their contrasting responses to beauty: "the difference between the desire of Peter for his lady and that of the elders for Susanna lies in the fact that Peter is an artist. The elders' basses, witching chords, and pizzicati-pulsing blood never achieve form" (Item 47).

Such a reading raises as many questions as it answers, but before approaching these I want to suggest how this formalist approach—variations of Stocking's assumption that the poem is primarily concerned with the value of pattern and order in art—has persisted as the more or less official description of "Peter Quince." In both his essay on the poem (subtitled "Immortality as Form") and his account in *The Clairvoyant Eye*, Joseph Riddel, who had not yet moved beyond his New Critical phase, seconded and extended Stocking's reading. "Peter Quince," he finds, "is a poem about poetry, and particularly about form as it comes to be an imperative in a world of flux" (*The Clairvoyant Eye* 73). Peter Quince is a mask of the poet who takes the myth of Susanna and the elders and "shapes it in the enduring forms of music"—music being Stevens' equivalent for poetry (73). As in Stocking's reading, Peter Quince is to be distinguished from the elders by his adherence to aesthetic form: "The forms of poetry, accounting like music for change, create and preserve beauty; the blind laws of moral convention, the Puritan distortions of the elders, leave it spent and dissipated" (76). To continue the line of descent, A. Walton Litz quotes approvingly from Riddel and echoes his assumption that the poem's chief concern is poetic form; the question it raises is "how can the form of beauty or art endure when it must be expressed in materials that are the wards of time" (41).

A number of other accounts of the poem pick up the assumptions and the language of these readings, but perhaps two essays from the mid-seventies will suffice to show the pervasiveness of formalist assumptions that have guided commentary on the poem. Carol Flake echoes the earliest distinctions between Peter Quince and the elders when she argues that the difference between Quince's arousal by an elegantly clad woman and the elders' arousal by a nude Susanna is the presence in Quince, the artist, of an imagination that is able to project the "blue-shadowed silk," while the elders' response is crude, existing only in the immediate experience. Borrowing from Herbert J. Stern's earlier reading, she sees Quince as the artist who is able to reproduce Susanna's music, Susanna as both woman and evoker of art, and the elders as "both lustful men and inadequate artists" (119). The assumption that the characters of the poem exist only as tests of the adequacy or inadequacy of their aesthetic responses underlies almost all interpretations of "Peter Quince," and it is made explicit in the argument of a 1975 essay ("The Perception of Immortal Beauty: 'Peter Quince at the Clavier'"): the poem presents us with a hierarchy of the varying abilities to appreciate the essence of beauty as they are

represented by Susanna, Quince, the elders, and Susanna's Byzantines (Goulet and Rosenbaum 66). In fact, readings of "Peter Quince" have changed very little since 1947 when Stocking first suggested that the poem, as erotically charged and unmanageable as it may now appear to us, was merely a demonstration that we can truly know beauty "only in some art-form such as music" (Item 47).

One may object to this kind of argument not only because it minimizes what is most compelling in the poem—the depiction of and the meditation on desire—but also because it is unable to deal adequately with the inconsistencies that its categories introduce. For example, if the poem is structured, as must be assumed for such a reading, on a distinction between aesthetic response and sensual response, then Susanna's masturbatory activity, her own purely sensual response, becomes problematical. It is easy enough to make a distinction between Peter Quince at the keyboard and the elders at Susanna's bath, but Susanna's "music" seems to fall on the same end of the scale as that of the elders. Stocking can only say that "her behavior, like Peter's is controlled," which is hardly convincing. Other critics (Riddel, Flake, Goulet, and Rosenbaum) have emphasized her complete harmony with the natural world, but that again devalues her sensuality since all these readings privilege the artificial, the aesthetic, the imposed form, over the natural, the sensual, the physical. Further, these readings in their haste to absolve the speaker of his own masturbatory and voyeuristic inclinations, have emphasized primarily the contrasts between his own desire and that of the elders and have consequently failed to see the implications of the more striking parallels.

There are, finally, unanswered questions about the nature of the speaker, the discontinuities in his mode and tone, and his rather abrupt shift between Susanna's plight and the lyric hymn to human transiency that occurs between the third and fourth sections. It is, in fact, the long fourth section of the poem that is most threatening to the formalist readings I have summarized because they tend to treat the poem as if it were a narrative in which the characters' actions take on symbolic functions that are then interpreted in terms of certain aesthetic categories. Since the meditation on beauty, desire, and change in the fourth section is not always in accord with the readings generated by the story of Susanna and the elders, the implications of the poem's conclusion, the conceptions of art, beauty, and desire that would move easily from the first three sections to the seemingly anomalous fourth, have yet to be sufficiently articulated.

I must, however, note two exceptions to the dominant line of commentary on "Peter Quince," and both suggest directions a more convincing reading of the poem might take. A recent discussion that does not gloss over the poem's eroticism or its oddities of form raises some of the issues I have noted in pursuit of a feminist reading. Mary Nyquist's "Musing on Susanna's Music" (1985) is attentive to the poem's structural discontinuities, which she sees as resulting from its shift from a narrative to a lyrical mode, that is, from a mode capable of representation to the nonrepresentational mode of the lyric. Ny-

quist's argument, which I can do no more than sketch here, is that Stevens' shift in the final section from narrative to lyric allows him to abandon Susanna after she has served her functions as mask for the speaker's own autoeroticism and as the muse by which the speaker's "guilty desire has . . . been transmuted into lyric song" (325). Although the poem's conclusion allows it the pretense of vindicating Susanna's honor and of purifying the speaker's desire, this is merely an illusion generated by an undramatized lyrical present. Once Susanna has performed her sexist role, "she ceases to be the paramount subject of her own music and becomes, as a legendary character, a heroine or saint, merely an enigma, her innocence in question, her memory stained" (325).

While Nyquist's interest is centered on the role of Susanna in the poem, the course of her argument exposes not only the inadequacies of the canonical readings but also a number of apparent gaps in the poem that I want to try to account for in a way that differs from her explanation. The other exception to the general line of inquiry, Harold Bloom's reading in *The Poems of Our Climate*, also anticipates in one respect my own approach. Like Nyquist, Bloom confronts the poem's erotic elements directly; he is primarily interested, however, in an intertextual reading that incorporates other Stevens poems and texts of Stevens' great precursors. Also like Nyquist, Bloom sees the crux of the poem in its fourth section. I quote his comment here in full because I want to read the poem in a similar (i.e., intertextual) manner, but I want to offer a different set of texts, both from Stevens and from his precursors. Here is what Bloom hears in the poem's conclusion:

It is section IV, ending the poem, that matters most, and here the doctrine and something of the voice of Walter Pater first enters fully into the world of *Harmonium*. Pater, Emerson, and Nietzsche had strange affinities, despite the authentic differences between Epicurean aestheticism, skeptical idealism, and "philological" perspectivism. These were rightly blended, overtly and knowingly by Yeats, hiddenly and probably unknowingly by Stevens. The text that hovers near in *Peter Quince*, IV, is the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*: "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only." (36)

Bloom finds a text in Pater but recognizes, without being able to account for it, a strange affinity with Nietzsche that extends even to the terms of his description, which speaks of a "will-to-possession" and a "will-to-representation" (36, 37) in the poem. I want to suggest that a text that hovers even nearer than Pater is Nietzsche's discussion of lyric poetry and tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a text that makes intelligible elements of "Peter Quince" that formalist readings have ignored and that Nyquist's feminist reading can account for only as failings of the poet or the poem.

Bloom is, I believe, correct in pointing to "Sunday Morning" and some of the "music" poems such as *The Man with the Blue Guitar* as texts in Stevens that should be read in conjunction with "Peter Quince." I would like to add a little-known poem, "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" (CP 88-89), as the text in *Harmonium* that directs the most enlightening perspective on "Peter Quince." Stevens seems to have been aware of the close relationship of the two poems, for he printed them side by side in *Harmonium*, and we are, I think, justified in conceiving of them as companion poems of a sort. The fact that their affinities have not been recognized may be one indication of the inadequacies of our present readings of "Peter Quince."

"Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" and "Peter Quince" become recognizable as companion poems once we see that they articulate antithetical art impulses analogous to those that Nietzsche labeled Apollonian and Dionysian. "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" expresses something very close to the Apollonian impulse while "Peter Quince" expresses a more complex fusion of the Apollonian and the Dionysian that Nietzsche finds characteristic of both lyric poetry and tragedy. In order to follow the poems' expressions of these concepts it is necessary to move back and forth between Nietzsche's text and Stevens'. Although *The Birth of Tragedy* long ago achieved classic status and has become Nietzsche's most widely-read and often-cited work, I must re-cover some familiar ground as a preparation for re-reading "Peter Quince" and several other *Harmonium* poems that cast light on it.

The most familiar of the figures by which Nietzsche developed the "duplexity" of the Apollonian and the Dionysian are of course those of dreaming and intoxication, and I want to take up the dream trope first since it is crucial to my reading of "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion." Dreaming serves as an analog for the Apollonian impulse because, Nietzsche argues, the plastic arts, like dreaming, presuppose a world of appearance. The plastic artist and the dreamer are content with the production and manipulation of images, however illusory these may be. The dream and the Apollonian artwork are both pictorial and individual, the products of the *principium individuationis*, the individuating tendency that shapes things and distinguishes one thing from another in space and time. The "beauteous appearance of the dream-worlds," in which the dreamer becomes the perfect artist, is thus Nietzsche's figure not only for the plastic arts but for "an important half of poetry also" (BT 23), as we will see when we come to "Peter Quince."

But the dream figure is more complicated than this description would indicate, for it stands not only for the work of art itself (as the illusory appearance in conflict with the more substantial experience of "real" life) but for that world of experience that we normally distinguish from the dream. Nietzsche points out that the "man of philosophic turn" has a sense that "this reality in which we live and have our being" is, like the dream, "also an appearance," and he notes Schopenhauer's belief that the criterion of philosophical ability is the gift of "regarding men and things as mere phantoms and dream-pictures." "Accordingly," Nietzsche argues, "the man susceptible to art stands in the

same relation to the reality of dreams as the philosopher to the reality of existence" (BT 23). Nietzsche's view, as Arthur Danto notes, is based on the assumption that "any experience which is intelligible to us is already, and in the nature of the case, an illusion, created by the human *Urvermögen* [primal faculty] which gives form to experience, this form answering to nothing in the world itself" (Danto 53).

This turn in the argument causes us to readjust our initial analogy in which the Apollonian artwork is to the world of experience what the dream is to waking life. That understanding depends on the antithesis *appearance/reality*, or something approximating it. If the reality is itself appearance, what then happens to the figure? This disorienting development is responsible for a curious passage early in *The Birth of Tragedy* that hovers at the margins of Stevens' own Apollonian vision in "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion." Nietzsche is describing the "primordial desire for appearance" characteristic of the "naive artist" (that is, the Apollonian artist) and the "naive work of art," which is only an *appearance of appearance* (BT 39). Contrary to Plato, however, Nietzsche finds this characteristic a positive element of the artwork and the dream. If, as he seems to assume, we have an instinctive desire for appearance, then the dream (or the work of art) as an appearance within appearance is a "still higher justification" of this primitive desire (BT 39). Danto interprets the argument in this way:

The question as to whether we experience reality or suffer illusion is gratuitous, and the difference which vexes us is between illusion pure and simple, which is what our waking life is, and illusions within illusion, which is what dreams are. If the former is a response to some original need for illusion, the latter is an even higher satisfaction of it, and so dreams within life must be, by our own implicit criteria, more valuable than the dream in which life itself consists. But this explains the value men set upon art, since art, like dream, meets this need more gratifyingly. (53-54)

It is in the context of these assumptions about the relations between dreams and waking life that Nietzsche states that "of the two halves of life, the waking and the dreaming, the former appeals to us as by far the more preferred" (BT 38), a conclusion that forms the premise of "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" when the speaker asks, "Of the two dreams, night and day, / What lover, what dreamer, would choose / The one obscured by sleep?" Stevens' poem depends on Nietzsche's assumption that the work of art is a dream of a dream, but his naive artist, a "dweller in the dark cabin" of the mind "To whom the watermelon is always purple" (always an idealized object) and "Whose garden is wind and moon," is urged in a different direction. Nietzsche follows his observation that the waking half of life is the more preferred with his own contrary view: "I should, paradoxical as it may seem, be inclined to maintain the very opposite estimate of the value of dream life" (BT 38). This estimate of

Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince"

course depends on the assumption discussed above: the dream within a dream is an even higher satisfaction of our need for illusion.

Stevens' artist is depicted at the beginning of the poem as satisfying this need for illusion by indulging the imagination. Separated from the larger dream, locked away in the dark cabin, he creates his imaginary images of watermelons that are always perfect and gardens that are romantically constituted of wind and moon. But if the world outside the cabin is equally illusory, equally a world of appearance, a dream, then why choose the obscure dream, the dream of a dream?

Here is the plantain by your door
And the best cock of red feather
That crew before the clocks.

A feme may come, leaf-green,
Whose coming may give revel
Beyond revelries of sleep,

Yes, and the blackbird spread its tail,
So that the sun may speckle,
While it creaks hail.

You dweller in the dark cabin,
Rise, since rising will not waken,
And hail, cry hail, cry hail.

The premise that art (or at least one kind of art) is a dream of a dream may yield conflicting conclusions. Both Stevens and Nietzsche assume that one artistic impulse—what Nietzsche calls the Apollonian—depends on the desire for appearance, for illusion. Nietzsche argues from this premise to the conclusion that the inner dream is superior to the external dream. Stevens argues that since the external world shares the quality of the imagined world, the artist might just as well (or better) dwell in the richer illusion of that dream of which life itself consists. Since "rising will not waken," it is possible for the artist who indulges in a desire for dream-like appearance to dwell in a world that he might formerly have compared unfavorably with the illusory world of his art. It is important to note that, paradoxically, Stevens' speaker is able to direct the artist to the "real" world only by convincing him that it is not real, only because it partakes, he assumes, of the same illusion as the artist's dream-world. The Apollonian artist's desire for appearance, form, individuality, for his own subjective vision, can be gratified only by that which is mere appearance. If the waking world were also the "true" world, it would lose its appeal for Stevens' and Nietzsche's Apollonian artist.

"Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" is one of a number of early poems that depend on what Nietzsche calls the "primordial desire for appearance," poems like "In the Carolinas" (CP 4-5), "Indian River" (CP 112), and "To the Roaring Wind" (CP 113) that, curiously enough, were first published in a

sequence called "Primordia."² All of these poems of the landscape express a fundamental assumption of *Harmonium*—the belief that the images of the physical world satisfy a primordial desire both of the human world and of nature. Nietzsche sees the Apollonian and the Dionysian as "artistic powers, which burst forth from nature herself, *without the mediation of the human artist*, and in which her art-impulses are satisfied in the most immediate and direct way" (BT 28). The spectacle of nature thus shows us the primordial desire for appearance that is only later taken up by the human artist: "For the more clearly I perceive in nature those all-powerful art impulses, and in them a fervent longing for appearance, for redemption through appearance, the more I feel myself driven to the metaphysical assumption that the Verily Existent and Primordial Unity, as the Eternally Suffering and Self-Contradictory, requires the rapturous vision, the joyful appearance, for its continuous salvation" (BT 38).

One might choose almost any passage from the "Primordia" sequence to illustrate Stevens' own version of the principle that the natural world, the landscape, illustrates in itself the desire for salvation through appearance. As Litz notes of the sequence, often the natural images are presented with little interpretation or obvious poetic intrusion (62). The emphasis is on a natural phenomenon that the poet pretends merely to observe: "The birch trees draw up whiteness from the ground. / In the swamps, bushes draw up dark red, / Or yellow" (*Opus Posthumous* 8). "In the Carolinas" depicts the sensory aspects of spring as redeeming the natural world, figured as the timeless mother: "The pine-tree sweetens my body / The white iris beautifies me." From the same sequence, "To the Roaring Wind" combines this figure of nature giving voice to her own refreshment with the figure of nature as dream, as seen in "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion." The roaring wind is here nature's poem, the attempt to give voice to her own vast dream: "What syllable are you seeking, / Vocalissimus, / In the distances of sleep? / Speak it." One impulse in early Stevens, then, consists of this Apollonian delight in appearance which is seen both in nature and in the artist. Something analogous to Nietzsche's conflicting Dionysian impulse, which attempts to get behind appearance to a primordial unity, may however be traced as well in early Stevens, and it is most nearly accessible in "Peter Quince."

"Peter Quince," in fact, reads like an exposition of Nietzsche's attempt to see the fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian energies in Greek art. Every crux of the poem—the relations among music, feeling, sexual desire, and poetry, the movement from the comic speaker's individual desire to the orgiastic scenes that project it in figures, the poem's attempt to achieve the condition of music, the progression from the erotic scenes of the first three sections to a lyrical fourth section that seems removed from the poem's early concerns, the shift from a self-conscious, desire-ridden speaker to the disembodied and purified voice of the concluding sacrament of praise—all of these issues are in some form matters of intense interest to Nietzsche. One might even argue that "Peter Quince" can be read as a parodic reenactment of Nietzsche's discourse on the

Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince"

Dionysio-Apollonian artist, the moment of union of these two impulses that occurs for Nietzsche in the creation (under the proper conditions) of both lyric poetry and tragic drama. I want to re-examine the cruxes of the poem in the light of Nietzsche's discourse. Barbara Johnson has noted that, when read in its intertextuality, a text "becomes differently energized, traversed by forces and desires that are invisible or unreadable to those who see it as an independent, homogeneous message unit, a totalizable collection of signifieds" (265). Nietzsche's text, I believe, provides a paradigm that makes accessible elements of the poem that the formalist paradigm (which gave us the standard interpretation) has been unable to read.

To return to the notion of "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" and "Peter Quince" as companion poems (and as overt expressions of two different aesthetic impulses in Stevens' early poetry), we may observe in moving from "Hymn" to "Peter Quince" the shift from the Apollonian naive artist and his dream-world of appearance to the Dionysian artist who, under the influence of a powerful intoxicant, penetrates the veil of appearance. Nietzsche's term for Dionysian art that corresponds to the Apollonian dream-state is *Rausch*, which is usually translated as *drunkenness* or *intoxication*. As Nietzsche's commentators have continued to point out, however, the English terms' association with alcoholic states is misleading in that Nietzsche's word carries wider associations of ecstasy or bliss that may be the result of other causes such as "the powerful approach of spring penetrating all nature with joy" (BT 26) or, most often, sexual activities: "In nearly every instance the centre of these [Dionysian] festivals lay in extravagant sexual licentiousness, the waves of which overwhelmed all family life and its venerable traditions" (BT 30).

The effect of the Dionysian state, however achieved, is in almost every way the antithesis of the Apollonian. If the Apollonian state is the apotheosis of individuation, of self-consciousness, of the comforting illusion of appearance, the Dionysian ecstasy "does not heed the unit man, but even seeks to destroy the individual and redeem him by a mystic feeling of Oneness" (BT 28). Likewise Apollonian self-consciousness yields to forgetfulness, illusion to knowledge. The Apollonian Greek, Nietzsche argues, had to recognize that "his entire existence, with all its beauty and moderation, rested on a hidden substratum of suffering and of knowledge, which was again disclosed to him by the Dionysian." The Apollonian art of appearance "paled before an art which, in its intoxication, spoke the truth." The Apollonian individual, "with all his boundaries and due proportions, went under in the self-oblivion of the Dionysian states and forgot the Apollonian precepts" (BT 41). As a shaping and individuating art that depends on the depiction of scenes and images, the Apollonian is of course exemplified in painting and sculpture. The destroyer of individuality and form, Dionysian art is exemplified by music, and the place of music in the origin of Greek tragedy and lyric poetry is Nietzsche's central concern, a concern that brings us back to "Peter Quince."

How do we characterize the place of music in "Peter Quince"? The title and the opening stanzas of the poem indicate quite clearly what we also see in the

dominant musical imagery and what has been seen as the musical structure of the poem as a whole—that the role of music is of fundamental importance to our understanding of the speaker's desire, his relation to the story of Susanna and the elders, and his meditation on desire, transience, and beauty in the troublesome fourth section. The poem begins with a premise concerning music that formalist commentators have had difficulty in accepting:

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

Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music.

As I indicated earlier, readings of the poem for the last four decades have attempted to find ways of ignoring or of blurring the equation here of music and human desire. These commentaries have, on the whole, equated music with aesthetic form, usually with the purpose of setting this sense of music as form *against* desire or feeling (i.e., the artist at the keyboard versus the elders at Susanna's bath). As recently as 1988, Robert Rehder's comment on the poem suggests that "song is order for Stevens," and he reads the *clavier* of the title as reminding us that "the title of Stevens' first book is *Harmonium*, a word that suggests the ordering-power of music" (112). Perhaps it is the influence of "The Idea of Order at Key West" (which Rehder alludes to for confirmation of his reading) or the importance of form generally in New Critical theory that is responsible for these interpretations which balk at what the poem so clearly says. Whatever the cause, the poem as a whole appears to make a claim for music that has less to do with its formal properties, its ability to impose order on shapeless experience, than with its Dionysian powers as outlined in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

From one perspective (one that accepts the identity of music and desire), music is not the aesthetic form for the feelings, desires, and actions involving Susanna and the elders; the scenes are rather the aesthetic embodiment of music. Music is equated with the desires themselves and not their aesthetic depiction, which takes a different form, what Nietzsche would call the Apollonian form of appearance, scene. I am suggesting that the relationship of music, desire, and aesthetic form in the poem is, in fact, the opposite of what formalist commentaries have concluded, and to be able to see what has been so long invisible we have to return to Nietzsche's conception of music in the Dionysio-Apollonian artist.

Since Nietzsche argues that both tragedy and lyric poetry represent a fusion of the two fundamental aesthetic impulses, the relation of Dionysian music to Apollonian scene is obviously crucial, and perhaps the key question of *The*

Birth of Tragedy involves this relationship: "what aesthetic effect results when the intrinsically separate art-powers, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, enter into concurrent action? Or, in briefer form: how is music related to image and concept?" (BT 122-23). The relationship depends on Nietzsche's assumption that the plastic arts give us only a copy of phenomena, appearance, while music is the universal language of will and feeling. Music, for Nietzsche, *is* feeling, and he quotes Schopenhauer's conclusion that music is the expression of all possible "efforts, excitements and manifestations of will, all that goes on in the heart of man and that reason includes in the wide negative concept of feeling" (BT 123-24). Nietzsche goes so far as to suggest that music is to scene, the Dionysian to the Apollonian, what the thing-in-itself is to its appearance. As is true for Stevens' speaker in "Peter Quince," it is not simply that music is feeling, but that feeling is music given human embodiment. If music is "the metaphysical of everything physical in the world, and the thing-in-itself of every phenomenon," then we are justified in calling the world "embodied music" (BT 124). For Nietzsche here, and I think for the speaker of "Peter Quince," the relationships among desire, music, and aesthetic form are dictated by the fact that Dionysian music is equated with the "inner spirit of [a] given phenomenon" (BT 125) such as the speaker's desire for the woman in blue-shadowed silk, while the picture or the scene—in which the speaker projects this music of desire—is equated with the Apollonian art impulse. But the relationship between the two impulses becomes more complex once we see them at work in the creation of any art that depends on their fusion. Nietzsche describes the process in explaining the dynamics of lyric poetry.

The aesthetic problem Nietzsche raises in his discussion of lyric poetry is at least implicitly raised in "Peter Quince." In the poem it may be stated in this manner: how does the lyric speaker's own subjective feeling, *his* desire, transcend the merely personal, the individual? Nietzsche initiates his discussion with this issue: "our aesthetics must first solve the problem as to how the 'lyrist' is possible as an artist: he who according to the experience of all ages continually says 'I' and sings off to us the entire chromatic scale of his passions and desires. This very Archilochus appals us, alongside Homer, by his cries of hatred and scorn, by the drunken outbursts of his desire" (BT 44). In relation to Stevens' poem, we might rephrase this: how does the comic Peter Quince at the keyboard singing the "chromatic scale of his passions and desires" become the elevated lyric voice of section four's universal hymn of praise? In Nietzsche's description of the scene of the lyric poem, art cannot take place until the artist has "surrendered his subjectivity in the Dionysian process" (BT 45). This surrender is necessary in part because, as Nietzsche notes later in another context, "all individuals are comic as individuals" (BT 81). By what process does the comic individual become the lyric (or tragic) voice of Nietzsche's primordial unity?

As we might imagine, the transformation takes place under the agency of music, and it may be summarized briefly in a form that is also a description of the movement of "Peter Quince." As we have seen, the lyric poet who begins

to compose under the influence of his own subjective passions and desires must surrender his subjectivity, his individuality, in the Dionysian process, which is initiated by the power of music. Nietzsche quotes Schiller's description of the act of poetic composition, which typically begins not with a series of pictures or images but rather with a "musical mood." The most important phenomenon of all ancient lyric poetry was, Nietzsche notes, the union of the lyrist with the musician, and it is as musician that the poet transcends his purely Apollonian state, his individuating and self-conscious personality, and becomes the Dionysian artist, who is "altogether one with the Primordial Unity, its pain and contradiction," and who "produces a copy of this Primordial Unity as music." The poet does not, however, entirely surrender his Apollonian impulse, and "under the Apollonian dream-inspiration, this music again becomes visible to him as in a *symbolic dream-picture*," a "second mirroring as a concrete symbol or example" (BT 45).

Nietzsche defines lyric poetry as "the effulguration of music in pictures and concepts" (BT 53). Although its creation is essentially Dionysian, it must make use of the Apollonian impulse toward appearance, scene, image. The moment of fusion occurs when the lyric poet becomes the Dionyso-Apollonian artist as the music "compel[s] him to use figurative speech" (BT 55), or, as Nietzsche phrases it elsewhere, the melody "seeks for itself a parallel dream-phenomenon and expresses it in poetry" (BT 51). He makes clear that the melody is "primary and universal" (BT 51) and that the parallel visual images are somewhat arbitrary, the poet's failed attempt to achieve in language the condition of music. The "entire faculty of speech is stimulated by this new principle of imitation of music," which seeks a "discharge . . . in pictures" (BT 53), and with Archilochus, the first Greek lyrist, a new poetic genre is born: "the word, the picture, the concept here seeks an expression analogous to music and now experiences in itself the power of music" (BT 52). "Peter Quince" depicts in quite explicit terms this moment when the musician searches for the analogous picture, as the speaker at the clavier says of his desire for the woman in blue-shadowed silk: "It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna." Mary Nyquist has suggested that the analogy here is a "lapse" or a "moment of blockage" in the poem which betrays the "problematical nature of the verbal medium" (312). Her remarks on this moment in the poem merit consideration because they raise the fundamental question of the place of the Susanna legend in the poem. Nyquist notes that the poem begins by asserting a relation of identity between music and desire, but that this relation is threatened by the *like* of "It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna":

The strain of striving after another condition becomes evident when the speaker tries verbally to turn his own erotic desire into music, for the poem then suddenly lapses into analogy, as if forced by its very medium to abandon the logic of the metaphorical oneness of music and desire. . . . This lapse, which marks, to use the phrase Northrop Frye has introduced, the "moment of blockage," is, simultaneously, a lapse into narrative and "thus" into the use of

Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince"

some of the conventional features of literary representation: character, action, temporality, meaning. It also creates a disturbing correspondence between the speaker "thinking of your blue-shadowed silk" and the elders "watching" Susanna bathe. (312-13)

Nyquist raises a number of issues which have to do with the relations in the poem between music and language, identity and analogy, lyric and narrative, the speaker and the elders, "thinking" and "watching." Because these relations go to the heart of the first three sections of the poem, I want to respond to her interpretation of them.

It is true, as she suggests, that the poem calls attention to the problematical nature of its verbal medium, but this problem is evident from its opening (or even from its title). Because it essays musical effects, it reveals its distance from pure melody, yet it never equates poetry with music, as Nyquist's argument implies. The poem's speaker would no doubt agree with Nietzsche that it is not possible "for language adequately to render the cosmic symbolism of music," because language is "the organ and symbol of phenomena," of appearance, and it can "only be in superficial contact with music when it attempts to imitate music" (BT 55). The issue here is the relation of music and scene in the poem, the movement initiated by "It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna." Nyquist argues that the "lapse" into analogy here betrays the opening identity of music and desire, but that is misleading. Music continues to be identified with desire. What is analogous is rather the speaker and the elders. "My desire is like their desire," he says, and the poem moves from the individual and self-conscious feelings of the speaker to a legendary and timeless account of sexual desire with which his own desire merges or on which it is projected. What I am suggesting is that the transformation begun by *like* is, in Nietzschean terms, the fusion of the two conflicting impulses of lyric poetry—the point at which the artist, intoxicated by his music/desire, expresses it in scenes, pictures, images.

The importance of this fusion in Nietzsche's theory of the lyric is that it solves two problems inherent in his conception of art as the product of antithetical motives. First, how can the subjective man, singing of his own passions and desires, be an artist? The answer, as we have seen, is that under the power of music he surrenders his subjectivity in the Dionysian process: "The 'I' of the lyrist sounds therefore from the abyss of being: its 'subjectivity' in the sense of the modern aesthetes, is a fiction" (BT 45). But the second problem is, in its own way, as difficult to overcome. Lost in the abyss of being, without individuality or self-consciousness, beyond the world of phenomena, how can the ecstatic be a poet since language, picture, and image are of the world of phenomena? The answer is that the lyric poet, if he is to be a poet, is compelled to interpret Dionysian music in Apollonian pictures, and in so doing is preserved from the undifferentiated unity of perpetual becoming. If he is to "express the phenomenon of music in pictures," the poet "requires all the stirrings of passion, from the whispering of infant desire to the roaring of madness." Under this impulse "he conceives of all nature, and himself therein, only as the

eternally willing, desiring, longing existence." In fact, "his own willing, longing, moaning, and rejoicing are to him symbols by which he interprets music." Yet in so far as he projects his desire in visual images, scenes, "he himself rests in the quiet calm of Apollonian contemplation, however much all around him which he beholds through the medium of music is in a state of confused and violent motion" (BT 54). One answer to the question implicitly raised by "Peter Quince at the Clavier"—how can the poet's individual passion become the basis for his art?—is contained in "It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna." His passion is subsumed under something timeless, both ancient and always in the process of becoming.

The lapse into analogy is, for Nyquist, simultaneously a lapse into narrative—the account of Susanna and the elders that occupies the remainder of the first three sections. The poem's odd structure, what she sees as a shifting between lyrical and narrative, is troubling to Nyquist for reasons suggested earlier. Her characterization of the poem's structure, however, gives a misleading impression of Stevens' treatment of the Susanna material. *Narrative*, in particular, is not an adequate term for whatever it is that occupies the middle sections of "Peter Quince." It is clear that Stevens' speaker is uninterested in the narrative elements of Susanna's plight, and were the story not available elsewhere, we would have no sense of it *as narrative*. Nyquist, who faults Stevens for a "lapse" into narrative, also faults him, ironically, for not telling the story adequately. It is not, however, as narrative that Stevens presents the Apocryphal material, but as a series of pictures or scenes. Even Nyquist's analysis of these stanzas reveals, contrary to her argument, their painterly rather than their narrative effects: "As if seeking to ally itself with yet another sister art, painting, Stevens's poem gives us only faint traces or figural tokens of this narrative. . . . For straightforward narrative progression which would unambiguously assert Susanna's innocence, Stevens substitutes a progression that is purely modal" (315). In a curious argument Nyquist declares that this portion of the poem is narrative, then faults it for not displaying narrative effects. But what is gained by calling this series of scenes a narrative? It is, I think, more accurate to conceive of these passages as the musical mood seeking its discharge in pictures, Nietzsche's conception of the progression of the lyric poem. "For the true poet," he states, "the metaphor is not a rhetorical figure, but a vicarious image which actually hovers before him in place of a concept" (BT 66).

Nyquist is also disturbed by the correspondence between the speaker "thinking" of the woman in blue-shadowed silk and the elders "watching" Susanna bathe, since the introduction of the elders emphasizes the shift in the figure for desire (initially the sound of music) to a visual image, "the specular gaze, which makes the imagined or visual object the Other" (313). Although a Nietzschean reading explains this shift from music to scene, indeed finds it inevitable in the lyric, Nyquist raises a different question here concerning the content of Stevens' scenes, in particular their sexist and voyeuristic implications. Why would Stevens' speaker compare his desire with that of licentious old men? This is of course another way of asking how we are to interpret the

function of the elders in the poem. In formalist readings they tend to function as bad artists who respond to Susanna's beauty in an inappropriate manner. In Nyquist's feminist reading they are the embodiment of the sexist undercurrent in the poem, "the pornographic and patriarchal eye" that views Susanna as an object to be possessed (314). It would be difficult to defend the poem against the charge of sexism, but there is an alternative interpretation of the elders' role in the poem that recognizes quite frankly their sexual function but sublimates it as a stage in the creation of art.

The transition inaugurated by "It is like the strain / Waked in the elders by Susanna" is not only a movement into a series of highly-charged scenes but a shift from the clavier, the drawing room, the woman in blue-shadowed silk—the world of social convention and sexual inhibition—to a primitive, orgiastic world of "natural" sexuality. In his description of the origin of Greek tragedy Nietzsche assigns this shift from the man of culture to the "natural" man to the satyric chorus, and the elders of "Peter Quince" quite clearly function as a version of this chorus of satyrs.³ For Nietzsche "the satyr, the fictitious natural being, is to the man of culture what Dionysian music is to civilization" (*BT* 60). As the archetype of natural man, for whom the illusion of culture is easily brushed away, the satyr of the chorus is the apotheosis of Dionysian intoxication; the satyric chorus represents as well that which persists in change, the power and pleasure at the heart of nature. The chorus is the projected image of ecstatic being, a conception of life as "eternally willing, desiring, longing" (*BT* 54), in short, what the man of culture would be if he could penetrate both the trappings of civilization and the phenomenal world:

the Greek man of culture felt himself neutralised in the presence of the satyric chorus: and this is the most immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy, that the state and the society and, in general, the gaps between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of oneness, which leads back to the heart of nature. The metaphysical comfort . . . that in spite of the perpetual change of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable, this comfort appears with corporeal lucidity as the satyric chorus, as the chorus of natural beings, who live ineradicable as it were behind all civilization, and who, in spite of the ceaseless change of generations and the history of nations, remain for ever the same. (*BT* 60-61)

The fourth section of "Peter Quince" is more obviously devoted to this last association with the satyric chorus—its representation of that which remains the same in spite of change. The first three sections highlight the transformation of the man of culture into the natural man, the means by which the speaker neutralizes his own desire by projecting it as the essence of nature, that which lives behind all culture. It may at first seem ironic that Stevens' chorus of satyrs should be made up of elders, the most responsible members of the culture, yet this is precisely the role of the chorus, to serve as emblems of the

transformation of the social man into the natural man. This is a “chorus of transformed beings, whose civic past and social rank are totally forgotten: they have become the timeless servants of their god that live aloof from all the spheres of society” (BT 68). For Stevens as for Nietzsche, the role of these satyrs is in part to remind us of the speaker’s shift from a social context in which his desire is comically out of place to a state in which all traces of social rank and cultural inhibition are stripped away under the power of music/passion.

A description of Susanna’s function in these orgiastic scenes becomes more complex once we view the poem through a feminist perspective. As I implied earlier, it is probably impossible to represent Stevens as innocent of the charge that his treatment of Susanna is sexist, especially since the Nietzschean text I am reading alongside Stevens is open to the same charge. I do wish to point out, however, that his treatment of the female figure in the poem parallels in some respects his treatment of the speaker. The Apocryphal material projects the self-conscious speaker as the uninhibited satyric chorus of elders; it projects the woman in blue-shadowed silk as the freely-sensuous Susanna. It is clear from the beginning that the Susanna of the poem is Stevens’ own creation, bearing no relation to the faithful wife and member of the community of his source. The Susanna of the poem, in fact, bears no relation to any social being; she is purely mythic, the apotheosis of sexual desire, both as object of desire and as self-gratifying desire itself—that is, an idealized desire that is capable of its own fulfillment. Were she merely the sexual object of the elders’ desire, her role would be simpler to describe, but she is swept up, like the elders, in the orgiastic scenes projected by the speaker.

Nyquist applies to Susanna Levi-Strauss’ term “floating signifier”: “Not that she signifies ‘nothing’; but not meaning anything, not representing anything, she is free simply, erotically, to be” (313-14). This is very close to my own sense of Susanna as what Nietzsche calls, in relation to the Greek spectators, “the ideal image of their own existence ‘floating in sweet sensuality’” (BT 34). She is the eternally desiring existence Nietzsche imagines the Dionysian ecstasy to reveal beneath the veil of *Mâyâ*. He uses a similar female figure in describing the manner in which music produces in the “receptive Dionysian hearer” the illusion that the plastic (i.e., Apollonian) world of myth has become animated under music’s power: “she [the mythic creation] can now move her limbs for the dithyrambic dance, and abandon herself unhesitatingly to an orgiastic feeling of freedom, in which she could not venture to indulge as music itself, without this illusion” (BT 160). Under the spell of the myth, Nietzsche notes further, the spectator feels that he could “dip into the most tender secrets of unconscious emotions” (BT 167). Floating in sweet sensuality, Susanna is initially the ideal image of a sensuous existence that underlies the phenomenal world. Under the influence of her “music” she abandons herself to an orgiastic feeling of freedom and produces in the spectators the illusion that she dips into the most tender secrets of unconscious emotions.

She searched
The touch of springs,

Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince"

And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.

Susanna is, as Nyquist suggests, "erotically self-sufficing" (314), and in the midst of Dionysian frenzy her eroticism seems perfectly natural. A number of critics have, in fact, pointed to her association with nature, where "The winds were like her maids." It is only when the frenzy subsides, after she stands "In the cool / Of spent emotions," as the speaker nears the end of his orgiastic interlude, that Susanna's eroticism is seen as something shameful, and the feminist reading notes quickly that it is at this moment that Stevens abandons Susanna for the lyricism of section four. This reading, however, ignores some of the implications of the fourth section, especially its relation to what has gone before.

"It is section IV . . . that matters most," Bloom finds, and although I agree with his judgment, I have not seen a reading of the poem that satisfactorily accounts for the presence of the fourth section, the manner in which it follows directly from the initial setting at the clavier and the plunge into the Apocryphal material. Formalist readings have been forced to discover in the fourth section a statement on the immortality of form, and these readings are unconvincing because they tend to violate the antithesis art/life that the commentator has used to read the first three sections. Riddel's comments are typical. He argues first that the poem is devoted to "the essential form which preserves art from the transience of life," but faced with what seems a contradiction in the opening lines of the fourth section that declare that beauty is immortal only in the flesh (i.e., life) and not in the mind (i.e., the imagination, art), Riddel declares that Stevens is saying that "any pure abstraction is not enduring unless manifest in some sensuous form" (*The Clairvoyant Eye* 73, 75). He does not appear to recognize that he has shifted his ground from the artificial forms (music, poetry, language) of the first three sections which were seen as preserving beauty from the transience of life to the transient forms of life itself. *Form* has now become a term that applies to anything physical: "In the flesh it is immortal, not because the flesh endures but because beauty once embodied is realized as only it can be, in a form" (*The Clairvoyant Eye* 75). If everything is form, then the opening distinction between music and experience, of aesthetic form and a world of flux, seems pointless; it is hard to see how any reading of the fourth section would sustain such a distinction. Nyquist's reading avoids this problem by positing a break between the third and fourth sections, but this interpretation depends on her assumption (mistaken, I believe) that "Peter Quince" represents an improper (in several senses) mingling of lyrical and narrative modes that allows Stevens to betray Susanna while seeming to vindicate her. That is, Nyquist assumes that the early sections of the poem employ a narrative mode that "represents" Susanna, but that the fourth section's lyric mode cannot represent her and abandons her to her shame, an argument that

depends on a questionable pun on *represent* as a legal term and a misleading description of the tone of the middle sections of the poem.

What I want to suggest here is the description a Nietzschean reading might provide for the fourth section. I have argued already that the movement of the first three sections of "Peter Quince" cannot be read as an illustration of music as form but rather the opposite; Apollonian form gives way to Dionysian frenzy. The progression of the scenes dealing with Susanna and the elders is toward increasing disorder; section three ends with Susanna's shame and the flight of the "simpering Byzantines," associated with the jangling of tambourines and "a willow swept by rain." The lack of resolution, the failure to order the episodes in a narrative fashion, the abruptness of the shift to what seems disparate material, the dissonance of the imagery—all reinforce the chaotic crescendo to which the first three sections build. What then does the fourth section with its calm opening lines on the momentary beauty in the mind, the immortal beauty in the flesh have to do with this orgiastic episode? One answer has perhaps already been implied in Nietzsche's account of the peculiar vision of the satyric chorus. Arthur Danto's reading of that account puts the issue in terms that apply directly to "Peter Quince": "Just as dreams and fantasies are sometimes thought to enable certain energies within us to be discharged harmlessly and vicariously, as it were, without any of the destructiveness or terror which might result if they were permitted free discharge in real life, so the impulses that erupted into the shattering excesses of the old Dionysiac rites could be similarly discharged in some proxy manner" (55).

In the fourth section the speaker has emerged from his vicarious participation in the Dionysian frenzy of the elders in the "metaphysical comfort" with which, Nietzsche argues, Dionysian art dismisses us. The calm opening lines suggest that his desire has been discharged; he has, however, retained the sense of unity, the dissipation of individuality characteristic of the Dionysiac state:

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.

The fourth section has to do not with the immortality of form but with the acceptance of a world of becoming. It says that individual desire is transient, but that life is infinitely desirable. Everything dies—bodies, evenings, gardens, maidens—but something persists in spite of perpetual death. In his desire the speaker partakes of something flowing interminably through human history. The woman in blue-shadowed silk arouses passion in the same manner that "Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings / Of those white elders." The speaker's self-consciousness has, under the power of music, given way to a feeling of oneness, and we recall Nietzsche's description of the paradoxically comforting effect of the frenzied satyric chorus, by which the man of culture is "neutralised," his sense of the gaps between men yielding to "an overwhelm-

ing feeling of oneness, which leads back to the heart of nature." The "metaphysical comfort" gained in this experience is the insight that "in spite of the perpetual change of phenomena, life at bottom is indestructibly powerful and pleasurable." The chorus of satyrs reveals the persistence of beauty and desire, for they are the "natural beings" who "live ineradicable . . . behind all civilization" and who contain within themselves that which is unchanging. Nietzsche posits an essential unity of all human feeling that persists in the chorus of natural beings which "in spite of the ceaseless change of generations and the history of nations, remains for ever the same" (BT 60-61).

The ultimate value of Dionyso-Apollonian art for Nietzsche is that it leads to an affirmation of life. In his later remarks on *The Birth of Tragedy*, included in the Levy edition as an Appendix, Nietzsche speaks of his Apollo/Dionysus fusion as "a formula of *highest affirmation*, born of fullness and overfullness, a yea-saying without reserve to suffering's self, to guilt's self, to all that is questionable and strange in existence itself" (BT 192). What in later writings he called simply Dionysian art (dropping the Apollonian component) is the "eternal delight of becoming" the "affirmation of transiency and annihilation" (BT 193). Dionysian art, he says, attempts to "convince us of the eternal joy of existence" that lies not in phenomena "but behind phenomena." We see how "all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end," yet a metaphysical comfort allows us to look into the horror of individual existence. This comfort is found in losing our individuality and for brief moments becoming "Primordial Being itself," feeling "its indomitable desire for being and joy in existence." In such a mood, "the struggle, the pain, the destruction of phenomena now appear to us as something necessary, considering the surplus of innumerable forms of existence which throng and push one another into life" (BT 128).

Stevens' affirmation of a world of becoming and annihilation depends on a set of tropes in which the process of becoming, annihilation itself, is granted an immortality as that which persists through changes. In a version of "Sunday Morning"'s "Death is the mother of beauty," "Peter Quince" gives us the Dionysian vision by which "the spell of individuation is broken, and the way lies open to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost heart of things" (BT 121). Stevens ends the poem with the celebration of becoming that lies at the core of both "Peter Quince" and "Sunday Morning":

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

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings
Of those white elders; but, escaping,
Left only Death's ironic scraping.

Now, in its immortality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

To read this passage as a treatment of aesthetic form is to mistake as well the final allusions to Susanna and the elders. Susanna's music and its effect on the elders were momentary. Its immortality depends on the speaker's vision of a oneness at the heart of things that unites Susanna and the woman in blue-shadowed silk, the speaker and the elders. Stevens' figures, in turn, depend on the assumption that all evenings, gardens, maidens are essentially one, and the unstated assumption of the poem is that this vision of oneness is the gift of music/desire, the Dionysian vision that is essential to the lyric poet.

The brilliance of Stevens' conceit of an individuality that loses itself in a process persisting in change is contained in the "green going" of an evening. What is, from an individuating perspective, a unique through transient experience here in the poem's perspective of primordial oneness is a "wave, interminably flowing." To see evening as an inexhaustible wave perpetually circling the earth is to lose the sense of *our* evening, to dissolve the boundary lines between things set by the Apollonian tendency. Nietzsche argues that a Dionysio-Apollonian contemplation of the world leads to "the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of all existing things, the consideration of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken" (BT 83). Stevens' illustration of his premise—"The body dies; the body's beauty lives"—with the dying of evenings and gardens and the metaphorical dying of maidens in marriage is evidence of the breaking of the spell of individuation in the poem. The implicit argument of section four is that all physical manifestations, whether of evenings or silken-clad women, share in a oneness that permits the eternal perpetuation of their beauty though they themselves must die. One evening is like another just as the speaker's desire is like that of the elders. The constancy of the "constant sacrament of praise" of Susanna's beauty/music depends likewise on generations of lovers like the speaker of the poem who desire women who share Susanna's beauty. To revert to an Apollonian tendency, to see Susanna or the woman in blue-shadowed silk as unique, would undermine the poem, return it to the self-conscious perspective of its opening. It is important to follow the stages in the education of the speaker in "Peter Quince"; otherwise the fourth section's contemplative tone will appear to be, as it is for Nyquist, an unjustifiable shift in poetic modes.

Before leaving Stevens' interminably flowing wave, his figure for the eternal process behind the phenomenal world into which individual phenomena are merged, it should be noted that it bears an uncanny resemblance to the figure by which Nietzsche distinguishes between Apollonian individuation and Dionysian oneness.⁴ In setting out these antithetical tendencies, Nietzsche states that "Apollo seeks to pacify individual beings . . . by drawing boundary-lines between them" while Dionysus seeks to destroy these circles in which individuals have been confined (BT 80). Nietzsche's trope for this antithesis is

the Apollonian wave set upon the Dionysian lake. Apollo prescribes "to the individual wave its path and compass," while the "suddenly swelling tide of the Dionysian . . . takes the separate little wave-mountains of individuals on its back" (BT 80). The Apollonian wave loses its individual identity to become merely a swelling of the Dionysian lake. Both Nietzsche and Stevens use the figure of the wave to suggest a phenomenon that is capable of being interpreted as a separate entity—a wave, an evening—or as the visible surface of some larger and more fundamental process—the wave as a mere undulation of the lake, evening as the continuously circling edge of darkness. But the resemblance does not end with the figure itself. The very rhythms and sounds of Stevens' expression of it—"So evenings die, in their green going, / A wave, interminably flowing"—have been anticipated in Nietzsche's quotation from *Faust*, by which he characterizes Dionysus: "An eternal sea, / A weaving flowing, / Life, all glowing" (BT 71).⁵

Such echoes—unsettling, perhaps fortuitous—are of primary significance not as evidence of a source for "Peter Quince" but as a way of opening up the poem to new and somewhat unexpected paradigms for interpretation. *The Birth of Tragedy* may well have been a source, in the conventional sense, for the poem, and that possibility is of considerable interest. It is not irrelevant to our concerns that Nietzsche was very much in the air at the time the poem was written and that Stevens later spoke of reading Nietzsche when he was a "young man" (*Letters* 409). It is important, however, to place these two ways of thinking of Stevens' and Nietzsche's texts in perspective. Stevens' interest in Nietzsche, the similarities in their conceptions of art and life, the possibility that Stevens was reading Nietzsche at the time he began writing his first mature poems—these factors suggest why the choice of Nietzsche's text is not arbitrary. (All reading is intertextual, but not all intertextual reading is equal.) Yet having established that this coupling of texts is not arbitrary, that it is generated by some historical or critical necessity, one must conclude that the intertextual reading itself, the possibility (to return to Barbara Johnson's characterization of intertextuality) that Stevens' text may become "differently energized," opened up to "forces and desires" that are otherwise "invisible or unreadable" (265), takes precedence over the matter of Nietzsche's text as source. Source study is a kind of intertextuality, but it is of limited value as a tactic of reading partly because its claim to an historical or factual basis curtails its usefulness in the play of interpretation. It may be, finally, that the question of source is most usefully viewed as an infinitely deferred tension in the cross-reading of texts. The possibility that *The Birth of Tragedy* was a source for "Peter Quince" operates at the margin of our reading. It can never be totally dismissed even if it is ultimately undecidable.

The primary motive, then, in reading *The Birth of Tragedy* and "Peter Quince" as if they occupied together a consciousness (or unconsciousness) in which themes, motifs, conceptions, images flowed from one to the other is the possibility it offers for describing forces at work in Stevens' poem that are invisible to more conventional commentaries. Nietzsche gives us, it is true, a rather bi-

zarre reading, but "Peter Quince," as I have tried to suggest, is a bizarre poem that has, unfortunately, lost its strangeness through several decades of formalist interpretation. And after a long and perhaps tedious comparison of Stevens' and Nietzsche's texts this is perhaps the place to address the questions that have been raised about the poem in the light of a Nietzschean perspective. I would agree, first, with earlier readings that suggest that "Peter Quince" is a poem about art, but what it implies about art is, I believe, far different from formalist claims. It is not primarily about "the essential form which preserves art from the transience of life" (Riddel 73); in these terms it is rather about the way that art leads one to an *affirmation* of the transience of life.

Music is associated with art in the poem, but not as a symbol for aesthetic form. Rather music is identified with the form-destroying Dionysian impulse; it is identified with desire, and music/desire is the force that moves the poem, the agency of change. The relation between music and scene in the poem is not that between lyric and narrative but rather between two resources of the lyric—the musical mood as the language of feeling and the image or scene as the form given to feeling. The shifts in tone and mood correspond to the shifts in imagery, and these suggest the stages of the transformation of the speaker, who moves from Apollonian individuality to Dionysian oneness to the Dionysio-Apollonian affirmation of the world of becoming that ends the poem. In terms of the assumptions by which the poem is organized, it does not "betray" Susanna in shifting from her scenes to the more general fourth section. The poem clearly privileges the Dionysian vision in which Susanna loses her individual identity to become a part of a wave of beauty and desire, interminably flowing.

The poem's fourth section is neither a statement of the immortality of form nor an escape from the poet's responsibilities to "represent" Susanna. It is the speaker's attempt to convey the insight available to the artist if the artist is conceived in terms of something akin to Nietzsche's fusion of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. It is finally Stevens' rather extravagant expression of the value of lyric poetry. In opposition to the Apollonian poet of "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion" who conveys the dream-world of phenomena, the poet of "Peter Quince" receives the Dionysian knowledge of that which exists behind phenomena. Granted the place of Stevens' first major statement on poetry, "Peter Quince" is offered as the prototypical experience of the lyric poet, a highly stylized version of the process of creation from the first stirrings of private desire to the final affirmation of the world of becoming that remained throughout his career Stevens' great theme.

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Notes

¹*The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, 90—hereafter abbreviated in the text as *CP*. The other title abbreviated throughout the essay is *The Birth of Tragedy* (*BT*).

²"Primordia," which appeared in the magazine *Soil* in January 1917, consisted of two parts. "In the Northwest" was never collected during Stevens' life and is reprinted in *Opus Posthumous* (7-9).

Apollonian and Dionysian in "Peter Quince"

Of the poems of the second half, called "In the South," one was reprinted in *Harmonium* as "In the Carolinas," one was reprinted in the 1931 edition of *Harmonium* as "Indian River," and the other two are collected in *Opus Posthumous* (9). A coda to the series, "To the Roaring Wind," Stevens also used as a coda to *Harmonium*. See Litz, 61-64, 155n, to whom I am indebted here.

³Goulet and Rosenbaum, innocent of my Nietzschean perspective on the poem, refer to the "satyric approach" of the elders (70), and I suspect that many readers of the poem have made the same identification.

⁴The resemblance is uncanny perhaps in Freud's sense of the term—something that ought to have remained hidden but that has come to light. Freud notes that an uncanny effect is produced when a distinction we have been maintaining is effaced, when, for example, something that we thought was dead is alive or something that we thought was imaginary is real (226, 244). In the case of an intertextual reading, striking resemblances in phrasing are unsettling if they throw into doubt the relationship between the two texts. Something that we thought of as a tactic for reading may now appear to be linked in a different manner.

⁵This translation of Bayard Taylor is included as a note in the Levy edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

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Wallace Stevens and the Cummington Press: A Correspondence, 1941-1951

RON KLARÉN

ARCHIVAL LIBRARIAN Peter McNiven of The John Rylands University Library of the University of Manchester, England, describes the collection upon which this article is based as follows: "There are 86 letters from the Press to Stevens and 106 from Stevens to the Press. The total number of letters, however, is 191, as one letter falls into both categories, being a letter from the Press on which Stevens has appended a reply" (25 February 1988). The press to which he refers is the Cummington Press of Cummington, Massachusetts, and the collection is called simply "Wallace Stevens Papers." Professor Frank Kermode was instrumental in their purchase during a correspondence with the Cummington Press in 1963, although the details of the transaction were handled by then Librarian Moses Tyson (Kermode, 20 February 1988).¹

The long affiliation of Wallace Stevens as attorney and executive with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company seems a paradox to many readers. After all, one's avocations are expected to fit one's vocation. Yet Stevens rose to a vice-presidency in the company, and thirty-five years after his death his literary reputation enjoys increasing critical acclaim. How Stevens performs in both capacities may be seen in his correspondence with the two directors of the Cummington Press, Katherine Frazier and Harry Duncan, between 1941 and 1951. The Cummington Press was operated by the Cummington School of the Arts, founded by Frazier in 1922 near the birthplace of William Cullen Bryant.

Frazier initiates the correspondence with Stevens, appealing to him to let Cummington print some of his poems. In her letter she mentions others whom they have published: Allen Tate, William French Smith, and R. P. Blackmur. She implies that Stevens, if he consents to having his work printed by the Cummington Press, will be joining a select group of fellow artists. She indicates her knowledge of Stevens and admiration of his work by offering to print *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* (a play written 25 years earlier) along with some of his poems. She describes the Cummington Press, its quality work using hand-set type, dampened paper, special inks, appropriate typefaces, artistic layout and design. In short she makes having one's work treated in such a manner most appealing. Frazier closes with a request that Stevens communicate his feelings to her. If they are contrary to her wishes, she can then work on overcoming his objections (19 December 1941).

Stevens' reply is businesslike, almost brusque. He does allow the possibility of "some thing" later, but insists that he will pay for any samples the Cummington Press may send, perhaps to avoid being placed in a position of indebtedness (23 December 1941). He signs off with a perfunctory "Yours very truly." In her reply, Frazier proceeds at once to such practical matters as printing schedules, paper supplies, and the proper typefaces. Responding to

Stevens' insistence that he will pay for anything he receives, Frazier graciously informs him he is under no obligation to purchase anything from the Cummington Press and concludes, "I hope very much you will want to let us publish some things for you" (27 December 1941). When Frazier receives a reply, she knows she has succeeded in closing the deal, for Stevens says:

Somehow your package looks like the packages that used to come from the Cuala Press. I expect to enjoy looking it over this evening. In the meantime, you can count on me for something, but not earlier than the end of June, unless I should have luck. (30 December 1941; L 397)

Little does Frazier know that her great luck will be a major poem, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Nor can she have anticipated that Stevens would associate the Cummington Press with the Cuala Press, known for the quality of its work and the stature of its authors, who included William Butler Yeats. But the packaging is persuasive. Stevens responds with enthusiasm and makes Frazier a promise even before he examines the contents of the package.

Frazier's next letter (19 January 1942) broaches another matter of great importance, both in tradition and in the law: copyright. The subject occupies considerable time and space in many letters, for the hazards of failing to observe correct procedures can damage a publisher, wrench profit from a writer, and, in the event of litigation, enrich only the lawyers. Stevens, acting as a businessman to protect his interests as a poet in this situation, takes exquisite pains to execute all copyright obligations with precision and dispatch:

I expect that the copyright will have to be in my name. It is Mr. Knopf's practice to require his authors to copyright their books in their names, and then to contract with them for the material so copyrighted. (21 January 1942)

Frazier replies with a similar degree of accuracy: "The application for copyright has gone and the Register of Copyrights directed to send the copyright directly to you. So it will come to you when Washington gets around to it" (22 October 1942).

This attention to copyright details reappears later in the correspondence between Stevens, Alfred A. Knopf, and Harry Duncan, the pressman who succeeds Frazier as Director of the Cummington Press in January, 1943. For example, in 1947 Duncan writes Stevens:

Perhaps I should tell you a note came to us from Mr. Knopf ribbing us (as I take it) on our handling of copyright and publication notice in *Five Prose Pieces*. I replied with a quibble on the contradictory wording of the law, but he evidently did not recognize the humor, found me confused (which my letter certainly professed), and recommended to me Miss Nicholson's book on copyright. (27 June 1947)²

Stevens replies to Duncan in a most lawyerly fashion: professional, precise, and even formal:

Thank you for sending the assignment of the copyright to Three Academic Pieces. What this means is that you may now copyright your edition in my name just as if it had never appeared elsewhere. I have forgotten the exact words, but they are, I believe: Copyright 1947 by Wallace Stevens. Mr. Knopf will not understand this without explanation, but the explanation is, of course, that the copyright has been assigned and that the assignment was duly and timely recorded and that under the provisions of the act it is proper to copyright the work in the name of the assignee without any reference to the assignor. Miss Nicholson's book . . . is excellent. There are other books that go into more details, but if you want something in your office, that is the book to have. The fact that Mr. Knopf refers to it vouches for its standing. (30 June 1947)

Stevens' letter of 14 May 1942 (L 406-07) is useful to critics and readers of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, for in it he provides the title of his book, the structural arrangement of the poems, the headnotes to be placed before each section, and the meaning of the title:

There will be 30 poems, each of seven verses, each verse of three lines. In short, there will be 21 lines of poetry on each page.

These thirty poems are divided into three sections, each of which constitutes a group of ten. There will be a group title, but the separate poems will not have separate titles . . .

The title of the book will be NOTES TOWARD A SUPREME FICTION. Each of the three groups will develop, or at least have some relation to, a particular note: thus the first note is . . .

I

IT MUST BE ABSTRACT

The second note is II

IT MUST CHANGE

Both of these sections are completed and I am now at work on the third section, the title of which is . . .

III

IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE.

These are three notes by way of defining the characteristics of supreme fiction. By supreme fiction, of course, I mean poetry.

In response to Frazier's question about his line length in this poem, Stevens replies in his letter of 19 May 1942 (L 407) with what must be every publisher's

and pressman's dream: "My line is a pentameter line, but it runs over and under now and then. If when you come to set the book up you find a line or two a little hard to handle, I can no doubt re-write it for you and shall be glad to do so."

On 1 June 1942 (L 408) Stevens mails off the manuscript of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* to the Cummington Press. His letter of the same date contains various instructions and comments. There is no prose introduction, no index of first lines; Stevens dislikes both practices. He states his preference for a light, bright color for the cover and suggests selecting a small, significant line or two from the poem and printing it on the back outside cover. He proposes, "'Soldier, there is a war' etc:" but adds that if they do not like the idea, it can be canceled. He leaves the decision up to the Cummington Press.

Frazier replies immediately and with gratitude. She responds positively to the suggestion of including some lines around the back outside border, says she likes Stevens' choice of words, which are taken from the end of the text, and adds the following quotation: "'How gladly with proper words the soldier dies if he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech'" (4 June 1942). In response to Frazier's letter calling for final changes (17 July 1942), Stevens makes several significant alterations in the text (20 July 1942; this important letter is reproduced in this essay). In his 11 August 1942 letter, Stevens concurs with Frazier's selection of words for the back cover and agrees that white would be an acceptable color for the cover, "provided it is not a white that picks up every thumbprint and fly leg and mosquito head."

Both before and after the first copies of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* are printed, Frazier comments on the poem in her capacity as lover of literature. "It seems to me," she writes in her letter of 4 June 1942, "that the calling attention to faithful speech can not be too strong, for I believe that the only hope of establishing a civilization must come from faithfulness in speech, or what I sometimes speak of as 'the integrity of the given word.'" Shortly after the first copies of the book are printed, she again notes its poignant connection with contemporary world events. She shows her comments to Marianne Moore, who urges her to send them on to Stevens:

It was a special delight to me to have to do with this particular set of poems, partly because they keep refilling my own life, and partly because they say what I think of utmost importance at this moment of the world's ineptitude and pain. Indeed "the soldier is poor without the poet's lines." Our former students who are now at the front keep writing me that they are thinking of almost nothing else but of the piercing significance which must connect the human individual and his actions. The significance is of the sun out beyond the farthest reaches, coming down with its light to the very spot at our feet where we look (or not) and where we need to step next.

That the sun "must be in the difficulty of what it is to be" bears me up. Your poetry partakes of that supreme fiction in that I can come back indefinitely for more light; it does not reveal itself all at once,

PAUL RUTHERFORD, PRESIDENT



Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company

HOME OFFICE - HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

WALLACE STEVENS
VICE-PRESIDENT

R. W. MULLEN
ASSISTANT SECRETARY

July 20, 1942.

Miss Katharine Frazier, Director
The Cummington Press
Cummington, Mass.

Dear Miss Frazier:

The proofs which you sent with your letter of July 17th are quite all right. This remark applies also to the two subtitle pages.

If it is not too late to do so, I should like to make the following changes: on page 22 in line 13 change Sky-blue to Night-blue, and on page 29 in line 1 change Nancia to Mansia. I did not see your letter until this morning. That is why I did not telephone you on Saturday, as requested.

I return the proofs.

Yours very truly,

WS P

note:

Page 41 contains two lines that have bothered me. While I have corrected them on the proof, I want to be sure that you understand the correction. They are the first two lines of the fourth verse, which now read...

Is it he or I that experiences this?

Is it I, then, that keeps saying there is an hour?

I want them to read ...

Is it he or is it I that experience this?

Is it I, then, that keep saying there is an hour?

It is curious how illiterate the ear is, if you give it a chance.

W.S.

nor, for me, ever exhaustively. And that is the best thing I can say about anything. (24 September 1942)

One might think of these comments as the first serious criticism of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Frazier is able to move gracefully between the roles of shrewd businesswoman and literata in much the same way Stevens moves between the roles of businessman and poet.

On receiving the initial copies of the first edition, Stevens' only comment is, "The book is a delight" (17 September 1942; L 419). It is not until six months later, perhaps after he has had time to reflect, that he writes a more circumspect note to the Cummington Press:

No doubt the time has gone by for further reviews, but the book seems to be toddling along without the help of reviews. It seems to me to be an extremely well-made, good-looking book. I don't see how the design of it could be improved, and all the impressions that I have seen were beautifully done. The only thing that I have ever felt any doubt about: that is to say, the lines on the back, are really all right in the sense that they relax the stiffness, and seem to me to be a pleasant kind of informality—like the colored boy that comes in after everything is over in *DER ROSENKAVELIER* and picks up the handkerchief that was left on the floor. (17 March 1943; L 442)

A few weeks later when Harry Duncan requests permission to print a second edition and asks whether there are any changes to be made in the text, Stevens, in writing back, reveals more of the workings of his own mind and adds a different and more personal praise of Frazier's and Duncan's work:

The mood to make changes in the NOTES has gone by, and I am now thinking about other things. There is one mistake that ought to be corrected: Line 7 on page 37 begins "There was"; this ought to be changed to "This was". Somewhere else in the text there is an error in punctuation, as I remember it, but I couldn't find this last evening and I may be wrong. . . . As a matter of fact, what any writer needs above anything else is acceptance. People don't even read him until they accept him: I mean that they get so much more as the result of accepting him. And the truth of the matter is that the book as a book, provided the writer does not let the printer down, plays an immense part in bringing about acceptance. The NOTES was exactly right, for me. (20 May 1943)

The Cummington Press goes on to publish *Esthétique du Mal* in 1945 and *Three Academic Pieces* in 1947. The discussion of *Esthétique du Mal* in the letters turns on color. Since designs by Paul Wightman Williams appear on the cover and some pages, Stevens and Duncan consider experimenting with the color of the cover paper and ink. The dialogue begins when Stevens receives

samples of possible cover materials from Duncan that include scarlet paper, vellum, and another paper called Fabriano. Stevens writes:

The scarlet seems a bit strong, and yet it is pretty much the same color as the color on the top of your notepaper. If, therefore, you are going to do any capital letters in color, the scarlet might be just the thing, assuming that the capital letters would be done in the color used on your notepaper. With vellum backs, except in the case of special copies, the book would be quite handsome.

Of course, I like the pink Fabriano, particularly since the surface doesn't seem to be in the least absorbent or sensitive. However, the paper might soil very easily. Again let me say that I leave the book entirely to you and you can dismiss what I have just said without a second thought. (20 March 1945)

In the next letter, which deals with the color of the ink, Stevens expresses his preferences so strongly that he feels obliged to underline the words deferring to Duncan's judgement. He closes with an apology:

I don't like the idea of green or purple ink in the text: in fact, I cannot even imagine purple. Green is possible, but why not black, with colored initials? I cannot think of a decent book that I have in which the text is printed in colored ink, and I am strongly against it. However, I leave the make-up of the book to you. I have at home a book in French which contains a great variety of different colored papers, with the text in different colored inks, which I shall be glad to let you have a look at, if you think it would help you to make up your mind. Books in colored inks are trivial and undignified, or so it seems to me. After all, we are trying to produce a living book and not a *bijou*. I hope you won't mind my saying these things. (11 June 1945; L 503)

Duncan, needless to say, does not select anything to which Stevens feels strongly opposed. After what may be surmised as a bad night for Stevens, he writes Duncan another letter in language even stronger than its predecessor:

In the letter that I sent you yesterday I spoke of sending you a book. This was by a man by the name of De Rochas, and is called LE LIVRE DE DEMAIN, or, of course TOMORROW'S BOOK. This was published about 60 years ago. It contains fascicules of different colored papers printed with different colored inks, and a lot of other things: samples of 16th century paper, 18th century paper, etc. There are even specimens of purple ink on white paper; but, after all, the 3¢ stamp on the top of an envelope gives you an idea of that particular combination.

I am not going to send you that book because nothing would convince me that purple was right. . . . I like the green of the prospectus

. . . But, page after page of green print, merely to offset the black of the drawings, would not be at all my idea of the thing. . . .

To sum it up: You are to be free to do as you please, but I don't like books in technicolor beyond the title page, capital letters and, say, the colophon or other concluding device. I am merely expressing my opinion. After all, the things that De Rochas was so sure were going to be typical of tomorrow's book are as dead as he is, and that is true even though in France freedom in respect to color is much more definite than it is here. (12 June 1945; L 504)

Such is the state of Stevens' emotions. But there is still some confusion as to what word indicates which color. Again, Stevens leaves it up to Duncan:

The specimen of purple which I return is quite different from what I had visualized. This is the color that the French call pensee. As a matter of fact, the book that I threatened to send you is bound in just that color, with a good deal of decoration. . . . Notwithstanding all I have said about color, the book is yours to do with as you like. (19 June 1945)

The outcome of this exchange is visible in a copy of *Esthétique du Mal*. The text is black ink on buff paper and Wightman Williams' drawings are rendered in *pensée*.

Space is not adequate to trace in detail the growing friendship between Stevens and Duncan, which becomes evident in the increasing familiarity of their language. Duncan's satisfaction in working on Stevens' poems is clearly stated when his labors are completed on *Esthétique du Mal*: "No book, I think, that we printed before has given us continuously so much pleasure all along the line. The binder's delay did cause some anxiety, that's all. I hope that even a little of our appreciation is shown in the book itself" (6 November 1945). Duncan takes liberties with Stevens, as when he chides, "Your own wishes in the matter are unclear to me—or, rather, expressed in their full ambiguity" (12 May 1947). Conversely, Stevens addresses Duncan at one point as "Mr. Cummington" (5 January 1948), and occasionally acts as Duncan's mentor, offering him money and advising him to take a trip to New York to meet with publishers who might advance his career.

The remaining correspondence between Duncan and Stevens ranges widely. Duncan asks Stevens to become a trustee of the Cummington School of the Arts, an offer the poet declines (17 July 1944; L 468). Stevens mentions seeing some photographs of students helping with the printing of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*. Occasionally one is startled by a fact, as when mention is made of Frazier Hall; there has been no mention of Katherine Frazier's death. There is news of prizes: Stevens wins a Pulitzer Prize and Duncan's printing of *Esthétique du Mal* is chosen by The American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of *Fifty Books of 1946*. The book is displayed at the New York Public Library and listed thirteenth in the catalog (3 April 1946).

The Wallace Stevens Journal

The last exchange between Stevens and Duncan (Duncan, 4 January 1951) finds both of them gloating over and planning the use of 100 sheets of *Papier D'Auvergne*, a seventeenth-century French paper Stevens procured from a writer with whom he corresponds, Henri Pourrat (29 December 1950). It is an abrupt but pleasant coda to the letters in this collection.

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Notes

¹Although the originals of these letters are housed at The John Rylands University Library of the University of Manchester, England, this article is based on photostatic copies of them in Special Collections at the Baker Library of Dartmouth College. Dartmouth also has this correspondence on microfilm and owns every edition of Stevens printed by the Cummington Press. Photocopies of these letters are also available at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, where they are filed according to the two directors' names: Katherine Frazier and Harry Duncan. Sixty letters are addressed to Frazier, 90 to Duncan, and the rest to the Cummington Press. Of the 32 letters cited in this essay, 9 are in *Letters of Wallace Stevens* and are identified in the text after the date (which is used for all the letters) by the abbreviation *L* and page number. All unpublished material from the letters is quoted with the permission of Holly Stevens and the University of Manchester.

Special thanks to Philip N. Cronenwett, Special Collections Librarian at Dartmouth College, who meticulously proofread all citations from the unpublished material against the photostats held in Dartmouth's archives. [Ed.]

²This, no doubt, refers to Margaret Nicholson, *A Manual of Copyright Practice for Writers, Publishers, and Agents*. New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1946.

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“A War Between the Mind and Sky”: Bakhtin and Poetry, Stevens and Politics

M. KEITH BOOKER

NOTING THE UNUSUAL AMOUNT of disagreement among critics of the poetry of Wallace Stevens concerning even the most fundamental issues, B. J. Leggett suggests that these critics have given us “a body of criticism in which every significant issue is open to question.”¹ Leggett is right, of course, and the lack of consensus in Stevens criticism seems to have become all the more readily apparent during the surge in interest in “literary theory” in the past two decades. Stevens’ poetry, remarkably amenable to a number of theoretical approaches, has ridden that surge quite successfully, and perhaps it comes as no surprise that critics with different theoretical orientations have developed a number of different ways of looking at him. But disagreements among Stevens critics were quite common even before developments in the late sixties brought names such as Derrida and Lacan to the forefront of literary criticism. A pre-deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller noted as long ago as 1965 that one “can develop radically different notions of Stevens’ aims as a poet, and for each of these it is easy to find apposite passages from the text.”²

Miller goes on to suggest that Stevens’ “chief contribution to literature” was the elaboration of a mode of poetic discourse in which it is possible to simultaneously express mutually contradictory ideas.³ In short, many (sometimes conflicting) voices seem to sound at once in Stevens’ poetry, and although one should be careful to avoid the error of confusing polysemy (an inherent property of language itself) with polyphony (a product of the social and political context of that language), this multi-voiced quality immediately suggests that it might be fruitful to approach Stevens’ poetry from within the framework of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin.⁴ After all, Clark and Holquist seem to echo Miller’s comments on Stevens when they suggest that the distinctive feature of Bakhtin’s thought is his “concentration on the possibility of encompassing differences in a simultaneity.”⁵

Meanwhile, David Carroll echoes the comments of both Miller and Leggett on Stevens criticism when he notes the wide variety of positions in support of which Bakhtin has been invoked and concludes that “one must wonder if anyone would have any difficulty enlisting the help of the ‘dialogic imagination’ to defend just about anything.”⁶ Bakhtin, of course, is today’s “hot” theorist. The increase in interest in his theories in the last decade or so has been nothing short of phenomenal, and enthusiastic proclamations of his importance abound in the critical literature. It is with good reason that Paul de Man once suggested Bakhtin as a candidate for “hero” in the modern development of the theory of narrative.⁷ Bakhtin’s thoughts on literature and language have provided particularly powerful tools for examining the social and political relevance of literary works, and as such they have proved to be a strong energizing force in recent criticism. But Bakhtin’s literary interests lay particularly in the

area of the novel, and his theories have seen relatively little application in the area of poetry.

Part of the reason for the relative lack of application of Bakhtin to poetry can be found in Bakhtin's own writings, which sometimes appear to dismiss poetry as inherently monologic and thus as having very little political force, except possibly that of acting in a conservative way to support prevailing authoritarian systems. Yet a closer look at Bakhtin's own comments on poetry shows that many of his attacks are in fact directed more at certain formalist ways of reading poetry than at poetry itself. In particular, it is fundamental to Bakhtin's thought to suggest a dialogic potential in *all* language:

The dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of any discourse. It is the natural orientation of any living discourse. On all its various routes toward the object, in all its directions, the word encounters an alien word and cannot help encountering it in a living, tension-filled interaction. Only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the subject.⁸

There is, then, good reason to explore the implications of Bakhtin's theories of dialogism for poetry in general.⁹ Moreover, many developments in modern poetry itself suggest a growing trend toward poetic dialogism. Max Näanny, for example, has discussed *The Waste Land* from the point of view of Bakhtin, declaring it part of a general trend toward carnivalization in modern literature.¹⁰ Marjorie Perloff suggests that Bakhtin's distinction between poetry and the novel can now be applied to two different strains within poetry itself, to "the difference between what we might call 'straight lyric' (Dickinson, Crane, Frost, Stevens) and the 'impure' collage poetry of the Pound tradition."¹¹

But the distinction that Perloff here indicates is by no means a clear one. For example, one might argue that the poetry of Pound and Eliot is informed by a conservative, centripetal political energy that is diametrically opposed to Bakhtin's notion of the centrifugal and subversive dynamics of dialogic discourse. As opposed to Näanny's argument that *The Waste Land* is a work of Menippean satire, Calvin Bedient suggests that it is in a sense just the opposite—that Eliot's poem involves a sort of negative carnivalization, the point being not to represent different voices in the text, but to show the inherent inability of all secular voices to speak with authority, and thus to silence them:

The Waste Land is never really, and is finally far from being, carnivalesque; instead, it arranges the *appearance* of a riot of tones and images and languages with the cold cunning of a Hieronymo and with no less an intention than to silence the pretensions of language and literature once and for all.¹²

Gerald Bruns expresses a similar view of the poetry of Stevens, arguing that Stevens' poetry is strictly monologic, but that American poetry in general is not. He goes on to claim that Stevens' texts are French in character, whereas Derrida's radically heteroglossic *Glas* is American in character. To Bruns, an American text is "that which is animated by alien voices—strange, unwelcome, unsettling voices that fail to cohere into a chorus." In Stevens (according to Bruns), the only hint of alien voices is "the way in which he plays out again and again, the drama of the fear and repression of alien voices."¹³

Both Bruns and Perloff recognize that Bakhtin's work can provide a useful optic through which to view some kinds of poetry, but neither finds Stevens to be among the more promising candidates for dialogic analysis. Of course, Stevens himself has made a significant contribution to these sorts of negative readings of his work. In poems such as "Mozart, 1935" he writes within a social context of growing political tensions that increasingly demand involvement on the part of the poet, yet encourages the poet to resist such demands:

Poet, be seated at the piano.
Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo,
Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic,
Its envious cachinnation.

If they throw stones upon the roof
While you practice arpeggios,
It is because they carry down the stairs
A body in rags.
Be seated at the piano.

(CP 131-32)¹⁴

Meanwhile, he makes the point even more clearly in his prose:

I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political, obligation of the poet. He has none. . . . The truth is that the social obligation so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet (in the absence of dramatic poets) is bound to resist or evade today. (NA 27-28)

Stevens' program here appears to conform quite closely to the aestheticist vision of poetry that Bakhtin always rejects. The poet's lack of social obligation here seems to indicate an attempt to remain "pure" in the face of the contamination of reality, demonstrating a Kantian aesthetic of "purposiveness without purpose." Actually, the often-remarked connection between Kant and Stevens is quite appropriate here, because Stevens' aesthetic attitude does not indicate a belief that art has no relation to the real world, and neither does Kant's. Soon after the above statement, Stevens argues that the poet's role "is to help people to live their lives," and elsewhere he suggests that "poetry is a part of the structure of reality." Further, he suggests that, while he is clearly open to charges of escapism, he is innocent of the pejorative sense of such charges. "The pejora-

tive sense applies where the poet is not attached to reality, where the imagination does not adhere to reality, which, for my part, I regard as fundamental" (NA 29, 81, 31). As for Kant, while he has often been seen to provide the philosophical background for the kind of formalist aesthetics that Bakhtin so opposes (John Crowe Ransom often cited Kant as a ground), a number of recent rereadings have emphasized the way in which Kant's attempts to demarcate the boundary between art and life have the function not of absolutely separating the two but of providing a framework within which to treat the movement or passage from one to the other across this interface.¹⁵ The result is a complex problematization of the differentiation between the inside and outside of the aesthetic frame. And while this sort of calling into question of margins and boundaries inevitably brings to mind the entire project of Derrida, it is also precisely the kind of phenomenon that Bakhtin invokes in his own attacks on formalism: "Bakhtin in all of his work problematizes the relationship between the 'outside' and 'inside' of a text."¹⁶

In short, Stevens is writing against very much the same kind of aesthetic "separatism" (though perhaps with a peculiarly American twist) that Bakhtin so thoroughly opposed. Thus Frank Lentricchia notes the political and economic "embeddedness" of a poem like "Sunday Morning" and argues that this poem's "very language does battle with various discourses of idealization from late-nineteenth-century American gentility to the critical culture of Bloom and Vendler."¹⁷ In this light a closer look at Stevens' denial of a political obligation for the poet shows that he is in fact not arguing for a complete separation between poetry and politics even in his seemingly categorical statement cited above. On the contrary, his "pressure" metaphor indicates that there is a dynamic interface at which poetry and politics participate in a vigorous exchange of energies. Stevens' injunction to resist the pressure of reality does not imply that the poet should remain separate from the concerns of the real world, but simply that he should remain as much as possible an independent and oppositional voice, not allowing himself to be co-opted (or "obligated") by any one viewpoint or language, and especially not by the prevailing authoritarian views of the society around him.

Stevens' most direct poetic statement of the continuing interplay between poetry and the real world occurs in his epilogue to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

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

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

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.

(CP 407)

This epilogue has evoked a variety of responses from critics, though more often than not those responses have been negative. Leggett, for example, finds this epilogue a “disappointment” after the greatness of the preceding poem, and sees it as “the apologia of the contemplative man justifying his inaction to the man of action.”¹⁸ I think that Leggett is nearly correct, except that the epilogue functions not so much as an apologia but as an explanation why no apologia is needed. Contemplation and action are not, in fact, two neatly distinguishable activities, but interdependent ones, and the poems of Stevens (in their own way) have as much relevance to the real world as do the guns and bullets of the soldier.

On the other hand, even if Stevens’ poetry does maintain a direct contact with the real world, that still does not mean that it has a positive political statement to make to that world. To do so, according to Bakhtin, poetry should bring in a rich diversity of voices from a variety of social and cultural strata and allow them to participate in an ongoing dialogic exchange, thereby dramatizing the interactions and conflicts among the associated groups in the real world. Yet this diversity of voices is precisely what critics such as Bruns and Perloff find lacking in Stevens’ poetry. I will not argue that Stevens’ poetry includes the same polyphony of voices as that which Bakhtin sees in Dostoevsky, or that which can perhaps be seen even more clearly in authors such as Joyce or Pynchon. It does not even include the obvious diversity of voices to be found in contemporary poets such as Pound and Eliot. However, Stevens’ poetry does consistently deny that there can ever be a single privileged voice to which all other voices must pay obeisance. To Stevens (as, apparently, to critics of Stevens) “‘There are many truths, / But they are not parts of a truth’” (CP 203.)

If one looks more closely at Perloff’s reading of Stevens as a monologic lyricist, one finds her suggesting that Stevens’

deep-seated suspicion of the “impurities of everyday life”—in Bakhtin’s terms, of the alien utterances beyond the boundaries of the self-sufficient world—can find an outlet only in the extravagant metaphoricality that is Stevens’ signature, particularly in the earlier poetry.¹⁹

Perloff here argues that Stevens seeks, through metaphor, to suppress the alien voices that make for dialogue, but of course the very need for such suppression indicates the element of difference inherent in his (and all) language—alien voices are always lurking in the margins of his discourse, threatening to make themselves heard. Indeed, Stevens himself significantly problematizes the notion of poetic voice being directly attached to the intentions of the poet. For example, there is an extended meditation on the difficulty of identifying a speaking subject in “A Dish of Peaches in Russia”:

With my whole body I taste these peaches,
I touch them and smell them. Who speaks?

The Wallace Stevens Journal

I absorb them as the Angevine
Absorbs Anjou. I see them as a lover sees,

As a young lover sees the first buds of spring
And as the black Spaniard plays his guitar.

Who speaks? But it must be that I,
That animal, that Russian, that exile, for whom

The bells of the chapel pullulate sounds at
Heart.

(CP 224)²⁰

Here Stevens emphasizes the Otherness of speech, the radically alien (“that Russian, that exile”) nature of a discourse that arises not in any unified thinking subject, but within a dialogic relationship with some vaguely specified Other. In addition to this “implied” dialogue, Stevens explicitly introduces dialogue into his poetry in a number of ways. For example, while his poetry does in general maintain a consistently elevated (even somber) tone, that tone is often undercut at key points by the emergence of opposing voices. These voices are of two general types. In the first, a colloquial voice may intrude into (and thus deflate) an elevated pedagogical or hieratic discourse—as in “A Primitive Like an Orb,” where the giant is described in elevated terms as a “grave / And prodigious person, patron of origins,” followed by the rather startling intrusion of the self-congratulatory “That’s it,” which serves to call attention to the artificiality of the preceding lines (CP 443). The second major type of oppositional voice employed by Stevens involves the frequent use of extremely unusual, even nonsensical words and phrases which, scattered within a matrix of formal diction, tend to undermine the authority of traditional poetic discourse, or of any monologic language.²¹

These latter voices produce a number of moments of sheer strangeness in the poetry of Stevens. Perhaps one of the best known instances of such poetic strangeness occurs in the episode of the “Arabian” in “Notes”:

We say: At night an Arabian in my room,
With his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how,
Inscribes a primitive astronomy

Across the unscrawled fores the future casts
And throws his stars around the floor. By day
The wood-dove used to chant his hoobla-hoo

And still the grossest iridescence of ocean
Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls.
Life’s nonsense pierces us with strange relation.

(CP 383)

Elsewhere, I have argued that such moments can usefully be illuminated within a Lacanian framework as a breakthrough of elements from the Real Order into the Symbolic Order of language.²² Such moments might also be glossed in terms of the irruption of the “semiotic” in language as proposed by Julia Kristeva, and indeed Kristeva provides a link between Lacanian and Bakhtinian views of such moments, given that her work is heavily influenced by both Lacan and Bakhtin.²³ But I would suggest that one can approach these moments from the point of view of Bakhtin by dispensing with the psychoanalytic framework entirely and concentrating on the dialogic properties of language. Since all language (to Bakhtin) is inherently dialogic to some extent, there is always a possibility for the emergence of dialogic effects even in the most ostensibly monologic of discourses, just as Kristeva’s semiotic always lurks beneath the surface of the symbolic. In moments such as the Arab’s “hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how” we witness an irruption of the subterranean dialogic potential of language into the surface “purity” of Stevens’ poetry.²⁴

Marie Borroff has conducted an extensive study of the varieties of diction employed by Stevens. While agreeing that Stevens’ tone is usually elevated and formal, she notes that his poetry includes a striking range of diction, the net effect of which is to make us intensely aware of the status of his language *as* language:

Words differing conspicuously from one another as tags become, in consequence, more visible; they interpose themselves between the reader and the discursive sequence of a text much as materials of differing textures in a collage attract the eye and thus compete for attention in the design.²⁵

But to be truly dialogic, these different voices that emerge in Stevens’ poetry must come from and be directed toward different social and political positions. On the other hand, to Bakhtin language is always interested, always invested with ideological force, and any work that seeks to explore the workings of language unavoidably investigates the ideological climate of its world: “In the novel formal markers of languages, manners and styles are symbols for sets of social beliefs” (*D* 357). And the use of language itself as an object for representation that Borroff describes in the poetry of Stevens is precisely the heart of “novelization,” as defined by Bakhtin:

Language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation. Novelistic language is always criticizing itself. In this consists the categorical distinction between the novel and all straightforward genres—the epic poem, the lyric and the drama (strictly conceived). All directly descriptive and expressive means at the disposal of these genres, as well as the genres themselves, become upon entering the novel an object of representation within it. (*D* 49)

The Wallace Stevens Journal

This trend toward criticism of his own poetic discourse can be seen virtually everywhere in Stevens' poetry. Parodies of traditional romantic poetic diction such as that found in "Depression Before Spring" abound:

The cock crows
But no queen rises.

The hair of my blonde
Is dazzling,
As the spittle of cows
Threading the wind.

Ho! Ho!

(CP 63)

And even in late poems such as the austere "The Rock," where Stevens' diction is almost exclusively reserved and formal, the language has a strongly experimental quality about it. Stevens constantly undermines the search for a proper mode of discourse, the perfect form of expression, trying, then deliberately subverting, first one tactic, then another, knowing that if he ever settles on a single approach he will be doomed to failure: "The poet speaks the poem as it is, / Not as it was" (CP 473).

Stevens' constant poetic experimentation results in a poetry in which change and flux are central structural features, and in which a fierce resistance to the stagnation of closure is embedded in a fundamental way. This resistance to closure can be seen almost anywhere in Stevens' poetry (as in the "slogan" from "Notes" that "It Must Change"), but one of the more powerful illustrations of his attitude occurs in "The Man on the Dump." This poem, like so many of Stevens' poems, is largely concerned with the dynamics of metaphor, and especially with the tendency of metaphors to be forgotten, to be absorbed into the "dump" of "ordinary" language and thenceforth taken to be literal statements. Consider, for example, the kind of poetic garbage that is left behind in the wake of the flux:

The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor's poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

(CP 201)

It is significant to note that this collection of Nietzschean dead metaphors contains both the sun and the moon, favorite symbols illustrating the two interdependent poles of Stevens' own poetry. Moreover, the dump receives not only the mundane everyday refuse of janitor's poems, but even more exotic trash, such as the tiger chest from Esthonia. No matter how outlandish one's metaphors, they never remain vivid for long. They cannot keep their vitality,

but must constantly be renewed lest they harden into misleading “truths,” per Nietzsche’s famous definition of truth as a “movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and anthropomorphisms . . . illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.”²⁶ Or, as Bakhtin would have it, they cannot avoid “canonization”—the process by which literature appropriates and subsumes social voices, turning them into a merely literary language that is divested of dialogic force (D 417-8).

Later in the poem, Stevens states the need for change and renewal in more direct terms:

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)
And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. One rejects
The trash.

(CP 202)

Note that there are only two kinds of “things” here—those that are already on the dump, and those that are soon to be there. Because the world is in constant flux, because reality is accessible only indirectly and metaphorically, we do not know “things,” but only metaphors for things. There is thus no possibility of achieving a single authoritative language for the representation of reality. Rather, our best hope for escaping the dump is through the acceptance of a multiplicity of languages, through the constant change from one voice to another.

This recognition leads to a moment of epiphany “when the moon creeps up / To the bubbling of bassoons” (CP 202). This moment is fleeting, however, and there is no chance to maintain this moment in self-congratulatory repose:

Is it peace,
Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:
Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?

(CP 203)

Clearly, Stevens says, the poet’s stanza must not become like the sculptor’s stone, lest his poems become dead relics of authority like the statue of General Du Puy in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” or like that of the monsieur on horseback in “Dance of the Macabre Mice.” The poet is not to be satisfied with the aptness of the *eve*; he has not reached a priestly transcendence in which his search for truth can come to rest. After all, “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.” The “the” suggests *theos*, and this line suggests that the whole

traditional notion of truth has theological origins. But the whole notion of god is simply an attempt to escape from polyphony, to exit the maelstrom of competing voices by positing a single authoritative grounding center or origin for truth. Stevens knows that such solutions are specious, that there is no *logos* to authorize this truth. Since the "the" is the source of the truth, and there is no "the," then there is no single fixed truth, but only humanity's polyphonic improvisations.

To avoid winding up on the "dump" of closure himself, Stevens employs an unceasingly critical attitude toward his own poetic discourse. But such "auto-criticism" of discourse is, to Bakhtin,

one of the primary distinguishing features of the novel as genre. Discourse is criticized in its relationship to reality: its attempt to faithfully reflect reality, to manage reality and to transpose it (the utopian pretenses of discourse), even to replace reality as a surrogate for it (the dream and the fantasy that replace life). (*D* 412)

This constant self-conscious experimentation with different languages with which to "reflect reality" summarizes as well as anything the core of Stevens' entire career as a poet. Thus Helen Vendler notes that Stevens' tone is often one of uncertainty, as he puts out "faint feelers," as his "interpretations of the world become so many hypotheses, necessarily entertained but of questionable solidity."²⁷ Similarly, Borroff describes the way in which we see Stevens "turning from one expressive means to another, trying out now this kind of language, now that, now this kind of word, now that, in the incessant attempt to express what remains perpetually 'beyond the rhetorician's touch.'"²⁸ Moreover, it is clear that Stevens' constant stylistic variations represent much more than a mere demonstration of poetic virtuosity. Stevens himself noted that "[a] change of style is a change of subject" (*OP* 171), indicating the importance to be attached to these variations.

This incessant stylistic experimentation may be what Bruns is interpreting as a rejection of alien voices. It is true that Stevens introduces all sorts of voices and eventually seems to undercut and discard them all. However, this undercutting does not entail an attempt to exterminate polyphony. Instead, it demonstrates a refusal to privilege any one language or style above all others. Stevens is installing a sort of "serial" polyphony, denying the existence of any such thing as a specifically identifiable "poetic" language. Moreover, he wages a consistent polemic against those "fops of fancy" and "bawds of euphony" who would seek to institute such a language. When Bakhtin rails against the "idea of a special unitary and singular language of poetry," he is carrying on very much the same struggle as that embodied in Stevens' poetry (*D* 288).

That Stevens' incessant self-referential interrogation of poetic discourse has direct social and political implications can easily be seen by a closer look at the form taken by the ranges of diction that he employs in this interrogation, especially in his use of words with a broad range of etymologies and greatly differing degrees of formality. Borroff, in her excellent analysis of the variability of

Stevens' diction, notes that "[t]he values we ascribe to words and phrases . . . though they seem inherent and inevitable, are in fact fortuitous, dependent on customs perpetuated by successive generations of speakers."²⁹ By varying his language between the "imagination's Latin" and the "lingua franca" (CP 397) (and sometimes by mixing them both within individual poems), Stevens enacts an intense dialogic confrontation between languages associated with different social and economic classes—precisely the sort of confrontation privileged by Bakhtin in his discussions of the novel. As Bakhtin himself puts it, "When there is a deliberate (conscious) multiplicity of styles, there are always dialogic relations among the styles."³⁰

Stevens directly emphasizes the social connotations of his variations in diction by employing highly stylized language that can easily be associated with specific social institutions. The most obvious examples of this technique involve his deployment of language associated with religious tradition in his efforts to undermine that tradition—one thinks of the incantatory quality of the verse in "Sunday Morning," in which Stevens "mounts a counterrhetoric against the words of idealism (holy, divinity, seraphim, Jesus, freedom, soul) by bringing those words into the poem and bringing them to earth."³¹ Also, the intrusions of alien voices that I noted above are particularly effective in Stevens when they are used to undercut religious voices, as in the carnivalesque "tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" (CP 59) that deflates the high tone of the old Christian woman.³²

Such polyphonic mixtures of diction, combined with the fierce resistance to closure and with the constant experimentation with new styles and new voices that I noted above, create a poetry with powerful political potential. What remains, of course, is to link Stevens' resistance to poetic totalization to a real world resistance to political totalitarianism. For example, one effect of this stylistic flux in Stevens' poetry is to give that poetry a historical dimension generally felt to be lacking in the lyric. But of course the "standard" argument that self-conscious literary reflexivity of the type embodied in Stevens' project (in which "Poetry is the subject of the poem" [CP 176]) simultaneously comments upon the real world is based upon the recognition that the real world is in fact itself constituted very much like a literary text. Stevens himself encourages this connection by indicating in a number of places his belief in the textuality of our access to the world. One of the clearest statements of his view of the physical and political world as being a text constructed through language occurs in "Description without Place":

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

As, men make themselves their speech: the hard hidalgo
Lives in the mountainous character of his speech;

And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires
The knowledge of Spain and of the hidalgo's hat—

A seeming of the Spaniard, a style of life,
The invention of a nation in a phrase . . .

(CP 345)³³

I do not have room to explore the many other indications of this view in detail, but a simple way to see that such indications do exist would be to note the way in which Stevens quite frequently constructs allegories of reading within his poems. These allegories can be found in poems such as "The Reader," "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," "Description without Place," "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," "Large Red Man Reading," "Things of August," and "One of the Inhabitants of the West." The typical form of these allegories is a comparison of the perception of the world with the reading of a text, a comparison that is, of course, central to the point that I am making here.

This perception of the analogy between ways of reading texts and ways of interpreting and engaging the world is, of course, one of the central legacies of the structuralist revolution that helped to shape so much of the thought of our century. In fact, this analogy is by now so well known (it has become "old song," as Stevens might say) that it seems to have lost much of its original force. The analogy is not, however, a mere instance of textualist preciosity. As Fredric Jameson puts it:

it is a historical fact that the "structuralist" or textual revolution . . . takes as its model a kind of decipherment of which literary and textual criticism is in many ways the strong form. This revolution . . . drives the wedge of the concept of a "text" into the traditional disciplines by extrapolating the notion of "discourse" or "writing" onto objects previously thought to be "realities" or objects in the real world . . . When properly used, the concept of "text" does not . . . reduce these realities to small and manageable written documents of one kind or another, but rather liberates us from the empirical object . . . by displacing our attention to its *constitution* as an object and its *relationship* to the other objects thus constituted.³⁴

Through his intense focus on the way in which poetic texts are constructed, Stevens provides a model for a similarly intense questioning of the ways in which the various institutional and political structures in society are formed. And it is Bakhtin who, by emphasizing the premier importance of language as a constitutive feature of the way we view reality, provides an exciting and promising framework within which the textuality of the world can be fruitfully explored through the study of literary texts. As Michael Holquist puts it, Bakhtin's project shows that "literature is important because it gives the most rigorous on-the-job training for a work we must all as men do, the work of answering and authoring the text of our social and physical universe."³⁵

It would seem, then, that the work of Bakhtin can provide an extremely productive entry into an exploration of the potential political force of Stevens'

poetry. Indeed, I believe that a detailed and systematic reading of Stevens' poetry within a Bakhtinian framework might yield many exciting results. I obviously do not have room to attempt such a project here, but this paper can be taken as notes toward such a project by at least demonstrating that it makes sense in general to read poetry with Bakhtin, and that it makes sense in particular to look for political implications in the poetry of Stevens. If we go beyond the usual interpretations of both Bakhtin and Stevens in doing so, then so much the better. Dialogism, after all, requires that we always be willing to entertain new voices, and it only makes sense that any "dialogic reading would assume the right to represent others in terms they might not have anticipated or acknowledged."³⁶ In his incessant interrogation of varying modes of poetic discourse, in his ability to accept contradiction, and in his fierce and relentless resistance to closure of interpretation, Stevens provides a striking representation of what Wayne Booth terms Bakhtin's insistence on "the supreme value, in art as in life, of resisting monologue."³⁷ In the hands of Stevens, and when employed in opposition to monologic, authoritarian forces of any kind, poetry can indeed be a destructive force.

University of Arkansas

Notes

¹B. J. Leggett, *Wallace Stevens and Poetic Theory* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 7.

²J. Hillis Miller, "Wallace Stevens' Poetry of Being," in *The Act of the Mind*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller, 143-62 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 146.

³Miller, 146.

⁴This quality of expressing and accepting contradiction obviously parallels the thoughts of a number of modern thinkers, of whom Nietzsche (who provides a useful gloss for so much of Stevens' work) can be taken as emblematic. The various similarities between the thought of Nietzsche and that of Bakhtin are greatly in need of further exploration. I think that Clark and Holquist are definitely understating these similarities when they conservatively note, relative to Bakhtin, that "there are hints of Nietzsche in his work." Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press, 1984), 26.

⁵Clark and Holquist, 9.

⁶David Carroll, "The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M. M. Bakhtin," *Diacritics* 13 (1983): 67.

⁷Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 106-7.

⁸M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981), 279. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *D* with page number.

⁹R. B. Kershner, Jr. notes that "approaching a lyric poet by way of the critical thought of Bakhtin may seem oxymoronic, or at least perverse," but then goes on to argue the relevance of Bakhtin for the reading of Yeats. While Kershner bases much of his argument on the "oral" quality of Yeats's poetry, many of his points reinforce those that I am making here. See "Yeats/Bakhtin/Orality/Dyslexia," in *Yeats and Postmodernism*, ed. Leonard Orr (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, in press).

¹⁰Max Nänny, "The Waste Land: A Menippean Satire?" *English Studies* 66 (1985): 526-35. Also see Nänny's study of the carnivalesque in Pound in "Ezra Pound and the Menippean Tradition," *Paideuma* 11 (1982): 395-405.

¹¹Marjorie 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), 61.

¹²Calvin Bedient, *He Do the Police in Different Voices: The Waste Land and Its Protagonist* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 8.

¹³Gerald L. Bruns, "Stevens without Epistemology," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, 34-5.

¹⁴All quotations from the poetry of Stevens are from Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954). They will be cited parenthetically in the text as *CP*, with page number. Other Stevens works cited include: *NA for The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951); *OP for Opus Posthumous*, ed. Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

¹⁵Representative of these "new" readings of Kant is the work of Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987). For a useful summary of Derrida's rereading of Kant, see David Carroll, *Paraesthetics: Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 134-44.

¹⁶Carroll, "Alterity," 68.

¹⁷Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 158-9.

¹⁸Leggett, 108.

¹⁹Perloff, 61-62.

²⁰Compare the suggestion by Holquist that "The obsessive question at the heart of Bakhtin's thought is always 'Who is talking?'" Michael Holquist, "Answering as Authoring: Mikhail Bakhtin's Trans-Linguistics," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, ed. Gary Saul Morson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 59.

²¹There is also clearly a carnivalesque component in much of Stevens' nonsense language, and there are quite a few explicitly carnivalesque moments in his poetry. One thinks immediately of the dancing naked men in Part VII of "Sunday Morning" (*CP* 69-70).

²²M. Keith Booker, "Notes toward a Lacanian Reading of Wallace Stevens," *Journal of Modern Literature*, forthcoming.

²³For Kristeva's discussion of the concept of the "semiotic," see particularly Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984). To Kristeva, the semiotic is closely related to the joyous experience, or *jouissance*, of infantile pre-verbal fusion with the mother. As such, it is most closely related to Lacan's Imaginary Order, though I would suggest that more emphasis should be placed on the importance of the Real Order in the poetic moments where Kristeva sees the emergence of the semiotic.

²⁴My argument here is in many ways related to the suggestion by Michael Riffaterre that intertextuality in literature becomes explicit when the reader is cued by "obscure wordings, phrasings that the context alone will not suffice to explain—in short, ungrammaticalities within the idiolectic norm." Michael Riffaterre, "Syllepsis," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980): 627. Appropriately, it was Kristeva who coined the term "intertextuality," and she in turn attributes her insight into this area to Bakhtin. For Kristeva's discussion of Bakhtin, see Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel," in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64-91.

²⁵Marie Borroff, *Language and the Poet: Verbal Artistry in Frost, Stevens, and Moore* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 44.

²⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense." In *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979), 84.

²⁷Helen Hennessy Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1969), 14.

²⁸Borroff, 73.

²⁹Borroff, 47.

Stevens and Bakhtin

³⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986), 112.

³¹Lentricchia, 159.

³²Stevens' use of religion as a target against which to mount transgressive linguistic attacks is a strategy common to a number of modern writers, among whom Joyce is probably the most notable. Religion functions very well in this regard because the orientation of its language is so clearly identifiable and easily recognizable.

³³Note that this same poem provides explicit links between poetry and the "real" world through direct mention of historical figures such as Nietzsche and (especially) Lenin.

³⁴Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 296-7.

³⁵Holquist, 70.

³⁶Don H. Bialostosky, "Dialogics as an Art of Discourse in Literary Criticism," *PMLA* 101 (1986): 790.

³⁷Wayne C. Booth, "Freedom of Interpretation: Bakhtin and the Challenge of Feminist Criticism," in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on His Work*, 152.

Announcement

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Performed by Mary-Averett Seelye and the Kinesis Collaborative, this production features a choreographed embodiment of eleven of Stevens' poems. Large sculptural forms fill the stage as two musicians, a silent moving figure, and a moving actor engage the audience in a unique performance of Stevens' poetry. It's a witty, provocative, humorous, and refreshing way to enliven students' appreciation of poetry.

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"A High-Toned Old Christian Woman"

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"The Hand as a Being"

"So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch"

"The Idea of Order at Key West"

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Poems

Reading at Night Next to a Window

Life's not so mortal . . . yet
though the earth could be blown to a curl—
hard to conceive in this quiet
turmoil where the green of Guatemala is written.

Is the purpose to sit here so plain
inhaling the air in a jar the poet set on a hill,
expecting an extravagant
woman to kick out the pane

and step through, so she thinks instead
on the ink in her own eyes?
The woman on the glass stares ahead,
which is back. Her inhibitions slip off as I rise.

June Goodwin
Oberlin, Ohio

Letter to Stevens

To think, not to dream, that is our duty, Van Gogh wrote from the sundrenched southern coast to his successful brother Theo. Here, snow falls steadily onto the grass around the music school. The new idea that all texts, even music, dissolve has destroyed unity and beauty, and no matter how hard I try, I am inconsolable. The poem is not built like a tree, or a man. It is a thing with no self or sense of being, they say. A picture of calm, my dog sleeps under the desk, breathing deeply. Indoors, looking out, I take a break from the life of the mind—breathing deeply, I claim those objects apparent to perception, fenceposts with their little pointed hats of snow, music, the nipples beginning of an icicle hanging from the eaves in the dull light, your snowman built again across the street by neighborhood children without an inkling that their hands construct a brutal meaning that has nothing to do with the impossible ontology of snow itself. Professors walk down our street toward their jobs at the school. A truck raises a rooster tail of powder, and the gray lilac branches glitter, crusted with ice, their very tips still summer-green. Sparrows gather in the snow shadow beneath the sagging pine in the corner of the yard. What the birds say cannot be called song. The motion of snow is unpredictable.

Aubade: A Poem of this Climate

The heads of those peonies sway
slightly in the late afternoon
light—deeply red
cabbages floating in a slanting corner
of the yard. One single iris
rises there, its manifold face
open for anyone to see.

In my heart's backwardness
the women I've thought loveliest
have been a little dowdy
and pinched around their eyes,
their faces entirely
without guile, though too long
or too round. They have swayed me
beyond measure in their
weak, uneven light.

The perfectly pretty—those
with nothing ungainly
to conceal—need no unbuttoning;
they must regret nothing. Everything
is already there to be seen:
slim irises rising
among the awkward peonies.

In rooms reached by sagging stairs
in renovated houses,
I talked half the night.
The reluctantly unhooked dresses
and loosened breasts
were not some little prize,
but the empirical kiss
the world sometimes relinquishes.

So I believe in love, though
less now than before—I have stood
before mirrors as uneven
as a lake's windswept surface,
and, bathed in the amber
light glinting from figurines
and bottles of cologne,
while from their beds with flowered
sheets (covered
with dusty sleeping bags),
they have fixed me
with contracted irises, knowing me
superfluous
to the deepest purposes,

The Wallace Stevens Journal

but necessary, too, like a Christian
angel, an agent of some Will
greater than the future
tense. I have felt the light
shift, as if a storm had passed
at dawn, leaving the sky perfectly
clear, set with only a few
shreds of white cloud
like discarded clothing.

The pure peonies sway again now
in a light so perfectly uttered
it cannot be countenanced,
and the intricately sexual
parsings of a robin's song
drift through the open window
on the white air of morning,
dressing and undressing
the understanding body of this
all too human, worldly love.

Joseph Duemer
Clarkson University

Ars Poetica

Once you have a mind of winter, stand
In the slant of late afternoon sun
And let your shadow fall behind

Your back, face down in the drifting snow.
Take the knife you brought from the barn
And push it, as far as it will go,

Into your chest, carving away everything
You think you'll miss. Cut clean
Through your body each time, beginning

With the heart, until several spots
Of snow are lighted by the sun.
Resting in your shadow like salt

Thrown carelessly over a shoulder,
These glints that from your darkness shine
Are all that for this moment matter,

White words lying in the shadow of yourself.

Lorne R. Mook
Baylor University

Poems

Melodrama at the Alhambra

If she had come back she probably would've
snapped a string. Oh, well,
nobody had asked her to play.
Instead, she frowned and ate
a stale bocadillo by her guitar case,
then left. *Tired*, we thought.
Or maybe she suffered the grief
of history and the gift shop,
its tiny, velvet sombreros
mocked her and her songs.
Possibly, but
as so often happens,
the arrangement got derailed elsewhere.
Perhaps the very idea of arrangement
had a note of betrayal built in,
and the black lizards resented their inclusion,
and sorrow, madness paced
under the golden arbors
with nowhere to go.
She was homesick
for the breath to be travelling,
for a song, a single artificer,
to reinvent the world.

Sigman Byrd
St. Lawrence University

North from Tobago[†]

A diver's mask hangs
netted with a breathy
artificial Palm.

Green sun and tide-
twisted seaweed fade
in the salt-filmed glass.

Fronds shiver and hiss
and even twang farewell
cloud shadows on the sea.

Thomas C. Grey
Stanford University Law School

[†]"It may be, after all, that in a few years the only true temples will have to be found in Tobago" (*Letters* 247) [*Ed.*].

Reviews

Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous.

By Barbara M. Fisher. Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1990.

Ralph Waldo Emerson translated the idea of inspiration for a materialist age and culture as the ability to hold an object of thought in the mind long enough for an image to form. This secularization of an ancient divine aspect made genius available to anyone with the discipline necessary to attend fully to something. Emerson understood democracy profoundly.

In the same way, as Barbara Fisher brilliantly shows, Wallace Stevens translates desire, all that the idea of the erotic engenders, into the verbal equivalent of equations for the electromagnetic force. Stevens demythologizes this motive for metaphor to remythologize it for the world as it is. His effects are sound. As Angus Fletcher observes in his informing foreword, Fisher rightly reaffirms Northrop Frye's perception of Stevens as "one of the most courageous poets of our time" in his making war on empty rhetoric, on what does not mean.

After a useful introduction that both points to the sources most significantly contributing to her interpretation and provides a map for reading the chapters to follow, Fisher proceeds through her carefully choreographed sequence of analyses. With grace and economy she illustrates how for Stevens poetry truly was the scholar's art. She does this without once losing her footing through an intricate argument and without hiding her technique in critical jargon. While there are abundant historical, literary, theological, and philosophical references, they are so deftly presented that they seem to have been parts of the poems being discussed all along. It is as if Fisher makes us see how much of what we saw we never saw at all. And while she does use highly technical terms and a specialist's language, her words are chosen out of desire, the desire to illuminate the precision of Stevens' intricate mind. Her vocabulary remains evocative.

Fisher places herself in the center of the scholarly circle that has formed around Stevens. Her reading deepens our understanding of earlier interpreters as she elaborates on points they have made. Picking up on R. P. Blackmur's astute placing of the poet in "a very old tradition, French and Platonic" and Harold Bloom's romantic references, Fisher pirouettes across the stage they set, appropriately expanding their insights with her own spiralling thoughts. Her application of certain Villon poems, for example, to key lines from "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and more compellingly to "Celle Qui Fût Héaulmienne" exhibits in just what way Stevens troped the past to enlarge his present. Her connection of his Platonism with Orphic ascetic ritual, Christian monasticism, and Henri Bergson's vitalism in her discussion of Stevens' idea of negation elucidates the most evasive of his poetry's issues while avoiding the convenient category provided by deconstructionist readings. Fisher convincingly demonstrates that negation is the necessary angel of both aesthetic judgment and moral consciousness, the bridge between art and ethics. Similarly, her extending Bloom's frame to include the language of the Canticles and the imagery of speculative mysticism illustrates scholarship at its best. Fisher's easy erudition is the result of long and patient attention.

Practicing a concision that would have tickled Henry James, Fisher wastes no critical time or space. She consistently resists the temptation to play with figures or allusions that are not wholly pertinent. Instead, she stitches together elegant read-

ings into an exegetical rhapsody. Her irregular form aptly mimics the flamelike nature of the erotic. It is as if she learned to step through thought from Heraclitus. Following the thread she unravels to lead us out of the labyrinth Stevens created gives pleasure that matches her subject. Our desire is simultaneously gratified and fanned as we come to understand why these poems have resisted the intelligence almost successfully. We want the answers to the enigmas Stevens has proposed, but we do not want the adventure to end. In tracing her steps through a poem we sometimes stumble on an unanswered question, or other, new ones present themselves. These occasions do not inhibit understanding; rather, they increase our pleasure by prompting imaginative additions to the offered interpretations. As Stevens himself noted in a letter Fisher quotes: "'Cross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking are illimitable. . . . While it may be the cause of other things, I am thinking of it as a source of pleasure, and therefore I repeat that there is an exquisite pleasure and harmony in these inter-relations, circuits.'"

Indeed, beyond the excitement of following Fisher's well-exercised intellect as it pursues her quick sensibility, we enjoy this book because it challenges. A good example presented itself to me in her reading, a real *tour de force*, of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour." There, she thoroughly explores all the permutations of references to *in* and *out*, and observes that, "For some reason, the fourth stanza is free of both *ins*, and *outs*." Because her interpretation is so exhaustive, I at first thought this was a rhetorical teaser and that by the end of her analysis this unusual feature would be explained and foregrounded, but Fisher does not use empty rhetoric. Left to my own devices, then, I went back, read the poem again, and with Fisher's map in mind alerting me to the playing of two against three figures throughout "Final Soliloquy," and sensitized to *ins*, I noticed immediately that the fourth stanza begins, "Here, now." This is the blackbird whistling, *inflection*. The other five stanzas, as Fisher exquisitely lays out, are all *about* the different ways the mind knows, *innuendoes*. At one point Fisher comments about her close focus on *in*: "Spirit and letter are thus gracefully joined. It may be old-fashioned to point out that this is a finely wrought piece, but it would be thoughtless to gloss over the technical skill—the labor—that goes into the making of a poem at once so fragile and so strong." Perhaps the greatest strength of *The Intensest Rendezvous* is its insistent indication of the intricacy of Stevens' art.

As to weaknesses, apart from splitting hairs about splitting infinitives (two, I noticed, probably caught in final editing—I read galleys), I think that whatever might be singled out for negative criticism would reflect personal preference rather than well-grounded objection. For example, I would have liked Fisher to expand on some of the obvious parallels between Emerson and Stevens suggested by certain lines she quotes. I also would have liked her to discuss "Carlos Among the Candles" in connection with her fine analysis of the star and candle imagery in various poems. Others may find references to Heidegger problematic in light of recent developments. But perhaps such excursions or excisions would have disordered her order. Finally, I found two timely comparisons, one to The Supremes and the other to a quotation from *Star Trek*, "Beam me up, Scottie," dissonant, jarring to the high tone she otherwise maintains. But then, these will make widows wince, and Fisher knows that her comedian liked German sausages and sauerkraut as well as *Poire Belle Hélène*, the honky-tonk of the harmonium as well as the vibrato of a virtuoso's violin.

I have not quoted any of the sentences from *The Intensest Rendezvous* that startle in their apt and poised beauty. Nor have I spoken of the subtlety with which Fisher discloses hidden puns. I do not want to deprive readers of the pleasure of finding these things in their place.

With this book, Barbara Fisher has shown herself to be an exegete of exegetes.

Joan Richardson
The Graduate School, CUNY

The Scepticism and Animal Faith of Wallace Stevens.

By Richard N. Sawaya. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1987.

As Richard N. Sawaya's use of George Santayana's title (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*) suggests, his book covers some familiar ground: the influence of Santayana's philosophy on Wallace Stevens' poetry. *The Scepticism and Animal Faith of Wallace Stevens*, actually a photographic reproduction of Sawaya's 1976 Harvard dissertation, presents more than the usual number of uncorrected typographical errors, the jarring anomaly of handwritten corrections, and such oddities as Sawaya's repeated use of the phrase "a Stevens' poem" when he means "a Stevens poem"; the absence of an index also lessens the book's usefulness. Nonetheless, Sawaya's study is in important ways not dissertationish. The book, dividing nearly down the middle between direct analysis of Santayana/Stevens and a Santayana-informed reader's guide to Stevens' poetry, is stylistically high-spirited, for instance describing the conclusion of "The Pure Good of Theory" as "Plato stood on his head, that is, right side up" and finding that in Section X of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "paradox becomes paradoxology"; and the commentaries on Stevens' poems, going well beyond a mere repetition of standard readings, often incorporate a more-than-stylistic ingenuity.

Sawaya is notably successful at encapsulating the details of Santayana's philosophy most relevant to Stevens. The most obvious connection, as other Stevens/Santayana studies have seen, is a mutual interest in the relation between poetry and religion, illustrated by Santayana's depiction (in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*) of "the sphere of significant imagination, of relevant fiction, of idealism become the interpenetration of the reality it leaves behind. Poetry raised to its highest power is then identical with religion grasped in its inmost truth; at their point of union both reach their utmost purity and beneficence for then poetry loses its frivolity and ceases to demoralize, while religion surrenders its illusions and ceases to deceive." Here both sentiment and vocabulary point directly toward such Stevensian turns as "God and the imagination are one" and "the theory / Of poetry is the theory of life." But Sawaya also attempts a more ambitious connection between Stevens' poetry and the key Santayanian concepts of "essence," "intuition," "spirit," and "truth."

The first of these is the most problematic (both in itself and in relation to Stevens), describing a nonmaterial form which is not an element in a Platonic (or Neoplatonic) transcendent reality, yet is at the same time not merely a mental category. Santayana stipulates that "any essence is an eternal form of being" (*The Realm of Essence*) and "will seem an event in no world, an incident in no experience. The quality of it will have ceased to exist; it will be merely the quality which it inherently, logically, and inalienably is" (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*). Referring to the latter formulation, Sawaya remarks, "An essence is *that which appears*" (his emphasis).

And to Santayana's "the identity of each essence with itself and difference from every other essence suffices to distinguish and define them in all eternity, where they form the Realm of Essence," Sawaya adds the gloss: "They [essences] are the appearance of all things that may exist, or have existed, or will exist, or will never exist: an essence is any *imaginable*. The Realm of Essence is, in a sense, the human imagination" (Sawaya's emphasis). The pattern here is clear: although noting that "Santayana describes essences as immaterial, infinite, independent, and indubitable," Sawaya tenaciously suppresses the curious ontological status of "essences" in favor of a representation of essence-as-appearance. As a rarefied phenomenology supplants the ontological/epistemological, the essences drift closer to a Stevsonian "description without place" for which "to seem . . . is to be."

Santayana's "intuition," as Sawaya shows, is more straightforwardly Stevsonian in its emphasis on mental function, particularly to the extent that Santayana "make[s] intuition itself an object of intent." Santayana, like Stevens, critiques the rational, emphasizing the imaginative/intuitive at least equally with reason as means for comprehending essences. Santayanian intuition suggests Stevens' "grand flights, . . . Sunday baths, / . . . tootings at the weddings of the soul" which "occur as they occur." And Santayanian "truth," as an "interpenetration" of ideal and real, joins rhetorically with Stevens' interest in the "interdependence" of imagination and reality; but as with "essence," this "truth" (a word about which Stevens is noticeably reticent) seems too ontologically ponderous to apply to Stevens' poetry. According to Sawaya, "Santayana described truth as that segment of the realm of essence that chances to be illustrated by existence. Truth then is the complete description of any thing in all its relations." Stevsonian "truth," however, is more clearly existential and non-eidetic ("to be changed / From a doctor into an ox")—not "illustrated" by existence, but originating in experience.

"Spirit," like intuition, is for Santayana a part of mental function and, as such, is congruent with Stevens' scouring of the mythical, religious, philosophical, and poetic for the kind of self-transcendent possibility that serves as cornerstone for his notion of "supreme fiction." Santayana explains, "By spirit I understand the light of discrimination that marks in that Pure Being differences of essences, of time, of place, of value, a living light ready to fall upon things, as they spread out in their weight and motion and variety ready to be lighted up" (*Scepticism and Animal Faith*)—recalling, among other Stevens passages, "Music falls on the silence like a sense" ("Notes") and "the hymns / That fall upon it [the real] out of the wind" ("Ordinary Evening"). But Sawaya's use of this definition of "spirit," including the reference to "Pure Being," without mention of Hegel exemplifies an unsettling inattention to intertextual complexities. This is not to say that he is blind to all possibilities except Santayana; he makes good use, for instance, of William James, the English Romantics, and (especially) Wittgenstein. But without acknowledging the Stevens who bathes his text in (often ironic) biblical allusion, enjoys poetically critiquing (and chaffing) Descartes, Aquinas, Heraclitus, etc., makes Nietzsche's imagery his own, and carries on a never-ending dialogue (his own particular series of footnotes, one might say) with Plato, the great—although, again, mostly ironic—"metaphysical" drama of Stevens' poetry remains largely inaccessible.

Though neglectful of this dialogical aspect, Sawaya nevertheless manages to read Stevens' poems with an insight that frequently unearths previously unnoted sound effects and punning and syntactic plays—documenting in numerous instances, for example, how Stevens' appositive constructions and "as if" phrasings

The Wallace Stevens Journal

create suggestive syntactic and semantic ambiguities. And his summary statements about various poems and portions of poems exhibit the same talent for illuminating paraphrase that serves him well in the discussion of Santayana's philosophy. He seems at his best in explicating the earlier poems, perhaps reflecting the nearness of Santayana's influence to the writing of those poems, but gives solid extended readings of most of the major poems from Stevens' later period as well.

Santayana's influence has long intrigued Stevens scholars, and Richard Sawaya's book, despite its blurring of certain important distinctions, is one of the more persuasive contributions to the subject. Combining a broad knowledge of Santayana's works with a sensitivity to the internal workings of Stevens' poetry, he reveals some of the subtler conjunctions of philosopher and poet. However, his study also inadvertently exposes the limits of a Santayanian approach to Stevens. The most significant limitation may be that Santayana does not achieve a luminosity—the sort found in Heraclitus, Plato, St. John, Descartes, Nietzsche, etc.—sufficient to engage seriously the mature Stevens. Stevens confronts the history of Western thought with a mental toughness reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's appraisal of Henry James: a mind that no idea can violate; yet with a zest (a Socratic eroticism, perhaps) for the play of ideas rarely, if ever, matched in English-language poetry. Santayanian thought gives a start toward appreciating that play in Stevens' poetry, but to do fuller justice to Stevens' sometimes obscure (or at least obscured) musings, one must resort to the gigantic precursors from whom both Santayana and Stevens draw vigor.

James S. Leonard
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For a biography of Thomas MacGreevy (1893-1967), Irish poet, translator, literary critic, art historian, and Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, I would appreciate hearing from anyone who knew him, or has anecdotes about him, or who has letters, manuscripts, or any other material referring to or written by him.

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