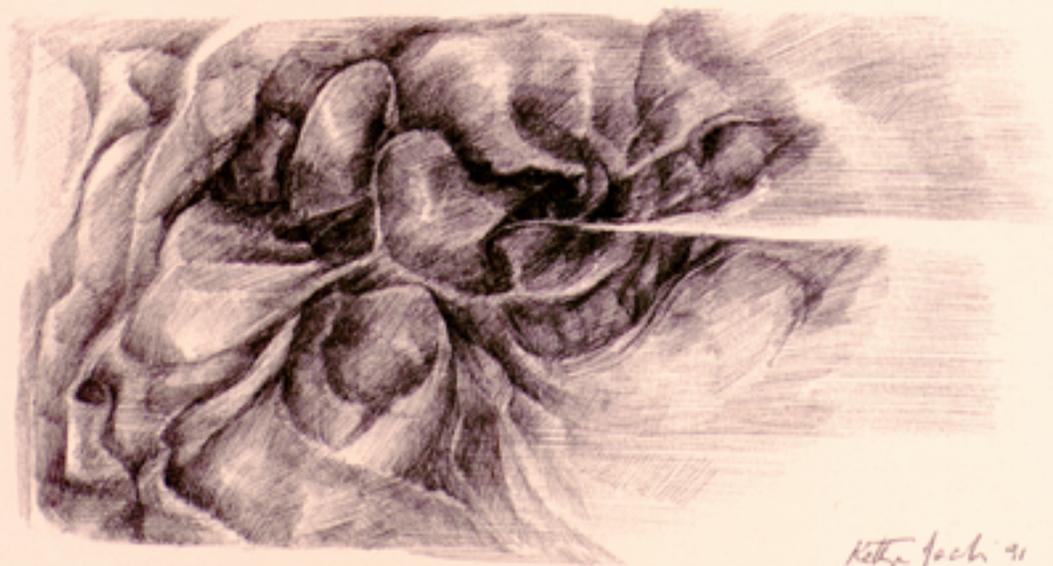


The Wallace Stevens Journal



Special Issue: Stevens and Structures of Sound

A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume 15 Number 2

Fall 1991

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume 15 Number 2

Fall 1991

Guest Editor: Jacqueline V. Brogan
University of Notre Dame

STEVENS AND STRUCTURES OF SOUND

Contents

Foreword	— <i>Sebastian D. G. Knowles</i>	107
Introduction	— <i>Eleanor Cook</i>	115
A Poet's Odyssey from Shakespearean Sonnets to Stevens'		
Not-So-Blank Verse	— <i>Diane Wakoski</i>	126
Collections of Sound in Stevens	— <i>Margaret Dickie</i>	133
The Caesura in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens	— <i>N. M. Hoffman</i>	144
Stevens' Armchair Travel: The Sound of the Foreign	— <i>Alison Rieke</i>	165
Images of Sound in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens	— <i>Anca Rosu</i>	178
Repetition and "Going Round" with Wallace Stevens	— <i>Mary Doyle Springer</i>	191
The Apparitional Meters of Wallace Stevens	— <i>Dennis Taylor</i>	209
Poems		229
Reviews		233
News and Comments		240

Cover by Kathryn Jacobi
from "The Jack-Rabbit"

The Wallace Stevens Journal

	EDITOR John N. Serio	
ART EDITOR Kathryn Jacobi	POETRY EDITOR Joseph Duemer	BOOK REVIEW EDITOR George S. Lensing
EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS Maureen Kravec Faye A. Serio	EDITORIAL BOARD Milton J. Bates Robert Buttel Frank Doggett George S. Lensing Roy Harvey Pearce Joseph N. Riddel	Jacqueline V. Brogan Eleanor Cook B. J. Leggett A. Walton Litz Marjorie Perloff Melita Schaum
TECHNICAL ASSISTANTS David W. Bray Michael Short		

The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

PRESIDENT
John N. Serio

ADVISORY BOARD
Milton J. Bates
Ellen C. Caldwell
Dorothy Emerson
George S. Lensing
Marjorie Perloff

Robert Buttel
David M. Craig
Kathryn Jacobi
A. Walton Litz

The Wallace Stevens Journal is published biannually in the Spring and Fall by The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Administrative and editorial offices are located at Clarkson University, Box 5750, Potsdam, NY 13699-5750; telephone (315) 268 3987; FAX (315) 268 4475.

Subscription rates for individuals are \$20.00 (\$35.00 for two years) and include membership in The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Rates for institutions are \$25.00 per year domestic and \$30.00 per year foreign. Back issues are available.

Manuscripts, subscriptions, and advertising should be addressed to the editor, Clarkson University, Box 5750, Potsdam, NY 13699-5750. Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate; word processed manuscripts will not be returned unless requested. Authors of accepted manuscripts should be prepared to furnish a disk copy or to mail their essays electronically to: serio@clutx.clarkson.edu.

The Wallace Stevens Journal is indexed or abstracted in *Abstracts of English Studies*, *American Humanities Index*, *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, *Current Contents*, *IBR (International Bibliography of Book Reviews)*, *IBZ (International Bibliography of Periodical Literature)*, *Literary Criticism Register*, *MHRA Annual Bibliography*, *MLA International Bibliography*, and *Year's Work in English Studies*.

This journal is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.



Grateful acknowledgment is made to the Hartford Insurance Foundation for its financial assistance in publishing this issue.

© 1991 The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.
ISSN 0148-7132

Foreword

SEBASTIAN D. G. KNOWLES

Is the function of the poet here mere sound,
Subtler than the ornatest prophecy,
To stuff the ear?

—Stevens, "Academic Discourse at Havana"

YES, IN *HARMONIUM*, a gaudy celebration of the sound of words. Wallace Stevens' early verse crashes from symbol to symbol, a riot of pitch and stress, as much a celebration of mere sound as his late verse is a celebration of mere being. "Mere sound," of course, means not "only sound" but "sheer sound," as "mere being" means "pure being."¹ "Sunday Morning" is no less philosophically rigorous for appearing in *Harmonium*; "The bird's fire-fangled feathers dangle down"² is a no less musically curved line for being late Stevens. But "Sunday Morning" is also a chant of paradise. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens concludes of the imagination that "the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives" (NA 36). For Stevens in *Harmonium*, the meaning of words is in their music; imagination is expressed through sound.

As Anca Rosu phrases it later in this volume, "the sound of language sustains its poetic sense in audibility." And that audibility is a musical language: the pulsing pizzicati of "Wink most when widows wince" and "In kitchen cups concupiscent curds" are less prosodic effects than musical accents, *sforzandi* (CP 59, 64). Words mean exactly what Stevens wants them to mean, neither more nor less. Margaret Dickie says that "wince calls up *wink*," and focuses upon the relation "between poetry's nonsense and its sense." Alison Rieke and Anca Rosu examine sound; Nancy Hoffman examines silence. Mary Doyle Springer looks at the repetitions of a word or phrase; Dennis Taylor and Diane Wakoski play upon the variations in Stevens' meter. The issue here, by way of a sort of foreword, is the purpose of Stevens' prosody, the meaning of his music.

Stevens is always Peter Quince, seated at the keyboard, composing on the typewriter³:

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

Music is always Stevens' central metaphor, for poetry, and for love:

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.

In *Harmonium* the music is physical, a “boisterous devotion to the sun” (CP 70):

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

Of a green evening, clear and warm,
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders watching, felt

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

(CP 89-90)

The terrible pun on “basses” hides a musical joke (they are double basses): a Hosanna would sound dreadful played pizzicato. The music, in *Harmonium*, is physical play. So is the poetry and so is the love.

But the “here” of “Is the function of the poet here mere sound” (CP 144) is Havana. And the rhyme “here mere” is disconcertingly flat. “Academic Discourse at Havana” is not in *Harmonium*: with *Ideas of Order*, Stevens leaves the bellows of *Harmonium* behind. By “Mozart, 1935” music is more than “its hoo-hoo-hoo, / Its shoo-shoo-shoo, its ric-a-nic, / Its envious cachinnation” (CP 131). The actual sounds of music are left to Mozart, and, in “Anglais Mort à Florence,” to Brahms. Some other poet is seated at the piano (“Be seated, thou”): Stevens is not interested in music as such but in music as the vehicle for the poetic imagination. “The prologues are over” (CP 250) in “Asides on the Oboe”; our revels now have ended; music is now the medium for Stevens’ philosophy of poetry. “And things are as I think they are / And say they are on the blue guitar” (CP 180); in “Of Modern Poetry” the poet plays the same instrument:

The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly
Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,
Beyond which it has no will to rise.

(CP 240)

These “sudden rightnesses” are the accidental harmonies, the “ghostlier demarcations” (CP 130), of the woman’s song along the Florida shore. Imagination is an ordering force: “imagination is the power that enables us to perceive the normal in the abnormal, the opposite of chaos in chaos”

(NA 153). Music is its metaphor; the music of the imagination fixes poles, arranges the night, invests the world with meaning.

There is a suggestion, even in "The Idea of Order at Key West," that we must go further than this. It is only an "idea" of order at Key West, which implies detachment, a "rage for order," which implies frustration. Order cannot be imposed; there was always something false about that jar. It must be discovered, as we discover in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

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.

(CP 403-04)

Stevens here moves beyond the imagination to a more difficult rigor, to the discovery of an untransformed reality:

But 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 sun, the moon, and the sea: the imagination, for all its "miracle of logic" (NA 154), cannot create, cannot transform what was before the dawn of transformation. Unreasoning is required, and serendipity. "The Sail of Ulysses" makes this clear, celebrating "The joy of meaning in design / Wrenched out of chaos" (OP 127), and then rejecting that jarring imposition of order for

A life lighter than this present splendor,
Brighter, perfected and distant away,
Not to be reached but to be known,
Not an attainment of the will
But something illogically received,

A divination, a letting down
From loftiness, misgivings dazzlingly
Resolved in dazzling discovery.

(OP 128)

Once again, music is Stevens' metaphor for this illogical, dazzling discovery. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens distinguishes most clearly between imposition and discovery, between understanding and unreasoning.

To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
And so, as part, to exult with its great throat,

To speak of joy and to sing of it, borne on
The shoulders of joyous men, to feel the heart
That is the common, the bravest fundament,

This is a facile exercise. Jerome
Begot the tubas and the fire-wind strings,
The golden fingers picking dark-blue air:

For companies of voices moving there,
To find of sound the bleakest ancestor,
To find of light a music issuing

Whereon it falls in more than sensual mode.

(CP 398)

The punctual jubilas, made facile by the rising sun and the clearing sea, recall the impossible pizzicati of Hosannas of the watching elders. The Canon Aspirin indulges in an equally facile musical exercise:

The Canon Aspirin, having said these things,
Reflected, humming an outline of a fugue

Of praise, a conjugation done by choirs.

(CP 402)

The Canon Aspirin offers no relief; his outline of a fugue is another empty structure. The choirs' conjugation is an achieved balance, a forced union, an imposition of order. Behind the common music of praise lies its bleak ancestor, begotten not made, a music that "falls in more than sensual mode." And behind this there is the discovery of the music of an absolute fiction, the angel of reality:

To find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute—Angel,
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear
The luminous melody of proper sound.

(CP 404)

The angel “Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory” (CP 404); the Canon Aspirin can only offer “an outline of a fugue.”

There are three kinds of music in Stevens, each with its own condition: the music of the body (“*It Must Give Pleasure*”), of the mind (“*It Must Be Abstract*”), and of the spirit (“*It Must Change*”). The music is first physical, as it was for Peter Quince:

And a familiar music of the machine
Sets up its Schwärmerei, not balances
That we achieve but balances that happen,

As a man and woman meet and love forthwith.
Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist.

(CP 386)

Second, it is mental, in the abstracted harmony of “balances that happen.” And third, there is a hint, in these moments of awakening, of a deeper, more spiritual music. Music not only pleases, not only reconciles, it has the power to change:

Two things of opposite natures seem to depend
On one another, as a man depends
On a woman, day on night, the imagined

On the real. This is the origin of change.
Winter and spring, cold copulars, embrace
And forth the particulars of rapture come.

Music falls on the silence like a sense,
A passion that we feel, not understand.

(CP 392)

The distant echo of Peter Quince’s “Music is feeling, then, not sound” reminds the listener how much Stevens himself has changed. Through music, Stevens has moved beyond the idea of order, beyond Plantagenet abstraction, beyond the synthetic imagination, to the abysmal glory of the angel, to the inhuman cry of the sibyl of truth.

But the sibyl of "The Sail of Ulysses" is herself a metaphor, as is the angel of reality. Stevens' poetry cannot and does not wish to escape metaphor; his images of untransformed reality are themselves transformed. The two pears are seen precisely as the observer wills, for all the poem's protestations to the contrary; Mrs. Pappadopoulos, with curving hip and eyes dripping blue, is a projection right from the start. The imagined depends upon the real, and *vice versa*: this is the double edge of the origin of change. Reality is, precisely and impossibly, "The fiction of an absolute." Look again at the rising sun, the moon hanging on the wall:

As when the sun comes rising, when the sea
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall
Of heaven-haven.

The sun doesn't rise, the moon doesn't hang. "Heaven-haven" is a direct quote.⁴ "Let's see the very thing and nothing else," is the cry of "Credences of Summer":

Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
Burn everything not part of it to ash.
Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
Without evasion by a single metaphor.
(CP 373)

But the perceiver is always implicated in what is seen.

Later in "Credences of Summer," singing before another metaphor, the singers must avert their eyes:

It was difficult to sing in face
Of the object. The singers had to avert themselves
Or else avert the object.
(CP 376)

The very thing cannot be seen, but it can be sung to, and it can be heard. Just be heard: as Eliot moved from a Shakespearian Rag to the stillness of a violin, so Stevens' songs diminuendo over time. The voices of the children hidden in Eliot's apple-tree are

Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.⁵

Eliot's children are heard but not seen; we have no idea what the singer at Key West looks like. It is her song that matters. Both Stevens and Eliot leave the hurdy-gurdy and the honky-tonk behind, for a music without instruments, and nearly without sound. In Stevens we cannot look for the

meaning of music, nor can we even know it, we can only hear, half-hear it. "One feels that one is listening to a thought-tormented music,"⁶ as Gabriel Conroy almost says on another occasion, thinking of another poet. On that other occasion, the thought-tormented music of "The Lass of Aughrim" brings first Gretta and then Gabriel to

moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep . . .

This may be the purpose of music in Stevens, as it certainly is in Eliot, and in Joyce.

Literature constantly aspires to the condition of music; this is as true after Pater as before him. Music is modernism's metaphor, from the distant music of "The Dead" to the stillness of the *Quartets'* violin, from the goblins and elephants of *Howards End* to the final fugue of *Between the Acts*. This is not to say that the modernists were musicians; there is no fugue according to any rule in "Sirens," no Bartok's fourth in *Four Quartets*.⁷ Musicologists are looking in the wrong direction: music can never provide literature a structure. What Vincent Sherry has called the "musical fallacy"⁸ resounds in most attempts to examine the cross-relations of literature and music. "Words move, music moves / Only in time"⁹—but music moves faster. As the late Leonard Bernstein has said, "An F-sharp doesn't have to be considered in the mind; it is a direct hit."¹⁰ A word is blocked by the chaff of its meaning, the uncertain contingency of language smothers the sound. Jacqueline Brogan has written of Stevens' attempts to escape this "linguistic mutability" through Dante, and through Christ.¹¹ Stevens also escapes the necessary clutter of language through music. Music has its own conditions, its own contingencies; but Stevens and the modernists are not concerned with the very core. Music, for the modernists, is both tenor and vehicle. When music is the vehicle, in *Ideas of Order* and beyond, it carries the freight of Stevens' changing philosophy of poetry. When music is the tenor, in *Harmonium*, when music is the primary purpose of the poetry, then the greatest and most certain function of the poet here is in fact mere sound.

The Ohio State University

Notes

¹This is also Yeats's sense, in "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world." Robert Spoo has pointed out, in a graduate seminar given by A. Walton Litz in 1983, that Yeats's phrase comes from the Introductory Notice of De Quincey's *Suspiria de Profundis*: "Mere anarchy and confusion of mind fell upon me."

²Wallace Stevens, "Of Mere Being," *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989), 141, hereinafter referred to in the text as *OP*. References to Stevens'

Collected Poems (New York: Knopf, 1954), will be cited in the text as *CP*; and to *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1951), as *NA*.

³For more on Quince's keyboard, and for more particular study of Stevens' close associations with classical music, see Kinereth Meyer and Sharon Baris, "Reading the Score of 'Peter Quince at the Clavier': Stevens, Music, and the Visual Arts," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12 (Spring 1988): 56-67, and Michael Stegman's counterpoint to that article, "Variations on a Theme in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier,'" *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 13 (Spring 1989): 3-14.

⁴From Hopkins, "Heaven-Haven" (1918).

⁵T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 59.

⁶James Joyce, "The Dead," *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 192.

⁷The fugue is a distraction, despite the protestations of Heath Lees ("The Introduction to 'Sirens' and the *Fuga per Canonem*," *James Joyce Quarterly* 22 [Fall 1984]: 39-54), and others, who persist in taking Joyce too seriously. "The eight regular parts of a *fuga per canonem*" simply cannot be said to underscore the episode. Mildred Boaz has compared "The Golden Sections" in Bartok's fourth and fifth string quartets with moments of "tense asymmetry" in *Four Quartets* ("Aesthetic Alliances in Poetry and Music," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 13 [1979]: 31-49); others hear Beethoven, or Mahler. It remains to be seen whether it is possible to write about the links between music and literature clearly and sensibly.

⁸From Vincent Sherry's unpublished book manuscript, *State of the Art: Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Musical Politics*.

⁹T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*, 19.

¹⁰Leonard Bernstein, 1958 telecast, quoted in "An Affair to Remember," *Newsweek* 29 (October 1990): 80.

¹¹Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, "It Must Be Re-newed: Dante's *Comedy* and Stevens' 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,'" *Lectura Dantis* 7 (Fall 1990): 122.

Introduction

ELEANOR COOK

THE TERM "MIMESIS," that is, "imitation," has had two different meanings since at least the time of Plato in its Greek and then in its English forms. The first is imitation or representation as miming, as acting out. The second is imitation or representation as depiction, as talking about.¹ The subject of prosody pulls perforce toward mimesis in the first sense, that of acting out or miming. I say "pulls toward" because I am being a little evasive: the categories are more complicated than this. (See W. K. Wimsatt's 1976 essay, building on the work of the great linguist Roman Jakobson.²) Still, the general twofold meaning of mimesis holds, as does the loose parallel of the twofold nature of poetry, its sound and its sense. W. H. Auden "constantly returned to the double nature of poetry," as Seamus Heaney writes. "On the one hand, poetry could be regarded as magical incantation, fundamentally a matter of sound and the power of sound to bind our minds' and bodies' apprehensions within an acoustic complex; on the other hand, poetry is a matter of making wise and true meanings, of commanding our emotional assent by the intelligent disposition and inquisition of human experience."³

Forms of sonal miming are highly conventional and they are learned. Nonetheless they sometimes seem to have a vitality and priority that the second kind of mimesis, depiction, does not. They seem to bring us closer to the non-verbal orders of things. Deconstruction reminded us of some functions of this miming sense of mimesis. More precisely, it reminded us of the pull between the two senses of mimesis, or the area between, the borderline between, the play and war between—in short, the metaphors governing our very ideas of betweenness.⁴ Deconstruction tends to cut and hold apart the two senses of mimesis. Yet they cannot be read apart. In poetics today, for all the influence of deconstruction (perhaps partly because of it), we are in little danger of reading poetic sound apart from sense. The problem is rather how to hear or read sound at all. How many of our students could identify any example of what Marianne Moore calls a "metrical barbarism"?⁵

Two discussions of meter frame the whole subject of Stevens and prosody, as shaped by Jacqueline Brogan. The essays by Diane Wakoski and Dennis Taylor may be read in conjunction but they also stand happily as gods of Terminus. Wakoski's is an essay of beginnings and growth and vitality, an apt guide. Taylor ends with a sense of Stevens' haunting and elusive mastery. This repetition, with difference, of essays on the subject of metrics is particularly appropriate because so much of this issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* revolves around questions of repetition and of breaking. (The miming sense of mimesis, we surmise, likes to work with

repetition, in various meanings of the word.) This is true not only of Wakoski's and Taylor's essays but also of Nancy Hoffman's on caesura (the breaking of repeated rhythmic effects), Anca Rosu's on polarities of thinking about sounds (including repeated sounds like refrains), and Mary Doyle Springer's on the difficult concept of repetition itself. Margaret Dickie and Alison Rieke work more with questions of breaking, whether in Dickie's paradoxes of continuity and discontinuity in "preverbal" language, or in Rieke's axis of familiarity through to strangeness in "foreign" words. In what follows, I want to highlight some arguments, raise a few queries, and note useful directions for future work.

Perhaps all discussions of meter nowadays should start, fortissimo, with the following ground rule. If it is all too evident to us, it is not evident to our students any more than it is to the editor of the *New Criterion*. There is good metrical verse and there is bad metrical verse, just as there is good non-metrical (i.e., free) verse and bad non-metrical verse. There is nothing virtuous in writing either metrical or free verse. And the word "traditional" is not a pejorative term per se.

Diane Wakoski's admiration for Stevens' work is well known, for example, her admiration for "Peter Quince at the Clavier." She reminds us that traditional forms, such as the iambic pentameter line or the sonnet, can indeed be a "prison" for some writers. It all depends on one's muse. And she makes clear the intense demands of writing good free verse. Her account of how the sonnet bound her, until her own right form of sound came to her, is both acute and moving. It also shows that her shift away from the sonnet was earned and not casually assumed. Part of that earning was acquiring a knowledge of blank verse, including knowledge of its long history and its masters.

Wakoski links a lyric gift to metrical poetry, an intriguing thought. How does this work for Stevens? His singing voice sometimes recalls, yet also plays with and against, traditional metrical forms. Do we hear snatches, broken refrains, for the most part? Do not some of his free-verse poems sing? Or is their "music" different in kind? Stevens mistrusted euphony (see the "bawds of euphony" in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"⁶), just as he mistrusted birdsong for most (not all) of his life. He could be sardonic about some singers—sonneteers, for instance, as in the "Maya sonneteers" ("The Comedian as the Letter C" II) or the "Mexican sonneteers" with their "fourteen laboring mules" or sonnet-lines ("From the Journal of Crispin"). Wakoski knows whereof he speaks, as we surmise from her vivid account of her own early experiments with sonnets.

Wakoski's own sensitive ear attunes our own and thereby teaches us. We hear, for example, how Stevens can shift his metrical base, as in "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu," where he starts with a strong dactylic rhythm, which becomes quite impossible by the seventh line. Or we hear how a line of regular iambic pentameter will sound out with force because it has

been deferred (for example, the fifth line of “Sunday Morning,” “The holy hush of ancient sacrifice” [CP 67]). Or, hearing Wakoski’s remarks about how Shakespeare set her up to fall in love with Stevens, we understand better Marianne Moore’s praise of him. “Not infrequently Wallace Stevens’ ‘noble accents and lucid, inescapable rhythms’ point to the universal parent, Shakespeare. A novice of texts, if required to name author or century of the line, ‘These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell,’ might pay Wallace Stevens a high compliment.”⁷

Wakoski’s closing paragraph catches, with precision and economy, the play of an invisible or ghostly or variation form in, on, or about a traditional metrical line. (See also Dennis Taylor.) She rightly says that Stevens’ “invisible structures include the presumption of blank verse, as we know it through Western tradition,” a sentence our students might memorize. I’ve been aware for some time of Stevens’ ability to sum up in one phrase an entire history of one trope, or a whole series of allusions. This same ability in his rhythmical work is well worth thinking over. Such summing up links one writer to another in a crucial form of repetition, with the older writer teaching, speaking to, singing to the younger, who will repeat, with a difference. Even where writers move away from certain forms, they need to know very well what they are moving away from. Stevens certainly did.

Nancy Hoffman’s essay works with the unit of the line, and the effects therein of caesura. She takes us back to Latin practice, as systematized—catechized, even—in grammars and rhetorical handbooks. It’s a useful overview, for the ancient sense of rules is so entirely different from our current atmosphere as to be breathtaking. Even in earlier English writing, the degree of regulatory firmness seems less, for rules have always been more flexibly applied in English, whether from the pragmatic disposition of the English people (as they like to say) or the mix that makes up the English language. It would be worth considering differences in the classical and English uses of caesura as well as similarities.

Hoffman’s interest is in the naming of kinds; space does not permit her to expand on degree rather than kind, or very far on the way that kinds and degrees function. Here, a scale of effects might be useful, together with some account of the fictive force of these caesural schemes. (On the fictive force of schemes, see some of the essays in John Hollander’s *Melodious Guile* or in Christopher Ricks’s *The Force of Poetry*.) Then too, one is curious about the difference between caesura marked by punctuation (the usual signal) and “caesura” not so marked. And one wants some control experiments: are there examples of “as if”⁸ that are not marked by caesura, and, if not, what can we claim? Incidentally, I am always a little hesitant to judge any very good poet, working in his or her prime, to have “less than masterful [masterly?] skill” in some technique. (On the case against “galliard,” for example, shouldn’t one look at something like “Pavan and Galliard” in the *Oxford Companion to Music* [ed. Scholes], with its remarks

about duple and triple rhythm? Or consider Amy Clampitt: “the rails sing dimeter / shifting to trimeter, a galopade to a galliard” [“Losing Track of Language,” from *What the Light Was Like*]? Is “galliard” simply disyllabic?)

Hoffman’s system of classifying yields fine results when it calls to our attention some rhythmic habit of Stevens’ poetry. Her remarks on “flanking” caesuras, as on caesuras centering prepositional phrases in the heart of the line, bring with them the delight of recognition. Similarly, listening for the caesuras in “Autumn Refrain” causes us to hear sounds in Stevens’ very “stillness.” In “the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air / I have never—shall never hear” (CP 160), the dash makes us want to supply the missing word “heard” (perhaps with its rhyming “bird”) and also to supply some unheard melody after “hear,” and against all sense and reason, so yearning is that double negative, broken by those caesuras. Similarly elsewhere, for it is function that matters and not simply naming, or rather the function that naming helps us to see. “Not to be realized because not to / Be seen” (CP 385): Hoffman’s naming of kinds of caesura helps us to see, to hear, and to realize.

Margaret Dickie is interested in the axis that runs from “preverbal” sounds to the “highly crafted” and “well-modulated language of Stevens’ poetry.” She usefully reminds us of connections and continuities where our sense of discontinuity (J. Hillis Miller’s term) or of division or merely of contrast may cause us to ignore the force of existing links. As so often, it is hazardous to use an either/or alternative when reading Stevens, and Dickie catches very nicely the paradoxes of continuity and discontinuity. Her terms remind us that Stevens’ lapses are themselves crafty if not positively crafted, as in his lines about the “word in the mind that sticks at artichoke / And remains inarticulate” (“Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” OP 78). We still need to muse over definitions of “nonsense” and “preverbal,” whose very difficulty of definition points toward a genuine problem area.

Dickie has taken us some way toward such defining, through her reading of “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” to my mind the finest reading we have of the form of that poem. I find the disaffected flagellants a shade funnier than she does, but agree that the force of Stevens’ “tink-tank-tunk” line is nothing like the force of his “hoobla-how-hoo” lines written twenty years later. His ability in handling such effects is extraordinary. Context can change all. A mandolin can apparently go “tink-tink” (though not “tunk”). Here is Stevens, age fifteen, writing home about his brother and a damsel called Rosalie: “while they together bask Buck’s kaleidoscopic feelings have inspired the keen, splattering, tink-a-tink-tink-tink-tink-a-a-a that are gamboling off the hackneyed strings of his quivering mandolin” (L 6, 4 August 1895). Fifty-four years later, “tink-tonk” is watery, and such is the force of Stevens’ lines that I hear “tink-tonk” as water dripping, even outside Stevens’ context: “the ramshackle spout in

which / The rain falls with a ramshackle sound . . . The tink-tonk / Of the rain in the spout" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," xiv, *CP* 475). We might hear the "jovial hullabaloo" (*CP* 59) of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" metamorphosed some twenty years later into the schematic echoing of "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" (*CP* 383). Stevens shows something of his power to sum up over a whole history of troping—of Whitman's moon, bird and sea, as Dickie says, and also of moon, bird and sea from incantatory poems from time immemorial. Dickie argues for oververbalization as belatedness in Stevens' hooing lines, agreeing with the critical position which says it matters a great deal that *we* say these things.

Her sentence, "Tone is all here," is one of the first importance. For she is right that, in order to make judgments about "preverbal" sound (and many another matter), we move into the area of tone or decorum or what James Merrill wonderfully calls manners⁹—a difficult yet essential area of judgment.

Alison Rieke, considering the "sound of the foreign," works on a scale of familiarity through to strangeness. Some words, "turquoise" for instance, are so fully assimilated into the English language that their ancestry may surprise us. But why do I say *some* words, when surely I ought to say most words. The notion of a racially pure English language is foolish. As any competent poet knows, and Rieke reminds us, the history of language is a changing family history of assimilating so-called foreign words, to a greater or lesser degree, or else rejecting them. English is a remarkably assimilating language, and every judgment a poet makes will take into account the kinds and degrees of consanguinity or of strangeness. What matters in a given poem is, as Rieke says, "the poetic setting [which the poet] establishes as normative." Of Stevens' delight in the life of foreign words, there is no doubt. Here he is, in 1953, on his pleasure in reading issues of *Le Figaro*: "I spend a long time dawdling over the fascinating phrases which refresh me as nothing else could" (*L* 773, 2 April 1953).

The actuality of Stevens' foreign settings is an intricate matter, involving paradoxes of first-hand and second-hand impressions, questions of possible sources (as against allusions and echoes), and so on. Among the paradoxes of first-hand and second-hand is the fact that an actual traveller can have a second-hand sense of the foreign if he or she sees only through stereotypes. The matter of possible sources requires a distinction between actual verbal allusiveness and a source. A source is something definitely or possibly read, which lies in the background somewhere, or may even be the spring whence begins a poet's stream or mighty river. But unless the source is verbally echoed or alluded to or quoted, it does not function in the area of allusiveness. It remains separated from the text as allusion does not. In Rieke's example, I hear Leigh Hunt as possible source rather than as allusion. (For example, the conjunction of stars and fireflies, which

may originate in a wonderful passage in Pliny, is common enough to form a poetic topos. Use of a topos is different in kind from use of a specific verbal allusion.)

I find "Puella Parvula" rather more frightening than Rieke does. It makes me stand back a bit and avert my eyes, for the vatic and ceremonious Stevens is juxtaposed there with the Stevens who suffers, the Stevens of whom we seldom catch a glimpse. How else to read what is a fearful line in the context of this poem: "Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch" (CP 456). The dauntless master who commands this apocalyptic poem and dissolves the world in biblical language appears to require a corresponding inner force as if the heart's own rock were being sundered into the pillars of Hercules (one of which is Gibraltar), the *ne plus ultra*, and then dissolved. The "puella parvula," the very small girl or perhaps beloved (Catullus calls Lesbia his "puella"): who is she that she can provoke so fierce a reaction?

What stays with me from Rieke's essay are two questions, one lateral and one central. The lateral question has to do with monosyllables. Rieke does not fall into the trap of saying that monosyllables are necessarily monotonous, but I should want to add a footnote to her remarks on monosyllabic monotony. The footnote would consist of quotations, say, of: "Never again would birds' song be the same. / And to do that to birds was why she came." Or: "God guard me from those thoughts men think / In the mind alone." Or: "Break, break, break, On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!"¹⁰ But then, I go on to search my memory for similar well-known lines in Stevens, without much success. ("The Snow Man"? Maybe.) So that a question remains: how far does Stevens like to work with a full scale of monosyllabic effects?

The second question has to do with the word "sound" itself. Rieke, like other writers in this issue, draws our attention to the word "sound" in Stevens' work. Stevens liked the word, to judge from its placing in the line and its grammatical and logical prominence. We might note among other things, its variety of meaning in his work ("The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"; "sound" as a depicter, a pointer, "in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves, / Which is the sound of the land" (CP 10); and so on). One could make a catalogue. There are other questions too. For example, how far and why is Wimsatt right that "any name of a sound we can think of in our own language will strike us with a degree of onomatopoeic force"?¹¹ Rieke works chiefly with mimesis as depiction but repeatedly suggests interesting questions about mimesis as miming.

Anca Rosu is quite right to remind us of the various axes of our discussions, including "traditional oppositions between sound and sense." (It's useful to distinguish, in such discussions, between opposites and contraries, as in Fowler's definitions.¹²) Of the contraries she mentions, easily the most important is that of natural versus artificial, because it guards against

a sloppy literal use of the term “music” with reference to words. The question of how often Stevens’ poetry “operates to dissolve or discredit all such traditional oppositions” would need to consider the case of Alexander Pope and other such writers.

Rosu has chosen a superb textbook example for reflecting on sound, Stevens’ “Autumn Refrain.” It begins, as she says, by sounding like outright parody. (Parody is also part of the sonnet tradition—see Coleridge’s Nehemiah Higginbottom sonnets—a tradition remarkably wide and flexible to this day, so that we want to distinguish what conventions Stevens is subverting.) And we could add to the traditions here that of the evening poem—the tradition going back to Sappho, and dominated in English poetry by Milton’s “Il Penseroso,” Gray’s “Elegy in a Country Churchyard,” Keats’s “To Autumn,” the opening of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and the closing of Stevens’ “Sunday Morning.” In this context, Stevens’ noise, cut suddenly to pianissimo, is parodic indeed. The “skr-” and “gr-” combination here is an old one, most immediately from Milton’s line, “Grate on their scannel pipes of wretched straw,” used also by Browning (a “sword’s griding screech,” *Sordello* l.67), and used very skillfully by Stevens because the consonants of the word “grackles” reverse the s-k-r sequence, only interposing one “l.” A fuller consideration would want to look at questions of silence raised by other critics. And the function of allusive hearing. And the fact that Stevens uses the word “stillness” and not “silence.”

One very interesting question in Rosu’s essay is the question of repetition, including refrain. Stevens is a master of the broken refrain (and a refrain etymologically means “broken”), the partial refrain, the scattered refrain, the refrain irregularly placed so that it breaks in on us unexpectedly, sometimes so quietly that we hear it more in its going than, in the usual way, by anticipation. We might extend Rosu’s remarks on the sound patterns produced by repetition, as for example, patterns of words or their cognates at short intervals, zig-zagging down the page. This zig-zag effect is something that A. R. Ammons has observed about sound in another context,¹³ and it would repay study. In “Six Significant Landscapes,” VI, “Rationalists, wearing square hats, / Think, in square rooms . . .” A stanza is literally a room in Italian, and many a poem plays on this fact. A square room of a stanza would logically be four by four, I suppose—a tetrameter quatrain. But this little room of a stanza curves on its right-hand side like an ellipse. (“If they tried rhomboids, / Cones, waving lines, ellipses” [*CP* 75].) And if we want an aural equivalent to this visual room, couldn’t we choose Stevens’ own internal repetitions and rhymes, zig-zagging or snaking or jumping their way through the rectangular shapes of stanzas? Following Rosu’s lead, we might work these out.

Mary Doyle Springer draws together differing perspectives on the huge subject of repetition. Context is all in such a discussion: what context, what

examples, in any given assertion? Are we thinking about repetition in metaphysics, in human generation, in individual experience, in personal or communal memory, in the conventions of an art, in poetic tropes and schemes? In all or some of these? C. S. Lewis's rule of thumb about that hydra-headed word "nature" is useful here. In order to help define any use of such a word, one asks: what, in any given context, is the implied opposite? Kierkegaard's concept of repetition is religious as he says in his *Journal*: "Repetition is and remains a religious category."¹⁴ Northrop Frye commented on it a generation ago, in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, locating Kierkegaard's meaning through its implied opposite. "Kierkegaard has written a fascinating little book called *Repetition*, in which he proposes to use this term to replace the more traditional Platonic term anamnesis or recollection. By it he apparently means, not the simple repeating of an experience, but the recreating of it which redeems or awakens it to life, the end of the process, he says, being the apocalyptic promise: 'Behold, I make all things new.'"¹⁵ The religious context is yet another to add to Springer's various implicit and explicit contexts.

Discussions of repetition often appear to repeat paradoxes inherent in the philosophical problem of identity. We desire intensely some forms of repetition. (We want our children to be born normal members of the human race.) And we abhor other forms of repetition. (We would not want our children to be born clones.) The tensions between sameness and difference are familiar to us all. And some of the debates between a closed-circle sameness and a spiral (or whatever metaphor) difference sound curiously like the old classical-versus-romantic debates. Yet decisions about our personal and collective identities can turn on such metaphors. Good art makes all this clearer, if we pay attention, as for example to some of Stevens' own poems about metaphor.

Springer has provocatively juxtaposed a variety of claims for and against repetition, in different senses of the word. These include some recent feminist writing as well as Kierkegaard's *Repetition*. And she has gathered together a fine set of examples of repetition from Stevens' work. Stevens is a true master of repetition. (One of my own favorite examples is "the oscillations of planetary pass-pass" [CP 425] from "This Solitude of Cataracts.") I am fonder than Springer of those bass in "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors," who are too wily to be caught by the adjectives "stupid" and "narrow-minded" (I think). And, like Stevens, I am fond of many of the "old rhyming poets," so that I want to hear names named. Who exactly is "repetitive in the old sense that amounts to repetitiousness"? The conjunction of "old" (repeated, and how can repetition not be significant in this essay?) with "rhyming" and with "repetitiousness" suggests a charge without substantiating it. Yet is not repetitiousness simply a mark of bad art, old or new, rhymed or unrhymed? Marianne Moore thought so when she praised Stevens' command

of "reiteration," "that pitfall of half-poets."¹⁶ Springer catches very nicely the paradoxes of repetition when she writes about the new arising "out of reconsideration, a circling backward and forward from the past."

Mimesis or imitation, in either of its meanings, is a matter of repetition. And so for all the arts, including the art of writing an academic article. (We repeat certain conventions, work in certain recognizable genres, but tenure committees also require so-called original work.) Springer reminds us that we sometimes need to step back and consider repetition with the widest possible sweep.

Dennis Taylor makes a very interesting and potentially fruitful suggestion when he talks of "the appearance of the sonnet without its aural substance" in connection with stanza 1 of "Sunday Morning." And when he talks of how, in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," "we are given a general sense of the line, which evokes the old iambic pentameter, but is only its modern outer shell" (though I pause over the metaphor of an "outer shell"). What might be called "ghost" rhythms in Stevens' work form a fascinating subject, treated by both Taylor and Wakoski. Stevens sometimes appears to play with a whole spectrum of spectral effects, so to speak. His rhyming also works along a spectrum in some poems, moving from true rhyme through to the most attenuated off-rhyme.

A somewhat different account of the shape of Stevens' metrical development might go as follows. Stevens' pre-1915 verses are bad metrical verse, or at least undistinguished and sometimes tedious metrical verse. In his good poetry from 1915 on, Stevens does a great deal of work in free verse, for example, in many of the short poems in *Harmonium*. (The longer poems build on the base of a pentameter line.) Taylor very helpfully reminds us of Eliot's astute remark about *vers libre*: that it works best when recalling a set form, all the while withdrawing from or else approximating to the form, like a ghost lurking behind the arras. Stevens' shorter *Harmonium* poems do seem to work this way. But in his later work, particularly in the longer sequences of the forties, I think Stevens returns to work with traditional verse, stretching it, making it show yet more possibilities. He accepts the extraordinary challenge of working with a pentameter line in the twentieth century. He himself said: "My line is a pentameter line, but it runs over and under now and then" (L 407, 19 May 1942). Here is just the place to investigate further Taylor's fine suggestion about a ghostly rhythm playing in, on, or about the ground bass of the pentameter line.

The intriguing aural-visual argument about free verse still needs to tackle one question. Bad free verse is marked by a crude cutting of the line, as if one could make free verse by taking a knife anywhere, anyhow, to a piece of prose. Not so. And is it not primarily the ear that decides on the cadence, the rhythm, the organizing principle of the line in free verse? For there must be an organizing principle, but it is not set, which is why good free verse is immensely hard to write. We might also add a footnote to

remarks about a “transition” from “traditional” to free verse, as follows: that the seventeenth century was also the great century of blank verse (Shakespeare and Milton). And that the stanzaic sense of the poem is not lost during the eighteenth-century heyday of the couplet. And is it not true that many (most?) excellent twentieth-century poets work in both metrical and non-metrical forms? Such a “transition” needs to be described in a way that accommodates Auden and Lowell and Bishop and Larkin and Heaney and Merrill and Hill and Harrison and Howard and Hollander and Clampitt and, and.

In 1919, Hart Crane wrote in a letter: “Have you given the poems of Wallace Stevens in the October *Poetry* any attention? There is a man whose work makes most of the rest of us quail. His technical subtleties alone provide a great amount of interest. Note the novel rhyme and rhythm effects.”¹⁷ It seems especially important at this moment of our critical lives to understand that word “technical” in its fullest sense, to be as fully responsible to its demands as any good artist is. Otherwise we lose the life of forms, and thereby something of ourselves. Prosody is one such form.

All these essays help us read back and forth between the two meanings of mimesis, as does good poetry by its double nature. It shuns metrical barbarisms, it tests the fictive force of its schemes, it desires manners appropriate to its actions, it knows the family of words as we know people. It tries to prevent an either/or reading of its own double self. These essays also avoid the either/or model that is so often ruinous to a good reading of Stevens. (As he himself said, “The law of contrast is crude [L 445, 29 March 1943].) They are interested in mapping what Stevens wonderfully and rightly called “accurate songs” (“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” *CP* 388). We all too often separate notions of accuracy from notions of song: either a Gradgrind accuracy of mimetic depiction or a tink-a-tunk trivializing of mimetic action. Stevens knew better, and we are slowly learning. There is much in this collection to help us on our way.

University of Toronto

Notes

¹“Plato uses the Greek word *mimeisthai* to mean ‘depict,’ although its ordinary meaning was ‘mimic’ or ‘enact’” (Francis Sparshott, *The Theory of the Arts* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982], 540, n 51).

²“In Search of Verbal Mimesis,” in his *Day of the Leopards: Essays in Defense of Poems* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1976), 57-73.

³*The Government of the Tongue* (London, Boston: Faber & Faber, 1988), 109.

⁴See, for example, some of Jacques Derrida’s work, such as “The Double Session,” which works through a reading of Mallarmé’s “Mimique,” in his *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); first published as *Dissémination* (1972), 173-285.

⁵*The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Penguin, 1987), 86 (on Vachel Lindsay).

⁶From *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), whence all other quotations from Stevens, except as follows: "From the Journal of Crispin," ed. Louis Martz, in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Robert Buttell and Frank Doggett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980). Quotations from *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989, rev. ed.) are indicated by *OP* in the text. Quotations from *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966), are indicated by *L* in the text.

⁷*Complete Prose*, 347.

⁸Milton Bates noted six years ago that there is no evidence whatever that Stevens read Vaihinger (*Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1985], 201-02). Perhaps we should agree to modify our wording accordingly.

⁹*Recitative: Prose by James Merrill*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 33.

¹⁰Frost, "Never Again Would Birds' Song Be the Same"; Yeats, "A Prayer for Old Age"; Tennyson, "Break, break, break."

¹¹"In Search of Verbal Mimesis," 65.

¹²As defined by Fowler, opposites are logical and single (black/white, good/evil). Contraries are often plural; green has no logical opposite though we can devise a number of contraries for it. (See H. W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926, 1937], under "contrary, converse, opposite.")

¹³"A Note on Prosody," *Poetry* 102 (1963): 202-03.

¹⁴*The Journals*, ed. and trans. Alexander Dru (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1938), item 474, 130.

¹⁵*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 345.

¹⁶*Complete Prose*, 97.

¹⁷*Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932*, ed. Brom Weber (Berkeley: California University Press, 1965), 25.

A Poet's Odyssey from Shakespearean Sonnets to Stevens' Not-So-Blank Verse

DIANE WAKOSKI

THIS WILL BE A BRIEF essay about the great influence which Wallace Stevens' poetry has had on my own work, and the odyssey in the title refers to the journey that I, Diane Wakoski, have taken, not to one in the life of Stevens. It will be prosody that I address, since I am one of those poets who started traditionally, believing that metrics was what created poetry, and that verse forms were what articulated metrics, so that by the time I had reached college, while I knew there was something called free verse, and at times I had even tried to write it, I am afraid that I was in the dark about its complexities.

I had already discovered for myself the prison of iambic pentameter lines. I wrote more than a hundred sonnets in high school, using my rhyming dictionary, and thumping out the rhythm in my heavy-footed peasant manner. Conceptually, I loved the Petrarchan sonnet, more than the Shakespearean poem. I felt comfortable with that octavian argument, intertwining and repeating itself—*abba abba*—and the cool sestet following it—*cde, cde*. And yes, like most young writers I was thinking of the rhymes more than the rhythms. In fact the rhythms were clunky and ugly to my ear, my foot—and I wrote terrible sonnets.

I liked the Petrarchan form better because it disguised the metrics slightly more. In the Shakespearean sonnet, I couldn't hide my ugly metrics, and more important—the fact that I *wasn't*/that I am *not*, a lyric poet. I hated that rhyming couplet, coming after those ballad-like quatrains. It made me a hippopotamus in a tutu, Gulliver among the Lilliputians, when I crushed out my Shakespearean sonnets. They displayed only my weaknesses as a poet. I was a talker, not a singer; a walker, not a dancer. Yet, I loved Shakespeare's sonnets. They were filled with smooth and sensuous ideas, which wound around the labyrinth of the mind, even if the form seemed so bare and without complexity. At a terrible time in my adolescent life I memorized

When in disgrace with Fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my out-caste state,
And trouble deafe heaven with my bootlesse cries,
And look upon myselfe and curse my fate . . .

thrilling to the way the presentation of the case for love as a rescuer, wound around to the great revelation of truth,

For thy sweet love remembered such welth brings,
That then I skorne to change my state with Kings.

I didn't hate the sound of iambic pentameter. I found myself reading these poems aloud and hearing my own voice with pleasure. But when I tried to write this meter, I thumped along like a cartoon (*huh-huh-huh-huh-huh-huh*). I tried to rescue myself in those days with a giant vocabulary of bookish words. So, that strange repository of knowledge, the rhyming dictionary, offered me words I'd never heard of, or if I knew them, words which would never have occurred to me to use when writing about my own feelings of love. And that was what I looked for in Shakespeare's sonnets. They were great poems of love—as one felt it, deep and usually with lots of trouble. I wanted to be able to write about my own life and feelings like this. The problem was—well, there probably were lots of problems, including the fact that in a way Shakespeare had already written the poems that I wanted to write.

But there was a greater trouble. As I said—and of course I didn't know this yet, how can a young poet know such things?—I wasn't/I am not a lyric poet. That smooth and even rhythm of the iambic pentameter sounded static to me. It imprisoned me, bored me, with its regularity. I didn't have the lyric gift to use it. *It* used, or mis-used, me.

One of the first things I remember learning when a discussion of metrics was taken up in a classroom—perhaps at my high school, or perhaps it wasn't until I got to Berkeley—but it hit me like a buzz saw: Robert Frost saying, “writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net.” It was already fashionable, whenever it was that I heard it, to laugh at this witty saying *but to disagree with it*. Certainly, in my Berkeley days, when *Go*, the oriental board game, was played by many young intellectuals in preference to chess there was a kind of ambiance of feeling about such things, Zen-like perhaps, that *great structures were invisible*. So, it was accepted by all of us, that visible structures were clumsy or gauche, crude, perhaps even stupid. This is when we started, as a culture, calling everything which was highly structured, “fascist.” And I used iambic pentameter like a fascist; I knew that free verse was what I wanted to be writing, but in fact, when I had tried to write it, it was exactly like trying to play tennis without a net. I couldn't tell if my ball was going over or not. In fact, to me, it was more like trying to play tennis without a court, and perhaps even without a partner. I lost track of the ball or what I could do with it after the first serve.

It would be a digression in this paper to say that it was reading a book by Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which taught me instantly what free verse was, what it could be, and gave me its gift. Perhaps because the book was written as prose, not poetry, I was instantly liberated from the presumption of metrics, and because it was a story I was offered the gift of narrative language. But it was/is Stein's music (narrative, prose), the flowing cadences, the repetitions, the use of the prosaic, together with the exotic, which made me listen to *the way* some-

thing was being said, rather than to the message or what was being said. Now, surely, lyric poetry should have done that for me. But it didn't. And not to belabor this digression, let me just say that once hearing the possibilities of poetry created totally outside of metrical conventions, strictures or structures, I began to see the possibilities for invisible patterns to shape poems. (Invisible metrics even, which is what I have thought over the years is what Williams means by the phrase "the new measure" and certainly a way in which one can interpret his even more elusive idea, "the variable foot.")

Maybe it was Shakespeare who set me up to fall in love with Wallace Stevens' poetry the first time I ever heard it. And maybe it was having already been freed by reading Gertrude Stein. Or maybe it was just blood chemistry. But when I first read "Sunday Morning," my instant response was to write my own poem, "Elizabeth and the Golden Oranges" (see Appendix), which was modelled on it as closely as I felt I could model it. I wanted that sound.

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
 Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
 And the green freedom of a cockatoo
 Upon a rug mingle to dissipate . . .

It never occurred to me that this poem was written in blank verse, though that slab of even line-lengths should have looked very similar to my Shakespeare-reading and writing eye. Because even though one can easily scan this poem to show iambs, there is very little of the iambic sound in "Sunday Morning." It is dactyls that you hear.

 ' u u
 Coffee and

 ' u u
 oranges in

 * * *

 ' u u
 freedom of

 * * *

 ' u u
 cockatoo

 * * *

 ' u u
 dissipate

Early in the poem, the sound of these dactyls or double dactyls dominates one's ear. Yes, Stevens usually follows a dactyl with a series of iambs, but

throughout the rest of the poem, early in many of the lines, comes that dominating dactylic sound, like this:

Stilled for| the (pass| ing of| her dream| ing feet) . . .

But that line can also be read as three dactyls and a leftover syllable, instead of one dactyl and a series of iambs. Listen:

Stilled for the| passing of| her dreaming| feet . . .

Another line reads:

Why should| she (give| her boun| ty to| the dead) . . .

Another one:

These are| the (mea| sures des| tined for| her soul) . . .

There are many many such lines in this long poem, of course completed by that famous last line of "Sunday Morning,"

Downward| to (dark| ness, on| extend| ed wings.)

No matter how many iambs there are in a line, it is the dactyls which you hear prominently in this poem.

Perhaps my rebellion against the pure iambic line, which surely happened because I wrote it so badly, made it necessary for me to refuse to see any resemblance in the prosody of Stevens' haunting poem to Shakespeare and blank verse. I remember quarrelling, ten years after I left college, with poet and critic William Jay Smith who matter-of-factly remarked that Stevens wrote in blank verse. "No, he didn't," I charged. And fussed. But my argument with Smith was not purely emotional. For, if "Sunday Morning," with its visually blank verse lines, was the first Stevens poem I encountered and fell in love with, the second one was "The Snow Man." And even if the dominant meter of "Sunday Morning" is a five beat line, despite its dactyls, then even visually one has to admit that "The Snow Man" looks different. It is written in eight syllable, perhaps four beat, lines.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow . . .

Now, you'd have to have the world's weirdest accent or a tin ear to scan those lines as iambic lines. They are not. Listen to this:

One must| have a| mind of| winter . . .

or

One must| have a mind| of win| ter
To regard| the frost| and the boughs
Of the pine-| trees crust| ed with snow . . .

In fact, this poem too uses the dactyl and its opposite three-syllable foot, the anapest, along with trochees and hardly an iamb. One thing is sure, though, if you are looking for five beat or iambic pentameter lines, this poem is not going offer them at all to the reader. This poem is not written in blank verse, no matter how you define the term, other than in its one most meaningless definition—verse which does not rhyme. In the last stanza which contains the wonderful philosophical meditation on being and nothing, the rhetoric is reinforced with Stevens' metrics, in the form of the dactyl. The word "*listener*" is a natural dactyl, if scanned by itself. And while the key word, "*nothing*" is a trochee, Stevens combines that word so that it forms a dactyl in the lines:

(And,)| nothing him| self, beholds
Nothing that| is not| there and the| nothing| that is.

My case was, and still is, that Stevens' poems can only be scanned as if they are written in iambic pentameter (his not-so-blank verse, of my title) when you count the syllables or scan them with your eye, not your ear. All of the Modernist poets were trying to find their own ways of using traditional poetic forms. Marianne Moore found syllabics. Williams' "new measure" was the variable foot and the step-down line, and Stevens more or less kept blank verse, though by the time he was rescuing it for his own use, critics would be quarrelling about the definition of blank verse. Have you ever looked up that term in your various poetry handbooks? Not every definition of blank verse says that it is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Many definitions say that it is unrhymed verse written in five-beat lines. Five beats, not iambic pentameter. And other handbooks simply say that blank verse is just unrhymed verse.

What I have discovered to my own satisfaction in reading and rereading Stevens' work is that his invisible structures include the presumption of blank verse, as we know it through Western tradition, an unrhymed approximation of the iambic pentameter line. But the *presumption* only. An expectation which offers a familiar look to the reader, but in fact allows Stevens to create his own rhythms whether in three, four, or five beat lines, whether iamb, trochee, anapest, or dactyl are emphasized as naturally as if he were a jazz musician. His fake book, we could say, is Shakespeare.

His music, though, has always been my own model for twentieth-century American poetry, Stevens' not-so-blank verse.

Michigan State University

Appendix

Elizabeth and the Golden Oranges

I

In packing boxes of spiders and amber,
under old letters, the stiff smell of folded satin
greet me tonight, in these quiet rooms:
a house dead, one that has never had life.
How proud my parents were of the wedding
pictures, their daughter in straight folds of silk—
if not beautiful, straight and clean: and the groom,
a man, that if they did not like, they had
to admire. How far all that is away.
The ink has turned brown; why do I open
these tall crates? So much unfulfilled time
has elapsed. My own hands are spiders
touching the satin, making webs from the box.

II

Zeno, with his arrows, saying they always
occupied a finite amount of space and proving
their static condition, disallowed progress
or change. He did not believe it. He saw
men live and die, not dying the same size
or in the same condition—baby-fine hair
turned to coarse hanks, milk coming from a cow's
eating grass.

He could not
believe, but wanted to know; arrows do not always reach
their targets. That is all I know. Not why
or how they get from one place to another.
The stiff smell of old satin greets me tonight.

III

Once married. Throw away twisted gold rings.
Cast them to the wind. Let spiders weave webs
about them, to glitter in the sun. Even a good
man would rather have a beautiful woman
than one who is not. She can stare in the mirror—
first lilies of the valley and April snow—

all day long and never turn a hand because
men love women who are beautiful, the bird
that flies out of an orange when you open
it. Who is the bird flying out of the orange
when you open it? There are so many birds.
The arrow does not progress, Zeno says;
but he sees the change in a man's hair.

IV

In packing boxes of spiders and amber,
you will never uncover the bone; the satin
is not stiff with blood but age. The arrow fell short.
There is bitterness in having only one chance
at your mark. Better to have never shot
at all. How often does a spider weave
a web? There is only one bird in every
orange. Leave gold rings at the circus.
Do not uncover the things you regret. My own
hands are spiders, crawling over this satin
handling letters that crackle like bones,
thinking of oranges from Spain
whose flesh is more fragrant than mine ever was.

Copyright © 1962. Reprinted from *Emerald Ice: Selected
Poems 1962-1987* with permission of Black Sparrow Press.

Collections of Sound in Stevens

MARGARET DICKIE

THOSE LAPSES IN WALLACE Stevens' poetry where he drops into mere sound as he does with the Arabian's "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how"¹ of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for example, have often been called nonsense verse. Recently, Eleanor Cook has rejected the term in favor of more careful distinctions: distinguishing nonsense verse from the imitative words "no rou-cou, / No rou-cou-cou" (*CP* 63) she finds in "Depression before Spring" or the onomatopoeia of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" or even parody as in "Unsnack your snood, madanna" (*CP* 349) of "Late Hymn from the Myrrh-Mountain."² Yet, in so skillfully detecting Stevens' word-play, Cook appears to commit herself to the project of making sense out of the poet's nonsense and of directing her inquiry chiefly to the representational quality of words.

In this general approach, she has been anticipated by Irvin Ehrenpreis' commanding survey of Stevens' nonsense which claims that

we may give three general meanings to Stevens' nonsense. It can be the joyous sound of the self when directly in touch with reality, or the poet's laughter as he defies the old morality. But most significantly, it can be the voice of reality or of the natural world producing the spontaneous, adequate music that the poet would like to match.³

Ehrenpreis' emphasis on the pleasure in Stevens' nonsense poetry (its joy, its laughter, even its spontaneity) is an uneasy way of accommodating the nonsense to the sense and cannot fully account for those moments in the poetry when the nonsense seems to turn on the sense of the poem in order to undo it or to express the poet's exasperation with his own imaginative project, moments that Cook has astutely noted.⁴

Here, I seek to direct attention away from what the nonsense lines may represent in order to explore the ways in which Stevens' lapses into pre-verbal strategies work in relation to the carefully articulated language and highly crafted poetry that surround them, as well as to those points when Stevens seems to refer to oververbalized sentiments.⁵ What is the "strange relation" (*CP* 383) between poetry's nonsense and its sense, between sense and overly familiar sentiments that rebound to nonsense? What is the connection between the well-modulated language of Stevens' poetry and his occasional lapses into sound that may be imitative, onomatopoeic, or parodistic, or merely syllables that have a contrastable value?

Helen Vendler makes a stab at that connection when she claims that

Stevens' resolute attempts to make himself into a ribald poet of boisterous devotion to the gaudy, the gusty, and the burly are a direct consequence of a depressing irony in respect to the self he was born with and an equally depressing delusion about the extent to which that self could be changed.⁶

Vendler's identification of a split in Stevens and her sense of the connection between the two sides are astute; but I would like to shift the split in the self from the ribald and the ironic to the preverbal and verbal and consider further how these two forms of expression and perhaps a third—the oververbalized—served Stevens' purposes.

Vendler identifies two stylistic forms of this ribaldry: "the willed and artificial primitivism of poems like 'Earthy Anecdote,' 'Ploughing on Sunday,' and so on, and the verbal mimetic reproduction, persistent only in the *Comedian*, of the actual density of the physical world" (52). Here again, in Vendler's insistence on the representational quality of Stevens' language and on the links between the verbal and the physical world, her argument, like those of Cook and Ehrenpreis, evades the interesting question of the connection between those words that make sense and lapses into, if not nonsense, then preverbal sounds. It is not quite adequate to claim that such sounds enunciate a principle of discontinuity, as J. Hillis Miller has argued because, although they signify a shift in decorum, they can carry along the point developed in the poetry's discursive language.⁷ An examination of the continuity and perhaps discontinuity between what Ehrenpreis has called sense and nonsense, Vendler has called the ironic and the ribald, and what I might call the verbal and the preverbal, will open up an aspect of Stevens' poetry that has been little discussed: the close proximity of its artifice or its careful articulation to both the inarticulate and the overarticulate.

To limit the discussion to the *place* of nonsense within the sense of the poem is not to evade Cook's cautionary comment that "sometimes Stevens' seeming obscurity and nonsense are in fact examples of wit we have not yet come to appreciate, riddles whose sibylline ideas of order we have not yet pieced together," nor to deny the extreme skill with which Cook herself has taught us to appreciate Stevens' wit.⁸ It is, rather, to explore an alternate approach to the poetry and to investigate different uses of its imaginative energy. In this task, two issues are important: the relation of the preverbal phrases to the form of the poem and their relation to the argument of the poem.

First, the form: in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the predominant iambic pentameter line continues in "Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" of the "disaffected flagellants" (*CP* 59). This example has reminded Ehrenpreis, at least, of syncopated jazz rhythms (224). It might

also be what John Hollander has identified as “a fictive version of what a linguist would call *ablaut*, the internal vowel changes in, say, the sequence *ring, rang, rung*.”⁹ It fills out a line, returns the meter to its regular beat, but it also leads into the most irregular line of the poem that itself leads into a comment on the activity of poetry. The whole passage needs to be quoted:

Your disaffected flagellants, well-stuffed,
Smacking their muzzy bellies in parade,
Proud of such novelties of the sublime,
Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk,
May, merely may, madame, whip from themselves
A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres.
This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.
(CP 59)

The declension of *tink, tank, tunk*, may imitate the declension in religious sentiment from the sublime; but the apposition of “such novelties” and “Such tink and tank” suggests that the declension is productive of such other activities that “May, merely may” proliferate in alliterative clusters. The line dramatizes the decline of religion, the rise of poetry; the balancing of *wince* and *wink*, of *will* as certainty and *will* as whimsy.

The generative principle here is contiguity: the “disaffected flagellants” require their opposite, the widows; *wince* calls up *wink*. Such contiguity of ideas about poetry as the supreme fiction and “muzzy bellies in parade” is evident in Stevens’ earliest musings on poetry, as indicated in a series of items arranged by Roman numerals under the heading “Schemata” in an early notebook where “XXXV Poetry supreme fiction” is followed by “XXXVI Sexual promenades.”¹⁰ The flagellants and parade turn up together again in a letter to his wife from Florida where Stevens describes Easter festivities, starting with a parade, and concluding with the comment, “Why a man who wants to roll around on the grass should be asked to dress as magnificently as possible and listen to a choir is inexplicable except from the flaggelant [sic] point of view” (L 193).

Yet, why give the disaffected flagellants the nonsense line? They make greatest sense in Stevens’ scheme of things. Can it be that this poet of fine distinctions cannot imagine how “novelties of the sublime” would be articulated? Or is it some misplaced delicacy that causes him to mask the particulars of the display? What is “muzzy” anyway in relation to “bellies”? Is Stevens displaying delicacy or its opposite, ribaldry? Winding through the poem is a trail of words that might suggest the connection between music, if not poetry, and the ribald: “hankering for hymns,” “bawdiness . . . converted into palms, / Squiggling like saxophones,” “A jovial hullabaloo among the spheres” (CP 59).

Perhaps the contrast between the “tink and tank” of the “disaffected flagellants” and the theorizing of the poet can best be conceived through a connective link, just as the “tone” of the speaker in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” is, if not “high-toned” and echoing the old Christian woman herself, in some way related to her tone. It repeats, as it presumes to parody, the guarded logic of the already made-up mind, sharing certain attributes as well as principles with the old Christian woman. It argues by assertion, by self-evident progression disguised as logical argument, and overcomes any disagreement by false or strained equations, making opposing laws apposite. And yet, the argument depends for its force entirely on the opposition of the Christian woman. The monologue develops only in addressing her, just as the “disaffected flagellants . . . Smacking their muzzy bellies” take on their chief significance only as they “make widows wince.” Without that contrast, their “jovial hullabaloo . . . May, merely may” seem simply pointless self-indulgence. The reductiveness of the argument, its circularity, and the condescending tone of its speaker should put him in the same category to which he relegates the old Christian woman and disqualify the poem from serious consideration were it not for the centrality to Stevens’ poetics of its opening statement: “Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame.”

The interactions between the supreme fiction and this highly artificial dramatic monologue, between the speaker and the high-toned old Christian woman, between his self-satisfaction and the satisfaction of “fictive things,” are intricately knotted in the interaction between the verbal and the preverbal in those lines that move the poem toward conclusion. By filling out the line, by exerting such control, the “tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk” echoes, as it parodies, the old Christian woman’s “moral law” and indicates the inadequacies of its own “novelties of the sublime.”

The “sublime” is never so easily contained nor even so new; it is, in fact, the experience of something that transcends human control and time. It is known to us, in Thomas Weiskel’s three-phase model, when the habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down and not, as here, where the mind asserts its formal control.¹¹ Nor is pride the usual response to the experience of the sublime. These “disaffected flagellants” are, it would appear, fairly affected creatures whose chief source of pleasure is in making “widows wince.” Their “tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk” does not express a sense of being overwhelmed by the sublime; rather it indicates the ease with which they can reduce “novelties of the sublime” to mechanical sounds.¹² Like the old Christian woman of their limited imaginations, they are all too serious in their joviality, too didactic in their frivolity.

They dramatize by caricature the affection of the overarticulate for the inarticulate. Their self-satisfying and thus self-deluding superiority brings the sublime under their control, thereby distancing them from it. Because

there is no lapse in tone between the manipulative language of the framing monologue ("Take the moral law," "take / The opposing law," "Allow, / Therefore") and the rhythmic control of the preverbal lines about the "sublime," the lapse from words with meaning to sounds without referential meaning is narrowed. Tone is all here. "Tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" represents not a preverbal but an oververbalized and so banal response.

These minor men appear not to be equal to their galactic hooting. And yet, Stevens' notebook entries and letters suggest a link between supreme fictions and sexual promenades, between poetry and disaffected flagellants, between highly articulated language and mere sound. He turns often to the preverbal in poems about poetry. A different connection may be seen in "On an Old Horn," the poem that offered Hollander his example of the ablaut in its final line: "Pipperoo, pippera, pipperum . . . The rest is rot" (*CP* 230). Hollander, seeing a storytelling about formal pattern in this poem, concludes that the whole last line is a declensionlike series "which also makes 'rot' follow 'rest' as if an inevitable and declensional form of it" (117).

Again, the connection between the germ of the poem and his interest in his vocation as a poet is there from the very beginning. In another early notebook, "From Pieces of Paper," Stevens writes, "The Poet's Sense of His own Merit," and follows it with "Men as Animals."¹³ In "On an Old Horn," Stevens starts, if not with the ridiculous, then at the opposite end of the spectrum from the sublime when "The bird kept saying that birds had once been men" (*CP* 230). In an extensive commentary on this poem, Stevens himself has said:

Man sees reflections of himself in nature. Suppose we start all over again; we start as birds, say, and see reflections of ourselves in man: perhaps we were men once, or we may even become men. This occasions a toot on the horn. (*L* 403)

He goes on, "As the change progresses and as we begin to think the thoughts of men, there may be survivals of the thinking of our primitive state. This occasions another toot on the horn" (*L* 403). The final toot comes, as Stevens claims:

whether bird or man, one has, after all, only one's own horn on which to toot, one's own synthesis on which to rely; one's own fortitude of spirit is the only "fester Burg"; without that fortitude one lives in chaos. . . . Suppose, now, we try the thing out, let the imagination create chaos by conceiving of it. The stars leave their places and move about aimlessly, like insects on a summer night. Now, a final toot on the horn. That is all that matters. The order of the spirit is the only music of the spheres: or, rather, the only music. (*L* 403)

Thus, the final lines:

If the stars that move together as one, disband,
Flying like insects of fire in a cavern of night,
Pipperoo, pippera, piperum . . . The rest is rot.
(CP 230)

The "tink and tank" of "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman" appeared to be a descent from the sublime, despite its novelties; by contrast, the "Pipperoo" here is the ascent of the spirit from the cavern of night. As formulation, the "tink and tank" is a decline to the preverbal in order to suggest the oververbalized whereas the "Pipperoo" is an imaginative as-saying of the preverbal to suggest the affirmation below the word that still can stand or "say" against the "rot." It is a kind of bird's "hip, hip, hurray," in which "In the little of his voice," he "against / Calamity, proclaimed himself, was proclaimed" (CP 230).

A toot on the horn and tooting one's own horn are perilously close here, another contrastive connection. Stevens comments on this point:

Animals challenge with their voices; birds comfort themselves
with their voices, rely on their voices as chief encourager, etc.
It follows that a lion roaring in a desert and a boy whistling in
the dark are alike, playing old horns: an old horn, perhaps the
oldest horn. (L 404)

Thus, in "On an Old Horn," men identified as "misers counting breaths" are no match for the bird which "from his ruddy belly blew / A trumpet round the trees," or for the bird which "boomed" (CP 230).

This same contrast is evident in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," where "The lion roars at the enraging desert" while the ephube can only "writhe and press / A bitter utterance from [his] writhing, dumb" (CP 384). The poet might take note of the lion, take note from him. So, the idea of the supreme fiction of poetry as mimesis contains two senses: imitation or representation as miming, as acting out, and imitation or representation as depiction, as talking about.¹⁴

Stevens' lifelong interest in this subject has another elaboration in the third canto of the first part of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Once again, in his sense of "the planetary scene" (CP 59) here, Stevens lets his language lapse into sounds, miming what he has been at pains to talk about. He writes:

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)

In "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the drop in decorum from an affected and highly artificial argument to the inarticulateness of mere meter-making sounds accentuated the strain in both voices, drawing them together, even as they pulled against each other; here, the seriousness and sincerity of the speaker in the first part contribute to or donate a kind of sincerity even to the fictional or fictionalizing Arabian and what Stevens calls "his damned hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how." And the final line of the canto indicates the relation between the poet's words and the Arabian's inscription, between candor and "unscrawled fores," between, as Stevens writes to Hi Simons, "the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight" and "unformed handwriting" (L 433), between sense and nonsense.

The "relation" may be "strange," but it is necessary, as Stevens argues in "Adagia" when he writes, "Poetry is not the same thing as the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions" (OP 189). This canto explores such contingencies. Cook claims this "canto is precisely *about* reversals, reversals of white, immaculate teleologies," and she argues, "It is not that such refreshing does not happen. It is that such refreshing may be too easy, and so easily reversed, as Stevens knew."¹⁵ Yet, I would suggest that such reversals indicate the instability of our sense and of ourselves, the proximity of the "immaculate beginning" to the "immaculate end," the congruity of inscription and the "unscrawled" that gives poetry its "pure power" (CP 382-83).

It is, after all, "*we*" who "*say*" the Arabian's words; "*we*" are the authors of the "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how." If the wood-dove "chant[s] his hoobla-hoo," it is we who say he chants it. And if the "grossest iridescence of ocean / Howls hoo," it is we who make that claim also. We choose to say these sounds, even to speculate about what the Arabian, wood-dove, and ocean would sound like if they sounded even remotely like us, and at last to claim that "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation," although we have made only a linguistic relation between the "hoobla-how," "hoobla-hoo," and "hoo" of Arabian, wood-dove, and ocean.

Life's nonsense is not no sense but that sense of "strange relation" when we connect in words or "say" what we no longer wish to fully articulate. The point at which the poem reverts from statement to sound is that moment when the poet's room is invaded by something foreign (perhaps the moon as Stevens suggests) or someone as strange as an Arabian, who is cast out of language and enclosed in preverbal sounds. The "strange"

then is made even stranger by this gesture, as if it could have only the most remote place in relation to the poem's speaker. Then, why does the poet in his communal identity "say" or call into being the Arabian? Is he said so that he can be unsaid?

Perhaps the relation becomes clearer if we look at the relation between what "We say" and what the poet has said earlier. The canto opens with the statement, "The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea . . ." The speaker of the poem may or may not be included in this "we"; he describes nonetheless the reaction of the poem's readers as if he could detach himself from them and chart their progress as they "move," "feel," "think," and then finally "say." So what "we" say may be an effort to "unsay" what has been so often said, so damnedly repeated, that it can be summarized in nonsense terms—the old moon, bird, and ocean from Walt Whitman. The "Arabian" with his "primitive astronomy" may be that figure of control that the poet wants to cast out in order to write his own future, to gain his authority over the "unscrawled fores the future casts." To let him speak only in sounds that make no sense is to sever relations with him, to make the too familiar into the very strange.

Of this canto, Vendler claims that "we have had twelve lines of iridescence, and now we are given eight lines of grossness" (188). She finds that "the grotesquely contrastive conclusion of the poem, shocking at first reading, is in effect a repudiation of the vatic language of the first half" (187). Nonetheless, she rescues the canto by claiming that "[t]he supralogical 'rhyme' of 'ocean' with 'relation' emphasizes as a matter of course the conviction of form surpassing formlessness"; thus, "the exquisite line is rudely married to the coarse cartoon and its howls" (189).

I would figure the marriage of the coarse to the exquisite somewhat differently. In the clashes of speech, we have the clash between the often-said and the poem's refreshing of speech, between *nonsense* and a *new* sense. Here, the Arabian's preverbal sounds, like those of the disaffected flagellants, are not the expression of lapses of meaning or disruptions which might destabilize the progression of the argument. They refer rather to meaning so hackneyed as to be in no need of the verbal. Like the lines they fill out, these sounds simply fill up space. They have been dislodged into the preverbal because they reflect the oververbalized and so meaningless sentiments. They are not married to poetry (in Vendler's figure), but divorced from it, which allows them nonetheless a strange relation.

Stevens came, at the end, to a particularly poignant sense of his own limitations in the creation of sounds, as he claims in "Long and Sluggish Lines":

It makes so little difference, at so much more
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.

Wood-smoke rises through trees, is caught in an upper flow
Of air and whirled away. But it has been often so.

The trees have a look as if they bore sad names
And kept saying over and over one same, same thing,

In a kind of uproar, because an opposite, a contradiction,
Has enraged them and made them want to talk it down.

He asks, then,

What opposite? Could it be that yellow patch, the side
Of a house, that makes one think the house is laughing;

Or these—escent—issant pre-personae: first fly,
A comic infanta among the tragic drapings,

Babyishness of forsythia, a snatch of belief,
The spook and makings of the nude magnolia?

(CP 522)

Such terms as “escent” and “issant” are not preverbal but partial verbalizations or suffixes—endings signifying beginnings. Stevens connects them here by opposition to the end when the poet over seventy finds only the “same, same” words. “The immaculate beginning” and the “immaculate end” come together in this poem where the old poet addresses the “Wanderer,” perhaps his grandchild born to him in old age, the “comic infanta,” who serves to remind him even at the end of “pre-history.”

The battle here is for the words, and it resumes in new terms. Early in his career, Stevens had relegated “novelties of the sublime” to the preverbal. Later, the preverbal could sound the opposite: the music of the spirit. And still later preverbal sounds became a way of isolating the oververbalized. Finally, with a new experience of the wonder of the preverbal in the figure of the comic infanta, suggesting his grandson, the preverbal came to articulate the “pre-personae” and the “pre-history” that would come to signify the continuity of persons and of time itself for the old poet. It is this process that kept him alive and responsive to the new task allotted him by time when “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (CP 503).

Some incidences when Stevens reverts to preverbal sound to fill out the line might be negative examples of the creation of sound. They are merely sounds as “an imitation for the ear” (CP 311), spoken by figures calling attention to themselves. By contrast, true poems “eke out the mind / On peculiar horns, themselves eked out / By the spontaneous particulars of sound” (CP 311). From such poems and such poets, “we collect,” Stevens claims in “The Creations of Sound.” The strange relation of transitive and

intransitive actions in this verb indicates something about the nature of sound: we collect from it a meaning and are collected in it.

Sound is music only when it comes to the poet “of its own, / Without understanding.” It is “sounds not chosen, / Or chosen quickly, in a freedom / That was their element.” Stevens claims that “speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier” (CP 310-11). In poems, he concludes,

We say ourselves in syllables that rise
From the floor, rising in speech we do not speak.
(CP 311)

Again, in the early notebook entries of “From Pieces of Paper,” Stevens indicates the germ of this poem, listing in a cluster a number of items on which this poem ruminates: “182. Parade of Poets . . . 184. The Artificial Man Coming Into Contact With Reality . . . 188. The Negation Of The Artist.”¹⁶

“[T]here are words / Better without an author, without a poet,” Stevens claims, or having a different poet will be “An accretion from ourselves,” “an artificial man,” “A being of sound.” Stevens concludes, in the important phrase mentioned earlier, “From him, we collect” (CP 311). The creations of sound include the whole range from the preverbal to the oververbalized, and a “being of sound” will be “an artificial man.” There is no music of the spheres that this being of sound does not create, no sound without this artificer.

University of Georgia

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 383, cited hereinafter as *CP* in the text. References to Stevens’ *Letters*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), and *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), will be cited in the text as *L* and *OP*, respectively.

²Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 18-19.

³Irvin Ehrenpreis, “Strange Relation: Stevens’ Nonsense,” *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 225.

⁴See Cook’s discussion of the Arabian passage in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” in “Riddles, Charms, and Fictions in Wallace Stevens,” in *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 232-41. In commenting on the ending of “Notes,” I, iii, she writes, “What Stevens accomplishes here is a systematic undoing of his first world, and with it all such ‘immaculate,’ idealized first worlds—childhood or erotic or religious paradises—and perforce all idealized theories of poetry” (237).

⁵When I delivered an early version of this paper at the Wallace Stevens Society session at the Modern Language Association meeting in December 1990, Eleanor Cook as respondent commented, “Her word ‘preverbal’ invites us to walk around the prefix

'pre-' and consider two different kinds of pre-ness or priority. One is chronological, where preverbal sounds are associated with sounds of infancy and childhood before full verbal articulation is attained. But the prefix 'pre-' allows another sense of priority, not chronological but ontological, so to speak, where preverbal utterance retains a sense of something original, primordial, vital. Highly crafted poetic language cannot ignore this sense of the preverbal force of the inarticulate, indeed, to vary Dickie, has a positive attraction for it. But how to map the connections, the paths, the movements from gibberish to—well, to what? To another kind of gibberish, Stevens once said, being mischievous and sensible and very intelligent all at once, as was his wont."

⁶Helen Vendler, *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 52.

⁷J. Hillis Miller, *The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 14. See also the more persuasive argument of Eleanor Cook that "We not only can unsay all our fictions, but must, for this is how one part of the imagination works" ("Riddles, Charms," 238). Cook cites two kinds of nonsense: Derrida's term non-radical "'illegibility,' that 'non-sense' (*le non-sense*) which is still 'interior to the book, to reason or to logos" and Derrida's "'radical illegibility' (*l'illisibilité radicale*) or the deconstruction of the traditional doctrine of logos, reason, and the book" (238).

⁸"Riddles, Charms, and Fictions in Wallace Stevens," 230.

⁹John Hollander, *Melodious Guile: Fictive Pattern in Poetic Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 117.

¹⁰For the original text of "Schemata" as well as discussion of its importance, see George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1986), 158-65.

¹¹See Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 22-33.

¹²Again, in comments Eleanor Cook made at the session in which this paper was read, she argued that "the force of Stevens' 'tink-tank-tunk' line is nothing like the force of his 'hoobla-how-hoo' lines written twenty years later . . . for the simple reason that 'tink' and 'tank' and 'tunk' are all defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and in *Webster's*, . . . whereas 'hoobla' does not appear at all." I would argue that the combination of *tink*, *tank*, *tunk*, whatever their individual dictionary definitions might be, deprives them of those definitions.

¹³See the complete list of entries in "From Pieces of Paper," in Lensing, 166-200.

¹⁴In her response at the MLA session, Eleanor Cook organized her thoughts around these two different meanings of mimesis, and I am grateful to her for this point.

¹⁵*Word-Play*, 222. See also Cook's entire discussion of this canto in "Riddles, Charms," 232-41.

¹⁶Quoted in Lensing, 177.

The Caesura in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

N. M. HOFFMAN

I am between two infinite states
on the mid-line dividing,
between the infinite that waits
and the long-abiding,
at the golden spot, where the mid-line swells
and yields to a supple, quivering, deep
inundation.

—Wallace Stevens, "Moment of Light"

THE CAESURA PLAYS A VITAL role in Stevens' prosodic repertoire as it does in the work of most of our subtler poets. Stevens' use of the caesura in some of its more traditional roles indicates his deep attachment to the poetic tradition; it especially reveals certain idiosyncrasies of his aesthetic. Before exploring these contentions, however, a closer examination of the caesura must be made.

The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*¹ (PEPP) rightly ascribes to the term "caesura" an "antithetical" quality which is an admixture of both metrical rigor and its opposite:

the caesura is used in two basic and quite antithetical ways: (1) as a device for emphasizing formality of poetic construction and distance from colloquial utterance; and (2) as a device for investing fairly strict meters with something of the movement of informal speech. (96)

The caesura participates in more than a divergence between formal poetic construction and informal speech, however. The caesura participates in the creation of meaning, and it is this capacity which is the chief sticking point in its definition; an exclusively metrical definition has not been possible because it is, in short, inadequate.

The term "caesura" is extracted from the Latin past participle of the verb "to cut" (conjugated *cædo, cædere, cecidi, cæsus*) according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) which also notes that the word has been incorrectly associated with the English verb "to cease." This seems a natural, if erroneous, association since the caesura may be thought to terminate sound, however briefly, in the unfolding of the metrical properties of the verse line. The caesura can also be linked to dispositions of sense, ruptures, transitions in focus, and the indication of a weighing or balancing of notions, among other things. In this light, it is interesting to contemplate the secondary meanings of the Latin word *cædo*: "strike" and "sacrifice" as in the killing or cutting down of an animal or the cutting of an animal

into pieces.² In its broad sense “sacrifice” means “to surrender or give up (something) for the attainment of some higher advantage or dearer object” (*OED*), and *Webster’s* defines “sacrifice” as the “destruction or surrender of something for the sake of something else.” The caesura partakes of this notion of a barter or an exchange and, since it is an element of what Derrida has called “the blank part of the text,” the caesura offers up the possibility of thought and consequent meaning in exchange for the silence which establishes it.³

The *Grammatici latine ex recensione* compiled by Henricus Keil⁴ in the mid-nineteenth century is the richest source of early materials treating of the caesura. It is apparent in these Latin discussions and definitions that the emphasis regarding the caesura was predominantly metrical; it is also evident that the caesura could be found in a variety of positions and was considered capable of making meaning. Both characteristics must inform an adequate contemporary understanding of the term. For instance, Gaius Marius Victorinus explores the meaning-making capacity of the caesura in one of his exercises for students from “*Ars Palaemonis De Metrica Institutione*”⁵:

Quot sunt species in caesura hexametri versus? Quattuor. Quae sunt? Conjunctus, districtus, mixtus, divisus. Conjunctus qui est? Qui in scandendo ita concatenatus est sibi, ut nusquam finito sensu divisa inter verba ponantur. . . . Qui districtus? Qui in scandendo sensum seu partes orationis separatas in se habet. . . . Quid est mixtus? Qui utrumque in se habet, ut in quibusdam coniunctus, in quibusdam vero separatus sit. . . . Quid divisus? Qui in priapio deprehenditur metro. Quod est metrum priapium? Cum in hexametro versu primi tres pedes concatenati inter se a reliquis tribus sequentibus divisi separatique sunt, ut puta veluti in bucolicis.⁶ (Keil, VI, 214-215)

Here the metrical nature of the caesura is set aside in favor of a taxonomy of caesuras ordered according to what they can do to and for meaning. “Conjunctus” is a concatenating caesura linking words related in sense; “districtus” has the capacity to separate parts of speech; “mixtus” joins and also separates; “divisus” (where three pauses occur in the hexameter) makes for a kind of metrical surprise (devised in honor of Priapus).⁷

In spite of the clear flexibility of the caesura in Latin and its unquestioned association with metric, its stature is noticeably diminished in contemporary writings. This is in part, of course, because modern and contemporary poetry is perceivedly less metrical than earlier, more traditional poetry. As Timothy Steele points out in *Missing Measures*, however, not even T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound avow that poetry should or even could be devoid of metrical dispositions.⁸ Nonetheless, the word “pause” is often substituted for the rightful term “caesura” precisely because it is less

dependent on traditional metric for interpretation. This substitution compromises the integrity of the caesura's relation to metric in free verse and erases its rich history which is used as a resource by both modern and contemporary poets.

For instance, when Derek Attridge writes in *The Rhythms of English Poetry*⁹ (1982) that "Syntactic boundaries . . . play a part in all generative theories of metre, though they have no structural role in traditional foot-prosody" (44), he is dismissing the long trail of evidence left to us by analysts of verse which indicates that the caesura is part of the metric. He calls into question the capacity of the caesura to perform structurally in traditional foot-prosody. In his definition of the caesura, Attridge continues to undermine its structural capacity:

Another classical term inherited by English prosody with a changed signification is *caesura*. In the analysis of English verse it is used to refer to a pause within the line created by the syntax. . . . The term does not refer to anything in the *structure* of most English verse, however, and there is no reason to prefer it to 'pause' or 'syntactic break' in describing a line. (8; emphasis added)

This position becomes tenuous because the "implied offbeat" in Attridge's system of scansion can be "literally realized as pauses" (172, 174); implied offbeats are considered part of metric structure in his system.¹⁰ Implied offbeats are, in reality, caesuras by another name and, thus, the caesura's relation to metric remains to be disproved.

Another example of the debilitation of the term "caesura" occurs in *Poetry in English* (1987) where Sally M. Gall adopts Attridge's principles in the "Versification" section of the anthology.¹¹ The caesura is listed, but the reader is referred to "pause" and no discussion is devoted to the caesura, per se. The term "caesura" is used, however, to explain characteristics of "pause,"¹² and, consequently, like Attridge, Gall does not successfully absorb the term "caesura" into the term "pause." If it is not simply a nicety of versification to preserve the term "caesura" at all, then the reasons for its recurrent use must be ascertained, and soon.

To formulate a sounder description of the caesura in our pursuit of its private life in the work of Wallace Stevens, we must first organize our understanding of it metrically. Despite its intimate relation to meter, the caesura is at best randomly distributed in poems. Patterns of its use rarely apply to the poem as a whole and are never predictive, only descriptive. If we consider the caesura to be part of the pattern of a particular line only, we can establish the caesura's metricity locally, where it is in use. William Ross Hardie's description of the caesura as a "metrical division" in *Res Metrica*¹³ also permits us to acknowledge the formidable link between caesura and metric in effecting the balance of metrical material in any given

line, without relying on patterns of stress or quantity. Therefore, we will consider the caesura to be a device which functions as a metrical division strictly in the unit of the line. The term governs any pause in any line irrespective of the degree of metricality, assuming that even free verse lines can be scanned "locally," that is within the precinct of the line. We may allude to the number of half-feet preceding the caesura to name it in relation to foot prosody (penthemimeral, hephthemimeral, etc.) or we may use Schipper's taxonomy, or we may refer to their positions by means of the terms initial, medial, or terminal, depending on the acuity required.¹⁴ We have determined the caesura to be metric; we can locate caesuras in the line with varying degrees of precision, according to analytical need. It remains to devise a way of speaking about the caesura's implication in the generation of meaning.

In *Introduction to Poetics*,¹⁵ Tzvetan Todorov uses the concept of varying "registers" in language to illustrate modes of discourse (20-27). The four registers he considers are, in brief, the concrete, the figural, the polyvalent, and the aesthetic. It is by means of these registers that the caesura reveals itself in full. Each register explicates an operative mode of the caesura and we find corroboration for each of them in Stevens' poems.

For the first register, Todorov uses the terms "concrete" and "abstract" to describe the "everyday usage" of discourse (21). It is by means of grammar that the caesura is essentially constructed and it is this grammatical function which constitutes the caesura's "everyday usage." Examples from Stevens illustrate¹⁶:

Is the spot on the floor, || there, || wine or blood
 And whichever it may be, || is it mine?
 ("The Man with the Blue Guitar" [CP 173])

The caesuras flanking "there" in the first line have no other function than to indicate the separation of this adverb from the rest of line; the caesura in the second line also functions strictly grammatically in separating the relative clause ("whichever it may be") from the question that follows in the second hemistich. We also observe this straightforward grammaticality in the following lines from "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard":

That tragic prattle of the fates, || astute
 To bring destruction, || often seems high-pitched.
 (OP 66)

The caesura of the first line is octahemimeral, falling after the eighth half-foot (or terminal). It separates the adjective "astute" from the subject which it modifies ("prattle"). In the following line, the caesura is penthemimeral, falling after the fifth-half foot (or medial) separating the infinitive and its object (which are modifying the adjective "astute" and

therefore functioning adverbially) from the verb “seems” and its adverb “often.” In both cases the caesuras are strictly manufacturing the grammar.

Todorov’s second register “is determined by the presence of rhetorical figures” and illuminates the capacity of the caesura to function in relation to figures (21). Todorov discusses repetition, antithesis, and gradation, but, as concerns the caesura, there is no limit to the figures that obtain. In Stevens’ poem “Table Talk,” for instance, we can observe the way in which the caesura functions figurally:

Granted, || we die for good.
Life, || then, || is largely a thing
Of happens to like, || not should.

(OP 73)

The caesuras of the first two lines are of the first register, functioning strictly grammatically. The caesura of the third line is not: across it is formed a comparison by negation between the conceptualization of “happens to like” over against “not should.” This caesura is still penthemimeral (falling after the fifth half-foot) despite its occurrence in a trimeter line, but true to the stricture of Todorov’s second register, this caesura is an active participant in the creation of the figure of comparison.

The figure of apostrophe is another figure which can be instituted over the caesura; Stevens’ prosody reflects this second register use from time to time as well:

*O pitiful lovers of Earth, || why are you keeping
Such count of beauty in the ways you wander?*
 (“For an Old Woman in a Wig” [OP 20])

The first caesura is octahemimeral, falling after the eighth half-foot in a hexameter line (which is hypercatalectic) or medial. It functions figuratively, separating the apostrophized material of the first hemistich from the question of the second hemistich. We can observe a similar figural use of the caesura in the poem “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue”:

Mesdames, || one might believe that Shelley lies . . .
(OP 80)

Although these caesuras are also grammatical, they are not exclusively so to the extent that they are implicated, as we have seen, in figural development.

Polyvalence (or “sensitivity to more than one exciting agent,” according to Webster’s) identifies Todorov’s third register of discourse (23), which also satisfactorily describes a possibility inherent in caesural formation. Certain recurrent caesuras can be traced through a line of poets and Stevens puts

several of these types of caesuras into service. I will trace three such caesuras in Stevens' poetry: the pyrrhic, the reflexive, and the fractive.¹⁷

A caesura in a pyrrhic foot, or pyrrhic caesura, is not common, but it recurs. When it does appear, it often underscores a sense of vacancy, stillness, or bleakness which is evident in the semantic aspect. The metrical division of the pyrrhic foot where accent has been suspended takes on an acute gravity which has been used to advantage by numerous poets.¹⁸ It appears in Stevens' poetry, but is not his "own." For example, Spenser employs the pyrrhic caesura.¹⁹

Where griesly Night, with visage deadly sad,
That Phoebus chearefull face durst neuer vew,
And in a foule blacke pitchie mantle clad,
She findes| forth com| ming || from| her darke|
 some mew,
Where she all day did hide her hated hew.

(Bk1, C5, 20)

The pyrrhic foot containing the caesura in the second to the last line is preceded by a compensating spondee. We find the scheme in Milton's "A Mask"²⁰:

Til an unusual stop of sudden silence
Gave respite to the drowsie frighted steeds
That draw| the lit| ter || of| close cur| tain'd sleep; . . .

(55)

The pyrrhic caesura also occurs in Pope's *Dunciad*, Book 1²¹:

(Pomps without guilt, of bloodless swords and maces,

Glād chains, || warm furs, || broad bān| ners, || and|
broad fāc| es)

Now night| descend| ing, || the| proud scēne| was o'er . . .

(76-77)

The third line is parallel to the third line cited from "A Mask" with "proud scene" supplying here the spondee to balance the pyrrhic in which the caesura falls. The second line of this example has three caesuras; it is the last one which falls in the pyrrhic foot, with compensating spondees on either side.

Despite Whitman's recourse to substitutions of one sort and another and the regular hypermetricality of his verse, the pyrrhic caesura fre-

quently serves as a metric division in his lines. Here are two such lines from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" (160-61)²²:

The white| wake left| by the pas| sage, || the| quick
 trem| ulous whirl| of the wheels . . .
 (line 42)

The stretch| afar| growing dim| mer and dim| mer, ||
 the| gray walls| of the gran| ite store| houses|
 by the docks . . .
 (line 45)

The peculiar beauty of these caesuras derives from their deeper abeyance because they occur in the pyrrhic foot.

We find the pyrrhic caesura in William Carlos Williams' poem "Dedication for a Plot of Ground,"²³ in the line

If you can| bring noth| ing || to| this place . . .
 (7)

Here, a caesura separates the conditional clause with its subject, verb, and object from the prepositional phrase "to this place" which modifies it adverbially.

Another such instance of the pyrrhic caesura occurs in Williams' poem "An Elegy for D. H. Lawrence," and I will quote the entire passage in the interest of illustrating the conception of local metric:

To stand by the sea or walk
 again| along| a riv| er's bank| and talk
 with a| compan| ion, || to| halt
 watch| ing where| the edge| of wa| ter
 meets| and lies| upon
 the unmoving shore . . .
 (65)

The local meter reveals itself in an homage to tradition by means of a line of perfectly regular iambic pentameter. The poet then reverts to free verse, but not before making one more gesture to traditional scansion; the caesura before "to halt" actually falls in what would have been a pyrrhic foot in regular pentameter. This is supported by the double stress in "halt watch" that asserts itself over the line-end. This assertion of a spondaic formation over the enjambement reestablishes the freedom of the verse, but not before

the poet has gestured technically to a metric tradition of which he was well aware.

H. D. avails herself of the pyrrhic caesura in the poem "The bird-choros of Ion."²⁴ Again, it is the local metric that provides a key to scansion of the lines and to the trace of a caesura in a pyrrhic foot which has been absorbed into the line-end of the free verse form:

lest all the song notes
 pause and break
 across| a blood-| stained throat
 gone song| less, (||)
 turn| back,
 back
 ere it be too late,
 to wave-swept Delos.

(206, stanza 3)

The three iambs of the third line are obvious and, as in Williams' lines above, we are invited to consider the line in terms of regular metric. In the next line "gone songless," this invitation ceases abruptly and we are forcefully directed to the next line; it is a single iamb in a local sense (turn *back*), but disengaged from a fully realized metric pattern. The repetition of stress over the repeated word "back" also militates against taking the line "turn back" as part of a regular iambic pattern. In fact, the free verse formulation has manipulated a pyrrhic foot which falls between two pairs of double stresses, as if an imaginary line were constructed as follows:

gone song| less, || turn| back, back . . .

Here, the opening two stressed syllables give way to a set of double unstressed syllables in a pattern we have already seen—one that houses a caesura to some effect. What would have been a caesura in the pyrrhic is further attenuated by the rupture of a line-end; free verse has absorbed a feature of traditional metric and obscured its origin, but the haunting quality of silence that informs these lines derives from the poet's technical excellence.

The use of the pyrrhic caesura is remarkably consistent in its interplay with semantics that point to obscurity, silence, or rupture (Spenser's "forth coming from her darkesome mew"; Milton's "litter of close curtain'd sleep"; Pope's "night descending"; Williams' "nothing" and "to halt"; H. D.'s "songless"). I dwell on examples because of the complexity of the metric, but also to illustrate that Stevens' use of the pyrrhic caesura rarely rises to the subtlety of the examples I have provided. This is largely because Stevens has no feel for spondaic substitution,²⁵ although he is certainly a

master in substituting anapests and dactyls. The pyrrhic caesura is dependent for its smooth delivery on the perfect formation of both the pyrrhic and the spondee, which traditionally balances it in the line. Nonetheless, the pyrrhic caesura occurs in Stevens' work. We find it in "The Silver Plough-Boy":

It wráps| the sheét| áround| its bó|d|y, || un| til the black
 fig| ure is| silver.
 It dán| ces dówn| a fur| row, || in| the ear| ly light, || back
 of| a crá| zy plough, || the green| blades fó|l| lowing.
 (OP 17)

In the first line, the caesura occurs in the pyrrhic foot as shown, with compensation by the double stress on the syllables "black fig" of the seventh foot. In the next line there is also a pyrrhic caesura, but its balancing spondee occurs at some distance and after the occurrence of a grammatical caesura between two regular feet. As in the examples supplied earlier from predecessors, the pyrrhic foot engenders a recess of both sound and sense in the line: in the first of these examples from Stevens, the body of shadow evaporates into a silvered one; in the second example, the deepening furrow and the hush of work beginning in the early morning are summoned wordlessly by the mirror made in the prosody by the caesura.

A pyrrhic caesura occurs in the following lines as well:

He perceives
 That cool| ness || for| his heat| cómes sú|d| denly',
 And only, in the fables he would write . . .
 ("From the Journal of Crispin" [OP 49])

The pyrrhic caesura here is trihemimeral, that is, falling after the third half-foot; its compensating spondee occurs in the fourth foot. Note, however, that a relationship between the construction and the sense is lacking. Another such pyrrhic caesura occurs in these lines from "Red Loves Kit":

And you, || good gál| liard, || to| enchant| black
 thoughts . . .
 (OP 64)

The second caesura is the pyrrhic, balanced by the spondee in the last foot. Unless we make heavy weather of the ethereal quality of enchantment, this pyrrhic caesura also misses the opportunity to harmonize the prosody with the sense.

Stevens can, on occasion, manage this subtle device. A lovely example occurs in the poem "Nuns Painting Water-Lilies," where the pyrrhic caesura helps to capture the sense of not-being, or unformedness of either the nuns ("these pods") or the lilies they are painting (the "odd fleurettes," which could also be the nuns themselves, inviting our consideration of the relations between subject and object):

The young| est, || the| still fuzz-| eyed, || odd|
 fleurettes . . .

(OP 120)

We can observe Stevens' enlargement on the use of the pyrrhic caesura where the second caesura occurs between the two compensating spondaic stresses effecting a perfect balance across the line. The pyrrhic caesura in the poem "'A Mythology Reflects Its Region . . .'" is also artfully managed:

And it is he in the substance of his region,
 Wood of| his for| ests || and| stone out| of his fields
 Or from under his mountains.

(OP 141)

Here, the quiescence between the hemistiches makes a reverential hush between that wood and that stone which so gloriously comprise "the substance of his region."

Although Stevens uses the pyrrhic caesura with less than masterful skill, there are other polyvalent caesuras which he uses with the same delicacy of the master makers. A reflexive caesura is one which is directly contiguous with words which mirror semantically what the caesura establishes in the metric: "silence," "nothing," "sleep," "break," "pause," and so on. The following lines will illustrate both the prevalence of this reflexive caesura and the shared use of it by poets in English poetry over time:

But I no word; || for my seekly distresse . . .

(Hoccleve,²⁶ "The Regement of Princes" [52])

It is nothing, || trowe I, bot feynit chere . . .

(James I, *The Kingis Quair* [73])

Thou riveted unto Ixion's wheel

Shalt break, || and the perpetual vulture feel.

(Marvell,²⁷ "Tom May's Death" [60])

Seiz'd and ty'd down to judge, how wretched I!

Who can't be silent, || and who will not lye; . . .

(Pope, "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" [33-34])

In silence listening, || like a devout child . . .
(Coleridge,²⁸ "To William Wordsworth" [192, l. 95])

Still is the unspoken word, || the Word unheard,
the Word without a word, || the Word within
the world and for the world; . . .
(Eliot,²⁹ "Ash Wednesday" [V])

Poised as a monument,
Thought rests, || and in these balanced spaces
Images meditate; . . .
(May Sarton,³⁰ "Nativity: Piero della Francesca" [17])

As in the case of the caesura generally, the reflexive caesura may occur anywhere in the line, whether we are examining traditional meters or free verse. Poets avail themselves of this technical delicacy and it recurs quietly and without fanfare to bond the metric with the sense. Stevens is no stranger to this caesura:

Death is absolute || and without memorial . . .
(*"The Death of a Soldier"* [CP 97])

Say that the palms are clear in a total blue,
Are clear and are obscure; || that it is night; . . .
(*"Two Figures in Dense Violet Night"* [CP 86])

I have never—shall never hear. || And yet beneath
The stillness of everything gone, || and being still,
Being and sitting still, || something resides . . .
(*"Autumn Refrain"* [CP 160])

If evil never ends, || is to return
To evil after death, || unable to die
Again and fated to endure beyond
Any mortal end. ||
(*"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy
of Fine Ideas"* [CP 259])

The silent watcher, || far below her, hears . . .
(*"Infernale"* [OP 5])

You say that spite avails her nothing, || that . . .
(*"Good Man, Bad Woman"* [OP 65])

To space. || To space? || The statue scaled to space . . .
(*"Sombre Figuration"* [OP 100])

The pyrrhic caesura is extremely subtle; the reflexive caesura is easier to detect. A third caesura which has been available to poets historically is easier still to find in verse. This caesura ruptures the line visibly on the page. Such a rupturing, by what I will call a fractive caesura, commands the effect of two rupturing techniques, the one accruing to the caesura normally, the other accruing to the pause at line-end. This double rupturing of the fractive caesura is common in dramatic verse, whether in plays or in shorter poems holding themselves out as dialogues. The fractive caesura is used to differentiate voices participating in dialogue. In some cases, the fractive caesura is used to breach the poem in an extraordinary way in the interest of some poetic end. It may be to enforce a change of direction or tenor in the poem's development, or it may simply be a means of underscoring a rupture in the sense of the line. Examples best illustrate. We look first to Milton.

Spirit:

Ye were the two she mean't, with that I sprung
 Into swift flight, till I had found you here,
 But further know I not. ||

2nd Brother:

O night and shades,
 How are ye joyn'd with Hell in tripple knot
 Against th' unarm'd weakness of one Virgin . . .
 (Milton, "A Mask" [55])

Shakespeare uses the device frequently.³¹ The following lines are from *Julius Caesar*:

Lucilius

The greater part, the horse in general,
 Are come with Cassius. ||

Brutus

Hark! he is arrived:
 March gently on to meet him.
 (IV.ii.32-35)

In Shelley's "Queen Mab,"³² we find the fractive caesura established between a hideous image and Ahasuerus' resolve in the face of it:

My murdered children's mute and eyeless skulls
 Glared ghastly upon me. ||

But my soul,
 From sight and sense of the polluting woe
 Of tyranny, had long learned to prefer

Hell's freedom to the servitude of heaven.

(56, lines 189-94)

Ezra Pound employs the fractive caesura as well. It is operative in Canto LXXXI³³:

Learn of the green world what can be thy place
In scaled invention or true artistry,
Pull down thy vanity, ||

Paquin pull down!
The green casque has outdone your elegance.

(lines 32-36)

The metric of the line does what the line says over the fractive caesura: "pull down" and the sense is heightened in this way.

The fractive caesura is also used by Mary Barnard³⁴ in alexandrines:

you and your gnomon
would cast no shadow at all. The ancients observed
the phenomenon, marking the spot. ||

And there were wells.
The ancients also observed that a well sunk here
would trap the sun in its depths on the longest day.

(*Time and the White Tigress* [III, 26])

As in Pound's fractive, the fall of the caesura here creates a mirror for the sense in the metric as we envision the deep wells of ancient times.

Stevens also uses the fractive caesura:

these horses should go clattering
Along the thin horizons, nobly more
Than this jotting-down of the sculptor's foppishness
Long after the worms and the curious carvings of
Their snouts. ||

II

Come, all celestial paramours,
Whether in-dwelling haughty clouds, frigid
And crisply musical, or holy caverns temple-toned,
Entwine your arms . . .

("Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" [OP 79])

Here, the fractive marks the transition between sections and the attendant shift in the poem's focus. In the following example, another shift is indicated, this time between the grim world of "the man that thinks" and an alternative "green" path:

We perceive each mask
To be the musician's own and, thence, become
An audience to mimics glistening
With meanings, doubled by the closest sound,
Mimics that play on instruments discerned
In the beat of the blood. ||

Green is the path we take
Between chimeras and garlanded the way . . .
(*"Sombre Figuration"* [OP 97])

Another example of the fractive caesura from *"The Woman That Had More Babies than That"* also marks a shift, this time from particularities to a generalized image. The poem explores the experience of the "acrobat"; it then proceeds over the fractive to name what the acrobat observed: "The universal machine."

An acrobat on the border of the sea
Observed the waves, . . .
Listening to the whole sea for a sound
Of more or less, ascetically sated
By amical tones. ||

The acrobat observed
The universal machine. There he perceived
The need for a thesis, a music constant to move.
(OP 104-05)

A fractive caesura also separates a speaker from his speech in *"Life on a Battleship"*:

The captain said, ||
"The war between classes is
A preliminary, a provincial phase,
Of the war between individuals."

(OP 106)

Stevens' use of the fractive caesura maintains the iambic pentameter of the blank verse even as it takes to itself all the power of change in tenor, contrast, and change in voicing that have accrued to this polyvalent caesura over centuries. The caesura, however, is far too delicate to bear the weight of any professional jealousies echoing from poet to poet. On the contrary, we observe the quiet, sustaining interconnection that this device provides for every wave of its users, irrespective of their aesthetic allegiances.

It is the question of aesthetics that informs Todorov's fourth register of discourse. "Every discourse bears traces of the personal and individual act of its production" (25). The caesura is not discourse; it is a metrical division

or mark. Nevertheless, as a poetic device it has bearing on the subjective or stylistic presentation of the individual poet. At least three such caesuras perform in Stevens' work. The first is actually a matter of the suppression of the medial caesura. The condition represents more than an absent caesura because the reference to silence or to nothing occurs at the point where flanking caesuras border words which fall "across the silence" of the medial caesura as in the following line from "The Greenest Continent":

Hissing, || across the silence, || puissant sounds.
(*OP* 86)

Other lines exhibit this feature as well:

To the final full, || an end || without rhetoric.
(*"Life on a Battleship"* [*OP* 109])

Voices in chorus, || singing without words, || remote and
deep . . .

The listener, || listening to the shadows, || seeing them . . .
(*"The Sick Man"* [*OP* 118])

And, || nothing himself, || beholds . . .
(*"The Snow Man"* [*CP* 10])

A day of which we say, this is the day
That we desired, || a day of blank, || blue wheels . . .
(*"Of Ideal Time and Choice"* [*NA* 88])

These suppressed medial caesuras are often preceded or followed by lines which have prominent caesuras encouraging the expectation of a single caesura instead of flanking ones. This heightens the effect of such lines and explains their haunting quality as in the line from "The Snow Man" which lingers and carries in itself a disturbing vacancy in the "nothing himself." The use of the caesura in this way is an economy of the prosody which, however idiosyncratic to Stevens' poems, relies on traditional caesural placement for its effect.

Another use of the caesura which is unusually prominent in Stevens' poetry sculpts the "as if" clause out of the line and promotes its importance.³⁵ Several examples will illustrate this technique:

The man below
Imagines and it is true, || as if he thought
By imagining, anti-logician, quick
With a logic of transforming certitudes.
(*"Sombre Figuration"* [*OP* 96])

As if in a golden cloud. || The son restores
The father.

(“Recitation After Dinner” [OP 115])

And thus an elevation, || as if I lived
With something I could touch, touch every way.

(“First Warmth” [OP 117])

And yet || nothing has been changed || except what is
Unreal, || as if nothing had been changed at all.

(“As You Leave the Room” [OP 118])

(Note in the above two lines the suppressed caesura in the first, as well as the one setting off the “as if” clause in the second.)

Little existed for him but the few things
For which a fresh name always occurred, || as if
He wanted to make them, keep them from perishing . . .

(“Local Objects” [OP 137])

To the suppressed caesura and the caesura which sets off the “as if” clause can also be added caesuras which manage conditional “if” clauses as well as clauses introducing the conception of likeness. These latter are extremely numerous and further implicate Stevens in a deep relationship with simile. A few examples of each:

The “if” clause:

If she is like the moon, || she never clears
But spreads an evil lustre whose increase
Is evil, . . .
How, then, || if nothing more than vanity
Is at the bottom of her as pique-pain
And picador? . . .

(“The Woman Who Blamed Life
on a Spaniard” [OP 66])

If the sky that followed, || smaller than the night,
Still eked out luminous wrinklins on the leaves . . .

(“The Old Woman and the Statue” [OP 77])

It would be done. || If, || only to please myself . . .

(“Life on a Battleship” [OP 107])

The “like” phrase:

The churches, || like dalmatics stooped in prayer . . .

(“Sombre Figuration” [OP 98])

That which is human and yet final, || like

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

("Americana" [OP 121])

Like things produced by a climate, || the world

Goes round in the climates of the mind . . .

("The Sail of Ulysses" [OP 129])

By far the most Stevensian caesura, and the most common, is the one which sets off prepositional phrases. This occurs in four ways. First, the prepositional phrase may be isolated in the initial hemistich. The following examples are taken randomly from "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (through section XVII only [CP 165-74]):

Of the torches || wisping in the underground . . .

Of the dead, || majestic in their seals.

Of blue, || blue sleek with a hundred chins . . .

At night, || it lights the fruit and wine . . .

Of destructions," || a picture of ourselves . . .

At a table || on which the food is cold?

The second method of foregrounding prepositional phrases is to use the caesura to bring them emphasis in the second hemistich. The following lines are taken randomly from "Sunday Morning" (CP 66-70):

Coffee and oranges || in a sunny chair . . .

Winding across wide water, || without sound.

Emotions on wet roads || on autumn nights; . . .

The very hinds discerned it, || in a star.

And pick the strings || of our insipid lutes!

Sweet berries ripen || in the wilderness; . . .

Often two prepositional phrases dominate a line with the caesura between them (these are taken randomly from "Sunday Morning"):

Over the seas || to silent Palestine . . .

Of misty fields, || by their sweet questionings; . . .

Like her remembrance || of awakened birds . . .

By the consummation || of the swallow's wings . . .

Downward to darkness, || on extended wings.

Finally, the caesuras which centerpiece prepositional phrases in the heart of the line are remarkably abundant in Stevens' poems³⁶:

Upward, || from unimagined coverts, || fly.
(*"Blanche McCarthy"* [OP 17])

Ursula, || in a garden, || found . . .
(*"Cy Est Pourtraicte, Madame Ste Ursule,
et Les Unze Mille Vierges"* [CP 21])

Now, || in its immortality, || it plays . . .
(*"Peter Quince at the Clavier"* [CP 92])

One with us, || in the heaved-up noise, || still
Captain, the man of skill, the expert . . .
(*"Examination of the Hero in a Time of War"* [CP
273-74])

And blows, || with heaped-up shoulders || loudly blows . . .
(*"The Greenest Continent"* [OP 89])

And that, || in this knowledge, || local objects become
More precious than the most precious objects of home . . .
(*"Local Objects"* [OP 137])

Denis Donoghue remarked in a recent lecture on the poetry of Robert Frost³⁷ that "prepositions change the destiny of verbs." This insight provides the key to an understanding of the control of the verb that Stevens required in his work and which he was able to attain with special intensity by means of the caesura. The prepositional phrase can be used as either an adjective or an adverb. In Stevens' poems, it is used almost exclusively adverbially. These phrases exert pressure on the direct action of verbs, and even interpose themselves between that action and the field in which it occurs, continually supplementing the action which is, for Stevens, inadequate on its own recognizance.³⁸ The caesura reveals this relentless pressure on the verb in Stevens' work by keeping the adverbial prepositional phrases continually, if discretely, in the foreground of our experience of the poems. As Stevens himself noted, "Manner is something that has not yet been disengaged adequately. It does not mean style; it means the attitude of the writer, his bearing rather than his point of view. His bearing toward what? Not toward anything in particular, simply his pose."³⁹ In keeping with Todorov's fourth register, the subjective or aesthetic register, the caesura delimiting Stevens' prepositional phrases affords a glimpse of the poet's bearing toward the work.

One of the reasons for the obfuscation of the caesura and its link to what Roman Jakobson has called "complicated phonological and grammatical

structures in the writings of individual poets,"⁴⁰ is our desire to conflate poetry with music to such a pitch that rests and pauses take the place of poetry's own word for its own silences: the caesura. In our hunger to link the rhythm of poetry with the rhythm of music, we have ignored the ramifications of the caesura regarding rhythm, meaning, and form in the territory of the poem. I do not plead over-arching signification for the caesura; I can only plead for a treatment of poetry *qua* poetry so that where the parallels between poetry and its sister art ends, poetry need not suffer an enforced poverty of descriptions.

Stevens was cavalier regarding form when he wrote in "A Note on Poetry": "I don't know of anything, respecting form, that makes much difference" (*OP* 240). He also wrote in section VIII of "The Irrational Element in Poetry": "You can compose poetry in whatever form you like. . . . It is not that nobody cares. It matters immensely. The slightest sound matters. The most momentary rhythm matters. You can do as you please, yet everything matters" (*OP* 230). Stevens' equivocation in his prose is clarified in his prosody.

New York University

Notes

¹*Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 95-96.

²*Collins Latin Gem Dictionary*, ed. G. F. Maine (London: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1961).

³*Of Grammatology*. 1967. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 93.

⁴Keil, *Grammatici latini* (B. G. Tevbnieri and Hermann Hagen, 1822-94; rpt. Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlag, 1961).

⁵This passage from Victorinus is noted to the Venerable Adam Bede's *de Arte Metrica* in Keil's note 23, VI, 214.

⁶[What kinds of hexameter verse exhibit caesura? Four. Which are they? Conjoined, differentiated, mixed, divided. What are conjoined verses? Those which when scanned (across the caesura) are so interconnected that divisions between words are in no way positioned according to completed sense. . . . What is delineated verse? That which when scanned (across the caesura) organizes the sense or the distinct parts of speech. . . . What is mixed verse? That which contains within itself both a certain connectedness and a certain separation. . . . What is divided verse? That which imitates a priapian meter. What is priapian meter? When in hexameter verse the first three consecutive feet are divided among themselves and separated from the remaining three feet as observed in bucolic verse.] (My translation, with the assistance of Vincent T. Martin)

⁷See in Keil for discussion of caesura as metrical phenomenon and its placement by Marius Servius at IV, 457; for discussion by Priscian concerning rhythm and the multiplicity of caesuras acceptable in the line at III, 460; for discussion by Gaius Marius Victorinus of the caesura's capacity to yoke ideas at VI, 120.

⁸*Missing Measures: Modern Poetry and The Revolt Against Meter* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1990), 63-64.

⁹*The Rhythms of English Poetry* (New York: Longman, 1982).

¹⁰Implied offbeats are generally associated with syllables which are unstressed. Attridge describes them in this way:

unstressed syllables also have a rhythmic identity of their own, and as the variation in the number of syllables between beats increases, the underlying structure becomes blurred. (97)

In so saying, he also links these syllables and, consequently, any associated implied offbeats to the verse structure.

¹¹*Poetry in English: An Anthology*, ed. M. L. Rosenthal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

¹²See, for instance, the contrasting of two of Shakespeare's sonnets at 1149.

¹³*Res Metrica: An Introduction to the Study of Greek and Roman Versification*. 1887 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), Ch. 1, 19.

¹⁴See *PEPP* at 96 and Schipper at 213-14.

¹⁵*Introduction to Poetics*. 1968. Trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981).

¹⁶Quotations from Stevens will be from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1954), cited as (*CP*); *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989), cited as *OP*; and *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951), cited as *NA*.

¹⁷Other polyvalent caesuras include those I will call "projective," that is, those which follow upon a colon and which heighten, with the colon, a sense of anticipation as in this example from section III of "The Woman Who Blamed Life on a Spaniard" (*OP* 67):

It must have tears
And memory and claws: || a paragon
Well-wetted . . .

Another distinctive caesura firmly established in poetic tradition is that which assists in distinguishing speaker from speech as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (*CP* 165):

They said, || "You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are."

¹⁸The pyrrhic foot is a frequent variation or substitution according to the *PEPP* (683); it is generally, but not necessarily, balanced in the line by a spondee.

¹⁹All quotations from Spenser are from *The Faerie Queen: Selected Poetry*, ed. Leo Kirschbaum (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).

²⁰All quotations from Milton are from *The Complete English Poems of John Milton*, ed. John D. Jump (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964).

²¹All quotations from Pope are from *Eighteenth-Century English Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, et al. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969).

²²All quotations from Whitman are from *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., 1965).

²³All quotations from Williams are from *Selected Poems by William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions Books, 1962).

²⁴All quotations from H. D. are from *H. D.: Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (New York: New Directions Books, 1983).

²⁵At least one notable exception occurs in "The Old Woman and the Statue":

Whitened,| again,| forms form| less in| the dark . . .

(*OP* 77)

²⁶Quotations from Hoccleve and James I are taken from *The Oxford Book of Late Medieval Verse and Prose* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

²⁷All quotations from Marvell are from *Andrew Marvell: The Complete Poems*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Penguin Books, 1983).

²⁸All quotations from Coleridge are from *The Portable Coleridge*, ed. I. A. Richards (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

²⁹*The Waste Land and Other Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962).

³⁰*Selected Poems of May Sarton*, ed. Serena Sue Hilsinger and Lois Brynes (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978).

³¹*The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. William Aldis Wright (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1936). See Marina Tarlinskaja's *Shakespeare's Verse: Iambic Pentameter and the Poet's Idiosyncrasies* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), esp. 136-152 (section 4.1.1, "Lines split between speakers"), where Tarlinskaja discusses this pause without examining its metricality.

³²*Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1977).

³³*Poetry in English: An Anthology*, 869-870.

³⁴*Time and the White Tigress* (Portland, Oregon: Breitenbush Books, 1986).

³⁵The significance of "as if" in Stevens' work, by way of *The Philosophy of "As If"* by Hans Vaihinger, is considered in Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); and Jacqueline Vaught Brogan's *Stevens and Simile: A Theory of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³⁶In 22 pages of *OP*, I locate approximately 30 instances.

³⁷At New York University, Washington Square, Nov. 20, 1990.

³⁸Stevens conjectures in "About One of Marianne Moore's Poems" that within poetry "there may yet be found a reality adequate to the profound necessities of life today or for that matter any day" (NA 102). This remark begs the question of whether reality, and impliedly, direct action, are adequate to the necessities of life. Mac Hammond, for one, touches upon Stevens' propensity for circumventing the verb in "On the Grammar of Wallace Stevens," *The Act of the Mind: Essays on the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce and J. Hillis Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), 180-84.

³⁹"The Irrational Element in Poetry" (*OP* 227).

⁴⁰"Subliminal Verbal Patterning," from the chapter "Grammar in Poetry," *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 261.

Stevens' Armchair Travel: The Sound of the Foreign

ALISON RIEKE

The water at your feet is the same water that bathes the shores of Europe, of Africa, and of Asia—of Italy and Greece, and the Holy Land, and the lands of chivalry and romance, and pastoral Sicily, and the Pyramids, and Old Crete, and the Arabian city of Al Cairo, glittering in the magic lustre of the Thousand and One Nights.

—Leigh Hunt, "Voyage to Italy," *Autobiography*

The sea is in the falling snow.

—Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

IN WALLACE STEVENS' "Human Arrangement," the figure of the meditative poet is positioned at the center of an arrangement of ideas, images, words, and sounds. The poem is a subdued effort, made almost entirely of the repetitions and plain diction we associate with Stevens' last volume, *The Rock*. Its minimalist approach makes it a useful example of his foreign travel by way of words. The brisk fluctuations in other lyrics packed with odd diction—"Bantams in Pine-Woods," "Oak Leaves Are Hands," or the deeply complex "Montrachet-Le-Jardin," for example—invite extensive consideration of Stevens' interplay between sound and sense. In the "turbulent tinges" (*CP* 82)¹ of these poems, Stevens exercises a wide range of verbal choices available to him, coupling odd and plain, familiar and strange, native and exotic. However, the more sparing lyrics, such as "Human Arrangement," illustrate, with convenience and concision, how Stevens uses shifts in sound and sense to travel with words as his vehicle. In these poems, Stevens establishes one kind of diction as normative and then upsets that norm with words distinctively "foreign," a shift in diction signalling poetic transport in a departure from verbal restriction.

What I mean here by Stevens' "foreign" diction usually hinges upon types of verbal contrast and incongruity. Obviously, Stevens took great delight in collisions between words that come out of a variety of linguistic environments. With much consistency, he also appears to identify words of Germanic and Old English origin with the plainness and familiarity of the American soil, and, on a darker note, with the reiterative ordinary language that surrounds and limits the poet. Thus Stevens plays the tune of his American vocabulary, often monosyllabic words of Old English derivation, against a counterpoint of diction from more exotic and more

strikingly foreign etymologies. He uses this variety and contrast to call attention to a linguistic norm, and, perhaps more importantly, to the manner in which he is about to upset the very norms which bind him in his use of language, the expectations which the poet must shatter to achieve poetic surprise. Allowing words from startlingly distinct linguistic environments to meet and clash, Stevens forces us to ask why one particular diction, in this case plain and native, is interrupted by another. He also forces us to look up nearly every word he uses to confirm its etymological history, including those of Old English derivation supposedly dominant in the American idiom.²

Here, I will look specifically at words as vehicles for the poet's mental travel: words are themselves committed wanderers, and Stevens uses their movement to counter his own stasis. One of several twentieth-century poets to have mined the *OED* for etymologies, Stevens diligently traced the wanderings of words: the route taken by "alguazil" through Spanish from Arabic; or of "toucan" through French from Brazilian; or the circuitous journey of "apricot" from Latin to Greek to Arabic to Portuguese to French to English.³ There are countless examples in Stevens' poetry of distinctively foreign and exotic words, many of these appearing in conjunction with sun, moon, wind, and weather, also great global travelers importing foreign sound and sense to Hartford. In "Esthétique du Mal," "moon—round effendi" (*CP* 320) moves from west to east, by way of the Mediterranean, as a Turkish lord. In "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," the sun arrives from his trip over Norway and France: "A long time you have been making the trip / From Havre to Hartford, Master Soleil, / Bringing the lights of Norway and all that" (*CP* 226).

In "Human Arrangement," as in other poems reframing this development of ideas, the poet typically engages his imaginative world in an enclosed room while surrounded by the ordinary and monotonous. He is imprisoned, static, and sedentary. To make matters worse, the weather is often poor, though, as we shall see, the poet turns the sounds of wind and rain to advantage: "seated in the nature of his chair," he often begins "To feel the satisfactions / Of that transparent air" (*CP* 493). In "Human Arrangement," the poet enacts his desire to wander from this kind of setting with words as his vehicle, "To compound the imagination's Latin with / The lingua franca et jocundissima" (*CP* 397). Here he accomplishes "transport" by way of one word only, the word "curule."

The repetitions in "Human Arrangement" express perfectly the poet's boredom with place and time. In making a poem of it, he is barely able to effect minimal changes, turning the word "bound" into "sound" for instance:

Place-bound and time-bound in evening rain
And bound by a sound which does not change,

Except that it begins and ends,
Begins again and ends again—

Rain without change within or from
Without. In this place and in this time

And in this sound, which do not change,
In which the rain is all one thing,

In the sky, an imagined, wooden chair
Is the clear-point of an edifice . . .

(CP 363)

However, the monosyllables of predominately Old English origin—"rain," "bound," "sound," "thing," "one"—do finally "change," and at their moment of transformation, the poet's diction changes. Specifically, the word "curule" seems not to belong in this relentlessly plain vocabulary, which expresses not only the poet's physical boundary but also the sonic boundary of his word play. Thus "an imagined, wooden chair / . . . evening's chair, / Blue-strutted curule, true—unreal" rises up before him, "Forced up from nothing" (CP 363). In the sound of the word, the poet defies verbal limitation. And since we are not likely to know what "curule" is until we look it up, perhaps we hear first the sonic shift it performs. A "curule," from Roman antiquity, is a chair or seat inlaid with ivory and shaped like a camp-stool with curved legs, used by the highest and most privileged magistrates of Rome (*OED*).⁴ Moreover, it is the word the poet selects for his imaginary chair, not the chair itself, which enables him to achieve transport into another place and time. A curule chair is literally "true—unreal" because the chair, once in use by ancient Roman officials, denotes an older time and releases the poet from the phrases "time-bound" and "in this time." Now, with the curule as his vehicle, he seeks and finds life's "glitter," "a gold / That is a being, a will, a fate" (CP 363).

The chair in "Human Arrangement" takes over the function often performed by boats in other imagined excursions. Yet even here is a watery kind of transport—induced initially by the sound of rain—even though the poet's boat (a kind of magic carpet) is, in this instance, his flying chair. The very chair enabling the poet to imagine his getaway is a suitable emblem of release from the phrases "Place-bound" and "In this place." By etymology, this particular kind of chair moves: "curule," a throne originally mounted on a chariot, comes from the Latin word *curulis* meaning "of a chariot," from *currus*, chariot, from *currere*, to run.

"Continual Conversation with a Silent Man" is similar to "Human Arrangement" in its delimiting monosyllables: it turns upon such words as "hen," "sky," "wind," and "farm." Yet here the poet also achieves evasion and escape in watery transport as he sails away in shifting sounds signalled by the word "turquoise." Sonic dazzle and glitter enable him to

leave his local scene behind, the scene which Stevens repeatedly sets up as the poet's point of entry into the act of writing as a metaphor for travel.

First the poet realizes his limitations, the Old English monosyllabic diction setting the boundary of his word-world: "The old brown hen and the old blue sky, / Between the two we live and die—" (CP 359). Then Stevens' famous "as if" signals a shift in space and time, as it does in so many other poems: "As if, in the presence of the sea, / We dried our nets and mended sail / And talked of never-ending things" (CP 359). The sound of wind and water overhead provides the vehicle for transport, by which the poet breaks out of verbal restriction and becomes "many wills, and the wind, / Of many meanings in the leaves, / Brought down to one below the eaves" (CP 359). At this point the poet sails beyond his limitations in an imaginative act fusing his own position as speaker, the sensations he experiences, the sonic devices representing these sensations, and the etymological meaning of the words he chooses to signal his departure from the local. This complex organization of language involves all the ingredients of the poem and cannot be fully described in terms of traditional metaphor.

The poet's transport is fulfilled when he links words, thoughts, and sensations that enact a switching of locales. By way of the word "turquoise," he is able to reposition himself in a new locale in which foreign hen and exotic sky substitute for the ordinary "old" kind, "old" underlining repetitive experience. Stevens' use of language is here akin to Proust's mental drift in which one sensual experience forms a link in a chain of sensations. The watery sound above the eaves is the "Link, of that tempest, to the farm, / The chain of the turquoise hen and sky" (CP 359). Functioning as the poet's vehicle for escape, the word "turquoise" is the traveler in the poem, from ME *turkeis*, from OF *pierre turquoise*, "Turkish stone," from *turqueis*, Turkish. The poet releases himself from quotidian repetitions, and in this manner individual words, often words of foreign origin or simply words that do not seem to belong in the poetic setting Stevens establishes as normative, move the poet out of one locale into another place or time. Thus words are themselves the vehicles by which the poet seeks "transport," ultimately both the physical displacement expressed in the word's etymology—Latin, *transportare*, to carry from one place to another—and the varieties of metaphysical rapture he may achieve in his quest for supreme fictions.

Obviously, then, Stevens uses the sound of the foreign to contrast his local New England scene, the northern quotidian, with sites of desire, often in the exotic south. Yet shifts in diction from the plain to the strange often aim for more than a general or abstract contrast between climates. Rather, the poet's mind has wandered to a specific fresh locale, a very definite "affair of places" (OP 185).⁵ In a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, Stevens let slip a revealing remark which made an important point about the sense

of place in his work, a point he often evaded in comments blurring imagination and reality: "my imagination is a most important factor, nevertheless I wonder whether, if you were to suggest any particular poem, I could not find an actual background for you. I have been going to Florida for twenty years, and all of the Florida poems have actual backgrounds" (L 289).⁶ Swatara, in "The Countryman," may sound foreign and even a bit unreal, but it is an actual river in Pennsylvania west of Reading. In "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," Tehuantepec is Tehuantepec: Stevens intends the word to signify the place, not just an abstract landscape that incidentally has a lovely, resonant, and, in terms of the Hartford scene, foreign name. All the more so because in 1923 he actually sailed by Tehuantepec on the Pacific line's *Kroonland* (see L 241), one of his few imaginative journeys based on an actual excursion: "being 'off Tehuantepec' is not merely something that I have imagined" (L 288).⁷

As he grew older, Stevens became more direct about the pleasures he derived from his "affair of places," these pleasures often achieved in reading about travel.⁸ There are repeated hints in his letters that he sought out specific information about foreign places in books, paintings, and in his own correspondences with traveling friends.⁹ Late in his life, some of his warmest thoughts go out to Barbara Church because she wrote to him from Europe. In a letter of 19 April 1954 to Thomas McGreevy, Stevens dropped his evasions about the pleasures of mental travel:

Mrs. Church reaches Gibraltar tomorrow, the 20th, and then starts to drive from there to Ville d'Avray. She is one of the marvels of my experience, which, after all, has taken place in a very limited space. It means a lot to me to know a man in Dublin, to receive letters from a friend in Italy, to look at the map of Spain and to find that it suddenly becomes as minutely significant as the map of Connecticut.

One shrivels up living in the same spot, following the same routine. . . . When I visit . . . [James A. Powers' country place at Cornwall, Conn.], being in his old-fashioned house in which he has made no changes transports me in time as Mrs. Church's movements transport me in space. . . . My life in Europe is the same as your own life in India, or, better still, at Nuwara Elyia, in the highlands of Ceylon. (L 827-28)

In his meditative journeying Stevens was often captured by the allure of the Mediterranean. He owned a book called *The Mediterranean: An Anthology*, from which we learn much about the sounds of the foreign in the mind of the traveling poet.¹⁰ *The Mediterranean* is a highly entertaining sourcebook of short readings, organized by locale, from the annals of literary travel. With this book in hand, the Hartford poet may have made many imaginative excursions as he sat reading and writing. As the intro-

duction affirms, it is “in the main by travellers, about travellers, for travellers—and of course for non-travellers, sportsmen, office-workers, drones, dilettanti, and all who lead a strenuous life as well. . . . [It is] for their humane entertainment.”¹¹

The section about Gibraltar and Spain includes an excerpt from a chapter of Leigh Hunt’s *Autobiography* called “Voyage in Italy.” The following passage appears in the excerpt Stevens would have seen in *The Mediterranean*:

This soft air in your face comes from the grove of “Daphne by Orontes”; these lucid waters . . . are the same from which Venus arose, pressing them out of her hair. In that quarter Vulcan fell . . . and there is Circe’s Island, and Calypso’s, and the promontory of Plato, and Ulysses wandering. . . . The mind hardly separates truth from fiction in thinking of all these things, nor does it wish to do so.¹²

Hunt’s *Autobiography* turns up in Stevens’ “Puella Parvula,” yet another poem covertly about armchair travel during uncongenial weather. “Puella Parvula” opens with an homage to Penelope, faithfully weaving and unweaving in wait for her husband’s return from places like Gibraltar:

Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.
By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured
And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind.

But over the wind, over the legends of its roaring,
The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring,
The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to spring

From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees
Making a great gnashing, over the water wallows
Of a vacant sea declaiming with wide throat,

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs
Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory,
When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past,

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch.

(CP 456)

Not just relying, for “Puella Parvula,” on what he had before him in the brief excerpt from *The Mediterranean: An Anthology*, Stevens appears to have looked up the full account of Italy in Hunt’s *Autobiography*. In it we hear more about the allure of entering the Mediterranean at Gibraltar, about the imaginative possibilities in sighting the African coast and saying the word “Africa”:

Such things are beheld in one's day-dreams, and we are almost startled to find them real. . . .

The first sight of Africa is an achievement. . . . "Africa!" They [voyagers] look at it, and repeat the word, till the whole burning and savage territory . . . seems put into their possession. . . . "Ape's Hill", which is pointed out, sounds fantastic and remote, "a wilderness of monkeys" . . . Africa, the country of deserts and wild beasts, the "dry-nurse of lions", as Horace, with a vigour beyond himself, calls it.¹³

Stevens' poems of reading are often set in autumn or winter, "in this season of memory, / When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past." In "Puella Parvula," then, the poet hears both the roaring of the wind outside and "legends of its roaring" inside the book—and, ultimately, inside the words of his own poem. Hunt's account of Africa transforms the clatter and blare of weather into the sounds of an elephant on the roof, the two experiences fusing in a watery transport. Yet while the poet read Leigh Hunt on Gibraltar and Africa, he would have seen that Hunt had been reading Horace on Africa (Hunt's allusion to the "'dry-nurse of lions'" is from *Odes*, I.xxii). And indeed "Puella Parvula" imitates an Horatian Ode: the triumph is here, as a successful leap of the imagination, "Flame, sound, fury composed," "The *summariū in excelsis*" by the "dauntless master"; so too a Latin girl, *Puella*, certainly young, *Parvula*, and perhaps also a little wild and eager, has materialized in the poet's room—materialized reflexively as he gives voice to his own surging desire—to "Write *pax* across the window pane" and subdue this desire. Indeed Stevens' young girl suggests the maiden, Lalage, appearing in this same Ode of Africa to which Hunt alludes (I.xxii). There she stirs the speaker's longing: "dulce ridentem Lalagen amabo, / dulce loquentem" (lines 23-24) ["I will love my sweetly laughing, sweetly prattling Lalage"]. She is the kind of Horatian (or Catullan) girl-mistress who might inspire Stevens' figuration of the mind gone wild when the poet exclaims, "Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch." A glance at Horace's Ode II.v. again reveals Lalage, this time as a maiden still too young to love, but about to mature into a wanton partner: "iam proterva / fronte petet Lalage maritum, / dilecta" (lines 15-17) ["Soon with eager forwardness shall Lalage herself make quest of thee to be her mate"].¹⁴ As his realized muse of wild passion, brought under the control of the shaping imagination, "Flame, sound, fury composed," this girl becomes the poet's reward for fulfilled transport, the poem he writes an emblem of his completed voyage.

"Puella Parvula" is one of Stevens' consummate Mediterranean excursions, despite its test of the poet's powers to shape passion into art. Yet Stevens' poet, as he finds himself no longer "Place-bound and time-bound in evening rain," will take many other secret journeys, many of them by way of books that release him from the local. He turned to Leigh Hunt at

least once more, this time for sonic embellishments in "On An Old Horn," an arrangement of piping sounds mimicking Latin declensions:

If the stars that move together as one, disband,
Flying like insects of fire in a cavern of night,
Pipperoo, pippera, piperum . . . The rest is rot.
(CP 230)

Hunt, in his *Autobiography*, expounds the poetic virtues of fireflies, recalling that Herrick compared them to shooting stars and that "Shelley used to watch them for hours."¹⁵ Hunt makes the additional point that, surprisingly, "There is no mention of them in the ancient poets":

Now, of all insects, even southern, they are, perhaps, the most obvious to poetical notice. It is difficult to conceive how any poet, much more a pastoral or an amatory poet, could help speaking of them; and yet they make their appearance neither in Greek nor Latin verse, neither in Homer, nor Virgil, nor Ovid, nor Anacreon, nor Theocritus. The earliest mention of them, with which I am acquainted, is in Dante (*Inferno*, canto 21 [*sic*: canto 26]), where he compares the spirits in the eighth circle of hell, who go about swathed in fire, to the 'luciole' in a rural valley of an evening.¹⁶

Stevens' pips of light, a fusion of a pastoral piper playing on an "old horn" and a sparkling firefly, blink in the sounds of made-up Latin. This sensory complex of words is Stevens' version of a classical band mimicking the sound of stars coming together and disbanding. Stevens perhaps retains the trace of Dante's eighth circle of Hell in his image of "a cavern of night."

As we discover more about Stevens' reading, we will find that often his foreign sounds signify specific places of desire extrapolated from the real journeying of real travelers. For example, in "The Green Plant" we see that it is autumn and the poet has turned to books. Through its etymological associations with the word "read," the word "legend" functions as an encoded term for mental travel: "Otu-bre's lion-roses have turned to paper / And the shadows of the trees / Are like wrecked umbrellas. . . . / Except that a green plant glares, as you look / At the legend of the maroon and olive forest" (CP 506). The idea for "The Green Plant," as Alan Filreis points out, came to Stevens in a letter that included a clipping announcing the strange early-October weather in Sweden.¹⁷ Stevens redraws this landscape as an allegory of reading, and the poem duplicates "Puella Parvula," in a more sombre mood, by referring to paper accounts of the foreign, the "constant secondariness" (CP 506). As the poet reads, however, the more immediate "green plant" comes to life in his conjuring imagination as "barbarous green / Of the harsh reality" (CP 506).

The word “sound” is itself crucial in Stevens’ poems of transport, especially those which seek islands, sea coasts, harbors, new havens, Mediterranean paradises. Having a variety of meanings, “sound” is a word Stevens uses punningly, and in associative combinations of words bringing together two uses, *sound* as something heard (Latin, *sonus*) and *sound* as water (Old English and Old Norse, *sund*, sea, swimming, water) (*OED*). Stevens plays with this etymological combination of “sounds” as early as “Sunday Morning” where a woman “dreams a little” of “pungent oranges and bright, green wings,” which

Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine . . .

(CP 67)

In the title word “Sunday” we hear both *sun-day* and *sund-day*.

Stevens will repeatedly evoke this felicitous connection of “sounds” in poems of watery transport. These two meanings of the word “sound” struggle with and complement each other in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” where “The song and water were not medleyed sound” (CP 128), as the singer makes “The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea” out of “The meaningless plungings of water and the wind” (CP 129). The concluding lines of the poem express, in “keener sounds,” an elemental—and etymological—fusion of sea and song, indeed tracings of “our origins”:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

(CP 130)

Stevens’ poet travels through his word-world as one for whom “The world was a shore, whether sound or form,” a place where “Geographers and philosophers, / Regard” (CP 179). In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” then, the poet will escape New England by way of Long Island Sound, “Sound” both the actual inlet of the sea and the poet’s figurative outlet for transport. A *haven* is, of course, a harbor or anchorage, a port, as well as a place of refuge:

 capes, along the afternoon Sound,
Shook off their dark marine in lapis light.
The sea shivered in transcendent change, rose up

As rain and booming, gleaming, blowing, swept
The wateriness of green wet in the sky.

(CP 484)

The poet, himself positioned in windy, rainy New Haven, associatively links his escape by sea with the sounds of the storm, which changes into the sounds of an exotic Mediterranean paradise “pungent with citron-sap” where “They rolled their r’s” (CP 486-87).

Such excursions were not without conflict, especially when it became more and more apparent to Stevens that they would always be second-hand experiences, achieved through bookish absorptions, paper words. “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” takes up this subject, an expansive and deeply thoughtful commentary on the dry life of the scholar poet who, insulated from the weather outdoors, hears the sounds of nature in printed pages:

A crinkled paper makes a brilliant sound.
The wrinkled roses tinkle, the paper ones,
And the ear is glass, in which the noises pelt,
The false roses—Compare the silent rose of the sun
And rain, the blood-rose living in its smell,
With this paper, this dust.

(CP 252)

Yet for the most part, Stevens’ aversion to the wordy life brought on by the season of rain and gloom is resolved in his conversion of bad weather into poetic rapture. He achieves this in an associative chain of thoughts and sensations by which traveling clouds, rain, and wind gather force as they circulate in a transparent, transcendent atmosphere, also occupied by those other mighty wanderers, sun and moon. As he puts it in “Prologues to What Is Possible,” “A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary, / The way some first thing coming into Northern trees / Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South” (CP 517). The rain, wind, and snow of autumn and winter spit, roar, gnash, tremble, clatter, and blare overhead, bringing the sounds of the foreign to his native New England. These are sea sounds, watery-weather sounds, sounds from books and dictionaries with words of “far-foreign” (CP 516) origins in them, sounds of the happy traveler sailing out and back in his chair, making “Variations on the words spread sail. / . . . Spread sail, we say spread white, spread way. / The shell is a shore. . . . Spread outward. Crack the round dome. . . . / Breathe freedom, oh, my native” (CP 490). It is no wonder that, as his journeying neared its conclusion late in life, Stevens paid such persistent homage to Odysseus, in “Puella Parvula,” “The World as Meditation,” “The Sail of Ulysses,” and in perhaps the most fulfilled expression of his late optimism for new beginnings, “Prologues to What is Possible”: “There was an ease of mind that was like being alone in a boat at sea, / . . . He

belonged to the far-foreign departure of his vessel and was part of it" (CP 515-16).

There are, of course, poems in which Stevens reverses the direction of his desire and longs to come home to the plain world of words, poems such as his variation on Heraclitus, "This Solitude of Cataracts," in which a river "kept flowing and never the same way twice" (CP 424). Movement in so many directions overwhelms the poet. He longs for a life "Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass" (CP 425), a life of stilled desires. Stevens reframes this idea in "Farewell to Florida." The poet, glutted with southern sensations, exclaims, "How content I shall be in the North to which I sail / . . . carry me, misty deck, carry me / To the cold, go on, high ship, go on, plunge on" (CP 117-18). There are, of course, the wholly imaginary foreign landscapes, such as the "Indytteranean" fusion of Indian and Mediterranean paradises in "Analysis of a Theme." In this poem, the poet admits that his foreign dazzle—three-legged giraffes, etc.—are "Pure coruscations, that lie beyond / The imagination, intact / And unattained." But it still makes him happy to tell his little boring girl, Blandina, who wears the guise of the foreign to conceal her fundamental monotony, about "bright-ethered things" (CP 348-49).

Nevertheless, in pursuing Stevens' armchair travel, future readers may well find that, more often than not, the poet has some specific destination in mind as a site of desire. At night in his room, after office work, Wallace Stevens preoccupied himself with real places as havens of the mind. One can imagine how Stevens discreetly kept at hand, in the drawers of his imposing desk at the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company, the telltale evidence of his armchair journeying. Marianne Moore tells, in an anecdote about her first visit to Stevens at his office, that he opened a drawer and "brought out a postcard, a Paul Klee reproduction from Laura Sweeney . . . explaining that she was in Paris."¹⁸ And answering a letter from Barbara Church, Stevens imagined the dust of Italy: "That cloud of dust over Italy is the dust of your car: as I remember it, you are now in Italy, enjoying its Mediterranean atmosphere. Over here, autumn has come" (L 760). He often concealed and transformed these places in abstraction and metaphor, but they too reveal themselves in the sounds of the foreign.

Should we be surprised, then, that the poet ultimately found his paradise in his own upstairs room? The word *paradise* is itself a traveler, through Middle English and French, from Latin, from Greek, and ultimately from the Persian word for "enclosure or walled-in park," *pairi-daeza*. The poet's mind wanders out and back, with his room as a point of origin, a center of thought, a port, a refuge, and a paradise. As Stevens puts it in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the poet's task is to savor moments "when the sun comes rising, when the sea / Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall / Of heaven-haven" (CP 398-99).

University of Cincinnati

Notes

¹Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954). All quotations from Stevens' poetry are from this collection and appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *CP*.

²For discussion of Stevens' particular word choices and his methods of mixing diction to achieve effects of sound and meaning, see Marie Borroff, *Language and the Poet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 42-79. She identifies the variety of styles—from elevated and solemn to eccentric and comic—suggested by Stevens' mixed diction, and she shows how his highly unique style results from "odd or quirky combinations of words" (43).

³I agree with Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 7-8, that the *OED* is indispensable in the study of Stevens' word play. A precise example would be the word "fusk" in "Phosphor Reading by His Own Light," an obsolete adjective, variant of *fusk* and *fuskish*, which means dark brown, dusky, somewhat dark or dusky. It does not appear in other major dictionaries, and Stevens obviously selected it for the precise meaning available in the *OED*. Stevens was as attached to dictionaries as he was to many other kinds of books. He kept an *Oxford Concise Dictionary* at home and "an old-fashioned Webster" at the office (L 674; L 698). Moreover, he asked subordinates at Hartford Life to look up words that interested him in the complete *OED* (see L 698-99). Manning Heard reports, in Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), that "I would have to go to the [Connecticut State] Library. Before I went, I'd go into his office. He'd say, 'Wait a minute. Will you do me a favor?' This is every time I went. 'Will you look up in the Oxford Dictionary the meaning of this word.' And I'd go and I'd just copy the definition, the whole thing, drew the Greek and all that business" (68). When Stevens visited libraries, we might assume that he did this kind of work himself.

⁴See also entry for *curulis* in Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary*, which Stevens consulted for Latin words. He owned this dictionary and thought it so useful that he even gave a copy to Robert Frost (L 275).

⁵Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989). All references to this text appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *OP*.

⁶Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966). All references to this text appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *L*.

⁷Richard P. Adams discusses the "reality" of Tehuantepec with regard to the poet's imaginative processes, in "Pure Poetry: Wallace Stevens' 'Sea Surface Full of Clouds,'" *Tulane Studies in English* 21 (1974): 92-94.

⁸See the letter to Ronald Lane Latimer in which he says, "I am not particularly fond of reading travel books" (L 288). I believe that Stevens simply lied about his interest in travel writing, perhaps to keep readers from looking in that direction for sources. For example, Stevens' letters document his ongoing "affair" with Ceylon during the correspondence with Leonard C. van Geysel (see L 327). I agree entirely with Jacqueline Vaught Brogan, who says in "Stevens and Stevenson: The Guitarist's Guitarist," *American Literature* 59 (May 1987): 230, "I should note that although the question of influence is always subversive, it is especially so in the case of Stevens, who often thwarted his contemporaries' efforts to discover his 'sources.' In one of his more blatant lies, Stevens wrote to José Rodríguez Feo that he didn't 'read a line' of 'other peoples' poetry at all' . . . Despite his fear that his readers might become mere talliers of allusions, our sense of Stevens' artistry has been deepened rather than diminished by our growing knowledge of his intellectual and artistic precursors."

⁹For more information on the ways in which Stevens used his correspondences with friends in his poetry, see George S. Lensing, *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 226-41. See also Alan Filreis

on "The Postcard Imagination," in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 207-41.

¹⁰Paul Bloomfield, ed., *The Mediterranean: An Anthology* (London: Cassell and Company, Ltd., 1935). See Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 2 (1978): 58.

¹¹Bloomfield, ed., *The Mediterranean*, 8.

¹²Bloomfield, ed., *The Mediterranean*, 25.

¹³Leigh Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, ed. J. E. Morpurgo (London: The Cresset Press [1949]), 305.

¹⁴All translations from Horace's *Odes* are from the Loeb Classical Library edition, *Horace: The Odes and Epodes*, trans. C. E. Bennett (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), 65, 119.

¹⁵Hunt, 390.

¹⁶Hunt, 390-91.

¹⁷Filreis, 236-38. There is further evidence in Stevens' poetry that he specifically intends the word "legend" to suggest books and reading; for example, see "The Comedian as the Letter C": "The book of moonlight is not written yet / Nor half begun . . . / Leave room, therefore, in that unwritten book / For the legendary moonlight that once burned / In Crispin's mind" (*CP* 33-34).

¹⁸Marianne Moore, "On Wallace Stevens," *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (New York: Viking Penguin, Inc., 1986), 581.

Images of Sound in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens

ANCA ROSU

THE EXTRAORDINARILY COMPLEX matter of sound in Wallace Stevens' poetry has normally been approached through the idea of one or another dominant opposition—between, for instance, sound as brute noise and as music (Roger Ramsey), between “natural” and “artificial” sound (John Hollander), between the sound of speech and the silence of writing (Terrance King), or between objective and subjective reality as these are fused or dissolved by sound in Stevens' verse (Lea Hamaoui). Nor is it difficult to see why the notion of such reigning oppositions has dominated discussion of sound in Stevens: they are all essential to a logic of poetic representation that Stevens wants to call into question in a certain radical way, such that epistemological breakdown or dissolution becomes, within the context of a modernism haunted by questions of “reality,” the great subject of his poetry.

Yet the ultimate truth about Stevens' verse, I want to suggest, lies in the way it operates to dissolve or discredit all such traditional oppositions between sound and sense, meaning and meaninglessness, and thus to lay bare the alternative domain of reality that otherwise remains perpetually veiled by all logics of representation or systems of signification as such. It is with this alternative domain that the “sound image,” as I shall be calling it, is associated in Stevens' poetry, a domain that comes into view only when we have seen the level at which sound operates at once to dissolve a certain epistemological order traditionally associated with poetic representation while summoning into existence another—the unrepresented, the (otherwise) unrepresentable—in its place.

In what follows, I should like to look with something like microscopic attentiveness at this operation of sound in Stevens' verse, and simply to say at the outset that the method of reading exemplified in my analysis, what might be called a method of *un*reading followed by a *rereading* or *reconstitution* in terms of underlying sound patterns, is, I think, nothing other than the primary mode of comprehension demanded by the poems themselves. My argument concerning the “sound image” is, in effect, about the outcome of such a process of reading, the manner in which sound works in Stevens to dissolve certain normative notions or schemes of reality while gesturing, ultimately, towards something that lies beyond them.

A poem that permits us to glimpse this process at work in an exemplary light is “Autumn Refrain,” in which sound works to dissolve a certain representation of reality associated with the Romantic sonnet, a particular idea of nature as simultaneously constituted by external world and subjective mood, by subverting conventions honored by both the sonnet as a

traditional form and by Romanticism as a distinct movement in English poetry. For Stevens' poem, as it appeared in *The Collected Poems*, containing fourteen lines and written in slightly-varied iambic pentameter, so closely observes the formal conventions of a Romantic sonnet concerning nightingales and evening sadness that it might, in first instance, be taken almost as an outright parody:

The skreak and skritter of evening gone
And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun,
The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and moon,
The yellow moon of words about the nightingale
In measureless measures, not a bird for me
But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
I have never—shall never hear. And yet beneath
The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
Being and sitting still, something resides,
Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
And grates these evasions of the nightingale
Though I have never—shall never hear that bird.
And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,
The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound.

(CP 160)

But there is more than parody here, for the conventions are not only reversed in the theme or strategically disobeyed in the meter; they are also "discussed" in a manner that betrays an analytic purpose. Although this would-be sonnet is most of the time dominated by its plaintive tone, while intelligibility is rendered vague by repetitions, there is an attempt to distinguish pairs of opposites, a clearly analytical step. The opposition between real and imagined, natural and artificial, is sketched in the contrast between the "skreak and skritter of evening" and the song of the nightingale. The latter seems to be privileged by virtue of the fact that it belongs to literary tradition, whereas the former is trivialized as a source of quotidian annoyance. It is at the end of the day, when these irritating sounds begin to disappear together with the agitation and distraction that stands in the way of mental concentration. Paradoxically, the speaker's attention is directed towards the perception of a sound he has never encountered except in poetry. And the paradox is double, since the sound he wants to "hear" is only the fiction or "image" of a sound which could only mentally be "seen."

The speaker's mental concentration is only a stage of a meditation made possible by silence. In its own turn, it is disturbed and distracted not by literal "noise" but by the interposition of memory and fictionality. Because the song of the nightingale is a fiction descending from Romantic poetry and is present only as a memory, its fictionality stands in the way of its

perception—"I have never—shall never hear that bird"—in the same fashion as the residuum of the "real" sounds does. Reduced to a residuum, surviving only as a memory of their immediacy, the "real" sounds become virtual fictions themselves, even as the song of the nightingale begins almost to take on reality in the silence that the speaker so intently listens to. The "real" sound, passing into silence, has been semi-fictionalized while the fictional one, which has become an object of inward perception in spite of its fictionality, acquires the same uncertain status. We do not know if "that desolate sound" at the end of the poem is the song of the nightingale or the "skreak and skritter" of the grackles. The opposition between fictional and real, artificial and natural, is thus dissolved, frustrating rather than satisfying the expectation of an analytical distinction which its occurrence, in the first place, created. We are left, in short, not only with a failure of the language to deal with reality but with a failure of the whole process of apprehending reality, of distinguishing between real and fictional.

As one should expect in this context, sound and silence represent another pair of opposites. But instead of maintaining this opposition, the poem moves towards an awareness that silence is only the other face of sound. In the speaker's present meditative mood, stillness comes to mediate between reality and fiction, to facilitate perception, be it of the intellectual or of the sensory kind, so that in the end stillness itself is the only perceivable "reality." The intense concentration on the act of perception makes its object disappear and offers itself as the only possible end of cognitive activity. Sound, on the other hand, is perceived as noise, as a disturbance of the concentration necessary to a mental act, being in many ways the physical counterpart of the mental turmoil that is preventing the speaker from making distinctions among his present perceptions. Yet, even when we consider it in this way, the opposition is dissolved, because the stillness cannot be achieved but "in the key of that desolate sound."

The poem as a whole, meanwhile, has its own "sound" which forms the recognizable pattern of a sonnet. This undercuts the speaker's apparent inability to compose a sonnet with the limited inspiration provided by the homely grackle. For the speaker's efforts are definitely directed towards the composition of a romantic sonnet. Although "Autumn Refrain" was initially published as a fifteen line poem (Holly Stevens' edition presents it in that form), it can be inferred that the fourteen line version was Stevens' final choice. The line "The stillness that comes to me out of this, beneath" (*Palm* 95) may have been omitted for its sheer clumsiness, but it may also demonstrate that Stevens wanted the poem to be a sonnet. However, determining Stevens' intention is beside the point in the present argument which is concerned with the poem's effect, with the intentions that can be inferred from its final form. The poem's rhythm, even as it hints at parodic intent, creates and maintains the expectation of a sonnet, thus working to sustain the very form its discursive aspect undermines.

At an even more fundamental level is the sound pattern produced by repetition, of which there are several important types in the poem. Some of the words are repeated in quick succession or at short intervals, as in "the moon and moon, / The yellow moon" or "not a bird for me / But the name of a bird." In the second half of the poem the word "still" and the related "stillness" zig-zag among the other words as if they wanted to dominate this part of the discourse or maybe to suggest that they have a dominant place in the speaker's mind. There are also words that are repeated partially in derivatives like "name of a nameless air," "measureless measures," "still" and "stillness," "resides" and "residuum." They give the impression of attracting one another's presence, as echoes do. And this is not a purely phonic coincidence because it has meaningful implications. The sameness of the sound creates identity between words which otherwise find themselves in most diverse logical relations. "[N]ame of a nameless" and "measureless measures," for instance, contain contradictory terms, and their sound similarity not only obscures the contradiction but mystifies the reference as well. In "still" and "stillness" the shift of grammatical category accentuates the difference contained in any repetition, whereas "reside" and "residuum" send us to distant etymologies that validate the sound coincidence.

In everyday conversation such repetitions would give one the feeling that the speaker was hesitating, that he could not find words for what he had to say, or conversely, that he had nothing to say and was thus mechanically deriving every word from a previous one without following the sense. The fact that we have to do with a sonnet does not prevent us from forming expectations that we would have from a conversational situation, since the classical sonnet, as well as its romantic form, contains a "theme" and an "argument," a lyrical communication indeed, but a communication nonetheless. It does not often allow for repetition, and even when it does, the repetition is felt as an emphasis, whereas Stevens' repetitions have nothing to do with emphatic intent. Here, repetition robs the message of its pointedness and discredits the speaker's authority; at the same time, it mystifies the content of the communication.

But there is another type of repetition in the poem which produces a different effect. Groups of words are repeated incrementally:

*But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
 I have never-shall never hear . And yet beneath
 The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
 Being and sitting still, something resides,
 Some skreaking and skittering residuum,
 And grates these evasions of the nightingale
 Though I have never-shall never hear that bird .
 And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,
 The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound.*

(emphasis added)

While the echo-like repetitions may be attributed to the speaker's hesitancy, the incremental ones make us recognize a pattern and a certain incantatory quality encountered elsewhere in Stevens' poetry. The sound pattern acquires power here not only because it becomes more obvious, but also because it occurs at a point in the poem when the speaker seems utterly to have lost control over language. The multiplication of negatives and the repetitiveness of his utterance seem to suggest a failure for which the poem has been preparing us from the start. For everything now begins to suggest that this is the voice of a modern poet, all too acutely aware of a reality that contradicts his romantic aspirations. Therefore, from the very first line we may suspect that this poem will not achieve a logical or rhetorical closure, that its message will not be rounded up. And the end will indeed confirm this expectation if we take it for its "message" value, but now the very poetic form, which through repetition of sound has given the poem status as a self-contained aural unit, compels us to forget the expected failure. For the last line, which literally includes most of the repeated words, is heard as a conclusion in an alternative mode, with the circling effect of the repeated phrases making the form cohere on its own, as in an oral poem where "patterns of repetition can provide structure and coherence . . . a necessary aspect in a medium as ephemeral as the spoken or sung word" (Finnegan 103).

Through its repetitions, the poem thus acquires an aural/oral intelligibility which is clearly distinct from the intelligibility of an utterance which attempts to represent a world external to itself. According to Gilles Deleuze, within the conceptual frame of representation, repetition can be defined only in a negative way: "One (language) speaks because one (the word) is not real. . . . One repeats because one cannot hear. As Kirkegaard put it, this is a kind of deaf repetition, or rather a repetition for the deaf, deaf words, deaf nature, deaf unconscious. The forces that ensure the repetition, that is the multiplicity of things corresponding to one concept that remains always the same, can, in a representation, be determined only negatively" (347).

Such repetition is mechanical and excludes the difference as it presupposes an identity of the repeated elements with the concept. Deleuze calls this kind of repetition "naked" and distinguishes it from the kind of "clothed" repetition which includes the difference. Such is the repetition one can find in nature, and one can define positively as evolution. For in nature, every element that repeats does so under a guise which includes the previous one but also differentiates itself from it. Under this aspect, "repetition constitutes the power of language, and far from being explained in a negative manner by a default of nominal concepts, it implies an Idea of poetry that is always excessive. . . . It is thus as function of its most positive and ideal powers that language organizes its whole system as a clothed repetition" (373).

What has emerged in the above reading of the poem can be seen as a transformation of the linguistic representation into the kind of excessive poetry that Deleuze describes. The mechanical, naked repetitions become clothed, obliging our attention to shift from representation to "excessive poetry" and to search for meaning there. And in this context it would not be inappropriate, I think, to call meaning a "sound image" by way of differentiating it from the "deaf" image/meaning of representation.

Due to the sound's complexity, we as readers may achieve the condition towards which the speaker himself aspires: the stillness in which one can hear. For as long as we are interested in the unavoidably fictional representation, we shall experience the sense of failure in the same way the speaker does. But as soon as the effort to follow the images becomes too hard to sustain, we are prepared to yield to the sound, to perceive its incantatory power. As R. P. Blackmur points out, the sound of Stevens' poems never assumes a total privilege that would eliminate intelligibility: "Somewhere between the realms of ornamental sound and representative statement, the words pause and balance, dissolve and resolve. . . . The ambiguity of this sort of writing consists in the double importance of both sound and sense where neither has direct connection with the other but where neither can stand alone" (Ehrenpreis 63). Thus Stevens cannot be accused of excessive concern with the form at the expense of meaning. After debating Stevens' preoccupation with Croce's idea of "pure poetry," George S. Lensing observes: "Stevens' defense of his work in terms of its variously contrived effects ('sensations,' 'images & sounds,' 'gaudiness,' 'Feeling of the words') underscores the importance of a special craft to him, the sound of a poem, how it was arranged on the page, and how it engaged the reader in all its attributes. Such concerns do not invalidate his many remarks on the meaning of poems; in absolute terms, Stevens was never a maker of pure poetry" (299).

The "contrived effect" of sound does not only allow meaning to develop but actually produces it. For it is sound that brings us to the stage where the distinctions between fiction and reality are transcended, and by virtue of the word's power, there is one single "reality," that *quasi* mythical realm in which things exist because they are spoken of. And we may even be able to "hear that bird," the nightingale that poems speak of, unhindered by the noise of any grackles, because neither grackles nor nightingales can *be* before a poem speaks of them. The sound silences the "noise" of the fiction the poem otherwise constructs, and allows us to perceive a reality beyond the physical world.

The sound effect resulting from repetition seems to be at work in most of the poems that have sound as their subject, but, for the purposes of this essay, I will confine my discussion to such poems which belong to Stevens' early career. For an engagement with his later verse would complicate the argument beyond the scope of this paper. My next example is "Domination

of Black," a poem about which Stevens wrote: "I am sorry that a poem of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds that it contains. A mind that examines such a poem for its prose contents gets absolutely nothing from it" (*L* 251). But the habit of reading for the "prose contents" is hard to ignore, and perhaps the poem's effect would not be possible beyond it. Although the sound pattern may strike the reader from the start, attention is first drawn to the status of sound as a metaphor of an enigma presented in visual terms. The poem opens with a setting reminiscent of the situations in which stories are told: "At night, by the fire . . ." This sounds like a promise to tell a story, and for the whole of the first stanza, one can get the illusion that the narration is on the way. We could even tell the genre of this story: a bit from the dark side, one of those stories about giants or dragons that eat human flesh and produce a kind of turmoil when they come upon the scene:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.
(*CP* 8)

It would seem that this is the description of an optical feast, a real, moving rainbow: the colors of the leaves and those of the fire which will be matched in the second stanza by the colors of the peacock's tail. But, curiously enough, although Stevens wants us "to get heavens full of the colors" (*L* 251), with the exception of "black" in the title, no other color is named. The speaker defines them by mentioning the objects to which they belong, and thus the visual appeal of the colors is doubly mediated. If we are to imagine the colors, we have to use our mind's eye not merely to replace the name by the picture, but to compose the picture and fill in the colors as well. This is a visual space of the mind: if we "see" a lot of colors, it is because we are used to identifying the objects mentioned in the poem by association with a multitude of colors. So that in trying to compose the picture, we are already engaged in an "act of the mind" (*CP* 240). The description of the room, this scene itself, solicits an intellectual activity similar to seeing.

The feeling that we are engaged in an act of cognition is also created by the presence of the analogies that grow in complexity as the poem ad-

vances. At first, there is the analogy between the colors of the fire—the element present to the speaker’s senses—and the colors of the leaves in the fall. It is not clear whether the leaves are just hidden from the view, outside, or reside only in the speaker’s memory. In any case they are not present to him. It appears that the speaker would engage us in a simple intellectual operation—to look at something and remember a similar image—but he does not stop at observing this simple resemblance that can have only a limited significance. The memory of the cry of the peacocks brings to mind the peacock’s tail which makes the speaker observe another resemblance:

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.

(CP 8-9)

This resemblance is more remote, as it is not based on the strict coincidence of colors, but is only suggested by their variety and movement. The fact that this resemblance is not so obvious makes us look again for some significance to it. In any communication, there is a presupposition of relevance (Levinson 101-02): there must be a reason why these things are seen under the same aspect, a sense to this resemblance, or the speaker would not bring it up. This makes us expect a revelation, but the poem, instead of progressing towards an answer, seems to get caught in a pattern of repetitions:

I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?
(CP 9)

The only sense of these repetitions seems to be that everything is reminiscent of everything else. The colors and shapes in “Domination of Black” represent and are represented, become in turn vehicles and tenors not of

a metaphor but of a chain of metaphors. Instead of one single correspondence which would give us the key to the cipher, we get a chain of correspondences. Each of them has the potential to represent the others, but none of them gets this privilege, and consequently they “mean” nothing. This may be the perfect example of what Deleuze calls “clothed” repetition, as there is no “concept” here that the words reproduce and remain identical with. Representation is subverted by its own multiplication, and repetition is the clothing of a phenomenon/word in the guise of a new one. The metaphoric chain itself comes close to being metamorphic, because, while representing each other, the colors of the fire, the leaves, and the peacock’s tail transform into each other and participate in the same movement.

The auditive analogy, already present in the first stanza, does not give a sense to this chaining, but raises more questions. The story that we have been led to expect loses its contours while the description of the setting expands into aural imagery. As the colors before, the visual and the aural are transforming into each other in synesthetical combinations: the hemlocks are loud and full of the cry of the peacocks. Thus, the sound does not get the chance to become the opposite of the visual effect, since from the point of view of communication it remains equally opaque and resistant to intelligence. The last stanza pushes the analogies even further by adding some cosmic elements to the series:

Out of the window,
I saw how the planets gathered
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
I saw how the night came,
Came striding like the color of the heavy hemlocks[.]
I felt afraid.
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks.
(CP 9)

The resemblance between the colors in movement and the planets is even more remote than the one between the leaves and the peacock’s tail: movement is probably the only common feature of the two images. This remoteness makes the comparison sound like a riddle and creates the expectations for one: that it has an answer, and we are supposed to find it. This is why, although there is no question being asked here, we feel that we are called upon to answer one. Some critics find it convenient to equate the answer to this question with death: “Death is the ‘Domination of Black,’ felt in the cry of the peacocks which haunts the mind of the lonely, isolated poet. . . . There are few modern poems which better evoke the experience of cosmic fright. The turning world, caught in the motion of leaves (and through an ominous anaphora), enshrouds the poet in fear, and the refrain

of the crying peacocks echoes through the 'color of heavy hemlocks' to catch a melancholic struggle of the self with its fate" (Riddel 86).

The suggestion of death is very strong indeed, but death seems to take a place in the chain of metaphors already existent in the poem. For as in the case of the other metaphors, we cannot tell if "death" is tenor or vehicle, whether the poem was written to represent death as enigma, or death is just one more enigma that remains undeciphered like "the color of the heavy hemlocks" or "the cry of the peacocks." The poem ends more or less where it began, with the memory of the mysterious cry that, instead of being interpreted with the help of the images, renders them mysterious too.

But as in "Autumn Refrain," the vagueness of the meaning as well as the possibility of multiple interpretations attracts attention to the poem's sound patterns. Repetition or near repetition forms the basis of a powerful sound effect that changes the register in which meaning has to be considered. Due to the irregular pattern of these repetitions, our action of following the communication of the poem is considerably slower and less significant than usual. The descriptive progress of the first stanza is interrupted by the entrance of what seems to be the main character of the drama which promises to develop on the scene: "the color of the heavy hemlocks." The second stanza, although moving to the description of a new element—"the tails of the peacocks"—merely picks up where the description was interrupted by repeating almost identically: "Were like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind." And, as if imagination had been exhausted, the next verse repeats incrementally: "In the twilight wind."

Because the description is done in the same words, the advance towards a new term in the chain of analogies is canceled or reduced to the bare minimum. By virtue of this sameness in description, the "tails of the peacocks" become not analogous but identical with the leaves and the fire. This identity blocks any advance on the cognitive plane—an advance which the poem has made us expect—since the analogy that could have said something, could have had a "sense," is now canceled. For there is nothing to distinguish these peacock tails from the leaves and the fire, nothing that their resemblance with the first two images could reveal. This contradicts one's expectations, for the purpose of comparing one object to another is to discover its otherwise hidden qualities. In a quite unnerving way for the analyst, the question that starts with "Was it a cry against the twilight" is completed only at the end of the stanza, and it actually forms a tautology. Its direct reference to the cry of the peacocks is wearing off, as the speaker tries to define it better:

I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,

Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks?
(CP 9)

The cry does not make sense without the repetitions and the correspondences that accompanied it in the first place, and the contradiction that the end of the question contains—the cry ends up to be against the hemlocks with which it had almost been identified—does not really matter, as long as we, as readers, can hold on to the same context that validates the existence of the cry for us. After having been caught in the pattern of these repetitions, our alertness to the logic of the question is slackened, and we do not even notice the contradiction. We begin to take the repeated “Turning” of flames, leaves, or tails for granted and accept it without questioning.

The leaves turn, and this “Turning” begins to look unquestionably “real,” perhaps because the repetition of this word is in itself a turning, a coming back made significant by the very gesture of repetition. For repetition makes us presuppose an original in whose “reality” we are ready to believe, even if we ignore it. Surrounded, closed in by the “Turning” of the leaves, and by its own repetition, the cry becomes a nothingness out of which a benevolent God might create the world, a beginning of a word, or the word that was in the beginning. And like all beginnings, it is frightening, not because the cry of some peacocks is the best metaphor for fear, or can best “represent” it, but because, placed among the repetitions of “Turning,” it produces a void, an enigma that threatens to absorb us. Against the void, the nothing of the beginning, we can only repeat, repeat the gesture of a divine agency which we suppose to have been there and created everything out of nothing. A cry is a word without meaning, a non-word uttered before or beyond language. And only by being repeated can this cry become something, a “real” cry, “a cry against the hemlocks.” The process of cognition enacted by this poem seems to end in an enigma that blocks its progress and to be caught in a circle, as its final images are similar if not identical to those of its beginning. The poem dramatizes a language failure: faced with the nothing of beginnings one cannot represent. But this failure is even more dramatic than the unsuccessful attempt to make language correspond to reality. For what seems to fail here is the very effort to understand, to “know” reality or nature.

The confrontation of the image of sound with the actual sound pattern of the poem thus generates questions about cognitive processes, about the very nature and status of knowledge, and we may wonder at such concerns

in a poetic work. That knowledge should be identified with poetry is a sort of paradox in modern times. In a section of *A Grammar of Motives* dedicated to the imagination, Kenneth Burke notes that modern thought is deeply permeated by "scientism." Although modernist theories of poetry try to define it by opposition with science, they have their root in a "scientific" view of life. Burke's example happens to be Stevens' essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" where the latter defines imagination in terms that can easily be identified as "scientific": "The important thing for our present purposes," comments Burke, "is to note that the key term 'imagination' here figures in a theory of poetry that is basically scientist. For poetry is here approached in terms of its search for 'truth' as a 'view' of reality, as a kind of 'knowledge'" (225).

Burke's observations may be accurate so far as the respective essay goes, since one can indeed see in Stevens' theoretical writings a tendency to place poetry in competition with science and philosophy. Some of his poems also refer to poetry as "a kind of 'knowledge.'" In "Man and Bottle," for instance, poetry appears as the satisfaction of reason and as the only product of the human mind strangely involved in violent action. But Stevens' poems do not lack that quality of "act" that Burke finds essential for genuine poetry, and their action, as described above, seems to reveal what T. J. Reiss calls "the uncertainty of analysis," the doubts about the possibility and validity of representation. They bring to a ritual failure representations of reality based on the scientism of Stevens' century, albeit covered by Romantic overtones, and hint towards the possibility of another epistemological horizon.

Gerald Bruns talks about the possibility of reading Stevens "without epistemology," if we define epistemology loosely as "a concern for how the mind links up with reality" (24). Indeed, according to such a definition, epistemology becomes cumbersome for reading Stevens. But what I want to suggest here is that an even looser definition—epistemology as a way of conceiving of knowledge—would permit the acceptance of the idea that different epistemologies may exist in different cultural spaces. If there is a way of conceiving of knowledge for Stevens, it belongs to a cultural space that could be deemed as poetic rather than "scientist." And, to follow up on Bruns's argument, in such a space one aspires to, if one does not achieve, what Bakhtin calls monoglossia, a language in which one's voice has absorbed the voices of the others to the point of annihilating them. This is why in my argument, I actually started from the changes in the discursive modality which, from the reader's point of view, come first and produce the change in the way one conceives of knowledge. For what we perceive as failing in Stevens' poems is not only the visual (sensory) image in the restricted sense whose sharpness declines as representation advances, but also the whole conception that assimilates cognitive activity to seeing. There is a whole "visual" code that collapses because it is pushed

beyond itself, and it is ever so subtly replaced by an excessive poetry, a kind of "aural" language made fuller and more significant by the clothing of its repetitions. Beyond the deafness of representation, the sound of language sustains its poetic sense in audibility.

Rutgers University

Works Cited

- Bruns, Gerald L. "Stevens without Epistemology." In *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi, 24-40. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Burke, Kenneth. *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Différence et répétition*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968. [My translation.]
- Ehrenpreis, Irvin, ed. *Wallace Stevens. A Critical Anthology*. New York: Penguin Books, 1972.
- Finnegan, Ruth. *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- Hamaoui, Lea. "Sound and Image in Stevens' 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself.'" *Comparative Literature Studies* 17 (1980): 251-59.
- Hollander, John. "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound." In *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel, 235-55. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.
- Lensing, George S. *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.
- Levinson, Stephen C. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- King, Terrance. "'Certain Phenomena of Sound': An Illustration of Wallace Stevens's Poetry of Words." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 20 (1978): 599-614.
- Ramsey, Roger. "Sound and Music: Stevens' *Harmonium*." *Contemporary Poetry* 2, 3 (1977): 67-74.
- Reiss, Timothy J. *The Uncertainty of Analysis: Problems in Truth, Meaning and Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.
- Riddel, Joseph N. *The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Knopf, 1954.
- . *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Knopf, 1966.
- . *The Necessary Angel*. New York: Random House, 1951.
- . *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1972.

Repetition and "Going Round" with Wallace Stevens

MARY DOYLE SPRINGER

The love of repetition is the only happy love . . . It has not the disquietude of hope, the anxious adventuresomeness of discoverers, nor the sadness of recollection; it has the blessed certainty of the instant . . . Repetition is reality, and is the seriousness of life.

—Soren Kierkegaard

I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be.

—Gertrude Stein

You will always have the touching beauty of a first time, if you aren't congealed in reproductions. You will always be moved for the first time, if you aren't immobilized in any form of repetition. . . . [W]e are made for endless change. Without leaps or falls, and without repetition.

—Luce Irigaray

Perhaps,
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,
But he that of repetition is most master.

—Wallace Stevens

EPIGRAPHS AT WAR, AS THESE ARE, might seem not to serve the proper function of epigraphs, which in this case is to point the way to a view we might take of repetition and circularity in the poems of Wallace Stevens. Actually the apparent contradictions, when examined closely, are not so contradictory as they seem; and they point up a considerable subtlety of modern critical thought about repetition as a feature of both life and poetry.

Beginning with the quotation from Stevens, readers of the body of his poetry will recognize at once that the figure of the "man-hero" is almost never a hero for Stevens, is always an "exceptional monster," a statue in the square whom he would wish to replace with a Chaplinesque figure in baggy pantaloons,¹ and with the cultivation of a self that is modestly of this world, a poet self, not a "man" staring down from some ideal height of the past. Since Stevens is himself a master of repetition of both sound and thought, it follows that what he is denigrating in repetition is still

wide open to analysis. "[H]e that of repetition is most master" (CP 406) is not only not a hero, but is denigrated for mastery of a kind of reiteration that fixes things in more and more layers of bronze, in a "withered scene." As we take down "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,"

We say
This changes and that changes. Thus the constant

Violets, doves, girls, bees and hyacinths
Are inconstant objects of inconstant cause
In a universe of inconstancy. This means

Night-blue is an inconstant thing. The seraph
Is satyr in Saturn, according to his thoughts.
It means the distaste we feel for this withered scene

Is that it has not changed enough. It remains,
It is a repetition.

(CP 389-90)

Devoted to change, from early on he advocates the "ignorant man," he who can never be master of repetition-as-recollection because he sees the world afresh each time:

You must become an ignorant man again
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye . . .
(CP 380)

"[A]gain" is a key word here, because it suggests a *repeated* experience but one which is to be denied the quality of repetition in any way that we can call repetitious. When the sun returns "again," the value of the ignorant eye is not to see it again in the same way. It returns not as we saw it before, but "In the difficulty of what it is to be" right now. In later lines Stevens spells this out over and over (but not, so to speak, repeatedly): "The freshness of transformation is / The freshness of a world" which has "these beginnings, gay and green" (CP 397-98). The speaker warns that for the supreme fiction to "Give Pleasure," its poet must know that

To sing jubilas at exact, accustomed times,
To be crested and wear the mane of a multitude
.....

This is a facile exercise.

Facile because it is repetitious, and repetitiousness is the stuff of custom, exactness, tradition, "the bleakest ancestor," sunk in "exercise."

But 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 . . .
(CP 398)

That rising sun, that "freshness of a world," is set up by Stevens against the

Red-in-red repetitions never going
Away, a little rusty, a little rouged,
A little roughened and ruder, a crown

The eye could not escape, a red renown
Blowing itself upon the tedious ear.
An effulgence faded, dull cornelian

Too venerably used. That might have been.
It might and might have been. But as it was,
A dead shepherd brought tremendous chords from hell

And bade the sheep carouse. Or so they said.
Children in love with them brought early flowers
And scattered them about, no two alike.
(CP 400)

The brilliance of the passage lies in the use of repetition, partly used repetitiously ("That might have been. / It might and might have been"), to contrast with the children and their flowers. Children are uninvolved with "Red-in-red repetitions" (the color of brazen insistence). Children bring "early flowers," and "no two alike."

Here again we have key words. Gertrude Stein, the most famous repeater in American literature, speaks sturdily of her belief that "there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be." No two recurrences are alike—what looks and sounds like repetition is actually what Stein calls "beginning again and again," with a new insistence, with the freshness of children, and not what "might and might have been." Freshness arises from new beginnings in what Stein calls a "continuous present," which is by definition not repetitious in any sense of harking dully, changelessly backward. Stein writes that "it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis," and "That is what makes life that the insistence is different." She is compatible with Stevens in his feminine preference for space over time, when she speaks of "keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking."²

Luce Irigaray, in the epigraph above, captures the quality of freshness and change that Stevens and Stein are after, but she sees repetition as the antithesis of change, and she seriously misses the possibility that repetition can and does change in its quality of emphasis and insistence. She misses, too, both the pleasures and dangers of circularity, the kindred subject of this essay. For her, to repeat is to be “congealed in reproductions,” and the price she exacts for the “touching beauty of a first time” is never to be “immobilized in *any form* of repetition.”³ She believes, even more strongly than Stevens, that the linear repeating of “exact, accustomed times,” wearing the “mane of a multitude” (*CP* 398), is a trap. She knows that it is possible to the feminine mode to “retraverse ‘differently,’” but she remains afraid of “their ‘truth’” (masculine) for which she chooses Stevens’ own marble image—it “immobilizes us, turns us into statues.”⁴ She does not see that so strong a phrase as “endless change” is itself suggestive of a pernicious kind of repetition. It bars rest and reconsideration, and casts one into what Kierkegaard calls the “anxious adventuresomeness of discoverers,” for whom every foot of ground is new and fearful.⁵

In “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” section X, Stevens approaches this problem with considerable delicacy. Curiously, the man “Of bronze whose mind was made up and who, therefore, died” is also the very moony man whose “spirit is imprisoned in constant change.”

But ours is not imprisoned. It resides
 In a permanence composed of impermanence,
 In a faithfulness as against the lunar light,

So that morning and evening are like promises kept,
 So that the approaching sun and its arrival,
 Its evening feast and the following festival,

This faithfulness of reality, this mode,
 This tendance and venerable holding-in
 Make gay the hallucinations in surfaces.

(*CP* 472)

This “faithfulness” of reality, “morning and evening,” sunrise and sunset, consists of repetitions that are slightly different each time they occur, but on which we depend “In a permanence . . . of impermanence.” And he is confident enough to say so in a comforting chant of “In . . . In,” of “So . . . So,” of “This . . . This.”

In her chosen dichotomy between “endless change” and the immobilization she sees in repetition, Irigaray misses the positive political importance that might be assigned to repetition in language if it were seen as Julia Kristeva sees it, as one of the “figures germane to carnivalesque language,” producing “a more flagrant dialogism than any other discourse.” Kristeva remarks that all that can be called carnival “challenges

God, authority, and social law; insofar as it is dialogical, it is rebellious." And she comments that "The scene of the carnival [is] . . . the only space in which language escapes linearity (law) to live as drama in three dimensions."⁶ But how is it possible, Irigaray might well ask, for repetition—which in both art and life seems to us clearly bound to linear time—to be in any way three-dimensional? How can it be seen to occupy space, not time, wherein it keeps "Blowing itself upon the tedious ear" as Stevens puts it?

Kierkegaard may be seen to reconcile these seeming opposites. His two most important terms, ones that I shall return to often, are "repetition" and "recollection," defined by him as opposite directions which recurrence can take:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, only in opposite directions; for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas repetition properly so called is recollected forwards. Therefore repetition, *if it is possible*, makes a man happy . . . provided he gives himself time to live and does not at once, in the very moment of birth, try to find a pretext for stealing out of life, alleging, for example, that he has forgotten something.

He goes on to say that

Recollection is a miserable pittance which does not satisfy, but repetition is the daily bread which satisfies with benediction . . . Indeed, if there were no repetition, what then would life be? Who would wish to be a tablet upon which time writes every instant a new inscription? or to be a mere memorial of the past?⁷

The distinction here is well worth studying. It appears that *recollection* is unsatisfying because it merely re-collects what has happened or what has been said before and burdens us with it, since there is no freshness or reconsideration. Even if what is recollected is happy, we enjoy it like a "voluptuary," and it does nothing for us now. *Repetition* is far superior because, having "circumnavigated" life, we do not "sit like an old woman at the spinning wheel of recollection," nor do we "run after butterflies like a boy," but make a conscious choice of repetition (as poets do in their making).⁸

Kierkegaard would, I think, suggest to Irigaray that it would be good to look for a middle ground between what he calls "a mere memorial of the past" (the threat all feminists like Irigaray oppose, and which is opposed in so many of Stevens' poems) and what she calls "endless change"—which, for Kierkegaard is a running after butterflies. The middle ground seems to be a "willed repetition" in which we choose, not the spanking new, but the fresh rediscovery as a basis for renewal.⁹

Here one thinks of Stevens' exquisitely developed image of the new chapel arising in the very heart of old St. Armorer's church. "[T]he province of St. Armorer's," lofty and massive and ancient, had "Fixed one for good in geranium-colored day" and there are still frightening "Reverberations" that "leak and lack among holes . . ." (CP 529). But now there arises a new sound from the old ground, "An ember yes among its cindery noes," a "chapel of breath" with "no sign of life but life, / Itself":

It is like a new account of everything old,
Matisse at Vence and a great deal more than that,
A new-colored sun, say, that will soon change forms
And spread hallucinations on every leaf.
(CP 529)

The newness of the chapel is stressed at every point in the poem. It arises "In the air of newness," "In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness." St. Armorer's cannot match it in vivacity:

St. Armorer's has nothing of this present,
This *vif*, this dazzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming . . .
(CP 530)

Three times it is repeated that it is "his own," that it belongs to the discoverer and not to the past, that it is

The origin and keep of its health and his own.
And there he walks and does as he lives and likes.

If he has such splendid freedom, why must the speaker repeat, almost redundantly, that the new chapel is "his own" and not a possession of the past? It appears that the answer is a very conscious one: what is reliably new is that which arises out of reconsideration, a circling backward and forward from the past. Thus the strongest repetition in the poem is not a butterfly newness that flits onto the scene, but a newness always rising out of a past that one had feared had "Fixed one for good." When one wills repetition of the past, one is able both to absorb it and conquer it with the new. Thus the chapel does not spring up, but "rises from *Terre Ensevelie*" (buried ground), and stands "*underneath St. Armorer's walls*," to subversive effect. That effect speaks to us. We actually hear it as "An ember yes *among its cindery noes*." In the rising confidence of the poem, "It is like a new account of *everything old*," as the Matisse chapel is a radically new account of Christian symbols that makes them over to the speaker as "his own." Rather than repressives from the past, they are like "The first car *out of a tunnel en voyage*." He adds that "Time's given perfections" are not to be ignored but

made to seem like less
Than the need of each generation to be itself,
The need to be actual and as it is.

(CP 529-30; my emphasis)

What is really new is the repeated determination of each generation to define itself. In diction, sound, and thought remarkably akin to Gertrude Stein's, Stevens takes his stand with

That which is always beginning because it is part
Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

(CP 530)

That is, repeatedly. But we are now prepared to understand more fully what Stein means when she says that there is "no such thing as repetition." There is barren recollection—those "Red-in-red repetitions never going / Away, a little rusty" (CP 400), and it is opposed to fruitful repetition which is non-repetitive in that it is "always beginning." It is the truest repetition, paradoxically, in that it is *always* beginning "over and over":

Alpha continues to begin.
Omega is refreshed at every end.

(CP 469)

The poems discussed so far have been used to elucidate Stevens' theory of repetition, which is articulated in a choice of poems whose seeming contradictions I hope to have brought into a congruity, a congruity which shows how subtle are the uses of repetition for those who are thinking as hard about it as Stevens, Kierkegaard, Gertrude Stein, and the French feminists like Irigaray and Kristeva, who have studied the political as well as psychological and aesthetic underpinnings of repetition. Trusting that theory exists for the examination and appreciation of practice, let us turn now to "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" (CP 98), Stevens' most notable poem for the extensive practice of repetition.

There are five sections to the poem, each one beginning with what sounds like, and is, a recollection: "In that November off Tehuantepec . . ." In a mysterious grammatical usage repeated often enough to be considered intentional, a comma occurs at the end of the first line of sections I and III, but not of II, IV, or V. Where it does occur, the sentence continues for a long time; where it does not occur, the sentence is clipped off at the second line, as for example:

I

In that November off Tehuantepec,
The slopping of the sea grew still one night
And in the morning summer hued the deck

And made one think of rosy chocolate
And gilt umbrellas.

.....

II

In that November off Tehuantepec
The slopping of the sea grew still one night.

Thus, verse by verse, though they are equally long, the speaking voice sends an extended wave of memory forward, full of the assonances and alliterations of sea-sound, followed by a clipped retreat, purposely oceanlike. Already in that opening device (section V will “close” the poem on the long wave of reflection), the quality of mere unworked recollection suggested by the specified month and place turns toward the immediately visual, moving, changing, ecstatic, oceanlike, reflective repetition that is the power of the poem as a whole. Unlike the sea which, however moving and changing, moves without thought, the poem depends on the conscious freshenings of repetition provided by the mighty imagination of the speaker. Far from merely recalling the past, he is re-seeing and re-hearing it in shifting colors, sounds, lights, and movements that are occurring in his mind—and provoked by his humor—right now. (Elsewhere Stevens calls the repetitious sound and movement of the sea “a form of ridicule” [CP 180].)

Every verse depends upon new relations between sea and sky. What happens in section V is a rolling together of sea and sky which constitutes a sense of closure only because it is the “freshest” experience of the whole poem. Influenced by a working together of the conjurer-speaker, the “cloudy-conjuring sea,” and the enunciation of this “sovereign” sight when the conch shell sounds its trumpet in “loyal conjuration,” the poem circles and turns toward a “motley” ultimate period, in images of a gorgeous roundness which allow it to be part of “that which is always beginning” (CP 530):

The wind
Of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue

To clearing opalescence. Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.

When we arrive at this closure-of-fresh-disclosure, we are in no way coming to the end of a nostalgic narrative “recollection” of what it was that happened “one night” and the following morning during “that November off Tehuantepec.” Someone is telling about it in the past tense, someone upon whom natural sounds of ocean and sights of sky worked and “made one think,” but who was not merely subject to those forces of

that time, memorable as they are, but in a new burst of sight and sound. The narrative time and story closure that Kristeva calls "paternal Death" are entirely missing from the rolling and reverberating sounds and movement of this poem. There is a shifting consciousness that is both recollecting a time, a place, a night, a morning, a boat deck, and an ocean view, *and* re-imagining it. The speaker speaks intensely and ecstatically, in a space composed of both then and now,¹⁰ and leaves us fraught with the sound of question marks.

The sound of those question marks arouses our own. If it was only "one" night, why is it seen in so many conflicting perspectives? If it was "November," how is it that "summer hued the deck"? Or, given that it was Mexico, was it only "summer-seeming"? Was the "machine / Of ocean" all on one morning by turns "perplexed," "tense," "tranced," "dry," and "obese"? And its color, all on one morning, "Paradisaal green," "swimming green," "sham-like green," "uncertain green," "too-fluent green," "thinking green," and "motley green"? And if all on one memorable night, why is it apparently both followed and not followed by morning at all (III)? All these are meaningless questions just because they are logical rather than about poetry which, especially here, begs to be sensually experienced, in a series of new perspectives imagined out of old memory.

One mysterious part of the experience has to do with the teller who posits repeatedly a separate persona ("Who, then . . . ?"). That separately considered persona has the power not merely to recollect the past as externals of a time and place but—in an intransitive verb powerfully turned transitive—to "evolve[]" the past in a series of conflicting effects that arise from an internal, intimate, darkly French-speaking imagination that wears motley, is carnivalesque ("ingenious and droll"), and is the soul ("*mon âme*") of the poet-speaker, variously his child, brother, life, and love ("*mon amour*"). That soul is made very attractive to us. All the conflicting perspectives—the "greens" that resolve themselves into blues, the various machines of ocean, the chocolate flavors and umbrella colors, the sounds of sloppings, rollings, roundings, and turnings—are "perfected in indolence" by that soul, and not in the spirit of logic. In Kierkegaardian terms, we have a bit of history told to us, repeating itself not recollectively and oppressively, but reflectively, in "fresh transfigurations of freshest blue," in a circulating "*nonchalance divine*."

Bruce Kawin, in his distinguished work on repetition which takes off from Gertrude Stein as well as Kierkegaard, analyzes repetition in *Ecclesiastes* in a manner that could also describe "Sea Surface Full of Clouds":

we find not only some of the finest examples of parallelistic verse . . . but also a deliberate activity of 'returning,' re-examining a situation until a solution is discovered. We have first the repetition, like a tonic in classical music, of the key phrase

["Vanity of vanities" or in our case, "In that November off Tehuantepec"] . . . These returnings never threaten to become repetitious, because each rediscovery is preceded by a conclusion [*"C'était mon enfant, mon bijou, mon âme"*] that, closing the matter for us, frees us to experience each repetition as something new.¹¹

In the light of this, the French italic phrases in the poem are worth further comment since, as italicized "conclusions," they are perhaps the most conspicuous form of repetition in the poem. Nancy Miller writes that "spoken or written, italics are a modality of intensity and stress" and they are also "a form of intonation."¹² In this poem they are both, and especially because they are in French they carry us away from mere "recollection" to the most intimate and pleasurable kind of "repetition" in strange sonorities, in the productive sense described by Kierkegaard. The impression I describe is the more powerful when we notice that Stevens made a conscious poetic choice of italics for these phrases (consciousness evidenced by the fact that in many poems he employs French phrases without italics, as mere slightly ironic twists on English).

In a summary gathering up of our critical terms, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" can be seen as initially a simple "recollection" of what happened that night and morning off Tehuantepec—though also an ingratiating set of sounds to hear over and over—a recollection advanced by reconsideration and reflection, working itself into a fruitful, often happy and humorous "repetition" in Kierkegaard's definition. The poetic process is what Stevens calls "renovation" when he says that "Poetry is a renovation of experience. Originality is an escape from repetition" and that "Poetry constantly requires a new relation" (*OP* 202).

It is a new relation, though not invariably joyful, that occurs in many of his other poems where repetition is a strong feature. For those who wish to study the remarkable variation of Stevens' process of renovation-in-repetition, I call attention especially to "Earthy Anecdote" (*CP* 3), "Domination of Black" (*CP* 8), "The Apostrophe to Vincentine" (*CP* 52), "The Place of the Solitaires" (*CP* 60), "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" (*CP* 66), "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz" (*CP* 121), "Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu" (*CP* 127), "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating" (*CP* 149),¹³ "Parochial Theme" (*CP* 191), "The Candle a Saint" (*CP* 223), "The Hand as a Being" (*CP* 271), "Dutch Graves in Bucks County" (*CP* 290), "Repetitions of a Young Captain" (*CP* 306)—a partial list and a rather staggering one for a poet seeking escape from repetition.

By now our critical eyeglasses will have helped us to see how Stevens conceives that escape in the very midst of remarkably varying patterns of repetition itself. Appropriate to his purposes, rhyme is cumulative in many of the listed poems, just as the other varieties of repetition of sound and

sense are cumulative (defined as the accumulation of small changes in that which is repeated, changes moving toward the ultimate new beginning).

An extremely interesting comparison can be made between the theory and practice of repetition in two late poems that can be seen as related. In "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors" (CP 356) "one" note is repeatedly struck and there is an "unstated theme" which controls each "variation." (Theme-and-variation is the musical analogue which numerous Stevens critics employ for Stevens' repetitions.) The other extreme appears in the very next poem, "Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion" (CP 357), where everything is caught in random, endless change, in a storm where "The air is full of children, statues, roofs / And snow." Totally to lack repetition, as Kierkegaard also understood, is to be "All mind and violence and nothing felt." In the earlier poem, even the most limited recollection can be turned toward repetition that produces a new disclosure. By contrast, chaos and "the wind that lashes everything at once" produce only the mind of a "Ludwig Richter, turbulent Schlemihl," who "knows he has nothing more to think about." In the opposite extremes of these two poems, the poet does perhaps his most conscious thinking about the tension between repetition and freshness. In "Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors," Stevens gives us, in remarkable repetitions of sound and sense, a powerful idea of the narrowness of single, tunnel vision. There is on the scene "one dove, one bass, one fisherman." The bass is a stupid recollector—he lies deep, "still afraid of the Indians," and keeps "looking ahead, upstream, in one / Direction," very like the people in Robert Frost's poem, "Neither Out Far Nor In Deep," who "All turn and look one way."¹⁴ The fisherman has only "one ear" and "is all / One eye, in which the dove resembles the dove" and nothing else. The doves, too, "are singing a single song." And yet a kind of miracle happens: "coo becomes rou-coo, rou-coo."¹⁵ How can such a change occur amid all these narrow-minded, repetitious eyes and ears? Unlike Frost, Stevens differentiates between the animal and the human consciousness that is the speaker who is "Thinking of a Relation" and calls for a "disclosure" to be stated. The disclosure is that the fisherman, however intuitively, is also open to revelation, or at least relation:

In that one eye the dove
Might spring to sight and yet remain a dove.

The fisherman might be the single man
In whose breast, the dove, alighting, would grow still.
(CP 356-57)

The poem is brilliant in its ironic repetition of the word "single" in the next to last line, this time with a connotation of praise. We can then look back and see that the narrowness of the repeated word "one" has gradually been mitigated by the sound-repetition that links "single" to such positive

words as “sing” and “spring.” Thus we, too, are participants in the “disclosure” at which all the repetitions aim. And we have done it by circling back and around to a fresh beginning.

Circularity, turning, “going round,” is for Stevens a concept connected to the anti-heroism and non-closure of reflective repetition in its “freshness.” However, it is important to see that, for him, all circularities, like all repetitions, are not alike. There is a terrifying kind of circularity in which the serpent bites its tail and the movement constitutes closure in its strongest sense of conclusion around tradition and “paternal Death.” On the other hand, circulation without closure of the circle leaves us relaxed in the *jouissance* of the present, open to new possibilities, unthreatened by closure, carried by the pleasures of sound in chanting and other forms of benign repetition.

That is Stevens’ mode. It seems to me that Michel Benamou is much too strong when he says of Stevens that “the circular poems go round and round toward a center, ‘the gold centre, the golden destiny’ . . .”¹⁶ In the context of the poem he is quoting, the poet-speaker posits a new flying angel, one who leaps downward and “*Forgets* the gold centre, the golden destiny,” a new angel indistinguishable from the poet who is “satisfied *without* solacing majesty” of finished beliefs, for whom the “merely going round is a final good” (*CP* 404-05; my emphasis).

“[M]erely,” however, does not suggest carelessness. Robert Pack, a critic not easily matched for his sensitivity to what Stevens was trying to do, helps us understand that not to fix a “centre” does not imply failure to seek an “order” (clearly one of Stevens’ favorite terms). If “In the long run the truth does not matter” for Stevens (*OP* 183), I think it is because it is simply unavailable *as such*, though one’s individual perception of it is not. As Pack puts it:

An object [such as truth] loses its independence as it becomes involved in the particular history of the perceiving mind, and we must begin to speak of the apprehension of this object, for it is seen within a particular psychological and aesthetic reference. From this point on, the higher consciousness comes into play in the further ordering of the apperception. The relationship between the newly perceived object and other remembered [and repeated] objects forms a correspondence, and thus is evolved a complex organization, a conception. It is the discovery and succeeding organization of resemblances and correspondences that for Stevens is the work of poetry, and in this activity lies his most profound pleasure which is also the pleasure of improvisation, of “merely circulating.”¹⁷

Surely Stevens comprehended this principle in his practice. He understood that a circle completing itself could be called one of those (pernicious)

"red-in-red repetitions," in that what goes round returns blankly to its own beginning, without that "clearing," without that "readiness for first bells" (CP 483). In traditionalist poets it is an image of perfection, such as we find in Yeats:

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
There all the serpent-tails are bit,
There all the gyres converge in one,
There all the planets drop in the Sun.¹⁸

In a reverse movement from any use of repetition we find in Stevens, "There" is where we go repeatedly for perfection and closure, for the unity that appears similarly in T. S. Eliot's "In my end is my beginning,"¹⁹ in this case a culmination of a kind. Since perfection is another name for achieved truth, and unity is another term for God in whom change is impossible, the closed circle cannot be expected in Stevens, for whom "The River of Rivers" is "an unnamed flowing," in which "The mere flowing of the water is a gayety, / Flashing and flashing in the sun" (CP 533).

It must also be said that Stevens has his own serpent who, far from biting his tail, is seen as "form gulping after formlessness" (CP 411). It is a darker, earlier image than the river, and we are told that even if the serpent were to prove "master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images," it would be his "poison" that "we should disbelieve / Even that." Adopting herself the serpent image, Luce Irigaray warns, "This passion for an origin that coils around neatly, even at the risk of biting its own tail . . . is not women's passion."²⁰ She also sees here what Stein knows, and what Stevens also knows:

It is an illusion that you can close the circle, return to the same point, the same 'truth.' The truth of sameness, which has always already artfully prescribed the detour needed for its re-cognition.²¹

If Irigaray can say this, she is joining our conclave of disbelievers in recollection and repetitious repetition, though she still has to cope with the extremity of retreating all the way to "endless change."

For Stevens, the serpent represents "form" (CP 411) and an impulse to "order" (CP 403), but subject to our "disbelie[f]," uncoiled as it is in "The moving grass" (CP 411). The ultimate function of the snake is to be "the finding fang" (CP 420), with the implication that there is something new to be found. The gyres do not "converge in one," but rather keep on turning. In my view, it cannot be too often reiterated that Stevens is far from a narrow skeptic who disbelieves in truth as a goal. Capital Truth, however, is for him an unrealizable goal. Truth is never conceived as a fixity and is a useful concept only in movement, a movement not upward to the heavens, but downward toward the reality of earth, which is where

human truth resides in all its perplexity. Mrs. Alfred Uruguay (*CP* 248), in her desire to know her own self in its naked reality, moves upward in her quest; but the rider, the poet, "a figure of capable imagination," rides past her downward, seeking truth in "the imagined land." What truth we can get, we get in mere flashes as the river goes by us, or as we circle inquisitively "the body of a world," a world "Whose blunt laws make an affectation of mind." Mind belongs to "the masculine myths we used to make" about truth and unity, and not to the imagination's "glass aswarm with things going as far as they can" (*CP* 518-19).

This body of the world, this "imagined land," is the same "Fat girl, terrestrial" and round, discovered in "difference," in a "moving contour, a change not quite completed" (*CP* 406). To speak analytically of this roundness is perhaps simply to reiterate in a way that blocks both the sensuality and the imaginative quality of it. Better to hear it in the cumulative repetitions of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." There the self is seen as divided between a tenacious hold on the common earth of the real as perceived in daylight and the "moonlit extensions" into imagined "longed-for lands." There is a repeated conflict between "the land of the elm trees" and "the land of the lemon trees" and it is resolved in a turnaround:

In the land of the lemon trees, yellow and yellow were
Yellow-blue, yellow-green, pungent with citron-sap,
Dangling and spangling, the mic-mac of mocking birds.

In the land of the elm trees, wandering mariners
Looked on big women, whose ruddy-ripe images
Wreathed round and round the round wreath of autumn.

They rolled their r's, there, in the land of the citrons.
In the land of big mariners, the words they spoke
Were mere brown clods, mere catching weeds of talk.

When the mariners came to the land of the lemon trees,
At last, in that blond atmosphere, bronzed hard,
They said, "We are back once more in the land of the
elm trees,

But folded over, turned round."

(*CP* 486-87)

The complexity of the repetitions, their contortions, accumulations, and confusions (it takes at least two readings to straighten out where the mariners are at any given verse), seem to me wonderful in their achievement, in their "beginning again and again," and in their resolution into the freshness of the ultimate "turned round."

Perhaps it is not surprising that here we have also a supreme anticipatory tribute to the feminine semiotic mode described by such critics as Kristeva, a mode very compatible with Stevens' practice of repetition in its resonance, circularity, and denial of closure. Partly the poem exemplifies the mode but also, in a later part of the same poem, it anticipates our contemporary French description of semiotics. The mariner's words here are "mere catching weeds of talk," and later there is a description of speech couched in a series of metaphors:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds
 Not often realized, the lighter words
 In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

 Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music
 In the strokes of thunder . . .

 These are the edgings and inchings of final form,
 The swarming activities of the formulae
 Of statement, directly and indirectly getting at,

 Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet . . .
 (CP 488)

To evoke the spectrum of violet as a simile is to see that "the edgings and inchings of final form" are no more final than the shifting violet tones of evening. It is known already in an earlier poem that "One goes on asking questions" addressed to "an intellect / Of windings round and dodges to and fro" (CP 429). That order of "windings" and "dodges" of thought and sound *is* the order and form in the poems we have been hearing here. Were Luce Irigaray able to hear them, she would hear a response to her plea to let "the feminine" emerge in a "copulative operation between the sexes in language," an operation that would "reject all closure or circularity in discourse" (that which she also calls the linear, "discursive economy." We can readily see that what she means here by "circularity" is the pernicious closed circle against which Stevens' kind of circularity conducts war. As she says, "We can never complete the circuit, explore our periphery: we have so many dimensions." When we hear Stevens' poems in the light of Irigaray's plea for "endless change," we see that her terms "many dimensions" and "multiplicity"²² are made manifest in the poems, and that they are better expressions than "endless change" to describe not only Stevens' poems, but the locus of human happiness in Kierkegaard's description of repetition.

The closer we come to pure poetry (so-called) in Stevens' writing, the more clearly we see this, and thus I end with the first poem from *Harmonium*, one that is sheerly the essence and not the theory of his repetitions and goings round. "Earthy Anecdote" is all repetitive activity and "no

symbolism" (L 204). "Every time the bucks went clattering," the same thing happened: "A firecat bristled in the way." That is a recollection, embellished quickly, however, with a reflection on causality. It was *because* of the firecat that they not only went clattering but "swerved / In a swift, circular line." This is not possibly a closed circle, but only a going round, sometimes "To the left," sometimes "To the right." In a cumulative summary repetition, we then hear the whole thing over again:

The bucks clattered.
The firecat went leaping,
To the right, to the left,
And
Bristled in the way.

Then an unexpected thing happens:

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes
And slept.

(CP 3)

So "ends" the activity of the firecat in a period to the poem. It is all a past tense story which has fulfilled its expectations—a child listening would be able at the end to close his own "bright eyes" and sleep. But not because of linear closure. The pleasure of the poem lies in the forward but circling account which allows us to rest in the suggestive assurance that tomorrow morning the bucks and the firecat will begin again—and again. Not repetitiously, however, for now we know what we did not know when we began this time: the bucks do not simply go clattering forward, they also swerve, one time this way, one time another, because of the firecat's bristling. "Dimensions" are added, turning movement, "multiplicity."

Similarly, in "Domination of Black" (CP 8), there is a repeated "Turning" that evolves from a chant to a passion, and we have a fresh beginning to an old recollection, arising out of the speaker's imagination. The new beginning is darker this time as the passionate turnings end in unresolved questions and images of night come "striding" back to call up the old fear and leave it newly unresolved. But the fear can be said to be contained and mitigated by the magic devices of repetition and turning, that is by poetry itself.

His particular imagination, then, is the crucial agent of the particular force of repetition in Stevens' poetry. Neither repetitive in the old sense that amounts to repetitiousness in certain of the old rhyming poets, nor complacent with comfortable reiteration and stress, Stevens' repetition is a propulsive force which, increasingly, not only goes "round" (CP 149) but goes as far as it can, becoming a "glass" that reflects the teeming world of the moment and not its bounded history. It is a new world that emerges (out of old St. Armorer's, so to speak), and it reverberates most when the

marble statues of the past are “like newspapers blown by the wind” (CP 473), and the River of Rivers flows onward.

Saint Mary’s College of California

Notes

¹See Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 389. Further references to this source will be cited as CP in the text. References to Stevens’ other works employ the following abbreviations: *OP*, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); *L*, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966).

I acknowledge gratefully that this essay was written during a fellowship at the Camargo Foundation in France.

²Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” *Lectures In America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 166, 167, 180. See also “Composition as Explanation” in this same volume.

³Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, tr. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 216 (my emphasis).

⁴Irigaray, *This Sex*, 154, 214.

⁵Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition: An Essay in Experimental Psychology*, tr. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 4.

⁶Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” *Desire In Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, tr. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 79.

⁷Kierkegaard, 5.

⁸Kierkegaard, 5, 6. Few postmodernist thinkers about the perspectival nature of language and event would grant to Kierkegaard so strict a notion of recollection. Old women “at their spinning wheels” may spin out more changes than he recognizes. And we have only to consult any recollection of our own to see how different it may be now from what “actually” happened originally. Poets reflect this intuitively, as almost every repetition by Stevens proves.

⁹Kierkegaard, 6; Irigaray, *This Sex*, 214.

¹⁰Where “now” and “then” are concerned, it is worth noting, as Holly Stevens does, that on the actual voyage which resulted in this poem, Stevens and his wife were “off Tehuantepec” not in November but in October. A small point, but it suggests that even in the specificity of the date lies reflective repetition of Kierkegaard’s kind, and not unworked recollection of what actually happened (*L* 241).

¹¹Bruce Kawin, *Telling It Again and Again: Repetition in Literature and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1972), 39-41.

¹²Nancy Miller, “Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women’s Fiction,” *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 343.

¹³See my discussion of the progress of circularity in this poem: “A Relativity of Angels: Wallace Stevens and Luce Irigaray,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 14, 2 (Fall 1990): 157-58.

¹⁴*The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 301.

¹⁵This is the miracle long ago despaired of in “Depression before Spring” where

ki-ki-ri-ki
Brings no rou-cou,
No rou-cou-cou.

(CP 63)

The incantatory and sometimes jovial sounds of Stevens' repetition of nonsense words constitute a pleasant minor study though, as Eleanor Cook points out, nonsense is too loose a term for the "imitative" sense of these bird sounds (*Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], 18). With such semiotic murmurs language leaves the scene to doves, its superior inhabitants.

¹⁶Michel Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 134. While I think my objection to Benamou's reading of this passage is valid, the remainder of the poem ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," a title already reluctant about finality) warns us against even the finality of "merely going round" as "a final good." When we turn to verse X, the world of Stevens, his beloved "Fat girl," is presented as "the irrational / Distortion, however fragrant, however dear." As for the conviction that "merely going round" is enough, and that "the irrational is rational," all of that holds good only *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; my emphasis)

She is at one and the same time going to be named (by him who said "do not use the rotted names" [CP 183]), is real ("green"), and yet still "fluent" and foreign ("mundo"). Faced with these contradictions, Benamou cannot be called wrong when he says: "Both circle and center, repetition and change, fixity and revolution, Stevens' crystal is a symbol for the conciliation of opposites" (135). Nonetheless they continue to flash and revolve. As Robert Pack puts it, "The name we give her exists only in the present moment" as "the fiction that results from feeling" (*Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958], 113).

¹⁷Pack, 56.

¹⁸*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 284.

¹⁹T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963), 190.

²⁰Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, tr. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 236.

²¹Irigaray, *Speculum*, 261.

²²Irigaray, *This Sex*, 153, 213-14, 210.

The Apparitional Meters of Wallace Stevens

DENNIS TAYLOR

WALLACE STEVENS' METERS are nearly invisible, for a number of reasons. For one thing, meter itself is now mysterious for most readers of poetry. Also, the development of traditional metrical verse into free verse is still a mysterious one. On or about December 1910 human character changed (Woolf 67), and so did our sense of metrical verse form. And this new sense has never been well defined.

Another reason for Stevens' invisible meters is that his poetic practice recasts meter in a way that makes them invisible unless one looks very hard. By this last statement I do not mean that Stevens so avoids normal metrical expectation that one can hardly discern what meter he is following. In fact, some of his poems are quite metrically regular. But Stevens does something remarkable with his meters; he connects them in very original ways with his imaginative sense of form; they share in that sense of form, and interact with his statements about poetic imagination in interesting ways. One paradox of Stevens' meters is that they seem quite conservative (according to Pound and Williams) and yet come to share in some of the most speculative possibilities of free verse forms. Stevens occupies an important place in the great transition from traditional to free verse. Indeed, his whole poetic career epitomizes the great transition, for he began with traditional forms and then varied them in ways that must be carefully understood in order that they be adequately seen. I use "seen" in a visual as well as intellectual sense, with the qualification that we "see" Stevens' metrical forms in a way that is different from the way we see the free verse poems of Pound and Williams.

I propose to chart Stevens' development of a new sense of verse form by tracing the evolution of his early poems and periodically referring to their later development. We can trace the emergence of his new abstract sense of metrical form out of the juvenilia we see him writing in the years before 1915, the year when "Sunday Morning" burst upon the scene, courtesy of Harriet Monroe.

Let me begin with something off the cuff, "Cuff-Notes," sent in a letter to his mother in 1896:

I have seen the grave of Franklin,
And his good-wife Deborah
I was but six-feet away from him
All the potentates of Europe could get no nearer.
Conclusion: I am as happy as a king.

(L 8)

This is silly, with no rhythm or rhyme, with some sense that the syntax is regularized to fit the form, and yet with an eerie likeness to the sorts of visual stanza form we shall be looking at. It is like Schönberg stumbling over some chords in his childhood, and our saying that this forecasts his matured atonal art. Yet there is that odd likeness.

In 1897, Stevens wrote a quatrain $a^2 b^2 a^2 b^2$ beginning:

Long lines of coral light
 And evening star,
 One shade that leads the night
 On from afar.

(SP 16)

It is one of many traditional quatrains the young Stevens will write and shows a traditional metrical skill. Like Kandinsky and other modern painters who influenced him, Stevens began his apprenticeship by first mastering the traditional metrical system. One interesting feature about these traditional lines is that the way they look is not quite how they come to sound. Visually (because of the indentation) we might expect

Long lines of coral light
 And evening star,
 One shade that leads the night
 On from afar.

But the last line keys a different rhythm:

Long lines of coral light
 And evening star,
 One shade that leads the night
 On from afar.

The last line transforms what we thought was rising rhythm into falling rhythm.

Later Stevens will play with rhythms which are hidden, in a sense, within the visual arrangement of the lines. In "The Ordinary Women" in 1922, the strong tetrameter rhythm (hidden slightly under the play with the visual arrangement of the "third" line) mimes the stepping forth of these ordinary women:

Then from their poverty they rose,
 From dry catarrhs, and to guitars
 They flitted
 Through the palace walls.

(CP 10)

A more advanced metrical example (for Stevens) of a quatrain is "To the Roaring Wind" (1917), which plays with the question mark of its own metrical pattern:

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

(CP 113)

In the first three lines we play the traditional metrical adjustment/readjustment game, which after a while gives us the beginning of a truncated common meter stanza:

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

Common meter is the "syllable" or syllable scheme we once "sought," but now we seek the more living speech which crashes through in the last line: "Speak it."

Back to chronology: In 1898, Stevens writes one of many traditional sonnets; indeed there is a kind of explosion of sonnets, about twenty in number written at the turn of the century. Then after several years he writes another sonnet in 1909, entitled "In A Garden," inspired by a fragment of Sappho:

Oh, what soft wings shall rise above this place,
 This little garden of spice bergamot,
 Poppy and iris and forget-me-not,
 On Doomsday, to the ghostly Throne of space!

The haunting wings, most like the visible trace
 Of passing azure in a shadowy spot—
 The wings of spirits, native to this plot,
 Returning to their intermitted Grace!

And one shall mingle in her cloudy hair
 Blossoms of twilight, dark as her dark eyes;
 And one to Heaven upon her arm shall bear
 Colors of what she was in her first birth;
 And all shall carry upward through the skies
 Odor and dew of the familiar earth.

(L 130)

After this there are no more sonnets until we see the following, which is quite familiar:

Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
And the green freedom of a cockatoo
Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
As a calm darkens among water-lights.
The pungent oranges and bright, green wings
Seem things in some procession of the dead,
Winding across wide water, without sound.
The day is like wide water, without sound,
Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
Dominion of the blood and sepulchre.

(CP 66-67)

Not a sonnet exactly, it is fifteen lines (though we remember that George Meredith wrote 16 line "sonnets"); the rhyme has largely disappeared (though there are some fragments left) and the iambic pentameter only slowly becomes apparent. But I would argue that this is an important step toward Stevens' matured sense of stanza form, where he gives the appearance of the sonnet without its aural substance. Later, in 1921, in the poem, "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," the sonnet-looking form in 15 lines comments on itself. The poem begins:

Gloomy grammarians in golden gowns,
Meekly you keep the mortal rendezvous,
Eliciting the still sustaining pomps
Of speech which are like music so profound
They seem an exaltation without sound.

(CP 55)

These still sustaining pomps of speech, urged by the gloomy grammarians, are in fact the traditional sonnet forms, those traditional forms urged by gloomy prosodists; the poem is a kind of exaltation of that sonnet form, its shape without its rhyming structure. The occasional rhyme indicates what this sonnet was once before it became in Stevens this exaltation of abstract form, the abstract of the sonnet without the required sound.

In 1938, "The Man on the Dump" ponders the poetic language that comes out of the dump, and seeks the origins of imagination. The poem begins with a 9 and 11 line stanza form, and concludes with two stanza forms, the first split in two by a midstanza break so that one does not

notice at first its 14 line form; and the last stanza gives us the full uninterrupted form, a 14 line chunk which teases us with occasional rhymes:

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.
One beats and beats for that which one believes.
That's what one wants to get near. Could it after all
Be merely oneself, as superior as the ear
To a crow's voice? Did the nightingale torture the ear,
Pack the heart and scratch the mind? And does the ear
Solace itself in peevish birds? 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*?
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.
(CP 202-03)

The dump produces its hidden sonnets, its "janitor's poems / Of every day," and the man on the dump discusses them as he unearths them. It may seem odd to associate beating an old tin can with writing a sonnet, but it is by means of the old metrical trash that Stevens hopes to get near to a more real voice. So he makes creative game of the stuff of sonnets, nightingales and birds, the dead, poetic diction, and seeks continually to find the point where writing begins, in the "the" which begins the sonnet. These are more than sonnets in blank verse; they are more like sonnet squares, sonnet cut-outs.

"Asides on the Oboe" in 1940 begins by saying: "say that final belief / Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose" (CP 250). Stevens then chooses, and the result is that the first and third stanzas following are these phantom sonnets. The poem ends:

It was as we came
To see him, that we were wholly one, as we heard
Him chanting for those buried in their blood,
In the jasmine haunted forests, that we knew
The glass man, without external reference.
(CP 251)

Stevens is always jarring us with these glass forms, without external reference, which somehow find their appropriate setting in these transparent metrical forms, without specific traditional attributes of rhythm and rhyme. Notice that the second to last line is iambic pentameter, and the last line more roughened, as the form fades out or is transformed.

Is it true that no sonnet appears in *The Collected Poems*? Yes and no. If one pages through, one will see stanzas that look like sonnets, and also quatrains, triplets, rondels, a sestina (in “Sea Surface Full of Clouds”) and other traditional forms to which Stevens keeps alluding in his peculiar way.

Back to the chronology: In 1899 Stevens mentions *Endymion* (L 28), which he will mention at least three more times in the next ten years (SP 201, 237). Blank verse is another form that may puzzle one as she looks through *The Collected Poems*: there is a lot of verse which looks like blank verse, but is it? A great phenomenon in modern verse is that one can write verse that looks like verse, is called metrical, but has no sense of expected accents in places. The appearance of metrical form, without its metrical substance of accents in place, is a remarkable phenomenon, to which Stevens contributes. “The Worms at Heavens Gates” in 1916 gives us traditional blank verse, as it begins:

Out of the tomb, we bring Badroulbador,
(CP 49)

where we *badroulbador* along the established pentameter rails; the pentameter has been lugged out of its 500 year old tomb. We need to distinguish in the later Stevens real blank verse from apparent blank verse, i.e., blank verse that is indeed iambic pentameter and verse that looks like blank verse but which does not fall into a pentameter form. An example of the latter is “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue” in 1935 where one really cannot discern any pentameter predictability. It begins promisingly with a sort of interrupted pentameter:

The thing is dead . . . Everything is dead . . .

But by the second stanza, the iambic thing is truly dead:

These are not even Russian animals.
They are horses as they were in the sculptor’s mind.
They might be sugar or paste or citron-skin . . .
(OP 78)

Are we supposed to rhythmicize this first line and so hear the metrical counterpoint?

 / u u / u / u / u / u
These are not even Russian animals.

Not likely. Other lines fall into pentameter modes: do we scan some, therefore, and not others? In “Reflections on *Vers Libre*” Eliot said in 1917:

Vers libre does not exist . . . [T]he most interesting verse which
has yet been written in our language has been done either by

taking a very simple form, like the iambic pentameter, and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and constantly approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse. . . . [T]he ghost of some simple metre should lurk behind the arras in even the 'freest' verse; to advance menacingly as we doze, and withdraw as we rouse. (183-87)

This is an excellent aural description of "free verse," but Stevens is even stranger than the free verse poet Eliot rationalizes. As we read these Stevens lines, I don't think we think about such scanning; rather we are given a general sense of the line, which evokes the old iambic pentameter, but is only its modern outer shell.

Every once in a while, then, in Stevens' poems one comes across a poem in regular meter, and the regularity of the meter fits the theme. In "Country Words," for example, Stevens is seeking the good old country rhythms of his tradition:

What is it that my feeling seeks?

 It wants Belshazzar reading right
 The luminous pages on his knee,
 Of being, more than birth or death.
 It wants words virile with his breath.
 (CP 207)

The older metrical tradition seeks the right reading of syllables in places. If the last line here read "It wants virile words with his breath," we would be witnessing the standard Stevens whose lines have the look but not the aural metricality of traditional lines.

Back to chronology: In 1899, Stevens writes an anomalous long stanza:

You say this is the iris?
 And that faery blue
 Is the forget-me-not?
 And that golden hue
 Is but a heavy rose?
 And these four long-stemmed blooms
 Are purple tulips that enclose
 So and so many leaves?
 Their names are tender mumbling
 For you who know
 Naught else; through my own soul
 Their wonders nameless go.
 (SP 36)

Stevens labelled the lines “silly,” and then “very” (SP 35). Did he do so because the lines and meters follow no traditional pattern? Stevens’ dissatisfaction with the traditional names of the flowers is like his dissatisfaction with traditional meters. Such tradition is a “tender mumbling” for us who know naught else, and through them Stevens seeks a more “nameless” wonder. But he is not yet ready to come up with a new name, a new meter, to express that new sense of wonder.

In 1900 he writes a series of varied stanzas, the first one of which is:

A night in May!
And the whole of us gathered into a room
To pack and bundle care away—
And not to remember that over the dark
The sea doth call—
Doth call from out an upward-rising day
For us to follow and to mark
How he doth stay
A patient workman by the city wall.
A night in May!
A night in May!

(SP 63-64)

This is probably as liberal as Stevens can now write and still consider it respectable verse form in 1900. The lines are metered but in different meters, and the rhymes are used but in an apparently spontaneous way.

In 1900 a major event occurs for Stevens when he finds Dante on the bookshelf of his furnished room (L 44). In 1909 he mentions Dante twice (SP 221, 223). “For an Old Woman in a Wig” in 1916 gives us terza rima in traditional form, as in the following fragment:

To our still envious memory, still believing,
The things we knew. For him the cocks awaken.
He spreads the thought of morning past deceiving

And yet deceives. There comes a mood that’s taken
From water-deeps reflecting opening roses
And rounding, water leaves, forever shaken . . .
(OP 18)

And so forth. There are no terza rimas in *The Collected Poems*, or are there? Again, as with the sonnets, there are apparitional terza rimas, sans rhyme and rhythm. One of many examples is “The World as Meditation” in 1952:

It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met,
Friend and dear friend and a planet’s encouragement.
The barbarous strength within her would never fail.

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,
 Repeating his name with its patient syllables,
 Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.
 (CP 521)

Meter is traditionally a form of repetition (“Repeating his name”) like an incantation that tries to bring something to life. The rhyme in this last stanza is a near one (“hair/near”), almost like a terza rima stanza; and just as this appearance of meter—something that looks like terza rima—almost becomes the thing itself, so Penelope’s words almost seem to call into existence that absent reality she so longs to experience.

Back to chronology: In 1906, Stevens writes a single three line blank verse stanza, double spaced:

Oh, Leonardo, paint with ghostly brush
 Subtle Melpomene, with slow regard
 To so much beauty be a little kind[.]
 (SP 170)

There is something very evocative about this form, a short self-sufficient stanza of blank verse, if such a thing is possible.

In 1908 Stevens write an interesting $a^2 b^2 b^2 a^2$ quatrain:

The house fronts flare
 In the blown rain;
 The ghostly street lamps
 Have a pallid glare.
 (L 108)

There is an imagistic feel to the lines, the concrete images subordinating the expected rhythm to themselves; indeed there is a kind of struggle between the metronome expectation and the pull of these concrete images. “The ghostly street lamps” is an odd line, as can be seen in its scansion:

The [˘]gho[˘]stly [˘]st[˘]reet [˘]lamps . . .

By contrast, if the third line read, “The ghostly lamps,” the lines would have a more traditional flavor.

In 1908 Stevens’ “Book of Verses” begins with a imagist-like poem,

One day more—
 But first, the sun,
 There on the water,
 Swirling incessant gold—
 One mammoth beam!
 Oh, far Hesperides!
 (SP 190)

This is not very interesting, a sort of forerunner of H. D., and indeed Stevens completes this sequence in traditional forms.

In 1909 T. E. Hulme gave his imagist proclamation: "This new verse resembles sculpture rather than music; it appeals to the eye rather than to the ear" (75). The interesting ambiguity here is whether the new verse appeals to the imaginative eye (we see those images), or to the visual eye (we see the free verse poem).

In 1909, Stevens writes an intriguing fragment, set up in lines, with a title, and roman numerals:

Colors

I

Pale orange, green and crimson, and
white, and gold and brown.

II

Lapis-lazuli and orange, and opaque green,
faun-color, black and gold.

(OP 3-4)

Stevens is mentally seeing those colors, more than he is visually seeing these lines, but the visual arrangement does pose the words as in a still life arrangement on the page. In a letter where he plays around with other versions of these lines, he also exclaims over the power of certain Chinese paintings and cites a "package of strange things from the East," including "a little poem written centuries ago by Wang-an-shih":

"It is midnight; all is silent in the house; the water-clock has stopped. But I am unable to sleep because of the beauty of the trembling shapes of the spring-flowers, thrown by the moon upon the blind." (L 138)

Not yet is Stevens writing:

It is midnight; all is silent in the house;
The water-clock has stopped . . .

Compare later,

The house was quiet and the world was calm.
The reader became the book . . .

(CP 358)

The obvious but extremely evocative fact is that the eventual arrangement of lines Stevens finds for his poems is extremely important and comes only after a long apprenticeship to traditional lines and their varieties. A characteristically mature still life by Stevens is his "Study of Two Pears":

The shadows of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills.

(CP 197)

Here we cannot easily sort out whether these are to be read as trimeter or dimeter lines, or just as symmetrically arranged lines: the pears resist their arrangement.

In 1911, Pound made one of a series of remarks attacking the metronome sort of meters, and calling for poets to realize the “inner form of the line” (SP 38). In 1913, he called for “an ‘absolute rhythm,’ a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed” (LE 9). He also wrote Harriet Monroe:

I’m deluded enough to think there is a rhythmic system in the d— stuff, and I believe I was careful to type it as I wanted it written, i.e., as to line ends and breaking *and capitals*. Certainly I want the line you give, written just as it is.

*Dawn enters with little feet
like a gilded Pavlova.*

In the “Metro” hokku, I was careful, I think, to indicate spaces between the rhythmic units, and I want them observed. (*Letters* 17)

Here, we are at a critical juncture in free verse theorizing: the predominant aural analogy gives way almost to the visual analogy.

In 1914 and 1915, Stevens explodes upon the scene with new poems which he sends to Harriet Monroe; she referred to “this master of strange and beautiful rhythms” (Kermode 7). Holly Stevens writes: “I cannot explain the great leap from the juvenile verses to ‘Sunday Morning,’ but we have seen many intimations of its coming” (SP 261). Indeed, “Peter Quince at the Clavier” in 1915 announces the new metrical aesthetic of our Peter Quince-Wallace Stevens who plays with the ghosts of old meters in new forms. It begins with those funny symmetrical stanzas where one cannot discern an aural pattern:

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

(CP 89)

On my spirit make a music, too? Maybe, maybe not. The second section gives us an aural form buried under the visual form. Hear in these the “concealed” metrical imaginings:

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.

(CP 90)

The third stanza gives us traditional metrical mimesis, which mimics grotesquely the tambourines of the Byzantines:

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.

The gallivanting Byzantines pound away in tetrameter style.

The final section gives us some uniform looking stanzas which only look uniform, but announce an important principle:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—
The fitful tracing of a portal;
But in the flesh it is immortal.

(CP 91)

We might paraphrase: imaginative form is momentary in the mind—but in the verse form it is immortal and results in that fitful tracing of a portal between the mental and the material, the vision and the verse form. My argument is that Stevens' career is a profound and continuous exploration of this interaction between imaginative and verse form.

In 1916 Amy Lowell said: "The definition of *vers libre* is—a verse-form based upon cadence." Lowell was picking up on things that Pound said, things which Williams will say when he talks about his cadences. This purely aural approach to free verse has caused massive confusion. In Stevens, we can see sonnets, quatrains, blank verse, terza rima, but of a very unusual sort; in a sense, we see ghosts of these meters, strange transformations, phantoms, which shall intersect with Stevens' imaginative life in intriguing ways, and where the visual shapes have been pruned away from their traditional aural accompaniment.

Here we need to distinguish the variety of visual shapes in Stevens poems, some of which represent other kinds of free visual form. "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" in 1915 uses line divisions to represent syntactic divisions, in a simple way:

The house are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,

Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings . . .

(CP 66)

The line divisions echo the syntax. In 1915, "The Silver Plough-Boy" follows Whitman's idea (as in "A Noiseless Patient Spider") of using suggestive pictorial form in:

A black figure dances in a black field.
It seizes a sheet, from the ground, from a bush, as if
 spread there by some wash-woman for the night.
It wraps the sheet around its body, until the black
 figure is silver.
It dances down a furrow, in the early light, back of a
 crazy plough, the green blades following.
How soon the silver fades in the dust! How soon the
 black figure slips from the wrinkled sheet! How
 softly the sheet falls to the ground!

(OP 17)

There is a kind of visceral likeness between the shape of these lines and the action being described, a principle which Pound and Williams will follow. Occasionally, we shall see Stevens use pictorial form like this, as in "Valley Candle" in 1917. The poem's shape dwindles and expands like the light it describes:

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
Until the wind blew.
Then beams of the huge night
Converged upon its image,
Until the wind blew.

(CP 51)

Stevens would praise Marianne Moore for her "The Fish" poem: "the lines move with the rhythm of sea-fans waving to and fro under water. They are lines of exquisite propriety" (OP 217); such propriety is a kind of naturalistic imitation by visual form which leads in one direction towards technopaegnia (as in Herbert's "Easter Wings" and William Carlos Williams' "Rain"), in another toward a sense of visual form as a more abstract player in the mimetic game. We see the lines, and the shape of them plays an important part in our aesthetic perception of the poem. In his analysis of Moore, Stevens pays tribute to the way she prints the lines: "all these things assist in creating and in modulating the rhythm" (OP 217).

In many poems, Stevens descends from his high abstractions and makes his rhythms pointedly imitate motion in traditional fashion, as in "The

Pleasures of Merely Circulating” where the rhythm is made deliberately stultifying:

Yet that things go round and again go round
Has rather a classical sound.

(CP 150)

The thumping trisyllabic rhythms of the first stanza deliberately stall into the obstructed rhythm of the second stanza:

The garden flew round with the angel,
The angel flew round with the clouds,
And the clouds flew round and the clouds flew round
And the clouds flew round with the clouds.

Is there any secret in skulls,
The cattle skulls in the woods?
Do the drummers in black hoods
Rumble anything out of their drums?

(CP 149-50)

It is as though a dancing cowboy had been shot, but continued to roll down the hill to the place where all rhythms stop. Other examples of these rollicking rhythm poems are “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” (CP 127), the title tipping us off to the game to come; also see “The Virgin Carrying a Lantern” (CP 71), “Sailing After Lunch” (CP 120), “Some Friends from Pascagoula” (CP 126), “A Postcard from the Volcano” (CP 158), “Loneliness in Jersey City” (CP 210), “Jumbo” (CP 269), “A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home” (CP 360). These are the poems one comes upon in Stevens where we can sense him using traditional metrical effects. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (CP 165) with its regular tetrameter lines is a prominent example.

We also need to distinguish Stevens’ most characteristic effect from the effects sought by Pound and Williams, who use aural and visual form for more immediate expressive effects. By contrast with them, Stevens may often seem stale and conventional. Thus, Williams found fault with “Stevens’ insistence on sticking with traditional forms, especially the blank verse line, while he—Williams—was deep in the travail of looking for new verse forms. The trouble with using the old line, Williams had quipped, was that Stevens thought he had to keep sounding important when he used it” (Mariani 479). The fact is that Stevens has a different notion of the abstract possibilities of traditional form and can use the overall appearance of stanza form as part of his imaginative plot. His metrical forms keep alluding to the more traditional sources which they mirror.

Kermode notes that Stevens said that his early pre-1914 poems gave him the creeps (6). Early on Stevens had read traditional metrical verse

and said (in 1899): "Verse is not poetry: it is the vehicle to poetry" (*SP* 25). He said: "I sicken of patterns . . . and conventions and the lack of thought" (*L* 79). Traditional form, when too clearly stated, is often defined as something static and dead, a bawd of euphony, "Such tink and tank and tunk-a-tunk-tunk" (*CP* 59). (Eleanor Cook notes the *OED* citation: "the heroic ten-syllabled tink-a-tink.") "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" has a meter stuck in his throat, and the $a^5 b^5 b^5 a^5$ form continues to the end:

One might in turn become less diffident,
 Out of such mildew plucking neater mould
 And spouting new orations of the cold.
 One might. One might. But time will not relent.
(*CP* 96)

This poem contains Stevens' most eerie pentameter line, "I am too dumbly in my being pent" (*CP* 96), which most readers assume must come from the 16th century or some Keatsian revival. The tetrameter mechanism of "The Mechanical Optimist" (a section in "A Thought Revolved") mimes its subject. A line from a very regularized iambic pentameter poem, "Stars at Tallapoosa," comments on itself:

The lines are much too dark and much too sharp.
(*CP* 71)

This sharpness and darkness of inherited tradition are of course what Stevens is attempting to intercept. Rhyme represents another sort of time which resists being molded. The insistent rhymes in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" gives a feeling of the finality of death, a form that stalls in a rhyme that completes nothing, only ends:

Above the forest of the parakeets,
 A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
 A pip of life amid a mort of tails.
(*CP* 82)

And so it goes for 6 stanzas which end with the "perfect cock" flaring "in the sun-pallor of his rock" (*CP* 82).

"Anecdote of the Jar" pointedly plays with its three different stanza forms, $a^4 b^4 c^4 b^2$, $a^4 b^4 c^4 d^4$, $a^4 a^3 b^4 c^4$:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
 And round it was, upon a hill.
 It made the slovenly wilderness
 Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
 And sprawled around, no longer wild.

The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

(CP 76)

Stevens makes these shifting forms seem arbitrary by his repetitive rhyme "hill" and the pointlessly accented "Tennessee." As he places the jar in Tennessee, he places these differing stanza forms on the page; and the arbitrariness of their forms is as powerful, mysterious, and silly as the ordering power of the gratuitous jar on that gratuitous hill. Stevens continues to meditate upon the ordering power of those old traditional stanzas whose fixity he despises.

A good example of the way Stevens moves from traditional to free verse notions, in fulfillment of his theme, is "The Death of a Soldier" where the first two stanzas seem to consist of a tetrameter, trimeter, and dimeter, a⁴ b³ c²:

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.

(CP 97)

The last two stanzas are increasingly symmetrical, as opposed to metrical, and the hollowing out of the meter reflects that stubborn insistence of a formless world.

But most interesting metrically are those where the metrical forms connect with the ultimate issues of Stevens' imagination. "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" gives us its 11-line blank verse stanza forms and with them

its opening discussion of “magnificent measure” and the elusive cutting and “watery syllable” (CP 13), which lie behind those eerily distinct stanza forms. At the end Stevens says:

Like a rose rabbi, later, I pursued,
And still pursue, the origin and course
Of love, but until now I never knew
That fluttering things have so distinct a shade.
(CP 17-18)

That distinct shade is given us in these distinct but abstract stanza forms. “Poem with Rhythms” is about metrical form, which is the figuration, the image of the image, the vitally clean, mirror-crisp, form of utterance:

the mind
Turns to its own figurations and declares,
*“This image, this love, I compose myself
Of these. In these, I come forth outwardly.
In these, I wear a vital cleanliness,
Not as in air, bright-blue-resembling air,
But as in the powerful mirror of my wish and will.”*
(CP 246)

When Stevens says that “Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words” (Vendler 1), the metrical shape is a sort of idea of the shape within the shape. In many ways, of course, Stevens is in that tradition of Emerson, of organic meter, meter-making argument; thus Stevens’ poems are metrical cries of their occasion, part of the res and not about it (Vendler 4); the meter must not be separable, like a convention, from its subject; it must be the shadow of its subject. But the result in Stevens is not Whitmanesque form or imitative forms that physically mime their subjects, but rather an elusive abstraction which cannot be traditionally defined but which helps to shape the talk. We need to be mindful of these outer shapes and not confine ourselves to micro-analysis of the rhythmic play within the poems. When Stevens speaks of “Words of the fragrant portals” and “ghostlier demarcations,” the portals and demarcations are figured in his line arrangements which transform traditional metrical demarcations into something ghostly, more fragrant, subtle portals of the speech, “keener sounds” (CP 130) which seem keen because of the way they are placed on the visual page. They are images of the abstract: “The abstract was suddenly there and gone again” (CP 270). A Stevens meter seems like that “threshold of heaven” (CP 508) in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” the meter with one foot in the traditional world of conventional meter and the other in a more heavenly abstract world; the poem is about the movement from one to the other. In the ears of the dying philosopher, “The newsboys’ muttering / Becomes another mur-

muring" (CP 508); so the metrical mutter becomes a vaguer murmur, and ultimately a form of the "celestial possible" (CP 509) which translates metrical fixities into metrical possibles. At the end, Santayana achieves his final form in the Stevens stanza:

It is a kind of total grandeur at the end,
With every visible thing enlarged and yet
No more than a bed, a chair and moving nuns,
The immensest theatre, the pillared porch,
The book and candle in your ambered room,

Total grandeur of a total edifice,
Chosen by an inquisitor of structures
For himself. He stops upon this threshold,
As if the design of all his words takes form
And frame from thinking and is realized.

(CP 510-11)

The stanza is the edifice, the visible image of that form and frame drawn from thinking and pushed toward visible realization. Thus we can rephrase Stevens: "The final belief is to believe in a metrical form, 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" (see *OP* 189). The idea of meter in Stevens is like his idea of order, a general sense, "the idea of order arising from the practice of any art" (*OP* 223). Stevens' stanzas are "intricate evasions of as" (CP 486), intricate evasions and versions of those forms of similitude we call metrical stanzas.

The crucial fact about free verse is that we need to have some knowledge of the 500-year history of traditional metrical form, if we are properly to see the nature of free verse, which frees itself *from* by depending *on* traditional verse form. Thus, we can see the irony of Graham Hough defining the means of free verse as no rhyme, no meter, and no metrical line length pattern, as though non-things could be means. Yet in a funny way they are; but we need to see the history to see how they are. In a profound sense, free verse is defined as verse that is not traditional verse: traditional verse acts as a sort of definitional trace. Stevens is well situated to give us some important insight into this strange definition. In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens said: "In recent years, poetry began to change character about the time when painting began to change character. . . It is simply that there has been a change in the nature of what we mean by music" (124-25). Before, we had regular meter and rhyme. Now, "It is like the voice of an actor reciting or declaiming or of some other figure concealed" (125). Stevens' practice teaches us that "concealed" metrical figures are often visually present in the visual shape of free verse.

Stevens therefore helps illuminate the transition from traditional verse to free verse. In most verse there is an essential interaction between the

aural and visual form of the poem. Our perception of the poem is a perception of lines in place, and that placing is both aural and visual, mentally visual if we are only hearing it, mentally aural if we are only seeing it. There is no time to say all that needs to be said about this. But I would want to argue at more length that the transition from traditional to free verse marks the point where aural-visual poetry became visual-aural poetry. This happened because the Victorian poet finally recaptured that stanzaic sense of the poem which had been present in the 17th century, lost more or less in the era of couplets and blank verse, and very gradually regained over the course of the 19th century. The acutely developed self-conscious Victorian sense, in Tennyson through Hardy, of the metrical form as a shaped aural-visual thing, provided the basis for the free verse revolution of seeing any visually shaped lines as constituting a "meter." The 500 year old background of traditional verse explains how a free verse poet could regard an aurally anomalous stanza, with no rhyme and expectant rhythm, as having the aura, though not the substance, of metrical form. Bridges argued that free verse tends to pose on the page, with a portentousness more obvious because freed from rhyme and expectant meter. In 1922, in an important essay, "Humdrum & Harum-Scarum. A Lecture on Free Verse" (on humdrum traditional versus harumscarum free verse), Bridges said: "However irregular the lines be, they are conscious of their length: they pose with a sort of independence and self-sufficiency" (45). Stevens' stanzas pose on the stage of the page:

It has to be on that stage
 And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
 With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
 In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
 Exactly, that which it wants to hear . . .
 (CP 240)

The transition in Stevens from traditional verse forms to these abstracted verse forms recapitulates the transition from traditional to free verse. What makes this statement peculiarly applicable to Stevens is that his metaphysics and aesthetics go along so well with this discovery of a form within old forms, of a rhythm abstracted from its concrete moorings in accents and rhymes, of a visual shape which looks like the traditional shape but which is different. Stevens evokes an enormous metrical history and gives us a fascinating creative adaptation of that history. It may even be that Stevens provides one of the legitimate theories of free verse meter, a theory that is adequate to its intriguing visual and historical sense of form.

Boston College

Works Cited

- Bridges, Robert. "Humdrum & Harum-Scarum. A Lecture on Free Verse." In *Collected Essays*, No. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1928.
- Cook, Eleanor. Remarks made as respondent to The Wallace Stevens Society Program, Modern Language Association Convention, Chicago, December 28, 1990.
- Eliot, T. S. "Reflections on Vers Libre." In *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings*, 183-89. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965.
- Hough, Graham. "Free Verse." In *Image and Experience*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960.
- Hulme, T. E. "A Lecture on Modern Poetry." In *Further Speculations*, ed. Sam Hynes. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955.
- Kermode, Frank. *Wallace Stevens*. Writers and Critics series. Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960.
- Lowell, Amy. *Some Imagist Poets* (preface). In John Press, *A Map of Modern English Verse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Mariani, Paul. *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982.
- Pound, Ezra. *Letters . . . 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950.
- . *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- . *Selected Prose: 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson. New York: New Directions, 1973.
- Stevens, Holly. *Souvenirs and Prophecies: The Young Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954.
- . *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, sel. and ed. Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.
- . *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1951.
- . *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Vendler, Helen. *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.
- Woolf, Virginia. "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown." In *Criticism: The Foundations of Modern Literary Judgment*, ed. Mark Shorer, et al., 66-75. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958.

Poems

Paper Lobby

*It was her voice that made
The sky acutest at its vanishing.
—"The Idea of Order at Key West"*

Flaring into blue smoke through the rusted prairie,
a white Ford Falcon carries her

to Porter Memorial Clinic.
The radio pales into white noise,

and there is something in the beautiful
she cannot trust.

It's as though real trees
stepped away into an imagined light,

shy to come forward
as their bare and dreamless selves.

They hang from their branches like disbelief
over a shadow on the wall:

outpatients wait
where the magazines have pictures:

the basketball player as he leaves
the floor, his body made abstract,

tense. She skims the surfaces,
listens for her name,

glances up at the others,
and looks away, swift, innocent.

The walls are papered in a garden-view
the size of two French doors. She opens

them cautiously and walks into Flint Park.
(The nurse takes in another stranger.)

Red squirrels bound in the grass
and freeze, black-eyed and panting.

Suddenly there is nothing indirect about the beautiful,
the collapsed moment under the flexing trees.

Call this the beginning: when someone you know
sits up in her chair to watch the seasons

coming forward scatter over the tar-bright roof:
leaves graze the paper lobby in their flames.

Bruce Bond
Lock Haven University

The Melon Should Have Apposite Ritual

*The melon should have apposite ritual,
Performed in verd apparel, and the peach . . .
.....
Should have an incantation.
—“The Comedian as the Letter C”*

Thump the bald rind, trace its
ridges and red-textured skin with
the fingers of your right hand.
Roll the cool round face around
your warm palms, the pale blushing
greens, peach-yellow flesh the rich
moist satin of a fat woman's
breast. Rub the white stem-scar,
her navel, with a bold and curious
thumb. The sun swells to see
his swelling children. The melons
glow with the blue-green moon.

Ed Madden
Austin, Texas

Chateau d'Eau

"The world must be measured by eye . . ."
—*"On the Road Home"*

Only *water tower*, but how translated.
It rises glittering from cloud, fluent
walls and mirrory turrets, melting outlines
of wet and polished stone, surfaces firm
but imprecise, watery stairs to the tower.
Curtains of wind like gauze, gray faces
at the windows, wistful faces of the drowned,
of unborn children, of the water-witch,
the lady of the lake, of Chateau d'Eau.

* * *

Yesterday in the glass wall of the gym
the pool's reflection overran the golf course,
wavelets in the grass. I watched it flow
on the flat, dry field, every green blade erect
at the bottom of the shallow shimmering pond.
I was there too, my glasses glanced at me, my hand
moved with the pen, watching the surface tremble,
waiting for an ending, some great wave.

This afternoon the deluge caught me up,
a sudden cloudburst, just as quickly over.
Now I stand in the true
revision of weather, the air cooled off
smelling of earth and moss. I squint to track
the runnels of dark water, study how
its own weight forms soft
coils of it, unrolling
pulling away from itself, feeling out
new grooves, extending itself
without pattern,
just looking for something
until it's
gone.

Janet McCann
Texas A&M University

Epiphany of Leaves

It is just that, in the leaves' cry, that decline,
A cry that's thought indelibly distinct.

Yet when I said that leaf that I heard turn,
Said then what I then heard, I did not think,

The leaves cry, crying in this separateness,
Turning, turning in this less in this cold clime.

The leaves cry, crying like the leaves,
Like voices in a waiting that has been,

Like coverings, the light the leaves turn in
Turns turning in the leafless, and the leafed

Light incomplete, the cries of leaves, leaves-like,
The object and the fallacy combine.

Robert Noreault
Massena, New York

Announcing Two Programs on Stevens at MLA

Poets Reading Stevens

Sat., 28 Dec., 12 noon-1:15 p.m., Continental Ballroom 2, Hilton

Program arranged by The Wallace Stevens Society

Presiding: Joseph Duemer, Clarkson Univ.

1. "Things That Do Not Exist Without Words," Kathleen Fraser, San Francisco State Univ.
2. "Wallace Stevens in the World," Robert Hass, Univ. of Calif. at Berkeley
3. "The Great Loneliness of Wallace Stevens," Robert Mezey, Pomona Coll.

William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens

Sat., 28 Dec., 7:15 p.m.-8:30 p.m., Marin Room, Hilton

Program arranged by the William Carlos Williams Society

Presiding: Glen MacLeod, Univ. of Connecticut, Waterbury

1. "'Sunday Morning,' 'January Morning,' and Romantic Tradition," Roger Gilbert, Cornell Univ.
2. "'The Mind Dances with Itself': Choreographic Idiom in Williams and Stevens," Barbara M. Fisher, City Coll., CUNY
3. "The Blue Nude and Mrs. Pappadopoulos," Terence Diggory, Skidmore Coll.

Respondent: Bonnie Costello, Boston Univ.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens and the Actual World.

By Alan Filreis. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.

Somehow missing from Melita Schaum's 1988 attempt to frame "the plethora of Stevens criticism over the last seventy years" (*Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*) is an account of the work summed up in the title of Alan Filreis' new book, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. Whether associated with the biographical tradition that includes Samuel French Morse's *Wallace Stevens: Life as Poetry* (1970), Richard Ellmann's essay, "How Wallace Stevens Saw Himself" (in *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, 1980) and Joan Richardson's two-volume biography, or with the historical scholarship of A. Walton Litz's 1972 *Introspective Voyager* and Milton Bates's 1985 *Wallace Stevens*, one group of Stevens' readers has always been uncomfortable seeing the poet's extended wings abstracted from history. Since the advent of New Historicism, even theoretically minded critics have begun to agree. In a 1984 *New Orleans Review* essay on Stevens, for example, Fredric Jameson categorically insists that "there must be a historical precondition even for [the] seemingly ahistorical availability of abstract landscape for whatever poetic ends." Stevens' style and epistemology, according to Jameson, "betra[y] a far deeper social and economic source which is that of the consumption of luxury products and objects at a particular moment in the development of modern capitalism." And in a more subtle Marxist reading, Frank Lentricchia in *Ariel and the Police* (1988) holds that Stevens' poetry should be historically interpreted as "a capitalism of mind, the foreplay of consumption without commodity that could and did become easily enough a life of consumption in the ordinary sense."

Filreis, trained in the older historical scholarship, hangs his study on New Historicist concerns. Broadly conceived, his subjects are Stevens' growing engagement with current events during World War II, and the impact on Stevens and his circle of the postwar era. As in Jameson or Lentricchia, questions of ideology assume a central importance. But more specific than they, Filreis minutely examines the way Stevens filtered and responded to two significant political moments in the American forties and fifties—"a national moment and what is accurately if clumsily called a postideological moment." A half dozen times, Filreis locates Stevens amid the controversy around some historical event, documents Stevens' response to controversy with the help of extensive archival research, and identifies how the controversy's rhetoric colors Stevens' writing. Contextualizing instances of Stevens' poetry, Filreis would build a general account of Stevens' ideological development.

Filreis' successes are persuasive. Elaborating a 1940 contretemps between Archibald MacLeish and Allen Tate about the responsibilities of formalist verse (Stevens and John Crowe Ransom were in the middle), Filreis uses archival scholarship of the first order to show how a particular "literary-political" rhetoric conditioned Stevens' "developing attitudes" about "American culture" and why it should "be asserted abroad." Then, connecting Alfred Kazin's

salvo against “the cozy self-satisfaction of [Ransom’s and Tate’s] esthetic cult” to “*Esthétique du Mal*,” he draws on this dialogue to interpret Stevens’ remarks about reality in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and place the composition of “Dutch Graves in Bucks County.”

Equally impressive are Filreis’ pages on the political circumstances surrounding two occasional pieces—“Description without Place,” which Stevens composed for the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Lecture, and “The Sail of Ulysses,” which was written for Columbia’s bicentennial celebration. (In reference to the latter, Filreis restores the fifties overtones of Ulysses’ “As I know, I am and have / The right to be”; “knowledge,” he shows, carries associations of America’s chief weapon in the cold war.)

Yet Filreis’ successes are also his limitations. For one his contextualizing narratives run on too long, crowding the texts they introduce. And because Filreis selects his examples according to the sharpness of their ideological focus, quite minor poems (“Description without Place,” “The Sail of Ulysses,” “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside” and “The Green Plant”) bulk larger than more successful ones. True, at one time or another he considers “Man and Bottle,” “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” “*Esthétique du Mal*,” “Dutch Graves in Bucks County” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.” But, inexplicably, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the potential centerpiece of his book, appears only in glancing asides.

More seriously, when Filreis does examine one of Stevens’ major poems he implies that the element he foregrounds can be used as a key to the poem as a whole. He describes “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” for example, as a response to “the new nationalism in painting” represented by James Soby’s 1943 Museum of Modern Art exhibit of “Romantic Painting in America,” which “prominently featured the landscapes of Thomas Cole.” Hence “Soby’s wartime Cole must suggest that Americans’ dependence on European tradition could be affirmed, and so imply that the war must be fiercely fought in Europe to save the culture on which our own is derived. . . . At the very same time, Soby’s Cole must be overtly patriotic. . . . These are precisely the tensions driving Stevens’ own ‘Chocorua’ as an American landscape for a war fought elsewhere, and presumably it is the reason he deemed the poem appropriate to send to Oscar Williams’ war-poem anthology.”

One would not guess from Filreis’ account that “Chocorua to Its Neighbor” is also a meditation on the self appropriate to one of the mountain’s former settlers (William James), or that its effect depends so heavily on the formal articulation of a skeptical and tentative mind. Not that these matters, of course, are incapable of ideological inflection. But without acknowledging them along the way any discussion of the ideological content of “Chocorua” is bound to strike us as a little reductive.

The issue of form especially, I think, suggests why Filreis, so much better informed than Jameson or Lentricchia, can look superficial by comparison. Their sometimes painfully large generalizations centrally pose a question raised by Theodor Adorno—whether a fundamental ideological impulse in modernist work might not be its radical “intransigen[ce] to the deception of realism, [its] refusing to put up with all that is innocent and harmless” (from *Aesthetic Theory*). And although Jameson and Lentricchia by identifying modernist form with elitist mystification instead of oppositional power stand Adorno on his head, at least they invoke the question which all serious discussions of modernism eventually must ask.

Finally (and perhaps unfairly) it might be observed that Filreis on a number of occasions fluffs a golden opportunity to reflect on how quarrels of the thirties and forties have been reincarnated on the current scene. Should writing (as MacLeish and Van Wyck Brooks argued then and Houston Baker argues now) be judged politically correct or not according to its dedication to America or its reflection of the values of the proletariat or the oppressed? Or (as Stevens fitfully believed), does the critical power of writing depend on the ability of its formal stance (itself historically conditioned) to resist what Adorno called the “manifest[t] social content” of the tabloid and the exposé?

Ronald Bush
California Institute of Technology

The Decomposer’s Art: Ideas of Music in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.

By Barbara Holmes. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1990.

The critical vocabularies for music and poetry intersect each other in so many places that an analysis may refer effortlessly to a poem’s coda or recapitulation. This shared vocabulary encourages an investigation of music in Stevens’ poetry, especially one that promises to stress the influence of musical forms and composers. While critics have long acknowledged Stevens’ use of the vocabulary and forms of music, Barbara Holmes maintains that criticism slights the importance of these musical references. *The Decomposer’s Art* sets out to provide “new readings of [Stevens’] poems,” especially his use of the “developing variation” form. In music, the developing variation uses seamless and continuous change rather than the sectional changes of the “classical theme and variations” where the structure of the theme frames each variation.

While she admits a thoroughgoing debt to Helen Vendler’s *On Extended Wings*, Holmes, a musicologist, seeks to distinguish the terms “variation” and “improvisation” by establishing “the musical basis for Stevens’ deliberately repetitious strategies.” Nevertheless, the book arrives at such a subtle distinction that Holmes herself ends by using the terms synonymously.

The exploration of Stevens proceeds fitfully at times. During her introduction of Stevens’ “Autumn Refrain,” Holmes uses “refrain” to raise the issue of how critics have treated Stevens’ practice of titling his poems. Without providing any sources, this digression faults “commentators [who] tend to dismiss [the titles], thus overlooking valuable clues to meaning,” then segues into “The Bagatelles the Madrigals” to demonstrate that Stevens does take care with his titles. Holmes recounts the history of both terms, their favor and decline, and finally their relation to images within “The Bagatelles the Madrigals” only to move on to “Aside on the Oboe.”

This second example does not further the argument of how Stevens used the terms for musical forms in his titles. Instead, it slides past the poem with the merest mention that an instrument’s name in a title, the oboe, can be a guide to a poem’s tone. The argument ends not by overcoming, but by reinforcing the objection that it raised at its start: critics ignore the musical references in “almost two dozen other musical titles in the Stevens canon” in favor of “more obvious links [to music] in the structural design.” Further, when we get

no more information than the tease that an oboe's "timbre and tone color provide an index to verbal tone" in "Asides on the Oboe," we begin to wonder how much this book has succumbed to its own critique.

Instances of such hasty writing appear elsewhere as in the unsupported claim that Brahms influences "several of Stevens' late poems (e.g. 'Esthétique du Mal' and 'The Auroras of Autumn')," or the introductory comment that "The Idea of Order at Key West," a "confusing poem" with "obscure moments," "vividly" characterizes the poetic process, and so on.

The most troubling moments in the book foster a confusion that can only unnerve the confidence of a reader. Although the book starts with the possibility that "Bach could have provided the poet . . . [with the] contrapuntal aesthetic that informs Stevens' many variations," a later discussion nominates Debussy first and then Brahms as the primary sources for Stevens' use of the developing variation. Similarly, the book at first claims Debussy, Satie, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky as the composers who most influence *Harmonium*, only to link Stevens to Brahms by saying later that both share a common role as precursors to modernism. The evidence for this connection to Brahms, Stevens' own precursor to modernism: *Harmonium*, the same book that the masters of modernism itself are supposed to have influenced.

Holmes offers as evidence of Debussy's influence that Debussy "would have appealed to Stevens, who, shortly after the introduction of the first book of [Debussy's] Preludes into concert halls (c. 1910), was composing not only 'Six Significant Landscapes,' but two of his more successful early poems to date: 'Sunday Morning,' and 'Peter Quince at the Clavier.'" In a second case, Holmes states that the form of Stevens' "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" is both "similar" to the musical form of Debussy's "Voiles," and, less than a page later, different, as it "does not illustrate the improvisational techniques of 'Voiles.'" With the proof that Debussy has influenced Stevens depending upon *post hoc* reasoning and contradiction, there should be no surprise in the reasoning that the very music by Brahms that most influenced Stevens' use of the developing variation was, according to Holmes, "probably unknown by Stevens."

If Debussy, Bach, and Brahms can provide "the musical basis for Stevens' deliberately repetitious strategies," why not Ferruccio Busoni as well? After all, Busoni might be the "B." referred to in a passage from "Esthétique du Mal" in which Stevens comes close to questioning the technique of the developing variation.

When B. sat down at the piano and made
A transparence in which we heard music, made music,
In which we heard transparent sounds, did he play
All sort of notes? Or did he play only one
In an ecstasy of its associates,
Variations in the tones of single sound,
The last, or sounds so single they seemed one?

Troubled by sustaining an argument through logic, Holmes also loses the advantage that developing similar evidence could offer. Holmes mentions that "Credences of Summer" relies on onomatopoeia in one canto, then neglects any complementary evidence for the "bare sound" of the poem's next canto, preferring to develop the argument with the vocabulary of music ("retro-

grade," "resonant") rather than any direct engagement with the poem's language. Similarly, a discussion of "The Idea of Order at Key West" notes the onomatopoeia that opens the poem, only to end with a mention of the "startling acoustic variations" in the poem: a reference not to the sound scheme of the poem, but to what the poem's narrator hears.

The analysis of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as the epitome of the developing variation form begins by claiming that the poem is "superficially" the "most 'classical' of all Stevens' variations." Later, a list of phrases from the poem suffices as the evidence that each canto contains "at least one variation" on "the idea of nothing becoming something." Since a list cannot itself explore how each example develops the previous variation, we are left wondering whether the developing variations in this poem are anything more than a thesaurus entry.

Indeed, when this analysis concludes that "An Ordinary Evening" illustrates Stevens' gift for improvisation, the distinction between the developing variation and an improvisation blurs completely. Since this is compounded by feelings of haste and unease that settle into the book, I believe that Holmes has not yet found the means to shape a complete discussion of the ideas of music in Stevens.

Michael O. Stegman
Shoreham, NY

Reading and Writing Nature: The Poetry of Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop.

By Guy Rotella. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1991.

Guy Rotella's book traces a central concern of American poets: their habit of seeking for significance in nature while at the same time having serious misgivings about that enterprise. He has chosen Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Elizabeth Bishop as exemplars of this disposition, both because they are among America's finest twentieth-century poets and because their positions with regard to this issue are so similar.

These poets share an historical moment when a second wave of doubt was sweeping American culture. Nature, which for many had either replaced or become synonymous with God, was itself now losing credibility as a source of transcendent meaning. When they were able to find significance in reading nature, these post-Kantian writers were never sure whether they were not simply writing on it their own subjective interpretations. Hence the terms of the book's title.

Rotella devotes roughly the first quarter of the book to showing the evolution of American thought concerning knowing and nature, thereby building a context for his discussions of Frost, Stevens, Moore, and Bishop. His treatment centers on Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards, Emerson, and Dickinson. Space and audience considerations prevent elaboration of this account. Suffice it to say that his is a helpful summation of and expansion upon existing discussions of the American intellectual heritage, which he directs to his conclusion that these focal poets are situated between "a variously

complete challenge to the formalist and logocentric tendencies of high modernism on the one hand, and a variously incomplete anticipation of post-modernist assumptions and devices on the other."

Rotella's discussion of Stevens (which, both in its scope and in its quality, is representative) begins with Stevens' intellectual history which, he says, parallels to some extent that of this country's, as outlined in his introductory chapter. (He similarly reviews the intellectual development of Frost, Moore, and Bishop, identifying Puritan and transcendentalist influences upon each.) He traces Stevens' movement from religious orthodoxy to transcendentalism, then to his important theory of fictions. After establishing key issues in his poetry, Rotella devotes the better part of the chapter to illustrating these concerns as they appear in individual poems, which he considers in the chronological order in which they were first published.

Among the major points of Stevens' work that Rotella considers, we find useful discussions of the antinomies that characterize his thinking (reality/imagination, object/process, realism/idealism, blank reality/order); his conceptions of metaphor and metonymy; the evolution of his stylistic devices; and, perhaps most central to Rotella's argument (and to Stevens'), his theory of fictions. This statement is characteristic:

Stevens' entire career can be seen as an attempt to face the loss of absolutes, and to do so while still exercising the will to believe. This attempt involves a redefinition of fictions as neither false nor true but as provisional "truths" that help us to live, and that do so without being merely escapist . . .

For the most part, Rotella well accommodates Stevens' ideas to his own rubric, thereby presenting them in a useful new light. He sees his contribution to the existing Stevens criticism as possibly, in his words, "a less foreordained approach" than those which force opposed theses "too grandly and inexorably toward synthesis." Yet sometimes Rotella's argument would seem to be just as foreordained in the opposite direction.

This problem by no means outweighs the considerable merits of the book. Yet it is central to his position on Stevens and, therefore, is the one to which I devote the remainder of this review. He claims, for instance, that "Stevens serves his naturalistic awareness that any specific, 'realized' sublime is dead, a merely human projection, *and* [Rotella's emphasis] his nonetheless persistent sense that the desire for the sublime is essentially and nobly human." No matter how much one knows that "desire for the sublime is essentially and nobly human," however, if one also thinks that the sublime is dead, then there is no real thesis or antithesis; there is only foreordained negation.

Put another way, the contention seems to be that, although Stevens knows that order and truth do not exist, he has to pretend that they do. But, aside from the injustice this argument does to the quality of Stevens' thinking (it reduces him to the status of those he dismissed as indulgers in "minor wish fulfillments"), much of Stevens' best work seems to support quite a different conclusion. Stevens' theory of fictions does affirm the possibility of significance and unity, however rare and short-lived. "Fiction" as "false-making" and

"fiction" as "making" are crucially different for Stevens, as different as "minor wish fulfillments," on the one hand, and "supreme fictions," on the other.

Rotella's book might have more adequately treated Stevens' theory of fictions if it had more fully considered Stevens' notion of truth. "We have been," writes Stevens in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "a little insane about the truth," making the point that what we usually call "truth" is no more than tautology, a calling attention to the correspondence between things and the names we have applied to them. When Rotella asserts that Stevens redefines "fictions as neither false nor true but as provisional 'truths,'" he is assuming a definition of truth that Stevens left behind. For Rotella, Stevens' fictions, as humanly made things, never really escape the familiar pejorative burden—"mere fiction."

But fictions for Stevens are not second best, a making do that is necessary because absolutes are dead. Truth, for Stevens, comes to be a matter of relationship in context, the "ringing true" that is possible within a supremely true fiction. Embracing and exploiting its fictive, metaphoric nature, poetry can achieve moments of balance, moments in which dichotomies between subjects and objects, between fiction and reality, or even between poems and their readers are rendered specious, as in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm": "The truth in a calm world, / In which there is no other meaning, itself / Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself / Is the reader leaning late and reading there."

This kind of balance is a major theme of many of Stevens' best works: "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "To an Old Philosopher in Rome," for example. That these balances can die, which, for Stevens, usually means that they can become clichéd, applied in Procrustean fashion to a dynamic world that they no longer fit, does not retroactively invalidate them. While a supreme fiction ("A man and a woman / Are one") must be replaced as the dialectic expands ("A man and a woman and a black-bird / Are one"), the fact of the new order does not, as Rotella suggests, prove the falseness of the first. The new order is only possible because of and by subsuming the old and its death.

Rotella's preordained negation also leads him to a curious kind of ambivalence when he comes to reading specific poems. His handling of Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" is typical. After a lengthy and careful look at the poem, he remarks: "Certainly this reading is more orderly than the poem." Such statements are consistent with a theory that distrusts unity as a measure of poetic value. But, his readings, thankfully, are more often consistent with the poems.

Indeed there is much to be thankful for here. Rotella's many excellent readings of Stevens, Frost, Moore, Bishop, and Dickinson would be sufficient justification for the book. Add to these his observations concerning the poets' shared ideologies and their genesis in the American tradition, and the result is a very valuable work.

Karen Pool Helgeson
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

News and Comments

Previously unpublished and lively letters from W. S. to his friend Ferdinand Reyher (who is mentioned only once in the *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, on p. 221) appear in the Autumn, 1991, issue of *The Hudson Review*. An informative afterword is by Holly Stevens.

W. S. and the law is the subject of an article by David Margolick in the *New York Times* on July 12, 1991. Although he makes the questionable point that W. S. "was never much of a lawyer," Margolick proceeds to mention Thomas C. Grey's then-forthcoming book *The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) and to note that W. S. and W. H. Auden are the most frequently cited modern poets in law reviews. He says of W. S.'s reputation among lawyers: "That one can be a poet and a lawyer simultaneously ennobles and elevates everyone, at least in certain corners of legal academia. Thus, in recent years law professors have embraced Stevens with all the fervor of Israelis welcoming Ethiopian Jews." The article is illustrated with a cartoon by Elliot Banfield showing W. S. sitting at his insurance office desk, holding a lyre and looking painfully (rather than pleasurably) abstract.

The Twenty-ninth Annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Awards will be held at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, on April 7, 1992. The Wallace Stevens poet for the occasion will be W. S. Merwin, who will present the awards to student winners and read from his own poetry. The 1991 W. S. poet was June Jordan; the shared first-prize winners were Ken Cormier and Khan Wong; Mary Kane and Steven Nicastro received honorable mention.

Scholars using the W. S. archive at the Huntington during the past year include Jill E. Cunningham (University of Pennsylvania), dissertation on abstraction in W. S.; Al Filreis (University of Pennsylvania), W. S. and the fine arts; Beverly K. Maeder (University of Lausanne), dissertation on W. S.; Robert D. Moynihan (SUNY-Oneonta), book on W. S.; David Thomas (UC-Davis), article on W. S.'s annotations; Jonathan Veitch (Pomona College), book on philosophical influences on W. S.; Ann C. Watts (Rutgers University), book on W. S.; Glenn P. Wright (UCLA), W. S.'s references to philosophers and philosophy.

One of the indispensable tools used by Stevens scholars is J. M. Edelstein's *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973). It is still in print, but the price has risen from \$24 to \$90. In response to an inquiry, the bibliographer reports that he keeps a file of additions and corrections but at present has no plans for a new edition. However, John N. Serio is in the process of completing an annotated bibliography, which should do much to update Edelstein's secondary bibliography. An essential text of W. S. himself is *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1951). This is long out-of-print, but the Vintage paperback edition (1965) is still listed as available from Random House for \$3.95.

"Wallace Stevens in Context" is the topic of papers to be presented at the NEMLA conference on April 3-5, 1992, in Buffalo, New York. The deadline for submitting papers or abstracts was September 13, 1991.

A first edition of *The Necessary Angel* has become fairly expensive: "A very fine copy in price clipped dust jacket" is offered by Eugene O'Neil, In Our Time List 261 (June, 1991), item 149, for \$150. The same catalogue (item 147) has *Esthétique du Mal* (1945), Edelstein A10.1, "some very light rubbing to tips of the spine," otherwise fine, for \$850. Among the more uncommon first editions are *Two or Three Ideas* (1951), Edelstein A16, offered by Glenn Horowitz, Catalogue 24 (March, 1991), item 222, "tiny watermark on the bottom of all pages; fine," for \$575, and in the same catalogue (item 221) "a trial copy without the purple design on the front cover or the lettering up the spine" of *Three Academic Pieces* (1947), Edelstein A12, out-of-series copy on Worthy Dacian paper, for \$550. For the less affluent, H. E. Turlington Books Catalogue 40 (March, 1991), item 393, offers the second edition of *Harmonium* (1931), Edelstein 1.b, "very good in spine darkened dj chipped at head of spine," for \$175 (this is of course the first edition of fourteen poems not found in the 1923 *Harmonium*). Finally, another interesting first edition, a copy of *Mattino Domenicale ed Altre Poesie* (1954), Edelstein A21, appears in Lame Duck Books Catalogue 6 (May, 1991), item 394, "near fine," at \$450; and for precise collectors of dust jacket varia, Robert Dagg Catalogue 4 (October, 1990), item 330, has *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), Edelstein A4.a, "conjunctionings" on the front flap of the d.j. (a reading about which W. S. complained), some sunning and spotting, at \$1250.

The editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* requests readers to submit current bibliographical items for inclusion in the "Current Bibliography" section of the Spring number and invites authors to send copies of their articles and/or books.

Daniel Woodward
Huntington Library

This Journal Proudly Belongs!

Council of Editors of Learned Journals

The Leading International Organization of Journal Editors



Promotes the highest quality in scholarly publication.

Resolves issues between editors and contributors.

Offers free display booths at MLA.

Sponsors annual workshops.

Shares innovative publishing strategies.

Distributes a Directory of member journals.

Features annual prestigious awards for editorial excellence:

- ✿ Best Special Issue
- ✿ Best Journal Design
- ✿ Best New Journal
- ✿ Distinguished Retiring Editor
- ✿ Phoenix Award for Significant Editorial Achievement

Executive Officers:

Michael J. Marcuse, President
Editor, *Literary Research*
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

John C. Coldewey, Vice President
Editor, *Modern Language Quarterly*
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195

John N. Serio, Secretary-Treasurer
Editor, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*
Clarkson University
Potsdam, NY 13699

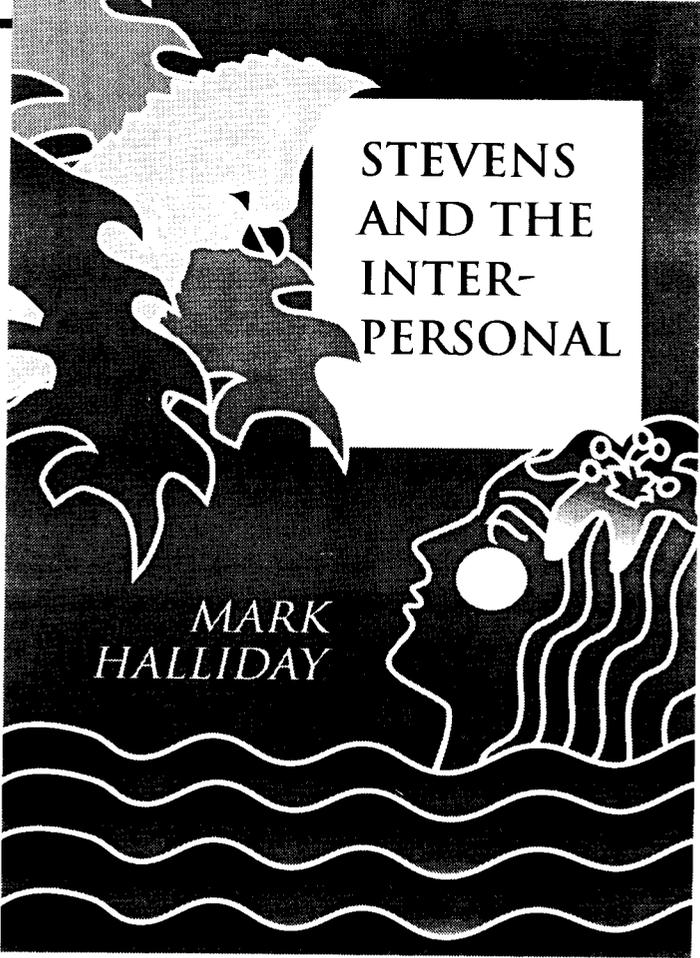
Evelyn J. Hinz, Chair, Mediation Board
Editor, *Mosaic*
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, Canada R3T 2N2

Regional Directors:

Peter Schmidt (Northeast), Editor, *The William Carlos Williams Review*, Swarthmore College ♦ Stanley W. Lindberg (South Atlantic), Editor, *The Georgia Review*, University of Georgia ♦ Janel Mueller (Midwest), Editor, *Modern Philology*, University of Chicago ♦ David Leon Higdon (South Central), Editor, *Conradiana*, Texas Tech University ♦ Luis González-del-Valle (Rocky Mountain), Editor, *Siglo XX / 20th Century*, University of Colorado ♦ Robert Hopkins (Pacific Coast), Editor, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, University of California, Davis ♦ Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin (Canada), Editor, *Thalia*, University of Ottawa

Official Bulletin:

Editors' Notes, Edna Steeves, Editor, University of Rhode Island;
Peter Schmidt, Associate Editor, Swarthmore College



STEVENS
AND THE
INTER-
PERSONAL

MARK
HALLIDAY

With Wallace Stevens emerging as a father figure for American poetry of the late twentieth century, Mark Halliday argues that it is time for this "poet of ideas" to undergo an ethical critique. Although Stevens outwardly denies aspects of life that center on such relations as those between friends, lovers and family members, Halliday uncovers in his poetry an anxious awareness of the importance of these relations.

"This adeptly written book challenges the familiar notion of Wallace Stevens as a poet of ideas rather than persons—challenging not by contradiction, but by an audacious following through to judgment. Showing no mercy toward received ideas or literary-critical customs, Mark Halliday deploys a recklessly commonsensical explicitness calculated to startle us readers into disagreement and provoke us into insight. He succeeds in trimming away some of the cant surrounding modern poetry itself, along with its murmuring criticism. This is a passionate, admiring and insolent work of scholarship."—*Robert Pinsky*

Cloth: \$29.95 0-691-06548-9

Princeton University Press

41 WILLIAM ST. • PRINCETON, NJ 08540 • (609) 258-4900
ORDERS: 800-PRS-ISBN (777-4726) • OR FROM YOUR LOCAL BOOKSTORE

Published in April 1989

Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects
Wallace Stevens'
Commonplace Book

"A remarkable work. . . . It provides the reader with a rare entry into the thinking of this most elusive of poets—thinking on many subjects, whether art, politics, poetry, friendship, or love."—MARJORIE PERLOFF

A Facsimile and Transcription
Edited and Introduced by Milton J. Bates

Between 1932 and about 1953, Wallace Stevens filled one notebook and most of another with excerpts from his reading, personal reflections on these passages, and aphorisms of his own invention. Taken together, these previously unpublished notebooks make up the commonplace book he called *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects*.

Notwithstanding its heterogeneity and casual character, *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects* is the work or work-in-progress of a poet seriously engaged with the aims, mysteries, and mechanisms of his craft. Compelled to seek an intellectual and spiritual center, he nevertheless entertained widely varying propositions about the nature of the world, humanity, and art. The most prosaic passage becomes, with his deft annotation, a theory of poetry. The commonplace book records, finally, the progress of a writer who repeatedly defined himself and his poetic enterprise against other artists and their work.

Based on the manuscript notebooks at the Huntington Library, this edition is a joint publication with the Huntington Library. The notebooks are reproduced in facsimile, together with an accurate and clearly laid out transcription. 128 pages. \$19.95

Stanford University Press
STANFORD, CA 94305

A new edition—
revised, enlarged, corrected

Wallace Stevens

OPUS POSTHUMOUS

Poems • Plays • Prose

"The considerable amount of new material in this revised edition, with its useful apparatus, makes even more valuable this absolutely essential companion to the *Collected Poems* of one of the very greatest of our poets. It is full of previously hidden treasure."

—JOHN HOLLANDER

"Like the sunken Spanish gold now on display in his half-mythical Key West, many recovered pieces here enrich our sense of the great poet. Open in wonder this cask of doubloons."

—JAMES MERRILL

Edited by Milton J. Bates

Just published by Knopf 

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens



THE WALLACE STEVENS JOURNAL

- Articles • Poems • Reviews • News and Comments •
- Bibliography • Original Cover Art •

Special Offer to New Members

Join The Wallace Stevens Society, which includes a subscription to *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, or get your college library to do so. Either way, you'll receive free your choice of one of our recent issues:

Stevens and Women

Edited by Melita Schaum

Stevens and Politics

Edited by John N. Serio, with an Introduction by A. Walton Litz

A recent issue with a **PEANUTS** cartoon on the cover about Wallace Stevens by Charles Schulz

Yes, I'd like to take advantage of this special offer!

Please send me: Stevens and Women Stevens and Politics PEANUTS Cover

Individuals \$20/year
 \$35/two years
Institutions \$25/year
Foreign inst. \$30/year

- I would like to join. Payment is enclosed for:
 One year (\$20) Two years (\$35)
 I have requested my college library to subscribe.
School _____

Reply to:

John N. Serio, Editor
The Wallace Stevens Journal
Clarkson University
Potsdam, NY 13699-5750
(315) 268 3987

Name _____
Address/Dept. _____
College _____
City _____
State _____ Zip _____ - _____

Membership in The Wallace Stevens Society includes a subscription to *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

