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Cover by Kathryn Jacobi  
*from “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”*

## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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In Memoriam

Joseph N. Riddle
1931-1991

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"Inventions of Farewell": Wallace Stevens’  
"The Owl in the Sarcophagus"

JOAN MELVILLE

The prologues are over. It is a question, now,  
Of final belief. So, say that final belief  
Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.  
—Wallace Stevens

For Wallace Stevens, the time to choose a final belief arrived  
with urgency on Good Friday, April 4, 1947, when the death of his  
closest friend, Henry Church, occasioned the poet’s thinking about  
death in a new, more personal way. With its close scrutiny of life from the  
vantage point of death rather than from the midst of living, “The Owl in  
the Sarcophagus,” Stevens’ elegy for his friend, marks the beginning of his  
final poetry in which “The effete vocabulary of summer” is discarded  
because it “No longer says anything” (CP 506).1 Written just after he  
completed Transport to Summer, as one of the first poems for The Aurora  
of Autumn, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” signals the transition from the  
earlier sensuous celebrations of summer to the austere, autumnal journey  
toward a “leafless north” (CP 118) which culminates in his final volume  
of poetry, The Rock. Though it is clearly similar to several of Stevens’ other  
poems in its verse form, diction, dialectical method, patterns of imagery,  
and many of the issues it addresses, “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is  
singular in the canon of Stevens’ work. Published less than six months  
after Church’s death, the elegy is saturated with Stevens’ feelings about  
his loss: it may well be the most profoundly personal “impersonal” poem  
in the language. The distant inscrutability of its landscape and personae,  
scarcity of specific intertextual allusions, muffled tone, and tentative, wist-  
ful conclusion set it apart from most of Stevens’ work. Because it was  
written in early mourning, the poem is an expression of grief in a strongly  
controlled, remote way; it is an irretrievably buried personal experience  
carefully embedded in a comforting set of universal feelings and locations.2  
“The Owl in the Sarcophagus” at once invites understanding by the splen-  
dor of its language and images, and repels it by the smoothness and opacity  
of its thought. Harold Bloom tells us that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”  
is “not wholly available to even the most prolonged and loving of readings”  
(Bloom, Wallace Stevens 292), and that it is “the least accessible of  
Stevens’ major poems.”3 A simple, directly useful reading of the poem is  
to see it as a valedictory gift to a beloved friend, meant to complete a life  
that had already ended, to fashion a comforting though ultimately fragile  
“mythology of modern death” (CP 435), and to offer him a happy ending  
in the form of a gentle, easy transition from life. In this sense “The Owl in
the Sarcophagus” is truly elegiac, for its gift is to the poet who wrote the
poem as much as to the one who had just died. Stevens was prevented by
lack of time from inscribing “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” with his chosen
dedication: “Goodbye H. C.” (L 566). As the poem consists of variations
on the theme of farewell, it is not surprising that the poem contains three
out of five of the “good-byes” in all of Stevens’ poetry (Walsh 123).

As one of the earliest written poems in The Auroras of Autumn, “The
Owl in the Sarcophagus” announces the beginning of the final phase of
Stevens’ mature poetry, in which his earlier study of the relationship
between the imagination and reality takes on new definition: the relation-
ship between the realities of life as it is experienced, and death, the un-
knowable, which must be imagined. The poet is inevitably thrown back
into the concrete world of physicality in the face of death, into the world
of space, time, and matter, in which even his previous imaginings become
artifacts of an inherited “reality.” Stevens had written about death many
times in his earlier writings, but it was from a comfortable distance that
allowed a philosophical and aesthetic stance like the one in “Sunday
Morning” in which death is “the mother of beauty, mystical” (CP 69), a
manifesto of Romanticism whose legacy echoes softly in “The Owl in the
Sarcophagus.” In earlier poems, death is seen as providing a necessary
frame for life that makes things “acutest at [their] vanishing” (CP 129), not
confronted directly as an experience of personal obliteration. Physical
death is at this point a limit that eroticism, “a substance in us that prevails”
(CP 15), can triumph over in the way that the imagination triumphs over
spiritual death. The mother who stands at the threshold of death as an
emblem of permanent change in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is the
embodiment of memory and of nostalgia for what comes close to belief in
spiritual immortality: childlike innocence. The poem that itself says that
death is the end remains after death as a triumph of the imagination over
obliteration.

It is crucial to an understanding of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” to
recognize how important Stevens’ friendship with Henry Church was to
him and to realize that in writing the poem he was not philosophizing
about a distant event. Both men were sixty-eight years old in 1947, and
though they had been friends for only eight years, theirs was a strong
alliance. Stevens gave Church legal advice about his will and the disposi-
tion of his estate, and together they discussed a Poetry Chair and a lecture
series at Princeton (L 376, 382). His friend had spoken of his own ill health
for several years (L 401), but Stevens apparently did not take the idea
seriously; Church’s heart attack came as an unexpected blow. Both friends
were poets, a fact which Stevens intuited but was not to confirm till after
the elegy was written. Heir to the Arm and Hammer baking soda fortune,
Church was an independently wealthy patron of the arts, leading a life
that must have evoked both envy and disapproval from Stevens, who
chose to maintain his job as a life insurance executive for as long as he was permitted. Church’s death must have brought home to Stevens with great force the inadequacy of traditional elegies and other conventional methods of dealing with death. Because of the emotional bond between them and the parallel features of their lives, Stevens confronted his own death in Church’s. “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is Stevens’ response to the question of what kind of life and belief would best enable him to accept death.

In “Homage to Henry Church,” a brief article that Stevens wrote in November 1947 for Mesures, the literary magazine Church had founded, the characteristic Stevensian tension between opposites is perceived to exist in his friend’s personality. “This sort of duality: being withdrawn and at the same time being eager to make friends, was characteristic of him.” Church is described, for example, as “a simple man who had little interest in things that were not complex.” The list of contraries goes on for two more paragraphs, then Stevens observes: “Because of the existence in him of these opposites, two things followed, one, that he seemed often to be an enigma and, the other, when one realized the truth about him, that he was always a potential figure.” Stevens ultimately amends this conclusion as if he felt it to be too harsh a judgment: “In the end this delineates a figure more than potential. He was as eager to make friends of life as he was to make friends of people and this he had accomplished to an extraordinary degree” (L 570-71).

Stevens implies that his friend’s life was not fulfilled in the realm of personal achievement, but rather completed through the love he bore for others and the way in which he was loved in return. By this description Church was not “a really powerful character who writes, or paints, or walks up and down and thinks, like some overwhelming animal in a corner of the zoo . . . the well developed individual, the master of life, or the man who by his mere appearance convinces you that a mastery of life is possible” whom Stevens described in a letter to Church in November 1945 as someone he felt “terribly in need of encountering” (L 518). When Stevens read his friend’s poetry, he observed drily that Church was “very impatient” with the sonnet form and that his poetry “clearly show[ed] his idealism” (L 566). In “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” Stevens creates a master of life in the form of the apotheosized poet, composed of the remembered Church augmented by Stevens’ imagination and poetic powers; both friends’ “owlish” identities are fused and expanded into a salvific figure in the second strophe.

The title of the poem helps elucidate its meaning; the very absence of any owl or sarcophagus in the body of the text itself allows the reader to discover the relation of these nouns to the personae of the elegy and the mythology of the poet’s other writing. Birds populate Stevens’ poems plentifully. Each species and individual bird has its own significance, from the Keatsian “casual flocks of pigeons” that at the end of “Sunday Morn-
"sink, / Downward to darkness, on extended wings" (CP 70) to the visionary golden bird in his last poem, "Of Mere Being," which sings "without human meaning, / Without human feeling" in the "palm at the end of the mind" (OP 141), in final reconciliation to the poet’s own death. In 1947 the emblematic bird of farewell for Stevens was the owl, with its rich legacy of connotations. The owl is a nocturnal, winter bird indigenous to northern climates. Because of its chilly habitat, and because it possesses human-like features, hoots, and does not sing melodiously, the owl has historically been thought of as being monkish and ascetic. Athena’s owl, the symbol of pure wisdom for the ancient Greeks, was adopted by the Romans, who introduced the idea of death by seeing its hooting as a groan of doleful mourning. In his Philosophy of Right, Hegel observes that “the owl of Minerva flies only at dark,” implying that wisdom comes only after experience. In Pliny owls are given the ability to predict “fearful misfortune” (Sparks and Soper 161) because the hoot of an owl is supposed to foretell an imminent death. Paradoxically, the owl was also seen as the bringer of eternal life. Besides having the ability to call souls away, it was believed to guard a particular soul throughout life, and become united with it after death.

Stevens might have been referring to Henry Church in the title of the poem, applying “owl” as a humorous and affectionate nickname, and using the figure of the owl to evoke the power of words to make the absent one present, to call him back from the dead. By connecting the owl, the figure of wisdom, with elaborate ancient rites and conventions of death, the title indicates that the poem offers wisdom in the face of death. It is a sarcophagus of words that contains all the wisdom and good wishes that Stevens could put into his “mythology of modern death.” Perhaps he deliberately chose a title that would be confused with the title of a nursery rhyme (the owl and the pussycat who went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat spring perversely to the unguarded mind), a gentle joke which Church would have enjoyed, and which furthers the “padded” nursery-like feeling of the poem. The mind as a child singing itself to sleep “among the creatures that it makes” (CP 436) in the last strophe embarks on a mysterious trip beyond the imagination analogous to that which the owl of the title makes in its sarcophagus of words. “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is a collection of icons or farewell wishes placed in the poem as an offering in an attempt to make the idea of death more bearable.

Stevens was most probably acquainted with the twelfth-century Middle English poem attributed to Nicholas of Guildford, The Owl and the Nightingale, the first debate poem in the language. It is an argument between the two nocturnal birds as to which has contributed more to humans, and whose way of living is superior. The nightingale is a representative of the earthly, sensual, romantic poetry that Stevens had written earlier. In “Autumn Refrain” Stevens mourns the desolation caused by the knowl-
edge that the “evasions of the nightingale” are evasions that can never be completely stripped away under “The yellow moon of words about the nightingale / In measureless measures” because the romantic urge is an integral part of the poet, even though he knows the nightingale is “not a bird for me.” The “skreaking and skrittering residuum” (CP 160) picked up by the grackles from the nightingale is Stevens’ early brand of American romantic sublime, expressed in those of his poems which fall under the rubric of “nightingale poetry.” The nightingale sings melodiously of its “starry connaissance” (CP 13), a song that became impossible for Stevens to sustain by the time of Henry Church’s death. The owl’s song is more ascetic, philosophical, and mature. It signifies an intellectual acceptance of the pain of disappointment and loss through abstraction. “[O]wliness” (L 311) does not appear prominently in Stevens’ poetry as an alternative to which he is committed until the 1940s, after his sixtieth birthday.

Up to this point Keats’s nightingale sings so beautifully that the poet, “half in love with easeful Death,” wishes to “cease upon the midnight with no pain . . . [i]n such an ecstasy” and is left in a drugged “waking dream” (Keats 206-07). The owl will not let the listener fall in love with death or escape through narcosis—it offers instead a potential relief through the intellectualization of difficult experience. The debate between the two birds occurs in its most basic form in Stevens’ poetry on the level of diction: the earlier “gaiety of language” (CP 322) with its sensuous gauds is replaced by the spare, hieratic vocabulary of the poet’s later years, whose effulgences are more spiritual than physical. A comparison of the way in which death is described in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” versus “The Auroras of Autumn” reveals the stately progression of the poet’s thought. There are no nightingales in Hartford, nor owls in Egypt, yet Stevens’ poetry evokes the song of these birds in the poems appropriate to each stage of his life.

In lines 1593-1600 of The Owl and the Nightingale, the owl argues for her own usefulness, claiming that she is “wel welcume” to humankind because she comforts sorrowing women at night, relieving their “sore mode” by singing all night for their “gode.” In “The Souls of Women at Night,” “Owls warm [the female protagonist,] and with tuft-eared watches keep / Distance . . . [in] The blindness in which seeing would be false” (OP 122). Stevens might have intended that “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” help Barbara Church keep watch through the night of her loss by becoming an internalized voice, “An affirmation free from doubt,” like the little owl in “Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers” that resides within the woman, telling her steadily how the “crude and jealous formlessness / Became the form and fragrance of things” (CP 247). The voice of the owl guards, advises, and creates, as does the voice of the poet.

Both birds are denizens of the dark, but the nightingale’s dark is for lovers, and the owl’s for souls in torment. Serious spiritual and epistemo-
logical questions are answered by the solemn owl who speaks in an hieratic voice and is more a chorister of divine love than a siren singer of sensuality. The nightingale’s voice is heard in earlier poetry like “To the One of Fictive Music” and “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” in which Stevens’ celebration of vitality withstands his conscious self-mockery. Abandoning the sensuous romantic sublime of his earlier poems, the older Stevens expresses through a nostalgic romantic sublime the yearning to return to a home that never existed. Both the sensuous and the nostalgic struggle towards transcendence, the moment when the poet can be released from the physical limitations of space, time, and matter. The nightingale thus emblematises desire, and the owl “desire without an object of desire” (CP 358), or desire tutored by the reality of loss—elegiac desire. In “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” Stevens creates for the ideal poet of the second strophe, for himself and for Henry Church, a point of perfect harmony at which poetic powers are strong enough to create a world inhabited by the apparently transcendental family of sleep, peace, and memory. The man who “walked living among the forms of thought” is the first “invention[] of farewell” (CP 432), the poet who can make the next three strophes come true.

This central man, when “a likeness of the earth, / That by resemblance twang[s] him through and through, / Release[s] an abysmal melody, / A meeting, an emerging in the light, / A dazzle of remembrance and of sight” (CP 433). This is the point of perfect integration, when the poet is enabled to achieve his highest creativity. “[T]wanged” by the likeness of the earth he releases his melody, which is literally of the abyss because by being the fulfillment of life it allows him to die a “master of life,” “a figure more than potential” (L 518, 571). Stevens describes this perfect integration as a change “in which being would / Come true, a point in the fire of music where / Dazzle yields to a clarity” (CP 341). The figure of the poet is “August” (CP 251) in the moment of full self-actualization, the moment of dazzling completion. The creations of the poet’s nostalgic desire are the “transcendental forms” (Bloom, Wallace Stevens 283), the conjured family of brother sleep, brother peace, and mother memory. But are they truly transcendental? Stevens insists that the three figures are “not abortive figures” (CP 432; italics added), and by the paradox of negation suggests the opposite possibility to the reader’s mind. These creations made of poetry are destined see the light of day in the form of immediate publication in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” unlike Henry Church’s poems, which were never anthologized, and may never have had a life outside of their creator’s sight. The reader must consider whether the wished-for consummations of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” are transcendent forms or ultimately consolations created by the poet’s mind to invoke the possibility of transcendence in the face of disbelief.
The two most traditional figures of consolation in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” are high sleep and high peace. Difficult to visualize, though replete with ornamental detail, these two imposing forms stand enormous and enduring in the world of the dead. Both massive beings offer substantial solace to the mourner; both represent sources of comfort and ritual that have evolved over centuries. And both are closely related to the poem Stevens described in “A Primitive Like an Orb,” in which “an abstraction given head” becomes “A giant on the horizon . . . a close, parental magnitude, . . . [a] / grave / And prodigious person, patron of origins” (CP 443). These “monsters of elegy” (CP 435) are eloquently presented in the austere stanzaic form that became the hallmark of Stevens’ late poetry, the tercet. Even at its most effulgent point, which occurs in the description of the two brothers, the elegy for Henry Church never approximates in its style the sumptuous elegance of Stevens’ elegy for George Santayana. The five-line stanzas of “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” allow the expression of a different kind of lyrical richness. Freed by his unequivocal feelings toward his mentor and inspired both by the clear, specific details of Santayana’s stay in the Convent of the Blue Nuns and his well-defined philosophic ideas, Stevens was able to write an affirmative elegy for him that ends on a singularly comforting note. The “design” of Santayana’s words “is realized” (CP 511) in the last line of the poem in a holy way, as if by some incarnation an eternal sufficiency has been reached. The affirmations in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” in contrast, are not sustained, and the poem ends in a more tentative, wishful way. The personae, or embodiments of Stevens’ good-bye wishes to his friend, either disappear or are collapsed into the playthings of the mind. In a characteristic Stevensian revision that undermines figures of permanence, even darkly desired familial ones, high sleep and high peace are ultimately vitiated, as is the poem in “A Primitive Like an Orb,” into “giant[s] of nothingness” (CP 443).

Sleep is nature’s healer, the figure who “quiets” the dead by his highness. He is the wished-for consummation of an imagined good life to which Stevens echoes in the final strophe in the innocent figure of the child singing itself to sleep. Here sleep is a form of nature, presented in the person of the moving mountain, “moving through day / And night” (CP 433), viewed in its grandeur by the figure of the poet. He is robed in the purest peaceful white on top of which lie other colors:

hardest streakings joined
In a vanishing-vanished violet that wraps round

The giant body the meaning of its folds,
The weaving and the crinkling and the vex,
As on water of an afternoon in the wind

After the wind has passed.

(CP 433)
The clothing of the mountain is not the mountain itself. It is added to the mountain as ideas about nature are ineluctably added to nature by human beings, or as the imagination covers the rock with leaves in the late poem “The Rock,” in which “The fiction of the leaves is the icon / Of the poem” (CP 526). The material reality of nature is clothed in the fictions of the romantic poet, who sees nature as substitute mother. We cannot see the mountain in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus”; all that is visible are the mind-created robes in which it is majestically swathed. The meaning of its folds lies in the earlier seductions of the nightingale poetry such as “Sunday Morning,” in which the dreaming woman conscious of “the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe” in a “procession of the dead, / Winding across wide water” feels “The need of some imperishable bliss.” At this point in Stevens’ writing such longed-for consolation must be derived from the romantic belief that from death alone “shall come fulfilment to our dreams / And our desires,” though death is “sure obliteration” (CP 67-69).

High sleep represents nature, the natural evolutionary parent of human-kind, vested in the garments of his making. Sleep “realized” in its fullest state reveals to us the workings of the unconscious, “A diamond jubilance beyond the fire, / That gives its power to the wild-ringed eye” (CP 433). Dreams and poetry come from sleep realized. The purest works of the imagination are empowered by the unconscious, both in their simplest and most complex forms. Stevens’ primitive counterpart is enabled by his simplicity to act freely on the deepest urges of his mind: the aboriginal native, his eye ringed in bright paint, mourns the loss of a loved one with feelings equal in intensity to those of the civilized poet, whose red-ringed eye is the only sanctioned physical manifestation of his grief.

Because the figure of high sleep is described as “central / Where luminous agitations come to rest, / In an ever-changing, calmest unity” (CP 433), it seems as if Stevens might have meant him to be an expression or source of the eternal. This is the conclusion of Joseph Carroll, who, in locating Stevens in the tradition of Emersonian transcendentalism, sees “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” as the poem in Stevens’ canon that establishes his belief in a transcendent power most decisively. This tempting argument cannot be maintained in the face of the evidence of the poem, for Stevens overturns his “monsters of elegy” in the final strophe, collapsing the owl, the poet, and the trinity into “inventions of farewell” which are liable at any moment to be extinguished. It is comforting to think of Stevens attaining peace through a confident belief in immortality, especially since his late poetry is a record of his spiritual quest for permanent meaning, a nostalgia for a dwelling-place that he fears never existed and can therefore not be achieved, unless it is through the power of the imagination. Mocking this pilgrimage, the poet once wrote: “The objective of all of us is to live in a world in which nothing unpleasant can happen. Our
prime instinct is to go on indefinitely like the wax flowers on the mantelpiece” (“Insurance and Social Change” [OP 234]). The brothers in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” are the most wax flower-like constructs of the poem, especially in contrast to the mind’s “floreate flare” (CP 436) at the close of the poem.

The fourth strophe belongs to the fourth figure of consolation: high peace, the representative of human history. He stands “Hewn” between the other two persons of the trinity, carved out of their experience by centuries of people eager for the promise of “peace after death” (CP 434). He is “inhuman” in the sense that the extrusions that cover him, which record the history of the human race, encase him so thickly that he is all “beam of leaves” with no trace of the rock within. He is certainly not a companion for Stevens on his journey to the “leafless north,” the land of the owl. Estranged from sleep and the mother by his coverings, peace flourishes the world as “godolphin and fellow,” “The prince of shither-shade and tinsel lights.” The nonce word “shither-shade” makes peace seem stealthy and untrustworthy; “tinsel” adds a touch of cheap surface glitter. This jarringly unexpected description of peace as a flashy man of the world is explained in the description of his encrusted exterior: he is “Adorned with cryptic stones and sliding shines,” the accumulated writings of “Generations of the imagination piled” upon each other. As Geoffrey Hartman observes, “the act of writing is deeply associated with feelings of trespass, theft, forgery or self-exposure. . . . Our great myths display confidence men or thieves” (22). High peace is “vested in a foreign absolute” because his traditional consolation offers the easy illusion of a transcendent deity and eternal life, an absolute which, though it might have been created by humans, is foreign to human experience. He, the archetypal prelate, is calmed by his own brilliance. “An immaculate personage in nothingness,” he cannot give solace because his promises are empty; they burn bright and soothe, but do not seethe “the way good solace seethes.” The four tercets spent describing peace’s sacerdotal robes are the most opulent part of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” Peace is a high priest whose vestments are artifacts telling the tale of human history from the time that people could first write, woven from “the wonder of [his] need.” His hieratic robes prophesy apocalypse (they “spell out holy doom and end” in an alphabet of flowers), but they do not leave out the “bee [‘B’] for the remembering of happiness”—the honey of heaven, the imagined taste of which is based on the honey of earth that “both comes and goes at once” (CP 15). The imperative “be” wills that being triumph in the face of nonbeing after death. 19

Peace, “cousin by a hundred names” (CP 432), is adorned with “our last blood,” which evokes the cultural heritage of centuries, from the doorways marked with lamb’s blood that saved the loyal Hebrew inhabitants, to the faithful Christians, who are “adorned” in their adoration by the blood of
the lamb during the sacrifice of worship. The indomitable figure of peace is “stationed at our end, / Always,” keeping us as children by preventing us from thinking for ourselves. Stevens stresses the wished-for consolation inherent in the word “Always” by placing it at the beginning of the line, set off by commas. Peace’s consolations, “fatal, final, formed / Out of our lives to keep us in our death,” shut down our thinking by enclosing it in received eschatological notions. He guards us in our beds, “a king as candle” suggesting not “that of which / Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible” (CP 509), but “the celestial definite,” a phrase not in Stevens’ lexicon. As the wily Odysseus protected his men in the cave of Cyclops, Peace protects us from facing loss by using words that distort the truth. Though pernicious in his effect, high peace is a sedative, not a menacing figure: he is a faithful, calm guardian, and his gorgeous robe is “our glory.” “But,” the word that begins the fifth strophe, emphasizes the comparison between the brothers and the most important figure of the trinity, the mother. The outward differences between them are obvious: the male figures are massive, silent, stationary, visible, clothed, and calm. She is their opposite—sleep and peace offer ocular proof of their stable consolations; she disappears. The mother is presented in the first strophe as:

she that in the syllable between life
And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice,
Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as
My memory, is the mother of us all,

The earthly mother and the mother of
The dead.

(CP 432)

This consolation seethes with potential solace.

The mother is the affective focal point of the poem; she exists in the instant of transition, the “syllable” that separates life from death, which is literally the white space on the page between stanzas in the passage above. Her piercing cry echoes through the silence of the rest of the poem. Offering an immediate experience of the present as it becomes memory, she is the mother of personal identity. Like Henry Church, each of us is formed, distinguished, and made unique by the sum of his or her memories, which, since they are the totality of life carried forward, comprise an individual’s narrative truth, and thus his or her unique identity.

Memory is also the work of mourning; the deceased can be “kept” only through the memory of others. His memory must be guarded against change or he will be lost, but as soon as vital memory is woven into the fictive covering worn by sleep and peace it becomes untrue. Paradoxically, in order to live in the fullness of memory, the mother must forever say good-bye to the present moment, tear it off, and fling it away “with
backward gestures,” to be free to confront the new present that constantly arises. She needs to strive to be perpetually naked, a “fling without a sleeve,” “losing in self / The sense of self” (CP 435), but in doing so gaining always a new sense of self. Every instant marks a new confrontation with self in her struggle to remain thoroughly alive in the present, “tall in self not symbol, quick / And potent.” Through constant effort, memory can be “a self that knew, an inner thing,” in contrast to the brothers, whose knowledge lies in their wardrobe. They avoid the difficult goal of constant introspection and declaim loudly and indolently with their impressive looks, insulated by their remoteness from human suffering. The mother is “Impassioned by the knowledge that she ha[s],” motivated by it, to

[hold] men closely with discovery,

Almost as speed discovers, in the way
Invisible change discovers what is changed,
In the way what was has ceased to be what is.
(CP 435)

The mother discovers by uncovering: her gift to us is revelation. She reveals to each a constantly changing identity by pulling away the disguises of the false self. Because of her crucial position on the “edges of oblivion” and the process of definition and discovery which the mother causes in each soul that she embraces, she is thrown into relief against the blackness that lies behind her. Death thus defines life and identity by contrast with its opposite. She offers us a difficult personal integrity, one which is her “splendor,” beyond the “artifice” of the brothers,’ but it is “sad” because it is gained at the cost of great effort and constant farewell to what is cast off.

When no longer able to change because their identities have been completed by death, “those that cannot say good-by themselves” are bade “Good-by in the darkness” by memory, “speaking quietly there” (CP 431), to her whose most eloquent words are “backward gestures of her hand,” sending them outward on their journey away from life. Having gathered up the past and present in an intake of breath (literally an “in-spiration”), memory exhales the dead, their completed lives “reddened and resolved” (CP 435), and flings them out of our sight. They are violently torn away from the living and thrown into a trajectory that is potentially a burial deep in oblivion. After this there is silence, the silence of deep space.

The loss of the mother looms as the most terrifying loss of all, because her womb-like memory preserves the particularities of each life. Without her there is no “self that kn[ows].” What happened to Henry Church will surely happen some day to the poet, and at this point in the poem the thought becomes unbearable. Stevens’ longing for his lost friend is transfigured into longing for the mother who far back in the lost distance stands waiting in memory as she can never be in life. To say good-bye to his friend
means “Farewell to an idea . . . The mother’s face, / The purpose of the poem” (CP 413). Nostalgia for the eternal, the memory of an ancient abode that never existed, is at its most acute in the presence of the mother. She awakes a longing for “the actual, the warm, the near,” for “So great a unity, that it is bliss” (CP 317).

In 1915 the idea of devising “Our earthly mothers waiting, sleeplessly” within the “burning bosom” of death (CP 69) was enticing to Stevens. At that point in his nightingale sublime he could decree confidently in the face of the unalterable fact of death: “Let be be finale of seem” (CP 64) and turn with vigor to celebrate the rich vitality of life surging around him. By 1947, his confidence in achieving a restorative unity with the mother is eroding; there is a suspicion forming in the back of his mind that she may be neither nurturing nor potent. The owl sublime warns him to be more cautious in her embrace: she could “feed on him,” “wicked in her dead light” (CP 507), like the bearded mother in “Madame La Fleurie” (1951). Or, though “still warm with the love with which she came,” she might become “exhausted and a little old” (CP 496) like the woman described in the final lines of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” (1949). As belief in the mother becomes more complicated for Stevens, desire for her becomes more urgent. At this point in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” Stevens’ “desire / Is too difficult to tell from despair” (CP 325).

The poem’s most intense feelings find expression in the mother’s poignant cry “Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as / My memory” (CP 432), a moment of incarnation and sacrifice in which union is predicated upon separation, possession upon loss. Both the mother’s reassuring assertion of memorial permanence (in the active imperative “Keep you as / My memory”) and her departure occur simultaneously, in an explosive emotional moment. In his desolation and yearning for comfort, the poet veers dangerously close to an intolerably painful emotional experience. The death of a loved one recapitulates the necessary and natural separation from the mother at the time that the infant is learning to use language: thus a successful elegy is a substitute for the mother, an object made of words that consoles the poet for her loss (Sacks 1-37). The powerful negative feelings aroused by the mother’s disappearance fade over time, as does their cause, the specific experience of being abandoned by her. Adequate resolution of subsequent griefs through writing requires facing these devastating emotions, recalling them from the unconscious. In “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” Stevens vividly reenacts the experience itself, with all its concomitant feelings. The fifth strophe closely approximates the primary process material occasioned by such a crucial loss. But words are not a sufficiently protective means through which to confront the disappearance of the mother in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” for language fails the poet “in the silence that follows her last word—” (CP 435). At this point, the major shift of the poem occurs: following the pivotal moment
of the mother’s good-bye Stevens retreats to a smaller, less threatening mental landscape.

That “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is an expression of early mourning is clear when it is compared to “Elegiac Stanzas,” the generic title Wordsworth gave to his lament for his drowned brother. Wordsworth, writing a year after his loss, is more aware of the variety of emotions that have come in the wake of the experience. Though both poets long for “unfeeling armour” (l. 51), Stevens uses his imagination as protection, while Wordsworth’s shield is the healing granted by “old time” (l. 51). Stevens seems largely still “Housed in a dream” (l. 54), hoping there is a loving presence beyond the limits of his own mind. Wordsworth bids farewell to the blind happiness he had found previously in solitude. His soul having been humanized by deep distress, he longs to live close to others. Stevens’ mourning is directed back on himself; his thoughts and feelings remain within the boundaries of his mind. The drama enacted in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is created by the poet and performed entirely on the stage of his imagination.

Both Wordsworth and Stevens struggle with the problem of the imagination’s inability to overcome the finality of death, and for both poets, death means an apparent betrayal by the mother. Wordsworth’s premature separation from his earthly mother was made easier by the adoption of nature as a surrogate. The mother of the dead in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” excites similar feelings of love and fear from her children to those aroused by Wordsworth’s nature in her dual ministry to instruct and nurture. But mother nature drowns John Wordsworth and mother memory flings Henry Church out of sight. In his sorrow, Wordsworth eschews his former “blind[ness]” (l. 56) to others and assumes the moral values of “fortitude, and patient cheer” (l. 57) to help him live in communal harmony with “the Kind” (l. 54). Stevens chooses the redemption of innocence, unsure of whether it is not also the panacea of solipsistic regression.

The fifth strophe of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” ends with a dash behind which lie the repressed feelings evoked by the mother’s departure; this repression also shrinks the trinity of consolation created by the poet into the “forms of thought” of the first strophe. In making this shift the poetry slips into the present tense again, in which it began: the use of the present tense in the first and last strophes frames the action of that special “day,” now over and part of the past. The excitement that began with the mother’s words in the first strophe and reached a crescendo by the end of the fifth ends abruptly as the poet removes himself from what he has created and reframes his thoughts. This movement telescopes the huge figures “in their mufflings” into “monsters of elegy” (CP 435), creaky, inanimate parodies of consolation created out of need.

The sudden withdrawal of energy from the mythological landscape that comprises most of the poem is the strategy of a mind trying to preserve
itself from itself. It is also part of a characteristic Stevensian rebalancing by means of which it is possible to maintain two or more realities simultaneously. In the second strophe of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” the surrounding world resonates through the poet; he is contained by it and vibrates sympathetically with it, causing his poetry to emerge. He is “twanging a wiry string that gives / Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly / Containing the mind” (CP 240). In the sixth strophe the situation is reversed and it is the mind that contains the world of the five preceding strophes. Generally Stevens can keep two mutually exclusive ideas simultaneously alive in his poetry through the use of negations, revisions, appositives, and “as if” hypotheses (“the intricate evasions of as” [CP 486]), but this habitual bipolar double vision becomes unbalanced in the final strophe of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” “[D]eath’s own supremest images,” first presented as “The pure perfections of parental space,” are reversed in the sixth strophe into “The children of a desire that is the will” (CP 436). The huge figures of consolation are not pre-existing independent beings; they are the internal creations of a desire so strong that it self-consciously wills them into existence against every obstacle. We are even privy to the secrets of their construction. In the final tercet the parental mind itself becomes a child, potentially contained within a larger parental mind, or perhaps enclosed by dark nothingness.

Seeing himself as author of the family of comforters empowers the poet, but it also leaves him disinherited, an orphan who has to make up his own ancestry, to parent himself. The two metaphors for the mind in the penultimate strophe demonstrate a paradox analogous to that of a camera taking its own picture: the mind attempts to see itself at work from outside itself. By imagining this, Stevens attempts to find a way to say good-bye without facing the mother’s loss. He accomplishes this by making models of himself in an act of self-authorship which, though it eases the pain, is reductive: the imaginative inventions of the elegy are contained within “the light-bound space of the mind, the floreate flare . . .” (CP 436). Death itself is just another thought the mind has, an idea that, because it has been willed into existence, can just as easily be willed into oblivion by the mind. But the poet knows that he has recognized the existence of death out of necessity, not choice, in the way a small child pretends to command the inevitable in order to retain the illusion of his control.

The ellipsis at the end of the penultimate tercet allows a pause for the imagination to visualize the mind of the two preceding phrases: it is a lantern shedding a circle of light just large enough for a traveller to see a few feet around herself, and it is a flower of light blossoming briefly against the night sky. Both metaphors accept death as a natural part of life, as a gradually encroaching darkness. The light itself, unlike the poet, has no self-awareness or understanding of what is happening. It is innocent of its death.
In the final tercet of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” which encloses all those that precede it, Stevens retreats still further into the dependent position of an innocent child, who perhaps has a mother close by to comfort and not desert him. The mind at last reaches a self-conscious peace in its return to the early innocence of childhood, surrounded not only by the “monsters of elegy,” but by all the “creatures that it makes, / The people, those by which it lives and dies.” Based on this solipsistic paradigm, death is a gradual slipping away, a falling asleep in trustful ignorance and comfort—a concept embedded in Stevens’ last words to his daughter on August 2, 1955: “‘Good night’” (Richardson 427).23

The child singing itself to sleep is a late version of the innocent babies, nursed by the night, drawn close by dreams in “a shimmering room” humming and sleeping in the comfort of their beautiful warm faith in the “Palace of the Babies” (CP 77), rewritten from the point of view of one who has grown wise enough to will innocence, yet too complex to be able to believe in it completely. The minimalistic position of the mind as a child in its ability to understand or cope with death offers the fiction of perpetual comfort and bliss. Hence, the dialectics asserted in the poem are ultimately not between the imagination and reality, but between fictions of the imagination, all ineluctably underwritten by the silent fact of death.

Unable to cast Henry Church into the abyss of “human after-death” and leave him there in “Darkness, nothingness . . . the deepnesses of space—” (CP 336), Stevens creates in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” a series of visions that begin with poetic apotheosis and gigantic forms of ritual consolation, reenact the earliest experience of loss, and finally shrink into a conception of life as a fading light and the poet going gently into the night singing elegiac songs. These beautiful “inventions of farewell,” while they do not constitute a “final belief” (CP 250), enable the poet to begin to say farewell to the dear friend who could not say good-bye himself.

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Notes

1Citations from the works of Wallace Stevens will be referred to as follows: The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens will be noted as CP, Opus Posthumous as OP, The Letters of Wallace Stevens as L, The Palm at the End of the Mind as Palm, and Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects as SPBS.

2Since it was written in the early phases of grief, it is not surprising that Stevens’ poem is an expression of incomplete healing. Most of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” describes a wished-for reality with which Stevens would embellish the fact of Church’s death. Except for a brief moment in the fifth strophe, none of the sharper emotions that follow a sudden death are expressed—there is no anger, terror, exultation, guilt, triumph, or even wailing lamentation. Unready to risk difficult feelings such as these, Stevens retreats into a padded world in the poem that seems a place to heal a wound or be cared for in one’s helplessness. It is a quiet, insulated environment that evokes the feeling of a hospital ward or a nursery. In response to the initial shock, the poet’s desire is for anesthetizing reassurance.
For other, very different readings of this poem, see the books and essays listed at the end of this paper by this critic and by Robert Buttel, Alfred Corn, Frank Doggett, J. Hillis Miller, Ralph Mills, Robert Pack, Robert Rehder, Joseph Riddel, and C. Roland Wagner.

“The Owl in the Sarcophagus” was first published by itself in the October 1947 issue of Horizon magazine (see Edelstein bibliography), which means that the poet must have begun working on it immediately following his friend’s death and completed it within a few weeks.

“I hope,” Stevens wrote to Church, “that your anxiety about your condition is only the ordinary anxiety of nine men out of ten about themselves after they are sixty” (L 402). Stevens himself, his daughter Holly tells us, “had once been told he might be dead at forty” (L 398). Stevens’ father died at sixty-three.

“Out so thoroughly lived the life that I should have been glad to live” (L 401), Stevens wrote to his friend in 1942. Several critics have noted that the importance of holding a job in the business world was a lesson inculcated by the poet’s father, who disapproved of his son’s making a career of writing poetry (Bates 32-36, Richardson 21, Lentricchia 196). Richardson supposes that Stevens saw being a successful businessman as a way of warding off a breakdown like the one his father suffered (21), but also theorizes that Stevens “wanted, more than anything, to be like Henry Church, someone who moved with grace among ‘the best and the brightest,’ someone who completely fulfilled the dreams Stevens’s father had had for him of making a place for himself ‘on the front bench’” (191). It is likely that Stevens’ ambivalence towards Church was influenced by his mixed feelings towards his father, according to whom Stevens was “more or less a nuisance and as Romantic as Cinderella” (Bates 10). Two other “fathers,” or major influences in Stevens’ intellectual life, were Santayana, for whom he felt a more consistent positive regard, as evidenced in “To an Old Philosopher in Rome,” and Wordsworth, whose complicated influence on “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” is examined later in this paper.

The structure of Stevens’ “Homage to Henry Church” seems, because of its many similarities, to have been inspired by Otto Gombosi’s reflections on Bela Bartok in Musical Quarterly 32 (January 1946), portions of which Stevens copied into his notebook. But the contrast between the two descriptions is stunning: Stevens’ words for Church seem mild and subdued, though both pieces are built on noting what Gombosi calls “diametrically opposed features.” The portrait of Bartok is a sharply defined description of a brilliant character. With a few changes it would describe Stevens, who, by subduing his description, made it applicable to Henry Church (SPBS 81-83).

Milton Bates says Church “dabbled in verse and puppet plays” (195), and describes his “desultory letters” as being “more self indulgent than scintillating and profound” (196).

There are also “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,” the sparrow that chirps “Bethou” (CP 393), the wren, jay, wood duck, or “cock bright” robin of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” Among Stevens’ other owls there are “perilous” (CP 474), “literate” (CP 403), and hundred-eyed ones (Palm 298). The poet, like the man described in the fourth section of “Owl’s Clover” (entitled “A Duck for Dinner”), “Is all the birds he ever heard” (OP 92). Owlishness, the tendency to seek refuge from pain through intellectual abstraction, is a theme that appears in Stevens’ poetry from the outset.

I am indebted to Margaret Ferguson for this quotation and interpretation.

Owlishness also exists in folklore as a companion on the journey through life. For the Kwakiutl Indians, the owl with which the ego is united after death exists already in this life as “a closely related being worthy of respect . . . [The owl] is a soul bearer paving the way for further development” (Sparks and Soper 163). Rilke, too, believed that one lives with one’s death throughout life until the moment of having earned it arrives.
The title also calls to mind the elaborate burial rituals of ancient Egypt. The writing of the poem enacts the ritual placement of gifts in the sarcophagus to make the deceased’s trip through the underworld more comfortable (Ions 116-18, 127-38).

Lest the idea seem too far-fetched, note that some of Stevens’ most serious poems have humorous titles (“The Bagatelles the Madrigals” [CP 213]; “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters” [CP 293]; and “Lebensweisheitspierle” [CP 504], for example).

See Helen Vendler’s On Extended Wings and Words Chosen Out of Desire for a study of Keats as Stevens’ antecedent.

In The Owl and the Nightingale the owl represents Christ. She is crucified at the end of the poem and, hanging on a pole over the garden, benefits humankind by scaring away smaller animals. Though obviously this is not part of the meaning of the owl in Stevens’ poem, the idea of the deceased’s powerfully beneficial influence on the living is an important theme in the genre of elegy.

According to Granger’s Index of Poetry.

As in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” heaven is considered in several of Stevens’ poems such as “Sunday Morning,” “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,” and “Cortège for Rosenbloom” among others, but not as a serious possibility. Most often Stevens sees “after death” as obliteration—as in “The Death of a Soldier” or “Flyer’s Fall.”

That Stevens was aware of this process, at least to a certain extent, is indicated by an entry in his journal. Just after completing “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” he copied an excerpt from “Freud and Literature” into his daybook in which Lionel Trilling asserts that “Of all mental systems, the Freudian psychology is the one which makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind. . . . This puts the case too strongly, no doubt, for it seems to make the working of the unconscious mind equivalent to poetry itself” (SPBS 89).

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan’s book Stevens and Simile is devoted to the study of this technique, especially in her discussion of Vaihinger’s “as if” philosophy in which she notes Stevens’ “need” for poetry to protect us from the ‘pressure’ of an increasingly violent reality, and “to provide an essentially spiritual sanction for life” (130). Brogan’s
argument is based on what she sees as the two equal and opposing directions of language (union and fragmentation). This is a subject crucial to Stevens’ poetry, but too vast to be considered here, except to say that either direction of language in its extreme leads to silence, either the silence of coming together (God), or coming apart (the void). Both silences struggle for possession of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.”

In 1954 Stevens published a short poem called “A Child Asleep in Its Own Life,” which, as its title indicates, functions as a gloss on the last tercet of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus.” In it the poet regards himself as “The sole emperor” of “the universe / Of [his] single mind,” brooding “in heavy thought,” giving meaning to “the old men” who are nothing except within his mind. The poem speaks directly to someone designated as “you,” as if it were written as a message to Henry Church, a reassurance that though the poet may seem distant, he is “yet close enough to wake / The chords above your bed to-night” (OP 132). Stevens may have imagined his friend still sleeping, and himself able to resonate enough poetically to make vibrations like those of the poet in “The Owl in the Sarcophagus,” for his friend.

Works Cited


Wallace Stevens and the Inverted Dramatic Monologue

MARGARET DICKIE

Despite Harold Bloom's monumental effort to demonstrate that the voice in Wallace Stevens’ poetry is an echo chamber of strong poetic precursors, recent critics have reinstated the idea that Stevens' speaker is the poet himself, a product of life not literature. In quite different ways although alike arguing from biographical evidence, Milton Bates and Frank Lentricchia have insisted that Stevens, the man, however divided and changing he may be, speaks as a coherent subject in his poetry. Even David Walker, who claims that the poet or lyric speaker has been replaced with the reader as the center of dramatic attention in what he calls the “transparent lyric,” depends upon a centered subject, capable of internalizing form. On this matter, perhaps Bloom is correct in arguing that Stevens, ahead of his critics, gives us in his major phrase “a canon of poems themselves more advanced as interpretation than our criticism has yet gotten to be” (168) because neither Bates’s conventional notions of autobiography nor Lentricchia’s Marxist critique of the sociological subject nor Walker’s conception of the unifying reader can fully account for the interpretation of subjectivity in Stevens’ poems.

The whole issue of subjectivity is rendered particularly acute in a sequence of dramatic encounters where two voices are collected, to use Stevens’ phrase, intermingle as if in a medley, and enact the idea that Stevens expresses in “The Creations of Sound”:

there are words
Better without an author, without a poet,
Or having a separate author, a different poet,
An accretion from ourselves, intelligent
Beyond intelligence, an artificial man

At a distance, a secondary expositor,
A being of sound, whom one does not approach
Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect

Although critics early and late from Randall Jarrell to Hugh Kenner have argued that Stevens is not a dramatic poet, here he does create, however briefly, a dramatic situation that is rendered in a different register from “the grave impersonal voice of poetry” to which Kenner restricts him. There are voices in his poetry that speak, and often they are given a female pronoun or a woman’s proper name, and there are voices that
respond, which may or may not be male but that are distinguishable from the woman’s voice. Walker claims that “Stevens’ characteristic form is not that of dramatic monologue,” but Stevens does use a truncated version of that form, often inverted, in which he gives voice first and most prominently to the monologue’s listener, thus creating what Robert Langbaum has identified as the peculiar effect of the dramatic monologue—the tension between sympathy and judgment. The use of this strategy is a development from Browning’s work, as Langbaum has described it, where judgment is historicized and psychologized and so made relative, limited in its applicability, and changeable. If the dramatic monologue is, as Langbaum argues, “an appropriate form for an empiricist and relativist age” (107), the form, as Stevens uses and changes it, is suitable for a pragmatic age in which the subject is open, interactional, and discontinuous. Browning’s use culminated in the victory of character over action; Stevens’ use witnesses the victory of circumstance over character because its ultimate effect is to create an intersubjective voice.

In Browning’s Dramatic Monologue and the Post-Romantic Subject, Loy D. Martin claims that the dramatic monologue is designed to give full force to the ideological desire for subjective unity while it denies, in its formal conventions, the possibility of fulfilling such a desire. The dramatic monologue challenges the prestige of the Cartesian dualism while it displays the individual, allowing him/her to exist only as an indissoluble part of something that is not her/himself. For Browning, the relation signified by “part of” is not the Romantic relation in which ideal whole is manifest in real individual; it is rather a relation entirely within linear human history in which the self is part of an open system. The dramatic monologue, in Martin’s view, represents the discovery of a literary form capable of fictionalizing the acts of speech and writing as never-complete, never-present unfoldings of the world-in-discourse (84). It does not have a structure like a sonnet or ode; it has a project, part of which is the denial of stasis as the basis of knowing the world (84).

Martin’s discussion of the dramatic monologue is pertinent to Stevens’ use of the “I” in overheard conversation in which he gives voice to someone, often identified as a woman, on whom the speaker’s thoughts are focused. In this transaction, Stevens emphasizes the impossibility of the unified subject. Neither the person who uses the “I” nor the one who hears it is a separate, single, independent subject. They are rather both part of a process, in which they are repeatedly changing and becoming. The part who uses the “I” to speak is often the one most interested in change, but paradoxically only as change will produce an unchanging end. The purposiveness of this “I” in typically female speakers in Stevens’ work, which might be able to establish their identity, is in fact revealed to be their guiding delusion. Their certainty, even when what they are certain about
is their own need and incompletion, is the target of their deflating dramatic encounters.

The subject that never speaks first yet must speak is equally problematic; his secondary status points to an uneasiness about the self that the inverted dramatic monologue dramatizes. The dogmatism of his statements is rendered possible only because he speaks after and in response to another; such dogmatism is contextual not universal, or rather it borrows its applicability from its context and the presence of an interlocutor.9 By this strategy, the poet behind the poem, creating the tension between sympathy and judgment toward both the first and second speakers, leaves open in this imitative way his own relationship to his work and complicates questions of who speaks and to what purpose. He also mixes genre, making it possible for critics to read a single poem as an epic, a mock-epic, a satyr poem, a comedy.10 And it is his elusiveness that evades Lentricchia’s flattening sociological approach. The split between the poet and the speakers of his poem is repeated in the split between the speakers themselves and between the variable voices in the poem. Only in the poem are they all “collect[ed] . . . / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing” (CP 524), as one of Stevens’ late poems summarizes this process; their differences are distinct and separate from indifference, but not from each other.

The reader’s problem may be, as Helen Vendler suggests, a matter of Stevens’ tone, but it is also a matter of the interactional nature of his speakers: one speaker alone is not sufficient to convey subjectivity. This interactive situation is evident when the woman’s voice in “Sunday Morning” says, “But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss,” and a voice replies without quotation marks, “Death is the mother of beauty” (CP 68). Or again in “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay” where a voice identified as female says, “I fear that elegance / Must struggle like the rest!” and “I have said no / To everything, in order to get at myself,” and a commentator replies, “Her no and no made yes impossible” (CP 248-49). Nanzia Nunzio provides another context for the female voice, claiming “As I am, I am,” and then pleading, “Speak to me that, which spoken, will array me / In its own only precious ornament” to which Ozymandias replies, “the spouse, the bride / Is never naked” (CP 395-96).

The poems in which these female voices speak are not simply meditations on a theme; they describe interactions, moving from the least active but no less persistent voice of the woman in “Sunday Morning,” who may be enjoying “Complacencies of the peignoir” (CP 66) but is not content with them, to the energetic world-traveler Nanzia Nunzio. Without these female activities, the magisterial conclusions of their interlocutors would (and perhaps even do) fall flat. Although all three female voices are heard as, in some way, absurd, limited, either too languid or too eager, they are not more absurd than those authoritative voices they confront.11
The woman in “Sunday Morning” has her reasonable doubts, as the narrator confirms in asking, “Why should she give her bounty to the dead?” (CP 67); her “bounty” is not so different in its physicality from those “Supple and turbulent . . . men” who are affirmed for chanting “in orgy on a summer morn” (CP 69). She may be petulant, but her petulance is a necessary part of the other speaker’s corrective thinking. Her need of some imperishable bliss makes it necessary for him to linger on perishability: the “leaves / Of sure obliteration” for “maidens” who “stray impassioned in the littering leaves” (CP 69; italics added). She insists; he insists. She extenuates; he extenuates. And, while Stevens has often been identified with this disembodied voice, he presents it so intermingled with the woman’s voice and so dependent upon it that its authority is limited to its context. “Death is the mother of beauty” is heartless in the rigor of its rhetorical reply to this merely dreaming woman, and the speaker modulates into questions in the next section and into a kind of bluff about the chanting ring of men in the penultimate section. In the final section, the voice, trying to find the right tone for a conclusion, moves back and forth, arguing both that we live in “old dependency of day and night,” and that we live in “island solitude, unsponsored, free” (CP 70). As one dependent or free, the speaker is accurate in identifying his own situation in this dramatic monologue: he speaks second and only in response, dependent upon the woman whom he addresses, and yet he speaks fully free from her limitations. Or does he?

The genre of “Sunday Morning” has been variously identified with a seventeenth-century meditative tradition, with the modulated ode, and with elegy. Nonetheless, it is organized around a dramatic encounter between a woman speaking and her respondent. Despite Stevens’ confession that he gave up writing plays because he was less interested in dramatic poetry than in elegiac poetry, “Sunday Morning” seems to retain some vestiges of the dramatic situation in the interaction between these two speakers that makes the meditation on death possible.

In this situation, the speakers are neither entirely separable nor equal. The woman speaks in quotation marks after a lengthy introductory description by the disembodied voice that seems not only able to record her, but to repeat what she says and know even what she feels (“Complacencies of the peignoir”), what she dreams about (“the dark / Encroachment of that old catastrophe”), how things appear to her (“The pungent oranges and bright, green wings / Seem things in some procession of the dead”), the quality of her memory and desire (“There is not any haunt of prophecy . . . that has endured / As April’s green endures; or will endure / Like her remembrance of awakened birds, / Or her desire for June and evening” [CP 66-68]). Nonetheless, for all his omniscience, this speaker is reduced to the circumstance of his encounter with or imaginative creation of the speaking woman. All that we know about him is his unchanging faith in
change; he speaks for contingency, and he speaks only in the woman’s context.

Moreover, the woman seems to speak in medley with the disembodied voice. The voice asks, “And shall the earth / Seem all of paradise that we shall know?” And the woman continues, as if asking the question again, “I am content when wakened birds, / Before they fly, test the reality / Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings; / But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields / Return no more, where, then, is paradise?” Or, when the woman speaks first, as in “‘But in contentment I still feel / The need of some imperishable bliss’” (CP 68), the answer confirms her need even as it redirects it.

The point is that the disembodied voice that answers the woman and seems to know so much about her is not the expression of either an authority or a subjective unity, but rather a respondent, wholly dependent for its expression upon the woman as the other and on her circumstances. The voice speaks in consort and of contingency. It moves from the exteriors of oranges, “sunny chair,” and “cockatoo / Upon a rug” into the woman’s dreaming which makes “things” seem like “some procession of the dead” on into the “passing of her dreaming feet / Over the seas, to silent Palestine” (CP 66-67). The movement is controlled by mingling, by procession, and by passing, all elements of contingency.

He cannot instruct her as his muse, as Bloom would have it (29), nor liberate her from autonomous subjectivity as Lentricchia argues (155), because he establishes no agency or authority outside his relationship with her. Even in stanza II when the process is stopped and the voice questions divinity and finally concludes that “Divinity must live within herself,” it describes no state outside the woman’s moods: “Passions of rain,” “Grievings in loneliness,” “Elation when the forest blooms” (CP 67). In the next two stanzas, the questions of the disembodied voice and woman echo each other. Then, curiously in stanza VII, the voice that has been so responsive to the woman and her needs delivers an extraneous address about “a ring of men” chanting “in orgy on a summer morn” (CP 69), as if the woman were no longer a significant figure, or so significant that she must be excluded from this scene. The orgiastic men have one effect alone, and, in the context of the woman, another, just as the “disaffected flagellants” in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” may “make widows wince,” but only widows, not the general public who may have more sober judgments of their “tunk-a-tunk-tunk” (CP 59). Context is all here, as in “Sunday Morning” where women are made to set a tone that men cannot set by themselves, or rather women are endowed with a certain stereotyped response that suits the needs of one man’s argument. The woman in “Sunday Morning” is brought back to center stage after this excursus, returning in the final stanza, however, only as the audience for another
voice that cries out that Jesus is not divine, his tomb “not the porch of spirits lingering” (CP 70).

Why does Stevens create this woman, allow her to speak, and then silence her in a poem about religion? If Bloom’s idea that the woman is a muse to be instructed is too purposeful for the poem’s indirections, it is probably unnecessarily indirect to suggest, as Bates does, that “Clearly the author of ‘Sunday Morning’ wanted to appear more hard-headed than the pensive woman and more sophisticated than the passionate youths and men, even as he invested some of his private feelings in them” (114). The question of what the author of the poem wanted or privately felt assumes that both the critic and the author can, from the start, identify such feelings and locate them in the poem.

The form itself appears to contradict such a notion as it gives us a hint of the poem’s meaning; the inverted dramatic monologue suggests that there is no unified subject who might know or believe, just as there is no imperishable bliss in which to believe and no poet who has decided firmly what he intends to say. Rather, there are needs and longings, and there are consolations and proposed confirmations; but they exist interactively. Like the day (Sunday), the time (morning), and the topic (Christianity), the voices that record them are part of a process, always changing, always becoming. The form of this encounter between a brooding woman and a ruminative man suggests that neither believer nor belief is a center of unity. Nor is the religious impulse consoled by being aestheticized as a Paterian reading of this poem might suggest, because it is not resident in any presiding consciousness. Neither the woman’s moods nor the speaker’s commentary is an inviolable center of consciousness; they impinge upon each other as needs and satisfactions and renewed needs.

A slightly different dramatic encounter is evident in “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay” where again a woman speaks only to be silenced, and the split between the woman and the voice that describes her is never exact. In her fear that elegance must struggle like the rest, she is absurd. Dressed in velvet, yet riding a mule, she has obviously not, as she claims, “‘said no / To everything’” (CP 249). And she admits as much to the mule, claiming that “‘Your innocent ear / And I, if I rode naked, are what remain’” (CP 249). Yet, deluded as she is, she appears to have elicited a too-harsh judgment from the voice, which then claims definitively that “for her, / To be, regardless of velvet, could never be more / Than to be” (CP 249). On what authority does he speak? And why should he be believed?

His own judgment seems questionable when he opposes Mrs. Alfred Uruguay to the rider, whom he identifies as a “figure of capable imagination,” since this rider is no hero, described as he is as a parody of Romantic hallucinatory exaltation, a ludicrous version of the poet in “Kubla Khan” as Joseph Carroll suggests.13 It is never quite clear why this “youth, a lover with phosphorescent hair,” is this speaker’s “Eventual victor,” who “cre-
ated in his mind, . . . The ultimate elegance: the imagined land.” Actually the speaker has created the poem out of the interaction of these two figures. Without Mrs. Alfred Uruguay’s ascent, this rider’s descent would be difficult to appreciate. He rises only as she sinks. Yet, he shares her qualities: she is arrogant in her velvet, he is “arrogant of his streaming forces”; she “struggles” and he struggles, riding “over the picket rocks” (CP 249-50). The reader is moved to judge both figures as self-dramatizing, somewhat deluded, and extravagant. Yet both Mrs. Alfred Uruguay and the poor youth are sympathetic figures, too, in their elegant and inelegant struggling, their desire, their devotion. Alone, neither one would convey a sense of the imaginative life; together, they suggest that its possibilities are always split.

Here, as in “Sunday Morning,” the brief dramatic monologue is designed to intensify the distinction between the poet and the speaker of the poem; but in this poem, the distinctions are not so clear: there is Mrs. Alfred Uruguay as a speaker, then a disembodied voice as a speaker, commenting both on her and on a third unspeaking yet active figure. They are not all equal personae. Mrs. Alfred Uruguay speaks, and is judged by a responsive voice; the lover may not even exist since his passage is first questioned and then converted into that of “the capable man” (CP 249).

The distinctions begin to blur when the donkey on which Mrs. Alfred Uruguay rides is given a consciousness equal to, perhaps even superior to, her own, as, in contrast to her asceticism, it “wished for a bell, / Wished faithfully for a falsifying bell” (CP 249). Consciousness creeps beyond character to the animal world where even the lover’s horse is “blind to her velvet” and outward to the countryside where “The villages slept,” “dreams were alive,” and rocks were “pickets” (CP 249-50).

In this context, saying no to everything in order to get at herself, Mrs. Alfred Uruguay has erred in assuming that there is a self beyond the things that she has denied. “Her no and no made yes impossible,” the commentator concludes because there is no self to affirm outside the contingencies of its condition. Her dress and the moonlight may become one; but they can be neither taken off nor wiped away without obliterating her subjectivity, and, if her outward form should be wiped away or cease to struggle like the rest, the speaker of the poem itself would have the range of his awareness and thus his subjective judgment restricted. There is no center here, but only external details through which subjectivity moves. The “Eventual victor” “created in his mind . . . the imagined land,” Stevens concludes, as if the victor, the mind, and the land, were distinct. The poem’s inverted dramatic monologue indicates that they are different names for properties that intermingle, divide, and move in and out of each other.

Moreover, while Mrs. Alfred Uruguay remains one of Stevens’ most unforgettable characters, and while we know her first through what she says, her voice is not unique; it is rather that of the narrator. Her use of
dependent clauses (“And I, if I rode naked, are what remain”) has the same grammatically interruptive effect as his phrases in apposition (“And, capable, created in his mind, / Eventual victor, out of the martyrs’ bones, / The ultimate elegance”). Both favor alliteration. Although she speaks, she has no distinct voice because, like the woman in “Sunday Morning,” she speaks in medley. Stevens’ strategy is to give the illusion of distinct voices that, in a turn of phrase, he can render as one, meld together, and then distinguish again, as he plays with the idea of exchange in language. The poem does not dramatize two entirely different characters enacting an imaginative approach to or retreat from reality; rather, it expresses the range of voices available to dramatize an idea. The movement between the woman and the “Eventual victor” (italics added) takes place in the eventuality of the poem rather than in the space of subjectivity.

In this context, the opening of the poem, so apparently bland beside the extravagances of the central action, is important. Stevens opens:

So what said the others and the sun went down
And, in the brown blues of evening, the lady said,
In the donkey’s ear, “I fear that elegance
Must struggle like the rest.”

(CP 248-49)

Who are “the others” and why do they say, “So what”? Are they other poets, other ladies, the rest who struggle? And are they shrugging off the day, the effort, or the “ultimate elegance”? Nothing is clear except the diffidence with which Stevens introduces the lady’s earnest struggle, and so the whole comedy of her effort as well as her eventual defeat and the eventual victory of the youth who goes in the opposite direction are undercut. And yet, of course, only the poet would ask “So what?” and remove the question from the indifference of the general public. To that question, “So what,” the answer is a poem of whatness, of details such as velvet dresses, “village clocks,” “enormous gongs,” which must focus the others’ attention and jolt them out of their indifference, thus performing the great service of poetry.

One final example of the female voice that speaks only to be silenced and the male voice that speaks only to silence is Nanzia Nunzio and Ozymandias in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Section II, canto viii. They too are part of each other, and their interest rests entirely in the drama of their interaction. Alone, each one of them would be silent; their speech, as all speech, erupts only from their interaction. Their meeting dramatizes the sense in which “Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another,” as the poet asserts in canto iv of that Section (CP 392). Yet, what Nanzia Nunzio says to Ozymandias gives the appearance of a one-sided dependence that the poem’s language must expose as illusion.
Nanzia Nunzio is at once the most self-assertive of Stevens’ speakers and the most humble and humbled. She goes “Alone and like a vestal long-prepared,” and she prostrates herself before Ozymandias, claiming, “I am the woman stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness” and pleading “Set on me the spirit’s diamond coronal” (CP 395-96). But this woman, trembling in her desire before an “inflexible / Order,” hears only Ozymandias’ words of denial: “the spouse, the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (CP 396).

Although there are biblical and classical ancestors for this veiling and unveiling woman, Nanzia Nunzio appears to express the sentiments of her time, and Ozymandias, despite Shelley, appears to be her contemporary. The two together dramatize a parable of sexual interaction for modern times that has found other forms of expression in Modernist poetry. The woman seems shameless in her desire: “I am the spouse . . . Beyond the burning body that I bear . . . Speak to me . . . So that I tremble with such love so known / And myself am precious for your perfecting” (CP 395-96).

Such a woman echoes the woman in T. S. Eliot’s “A Game of Chess,” who says, “Speak to me. Why do you never speak.” And Ozymandias, who spurns her with his self-protecting authority, has some of the emotional inadequacy of the man in “A Game of Chess,” who attempts to calm the woman’s nerves by declaring, “I think we are in rats’ alley / Where the dead men lost their bones.” The desire of Stevens’ desiring woman (and, unlike Eliot’s woman, she does desire, although that too may be simply evidence of the poet’s tendency toward melodrama) seems to be a factor of the lack of desire among his men. Ozymandias is too rigid in his exclusions. It may very well be that “the bride / Is never naked” because the bridegroom is always veiling her so that she may be unveiled; but Ozymandias’ point is mean-spirited. She opens herself too fully; he draws himself in too completely. The confrontation—Stevens’ term for this meeting—enacts a drama of female appetite and male fear, the one fed by the other. From this meeting, no particular raptures come forth, and we may judge that, if Ozymandias has been too forbidding, Nanzia Nunzio has been too demanding. Yet, we may sympathize both with Nanzia Nunzio’s desire and with Ozymandias’ fear of it.

This reading assumes that Nanzia Nunzio is a distinct character, who “On her trip around the world . . . Confronted Ozymandias” (CP 395); but much of what Nanzia Nunzio says suggests a more complicated exchange than that. Her language and the language of the narrator implode upon each other, as in his claim that she “went / Alone and like a vestal long-prepared” to which she says, “I am the spouse” (CP 395). Virgin or spouse, she seems to be divided between what she appears to be to the narrating observer and what she herself wants or imagines she is. If she is both the “long-prepared” and the already accomplished, she is not
entirely distinct from Ozymandias himself, as she adopts his language for her own purposes in her claim, “As I am, I am / The spouse.” Shifting the meaning of the all-sufficient “I am that I am” by a simple turn of words, reversing by repeating, Nanzia Nunzio also imitates by reversing the fate of Shelley’s Ozymandias. Shelley’s rendition of the words on the pedestal of the fallen statue, “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!,” is itself a reversal by repetition of the inscription on the largest statue in Egypt, “I am Ozymandias, king of kings; if anyone wishes to know what I am and where I lie, let him surpass me in some of my exploits.” Nanzia Nunzio’s divestiture of necklace, stone-studded belt, bright gold, appears to be a perverse, even comical, but willful imitation of Ozymandias’ fate.

Then, she asks, “Clothe me entire in the final filament,” a wish that generates another reading of what might have appeared to be Ozymandias’ dismissive reply: “the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (CP 396). In this context, he has already granted her what she most desires. Her desire and his desire are one. “Clothe me,” she pleads so that I “am precious for your perfecting,” and he answers that he has already anticipated her need in the “covering . . . always glistening.”

What kind of “perfecting” does Nanzia Nunzio require here? The term she chooses winds back to Twelfth Night when the Duke reminds Viola, “For women are as roses, whose fair flow’r / Being once display’d, doth fall that very hour;” and she replies wittily, “And so they are; alas, that they are so! / To die, even when they to perfection grow!” (Twelfth Night II.iv.38-41). And it recalls the refrain of Donne’s “Epithalamion Made at Lincolnes Inn,” “To day put on perfection, and a womans name” which becomes “To night puts on perfection, and a womans name.” Nanzia Nunzio’s desire is ages old; her appeal, legendary. The “precious” woman and the “perfecting man” have a long sexual history. What is new is not the interaction of the two, but the silencing of the woman. Ozymandias’ final word turns in on its speaker, identifies his own lack of wit and tact, and shuts off the necessary dialogue.

Vestal/spouse, naked/covered, body/spirit, Nanzia Nunzio embodies the dilemma of language itself as she separates and unites, exposes and covers up, imitates and expresses. In her exchange with Ozymandias, she speaks to be silenced, and yet what he silences is his own speech and what she speaks is his own silence. Everything she says depends upon what she knows of him, as everything he says comes from her and in response to her. Her dramatic monologue is permeated with his consciousness and words, and, like the speaker in Browning’s monologues, she serves to remind us that language is a shared system that we inhabit.

The world, like the bride, is never naked because it is known to us only in the fictive covering of language. Like Mrs. Alfred Urquay, Nanzia Nunzio will never be “the woman stripped more nakedly / Than naked-
ness, standing before an inflexible / Order” because she will never be naked and, similarly, Ozymandias is not inflexible. There is no order—as Ozymandias’ fate reminds us—that is “inflexible.” Nanzia Nunzio herself acknowledges this fact when she asks for “that, which spoken, will array me / In its own precious ornament . . . So that I tremble with such love” (*CP* 396). She dramatizes the idea that language is never a covering for something that exists apart from language; there is no inner reality distinct from the outer form of language. The connection she imagines between an ornamental array and an inner trembling love that derives from it does not exist.

Nanzia Nunzio desires love; Mrs. Alfred Uruguay, the real; and the woman in “Sunday Morning,” something in which to believe. They would appear to dramatize the distinction between the self and the magnifying other, the inside and the outside, the subject and the object. Yet, as this discussion has suggested, they are not discrete subjects separated from objects, not inner lives that can be known by anything but their outer coverings, not selves except as they are intermingled with others. Indeed, in their desire for love, for the real, for some “‘imperishable bliss,’” they acknowledge their openness, their sense of incompleteness, their lack. It is the source of their speech; without their needs, they would need no speech in which to name their desires, to formulate their plans, to indicate their willingness to be perfected.

But speech does not reveal the inner to the outer world. It does no more than distinguish one external thing from another: the oranges from the peignoirs, the donkey from the woman, the velvet from moonlight, the emerald or amethyst from the necklace. Speech can follow process—the divesting of all external details, the saying no to everything, the disrobing—but it cannot get beyond the end of such process. It can weave a covering for nakedness; but it can expose nothing more naked than nakedness. The hope that it would is the source of speech in these women from Stevens’ poetry and leads to their silencing.

If speech will reveal no inner truths, neither can it support and define subjectivity. As these dramatic encounters suggest, language is an exchange that destabilizes subjectivity. It is an exchange not between discrete entities but between changing, reforming, and moving speakers who are changed by it. The disembodied voices of these poems are partially embodied in the women to whom they respond and whose language they repeat and readjust, as the women are moved by their interaction with the men. Neither is separate from the other.

So entangled with the other, the speakers in and of Stevens’ poems come to rest, not surprisingly, in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour.”16 The title itself suggests a certain playfulness with the imagined boundaries of inner and outer. A soliloquy is delivered perhaps to oneself but in public; here it is retired to the interior. Spoken by someone identified as a par-
amour, a soliloquy will have, if not an audience, at least an imagined listener, the paramour’s true amour. As the poem develops, it appears that the paramour is delivering her final soliloquy neither alone nor in public; she has moved into the heart and mind of her beloved, joining with him, speaking from the interior of the other where she affirms herself and her speech as part of him. The “intensest rendezvous” is “in that thought that we collect ourselves, / Out of all the indifferences, into one thing” (CP 524).

The two in a “single shawl / Wrapped tightly round us . . . forget each other and ourselves” (CP 524). In the act of speech, the soliloquy, and in the act of love, the two “feel the obscurity of an order, a whole.” The voice here is the paramour’s alone although its purpose is to include the other, to “make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough” (CP 524).

This final soliloquy is the celebration of speech, not the imagination, a speech in which we “collect ourselves” from each other and into each other “Out of all the indifferences.” The indifferences recall the opening “So what said the others” in “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay,” where the poem serves as an answer to that question, collecting itself out of all the indifferences of others. The “interior paramour” is the other with whom we have intermingled through love, the other that inures us to otherness, the other who proves the falseness of the boundaries between interior and exterior as speech itself does.

“Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves,” the interior paramour says, and “We feel . . . A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous” (CP 524). The language is of illicit love, and it is spoken not in the poet’s own voice (however much it sounds like his language and his voice) but again by a woman. Nonetheless, it expresses an idea to which Stevens has returned again and again: being is a rendezvous, a “dwelling . . . In which being there together is enough” (CP 524). We “collect ourselves”; we, as individuals or as lovers or as poets, are not already together. The “central mind” is not our mind, not our dwelling; we create ourselves for and with others out of the “indifferences” of that mind. “We say God and the imagination are one” because, in saying so, they are. Speech itself is a collection, a place where, as Stevens writes in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” “Two things of opposite natures seem to depend / On one another” (CP 392). Saying or speaking makes it so because speech erupts not from an isolated, single, separate consciousness, but from an openness to someone else, from a desire immediately fulfilled to be part of something. “The partaker partakes of that which changes him” (CP 392), Stevens acknowledges, and, in a verb that does not limit its mood, writes: “Follow after, O my companion, my fellow, my self, / Sister and solace, brother and delight” (CP 392). Depending, partaking, or following after, the speak-
ers in the poems are composed of their circumstances. Contingency is
central to the collection of their selves.

Although questions of gender and genre may be raised here, their
resolutions will depend on what these dramatic encounters between a man
and a woman speaker suggest about Stevens’ understanding of subjectiv-
ity. If, as Stevens admits in “Theory,” women understand that they are part
of all that is around them (CP 86), it must be admitted that Stevens too
understands this and that his women speakers are witnessed from the
inside. If the tone, both of the voice that answers the women and the voice
that meditates, appears to be patronizing and dismissive toward women,
it is no less true that the women make others possible, share their language,
permeate their consciousness, and, in this way, subvert the tone that would
patronize. So too, the poet shares his voice and language with both men
and women speakers, shifts the boundaries between himself and those
who speak the dramatic monologues, and thus undermines the dramatic
encounter he has been at such pains to create. Why?

Stevens suggests something about the answer in “The Creations of
Sound” where, talking about an anonymous poet, he argues, “If the poetry
of X was music . . . we should not know”

That X is an obstruction, a man
Too exactly himself, and that there are words
Better without an author, without a poet,

Or having a separate author, a different poet,
An accretion from ourselves, intelligent
Beyond intelligence, an artificial man

At a distance, a secondary expositor,
A being of sound, whom one does not approach
Through any exaggeration. From him, we collect.

( CP 310-11)

Again, as in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” the end of speech
or poetry is to collect. It seems paradoxical that Stevens, writing here
probably about Eliot who made so much of the impersonality of the poet,
attacks him for being too present, “Too exactly himself,” too eager for
self-expression, for clarity, for vision. Stevens’ preference for words “with-
out an author” is not, it seems to me, a preference for words as simply
sound. It is rather for words without authority, for “spontaneous partic-
ulars of sound” that come “in sounds not chosen, / Or chosen quickly, in
a freedom / That was their element” (CP 310-11).

From such a poet, “we collect.” Stevens has written a poetry of collection
in which the boundaries of inner and outer, self and other, author and
poem, are crossed and re-crossed. Collection is a way to connect that
requires neither distinction nor separation, yet allows for differentiation
as an on-going process. The speakers are collected together and collect themselves in his poems. There, they exist in relation and only in relation as speech itself makes and remakes the speaker no less than the listener.

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Notes


4Although I want to argue for Stevens’ understanding of subjectivity as interactive and against Bloom and Lentricchia’s recovery of a coherent subject, I find that I have only their language to discuss the subject of the subject. While it is true that Stevens populates his poetry with fantastically named women and generally anonymous men, they are not actually characters in any novelistic sense. They are rather voices and, in fact, only fragments of voices, which can be heard chiefly as they respond to or enter into a dialogue. I want to stress the dependence of the voice on an interlocutor and the interactive energy of speech.


6Jacqueline Vaught Brogan maintains, to the contrary, “Ironically, one of the most ‘telling’ marks of Stevens’ repression of the feminine is that in his poetry female figures almost never speak” (108). Brogan argues that Stevens had an “apparent need” to break into the text to silence the feminine figure (in “The Idea of Order at Key West”) because she figures absence and repression. For an interesting discussion, see “‘Sister of the Minotaur’: Sexism and Stevens,” The Wallace Stevens Journal 12 (Fall 1988): 102-18.


8Browning’s Dramatic Monologue and the Post-Romantic Subject (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

9For an interesting discussion of women’s secondary place in the two stories of creation in Genesis, which has interesting implications for Stevens’ reliance on a guiding voice for the female figure, see Patricia Parker’s “Chapter Nine: Coming Second: Woman’s Place,” in Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 178-233.


11Their names are one indication of their playfulness, both their triviality and their good humor. See Eleanor Cook’s idea that “Our discussions of the changing dramatic monologue, of dramatis personae, and of theories of the mask should look again at Stevens’ names (Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], 304).

12See Eleanor Cook’s discussion of the genre as identified by Louis Martz and Alastair Fowler in Poetry, Word-Play, 103-04.
16Bloom writes, “The mind, which could never be satisfied, never, just for once requires a sense of having fulfilled itself. This impatience is so much against the wisdom that Stevens has spent a lifetime acquiring that his reader is warned of another crisis” (338). It seems to me that “Final Soliloquy” follows naturally from the poems read here. Brogan argues that “In this poem, the phallocentric ‘central mind’ is consciously exposed as a fiction” and claims that “the recovery here of the feminine voice, which is so silenced in his early poems, especially after Harmonium, opens up the space in Stevens for the magnificent voice of his later years” (112).
Fable in *Harmonium’s ‘Adult Make-Believe’*

JAMES C. RANSOM

I

WHEN WE READ WALLACE STEVENS’ first collected volume, we observe that the structure of *Harmonium* is a structure of self, where, as in a hall of mirrors, whatever central self might be said to be is reflected in a series of images whose elusive vanishing point seems virtually infinite. In such an abysmal hall, the self may be as readily viewed as diminished as it may be seen to be enhanced; and *Harmonium* reveals just such a structure, a multiplicity of selves, whatever central self it may be supposed to articulate, reflected, as it were, in a succession of poems whose images of self recede from the opulence of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (*CP* 65) through the lassitude of a “Banal Sojourn” (*CP* 62-63) to the impoverishment of “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad” (*CP* 96); though one might as well see a procession back from the poverty of “The Snow Man” (*CP* 9-10) through the expansion of a “Nomad Exquisite” (*CP* 95) to the splendor of Hoon.1

“[E]very self is many selves,” or so the American philosopher William James is said to have concluded in 1890, and what may be called the many-sided self one encounters in reading *Harmonium* is one whose varied facets reflect a fragmentary or multiplicitous poetical character.2 An imagery of mirrors reflecting some hypothetical central figure may be more apt, however, in that it allows for the introduction of properties of distortion in the different configurations of the various mirrors. Such distorting properties would, as it were, account for the many variations in the reflections of self as “seen,” so to speak, by Stevens’ readers.3 The reader of *Harmonium* may thus be said to enter a hall of distorting mirrors; and the purpose of my present essay is, through a close analysis of two poems that may be found at the extremities of this volume’s reflections of self, “Bantams in Pine-Woods” (*CP* 75-76) and “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” (*CP* 57-58), to identify and explore certain of the distorting properties that wrench the poetical character in *Harmonium* into such various and often wry postures.

Roy Harvey Pearce, in 1951, first defined the “mode” of *Harmonium* as “essentially dramatic,” a definition he went on to clarify in *The Continuity of American Poetry*: “These are poems of the imagination as it seeks to discover the truth not about the world but about itself.”4 Pearce’s assumption that *Harmonium* represents Stevens’ initial explorations of that American Adamic self of which, in Pearce’s reading of him, Stevens is the preeminent modern incarnation was replaced by Joseph Riddel with a view of *Harmonium* as a volume in which “the poet in search of himself dons many masks” of a more cosmopolitan modernist imagination, still
conceived, however, as a unitary and unifying self toward which the “tenuous and unsure” self of Harmonium moves. While it is well to consider the problematic self of Harmonium in the broader context of a general crisis of modernity in whatever temporal or geographical guise it assumes (e.g., any particular national historic “figure,” such as the American Adam), it does not therefore remain that the multiplicitous self of Harmonium must be seen as arriving at, or even in search of, some resolving and unitary identity. Here, I tend to agree with Milton Bates’s assertion that, in Harmonium, Stevens’ “self-consciousness sponsored a proliferation of comic personae,” though I doubt that these personae may be reduced to Bates’s tripartite “Burgher, Fop, and Clown,” primary masks, in Bates’s reading, of a self divided along essentially binary lines first established in the young Stevens’ antithetical adult role models, his father and George Santayana, and subsequently internalized in the opposition between American businessman and Pateresque aesthete. It is my own purpose in this present examination of two of Harmonium’s more bizarre poems to suggest that the “comic self-consciousness” that Riddel and Bates have attributed to Stevens might be redefined as a form of modern anxiety and that the “sensitive, alienated self [of Harmonium] . . . trying heroically to find his way through the world rather than beyond it” could be understood in specifically American terms that suggest that distortion and fragmentation are not so much problems to be eventually overcome as conditions of “living as and where we live” (CP 326). That the terms of this understanding appeal to the local habitation that Stevens gives to the modern self does not argue that Stevens’ multiplicitous self is uniquely American but only insists that his being American gives to the modern crisis of self a distinctive cast.

II

Stevens’ beast fables are the most fanciful of the kinds of “adult make-believe” that render Harmonium perhaps the dandyest linguistic invention ever copyrighted in the USA. The furiously alliterating syllables of the opening couplet of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” strut onto the page in an instance of the unique comic style of Stevens’ fables:

Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

This couplet exemplifies an extremity in Harmonium’s structure, where reflections of the poetical character appear in their greatest degree of distortion among the volume’s beast fables. They are its “ithy oonts and long-haired / Plomets,” which “We enjoy . . . as the Herr Gott / Enjoys his comets” (CP 349). The underlying cause of delight is a verbal hyperbole comparable to that of the degree of distortion of the ellipse of normal planetary orbits that characterizes the orbit of a comet. The hyperbole of
“Bantams in Pine-Woods” is also showy, in the manner of a comet’s tail. The salient feature of Stevens’ bold eccentricity is an apparent nonsense that, as Irvin Ehrenpreis has shown, resolves itself in the overall sense of the poem. This is a reversal of traditional British nonsense, where an overall illusion of sense finally eludes us in the evasions of nonsense. Moreover, the manner of Stevens’ fables is more robust, less confined to mere exploitation of linguistic and literary conventions, and much more wry than that of a Carroll or a Lear. It is this unique “twist” of Stevens’ comic exuberance that I wish to elucidate in examining the distortions in “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks.”

“Bantams in Pine-Woods” is among those poems that earned Stevens his early reputation as a dandy. His verbal bravura, with its “tink and tank and tank-a-tunk-tunk” (CP 59), its “ric-a-nic” and its “shoo-shoo-shoo” (CP 131), appeared outlandish in the thin atmosphere of the modern among the spare and chiseled forms of “The Image.” And where but from France could such dandified behavior have been imported?—hence, the tendency of Stevens’ first American readers to suppose the influence of Jules Laforgue and his followers. Scholars set out to explore the enthusiasm for French poetry that Stevens shared with many of his American contemporaries, finding in his poems a symboliste heritage, from Baudelaire’s dandy through Mallarmé’s musician of silence and on to Laforgue’s ironic Pierrot and the verbal contortionist of Tristan Corbière. Beginning with Frank Kermode’s book in 1960, more recent criticism (most notably, of course, that of Harold Bloom) has tended to favor the British Romantics and their nineteenth-century American cousins, Emerson and Whitman, as the proper origin and abiding influence for Stevens as poet. Yet our suspicion of a French influence persists. There is a playful verve, a glitter and brilliance in Stevens’ use of language that seems undeniably French. He remains the dandiest of modern American poets, and Robert Buttel has demonstrated that Stevens’ unique style, especially during the Harmonium period, shares much with nineteenth-century French poetic practices. Milton Bates emphasizes the influence of Walter Pater’s English Decadence, “a distinctly English translation of a French text,” on Stevens’ mode of assimilating French practices; and this is a plausible and often illuminating way of pursuing “the glare of essential differences” in which, for Michel Benamou (our most knowledgeable, careful and convincing student of Stevens’ supposed debt to the symbolistes), “whatever sameness struck us at first pales.”

Marianne Moore recognized Stevens’ difference as “ferocity” and felt herself “in danger of unearthing the ogre” beneath the “sweet-Clementine-will-you-be-mine nonchalance” of Stevens’ Yankee-doodle-dandified comedy. The robust, the wry; the nonchalant, the ferocious—these are the oxymoronic attributes of an American comic tradition that Constance Rourke traces from colonial times to the era of Harmonium in her admirably
durable study, *American Humor.* To see Stevens’ adult make-believe as one aspect of a self formed, and perhaps deformed, in the difficulty of what it was to be a poet in his particular time and from his particular place is to locate Stevens among those American poets, painters, musicians, and photographers with whom he so diffidently associated in Greenwich Village during the years of *Harmonium’s* composition. It is to take our direction “From the Journal of Crispin” and, “stress[ing] Stevens’ alliance with the . . . writers who . . . stayed home in America, and who . . . sought to create American . . . literature through cultivation of the ‘local,’” to perceive the unique twist of Stevens’ comedy upon its native ground. What better starting place than the aggressively territorial beast fable, “Bantams in Pine-Woods”? Stevens found a favorite example of the effect of poetic language in the *Fables* of La Fontaine, an effect “similar in kind to the prismatic formations that occur about us in nature in the case of reflections and refractions” (*NA* 109). Stevens understood this as an effect of analogy, or resemblance, and sought to account for the prisms of poetry as a function of “the story and the other meaning [the vehicle and, in the case in point of La Fontaine’s fable of “The Crow and the Fox,” the explicit tenor] . . . com[ing] together like two aspects that combine to produce a third” within the mind of the reader; “or, if they do not combine, [they] inter-act, so that one influences the other” (*NA* 109). Here we have the two indispensable parts of fable, story and moral, as well as that *tertium quid*: the prismatic formations that become the never-ending elaborations of critical discussion. Hence, fable reveals itself in Stevens’ essay, as in the second-century B.C. rhetorician Theon’s definition (*logos psudês eikonizoon aletheian*: “a fictitious story picturing a truth”), as a model in little of all fictive discourse. From the reader’s point of view, then, Stevens’ prismatic formations may be regarded as the various levels of interpretation that one discovers when reading a poem; as, for example, when Ehrenpreis discovers in the interaction between the speech of the Bantam and the “meaning” made explicit by the word “poet” (l. 7), together with the words “universal” (l. 3) and “personal” (l. 5), a fable of the “man’s pretensions as a poet” shamed by the bird’s ability to speak “naturally, effortlessly, and accurately for a world that is always beyond the poet’s grasp.” Reading the poem as, in this sense, about the humbling of pretensions is apt to its generic context. Marcel Gutwirth tells us that “the most universal tenet fable has to teach” is “the law . . . [of] limitation.” In this way, regarding Iffucan (who is, after all, “just one of us chickens”) as a reflection of the poetic self, we observe a simple structure of reversal: the pride of the poet is overturned in face of “the veritable ding an sich” (*CP* 29).

Yet, in the mirroring turns of the poem’s language, we recognize the speaker himself as a figure of the poetical character. Reversing the universality of Azcan, *this* Bantam is a poet of the particular. Though not a
universal bard, the Bantam is perhaps one of a certain class of poets. He is, as it were, a down-home Appalachian poet, from Georgia perhaps ["The man in Georgia waking among pines / Should be pine-spokesman" (CP 38)], whose "words / Are as natural sounds / Of their place"] (CP 51). One can almost hear the fiddle striking up "Turkey in the Straw" as this Bantam struts his stuff. It would not be too much to say that his tangy pine-poem is "an invisible element of that place / Made visible" (CP 52). Indeed, this Bantam’s boastful confrontation of Chieftain Iffucan has all the qualities of backwoods American humor described by Rourke in her chapter on the old southwestern frontier, entitled “The Gamecock in the Wilderness,” after Falconbridge’s 1851 biography of Dan Marble, a Yankee actor famed for his characterization of the backwoodsman.26

Stevens’ choice of persona reflects the “strong leaning toward natural history” that dictates the imagery of self in this tradition, where the comic hero is invariably identified with one or another of America’s noisier, more belligerent animals. Of these, “the leaping, crowing, wing-flapping” cock was a favorite vehicle by which comedians sought to express the aggressive energy of the exuberant backwoodsman. Along with this expansive assertion of self went habits of speech very like those of the Bantam. The tall talk of frontier humor was full of “strange new words,” “sudden comic shouts,” and “apparent nonsense.” The free invention of this speech abounded in “ear-splitting syllables,” “mock pompous words,” and plethoric alliteration. Even the theatricality of the Bantam’s “blackamoor” and its attendant Shakespearean imagery belong to this tradition.27 And the confrontational mood of Stevens’ poem is also that of backwoods humor, where an obsession with size, scale, power—every aspect of physical strength—expressed itself in the boasting contests and storytelling matches that are the staple forms of this tradition.

From the angle of vision established in Ehrenpreis’ reading of “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” the Chieftain’s comic name may be seen to caricature the power attributed to Imagination in nineteenth-century European Romanticism. His ability (“can” in the sense of “be able to do, make, or accomplish”) is the power inherent in the imagination’s rhetoric of “if” and “as,” of surmise (make-believe/fiction) and resemblance (analogy/metaphor/metamorphosis). The poem’s rhetoric, as in the use of the Shakespearean “blackamoor,” also may reach back to the archaic sense of “can” as “know or understand,” thus revealing the knowledge of this bard to be the poetic mystery of “if” and “as.” Hence, his power is expressed in the potentially fearful “hoos” of hieratic utterance. That his “hoos” fail to achieve the appropriate effect is the result, of course, of the comic reversal that comes with the recognition that the metaphorical garb (the “caftan / Of tan with henna hackles” suggests the Rhode Island Red, a relatively large American barnyard rooster) of this hyperbolically “tall” poet cannot mask the image of a strutting Bantam; and the inflated Iffucan takes his
place as a modern addition to “the grotesque and balloonlike guises” that float through the gallery of nineteenth-century American burlesques of the Grand Style of European Romanticism, of which William Mitchell’s Manfred, who delighted audiences at the Olympia Theatre in New York at the end of the 1830s, is among the earliest examples. Rourke concludes that such burlesque “could only have been created by a temper steeped in romanticism,” and she suggests that its deflations were aimed at a “romantic emotion which . . . belonged to the popular mind” of America. In like manner, one concludes that the comic distortions of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” are burlesque reflections of a universalizing or transcendental tendency in Harmonium’s central if multiplicitous self.

If, however, one establishes an angle of vision in which the conventions of American humor are recognized as part of the structure of the poem, one then regards the Bantam speaker as himself reflecting the properties that structure the distortions of self in the poem. This cocky figure may then be seen to mask the insecurity of the provincial artist, whose personal world appears trivial from the viewpoint of any truly major European achievement. The local poet may be, indeed, a dwarf, isolated from the resources of a poetic tradition wherein the individual talent might take on universal significance. In this perspective, the Chieftain’s name poses a challenge to the Bantam speaker: if you can do as I can, then perhaps your inches will assume the significant proportions of my feet. The Bantam speaker expresses the insecurity inherent in his provincial situation in what Rourke teaches us to see as a characteristically American manner, masking his anxiety in a crowing, wing-flapping strut that loudly proclaims the very limitations with which he might be charged. Lacking a refined cultural tradition, he “bristles” in a burlesque performance of the local vigor that is the provincial’s reply to the grandeur of a central tradition. Seen from this angle of vision, the Bantam speaker compounds the structure of reversals already observed in the image of Iffucan, undercutting pretensions not unlike those of the naïve realism projected by Crispin in his idea of a colony of local colorists (CP 36-40).

This structure of reversals is appropriate, moreover, to the context of fable, where the law of limitation teaches that:

By the very nature of things whatever strength you may possess, another will be found who is stronger, or wilier or more imposing. That sobering truth, and the fact that all must learn to cope with it, fable rehearses endlessly.

Among the earliest recorded fables in the Indo-European tradition is one from Babylon in the second millennium B.C. where we read that “A mouse (?), fleeing from a . . . entered a snake’s hole and said, ‘The snake-charmer sent me here. Greetings!’” In flight from some original, nameless terror, a humble protagonist comes face to face with a deadly adversary, only to
escape, if but for the timeless moment of the fable, in a triumph of comic audacity masking his limitations by invoking a power beyond himself yet appropriated in the inventiveness of his quick-witted response. Whatever anxieties it may mask, fable’s lesson is that of learning to cope with the sobering truth of personal limitations. Fable thus works to transform debilitating fears into a capacity for self-assertion, however limited by the conditions of things as they are. From the ancient Sumerian fable (1800 B.C.) of the smith’s dog who could not overturn the anvil and therefore overturned the water pot instead31 to Uncle Remus’ plantation tale of “How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox,”32 fable inculcates the wit that enables one to live within one’s limitations, transforming even the deepest anxieties into the humor of comic inventiveness.

Just so, the irrepressible Bantam struts about, whatever his limitations, including provincial anxiety, boasting that he does not fear his adversary; and, in the comedy of his wildly inventive burlesque of the Grand Style, not only are his fears overcome but a potentially destructive force is perhaps exorcised. Romantic excess can alienate the American artist from the sustenance of everyday life among ordinary men and women. To find oneself alone in the solipsistic space of a universal “I” without the social comforts of any familiar home is, throughout American literature, a persistent nightmare.

This is the fear that haunts the phantasmagoric fable of the “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” (CP 57-58), where the figure of the Romantic poet is reflected in the image of the most exotic bird of Harmonium, and the pointed challenge of the Bantam of everyday particularity is reiterated in the sharp intrusions of Berserk. Here, it is the Romantic who speaks, telling of an encounter with a figure whose potential for blocking the poet is the power of the real, in Stevens’ everyday American usage of the word. Stevens uses his typical imagery of moonlight and sunlight in order to identify the Prince of Peacocks as a figure of pure imagination and, therefore, of Romantic excess, and Berserk as a figure of the pressure exerted against the imagination by the world of ordinary, daytime experience. Everywhere in Harmonium, moonlight is associated with an imaginative indulgence bearing the conventional markings of that “twilight interval” to which nineteenth-century High Romanticism had come in its passage through the French symbolistes and the British decadents to the Harvard aesthetes of the 1890s among whom Stevens first set out to be a poet.33

And more often than not, such imaginative indulgence is thwarted by the hustle and bustle of ordinary daytime activity, by hard fact, by the “blocks / And blocking steel” dreaded by the Prince of Peacocks. Thus, “the legendary moonlight that once burned / In Crispin’s mind” is the locus of a frozen dreamscape in which Crispin seeks “blissful liaison” with a “sequestered bride” in an elaborate figuration of the pure poet’s aspiration for unmediated union with an idealized environment. This moonlight
turns out, however, to be “Illusive, faint, more mist than moon, perverse” and the scene of “an evasion, or, if not, / A minor meeting, facile, delicate.” Consequently, as he encounters “the visible, circumspect presentment” of an actual Carolina, Crispin’s “moonlight fiction disappear[s]” before the “arrant” sights and sounds and smells of everyday American commerce among sunlit warehouses, docks, and railroad spurs (CP 33-36).34

As a wanderer in the moonlight, the Prince of Peacocks is also haunted by an exquisitely abstracted “beauty,” the pure poetry of which is carried in the music of Stevens’ verse—that is to say, in its cadenced rhythms and harmonious patterns of sound, resolved in the tonic rhyme: “there” / “air.” This is the beauty of an airy nothing without local habitation or a home. Here, the reader may remember the warning a perhaps less ambivalent Stevens was to pen nearly 20 years after the composition of this poem: “The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. . . . It has the strength of reality or none at all” (NA 6-7).

Indeed, the waking reality of the sunlight is beyond the capacity of this lord of the somnambulistic realm of moonlight fiction to assimilate into the fragile beauty of his world. Hence, it appears to him as Berserk (as, indeed, the strident Bantam speaker might have appeared to his adversary, Chieftain Iffucan), a chaotic presence who threatens the “innocent” beauty of the moonlight—innocent, that is, of the unaccountable particulars that make of everyday experience such an uncontrollable clutter from the point of view of the aesthetic purist or dandy of the imagination. That such imaginative innocence is necessarily self-defeating would seem to be the moral of this fable. Once again, fable asserts its law of limitation. The “sun-colored” world of everyday particularity cannot be evaded; Berserk “set[s] [his] traps / In the midst of dreams.” In this way, one may read Berserk as an avenging warrior of nourishing particularity directing his force against the Prince of Peacocks, reflection of the transcendental ambitions of a latter-day Romantic self. And the dread-inspired vertigo, however hauntingly beautiful, of the Peacock’s concluding evocation of moonlight suggests the nightmarish revenge of reality on the Romantic who seeks to evade its conditions. The pure poet of mental moonlight may fall from innocence into the nightmare projection of his own dread of things as they are, finding that “the blue ground / [Is] full of blocks / And blocking steel” and knowing “the dread / Of the bushy plain.” Whatever “beauty / Of the moonlight” falls in this dread place can only intensify the shudder attendant upon its phantasmagoric effects. The ultimate effect upon the creature of High Romantic yearning of his encounter with waking reality “In the midst of dreams” is a knowledge of “moonlight / Falling,” an atmospheric effect that seems correlate with the vertiginous sense of “dread” everywhere emanating from this only seemingly harmonious poem.
Like the burlesque of “Bantams in Pine-Woods,” the phantasmagoria of “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” reflects the structure of traditional American humor. Again, Rourke has followed the inward movement of the theatrical masquerade of America’s earliest comic expression into the literary monologue of an isolated self, whose revelations of the personal own the very grotesquerie that characterized the masks of popular comedy. Poe, of course, claimed this “area marked out by the popular comic tradition” as his own, exploiting the “hysteria” masked by the “blank and undisturbed countenances” of those popular storytellers whose grizzly fantasy-making “swung from an impinging terror to a gross and often brutal comedy.” It was left to Poe to make of this popular form a calculated device for the expression of all manner of psychic alienation, revealing the horror beneath the potentially pathological detachment of the American habit of masquerade. The calculated frisson of “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” is among Stevens’ eeriest contributions to the tradition of American comic horror.

The theatricality of the Prince’s somnambulistic monologue is apparent in its evocation of the scene where his confrontation with Berserk is set. One readily envisions the “busby plain,” filled with “blocks / And blocking steel” beneath a moonlit sky opaquely suffusing the scene with its “milky blue,” as a set designed in the manner of some surrealistically modernist painter. Into this nocturnal scene wanders the iridescently shimmering Peacock only to encounter the primary assertion of “red” Berserk. Harkening, as he so intently does, after the “beauty / Of the moonlight,” the Prince experiences “dread” in face of this “sharp” and “sun-colored”’ assertion of all that blocks his way. Along with the theatricality of setting and action, the strangely detached, hypnotic monotone of the “Anecdote” identifies its kinship with traditional American modes of comic horror in which the grizzliest actions are narrated in an imperturbably deadpan manner. So, too, the formal control of rhythm and sound that characterizes the prosody of this poem only serves to intensify its eerie, even nightmarish quality. One senses a cry of terror just beneath the regular cadences, consonant sound patterns, and seemingly obsessive repetitions that give this poem its distinctive atmosphere. Affect is strangely at odds with tone of voice here, and the anxiety that haunts “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” is very nearly palpable.

III

If one were to posit a central self for Harmonium, one would have to construct a figure of which the burlesque of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and the phantasmagoria of “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” would be resolvable reflections. To do so would be to view the distorting properties in these poems as part of the figure—elements of the structure, so to speak, by which various transformations of self are governed in individual poems. Such a “self” would be less an identity than an anxious structure
of consciousness reflected in various, and possibly conflicting, identities. The readings I have elaborated in the second part of this essay suggest that Stevens’ beast fables may be understood to be transformations consistent with a self whose distortions reflect an intense and peculiar form of self-consciousness. I would identify this with that unique sentiment américain observed by Tocqueville in 1831-32, for which he coined the term l’individualisme. The bright surface of the American character is Adamism; its dark underside, solipsism. Hence the theme of alienation, or madness, that haunts the center of American literature, as a sinister double of the innocent Adam, at least since the generation of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville. Tocqueville defined American individualism as a “feeling” that disposed each member of the community to sever himself from his ancestors, his descendants, and even his contemporaries. “It throws him back forever upon himself alone and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.”

For Stevens, I would assume that this “horror” is given a special twist by the specter of imaginative excess that haunts the Romantic heritage of that “twilight interval” wherein he commenced as a poet, and by the fear of its consequences in an America increasingly given to the can-do pragmatics of a rational, progressive manipulation of what passes for everyday, common-sense reality. This fear particularizes the general anxiety of the New World artist, for whom insecurity with respect to the sophistications of European culture is only heightened by a reluctance to become alienated from homespun American life. Again, it is fitting that Stevens should have reflected the fears of his American poetic self in beast fables. Our modern willing suspension of disbelief in the miracle of talking beasts, which harkens back to the archaic origins of fable, if only imagined, in the oral folklore of Indo-European and African peoples whose ego differentiation was presumably less intense than our own, suggests that fable may rise from some psychic region where wonder and fear prompt the adult make-believe whereby, according to Stevens, we must structure our reality. If so, it is the especial property of this genre to mingle the awe implicit in such origins with a dram of condescension. The conventions of fable include its use as a vehicle for moral instruction of children, and this puerile association keeps the genre within the humble boundaries of its own lesson of limitation.

Whatever fears it may mask, fable wittily transforms them into laughter, thereby converting a potential blocking of the self into a form of self-expression. While the burlesque and phantasmagoria of Harmonium do involve a comic deflation of the Grand Style of European Romanticism, they also reflect the special conditions of a modern American poet, transforming anxieties about European culture and fears of the potentially destructive force of imaginative excess, compounded by the inherent loneliness of American life, into the wry comedy of poems like “Bantams in Pine-
Woods” and “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks.” The urbane wit of Stevens’ combination of the homely (the local, everyday, and familiar) and the fabulous (the outlandish, unique, and strange) may remind us of the Fables of La Fontaine, of which Stevens himself was obviously fond; but any resemblance fades in the blare of Stevens’ American bravura, which is resolutely provincial, that is to say, hometown. Somewhat in from the extremity of Stevens’ beast fables, the Yankee-doodle-dandified tones of “Ploughing on Sunday” (CP 20), “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” (CP 59), and “Life Is Motion” (CP 83) sound the horns, saxophones, and shouts of the same resilient, irrepressible energy, however bizarre its expression. The conventions of traditional American humor, indeed, the “difficulty of what it is to be” (CP 381) in America that these transform into exuberant comedy, are indispensable properties of the structure of Harmonium. Part of what makes Stevens such a dandy poet is the manner in which he manages to fulfill Whitman’s prophecy that the best American speech would have a cosmopolitan range of expression; for not least among the twists of Harmonium’s homespun comedy is the curious way in which its American aspects have appeared so outlandish in the cosmopolitan context of that modern poetry of which Stevens is an acknowledged master.

Elsewhere among Harmonium’s reflections of self, we perceive the relatively distortion-free lineaments of a figure whose energy freely cycles between the poles of wintry decreation and the imaginative fulfillment of summer. Yet, if the many selves of Harmonium thus appear to cohere, it must be about a figure whose anxieties, however suppressed in the winter mind of the Snow Man or sublimated in the enchantments of Hoon, nonetheless increasingly assert themselves, not only in the burlesque and phantasmagoria of Stevens’ beast fables, but in the wry, often bizarre distortions of poems like “Invective against Swans” (1921), “Cortège for Rosenbloom” (1921), “Palace of the Babies” (1921), “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” (1922), “Floral Decorations for Bananas” (1923), “The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade” (1931), and, a relatively early example, “The Weeping Burgher” (1919), whose “strange malice . . . distort[s] the world,” in the “excess” of a ghostly self, who, “tortured for old speech,” can “come / Among the people” only as “belle design / Of foppish line” (CP 61).39

Though this Burgher may appear to wear the guise of a French dandy, this affectation will be seen to differ from the French model inasmuch as it is assumed in order to mask the anxieties of an American poetical character. In the explicitly American locale of Harmonium, the use of French words and poses involves the self-conscious appropriation of a cultural milieu recognized as foreign, however appealing its refinements to one who finds himself, in Perry Miller’s haunting phrase, “alone with America.”40 In Harmonium French words often signal a certain urbane refinement
for which the American poet has no hometown equivalent. “The Plot against the Giant” (CP 6-7) is illustrative. The third girl will undo the maundering, guttural yokel by whispering the heavenly labials of the French language from her irresistibly puffed lips: “Oh, la . . . le pauvre!” This typifies the use in Harmonium of the French language for its elegance and refined sensuous appeal, to which the poet is attracted and yet about which he feels uneasy. If the girls in this poem may be said to reflect the poet’s desire for European cultural refinement, anxieties about his own native strength may be no less reflected in the plot to check, abash, and undo the graceless giant.

In Harmonium’s poem of centering, “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” (CP 13-18), the poet is able to transform the anxieties implicit in the affected mask of an avuncular French dandy into the mature tones of one, like a rose rabbi, able to “pursue[] the origin and course / Of love,” despite the losses of time and the hindrances of place. This suggests that the poet of Harmonium will be capable of supporting the burdens of the American poetical character along the route of a major career, despite the fatalism with which “The Comedian as the Letter C” concludes the period of Harmonium’s composition. The linguistic eccentricities of this most bizarre of modern poems, as well as its entropic action and fatalistic conclusion, reflect the multiplicitous poetical character I have been exploring in this examination of the distorting properties in Harmonium’s beast fables; and Stevens’ abandonment of poetry during the years between the two editions of Harmonium may indicate that, for a time, the poetic self was silenced by the contradictions of what it was to be a poet in the USA, including, of course, the necessity of making a living for oneself and one’s family.

IV

In the traditional humor of America, genuine emotion seldom shows through the assumed mask, and when it does, “fear alone [is] revealed, but only in a distant and fragmentary fashion, only to be cast away with laughter.”41 This is the fear masked in the comedy of Harmonium. The wild diction, the irreverence, the grotesquerie with which Americans everywhere express themselves in the forms of burlesque, lampoon, and travesty constitute a range of verbal expression bred partly out of the “horror” attendant upon the lonely confrontation with the unknown implicit in the American experiment (whether it be mastering the wilderness, making it in a democratic social order, or pursuing whatever is new and different) and partly out of the anxiety attendant upon the opprobrium of cultured Europeans. The resultant hyperbolic self-consciousness has expressed itself traditionally in a caricature whose antic behavior is partly a protective mask, partly a grotesque sporting in public of the faults with which the American character has been charged by Europeans, especially the British and their imitators among “cultured” New Englanders (the Harvard Aesthetes, for example, among whom Stevens’ poetic self was first given
structure). As a reading of Rourke suggests, the tradition of American humor has no doubt contributed to the staying power, for better or for worse, of what we call, for want of the dignified grandeur we associate with the word culture, the American way of life, transforming its horror (loneliness, violence, disillusionment) into laughter through the inventions of a wry comic wit.

To identify the American ground of Stevens’ comedy in Harmonium is not to deny its affinities with either French symbolisme or British Nonsense, but to distinguish his unique twist of the modern sensibility. Stevens’ adult make-believe is a peculiarly American strain of modern poetry, related in some generic fashion, no doubt, to both symboliste and Nonsense practices as a working out of the heritage of European Romanticism. Stevens’ difference, however, consists, at least in part, in the way his poems continue a comic tradition capable of transforming the potential for alienation inherent in American experience into the robust if wry laughter of an exuberant comedy that celebrates the possibilities nevertheless available within the limitations of what it is to be “living as and where we live.”

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Notes

1The following system of abbreviations is used throughout this essay in reference to the works of Wallace Stevens: CP—The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1954); L—Letters of Wallace Stevens, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf, 1966); NA—The Necessary Angel (New York: Vintage Books, 1951); OP—Opus Posthumous, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Knopf, 1989). Stevens first published Harmonium in September of 1923, when he was less than a month away from his 44th birthday, a successful insurance lawyer, and about to go with his wife on a cruise to California by way of Havana and the Panama Canal. He did not publish again for nearly six years, when “The Sun This March” appeared in the New Republic for April 16, 1930. The second edition of Harmonium was published on July 24, 1931. It is to this edition, the “Harmonium” of The Collected Poems, omitting three poems from the 1924 edition and adding fourteen, that I refer in this essay. Harmonium represents the collected poems of a mature poet already equal to the best among his own remarkable generation of American poets. It seems safe to assert that, had he ceased publishing altogether after its appearance, Wallace Stevens would still be an important modern poet.


3While (as in the discussion of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” that follows) I recognize and take into account the distortions in various readings of any poem proper to the respective viewpoints of the various readers who pose them, I do not, in this essay,
explicitly address these phenomena. Here I am concerned with distortions that properly belong to the text of the poems themselves when interpreted within the conventions operative in American modernist poetry.


6J. Hillis Miller’s recognition that “self-division, contradiction, perpetual oscillations of thought” are “the constants in Stevens’ work” is instructive in the context of my own argument for multiplicity (Poets of Reality [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965], 258). Miller carries this insight over into his analysis of Stevens’ “deconstruction” of the Emersonian “American tradition of the strong self” in the catachresis of “The Rock,” where “the chasm between self and other remains unfilled” (“Stevens’ Rock and Criticism As Cure,” Georgia Review 30 [1976]: 5-31).

7Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 115. “Burgher, Fop, and Clown” is the title of Bates’s Chapter III, where he elaborates a reading of Harmonium in terms of the tension between businessman and aesthete, which collapses into silence with the “disintegration” (122) of the clownish failure, Crispin. The origins of this tension in the conflicting models of Garrett Stevens and George Santayana are explored in Bates’s first chapter.

8Riddel, 56.

9Riddel, 57.

10I take the term “adult make-believe” from the first of Stevens’ “Three Academic Pieces,” where he asserts that “the structure of reality . . . is measurably an adult make-believe” (NA 75). Stevens would say that the ideas of order whereby we unify experience are “fictive things” (CP 59), mental constructs with which we arrange, interpret, and come to know deeply “things as they are” (CP 165-80). Hence, he insists that we must “[p]iece the world together, . . . but not with [our] hands” (CP 192).

11Strange Relation: Stevens’ Nonsense,” in Doggett and Buttel, 219-34.

12Hugh Kenner, “Seraphic Glitter: Stevens and Nonsense,” Parnassus 5 (1976): 153-59, assigns Stevens’ fables to the genre of Nonsense, quoting both “Bantams in Pine-Woods” and “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” as examples of how Stevens “co-opts effects from sophisticated nursery verse.” This aptly identifies an analogue to Stevens’ make-believe, one that contributes to our understanding of Stevens’ location on the map of modern poetry, helping to establish his distance from that other apt analogue, French symbolisme. But to move all the way to a reading of Stevens as “the most insouciant of all Nonsense poets, apologist of an honored métier, he for whom even a Carroll or a Lear came but to prepare the way,” even in fun and with an awareness that, like Poe’s, Stevens’ is “American Nonsense,” and hence the work of an outsider, “convinced that traditional and nonsensical effects are alike synthetic,” is to push him too far in the direction of British verse. Though Kenner acknowledges that Stevens believes deeply in the power of words, arguing, though with tongue in cheek, that the poet had “something to say,” his reading misses the full weight of that world Stevens so airily balances before us. Stevens did aspire to more than a deflation of the Grand Style, more even than the construction of a self-referential world of words. “Something to Say” is Kenner’s title for the chapter in A Homemade World (New York: Knopf, 1975), 50-90, where he more fully develops his reading of Stevens as a Nonsense poet, using Stevens as a foil (perhaps straight man, or even fall guy) against which to elaborate a brilliant reading of William Carlos Williams.

13Paul Rosenfield’s chapter on Harmonium in Men Seen (New York: The Dial Press, 1925), reprinted as a prelude to Kenner’s “Seraphic Glitter,” and Gorham Munson’s review in The Dial 79 (Nov. 1925): 413-17, “The Dandyism of Wallace Stevens,” are prime


17Mythology, 94.


21The milieu in which Stevens composed Harmonium is explored in detail by Glen MacLeod in Wallace Stevens and Company: The Harmonium Years, 1913-1923 (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983).

22Louis L. Martz, “‘From the Journal of Crispin’: An Early Version of ‘The Comedian as the Letter C,’” in Doggett and Buttel, 10.


24Strange Relation,” 221.

25Fable (New Orleans: The Graduate School of Tulane University, 1980), 2. I am indebted to Professor Gutwirth for his many insights into the nature of this genre and also for his having introduced me to the work of B. E. Perry.

26Rourke, 33-76. The paragraph that follows in my own text is drawn largely from “The Gamecock in the Wilderness” and the examples of frontier humor cited therein by Rourke. The words and phrases I have indicated with quotation marks are taken verbatim from her chapter.


28Rourke, 120, 130-31.

29Gutwirth, 2.

30Perry, xxxii.
31 Perry, xxx.

32 Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896), 16-19. Two poems by Stevens, “The Jack-Rabbit” (*CP* 50) and “Some Friends from Pascagoula” (*CP* 126), suggest that his beast fables may derive, at least in part, from the same oral tradition of African-American folklore that Harris appropriated in his tales of Uncle Remus.

33 The contours of this inheritance have been carefully mapped by Buttel in *The Making of Harmonium*. He provides a full description of the conventional poetry of the era of the American ’90s and a thorough analysis of Stevens’ engagement with this context. The phrase “twilight interval” is Edmund Clarence Stedman’s, quoted by Buttel from Horace Gregory and Maria Zaturenska, *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1942), 10.

34 Among the poems of *Harmonium* associating moonlight with imaginative indulgence, see especially “The Ordinary Women” (*CP* 10-12), “Of the Surface of Things” (*CP* 57), “Palace of the Babies” (*CP* 77), and “Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion” (*CP* 88-89).

35 Rourke, 183-86.


37 Richard Ellmann, “How Stevens Saw Himself,” illuminates Stevens’ anxieties concerning his own strength in the context of a discussion of Stevens’ relationship with his father, a hometown poet whose verse appeared in a local Reading newspaper. It is significant from the point of view of my own argument that Stevens learned the “gaiety of language” (*CP* 322) through the “fancy fooling” of his father’s verbal play. Given the importance of this crucial relationship, Garrett Stevens’ nervous breakdown in 1901 could only have intensified any anxieties his son may have had concerning his poetic self.

38 See Gutwirth, 2-3. The figure of awe mingled with a dream of condescension is Gutwirth’s.

39 The dates are those of first publication, taken from S. F. Morse, J. R. Bryer, and J. N. Riddle, *Wallace Stevens Checklist* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1963). I include them in support of my adverb “increasingly.” The phenomenon I am concerned with here is the one noticed by Yvor Winters in his (in)famous attack, “Wallace Stevens, or The Hedonist’s Progress,” in *Anatomy of Nonsense*, 88-119, though I offer a very different interpretation of its nature and significance.


41 Rourke, 100.
Re-figuring Stevens: The Poet’s Politics

LISA M. STEINMAN

MOST ACCOUNTS OF THE POLITICS of Wallace Stevens’ poetry focus on poems of the mid-thirties, and especially on Stevens’ response in “Owl’s Clover” to the review that Stanley Burnshaw published in New Masses in 1935. Recent criticism invites a rethinking of this issue. For instance, Marjorie Perloff has examined Stevens’ disconcertingly displaced response to World War II, and argued that “Stevens is at his most assured . . . when he makes no gesture toward the world of ‘prose reality’” (51). Further, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, Perloff concludes that even when Stevens does mention “the normal” of “actual available social dialects,” he is evasive, writing finally out of a “deep-seated suspicion of . . . the alien utterances beyond the boundaries of the self-sufficient world” (61). Gerald L. Bruns similarly argues that Stevens does not exclude other views but rather subsumes them within a monologic discourse, playing out “the drama of the fear and repression of alien voices”; that is, according to Bruns, “it is not . . . that there are no people in Stevens’ poetry[,] . . . it is that people in Stevens’ poetry never answer back” (35, 26). Even sympathetic critics argue that Stevens’ poetry upholds “the barrier between aesthetic and material production” (Davidson 157); treats “social problems in the terms of aesthetic ones” (Monroe 147); or that Stevens’ interest in eastern philosophy led to his belief that “passing political or economic realities . . . [had no] ultimate value” (Richardson 90).

In a slightly different vein, Cary Nelson in his recent book, Repression and Recovery, describes “Owl’s Clover” as “an intricate defense of art’s paradoxical double capacity for transcendence and recontextualization,” with—for Stevens—“transcendence . . . grounded in primitive universals” (Nelson 124). In short, Stevens ignores historical specificity, as in his caricature of vulgar Marxism or in his vision of African art grounded in transcendent universals. Nelson juxtaposes Stevens’ poem with Langston Hughes’s 1938 “Let America Be America Again,” which is defended not as a Whitmanian “universalizing claim to occupy an infinite range of subject positions,” but as a recognition of a “specific historical imperative to cut across cultural differences” (Nelson 125).

In a footnote, Nelson also points out that the very lack of a common ground of argument among Stevens critics who discuss the poet’s politics reveals “how unstable . . . is our whole notion of what constitutes the political either within poetry or in the culture at large” (Nelson 292 n. 149). I am not about to solve the puzzle of what constitutes the political in poetry, let alone in the culture at large, but I would like to elaborate on the cost of assuming the answer is simple and to suggest that Stevens addressed
this very question in the specific historical context of the mid- to late thirties. This seems the most useful place to begin some dialogue between, on the one hand, those who fault, or for that matter praise, Stevens on the grounds that he universalizes and internalizes reality, or represses the actual social and political discourses of his day, and, on the other hand, those who attempt to characterize not only how often Stevens reacted to specific historical events, but also how individual poems figure the relationship between the poetic and the political.

Perhaps the questions can most simply be posed by quoting Stanley Burnshaw from a recent interview where he says that even for those who note that Stevens “constantly speaks about reality and in a lot of the poems about the necessity of reality . . . [the question remains] what does he mean by reality?” Burnshaw concludes with a series of Stevensian statements: “His reality is the imagination. . . . [H]e uses a word such as ‘reality’ but . . . by all evidence . . . Stevens was not very interested in actuality. And he didn’t respond to actuality except by transfiguring it” (Filreis and Teres 113). It is useful to have the word “actuality,” by which we might point to historical events or material reality untransformed by any interpretation or representation, although Burnshaw’s point is more simply that Stevens distances himself from the actual, with the implication that other writers might not.

Here, it helps to raise Melita Schaum’s argument that critics of Stevens (and perhaps of so-called High Modernism generally) “may themselves be masking a nostalgia for a pure, unmediated presentation of the discourses of the ‘actual’ world, an implosion of the mediating self into an innocence which is simply unavailable” (Schaum 204). Schaum raises an important problem, one, I will finally argue, of which Stevens was well aware, namely that to judge Stevens apolitical on such grounds, we need some way of saying why all literature is not subject to the same criticism. What, to use Nelson’s example, marks the “actuality” in the following lines from Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again”?

I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars.
I am the red man driven from the land.
I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.

Perloff and Bruns help address such issues when they distinguish between representations and discourse, and ask whether Stevens includes alien voices and dialogue within his poetry. But the question remains: while Hughes’s poem clearly does attempt to forge a consensus between different cultural positions, it also draws on a fairly homogeneous, if politically attractive, form of discourse. “[S]lavery’s scars,” “bonds[men] to the soil,” “worker[s] sold to the machine” invoke a diction so familiar as to need almost no comment, certainly not for those who read the publications of
the International Workers Order, one of which contained Hughes’s poem in 1938.

Nelson goes on to argue that poetry, implicitly poetry like Hughes’s, can offer idiosyncratic (and unprogrammatic) political visions, as well as being able to “relocate the discourses of politics, religion, justice, and both personal and national identity within itself” (Nelson 125-26). But this, I would like to argue, is just what Stevens, and most self-consciously, does, not only in “Owl’s Clover” (as implied in many of the articles in the recent special issue on Stevens and Politics of The Wallace Stevens Journal) but also in any number of his poems written in the decade between 1934 and 1944, when Stevens emerged from a period of silence brought on by what he would call the pressure of reality, by which he might be understood to mean everything from familial and socio-economic pressures to the Depression and the approach of the Second World War or, in short, politics. There are, then, a variety of reasons Stevens might have revisited what one can show were longstanding concerns about the stature and uses of literary (and particularly poetic) production, both for himself and for his readers.

These concerns were not just in response to external pressures, nor motives for metaphor, however; they inform and are inscribed in poems of the mid- to late thirties and early forties in various ways. One might take as an example a 1938 poem, “The Man on the Dump,” a poem which, unlike “Owl’s Clover,” and unlike Hughes’s poem of the same year, is not so obvious in the ways it engages questions that, in the late thirties, were clearly political questions, namely questions about how actuality is or can be presented.

In January of 1938, Stevens wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer saying, “I want my poetry to grow out of something more important than my ink-well” (L 329), although it is not immediately obvious what he means by this. A first reading of “The Man on the Dump” only sharpens the question. After all, in “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens had offered a vision of a different kind of dump, a “trash can at the end of the world” (or an externalist’s inversion of the palm at the end of the mind) where buzzards “eat the bellies of the rich, / Fat with a thousand butters, and the crows / Sip the wild honey of the poor man’s life, / The blood of his bitter brain” (OP 81). Presumably, this is not so much Stevens’ representation of what he described to Latimer as the “conflict between the rise of a lower class [“the poor man’s life”] . . . and the indulgences of an upper class [“a thousand butters’”]” (L 291) as it is a vision of how any imagination—political or poetic—that counts on actualization runs the risk of ending in disillusion. However, it is also a vision of how rich and poor are fed off by those who insist on socialist/realist representations of class war in literature.

In light of the images in “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens’ later 1938 dump seems far less engaged, more literary: “full / Of images” (CP 201). At first, the
poem seems at best to lament the devaluation of rhetoric, perhaps of the
romantic, as well as the quest after novelty for novelty’s sake in an age of
consumerism:

Days pass like papers from a press.
. . . So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor’s poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea.

(CP 201)

Yet this is a curiously critical view from a man whose letters in 1938 are
full of requests if not for boxes and tea chests, then certainly for Ceylonese
Buddhas that, if Frank Lentricchia is right, are fetishized by being with-
drawn from the social network in which they were embedded, and by
being internalized (Lentricchia 232). Indeed, it seems “The Man on the
Dump” launches its own criticism of what Lentricchia calls “capitalism of
mind,” whereby Emersonian freshness of perception itself becomes com-
modified (Lentricchia 226-27). The poem also echoes what seem to be
Stevens’ increasingly frequent complaints about a culture of consumption.
In 1945, for instance, discussing (and dismissing) propaganda—interest-
ingly, as a defense of Pound on the grounds that “noone attaches really
serious importance to propaganda”—Stevens explained that despite hav-
ing heard much advertising: “I still don’t smoke Camels, don’t eat Whea-
ties and don’t use Sweetheart soap” (L 516). In other words, for Stevens
the political rhetoric of the day (whether from the left or the right) is as
devoted or commodified as advertising language.

A related critique is proposed in “The Man on the Dump,” first, by the
appearance of Cornelius Nepos in the poem. It is not only Nepos’ puffery
of the late republic and early empire that, like commodified images, is
consigned to the dump. Nepos was also the first Roman historian to
include foreign (that is, non-Roman) lives in his eulogizing biographical
sketches. Nepos might be a figure of inclusiveness, as one who included
if not alien voices then alien lives. Similarly, like the crow (presumably
related to the crows that live off poor men’s lives on the 1935 dump, and
certainly a bird whose voice is subordinated to the inner ear in the final
lines of the 1938 poem), Nepos could be read as a figure of a feared and
repressed alterity. Yet this seems inadequate to a poem that so harshly
mocks the poet sitting in the middle of “Bottles, pots, shoes and grass”
murmuring about natural or pure poetry that quixotically tries to ignore
a littered and commodified natural world with cries of “stanza my stone”
(CP 203). Late in 1935, Stevens made clear his concern with just such
questions about the dangers of ignoring contemporary culture, on the one
hand, and, on the other, of packaging objections to it. He wrote that he did
not accept the “common opinion that [his] verse [was] essentially decorative,” although it would also be “wrong,” he wrote, “to object to such comments” (L 288-89). In the poem, both the historian Nepos on one side and the purely poetic murmurer on the other side are men whose language has missed the mark, and how or why this is so is one of the centers of the poem.

Indeed, one need only look at Stevens’ preface to William Carlos Williams’ *Collected Poems*, written four years before “The Man on the Dump,” as well as at Hartford, Connecticut, in the early thirties, to begin to see that “The Man on the Dump” is already a rigorous, if problematic, examination of how material reality, or actuality, can and cannot enter poetry, and what it means to say, to quote from another 1935 letter from Stevens to Latimer, that “one has to live and think in the actual world, and no other will do” (L 292). Two years earlier, Stevens wrote to James A. Powers describing the proximity of his house to the public dump, a dump in which a man said to be a Russian refugee had built a shack out of old boxes and tin cans (see L 266; Holly Stevens 652). The following year, Stevens characterized Williams (and implicitly all poets) as romantic, as follows:

What, then, is a romantic poet now-a-days? He happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life there would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider’s Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars; he is the hermit who dwells alone with the sun and moon, but insists on taking a rotten newspaper. (*OP* 214)

As Stevens continues, Williams is said to be a “realist struggling to escape from the serpents of the unreal . . . commonly identified by externals . . . [and] a kind of Diogenes of contemporary poetry” (*OP* 214). While this is, certainly, in part a projected self-portrait of the man whose house did look down on the public dump (and who himself looked down on propaganda whether political or corporate), it is also surely a criticism of the left’s insistence on realism in the thirties, here defined as a form of idealism or ivory-tower romanticism in no way superior to the retreat or escapism of which Stevens was accused. That is, for Stevens all writers look down from some tower. Stevens suggests that the difference between Laocoön and Diogenes, both seekers after reality, is moot and quixotic, whether one identifies with a certain kind of realistic subject matter (or representation) or not. In short, Stevens welcomes Williams to the company of poets, all of whom he says are on the tower, not on the dump.

But what of the man on the dump, not only Stevens’ figure for the crows and buzzards of 1935 and the poet of 1938, but also the real or actual Russian of the Depression years in Hartford? Did Stevens have second
thoughts about whether poets are stuck in towers? Is he by 1938 rejecting not only nightingales and moon but also the romanticism with which he aligns all seekers after the real in 1934? The answer to these questions is, typically, not to be framed as a simple yes or no. The poem juxtaposes various ideas about how actuality is always transformed by the discourses that frame history and poetry. Stevens again implies that the images of decultured commodities (literary, political, and commercial), as of the exiled Russian, get one no closer to (if no further from) material reality than any other language. At least in this sense, Stevens cannot be said to ignore alien discourses so much as to question the relationship between image or representation and discourse or alterity. Thus, he addresses one of the central issues informing debates of the thirties about political poetry. Moreover, there are multiple voices in the poem, not just those referred to by the literary names, or the nightingales and other literary icons, or those echoed in the more realist lists of things on the dump. Other figures are also given voice in the literary and philosophical positions embodied in the poem, including most interestingly Bertrand Russell and Gustave Flaubert.

Up to this point, I have been trying to show how Stevens responded to calls for a realist literature more open to the actual both by noting the idealism implicit in calls for realist representation (as in the characterization of Williams) and by resisting any literary or political program as too close to advertising, which is to say too easily dismissed or made fashionable. Finally, I have argued that whatever else we find when we compare the dumps in Hartford, in “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” in the preface to Williams’ *Collected Poems*, and in “The Man on the Dump,” we certainly find the suggestion that it is better to try to be Diogenes or Laocoön than Nepos, but, at the same time, there is the recognition that Stevens like Nepos lived in an age of war and imperialism, not of golden-age republicanism. To think otherwise, Stevens suggests, does not cancel one’s romantic position and, moreover, may cause one to ignore the continued need for resistance. We may, in retrospect, find Stevens’ position problematic, but we cannot pretend to unmask him when we point to his resistance to the discourses of local, political debates; to quote from Stevens’ 1936 essay “The Irrational Element in Poetry”: “Resistance is the opposite of escape” (OP 230).

Having thus argued, it may seem I am turning my essay into a hodge-podge, if not a dump, by now invoking Russell and Flaubert. Admittedly, Stevens is not overt in his use of other texts. And as he says, claiming to have learned such reticence from Yeats, it “is not so much that it is a way of being oneself as it is a way of defeating people who look only for echoes and influences” (L 575). But it seems important to note the texts and discourses on which Stevens calls in his investigation of the relationship between poetry and actuality. These texts, in short, are the actuality in
Stevens’ poem. We are familiar with related analyses of Pound’s work, but we rarely consider how Stevens also appropriates and incorporates texts, including those of early modernism, and for unorthodox, political purposes.

What we have in “The Man on the Dump” is, then, not so much echo or influence, in fact, as a kind of dialogue, although it is worth pointing out that Stevens did know the work of the authors mentioned. He owned a set of Flaubert’s complete works (now in the Huntington), and by the forties wrote to several people that first Gide, then Stendhal, might replace Flaubert in his canon, thus suggesting how important Flaubert was in Stevens’ earlier canon (L 461, 505). But by 1938, Flaubert was not Stevens’ Penelope. When the Partisan Review reorganized as a journal to serve the anti-Stalinist left, the editors wrote to Stevens, whose poem “The Dwarf” appeared in the December 1937 issue between Delmore Schwartz’s “In Dreams Begin Responsibilities” and Edmund Wilson’s article “Flaubert’s Politics” (Bauer 209), the latter reprinted from a 1932 Herald Tribune book supplement where Stevens might also have seen it. For Stevens, then, Flaubert would have had a place in the arguments about literature and politics that surrounded all American writers in the mid- to late thirties, arguments Stevens followed closely, to judge by his letters, essays, and commonplace book.

It is then worth looking at Wilson’s article, which opens by noting that Flaubert “has figured for decades as the great glorifier and practitioner of literary art at the expense of human affairs both public and personal . . . he has no moral or social interests . . . Madame Bovary has been taken as a parable of the romantic temperament” (Wilson 13; emphasis added). Wilson also argues that despite Flaubert’s opposition to the materialism and authoritarianism of socialists, his letters and novels criticize romantic individualism as nostalgic, as evasive, and as a capitulation to industrial-commercial processes “unimpeded by . . . dreaming,” in a way that places Flaubert surprisingly close to Marx (Wilson 17-18). Interestingly, the figure of an apolitical Flaubert, against which Wilson argues, is close to the figure Stevens’ critics thought they saw: a writer whose literary craft came at the expense of human affairs. Of further interest is that this is the same image of Flaubert to which Stevens himself paid careful, and critical, attention in his earliest reading, to judge by the marginal comments in Stevens’ copy of the 1897 edition of Pater’s Appreciations (now in the Huntington), in which Stevens wrote “Phew!” next to Pater’s description of Flaubert’s dedication to his art at the expense of the living (Pater 24).

The point of tracing what interested Stevens about Flaubert is to suggest that through the French writer Stevens self-consciously thought about the question of craft’s relationship to or distance from life; he was also attentive to a related thematic concern of Flaubert’s, not only the gap between language and the world but between language and the self or desire:
Stevens placed a thick double underline under Pater’s quotation from Flaubert: “I am like a man whose ear is true but who plays falsely on the violin” (Pater 30). The ear’s frustrated desire for music, of course, is a major figure in the concluding lines of “The Man on the Dump.” But more importantly, the old tin can on which Stevens says one beats for that which one believes allows Flaubert a central voice in Stevens’ poem. The best known passage from Madame Bovary, after all, appears in chapter twelve as Rodolphe, for whom Emma has lost the lure of novelty, cannot hear the passion in his lover’s overly familiar language, as if (to quote from the novel) “the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars” (Flaubert 219). The lard pail on the dump, I would suggest, is Flaubert’s. Stevens shows that the devaluation of language, in Flaubert, as in Nepos, both located in “The Man on the Dump,” points to the ways that self-construction, political vision, and culture (for Stevens, consumer culture) are unhappily related.

This may not wholly answer the charge that the actual victims of repression and Depression are left untouched and unvoiced in the series of apparently internalized questions that end Stevens’ poem. Like Yeats here too, Stevens seems more in argument with himself than with others over how and whether language can represent either public or internal voices. Yet again Stevens still anticipates and responds to his critics, when he asks: “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the” (CP 203). And this is where Bertrand Russell enters the poem.

We know that Stevens read many of Russell’s books of essays and journalistic pieces, including Russell’s 1935 question from the New Statesman and Nation, copied into Stevens’ commonplace book along with a number of other statements on the thinker’s or writer’s social responsibilities. Russell’s question is on whether a philosopher should “concern himself with public affairs, or should he retire to a mountain-top and meditate” (SPBS 40-41). Further, although there is no firm evidence that Stevens read Russell’s 1919 Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, in particular the chapter giving a “theory of descriptions” (Russell 180), it seems highly likely he did, given his eclectic interests, in particular his interest in Russell’s work (Steinman 66-68; 156-57), and given the apparent direct quotations from Russell’s essay on the distinction between indefinite and definite description in later poems from “The Latest Freed Man,” placed nearby “The Man on the Dump” in Collected Poems, to the 1943 “So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch,” to the 1945 anti-war poem, “Description without Place” (see Brogan 183).

Russell’s theory of description considers what he calls the “question of unreality” (Russell 168), whereby indefinite descriptions, including liter-
ary descriptions, are said to refer to the writer’s and the reader’s “real” thoughts but without thereby conferring existence on the objects represented (Russell 169-70). As Russell says, there is a difference between saying “a so-and-so” and “the so-and so.” Analyses of the former, that is, of indefinite descriptions, require a “robust sense of reality,” by which Russell means that one should not import nonexistent entities into one’s ontology (Russell 167; 170). When Stevens, then, asks “Where was it one first heard of the . . . the,” he is following Russell. Most importantly, the end of Stevens’ poem, especially when read with Russell in mind, should call our attention to his title: “The Man on the Dump.” If Stevens’ critics ask what has become of the actual Hartford shanty town, surely Stevens’ point, again by way of Russell, is that no style would capture the “actual” Russian who lived in a dump on Albany Avenue in 1933. What might be “real” are (to quote Russell) “the thoughts that [Stevens] had in writing . . . [and] the thoughts that we have in reading” (Russell 169), or, to augment Russell with Flaubert, the speech we try to wrest from cultural commonplace to figure or shape thought and feeling.

Burnshaw’s recent comments on Stevens’ transfiguration of reality, with which I began, include the statement that what trouble Burnshaw about Stevens are his shifts of definition, making his poems “almost like mercury” (Filreis and Teres 113). In 1937, considering a revision of “Owl’s Clover,” Stevens wrote that he wanted to use “images that are never fully defined. We constantly use such images . . . This is part of the rapidity of thought” (L 319). Russell suggests that to represent thought is not evasion but logic and reality. Indeed, as Russell puts it, “logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology” and to say that literary creatures or representations are actual “is a most pitiful and paltry evasion” (Russell 169). Flaubert would add that the reality of thought, as it enters speech, is not to be mistaken for some autonomous or authentic expression of a prior self.

My conclusion, then, is that “The Man on the Dump” self-consciously contains the reality of expression as considered and dramatized by historically specific and politically engaged writers and thinkers. Stevens, in short, seems to have taken quite seriously the lines from Stephen Spender’s 1938 article “Poetry and Expression,” which Stevens copied into his notebook, and which say that the poet’s “poems are speeches from the drama of the time in which he is living” (SPBS 56-57). If the drama of Stevens’ time and poetry is also preserved for us in the pages of the New Masses, the New Statesman and Nation, and the Partisan Review, the drama in somewhat altered form is continued in the debates that surround Stevens’ work today and raise the questions: what is the political in literature or culture? the actual? In what way is the work of the poet a form of resistance? of production? Whatever we think of the way Stevens dramatizes these
questions for us, he does not sit looking down at the fray impassively; he is very much a participant in the conversation.

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Notes

1 I have written elsewhere about what I take to be Stevens’ argument in “Owl’s Clover,” and more generally about Stevens’ response to criticism from the left. Most simply, my argument has been that Stevens rejected what he took to be oversimplified views of the relationship between poetry and reality, a relationship that nonetheless figured centrally in his thought from the nineties on. That is, reviews not only in the New Masses but also in the New York Herald Tribune Books, New Verse, and New Republic did not initiate but rather helped crystallize Stevens’ already formulated questions about poetry’s public role (Steinman 144-58).

2 This and the following issue contain the suggestions that Stevens relates poetry to the historical world by insisting on “the textuality of our access to the world” (Booker 81); that he “rejected the radical division between the private world of the poet’s imagination and the public world,” even as he refused to subordinate or equate the self to the ensemble of social relations (Teres 164); or, as Melita Schaum has pointed out, that Stevens had an acute awareness of how “discursive and socio-historical events interact” (Schaum 200).

3 Stevens also wrote urging Latimer to visit Ceylon (L 331), which other 1938 and 1939 letters associate with the exotica, including a Buddha Stevens claimed as his own which he had asked Leonard C. van Geyzel to find for him. By 1939, Stevens would explain that “with so much of Hitler and Mussolini so drastically on one’s nerves, constantly, it is hard to get round to Buddha” (L 337). The question presented by both the letters and the poem is do Stevens’ poems betray an attempt to “get round to Buddha,” as a form of escape from the actual?

4 I would like to thank Jennifer Easley for introducing me to Russell’s theory of descriptions.

Works Cited


Stanzas of Color: Wallace Stevens and Paul Klee

SASCHA FEINSTEIN

IN HIS COMPARISON OF PAUL KLEE’S theories on painting and the poetry of Wallace Stevens, James Baird quotes this important passage from Klee’s *The Thinking Eye*: “‘There is a yellowish red (so-called warm red) and also a bluish red (so-called cool red). . . . But from the stand-point of red, bluish and yellowish mean weakening’” (Baird 179). Klee, naturally, was not the only artist to respond to “unweakened” colors, but the directness of color, coupled with the directness of simplified forms, gave his work a quality that verged on being iconographic. At the same time, the evocative colors and expressive linear designs gave motion to the paintings; Klee animated his linear images by the suggestiveness of pure colors and by the associative qualities of simplified forms.

These characteristics of form and color are vital to understanding Stevens’ attraction to Klee. Although Stevens was deeply interested in painting in general,1 few painters besides Klee relied so heavily on the suggestiveness of linear details and colors that have not been “weakened.”2 Stevens shared this delight for the playful and evocative ways in which a minimal use of color and scene could create much larger panoramas, and it is this shared aesthetic that explains why Stevens was so drawn to Klee in particular. The colors and linear forms in Stevens’ poetry evoke images that dance and tease the imagination in much the same way as the visual images in Klee’s paintings.

Apart from these aesthetic comparisons between poet and painter, there is considerable documented evidence of Stevens’ fascination with Klee, particularly in Peter Brazeau’s *Parts of a World*, where several of Stevens’ friends reflect on his admiration for this artist. James Johnson Sweeney writes, “Paul Klee was one person he used to speak to me about. He liked Klee” (227); James Thrall Soby remembers “when I used to follow him through the gallery [at the Museum of Modern Art in New York], he always stayed longer in the Klee gallery than anywhere else” (119); and Samuel French Morse notes that “[Stevens] had every book of good color reproductions of Paul Klee up to 1955. He really did like Klee very much; I always felt there was kinship in spite of some of the things he says about modern art” (157).3 Although Stevens avidly collected art catalogs in general, it seems significant that Morse recalls so many books exclusively on Klee.

What is less certain is the actual date when Stevens became aware of Klee’s painting. Roy Harvey Pearce offers the engaging suggestion “that ‘The Comedian as the Letter C’ might have in its conception been influenced by a painting by Paul Klee, ‘The Order of the High C’ (1921)” (426 n. 3). Pearce analyzes the primary images in the painting—particularly the
figure of the clown and the “black beetlike object” which “makes the figure’s tie”—noting their presence in Stevens’ poem as well. His persuasive comparison would therefore suggest that Stevens was well aware of Klee’s work by the mid ’20s. However, Pearce also mentions a letter from Morse that states “that there is no evidence that Stevens knew Klee’s work before the 1930’s” (426 n. 3).

In his correspondence after 1930, Stevens mentions Klee several times, most notably in letters to Paule Vidal and Thomas McGreevy, in which he addresses his admiration for the painter by way of the painter’s philosophy. In 1948, he wrote to Vidal—who had acted as his go-between to the Paris artists whose work he was interested in collecting—that “A painter finding his way through a period of abstract painting is likely to pick up a certain amount of the metaphysical vision of the day,” adding:

As a matter of fact, the physical never seems newer than when it is emerging from the metaphysical. I don’t object to painting that is modern in sense. To illustrate: I have the greatest liking for Klee. No-one is more interested in modern painting . . .

(L 595)

Four years later, he wrote to McGreevy:

It is easy to like Klee and [Wassily] Kandinsky. What is difficult is to like the many minor figures who do not communicate any theory that validates what they do and, in consequence, impress one as being without validity. (L 763)

It is interesting that Stevens should find artistic theory so important, though it is difficult to say how much of Klee’s theory he actually knew. “The Bauhaus notebooks of Klee, comprehending the years 1921-33,” explains Baird,

were not available in a full English translation until 1961 . . . Yet we should not deny the possibility of Stevens’ having seen them in an earlier German edition or of his having read an early European printing of the Klee lecture on modern art at Jena in 1924. (178-79)

Stevens had obviously familiarized himself with some of Klee’s theoretical writing, for he quotes Klee directly in his lecture on “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”: “And what artist would not establish himself there where the organic center of all movement in time and space—which he calls the mind or heart of creation—determines every function” (NA 174). (Joseph Riddel notes that “The phrase ‘heart of creation,’ which seems to be not a part of this quotation but an interpolation of Stevens, is from the epitaph on Klee’s grave” [293 n. 7]). Although Stevens’ discussion of an “‘organic center’” becomes rather vague (as does much of his discussion
about art), one can turn to other writings by Klee for a greater understanding of this theory. In Klee’s “Creative Credo,” for example, he begins: “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible” (n. p.). What does he mean by this? Perhaps, that art should not try to capture the absolute physical appearance of nature because such an undertaking is impossible. Therefore, if one cannot reproduce all the radiant colors of a maple tree in the fall, the modern artist must try to capture the overall gesture of that tree, the “organic center.” In the case of Klee and many of his contemporaries, this was achieved through the suggestiveness of color: black leafless branches to evoke winter, a few dabs of orange and red for autumn, and so on. For Klee, art “makes visible” the essential qualities of nature to which the eye responds.

The use of form, particularly linear form with bold outlines and fractured imagery, is a good place to begin comparing the work of these two men. In Klee’s painting, form is especially important, since much of his work concentrates on outlined images, thick black lines which constitute form in its most raw state. (Often his work has been labeled “primitive,” although the word itself is problematic.) To extend the principles of Klee’s color theory, these forms are not weakened by excessive details. What Klee therefore achieves is visual impact on a primal level, whether the sought-after emotion is humor, grace, serenity, or despair.

In his painting Captive (see fig. 1), Klee presents an abstract figure imprisoned by the crisscrossed black bars that surround it: “The crux here,” explains Will Grohmann, “is the unhappy figure outlined in black and the grid in which it is entangled” (126). The burlap texture makes the background a mottled blue, with patches of white seeping through the less-stained areas. The face consists of a straight line for a mouth, and two eyes: one a dot inside an arch, the other simply an upturned eyebrow. Grohmann asks, “What has death to do with blue—for there can be no doubt that the figure with the U-curved eyes represents someone dead, someone who has already passed beyond” (126). But there is doubt. Using Grohmann’s own terms, it seems impossible for a figure to be both “unhappy” and “dead.” Only one of the eyes is U-curved, and the other addresses the viewer with a penetrating delivery. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that captivity has caused this lively figure to be half-dead, to lose half of its original vitality.

Here, and in so many of his works, Klee achieves a forcefulness by reducing forms to minimal representation. He evokes an entire jail simply by coupling the painting’s title with a visual black grid; he outlines a head, shaped more like a bowl with a lid, and fills it with the least amount of information needed for the viewer to recognize a face (an eye and a mouth); the body is little more than an arc. As a result, he virtually forces the viewer’s eye to concentrate on the details of the face, and to make some interpretation of the facial expression. (Although Grohmann’s descriptive
language might be questioned, his impulse to evaluate those eyes is an
inescapable one.) The captive in this painting is evocative and engaging
not because of any detailed depiction, but because we know so little about
him and yet are asked to make significant conclusions.

In the same way, one might examine Stevens’ poem “The Common
Life,” which, according to Bonnie Costello,

offers another example of how poetry borrows rather than
copies the pictoriality of the visual arts. The poem seems to be
describing something visual (perhaps a work by Klee, who
often plays with verbal and visual signs on a single surface),
but no distinct pictorial image emerges . . . (75-76)

“The Common Life” begins with specific references to architecture: “That’s
the down-town frieze, / Principally the church steeple” (CP 221). Stevens
creates a geometric pattern through the evocation of the forms of this
building, its horizontal structures (the “frieze”) and its vertical, if not
triangular, peak (“the church steeple’). By focusing on such details, the
poem breaks down the complicated architecture into its most striking,
geometric components—the way, for example, Klee could create an entire
building simply by drawing a roof and a door.

Fig. 1 Captive (1940).
In the subsequent lines, Stevens capitalizes on the simplicity of form still further. He reduces the building to its primary outlines: “A black line beside a white line; / And the stack of the electric plant, / A black line drawn on flat air” (CP 221). It is as though Stevens were literally drawing the image with a black marker, and it is the pure blackness which gives the image power. If one were to mix in even a little of the white, the impact would be significantly weakened.

Note, for example, Baird’s discussion regarding Klee’s theory of “grey” in relation to Stevens’ poetry. Baird first quotes from Klee’s description of gray:

“the fateful point between coming-into-being and passing-away . . . white and black at the same time . . . neither up nor down . . . neither hot nor cold . . . grey because it is a non-di-dimensional point, a point between the dimensions.” (179)

He then compares this description to Stevens’ poem “Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons” and explains how the archbishop’s absence causes all color to dissipate—from the buildings, to the birds, to the sky—and how all “will remain gray until the bishop passes again in his colored robes” (Baird 179). The very spirit and liveliness of the scene become flat and lose definition; everything is reduced to tones of mediocrity.

In contrast, one might look at the fourth stanza of “The Common Life.” Stevens refers to the poem itself when he says, “The paper is whiter / For these black lines,” but he is also, of course, referring to the black and white lines from the opening stanza. The power of these images radiates because of their juxtaposed opposites. Thus, the poem concludes: “The paper is whiter. / The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side” (CP 221). Clearly, Stevens creates a painterly image where the figures have been stylized to accentuate their two-dimensionality. The success of the poem rests not so much on poetic technique as on the visual starkness. “In seeking for the essence of poetry,” to quote Costello again, “Stevens distances himself from its limitations, and by invoking painting in various ways he borrows new forces” (69).

In “The Common Life,” Stevens fragments the imagery to accentuate the fragmented and flat lives of the people in that landscape, but in “The Public Square,” the drama seems still more suitable for these fractured images, for the poem explores the demolition of a large building. It begins:

A slash of angular blacks
Like a fractured edifice
That was buttressed by blue slants
In a coma of the moon.
A slash and the edifice fell,
Pylon and pier fell down.

The first three lines are especially gritty in language, filled with the hard-edged sounds of “blacks,” “fractured,” and “slants.” The release of this aural tension arrives in the fourth line—“In a coma of the moon”—an image that eventually returns to close the poem. As is often the case, moonlight shines on Stevens’ landscape as though it were commentary from a spiritual plane. In this case, however, the moon offers a “porcelain leer” (CP 109): white light suggesting the clarity of vision, and the leer implying disapproval over the loss of this structure. There remains an inexplicit yet pervading tone of sadness at this destruction.

Unlike “The Common Life,” which begins with a geometric paraphrase of the architecture, “The Public Square” confronts the immediate demolition of the building. “A slash of angular blacks” seems to modify both the building and, possibly, the wrecking cranes that bring it down. This is a portrait of urban demolition where a dark structure explodes into “A mountain-blue cloud” of smoke and dust. The images are splintered and active, necessarily stark. By the end of the poem, though, the tone becomes quiet: “It turned cold and silent. Then / The square began to clear” (CP 109). The action slows down considerably, but the predominantly black-and-white tones of the poem remain consistent in its close; the cold weather suggests the arrival of night, and, within that darkness, the porcelain color of the moon.

The blue-colored cloud, like the blue burlap in Klee’s Captive, creates a soft background for these black images, which remain the dominant forms in many of the poems and paintings. But in other cases, the reverse is also true: colored forms project from black backgrounds. This is immediately apparent in the work of Klee, for although he painted with a great diversity of styles and forms, one technique that he particularly enjoyed was the use of bright oil paint against black watercolors. This technique is based on the resistance of oil color against a black wash; as a result, the color forms seem to glow from within a night- or deepsea-scape. The effects are often mysterious, obscure, and evocative.

One of Klee’s more famous paintings in this style is Black Prince (1927). Except for some smudges of brown, the background is entirely black, and from within this darkness emerge radiant colors that create the primary features of a prince at night: his face, one hand, an abstract crown, the suggestion of armor across an invisible chest, and a stylized moon. As with Captive, the face commands most of our attention; its eyes glow an unnatural green, looking more like miniature planets from an unexplored solar system than parts of a body. The bright gold nose, sharp as a backwards “L,” gives the head direction (a visual aid in place of the actual contours of the head) and makes a strong vertical gesture in contrast to the mes-
merizing green spheres. The two reddish lines below the nose, uneven though parallel, suggest lips. On top of this green, yellow, and red face, Klee paints a crown out of crisscrossed gold lines.

Grohmann describes this prince as “A peculiar mixture of cruelty and magnetic attraction, of exoticism and European sensibility” (76). He also notes that Klee painted other “black” pictures in 1927, but that “none of the other dark figures is as ‘African’ and daemonic, at once fascinating and fearsome” (76). Although I hesitate to judge the figure with words such as “cruelty,” I agree with Grohmann’s general assessment that this figure attracts the eye while at the same time giving warning to the prince’s possible threat. We have no knowledge of the figure’s past, no landscapes or contextual information with which we can place him. The African quality which Grohmann notes can certainly be supported by the gold-colored breastplate, the black color of the face itself, or the stylized moon, which seems particularly African in its design and is echoed in the forms of the crown and armor. But even if we can assert that this figure is African by nature (a fact Grohmann seems uncomfortable accepting completely), the glowing eyes of the figure transcend human form. The assertiveness of *Black Prince* could not be more fully directed at the viewer, yet his unexplained qualities become more mysterious the longer one examines the details.

Although there is no specific evidence about which of Klee’s styles attracted Stevens most, I believe he was drawn to Klee’s use of these black backgrounds, for one can see parallels in the poetry, particularly in works from *Harmonium* and *The Auroras of Autumn*. From the former collection, one might examine poems such as “Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion,” a poem that begins with a reflection on dreams and that concludes with a forceful command that people face the day. Like Klee’s black prince, Stevens’ “dweller in the dark cabin” seems both specific and utterly anonymous. For this dweller, “the watermelon is always purple” (a color of lushness), but the fact that his “garden is wind and moon” may mean that he has lost touch with soil and with the fertile colors of flowers and plants. Thus Stevens asks of his character: “Of the two dreams, night and day, / What lover, what dreamer, would choose / The one obscured by sleep?” Surely, Stevens asserts, one must acknowledge that the brilliance of the day, in all its energy and color, is superior to the darkness of night. He paints the day with blackbirds, red crowing cocks, and a woman, “leaf-green, / Whose coming may give revel / Beyond revelries of sleep” (*CP* 88-89).

Like so many of Stevens’ poems, however, the ending—as definite and emphatic as it may seem—does not feel like an absolute conclusion, and perhaps this has something to do with the provocative language of the opening stanza: nowhere in the poem is Stevens more romantic and captivating. Against the purple watermelon and the garden of wind and
moon, all the other images seem mundane. The exoticism of “purple,” mixed with the color and shape of the rounded fruit, produces an enchanting abstraction.

Visually, “Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion” might be compared to another poem, “Two Figures in Dense Violet Night,” which begins, “I had as lief be embraced by the porter at the hotel / As to get no more from the moonlight / Than your moist hand.” Here, the speaker wants the evening to embrace a romantic ambience, and there is an active need to hear the lover darken her language so that words and the evening itself melt into a singular, provocative love song:

Speak, even, as if I did not hear you speaking,
But spoke for you perfectly in my thoughts,
Conceiving words,

As the night conceives the sea-sounds in silence,
And out of their droning sibilants makes
A serenade.

(CP 85-86)

The dark night embraces the whole world in its blackness. As in the paintings of Paul Klee, however, the forms in this poem do not dissipate into the pervading black night; instead, they maintain a visibility within this mysterious setting. The poem concludes: “Say that the palms are clear in a total blue, / Are clear and are obscure; that it is night; / That the moon shines.” The dark sky keeps changing its colors, from dense violet to a total blue, and the speaker asks the companion to speak these words as though recognizing that romantic love, like nature in moonlight, can be both “clear” and “obscure.” These last three lines are “the voice of night,” the sound of “Florida in my ear,” and the “dusky words and dusky images” (CP 86) which he requests in the second stanza. By the end of the poem, he is still requesting, but the images have become somewhat more defined, with sensual overtones as rich as purple watermelons.

If the subject matter of Klee’s Black Prince does not seem to parallel the context of these poems, one might turn to other landscapes by the painter. Klee painted a number of moonlit panoramas, experimenting with the light of a night sky, how dark grays can blend with deep browns, obscuring certain forms and highlighting others. But some of his most successful paintings involving black backgrounds were his seascapes, more specifically, his oil portraits of bright fish in black water. According to Grohmann, “no one would have expected him to produce . . . a long sequence of fish pictures” because “Klee’s attitude to animals [in general] was a matter of surprise to his contemporaries” (74). But Klee produced a great number of works relating to fish, and those who now reflect on his work, noting in particular his interest in black as a contrasting background, will quickly see what a logical subject this was for Klee. Exploring the ocean depths,
the artist could bring forth brilliant colors rarely seen by humans. The sea would become yet another vehicle for the imagination.

In *The Goldfish* (1925), the size and color of the fish command most of our attention. “This wondrous goldfish,” as Grohmann describes it,

is in deep blue water, other little red and purple fishes rather keeping out of his majesty’s way. . . . The goldfish is giving off an inner light, and actually should light up the water, but the water remains dark. The goldfish glows alone with its improbable color. The cinnabar red fins and the red eye heighten the brilliance of the scales, which look as though embroidered upon the fish. (74)

Grohmann’s attention to the less pronounced forms surrounding the goldfish helps us analyze the painting as a whole, for it is the movement of the other fish (all of which dart away from the central figure) and the ripples in the water (which is relatively calm, despite all the suggested action) that define the goldfish itself. We are witnesses to a colorful energy from the depths of the sea, and the commanding presence of this golden fish is not so much a result of its speed or threatening features, but rather its vibrancy, or “inner light.”

A still more famous and related painting is *Fish Magic* (see fig. 2), in which Klee again uses a dark background to highlight the colored fish. But unlike *The Goldfish*, this painting includes a number of disparate images surrounding the sea creatures: a line figure with two merging faces, two blue cones connected like an hourglass and filled with flowers, a roughly sketched white clock, a face wearing a cone hat peering in from the bottom left-hand corner, a moon, a sunflower, a daisy with white leaves like the needles from a pine tree, and, surrounding the clock, some geometric lines which look like an abstracted bird cage. Taken literally, the painting is a circus of dreamlike imagery; on a purely aesthetic level, however, it is a completely homogeneous and wonderfully playful dance of colors against a mysteriously dark canvas.

To analyze all the symbolic references, or to create a general thesis in an attempt to rationalize the collage of imagery, would certainly destroy the painting’s spontaneity and whimsicality. It would also go against the principle of the title: this is, after all, a painting of magic, and we are to accept that word without the usual qualifications of “trickery” or “deception.” Here is a world where multicolored fish swim together in moonlight that also shines on a variety of flowers and colored planets. The only people allowed in the scene are those who can have two expressions at the same time (with one hand up and one down to accentuate the different moods) or who willingly wear a dunce cap. The faded clock, our only reference to time, sits within a cage held by a taut string which suggests a fishing line about to be pulled from the depths.
Several poems by Stevens reflect similar imagery, not the least of which is section X of “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War”:

parades like several equipages,
Painted by mad-men, seen as magic,
Leafed out in adjectives as private
And peculiar and appropriate glory,
Even enthroned on rainbows in the sight
Of the fishes of the sea, the colored
Birds and people of this too voluminous
Air-earth . . .

(CP 277-78)

One might also turn to “Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks” where the moon, like the moon in “The Public Square,” projects its light on all the estranged imagery. Subsequently, forms change from their usual shapes and colors. The opening is typically peculiar and mysterious:

In the moonlight
I met Berserk,
In the moonlight
On the bushy plain.
Oh, sharp he was
As the sleepless!

And, “Why are you red
In this milky blue?”
I said.
“Why sun-colored,
As if awake
In the midst of sleep?”

(CP 57-58)

Helen Vendler offers a possible explanation of the dramatic situation in this poem:

The poet—here, the Prince of Peacocks, full of showiness and *superbia*—meets the Saxon-named Berserk: he meets him in the realm of poetry—sleep and moonlight. But Berserk is “sharp as the sleepless,” a phrase suggesting that if the Prince of Peacocks should wake into the dread sunlight of experience, he would go mad. (15)

Vendler’s cast of characters seems fairly persuasive (it would make little sense for Berserk to be the Prince of Peacocks as well), but her interpretation of Berserk’s warning might be slanted too heavily, for his couplet in the third stanza—“I set my traps / In the midst of dreams”—is not a reproach against the “sunlight of experience”; rather, it is a claim that dwelling too long in the imagination can be as harmful as losing all sense of abstraction. The speaker in the poem concludes that the earthly world ("the bushy plain") is filled with dangers, but so is the world of dreams ("the blue ground"). Therefore, he finds comfort in moonlight, which combines the realistic world with abstracted visions. The poem concludes,

I knew from this
That the blue ground
Was full of blocks
And blocking steel.
I knew the dread
Of the bushy plain,
And the beauty
Of the moonlight
Falling there,
Falling
As sleep falls
In the innocent air.

(CP 58)
The emergence of a “red” figure (Berserk) out of a “milky blue” background certainly seems impressionistic, though it is important to qualify that term, especially when discussing poetry in relation to painting. “[Stevens’] way of seeing the world, while suggesting an impressionistic method,” to quote Riddle, is more like that of Klee; the extraordinary is the ordinary as perceived from the inside rather than the outside: for example, the form of a thing, its appearance, may be seen to suggest motion rather than fixity, or nature looked at in terms of its incongruities rather than its congruities. (12)

The same emergence of form might be noticed in section X of “Credences of Summer.” Once again, the subject of the poem is not necessarily a human speaker, and the landscapes which surround the drama are filled with emerging colors:

The personae of summer play the characters
Of an inhuman author, who meditates
With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night.
He does not hear his characters talk. He sees
Them mottled, in the moodiest costumes,

Of blue and yellow, sky and sun, belted
And knotted, sashed and seamed, half pales of red,
Half pales of green, appropriate habit for
The huge decorum, the manner of the time,
Part of the mottled mood of summer’s whole,

In which the characters speak because they want
To speak, the fat, the roseate characters,
Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,
Complete in a completed scene, speaking
Their parts as in a youthful happiness.

(12) CP 377-78

Bright forms, such as “the gold bugs,” glow “in blue meadows, late at night.” As the speaker’s eyes become accustomed to the summer evening, they begin to see a range of colors besides the gold hue: “blue and yellow,” “half pales of red,” “Half pales of green.” All the qualities of summer become “roseate characters,” dancing “in a youthful happiness,” their colors radiating in the night sky. Visually, the poem uses what Klee called weakened colors, but the action of these colors animates the poem in much the same way that color animates Klee’s paintings—particularly paintings such as Black Prince and Fish Magic.

In “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight” we see other color combinations, though in a more fixed setting, as in a still life. The poem progresses from
a mixed palette to simplified color, and once again supports Klee’s theory
that purity of color has the richest impact on the eye. In fact, the poem
celebrates the power of color:

It is like a flow of meanings with no speech
And of as many meanings as of men.

We are two that use these roses as we are,
In seeing them. This is what makes them seem
So far beyond the rhetorician’s touch.

(CP 431)

In terms of form, the poem also suggests that our senses create our own
reality; that is, objects in nature attain their energy in part because we
transfer our own emotions onto those objects: “Our sense of these things
changes and they change, / Not as in metaphor, but in our sense / Of
them. So sense exceeds all metaphor” (CP 431). This is why the mind is
able to make the associative leap that turns crisscrossed lines into a jail, as
in Klee’s Captive, or why we respond so differently to opposite colors such
as vibrant orange and olive green.

Several critics have addressed Stevens’ passion for color, often trying
to rationalize or systematize his choices. As part of her essay on Stevens
and painting, Dorathea Beard proposes looking at the colors in Stevens’
poetry as symbols. In her discussion of Stevens’ poem, “The Ultimate Poem
Is Abstract,” she quotes these passages:

The lecturer
On This Beautiful World Of Ours composes himself
And hems the planet rose and haws it ripe,
And red, and right.

[T]his placid space

Is changed. It is not so blue as we thought. To be blue,
There must be no questions.

(CP 429)

Then she makes the following observation:

Such abstractions could perhaps be described as symbols:
yellow, which Stevens once called the “first color” (in “Bouquet
of Roses in Sunlight”), might then become the fount of reality;
red seems to be primitive energy (sometimes becoming ferocity
and violence) and fertility; blue he equates with imagination,
or the world of the imagination which produces art, which is
one side of the basic polarity Stevens constantly expresses
through color, in which the other pole is green, the concrete reality of the actual world ("my green, my fluent mundo" ["Notes"]). (8)

Immediately, however, Beard notes that Stevens often switches colors as his thoughts become more complicated or abstract; as an example, she quotes from “Connoisseur of Chaos”: “If all the green of spring was blue, and it is” (CP 215). In comparing a poet to a painter—especially a painter such as Klee, who was so fond of symbolism—it would be a great asset to find some correlating color scheme that could unite the two still further. But in this case it would be a mistake to set forth any absolute relationships between colors and symbols. The many permutations of color in Stevens’ poetry prove that a single code of symbols simply will not suffice. “Blue” in one poem is certainly not the same blue in all poems; to say that Stevens “equates [blue] with imagination” is a dangerous assumption because it is so general and because this generality is often not convincing.

Much more satisfying and accurate, however, is Beard’s statement that “Stevens’ preferred colors are simple and basic, notably primary hues, which for Stevens (as for Vlaminck) include green” (9). As we see in “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight,” it is the pure color that creates the greatest visual response, and Stevens uses this painterly technique in many of his poems, including the opening to “Banal Sojourn”: “Two wooden tubs of blue hydrangeas stand at the foot of the stone steps. / The sky is a blue gum streaked with rose. The trees are black” (CP 62). Stevens feels no need to qualify the blue that colors the hydrangeas because he knows the reader’s mind will do so for him. But the simplicity of “blue” creates a serene image in the context of flowers, and the hydrangeas become far more significant as a result of their color. Stevens follows this image with another swash of blue (sky), this time slightly qualifying the color by adding a streak of rose. The very words he uses (“gum,” “streaked”) suggest the act of painting, but certainly the purity of color (“blue,” “rose”) seems more akin to a painting than to actual flowers or a sunset.

Against this colorful landscape, “The trees are black.” The reader gets no clues as to what kind of trees these are, if they are from a forest or a park, tall or short. But these are details which the mind does not immediately question, since the blankness of these trees is such a strong image that the specifics become relatively unimportant. The brevity of that sentence within the line evokes stark images of branches and tree trunks in silhouette. Stevens paints the scene with just enough colorful detail to suggest the entirety of the landscape.

A few lines later in “Banal Sojourn,” Stevens transforms this realistic setting (hydrangeas, trees, birds, garden) into an enormous abstraction. “Summer” becomes “a fat beast, sleepy in mildew, / Our old bane, green and bloated, serene” (CP 62)—a beast as playful and mythic as some of Klee’s figures. Stevens achieves his imagery through a precision of detail.
that suggests more than it explains. One does not need to know if this beast has a face or a tail to see a specific image; the mind draws one up automatically. As for the color of this beast, the mind’s eye probably makes the green more olive and sickly (closer to “mildew”) than the lush yellow-green which is often associated with “swollen” gardens. Equally interesting is Stevens’ decision to use an abstraction to represent the season and, subsequently, elicit the human response to that season.

Like any strong visual artist, Klee recognized the general human responses to particular shades of color, and cleverly tried to choose only the few details that would spark the imagination. In *Park near L(ucerne)* (see fig. 3), for example, Klee offers a relatively abstract portrait of a park in springtime. The trees are black—thinnily outlined by white to accentuate their darkness and to distance the images of trees and branches from the abundance of colors that surrounds them: bright orange, lavender, poppy red, lush pink. The painting seems like a dance of black branches amid a burst of bright color. A few black circles, each surrounded by a different color, suggest fruit: a green apple, a yellow lemon, an orange. The lavender between the trees looks like a stream or pond, though it might very well be hints of sky, and either interpretation works equally well; one does not need to know anything about this particular park to experience its flowering fertility.

The central image in *Park near L(ucerne)* is a stylized tree, one with five branches, balled-up and curving downward at their tips. Like the others, this tree is completely black and outlined by white. (This highlighting is reminiscent of Stevens’ statement in “The Common Life”: “The paper is whiter / For these black lines.”) What Klee achieves by this more recognizable image is a sense of location, a specificity in landscape. This singular tree—or symbol that one recognizes as a tree—allows the viewer’s eye to interpret the more abstracted branches that surround the central image. “If [Klee’s] minute analyses of nature led him to the notion that things might wear their irregularity in surprisingly orderly patterns,” writes Carolyn Lanchner in reference to the artist’s more geometric compositions, “he nevertheless realized he could only find parts . . . not the whole” (100). She then makes reference to Stevens’ poem “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery”:

> Wallace Stevens had something of the same notion when he wrote: “It was when the trees were leafless first in November / And their blackness became apparent, that one first / Knew the eccentric to be the base of design.” (100)

It is precisely the black, stylized tree in *Park near L(ucerne)* that acts as “the base of design” (CP 151).

Stevens was able to create exotic landscapes by offering only a few, telling visual images. In “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,” for
example, Stevens uses a two-line, parenthetical aside to paint most of the landscape: “(The rudiments of tropics are around, / Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)” (CP 82). This is all he needs to set the reader’s mind in motion. Similarly, in “The Comedian as the Letter C,” he fleshes out the Yucatan forest in section II by spotting the trees with birds of opposite colors—“green toucan” and “raspberry tanagers”—dramatically set against an “orange air” (CP 30).

Klee’s *Landscape with Yellow Birds* (1923) demonstrates a shared aesthetic between poet and painter: when one starts to describe this painting, the language evokes many of the exotic images in Stevens’ poetry. The birds are colored bright yellow. Thin silver trees rise up like Brancusi’s *Bird in Space*. One bird hangs upside-down on a cloud, but holds on firmly. Another peers from behind a red bush. The forms in the painting, in all their abstract shapes and bright colors, make this more of a dream than
Stevens’ description of the Yucatan. But the stylized birds that dominate the landscape keep our eyes and minds keyed into this picture because of their symbolic attraction; like the blackness of the trees in Park near Lucerne, the bold yellowness of these birds forces us to contemplate that striking color, with its suggestion of exoticism and liveliness. The characteristics of these birds become individualized, like “The old brown hen” and “the turquoise hen” (CP 359) in Stevens’ poem “Continual Conversation with a Silent Man” or the “red bird [that] flies across the golden floor” (CP 13) in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle.” The purity of these unweakened colors is what makes the images so evocative and suggestive.

Certainly Klee was not the only artist who used such techniques, and at the last one can only guess at what intrigued or inspired Stevens most in the paintings he studied at museums and in books. But the many similarities between Stevens’ poetry and Klee’s painting make comparisons inevitable. The predominance of bright colors and abstract forms in Stevens’ work suggests that, in many cases, the painting affected his poetry more than literature did; his love of Klee must have gone well beyond tangential fascination. It seems more likely that Klee’s work inspired and helped form Stevens’ impressive range of poetic imagery.

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Notes

1There have been several essays that discuss the direct relationship between painting and Stevens’ poetry. Aside from Michel Benamou’s 1959 essay “Wallace Stevens: Some Relations Between Poetry and Painting,” the two most engaging essays on the subject are Bonnie Costello’s “Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting” and Dorathea K. Beard’s “A Modern Uit Pictura Poesis: The Legacy of Fauve Color and the Poetry of Wallace Stevens.”

2My emphasis on Klee’s “pure color” or “directness of color” should in no way suggest that the artist never mixed colors in his work. At the same time, I do believe that there is an important correlation between Klee’s theories of pure color and his general appreciation for simplified images. Even in work where Klee blends his colors together, the effect is often that of a singular, directed image.

3Morse mentions the permanent collection at The Museum of Modern Art, but there were also a number of New York exhibitions where Stevens could have seen Klee’s work. The Museum of Modern Art itself, for example, featured the artist’s work in 1930 (Paul Klee, March 13-April 2); 1941 (Paul Klee, June 30-July 27); 1949 (Paintings, Drawings, and Prints by Paul Klee from the Klee Foundation, December 20, 1949-February 14, 1950); 1954 (Prints by Paul Klee, July 7-September 19); and several other times in shows devoted to various artists. Klee’s work was also frequently shown at galleries in New York such as the Buchholz Gallery and the Nierendorf Galleries. (See Lanchner’s “Exhibition History,” 335-37.)

4Aside from the problems with dates, there is also a danger in offering such a direct translation of painting to poetry. Unlike William Carlos Williams or W. H. Auden, Stevens did not attempt to reproduce specific works of art through poetry. “Although Stevens’ poems abound in references to particular artists and their works,” explains Costello, “it is finally the idea or ideal of painting, its struggle to define an imaginative space with a presence to rival natural experience, that attracts him” (67). In discussing
Stevens and Klee, I have tried to emphasize aesthetic connections in form and color rather than force more specific analogies that may or may not be valid.

5 There are a number of relatively minor similarities which I do not discuss in detail but which may have been attractive to Stevens. For one, Klee experimented with various symbols (letters, numbers, arrows, etc.) which would have appealed to Stevens’ affinity for coded references. Stevens would have also enjoyed the cryptic titles of Klee’s paintings; Klee himself wrote a number of poems, and, as Grohmann asserts, “The thousands of titles Klee invented for his pictures are a direct outgrowth of this poetry, much more than mere designations or literary glosses” (8).

6 Photographs reproduced in this article are taken from Grohmann (n.d.); quotations from Grohmann are taken from Grohmann (1985).

Works Cited


Blowing Hot & Cold:
Wallace Stevens and Poetic Potency

MACGREGOR FRANK

I

I WISH TO PURSUE TWO CLAIMS about Wallace Stevens in order to propose an unusual but useful way to read him: 1) that wind imagery in the poems is significant and revealing and 2) that such imagery records the poet’s concerns with what I shall call “poetic potency.” Although my remarks pertain to Stevens’ work generally, I will illustrate by reference to part of the 1917 “Primordia” series and then to one of the most important extended poems from the other end of his career, “The Auroras of Autumn” (1948). The issue of “potency” has much to do with Stevens’ eventual affirmation of decreation as an aspect of poetry. Specifically, while the “Primordia” poems hint at Stevens’ worry that he lacks justification to be writing poetry at all and may in fact be putting himself into significant emotional danger by doing so, the important later poem derives from the same themes, now transmogrified into the familiar Stevensian credo of poetic undoing.

The young poet’s distinctive voice is often thought to have begun with his attainment of a particular level of confidence, so that biographical critics such as Robert Buttel, for example, observe that Stevens “overcame his uncertainty and . . . brought his talents into focus” by 1915, when he had produced poems such as “Tea” and “Sunday Morning.” Similarly, George Lensing maintains that Stevens appears to have discovered his originality, and “the confidence to pursue it in his art, at about the same time that the post-Christian conclusions of ‘Sunday Morning’ were resolved—around 1914–1915.”1 Frank Lentricchia, who, like Buttel and Lensing, attends to biography but whose focus is on the interplay between the socioeconomic influences of his time and Stevens’ poetics, has discussed the poet’s struggle with the feminization of literature typical of early twentieth century America. According to Lentricchia, despite the fact that most of the important canonical poets were male, the territory of the poetic was culturally female—so much so, for example, that Mark Twain could expect readers to recognize and to laugh at his burlesque of the poet in the Emmeline Grangerford episode of Huckleberry Finn. In view of such cultural orientation, Stevens’ “lady-like” and “absurd” (as he called it [L 180]) poetic involvement “forc[ed] upon him a feeling at odds with his maleness.”2

As Lentricchia suggests, and in contrast to Buttel and Lensing’s conclusions about the poet’s confidence, Stevens’ early career registers his conflict between the “impractical” occupation of being a poet in America, where
there was no class privilege to sanction the gentlemanly pursuit of poetry, and the more “practical” one of being an attorney and insurance executive. But Lentricchia’s tracing of the way “Sunday Morning” (the poem on which he builds his case) seeks to displace the sanitized “Keats” endorsed by the dominant Genteel poets of the era assumes Stevens had more control of his material than he actually had, I think, and the assertion that “Sunday Morning” “bears little if any anxiety over the power of a predecessor lyricist” (161) is open to question. By the time Stevens wrote “Sunday Morning,” he had in no sense overcome his early gender conflict, and when we recognize the extent to which wind imagery registers an emotional dis-ease for Stevens we will also see that his subsequent poetry often bears the imprint of ambivalence and turmoil concerning his avocation. In fact, it is not far-fetched to regard such turmoil as at least one cause of the poetics that is distinctly his. A poet who feels insecure about the gender-correctness of his poetic avocation, who fears his work may not be “potent” enough to outshine that of his predecessors, quite logically adopts an anti-poetic stance.

II

For Stevens, “potency” means both “masculinity” and “poetic efficacy,” and the word or variants of it occur often enough in the poems, letters, and addresses to suggest that it was more than a casual concern. It is a consistent, though mostly unacknowledged, presence. A statement from “Mountains Covered with Cats” (1947) is illustrative: “Freud’s eye was the microscope of potency” (CP 368), a metaphor that resonates when read in conjunction with an early letter to his fiancée, to whom Stevens remarks, “I don’t believe in holding up the microscope to one’s self” (L 107). In another place Stevens mentions Freud’s idea that “writing poetry is a sexual activity,” defensively dismissing it: “I write poetry because I want to write it” (L 305-06). And remarking in 1951 on the growing attention scholars were devoting to him, he expresses similar anxiety in rather revealing language: he hopes he will be able to “stand up,” he says, “under all this scrutiny” (L 719, 711). Such defensiveness must rise from a perceived deficiency, warranted or not. My thesis is that wind imagery, and often the specific wind imagery of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” marks a double-edged fear for Stevens: that because poetry and the wind he associated with it are “feminine,” he should not be working in the dimension of the poetic; and that his poetry is inadequate in any event, thus confirming the fundamental worry that the enterprise feminizes him.

Stevens could not have escaped the idea of wind as poetic potentiator, even if he never recognized it as an idea distinct in itself. He had inherited this metaphor for poetic justification from his Romantic forebears: the poet speaks authentically when he is inspired by and in tune with nature, the representative “voice” of which is wind. This is the reason that Crispin, wanting to come to an authentic voice for himself, attempts to dismiss
“that [nineteenth] century of wind in a single puff” (CP 28). “The Comedian as the Letter C” is “an anti-mythological poem” (L 778) because it tries to repudiate the idea of a Romantic concordia discors.

Shelley is prominent among questors for this union of nature and mind, but perhaps because Keatsian images and language so dominate “Sunday Morning,” Stevens’ “leaves / Of sure obliteration” and his “littering leaves” (CP 69), both allusions to Shelley’s topos of the wind and the dead leaves in the “Ode,” may be overlooked. These allusions are so often repeated in Stevens’ canon, however, that they may be regarded as markers of anxiety. In the “Ode” Shelley had petitioned Zephyrus, the mythological West Wind, “Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is,” and in the Collected Poems Stevens alludes to or echoes this poem often enough that it constitutes a most consistent and pervasive touchstone for him. Although the reference is sometimes to other parts of Shelley’s poem, not always to the wind and dead leaves specifically, this is frequently the part that Stevens reiterates. “Sunday Morning,” “Domination of Black,” “The Snow Man,” “The Comedian as the Letter C,” “Farewell to Florida,” “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” “The Auroras of Autumn,” and “The Hermitage at the Center,” to name a few of many possible examples, allude to the wind and leaves of the “Ode” explicitly.

If the allusion is associated somehow with poetry and with the poet’s confidence in writing it, we might expect the frequency of reference to change over time. Given the likelihood that Stevens’ poetic self-confidence increased, particularly after 1946, when significant honors and prizes were beginning to come his way, the allusions ought to become less frequent. In fact, if a strict review of only the most obvious pairings of fallen autumn leaves and wind can be relied on, they seem to decrease. They occur most frequently in the early poems, a total of eleven through Harmonium (six are included in Opus Posthumous), and decrease in number in successive books. In Parts of a World, for example, three poems make the allusion expressly one or more times; in The Auroras of Autumn, two poems do so, and in The Rock, only one reference is obvious. The measure is crude because sometimes the allusion is to other parts of the “Ode” (as in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” [CP 380]), or is buried and not readily apparent (as in “The Lilac Bush” [SP 229]), or is a likely but not definitive reference and so does not figure into my enumeration (as in “Puella Parvula” [CP 456]), but it may at least suggest the disposition of the allusion in Stevens’ work.

In view of such reiteration, the observation to be made is not, or is not only, that Stevens continually confronts Shelley, but that he seems to have felt so strongly the need to do so that he rehearsed the encounter throughout his career. I believe his returning to it again and again suggests an operation akin to Freudian repetition compulsion. “A thing which has not been understood,” says Freud, “inevitably reappears; like an un laid ghost,
it cannot rest until the mystery has been resolved.” The mystery’s resolution always lies repressed as an unsatisfied desire that “insists on representing itself in the signified,” Jacques Lacan tells us. What is the desire that remains unsatisfied? Exploring this question in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud concluded that it “always has as [its] subject some portion of the infantile sex life—of the Oedipus complex, that is, and its derivatives” (SE XVIII, 18). Ultimately, he was led to postulate a “death instinct,” fundamentally a desire to return to the mother’s womb. In Stevens’ poetry, the mother imago is closely bound with the idea of “poetry,” and what often seems to represent “poetry” is Shelley’s *topos* of wind and leaves. In this way, Stevens’ allusions to the “Ode” register his repressed maternal desire, as well as the anxiety generated in his seeking to satisfy it through the writing of poems.

To cleave to the mother in Stevens’ situation would be to turn away from the hard economic facts of life that his father had wanted him to recognize and that the poet’s experience as a journalist had confirmed. It would also be to reject growth and individuation leading to the emotional independence of an adult. This is the reason Lacan defines the repetition compulsion as “a fundamental lack of maturation.” A turning away from the restrictiveness represented by the father was congenial to Stevens, but a turning towards “mother” raises its own Oedipal difficulties.

Lacan’s basic idea is that the unconscious is “structured in the most radical way like a language” (Sheridan 252). As Freud noted in his discussion of the *fort/da* incident, the child uses language to help himself cope with the absence of his mother. According to Lacan, the substitution permanently displaces the originally wordless unity between the two. Coming between the partners of this primally blissful condition, words continuously displace onto other words the desire of which they are the markers. This “combination of one term with another” produces “the effect of metonymy.” Thus, “Desire is a metonymy” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle, SE XVIII, 14–16; Sheridan 258, 175).

Shelleyean wind imagery in the “Primordia” poems is consistent with metonymic displacement of this sort. I wish to demonstrate the vexedness of “poetic potency” for Stevens by commenting first on the two border poems of this series and then on poem 7 (“In the Carolinas”) to show how it is implicated in the issues evident in those framing poems. The series consists of nine poems and a final coda, seven of them not retained in *Harmonium*. The poems appeared originally in a little magazine called *Soil*, where they are grouped in two sections, each organized around a landscape, five “In the Northwest” and four “In the South.” *Soil* itself is a maternal image, here also underscored by Stevens’ title, which suggests that the mother, the primordial “material,” lies at the origin of the poems. In the first poem of the series the poet features the Shelleyean wind of poetic
imagination as it acts on the quotidian material of the real world and brings about his inspired response.

1
All over Minnesota,
Cerise sopranos,
Walking in the snow,
Answer, humming,
The male voice of the wind in the dry leaves
Of the lake-hollows.
For one,
The syllables of the gulls and of the crows
And of the blue-bird
Meet in the name
Of Jalmar Lillygreen.
There is his motion
In the flowing of black water.

(OP 25)

This poem divides easily into two parts. Its first six lines describe the scene and introduce its complementary male and female characters, who respond to each other to create a natural unity which the poet will both perceive and express. The second six-line set follows the central “hinge” line, “for one,” which through lineation probably refers to the poet himself and emphasizes the synthesis that is occurring. In the second set, concord is achieved when Stevens’ birds representing the real world, crows and gulls, and the one representing the poetic imagination, the bluebird, “Meet in the name / Of Jalmar Lillygreen,” whose first name is so nearly reduplicative it suggests mimesis and whose poetic last name connects the feminine, the landscape, and poetry itself.

Note in the first half of the poem Stevens goes out of his way to tell us that “the wind in the dry leaves” is masculine. This seems a curiously extraneous bit of information. Whatever could have impelled him to provide it? Though the four winds of Classical antiquity are traditionally masculine—so much so, in fact, that they are often associated with an active fecundating principle—the undergraduate poems and the “Little June Book” poems regularly represent the wind as without gender at all or as feminine. In my view, Stevens insists on its masculinity here because at this early point in his public career and in this place where he confronts Shelley he needs to deny an unconscious “feminine” stigmatization by situating his own poetic activity in the masculine realm. The trick is both to align himself with his feminized avocation and to do so with such authority he will not be considered effeminate. In this situation, the specific masculinization of the wind is overdetermined, which is to say that lines of signification intersect to form “a double meaning” symbolizing both a
past and a present conflict. Stevens’ description registers both the poet’s by now historical gender-related anxiety in writing a poem at all, thus unconsciously aligning himself with “mother,” and his immediate predecessor-anxiety of writing in the shadow of those potent cultural “fathers,” the “man-poets” (L 26) he admired and also feared. By repeatedly acknowledging his great predecessor in the use of this topos, I believe, Stevens suggests his own uncertainty about his poetic competence.

The last poem of the series (and of the book), titled in Harmonium “To the Roaring Wind,” also explicitly refers to the wind, though not specifically to the Shelleyean topos. It is worth noting, however, that in Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud expressly links the repetition compulsion and dreaming sleep, which is commonly for Stevens the domain of poetry, as it is in the present case:

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

(CP 113)

The wind addressed here as Vocalissimus is personified with the honorific and bears the Latin superlative form, which appears, I feel sure, partly because its sound enhances the windy sibilance of the poem overall. But according to its meaning, the creator thus honored is “most vocal.” I think we would not be wrong in regarding that name as synonymous with “most potent,” particularly when we remember that this is a poet who in his youth worried that many people think of poetry as “the peculiar province of women” and remarked that poets such as Shakespeare, Milton, and Keats are “your man-poets,” apparently because only poets of their stature could write poems of such influence and power that their authors might avoid the stigma of their “feminine” pursuit. Note that the poem implicitly asks what Shelley had asked, “Make me thy lyre.” Stevens is expressing the common Romantic longing in terms of his personal poetic potency.

The poet who has placed this early poem at the end of the “Primordia” series and of his first book of poetry asserts in it potency enough to urge his poetic self to continue, to keep seeking, and to voice what he finds, presumably a coming together of word and world such as Jalmar Lillygreen betokens. In doing so he likens himself to the “man-poets” he wished to emulate but whose eminence inevitably suggested he would fail to measure up. Because of what it says and because of its position, “To the Roaring Wind” makes it appear that a passage of some sort has been negotiated: the voice that began tentatively in the Shelleyean topos is now a bigger, more potent one than the first poem asserts. Its final position gives it a priority for poetic speaking that the poet promises to continue.
Yet there is something in this concluding poem that argues against our too hasty conviction that the poet has undergone a sort of investiture and will now speak with the authority of the wind. “Seeking” is not necessarily finding, and the poem does not really proclaim the potency it seems to, but I think equally suspect is the fact that the poet needs to make such a proclamation in the first place. I read the figuration of the wind as potential at both boundaries of this series as an assertion of masculine priority made twice, perhaps because the one asserting is in fact unsure, as poem 7 strongly suggests. The origin of this lack of certainty is the poet’s uneasy reconciliation between his desire to rejoin the mother and his recognition that he ought to leave such things behind and devote himself to more acceptable “manly” pursuits. At bottom, the issue is Oedipal. “In the Carolinas” shows evidence of the poet’s attraction to his poetic enterprise and also a trace of the dangers of such an attraction:

The lilacs wither in the Carolinas.
Already the butterflies flutter above the cabins.
Already the new-born children interpret love
In the voices of mothers.
Timeless mother,
How is it that your aspic nipples
For once vent honey?

The pine-tree sweetens my body
The white iris beautifies me.

This poem’s “Timeless mother” is an early example of Stevens’ muse-figure or interior paramour. In the earliest poems where a muse-figure appears, such as the 1908 “Little June Book” poem “Afield” (SP 190), the figure has already picked up a metonymic association with wind, and the poet easily identifies himself with the female. Here, it is this identification that is in question.

We must read the poem’s three parts as a progressive nearing of its fundamental issue, which the poet holds at a distance by three important plays on its words. In the first part we have, as in the first poem of the series, a statement of the situation, the literal and figurative grounds for the poetic moment. Spring is passing into summer, and the fact that the children “interpret love / In the voices of mothers” suggests they find themselves irrecoverably within the realm of language. They are, then, also irrevocably divided from their mothers, this separation being the cause of Stevens’ metonymic operation by which culturally interdicted desire has been displaced to Shelley’s wind, among other substitutes.10

In the second part of the poem, the same voice that speaks about the children in the first strophe figuratively places himself in the role of child and questions the timeless mother. Such action more closely aligns speaker
and mother, but the words also register an ambivalence: ordinarily, the speaker cannot feel united with her, though occasionally (“For once”) he feels reunion is possible. However, he also knows that this possibility is only apparent; the word is not the thing. Moreover it is frightening, as the ominous phrase records, because it is prohibited through the incest taboo.

Unlike the first and last poems of the series, where poetic potential was foregrounded as masculine and was figured as wind, here the potential is covert and rests with the mother, whose own potency is underscored by her possession of that same wind that was formerly in the possession of Jalmar or of Vocalissimus: her nipples sometimes “vent” honey, the word coming from Latin *ventus*, “wind” by way of Old French *eventer*, “to puff, blow, breathe, or yeeld wind; also to divulge, publish, or spread abroad.” 11

The honey she offers is synonymous with authentic poetic speech, as in other poems, for example, the “golden ointment” (CP 65) of “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” (1921).

A second doubling undermines the image of poetic potential suggested by the timeless mother’s presence. The questioner asks about her nurturing “aspic nipples.” Aspic is a flower, spikenard, commonly known as lavender. Stevens associates blue or lavender with the poetic imagination, generally; thus, Whitman, that anxiety-provoking American nemesis, is also implicated here, as he is elsewhere in Stevens. 12 Equally important, this spiky lavender plant connotes mistrust and the need for caution, since in 18th and 19th century England it was thought that the asp, by extension the English viper, habitually lurked beneath it. 13 There is both poetic failure and individual extinction in these nipples, then—just the opposite of the nurturing mother of beauty proposed on the surface of the poem. Figuratively, the serpent suggests the emotional danger of the poet’s attraction, which has to do with potency: just who can claim it and who can’t. In this regard, it functions in the same way the allusions to Shelley’s “Ode” elsewhere do, and it is even possible, though it is not necessary for my argument, that the connection is made in part because Stevens was familiar with Shelley’s cognomen, “the snake.” 14

The third section gives the timeless mother’s answer to our speaker’s question. She says that the pine tree sweetens her body and that the white iris beautifies her. Stevens’ overdetermined wordplay shows up again in his pairing of the flower with the tree. The white iris has connection to the feminine for Stevens—to his wife and his mother—and “sweetens” is an etymological pun on two senses of the verb. First, it means “makes sweet” and refers to the honey of poetic production. Second, however, the word is a verb applied to soil and means “to make fertile.” The speaker’s question and the timeless mother’s answer show her to be the object of his fantasy and reveal his alienation from her: he is not a party to her fecundating relationship, which specifically excludes him but at the same time reinforces his awareness of deprivation. The questioner is seeking in his
discourse with her “what was lost for him . . . the moment he entered into this discourse” (“Hamlet” 16). He must conduct his search, moreover, in competition with the father. This is the reason the young cock of “Bantams in Pine-Woods” speaks as aggressively as he does: “Fat! [i.e., “Fly!”] / Begone! An inchling bristles in these pines” (CP 76). The speaker’s loss has occurred at the Oedipal boundary and is articulated in such fantasy and repression as “In the Carolinas” presents. Lacan would explain that the timeless mother symbolically takes the place of what the speaker is deprived of, the phallus as signifier of his lack (“Hamlet” 15). She has the phallus he perceives himself to be missing.

III

She has it so completely, in fact, that when we turn to the “The Auroras of Autumn” we might say she quite literally holds it over him, a revision which in the context of the dream-work Freud would have recognized immediately: “This is where the serpent lives” (CP 411). The serpent symbol (repressed in “In the Carolinas”) now fills “The vivid, florid, turgid sky” (CP 169), as the poet describes it in “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” Freud tells us that the repetition compulsion seeks “to master [a damaging original] stimulus retrospectively.” In an effort to do so, it develops material arising “in the psychical traumas of childhood,” principally repressed elements associated with the primal scene and instigating castration anxiety (SE XVIII, 32, 13). In Lacanian terms, “castration” is linguistic because it denotes the speaker’s subjection to language, including the cultural attitudes and restrictions inscribed in it. Such “castration” is the very subject of this poem. The poet desires a first-seeing and on the basis of that a first-expressing, but he cannot have it and in the end must accept his inadequacy. The problem is named with the opening metaphor, which transforms the auroras into something of the poet’s affective world, different from what exists in the actual one. “This is nothing, . . .” he tells us later, “Nothing until this named thing nameless is / And is destroyed” (CP 416).

But here the nameless thing is named and perpetuated as fiction, the inescapable “poetic” impulse to name and to perpetuate the falsity being what the poet is arguing against. The fictive serpent that presents itself to the poet is “Relentlessly in possession of happiness” (CP 411), which is to suggest that happiness lies in the sort of perfected natural statement the auroras can make, comparable in the poet’s case to the desire to utter words that are definitive. This desire is unfulfillable. If the poet could achieve it, the result would be a concord of the sort I have discussed in the “Primordia.” But even though the impulse has long been disallowed, it still hovers tantalizingly, so that the serpent in form after form, name after name, constantly reappears, “In another nest, the master of the maze / Of body and air and forms and images” (CP 411). In his address to the m/other, the speaker articulates his desire, and in doing so he unavoidably “alien-
ates him[self] from himself” (Sheridan 19). He thus becomes permanently impotent, so to speak—permanently incapable of satisfying that desire. The reptilian signifier forever arrives before him.

As a consistent principle of negation, difference, or otherness, this serpent represents the change in poetic orientation implicit in the late *Harmonium* poems and explicit in “Farewell to Florida” and poems thereafter. When it appears it signifies the shift that has occurred between “In the Carolinas” and the greatest part of the canon like “The Auroras of Autumn” that accommodate the decreative theme. Now Stevens wants to abjure the Romantic idea of concord between the mind and the natural world.17 As he says in “Farewell to Florida,”

The snake has left its skin upon the floor.

Her mind will never speak to me again.
I am free.

(CP 117)

“Her mind” refers to “Florida,” but it means the “venereal soil” (CP 47), the muse, and ultimately the mother. By the time this poem was written, the shadows of simple repression I have discussed in “Primordia” had given place to another repressive defense, what Freud called “reaction-formation.” This is the condition in which a fragile balance is struck between unconscious libidinal energy and an equally strong countercathexis channeling it into an acceptable configuration, often into a form completely opposed to the original desire.18

In “The Auroras of Autumn,” as a case in point, fundamentally sexual desire for the mother is cast into a “sublime” form—it is no accident the word suggests “sublimation,” for the two mechanisms are closely related—and the potency issue that was repressed and unacknowledged in the early poems has now become the overt subject matter of the poetry. What is illustrated here as the poet’s most characteristic defense, in other words, is an alternative sort of “potency,” which has the purpose of setting the earlier concerns about adequacy and efficacy aside but which is fueled by the same anxiety that the “Primordia” reveal and which now overlays the desire for concord itself with the desire to recognize such concord as illusory. The “bodiless” reptile bridging earth and sky is certainly a trope for death, as Harold Bloom asserts,19 but that is because it is, first of all, an emblem of maternal hegemony that the poet seeks to disallow.

“Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne” (*OP* 86), Stevens says in “The Greenest Continent.” The overwhelming serpent of “The Auroras of Autumn,” too, threatens a complete effacement by the m/other, and, as in “The Greenest Continent,” regal imagery connects the serpent and the reigning “maternal” imagination: “Is there an imagination that sits en-
throned / As grim as it is benevolent . . . ?” (CP 417), the speaker asks, rhetorically. And in section iv he asks, “Look at this present throne. What company, / In masks, can choir it with the naked wind?” (CP 415).

If the serpent represents the rule of an alienated and alienating imagination, the wind that blows through the poem must represent what Lacan would call the Real and is opposed to imaginative rule. Moreover, and importantly, it is exactly the opposite of the earlier Shelleyean wind and “naked” because it is unclothed in imaginative constructs. Nothing of the imaginative realm can “choir” with it, since that word suggests the very concord the poet wants to discredit. For that reason, the “most potent” wind invoked in “To the Roaring Wind” is reconstituted here, only this time it is not Shelley’s Zephyrus, the revivifying, fructifying, and inspiring West Wind. Instead, it is the cold North wind, brother and companion to Zephyrus according to Classical mythology. Stevens has shifted his allegiance from the West to the North, to Boreas, which, incidentally, is associated with a serpent (with Python) and is sometimes depicted in mythology as having serpents for legs.

The poet is at pains to make a distinction between this inhospitable northern wind and the hopeful Shelleyean one, and to this end he alludes to the “Ode” several times in the course of “The Auroras of Autumn.” In the central line of the second canto Stevens says “The wind is blowing the sand across the floor” (CP 412). The line indicates his abandonment of what he implicitly accepts in 1917, the cyclical pattern of the “Ode” (“If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?”), together with the idea of the West wind as fructifying agent. Inorganic sand replaces the organic leaves, and Shelley’s positive cycle is canceled. “Poetry” itself, thus, is also countermanded.

Two tercets later, the “Ode” again appears in what is for Stevens a rare occurrence, two simple declarative sentences that in their contrariety emphasize the cancellation that the poet is making: “The season changes. A cold wind chills the beach” (CP 412). The first of these sentences makes the allusion, and the second negates what is alluded to, almost explicitly denying his predecessor’s quest and also abjuring his own former relationship to it. The season changes, but it is still winter; and the poet implies a credo here: “by this cold wind I will define myself, not by any predecessor’s comforting warmth.” Stevens does substitute a cyclical pattern of his own, but it is not one that holds out any hope for primal reunion. “Turn back to where we were when we began,” he says in section x, “An unhappy people in a happy world” (CP 420), where “happy” has the force of “chancy,” i.e., of purposelessness, as Stevens has suggested in an earlier section:

[The visible world] is of cloud transformed
To cloud transformed again, idly, the way
A season changes color to no end,
Except the lavishing of itself in change . . .

(CP 416)

In the allusive second canto there is only the desolation of “The man who is walking [who] turns blankly on the sand” (CP 412). So much sand has a history in Stevens insofar as it has often been the scene of conjunction between world and word and thus of poetic “turning” or troping, as for example in the case of Jalmar Lillygreen or the “Infanta Marina” or the “maker” of “The Idea of Order at Key West.” In the present case, “turn[ing] blankly” suggests the futility of “turning” at all.

Stevens will not invest himself in such error; he wants instead to privilege those “squirming facts” that “exceed the squamous mind” (CP 215). In “The Auroras of Autumn,” he demonstrates the point by conjuring up two originary images suggesting a possible wholeness, only to show the solace they seem to promise to be mere fantasy. Thus, part of his address to the father imago asserts that the theatrical maskers the father produces are fictions. The poet asserts, “There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here” (CP 416).

The mother imago fares little better. As he does in “Farewell to Florida,” the poet bids his nostalgic farewell. Even though the mother here “makes that gentler that can gentle be,” the poet tells us, “she too is dissolved, she is destroyed” (CP 413). The Shakespearean turn of phrase should alert us to the upcoming allusion, which is to Hamlet:

Boreal night
   Will look like frost as it approaches them

And to the mother as she falls asleep
   And as they say good-night, good-night.

(CP 413)

In discussing Ophelia’s meeting with Hamlet just after he has seen the ghost of his father, Lacan adduces the phenomenon of “depersonalization,” wherein the fantasy image one has had of the other subject in some relationship is severely contradicted and subsequently “decomposes.” Hamlet, for example, does a complete turnabout after his shocking encounter, no longer regarding Ophelia as an object of his affections but rather as a future “breeder of sinners” (III.i.122). Ophelia, whose name suggests “serpent” (it means, as Lacan notes, “O phallos”), “is the equivalent of, assumes the place of, indeed is—the phallus” (“Hamlet” 20, 22-23), and Hamlet curses her, using winter imagery reminiscent of Stevens’ own: “be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, farewell” (III.i.137-39).

The two contexts are quite different, but they have the subject’s relation to the phallus in common, just as “The Auroras of Autumn” and “In the Carolinas” have, and Stevens has also done a turnabout involving a very
similar reaction against a metonymy for “mother.” If the poet initially was taught to feel his desire for her was wrong because it is culturally forbidden, and impossible because he was not poet enough to compete with the “man-poets” in pursuit of concordia, then to articulate in poetry the impossibility—indeed, the folly—of such reunion becomes the purpose of poetic endeavor. Luckily for readers of Stevens, the poet cannot free himself from his fundamental desire—only endeavor to deny it, returning to it often enough in the process that the work provides us with a meta-poetry wherein the wind figuration that originally stood for Stevens’ anxiety and desire can reappear as an emblem of their renunciation.

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Notes


2Frank Lentricchia, Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 139-40. T. J. Jackson Lears’s No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (New York: Pantheon, 1981) describes the cultural split between male and female that occurred in the early years of this century. David Leverenz has discussed the various strategies employed by the major American writers of the generation before Stevens, Thoreau, for example, to relieve themselves of the anxiety engendered by their feminizing pursuit (see Manhood and the American Renaissance [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989]).

3Compare a similar remark made in 1945: “I should probably not be able to stand up to Freudian analysis” (L 488).

4“I saw how the planets gathered / Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind” (CP 9); “not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves” (CP 10); “the strict austerity / Of one vast, subjugating, final tone. / . . . It was caparison of wind and cloud” (CP 30); “The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound . . . whistled in a sepulchral South” (CP 117); “fixed as a photograph, / The wind in which the dead leaves blow” (CP 180); “The wind is blowing the sand across the floor” (CP 412); “The leaves on the macadam make a noise” (CP 505). Though these examples are relatively specific, the reference is not always so direct.

Two letters commenting on the allusive lines “Bethou me, said sparrow . . . / And you, and you, bethou me as you blow” (CP 393) from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” suggest a metonymic connection to birds: “the sparrow begins calling be-thou: Bethou me (I have already said that it probably was a catbird)” (L 438; see also 435). Reading backwards from these remarks, I suspect that the “Ode” is manifested covertly for the first time in the 1909 “June Book” poem “The Lilac Bush,” where the catbird mentioned in the letters is prominent, emblematizes the Shelleyean topos, and fulfills the same transformative role Stevens’ “bethou” stands for in “Notes.” For “The Lilac Bush,” see Holly Stevens, ed. Souvenirs and Prophecies (New York: Knopf, 1977), 229, hereafter cited as SP. The full text of the poem suggests additional connections to Shelley, as well as a connection to Whitman. For Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” see The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley, 10 vols., ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1927), 2: 294-97.

"Shelley" is only one of Stevens' metonymic displacements. That Shelley was a man does not forbid his emblemization of the mother; Lacan speaks of "a relation of the subject to the phallus that is established without regard to the anatomical differences of the sexes" (Sheridan 282).


Similarly, Robert Buttel says that Jalmar Lillygreen "assimilates elements of nature into a unity of being" (130).


A case might also be made for certain sweet-voiced birds, for example.

Cotgrave's *French-English Dictionary* (London, 1611), cited in Ernest Weekly, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 1921 (New York: Dover, 1967). Stevens' competence in both Latin and French would have made it impossible for him not to recognize both these contexts, if only subconsciously.

As, for example in "Last Look at the Lilies" (*CP* 48), where Stevens satirizes the purely rational man as "caliper" [sic] and registers his own poetic anxiety in another word applied to Caliper, "buffo," literally a puff of wind, but commonly applied to a male opera singer (shades of Whitman again) and also suggesting reptilian imagery similar to what we find in "In the Carolinas" : *L. bufo* denotes a frog. Cf. the contrasting bird and frog in "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," sections ii and xi (*CP* 13-18).

Claire Powell, *The Meaning of Flowers: A Garland of Plant Lore and Symbolism from Popular Custom and Literature* (London: Jupiter, 1977), 90. Eleanor Cook's reading of this poem is a perceptive one. She connects "aspic" to Cleopatra and the poisonous asp, through Keats's "Cleopatra regal-drest / With aspics at her breast," though she does not emphasize the flower association inherent here and also misconstrues the word "vent" (see *Poetry, Word-Play and Word-War* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989], 33-34).

In the poem "To Edward Williams," which may refer to Shelley's attraction to Jane Williams, the poet compares himself to a snake shut out from Paradise. Byron also called Shelley "the snake." See Ingpen and Peck 4: 98.

There are actually three serpents in this first poem, this first one displaced onto two others, one in the second and one in the final tercet. The movement is associational, i.e., metonymic, as is suggested by the allusive second tercet, allusion being one mode of displacement.


In fact, the ophidian imagery of undoing that begins to appear in the poems written around the time of "The Comedian as the Letter C" first suggests this change in outlook regarding the imaginary Paradise: "Sing a song of serpent-kin, / Necks among the thousand leaves, / Tongues around the fruit" (*CP* 103), the soldiers of "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade" sing. Compare "The Comedian as the Letter C":

\[
\text{an earth,} \\
\text{So intertwined with serpent-kin entwined} \\
\text{Among the purple tufts, the scarlet crowns,} \\
\text{So streaked with yellow, blue and green and red} \\
\text{In beak and bud and fruity goblet-skins,} \\
\]

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That earth was like a jostling festival
Of seeds grown fat, too juicily opulent,
Expanding in the gold’s maternal warmth.
So much for that.

(CP 32)

18Freud: “[T]he repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which
would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction. No substitutive or
reaction formations and no sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct’s per-
sisting tension” (SE XVIII, 42). For helpful discussions of the terms here, see Jean Laplanche
and J. B. Pontalis. See also the article on Reaction-Formation in Robert Jean Campbell, M. D.,
19Harold Bloom, Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate (Ithaca and London: Cornell
University Press, 1977), 256.
20Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology, trans. Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (New
York: Prometheus Press, 1959), 165.
21William Shakespeare, Hamlet, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York: Methuen,
1982).
Poems

A World without Desire

Occurred tonight for an hour only,
An hour spent around the back porch
Where I was sent from the family, exiled
From myself. It was a world of order,
Order and presence, the final meaning
Of forms conversing through the night
As large as all thought must be
This house a ragged piece of locale
Torn adrift in the space of a dark mind.

Every variety of matter floats by,
The blue-silver dust motes of the moon,
Distant lights of unidentifiable aircraft,
Colored, small as fireflies
In the tilted sheet of my cigar smoke,
Vegetable flakes, dried insects’ wings,
Luminous bits of debris, fanciful nuclei
Circling themselves like smiling opinions
Without destinations, souls that surround

And surround their forgotten voyages,
Sparks from a funeral fire sucked whirling
In a draft, a cigar coal added
To this effluvium of references
Describing presence by glimmering
Forms only, no destiny other than a world
Without desire, a world without end,
A description I could take inside
Long after the family retired.

Michael G. Gessner
Central Arizona College,
Signal Peak
Stevens in Late Evening

Words unspoken, words unlettered. In the heat of summer, he settles into his armchair listening for unravellings, the hour that approaches.

Is this anticipation of angels plummeting, tumble of the fat girl into the glittering world and the heart withering as she disappears?

What of it, if an ordinary evening is illumined? Or habits are weathered to mere observation? Ordinary men have emptied their tankards.

The laws of men are poor distillations altering the imagination. Silicates or slags, such ruminations pose meanings he can resist.

Slowly he rises and winds the grandfather clock moving its tired hands into metaphor, correcting tick or tock, aligned to his own pulse and passing.

Harriet Susskind
Monroe Community College

Crispin's Theory

Tiny islands spice the harbor, the smallest mere huddles of bedrock, the largest a dozen acres of saplings stunted by wind.

We dock at the lone inhabited point, a spine of houses and shops so narrow the inhabitants share front yards, and the general store extends on pilings on both shores of the spit at the northern tip. Ramshackle houses, half abandoned, hold their ground. Indians live here, digging clams, fishing, motorboating to the city for construction jobs. A gaggle of black-haired young men smiles and shakes our hands. One of them,
inflamed by invisible forces,
calls me by name. He’s an artist,
and wants to show off his paintings.
In a loft facing the city,

da distant misty construct
bobbing on the oily chop,
he wields canvases as star-struck
as Van Gogh’s. I want to name this

young man’s genius after someone else
and assuage my dread of origins,
but the paint’s too thick and kinetic,
and the color’s too personal.

He has shown them in the galleries,
but when a pop singer bought one
because it complemented her clothes,
he kept the rest for himself.

We have to return to the mainland.
Motoring back past brittle islands
groping like swimmers for breath,
I decide to walk on water

and inspire impossible works
of art, the kind no one can buy,
and bring them to that island town.
I’d prop them against every house

and walk the young men up and down
and let them breathe the rich excrescence
for lack of which the large world suffers
in secret, requiring sea-wind

and thousands of miles of whitecaps
to brace the human effort
and lend it the pure dialectic
of an opposing natural force.

William Doreski
Peterborough, New Hampshire
Marble Whiter than Moonlight

Where I lie let the thyme rise
and basilicum
let the herbs rise in April abundant
—Pound, Canto 82

Green water lapping round the vaporetto,
Garofani in a borrowed vase,
Marble whiter than moonlight
Signed with a simple name.
Marigolds and moss roses
Humble under the weight of noon.

One laurel bush, more to the mourner’s taste
Than yours, O Daphne lover.

I came years ago,
Up the salita’s rigor.
Were you less there, at San Ambrogio,
Than you are here?
Where is your sweet basilicum and thyme?
Tima, Venetians call it.
In the Fenice, violins cry low.

Bernetta Quinn, OSF
Assisi Heights, Minnesota

Mortality

After reading Dorothy Emerson’s ‘All Fall Down,’ from Eve’s Primer

The leaves that blaze and blazon fall and burn.
Poets lament, and shiver; fall in turn.

Bruce Bennett
Wells College
Assessing the split reception history of twentieth-century American poetry in a 1982 essay, Marjorie Perloff asked, “Pound / Stevens: Whose Era?” Implicitly, her analysis also challenged us to envision both traditions as functions of the same historical moment. James Longenbach has attempted as much and more. A literary history of the Pound/Stevens era, his *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* at the same time contributes to the historicist trend in Stevens studies that recently produced Alan Filreis’ *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*. More impressive still, Longenbach has crafted a strong personal interpretation of Stevens’ poetry that deserves a place among the half-dozen major studies of Stevens on our shelves.

Longenbach’s keynote answers Frost’s great poem, “The Oven Bird”: “The question that he frames in all but words / Is what to make of a diminished thing.” There are various ways, of course, that one might address Frost’s question. By way of post-romantic literature or culture, for example, or, if one wanted to address it in strictly American terms, through an inquiry into what happens after Emerson. Longenbach would go farther and situate Stevens in the less exalted but culturally thicker context of ordinary America in the waning of the Gilded Age. Stevens, he argues, like Kenneth Burke (whose “writing serves as a kind of descant to Stevens’s”), presented himself as an articulate spokesman of American moderation and constructed his writing within a web of cultural and political debates between what were more apparent than actual extremes. Hence for Longenbach the political contradictions of William Jennings Bryan represent as useful a reference point as the literary quarrel between George Santayana and the muckrakers. Bryan, Longenbach points out, whose populism Stevens praised as a journalist, fought as a young man against imperialism and as an old one against Darwin; his “fate highlights the peculiar combination of reaction and reform that can be found throughout American modernism.” And just as the “fight for control of the terms of the country’s self-definition would never be won outright, since the opposing sides could not stand clear opposition,” so the struggle over ideological control of the nation’s literature was doomed to confusion. Reacting to this situation, Stevens, like Burke, sought in his poetry, his theory, and his politics a condition that, although he “alternately spoke of [it] as the ordinary, the humdrum, or the commonplace,” in fact represented “an achievement—a middle ground that was not a compromise between extremes.”

Admittedly, Longenbach acknowledges, Stevens’ position “teetered on complacency.” Yet “that danger was often subverted because the plain sense of things is never plain for long.” Moreover, for Stevens, this dialectic grounded itself not in art but in our fundamental being in society. To quote words he copied into his journal as a young man (words in praise of a suffragette play), aesthetic criticism needs “‘to explain why . . . it is easier for nearly everyone to recognize the meaning of common reality after it has passed through another’s brain—why thousands of kindly people should have
contemplated negro slavery day by day for years without emotion, and then have gone mad over “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

A citation like this associates Stevens’ poetic with a progressive ideology at once of the left and distinct from the one theorized by Stevens’ Yale critics (who see Stevens’ self-consciousness as an expression of post-enlightenment skepticism). Yet Longenbach also understands the validity of the New Historicist commentators, who beginning with Fredric Jameson have connected Stevens’ poetic flights with what Frank Lentricchia calls “capitalist foreplay.” Acknowledging the presence of multiple ideological possibilities in Stevens (and in modernism), Longenbach explores Stevens’ own “combination of reaction and reform.” And by paying close attention to the nuances of Stevens’ poems, he also manages to avoid the family weakness of New Historicist criticism—confusing literary products with other kinds of cultural practice.

On the downside, Longenbach’s narrative voice demands an illusion of mastery that sometimes tempts him into the facile generalizations of old-fashioned literary history. (“The year 1939 marked the sesquicentennial of the French Revolution, and to writers of a certain generation it seemed as if very little time had passed. Just as post-Romantic poets have repeated Wordsworth’s mode of imaginative internalization, so have they appropriated his evaluation of the French revolution as a way to contain or justify their own retreats from historical events that similarly failed to bolster their political ideals.”) Longenbach also misses a major opportunity to define the nuances of Stevens’ project by not referring more extensively to William Carlos Williams (a close friend both of Burke and Pound). Williams was, as L. S. Dembo long ago demonstrated in *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry*, Stevens’ ally in the battle to convince America of the imagination’s importance in ordinary life. (Thus the great theme of *Paterson*, Book I: “The language is missing them / they die also / incommunicado.”) Had Longenbach kept Williams in mind, he would have been compelled to emphasize the prominence of Stevens’ fastidious and ornate diction, and would have had to face up to Stevens’ intermittent social snobbery and (as Hemingway discovered at Key West) not inconsiderable ego. Turned away from these realities, Longenbach, in an otherwise impressive treatment of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” glosses over the full implications of that poem’s mandarin wit.

Another way of calibrating Longenbach’s achievement involves Stevens’ most celebrated poems. Every full-dress study of Stevens has to prove its mettle by reinterpreting “Sunday Morning,” “The Idea of Order at Key West,” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” With the first, Longenbach tries to recontextualize the poem radically by invoking World War I, but in this instance remains too distant from Stevens’ text to be persuasive. On the other hand, his discussion of “The Idea of Order at Key West” is a tour de force—perhaps the best thing in the book and a model of historical and literary sensitivity. Longenbach first excavates the poem’s macropolitical background. (In 1933 Batista had taken over Cuba and FDR sent the navy into Cuban waters to maintain a U. S. presence. On Key West in February 1934, Stevens wrote to his wife that “owing to the disturbed conditions in Cuba there have been warships in port here for a good many months. At the moment the *Wyoming* is lying at anchor out near the Casa Marina.”) Instead of drawing immediate conclusions, though, Longenbach examines “other possible points of origin.”
Briefly he tracks Stevens’ address to Ramon Fernandez in the poem to a translation of Fernandez’s “I Came Near Being a Fascist” in a contemporary issue of the *Partisan Review*. Stevens’ purpose in “The Idea of Order,” Longenbach proposes, was to counter the rigidity of Fernandez’s theorizing both before and after his conversion. The result was a fiercely ambiguous poem “that retreats from political revolution and chastises Fernandez for committing himself to change.” The ideological force of the poem thus must be approached through its formal properties—the ambiguity that “The Idea of Order” enacts “on a syntactical level, throwing its own answers into question” as (I omit Longenbach’s splendid explication here) “even the clearest explanation of the woman’s song does not remain clear for long.” In Longenbach’s view, only when we have understood the contextual charge of Stevens’ syntax can we gauge his culminating vision, in which the lamps on an American battleship may or may not be transfigured into “The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there, / As the night descended, tilting in the air, / Mastered the night and portioned out the sea, / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.”

Longenbach’s chapter on “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” at first less striking, embodies what seems to me the lasting virtue of his book—an ability to articulate one of the genuine sources of Stevens’ power and at the same time acknowledge the limitations of his own reading. After a lucid but rather one-dimensional rehearsal of the structure of “Notes,” Longenbach invokes Stanley Cavell on Emerson to highlight the poem’s fundamental theme—the paradox that what Emerson called “sit[ting] at the feet of the familiar” requires “more effort than rising to the heights of the extraordinary.” Or, as Longenbach, following Cavell, intensely restates it,

> there is in philosophy a deep wish to complicate and escape the ordinary world . . . a wish that is paradoxically a necessary part of the effort to recover that world: the wonder of the meal in the firkin or the man in the sagging pantaloons is not apprehensible until we have become estranged from it first; the sublimity of the humdrum is an achievement—an achieving—and only through the complexities of poems like “The Comedian” and “Notes” will the ephebe achieve a ‘social nature’ in which such poetry is no longer necessary. Only by voyaging to the fantastic ‘land of the lemon trees’ do the mariners of the twenty-ninth canto of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” realize the wonder of the common world.

This is as fine a summing up of this mood in Stevens as I know. And yet, on the same page, Longenbach both concedes how much it leaves out and reminds us that Stevens worried about the inconsistency himself. According to a letter of 1935, the more determined Stevens was to write of the normal, the more it eluded him. “With me, how to write of the normal in a normal way is a problem which I have long since given up trying to solve, because I never feel that I am in the area of poetry until I am a little off the normal. The worst part of this aberration is that I am convinced that it is not an aberration.” Or, as Longenbach generalizes the difficulties of any reading of Stevens that
emphasizes the commonplace, “if the idea of ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction’ concerns the recovery of ordinary experience (or, more specifically, poetry’s role in that act of recovery during a time of war), then why is the poem so defiantly extraordinary? Why is it that when Stevens remarked that the normal is the chief problem of the artist, he also said that in order to solve that problem, the artist needs ‘everything that the imagination has to give’? And isn’t poetry as such—or at least what Stevens called the ‘essential gaudiness’ of poetry—inimical to the normal or the ordinary?”

As powerfully as Harold Bloom and J. Hillis Miller have portrayed Stevens the poet of endless deferral, James Longenbach delineates Stevens the master of “The Plain Sense of Things.” Both representations amount to partial views, but I for one would be reluctant to relinquish either.

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Stevens and the Interpersonal.

Almost at the end of Stevens and the Interpersonal, Mark Halliday comments on Stevens’ “Man Carrying Thing,” in a voice reminiscent of a Stevens essay: “the play of the imagination that gives life its interest and nobility.” But “interest and nobility” are far from Halliday’s business at hand. He relentlessly constructs what he calls “a moral critique of Stevens” and he wants his readers to become aware of the poet’s moral “irresponsibility,” a subject that he believes has been overlooked by the vast array of Stevens critics who seem content with an “elitist” poet who never provides us with “a real examination of human intimacy.” Although the author claims, early and late, that he is speaking “not of the biographer’s man but of the poet-in-the-poems, the man figured by poetry,” he cannot help conflating the two; he can hear the voice of a “wealthy, white male executive from Connecticut” yearning to escape from the problems of being “a certain man with a certain troubling wife and troubling daughter and certain troubling memories.” That Stevens failed to incorporate these troubles as his subject matter troubles Halliday immensely: life experience must share the stage with poetic experience.

Admitting that his argument is “literal-minded,” Halliday clearly desires real gardens with real toads, and he cannot tolerate Stevens’ refusal to confer particular, personal identities on Susanna in “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” the singer in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the woman in “Another Weeping Woman,” or Penelope in “The World as Meditation.” For this critic, Stevens “seems to discredit the possibility of actual contact between human lovers present to one another in a complex interaction.” These female figures are not individual “real” human beings because Stevens is continually “shutting them within the vehicle of metaphor.” But isn’t this precisely what poetic art does with experience? Halliday cannot tolerate an unconnected consciousness, a consciousness that is individual but impersonal. Refusing to grant Stevens his donnée, Halliday spends his pages pointing out what Stevens is not. Readers who have enjoyed Stevens’ world of words are not likely to enjoy this book.
Since the critic cannot accept the poet as he is, and feels compelled to remake him, the reader may well ask in whose image? What tradition is he building on? What models has he in mind? Although he begins surprisingly with a poem of George Herbert, and considers other 19th-century poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, Dickinson, and particularly Hardy, he runs into difficulty in connecting these poets with the “moral realities of choice, work, citizenship and love,” without going outside the precincts of poetry, to letters or historical documents. Even with a modern poet like Frost, Halliday has to admit that “Frost and Stevens share an aversion to the clamorous demands of interpersonal relations”; but Frost at least remains aware that he cannot escape his social obligations for long whereas Stevens in his godlike self-sufficiency lacks “any kind of action other than perceiving.” Again, the simplified dichotomy prevails: action in poetry versus action in the world. The indictment against Stevens remains dual: “his repudiation of action, along with his repudiation of the interpersonal.” However, it extends even further: he is guilty of “racist elitism” and “elaborate sexism.” The only poet more irresponsible than Stevens is John Ashbery, with whom Halliday closes his book. Like Stevens, Ashbery is a poet without “real” subject matter (“Poetry is the subject of the poem?”) and even more morally dangerous than Stevens because in his randomness, his blasé presentation of the “flotsam of consciousness,” he is indifferent not only to real people and real action but to his real reader as well. It seems clear that Halliday’s ideal poets are those who came after Stevens and who made the materials of their personal lives their subject matter: Lowell, Snodgrass, Ginsburg, and later Plath, Sexton, Rich.

This book follows on the heels of Wallace Stevens and the Actual World in which Alan Filreis demonstrates that Stevens wasn’t asleep in his ivory tower, and quite aware of the momentous events taking place around him; but Filreis, too, has to admit that Stevens could not resist “aestheticizing a historical event.” Far more sympathetic to Stevens’ method, however, Filreis can accept the possibility that “reality exists in the mind” and he effectively shows how Stevens could take Barbara Church’s descriptive postcards from Europe and make them a part of his own poetic experience in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.”

Halliday remains throughout suspicious of meditation, contemplation, abstraction, the life of the mind, although he admits that Stevens is a poet “whose thinking we admire despite its omissions.” Stevens’ consciousness revealed through words must be converted into a social consciousness revealed by actions in the world: responsibility to language converted into responsibility to other people. Halliday wants Stevens to live an ethical life outside of poetry that engages problems such as nuclear weapons, erosion of the earth’s ozone layer, and the greenhouse effect. In his dismaying vulgarity, Halliday could come across so many poets to please him. Why, we must ask, must he drag Stevens—and Dickinson as well—from their chosen solitude?

Mark Halliday joins those “rowdy gun-men” that Stevens refers to in The Necessary Angel, who cannot appreciate, even tolerate, a poetry that assumes a social reality yet does not directly connect with it. The classic problem with aesthetic distance is that it seems to demand moral indifference; however, recent theorists have shown that the referential content of a poem could as well be expressed in other verbal modes. The thematic content, however,
cannot be connected. Only in the form of the poem can what Halliday calls “action in the world” be revealed. At the end of “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” Stevens projects a view of “Interpersonal Relations”:

The crow looks rusty as he rises up.  
Bright is the malice in his eye . . .  
One joins him there for company.  
But at a distance, in another tree.

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Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons.  

In Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons, John Timberman Newcomb asks us to suspend belief in the poet as an artist trained in a particular craft, capable of creating singular works of art. He invites us to deliberately short-circuit any understanding of poetry as a compound of poet, poem, and responding, interpreting reader and to consider poetry solely from the point of view of “reception,” as an array of material peculiarly amenable to interpretation. He wants us to jettison the notion of intrinsic value, both in the poet and the poetry, so that he may concentrate attention on the extrinsic forces that foster inclusion in a given “canon.” If one accepts these strictures even conditionally, Newcomb’s study rewards the reader with a detailed, comprehensive, beautifully organized survey of the American literary establishment from, roughly, 1890 to 1970. The book does not replace Melita Schaum’s finely-tuned study of Stevens criticism, which moves into the 1980s, but adds new dimensions to the investigation of criticism itself.

While Stevens is the “constant” in this sociohistory of American modernism—just short of 300 pages—Newcomb only occasionally turns to the poems. Let it be said right away that when he does, one finds a sensitive and alert reader. Essentially, the book is concerned with the politics and PR of literary visibility: marketing, spheres of influence, the various interest groups, small and large publications and their criteria, the dynamics of critical assessment, of academic inclusion (and exclusion) that single out a few for special recognition and study. Specifically, Newcomb’s object is to graph the changing status of Stevens’ reputation over the decades and to trace the notable increase in value accorded to his poetry. He sets out to examine “what practices, processes, and discourses made it possible for Stevens’s advocates to promote his ‘majority’ at the expense of various other writers and their advocates,” to learn how Stevens could “first not be seen as a major writer, and eventually not be seen as anything else.” And over the course of what is often a fascinating narrative, Newcomb accomplishes both of these goals handsomely.

A sizeable portion of the introductory first chapter is devoted to anatomizing “superlativist” Marjorie Perloff’s “cultural Manicheanism” as evinced in the Pound/Stevens Era controversy, and to decided effect. But while Newcomb supports his critique by calling upon fluid theories of “contingency” and “reader-reception,” he remains bound to an uncompromising neohistoricist
methodology. One must consider the irony of the critical stance. Newcomb
unsheathes his sword in the opening chapter and sets out to slay the monster
of canonical absolutism—with a relentless militant absolutism. He is right to
call into question Perloff’s limiting dichotomies, but his own discussion moves
in terms of conflicting antitheses—e.g., “elitist” vs. “humanist” values or
“formalist” criticism vs. “sociopolitical resonance”—with no middle ground.

The five chapters between the Introduction and the Afterword present a
complex and sophisticated weaving of intellectual issues and political facts.
In leisurely chronological order, the political concerns and aesthetic climate
of each successive period are explored. Individual agendas are related to broad
social programs and movements. The demographics of the literary scene are
established: 1) formal criticism, mostly in the form of reviews; 2) the work of
other poets and artists; 3) letters, biographies, histories of the period; 4) an-
thologies, surveys, textbooks; 5) prize-giving and subsidizing bodies; 6) pat-
terns of literary publishing; 7) academic support and study; and 8) “some
attributes of Stevens’s life and personality which . . . shaped his reputation,”
i.e., biographical data.

Newcomb’s second chapter spans the years between 1890 and 1920 with
sketches of the “little magazine” world (Poetry, Others), New York intellectual
and artistic circles, and a discussion of U. S. poetry in the period following
Stevens’ Harvard years. Strangely, there is no mention of the 1913 Armory
Show in New York which changed the whole spectrum of American poetry,
art, and theater. Chapter three centers upon the disastrous reception, in 1923,
of Harmonium (remaindered at Filene’s, Newcomb reminds us, at 11¢ per
copy) and the famous seven-year silence that followed. “The playful hermeti-
cism of Harmonium demanded a critical flexibility and patience that reader-
reviewers of 1923 were unable to sustain,” comments Newcomb, who then
compares Stevens’ happy “hermeticism” with the exclusionary poetics of T. S.
Eliot:

Eliot’s hermetic poetry excluded the reader who did not follow its
allusive textures, but it also clubbishly admitted those who did follow
it into the priesthood of a prestigiously erudite tradition. On the other
hand, Stevens’s hermeticism primarily functioned not to exclude a
reader who could not identify Azcan, an inchling, or a blackamoor but
instead to promote a play of elusive “suave sounds” . . . [T]hese obscu-
rities offered no discernible cultural laurels to the winners, nor did
did they force a guilty acknowledgement from the losers that they should
have remembered their Dante better.

The fourth chapter covers the 1930s, discussing in depth the turn in Stevens’
reputation wrought by R. P. Blackmur’s “Examples of Wallace Stevens,” first
appearing in Hound and Horn in 1932. “One of Blackmur’s ambitions for the
essay was to wrest Stevens out of the clutches of his major supporters who
would preserve him as an aestheticist cult figure.” With a rare fleeting humor,
Newcomb shows how Blackmur not only changed perceptions of Stevens’
poetry, paving the way to recognition, but also provided the poet’s formalist
antics with an “attractive nimbus of integrity.” The fifth chapter brings the
reader up to the 1940s and ’50s, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” and the
Cold War climate of paranoid patriotism. Newcomb credits Stevens with “theorizing social structures” but does not expand on or clarify the claim. Patterns of anthology selection and the rise of academic interest in Stevens are traced, and an account given of the delayed appreciation of Harmonium, in its reissued form. The final chapter covers the period of 1954 to 1966—prizes awarded, Stevens’ death, the appearance of Opus Posthumous, the publication of the Letters by Holly Stevens. It traces the emergence of a new respect for Stevens’ comedic aspect, no longer seen as a trivializing agent but as a way to convey “the notion that life on this physical earth was cause for celebration.”

Newcomb’s book is thought-provoking and ambitious. Its chapters are perhaps too generous (two run well over 40 pages, and one over 60), and his demographics somewhat skewed to generational divisions: people are primarily young or old; Kenneth Rexroth, for example, is introduced as “a middle-aged American.” In this study, Stevens’ poems are appraised according to their social implications, and the social range is calibrated from a democratic celebration of daily life to “antibourgeois antagonism.” In 1955, a gravely ill Stevens wrote to Elder Olsen praising his poems: “I like the landlady’s cat staring at the motionless cockroach,” he noted. “You have a strong social interest, not the prescribed academic thing but something real.” Newcomb, who finds the overwhelming “authority” of the Letters daunting, may find room in his heart for this engaging one.

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“Ne parlez plus de vieillesse,” Stevens quotes an unknown French correspondent in a letter to José Rodriguez Feo written on January 13, 1953: “Le destin des artistes et des poètes est précisément de pas vieiller.” Stevens added that he himself was beginning to feel he no longer wanted to pay any more attention to old age. Michael Draxlbauer’s book, a welcome and important addition to the as yet few publications in German on Stevens, goes some way towards clarifying why this should have been particularly easy at least for the poet. In his study, which was completed as a dissertation at the University of Vienna in 1987, Draxlbauer argues against biographically-oriented criticism of the poems Stevens wrote between 1950 and 1955. He insists that the reductive “plain sense of things,” the “leaflessness” that seems to dominate these late texts does not at all reflect the frustration and barreness caused by the writer’s sense of his own approaching death, but should be read as just another phase of an elaborate process through which the poetic imagination, having reached its heyday in summer, must fall into decay during winter, thence to be renewed by a fresh act of creative construction in the springtime.

Obviously, this does not come as news to readers of Stevens who have always felt their poet to be obsessed with the cyclical turns of day and season.
The merit of Draxlbauer’s approach is that it makes us realize, even if not for the first time, the basic coherence of Stevens’ poetic vision. Draxlbauer is rightly suspicious of an oversimplified picture of Stevens’ career whereby the music master of Harmonium and the quirky philosopher playing around with Ideas of Order are finally transformed into the dying old man sitting on the bare rock of reality (The Rock). For this purpose, he valiantly strives to establish the existence of a “poetological matrix” that connects the linguistic brilliance of Harmonium and the overtly metapoetical texts of the thirties and forties with the more austere reflectiveness of the later meditations. At first implicitly and then explicitly, Stevens centered his poems around a “supreme fiction” created by the “capable imagination.” This fiction, which assumes programmatic importance in the late work, can only reign supreme precisely because it knows its own limitations. Draxlbauer stresses (movingly, I think) the basically optimistic character of Stevens’ poetry.

The first part of the study is somewhat tough reading, since it promises to give us a thorough overview of criticism on the later poetry but then focuses mainly and in repetitive detail on studies published in the fifties and sixties, with the notable exception perhaps of Charles Berger’s Forms of Farewell. Like so many critical acts, Draxlbauer’s plea for the “wholeness of Harmonium” takes the form of a rescue operation, and at times the sheer force of his attacks seems somewhat exaggerated. One may wonder, for example, whether it is really justified to find fault with J. Hillis Miller for having described the late poems in 1965 as “final and stable” in meaning when we all know that in an extended reading of “The Rock” published thereafter, which Draxlbauer himself quotes in other parts of his study, the same critic discovered himself to be facing not a rock but an “abyss” of linguistic complexity.

Be that as it may, Draxlbauer is exceptionally skillful in explaining the significance of the “supreme fiction” and of the two interdependent but eventually irreconcilable concepts of “reality” and the “imagination” in Stevens’ poetry and poetics. For Stevens, as Draxlbauer points out, the imagination could not itself be imagined without a conception of reality as a point of reference. Draxlbauer is one of the very few critics who can make sense of the enigmatic “Earthy Anecdote,” arguing convincingly that it is a transcription of the interaction between “imagination” and “reality.” Some of the details, though, that make the poetry so attractive to the reader who shares Stevens’ love for language are missing from Draxlbauer’s large-size picture: is it without significance that in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” the poet who invokes the death of “Phoebus” can only do so by addressing these lines to an “e-phebe,” i.e., another, younger Phoebus? Draxlbauer is very perceptive, however, when it comes to Stevens’ essays, which he regards as an extension of the poetry in a different medium: they read, Draxlbauer says, as if the thoughts developed there “were continually watching themselves.” The final part of the book is devoted to close readings of ten late poems which Draxlbauer situates within the seasonal cycle outlined earlier. Although, just to underscore the existence of said “poetological matrix,” a few explicit connections with earlier poems could have been drawn here (e.g., between the “chorister” in “Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself” and the “red bird” seeking out his “choir” in “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”), some of these readings belong to the best we have on the late poetry. “Farewell without a
“The Man with the Blue Guitar,” to add one observation of my own, does perhaps not so much refer to the loss of the instrument of artistic imagination as it was painted by Picasso; rather, if we think of the riderless horse returning home in a “wide, still Aragonese” storm, it recalls the end of another Spaniard’s imaginative exploits: “male reality” is indeed all that is finally left of Don Quixote’s quest for a beautiful Dulcinea, for “that other and her desire.” But even that is, as the poem says, just another “construction” and then perhaps less “final” than it seems.

If I have reservations about the book, they are of a methodological sort. Since Draxlbauer is so content with working out the “internal logic” of Stevens’ poetry, he never addresses some of the most interesting ramifications of his argument. He quotes from Stevens’ letters no less freely than he does from the “Adagia” and essays, but he never really explains what status these documents should have if the poetry, as he claims, ought to be approached on its own terms and not from an external perspective. How should we read such a beautiful passage as the one from a letter to Sister Bernetta Quinn dated October 8, 1952, in which Stevens explains that he had “this morning” felt “as blank as one of the ponds which in the weather at this time of year are motionless”? But, he adds, with a twist that would reinforce in a nice, unobtrusive way Draxlbauer’s point about the late poetry, “perhaps it was the blankness that made me enjoy it so much.” For all of Draxlbauer’s argument about the ethical basis of Stevens’ aesthetic vision, about the rootedness of Stevens’ literary concerns in the actual world, the poet in this book emerges as a strangely aloof figure, as a writer who, as early as “Earthy Anecdote” (1918) or “The Snow Man” (1921), seems to have been less determined that his poetry “should give pleasure” than that it should follow a preconceived scheme, no matter when he would find the appropriate terms to express it. How could this have been possible, if order was, as Draxlbauer says at one point, “illusory” for Stevens? Draxlbauer is less, it seems, a player on Stevens’ harmonium than its expert technician. The most pressing question that is left unanswered by Draxlbauer’s analyses is just what kind of reader Stevens’ poetry might have been designed for. Is this really, as Draxlbauer repeatedly insinuates, a poetry for the Stevens specialist only—for a reader, then, who would certainly not be a “connoisseur of chaos,” but the detached observer of orderly, impersonal structures spanning an entire poetic career? The present reviewer for one remains more interested in the poet who knows that he “cannot bring a world quite round” (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”), but who nevertheless enjoys “the pleasures of merely circulating.” The play of possibility in Stevens’ language is more contingent, less severe than “poetological matrices” would lead us to believe. I am not making another attempt to cast Stevens in the role of an irresponsible hedonist and irrepressible punster (for which I would deservedly attract Draxlbauer’s approbrium). What I am trying to say is that while we certainly should not forget about the “whole of harmonium,” we should also realize that, even if such an all-encompassing structure exists, individual poems are, to adapt Stevens’ own phrase (from Souvenirs and Prophecies), maybe “a part of [it], but apart from it . . . Hope this is clear.”

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Wallace Stevens: Harmonium and The Whole of Harmonium. 

Kia Penso’s Wallace Stevens: Harmonium and The Whole of Harmonium starts from the premise that Wallace Stevens’ critics have focused too much on his development. They have read the early poems almost entirely in terms of how they anticipate the more complex—and “greater”—later poems. “The current tendency,” she points out, “is to look at the earlier poems as sort of experimental squibs that occasionally show the rough beginnings of the greatness to come.” This impulse, Penso contends, privileges the later poems and often leads to misreadings and misrepresentations of Stevens’ project as a whole. In an effort to redress this wrong-headed approach, she looks at early poems from Harmonium, such as “Sunday Morning” and “The Comedian as the Letter C,” arguing that in these poems Stevens posed questions he would ask again and again in his later poems. Hence she concludes that “the same questions recur, and he kept on writing poems that do not show any ‘progress’ toward a complete resolution.” For Penso, the central issues of Stevens’ poetic enterprise can be seen in Harmonium, for the poems of this volume raise the questions Stevens will continue to ask in all of his subsequent poems.

Although Penso makes a spirited attempt to restore some of the delights and torments of reading Stevens’ early poems, she spends her best energies attacking Stevens’ major critics who she feels have misrepresented his project. Helen Vendler is criticized for considering Stevens’ “development,” J. Hillis Miller is dismissed as another one of those “demon dialecticians of deconstruction,” and Harold Bloom is censured for suggesting that Stevens might have worried that his poetic voice would fail. Pointing out that “there is no evidence in the letters or elsewhere to suggest that Stevens suffered from the kind of anxiety that Bloom ascribes to him,” Penso notes: “How is Stevens’ anxiety different from the sort of worrying about the ability to write that even a bad novelist or a dissertation writer might indulge in?” Such a question hardly deserves our attention.

Penso also quarrels with those who want to use the poems to recover some understanding of the poet’s life, to understand the relationship between the life lived and the art created. She feels that such a narrative will keep readers from taking the poems on their own terms, from considering the formal components of Stevens’ poems. Stevens, she points out, “finds a variety of ways to deter us from making biographical connections: the impersonal constructions, . . . the invented personages . . . and the variety of voices and approaches to subject matter.” Endorsing a narrowly defined formalism, Penso maintains, “a poem is one kind of object and an explanation is another. An explanation can be substituted in a reader’s mind for the poem itself: that’s how poems get spoiled.”

Penso’s readings of “Sunday Morning” (Chapter Two) and “The Comedian as the Letter C” (Chapter Three) are sincere attempts to restore our interest in these often written about poems. These readings, however, do not offer new insights to those familiar with Stevens’ poetry; and those who are not familiar with his work will be frustrated by the inordinate amount of time she spends dismissing the assumptions of those who have written, often eloquently, on these poems. A case in point is her impatience with those who link Stevens
and Pater. Citing the often remarked on influence of Pater, Penso maintains: “To identify ‘Sunday Morning’ as created under the influence of Pater is to say something that may be true (can’t be proven to be untrue) but is inert.” This comment might have been confined to her reading notes; placed here it ends up distracting Penso from the task at hand.

The final chapter considers Stevens as a modernist, mentioning his “formal innovation, new subject matter, and the feeling that something separates him from the past.” Crispin’s “questioning of poetic tradition” we are asked to infer is not unlike Stevens’. The strength of this chapter lies in Penso’s appreciation of Stevens’ “lively poetic effects” in *Harmonium*. Penso is right to point out that these poems are important in their own right. One wishes, however, that some of her readings had not been overshadowed by her gratuitous attacks on those who came before her. These judgments undermine and obscure her own explanations concerning Stevens’ poetic project.

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The Wallace Stevens Case: Law and the Practice of Poetry.

In *The Wallace Stevens Case*, Thomas Grey (himself a professor of law at Stanford Law School) adroitly addresses his arguments to two audiences: first, to legal scholars and theorists, in order to show how Stevens’ poetry can add to an understanding of law; and second, to literary scholars in general, especially those interested in interdisciplinary cultural studies. To these I would add a third group, for this is also a book very much of interest to Stevens scholars in particular.

Although Grey is clearly a legal theorist and not a literary scholar per se, his insights into the legal ramifications of Stevens’ use of language are thoroughly grounded in literary history. For example, when Grey asserts that “Stevens can speak to the lawyer or legal theorist as a kind of therapist for the habitual and institutional rigidities of binary thought” characteristic of legal decisions, he locates this ability in Stevens’ continuing, “perhaps more than any other poet in English,” the “Shakespearean and Keatsian tradition of negative capability.” This work proves quite unusual, and delightful, as Grey consistently places Stevens’ relation to the current debates in the law-and-literature movement within a well informed framework of both literary tradition (albeit a highly conventional or canonical tradition) and Stevens criticism.

Divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a brief conclusion, the last two chapters are most obviously of note to Stevens scholars. In addition to providing new readings of some of Stevens’ best known poems, both chapters demonstrate how thoroughly what Helen Vendler has rightly called Stevens’ “qualified assertions” are related to philosophical perspectivism and, in turn, how Stevens’ perspectivism is applicable to contemporary legal theorists (curiously motivated, I would say after reading Grey’s book, by the unlikely convergence of pragmatism and deconstruction). As a consequence, Grey gives us unique insights into how Stevens’ “unpeopled” poems have a genuine
connection to the “actual world,” even when not immediately about the actual world:

Stevens shows us that the boundary between the aesthetic and “life-world” uses of the imagination—the boundary between art and life—is unstable, since the whole social order of discursive “spheres” is itself an imaginative cultural construct “in continual flux.”

This work, then, is expectedly far-ranging. For example, not only does Grey demonstrate Stevens’ indebtedness to both Nietzsche and William James, as well as to many literary ancestors such as Shakespeare and Whitman, but he also persuasively shows that when writing “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (a poem Grey correctly notes is Stevens’ attempt to rewrite “the three canticles of the Divine Comedy”) Stevens is able to explore a “familiar topic of legal theory—the opposition and interplay of permanent reasoned truth (‘abstraction’) and imaginative transformation (‘change’).” Further, he introduces a more complicated issue, “the place of pleasure in the legal theorist’s work.” In the last chapter of his work, Grey proves with far more success (and certainly with much less derision) than does Frank Lentricchia that Stevens’ poetry indeed has social relevance.

I do not mean to slight the first chapters of this remarkable new book, however. While giving us an account of the usual approaches when and if legal scholars do embrace the study of poetry (approaches, Grey argues, for which Stevens’ poetry curiously will not avail), Grey manages to produce a highly succinct but vivid biographical account of Stevens’ life as a lawyer/businessman, his life as a poet, and the ways in which these two lives were simultaneously held discrete and yet equally entwined in the life of the actual man. This, in itself, is a remarkable contribution, given how elusive Stevens has proven to be for even his most dedicated biographers. Similarly, in Chapter Two Grey deftly exposes the tension between the competing influences of “art for art’s sake” and the “populist version of modernism” in Stevens’ work and temperament. In Chapter Three, Grey potentially adds to recent feminist inquiries into Stevens’ poetry by distinguishing Stevens’ own sense of his legal style as masculine and his poetic style not as simply feminine, but notably as something androgynous. “[D]espite all the pressures of background and environment,” Grey convincingly argues, “Stevens managed largely to stay faithful to the bent of his own genius toward an androgynous poetry of receptivity and multiple perspectives.”

Without question, this new book will make a major contribution to legal scholars debating the relevance of poetry to legal studies. However, as the last quotation should readily suggest, The Wallace Stevens Case simultaneously provides rewarding insights into Stevens’ poetry that have compelling extensions into some of our most important contemporary critical debates in literary studies as well. For a variety of reasons, then, this is a book well worth reading.

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