The Wallace Stevens Journal

Special Issue: Poets Reading Stevens

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# The Wallace Stevens Journal

**Volume 17**  
**Number 1**  
**Spring 1993**

Guest Editor: Joseph Duemer  
Clarkson University

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Preface

JOSEPH DUEMER

As I began assembling and sorting the contributions that comprise this issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, I initially arranged the various pieces within the usual divisions of the journal—essays followed by reviews, poems, and bibliography. But every writer in this issue is a poet (even if some of them are pretending to be critics here), and their poems (in prose and verse), as well as their essays, seemed uncomfortable trying to imitate, even in arrangement, the fine critical work that usually occupies these pages.

As I began the editorial process, which is new to me, I seemed to hear the pieces whispering to each other, both within and across genres; occasionally I thought I could sense a fragment of song rising from the manila folders and paper clipped pages. I tried to listen to what I heard, and so, slowly, as I shuffled pages of poetry and prose, a musical metaphor began to assert itself and to shape my thinking about the work I had undertaken to present.

If the contents of this issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* are, by analogy at least, a kind of musical composition, it is a composition that contains several ringing silences. Carol Frost, Sandra McPherson, and John Skoyles, among other gifted poets, though interested in the project, were unable to contribute because of other commitments; the same is true of Adrienne Rich, surely the most powerful presence in recent American poetry, whose early turn away from the elegance and idealism represented by Stevens is of considerable literary-historical interest. I am sorry not to have their contributions. Perhaps more unfortunate, it was necessary, for reasons of length, to eliminate two pieces I had originally thought to include—John Allman’s long poem “The Hockney Variations” and Donald Justice’s essay “The Free-Verse Line in Stevens.” The issue is weaker for these omissions. (Justice is arguably the finest prosodist among American poets for several generations, and I urge interested readers to seek out his essay, which appeared in *Antaeus* and was reprinted in *Platonic Scripts*, published by the University of Michigan Press in 1984.) Robert Hass participated in an MLA session in 1991 arranged in connection with this special issue, and his talk was published last year in *Threepenny Review* (Summer 1992); interested readers will wish to seek it out. Dana Gioia, after initially agreeing to write an essay, later declined, citing his reputation as “a grumpy naysayer at the love fest of American poetry,” and saying that, while he is a great admirer of Stevens’ work, the essay he *would* have written would have had to cite “specific contemporary American poems and poets” in support of his contention that “it’s incontestable that [Stevens] is the single most debilitating influence on contemporary American poetry of the 1980s...
and ’90s.” Gioia concluded that it “seemed both rude and inappropriate to place the sort of essay [he] wished to write” in this issue, which, he surmised, would be likely to contain the work of poets he felt called upon to criticize. As editor, I can only say that I would very much have liked to include just such an essay, for purposes of contrast. What is music without conflict? I have hoped all along that this project would contain the kind of dissonance that creates greater interest and meaning than mere harmony can aspire to. In somewhat the same spirit as Gioia, A. R. Ammons, in his letter turning down my invitation to contribute, wrote, “I have never been particularly drawn to the poetry of Wallace Stevens. I have stood in some wonder of his use of the linking verb to be and of propositional philosophy, but I am not a critic, and I have absolutely no wish to attack a great poet.” Finally, William Bronk—in my opinion the most undervalued poet of his generation—declined to be included, noting, “I am aware that people have traced me to Stevens where I think disparity is much more than likeness. There was a period of a few years when I was entranced with Stevens’ sound. Although I hardly approached it, I needed to get away from it and I stopped reading him before I had much understanding of his thought or feeling.” I name these poets because their absence from this collection is telling, each silence meaningful to readers interested in the dynamic literary relations within current American poetry.

It remains to say something about the essays and poems that do comprise the measures and passages of this extended composition. (I won’t say symphony, though in my mind there are four “movements.”) The first movement—a kind of overture—consists of four poems. It begins with Roethke’s comic “A Rouse for Stevens,” and then moves quickly to elegy with Berryman’s “So Long? Stevens,” and two poems by Donald Justice—the first simply elegiac, the second a formal elegy in the manner of Auden’s famous poem to Yeats. All these poems, of course, have appeared elsewhere, as have several other pieces in this issue, and while this is a somewhat unusual procedure, I have justified it on the grounds that I hoped to make an anthology that gauges the range of Stevens’ importance to contemporary poetry, as well as by the fact—especially so!—that these poets continue to be important presences in our literature.

The second movement opens with a prose interlude that includes pieces by John Updike, Albert Goldbarth, and Bin Ramke. These fade into a central suite comprised of four long poems. Of these pieces, by Robert Mezey, Jorie Graham, David St. John, and David Lindley, two refer directly to Stevens and two only obliquely. (While never invoking him by name, Graham refers to her three “Notes on the Reality of the Self” as “a direct address to Mr. Stevens,” while Mezey’s cento is comprised entirely of Stevens’ own words.) This section of long poems merges into several short pieces of personal prose, sometimes accompanied by poetry, which complete this section. The next “movement” is entirely lyric, consisting of short
poems bearing in various ways on the presence of Stevens. The final section, composed of critical essays, proceeds at the most stately pace, though each piece is written with a poet’s graceful touch.

However one reads, the variety and range of this collection of texts will surely be apparent. There is, indeed, a considerable distance between, say, the work of Charles Bernstein and that of X. J. Kennedy—and not just in style, but in fundamental beliefs about the nature of language. The reader will also notice that not every poem in this issue of The Wallace Stevens Journal deals directly with Stevens’ life or work; in making selections I have tended to take a poet at his or her word when they have asserted an influence, and in a couple of cases (Anderson, Peterfreund) I have detected a trace of Stevens that the poets themselves had not made a point of. This fact points up an interesting condition of Stevens’ continuing presence in our poetry—it is quite extensive, but by no means universal, nor always fully conscious. Often, of course, as Ramke points out, “influence” can be a matter of argument, or even the passionate rejection of principles.

This collection of texts is intended to map the complicated range of Stevens’ influence on contemporary American poetry. “Context is everything,” commented Charles Bernstein when submitting his poem, and I have tried to use context in such a way as to highlight the ways in which Stevens is currently being encountered by American poets. (For contrast, two non-Americans appear here, David Lindley, who is British, and Judita Vaičiūnaitė, who is Stevens’ Lithuanian translator.) My goal has been to bring together, if not exactly harmonize, a body of commentary and response that reflects Stevens’ continuing and problematic presence in American poetry.

And that presence is problematic. Certainly, the way Stevens’ poems are now read by poets differs considerably from the way they were read even fifteen years ago—there is a much greater emphasis among those poets who acknowledge Stevens as an influence on his empiricism rather than his idealism. That is, the use to which poets now tend to put Stevens has more to do with his realization that the lush and tropical imagination must be counterbalanced by a palpable and painful world of objects. There is much less interest, it seems, in the idealized surfaces of his images and sounds. Many contemporary American poets, furthermore—those we might call materialists, like Michael Waters or Tony Hoagland, perhaps Stephen Dobyns—would seem to have little use for Stevens’ transcendentalism, which can seem purely “aesthetic.” Others—Creeley, Bronk, perhaps Rich—acknowledge an early influence by Stevens that had later to be rejected. Still others, such as Ramke and Young, name a continuing presence in their poetic lives of the enigmatic music man Wallace Stevens. One could almost suggest a kind of genealogy of contemporary poetry based on these observations.
As an editor then, or rather, composer, I have tried to produce a rich intertextuality, like that of music, in which every note alludes to every other, and every cluster of sounds to every other cluster. Naturally, I hope the reader will go sequentially, as when listening to music (where there is no choice), but given the insurrectionary nature of good reading, I hardly hope for such restraint.
A Rouse for Stevens
(To Be Sung in a Young Poets’ Saloon)

THEODORE ROETHKE

Wallace Stevens, what’s he done?
He can play the flitter-flad;
He can see the second sun
Spinning through the lordly cloud.

He’s imaginations’s prince:
He can plink the skitter-bum;
How he rolls the vocables,
Brings the secret—right in Here!

Wallace, Wallace, wo ist er?
Never met him, Dutchman dear;
If I ate and drank like him,
I would be a chanticleer.

(TOGETHER)
Speak it from the face out clearly:
Here’s a mensch but can sing dandy.
Er ist niemals ausgepoopen,
Altes Wunderkind.

(AUDIENCE)
Roar ’em, whore ’em, cockalorum,
The Muses, they must all adore him,
Wallace Stevens—are we for him?
Brother, he’s our father.
He lifted up, among the actuaries, 
a grandee crow. Ah ha & he crowed good. 
The funny money-man. 
Mutter we all must as well as we can. 
He mutter spiffy. He make wonder Henry’s 
wits, though, with a odd

. . . something . . . something . . . not there in his flourishing art.

O veteran of death, you will not mind
a counter-mutter. 
What was it missing, then, at the man’s heart 
so that he does not wound? It is our kind 
to wound, as well as utter

a fact of happy world. That metaphysics 
he hefted up until we could not breathe 
the physics. On our side, 
monotonous (or ever-fresh)—it sticks 
in Henry’s throat to judge—brilliant, he seethe; 
better than us; less wide.

(Dream Song 219)
After a Phrase Abandoned by Wallace Stevens

_The alp at the end of the street_
—Stevens’ Notebooks

DONALD JUSTICE

The alp at the end of the street
Occurs in the dreams of the town.
Over burgher and shopkeeper,
Massive, he broods,
A snowy-headed father
Upon whose knees his children
No longer climb;
Or is reflected
In the cool, unruffled lakes of
Their minds, at evening,
After their day in the shops,
As shadow only, shapeless
As a wind that has stopped blowing.

Grandeur, it seems,
 Comes down to this in the end—
A street of shops
With white shutters
Open for business . . .

Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens

Hartford, 1969

DONALD JUSTICE

1

Hartford is cold today but no colder for your absence.
The rain is green over Avon and, since your death, the sky
Has been blue many times with a blue you did not imagine.

The judges of Key West sit soberly in black
But only because it is their accustomed garb,
And the sea sings with the same voice still, neither serious nor sorry.

The walls past which you walked in your white suit,
Ponderous, pondering French pictures,
Are no less vivid now. Not one is turned to the wall.
The actuarial tables are not upset.
The mail travels back and forth to Ceylon as before.
The gold leaf peels in season and is renewed.

And there are heroes who falter but do not fall,
Or fall without faltering and without fault,
But you were not one of them. Nevertheless,

The poet practicing his scales
Thinks of you as his thumbs slip clumsily under and under,
Avoiding the darker notes.

2

The *the* has become an *a*. The dictionary
Closed at dusk, along with the zoo in the park.

And the wings of the swans are folded now like the sheets
of a long letter.
Who borrows your French words and postures now?

3

The opera of the gods is finished,
And the applause is dying.
The chorus will soon be coming down from the clouds.
Even their silence may be understood
As a final platitude of sorts, a summing up.

The tireless dancers have retired at last
To a small apartment on a treeless street.
But, oh, the pas de deux of Eden begins again
On cotsprings creaking like the sun and moon!
The operation of the universe is temporarily suspended.

What has been good? What has been beautiful?
The tuning up, or the being put away?
The instruments have nothing more to say.
Now they will sleep on plush and velvet till
Our breath revives them to new flutterings, new adieux—

And to the picnic all the singers come,
Minus their golden costumes, but no less gods for that.
Now all quotations from the text apply,
Including the laughter, including the offstage thunder,
Including even this almost human cry.
Stevens as Dutchman

JOHN UPDIKE

WHAT COULD BE MORE SLAVISCHLY Stevensesque than these stanzas of “Cloud Shadows,” a poem I wrote at the age of twenty-one?

That white coconut, the sun,
is hidden by his blue leaves
piratical great galleons.

Our sky their spanking sea,
they thrust us to an ocean floor,
withal with certain courtesy.

Stevens was fascinating to me because I came from a suburb of Reading, Pennsylvania, and discovered about halfway through my adolescence that a famous modern poet had been born and raised in the heart of the city, on North Fifth Street. His brother, Judge Stevens, still sat on the Berks County bench, and the librarian at the Reading Public Library, Miss Ruth, remembered Stevens fondly as her (handsome, wealthy) high-school classmate. But I had to go to Harvard to read his work—in Edwin Honig’s seminar on modern poetry, which I took in my senior year. My paper on Stevens got a C+, though I had put myself heartily into it, reading all of Harmonium and the Faber and Faber Selected Poems. Honig said I tried to cover too much. Better from narrow to broad than from broad to narrow was the life-lesson this unfortunate C taught me.

I loved the high color in Stevens, the rollicking vocabulary, the bearish delicacy, the tirelessness of the onrolling blank verse, and the rare glimpses of Berks County terrain—

From a Schuykill in mid-earth there came emerging
Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them

Shadows of friends, of those he knew . . .

(CP 352)

and

One of the limits of reality
Presents itself in Oley when the hay,
Baked through long days, is piled in mows.

(CP 374)
If Stevens could climb up from this pedestrian, workaday land of farmers, factory workers, and square-headed Pennsylvania Dutchmen into the airiest heights of modernist aestheticism, then the path was clear, if not broad, and could be followed. A distinctly “Dutch” earthiness, I seemed to perceive, lay at the root of Stevens’ fanciful sublimations, and a certain familiar stubbornness and industriousness at the heart of his productivity, which grew as he aged. Reading, a city of factories and railroad yards set squarely among exiguous but tidy and decorated and solid brick row houses, a city built between the gritty Schuylkill and the looming profile of Mt. Penn—surprisingly ornamented by a twelve-story pagoda—had bred not merely a poet but a superpoet, whose sense of mental adventure was present in the grandiloquent drift and the exuberantly mixed vocabulary of lines like

Nota: his soil is man’s intelligence.
That’s better. That’s worth crossing seas to find.
Crispin in one laconic phrase laid bare
His cloudy drift and planned a colony.
Exit the mental moonlight, exit lex,
Rex and principium, exit the whole
Shebang. Exeunt omnes. Here was prose
More exquisite than any tumbling verse:
A still new continent in which to dwell.

(CP 36-37)

I was still provincial and unlettered enough to treasure his lusher verse, above all “Sunday Morning,” which bids farewell to faith with a Lutheran gravity and ends with images that might have come right from the hilly fertile landscape of home:

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

(CP 70)

My youthful sense, in connection with Stevens, of personal discovery and delight has been somewhat stolen from me by his great academic popularity in these recent decades. He has eclipsed in favor, I believe, almost all of the other stars of Honig’s curriculum—Cummings, William Carlos Williams, Moore, Frost, even Eliot. His later, less lush poems, lit by mental moonlight and thought to be rather dry and circular in the Fifties, have been hoisted into great esteem by such connoisseurs of the American
sublime as Harold Bloom. But I, perhaps, am still too Dutch to believe in
the relentless essentialism of such efforts as “Notes toward a Supreme
Fiction,” wherein we are told:

    How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
    Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
    That has expelled us and our images . . .

(CP 381)

Enough such lines put me in mind of Peter Davison’s epigram on Stevens:
“He mouthed and chewed ceaselessly upon the real, without, it seems,
often tasting it.”

And yet, even such a cursory inspection of his work as this brief tribute
has prompted reminds me of how his poems are always a step ahead of
the reader, always bearing from an oblique angle upon a momentous
central matter, always demanding direct quotation and rendering para-
phrase apologetic. His handsome Collected Poems, opened anywhere, opens
onto greatness, in the continuous concern with the highest use that poetry
can be put to, in the call to an Epicureanism of the noblest sort, a stoic love
of a dissolving world, a persistent reconstruction of the world through the
workings of language and the mind, a delicious and elevating labor that
puts death behind one.
My Father’s Book

ALBERT GOLDBARTH

It was after ten when my father returned from his “territory”—Cicero, Illinois. If I was sixteen he was, what? Forty-six, forty-eight. I could see where the grime of another twelve-hour day had made his face a system of branches and finer branches. And I remember the “debit book” he’d heft to its place in the corner: a great grained leather-cased collection of payment and principle, that seemed to slowly breathe in and out, that had an ancient saurian existence, that had preceded my father, that lived on the sweat of his tight grip, and that said it would outlast him. His name was written in faded ink, on a card set into its spine. But its name gleamed off its cover, in gold: METROPOLITAN LIFE.

He ate. They talked. Bills, love, whatever. I kept the door to my bedroom shut. I was interested in a different life, I was reading. I copied some of it onto the wooden base of my desk lamp. A man and a woman are one. A man and a woman and a blackbird are one. Did I understand it? I was sixteen, it said to me that there was a world of exciting sexual interconnection out there, somewhere, waiting in the future maybe, a world of sultry temptresses and zen. Now I forgive myself for being sixteen, for reading those pages so thinly, for thinking they turned away from those bills and that homely love, when in fact they included it.

What did I want? What did I think I’d become, if I kept on reading the magic words? The house was quiet and the world was calm. . . I turned off the desk lamp and looked out the window. “Good night,” he said through the door, in the voice that’s my voice now. But I didn’t answer. What was in the stars? I burned to know, to grow into the world—but I had no insurance of anything.
Wallace Stevens

BIN RAMKE

THE POEM, AS I HAVE COME to understand its machinery, is engaged in a conversation with other poems. But this interest in poetry some of us share is a study like genetics—an attempt to listen in on a complex conversation that is vital and dangerous and little understood. I imagine the geneticist trying to come to terms with what the little particles of life are saying to each other, and why, and how. In spite of the difficulty and the complexity we encounter in studying it, genetics is among the simplest of sciences to practice, since every living organism does genetics, constantly. Consider the parallel with poetry.

I had a previous opportunity to try to say to the world at large something of what place the poems of Wallace Stevens hold for me. It was the Stevens centennial year, 1979, at the MLA convention in New York. Holly Stevens had invited me to be part of the celebratory panel. As I recall, I was the only member of the panel to keep to his allotted time limit, but otherwise I did not distinguish myself. Being the first to speak, I had no model of decorum: I mumbled into my prepared text, and when once I looked up I noticed, to my horror, Eudora Welty centered in the first row of the audience. I still cringe at the idea of such a literary eminence as she being forced to listen to my sophomoric obsequies. But my one correct act of the day was that I read a poem. Perhaps not a particularly good one, but mine, and what I wanted to do was demonstrate how Stevens’ poetry was always implicated in any poems I could try to write.

This implication began in 1965, the year I took a freshman English class from then-graduate student John McNamara at Louisiana State University. I still recall the look of the texts that I gingerly examined walking back to my dormitory from the bookstore: the Hopkins (which intrigued me since I was still practicing Catholicism), the Yeats (which looked like poetry, I remember thinking), the Hart Crane, the T. S. Eliot, and finally the Samuel French Morse edition of a selection of poems by Wallace Stevens. My experience that term was that, insofar as I thought I “understood” a poem, I accepted and used and then discarded it. But this procedure did not work on the Stevens collection. I wrote my term paper on Yeats because I thought I understood some of his work. But I could not pretend to “understand” the Stevens, and I continued to be intrigued—haunted—by the presence of his poems. When I eventually gave up mathematics for a degree in English, it was because the not-quite-rounded world of Stevens’ poems would not go away.

I rarely think of Stevens when I am actually writing a poem. I would avoid such thoughts, if it became necessary, but given my processes and state of mind during composition, it is not necessary. Yet as I look back on
the process, and the products, it does seem to me that there is not a single poem of mine that doesn’t in some way take issue with or come to terms with Stevens. Part of the reason for this, I think, is that Stevens does not have a “voice.” Not in the sense that has been popular in the poetry classroom for a generation—that demand for a “human presence” that makes the poem itself an excuse, an occasion for companionship. Stevens’ work was not about companionship. It was about the making of connections, the generation of energy—it was about neurons and necessity. It was about whether there was a difference between how things look and what things are and why human beings insist on pretending the difference is clear:

Without her, evening like a budding yew
Would soon be brilliant, as it was, before
The harridan self and ever-maladive fate
Went crying their desolate syllables, before
Their voice and the voice of the tortured wind were one,
Each voice within the other, seeming one,
Crying against a need that pressed like cold,
Deadly and deep.

(OP 77)

Stevens’ appeal is not easy. I do not mean that reading him is difficult, only that liking him is. Or was. He is now, of course, merely another assignment in the text, having achieved the dubious distinction of canonization. But the population of voices made indistinguishable by the poem (as in the passage I quoted above), and the desolation of the mind that generates its own solace, the grandeur of language raised against need (appetite being the ugliest human virtue): these are the elements of my own continuing argument with poetry. His is my model of generation.
The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words:
A Cento

I might be expected to speak of the social, that is to say sociological or political obligations of the poet. He has none.
—Wallace Stevens

ROBERT MEZEY

The soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight.
If only we could yield ourselves to the unreal—
But we cannot yield, we are not free to yield.
Still on the edge of the world in which we live
Is an invincible man, who moves in our midst,
A charioteer traversing vacant space,
Like the empty spirit, smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes,
Or is it perhaps a rider intent on the sun,
Rushing from what is real? It is gorgeous nonsense,
Dear, gorgeous nonsense, the passion of rhetoric.
The enemies of poetry like Freud
Despise the consolation of illusion,
Without which men cannot endure reality,
The cruelty of it. They would have us
Venture into the hostile world, which is,
The way we live and the way we work alike,
A world of ever-enlarging incoherence,
Of violence, the disparagement of reason,
Absent of any authority save force,
The spirit of negation being so active.
We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast,
The drift of incidents, to which we accustom ourselves
As to the weather, the impermanence of the future
And of the past—as for the present,
It is merely an opportunity to repent.
Little of what we believed is true—
Only the prophecies are true:
The movement of people in the intervals of a storm,
A whole generation and a world at war,
And the war only a part of a warlike whole
Beyond our power to tranquilize.
But for the possible poet, the noble rider
Responsive to the most minute demand,
The dead are still living,
Living on the earth or under it,
And what is dead lives with an intensity
Beyond any experience of life—
Black water breaking into reality.
This potent figure cannot be too noble,
The arm of bronze outstretched against all evil.
Don Quixote will make it imperative
For him to choose between the imagination
And brute reality. His choice must be
That they are equal and inseparable.
It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.
But neither is everything favorable to reality.
The use of that bare word has been enough;
It means something to everyone, so to speak.
Reality is things as they are,
The life that is lived in the scene that it composes,
It is a jungle in itself,
A plainness of plain things, a savagery.
It became violent and so remains,
Wherefore the possible poet must resist
Its pressure, and with the violence within
Protect us from the violence without,
Always in emptiness that would be filled.
One loves and goes back to one’s ancient mother
Certainly not as a social obligation
But out of a suasion not to be denied.
Who is it that the poet addresses? Stalin
Might grind his teeth the whole of a Russian winter,
And the poets might be silent in the spring.
Who is it that the poet addresses? A drab?
Or a woman with the hair of a pythoness?
To give life whatever savor it possesses,
By some fortune of the mind give it that life
For which it was searching and which it had not found,
To mate his life with life, to find the real,
To be stripped of every fiction except one,—
This is his task. Nothing more difficult
Than the affirmations of nobility:
We turn away from it, as from a grandeur that was,
As something that was noble in its day,
A lifeless rhetoric now false and ugly,
A cemetery of nobilities.
The space is blank space, the objects have no shadows
And exert a mournful power in this poverty.
We live in a place that is not our own,
Not in the world where we shall come to live.
He denies that he has a task, but it is he
Who must create the world to which we turn
Incessantly and without knowing it,
With a deepening need for words, for the poem
That is part of the res itself and not about it,
All the truth we shall ever experience.
The imagination is nobility.
It cannot be defined, that would fix it,
And to fix it is to put an end to it.
We have been a little insane about the truth.
Poetry is words and words are sounds
Of things that do not exist without the words,
Words that are life’s voluble utterance.
We search the sound of words for a finality,
A perfection, an unalterable vibration
In the ecstatic freedom of the mind,
A life that is fluent in even the wintriest bronze.

A Note on the Cento

It will be noticed immediately that my poem has the same title as Wallace Stevens’ famous essay, and soon afterward that its diction is very like Stevens’ diction and that it is full of quotations from his work. In fact, it is nothing but quotation. The whole poem, down to its epigraph, is composed of phrases and sentences written by Stevens, most of them taken from his essay; I have altered only a little, here and there—a connective, a tense, the punctuation—and whenever it came unbidden into my mind and seemed to fit, I have interpolated a line or part of a line from his poems. The essay is very difficult; Stevens can be as confusing and opaque in prose as he is in some of his verse; I thought that this form might help me to clarify for myself the meaning he seems to be feeling his way toward. (I also hoped to use his own testimony to repulse the tiresome efforts of the politically righteous of our own day to rehabilitate him. His politics were unpleasant and irrelevant.) The cento is an ancient form—the word is Latin for “patchwork”—that is rarely used nowadays and almost always with humorous intent. The only serious modern cento I can think of is to be found in Julian Moynahan’s introduction to The Portable Hardy: he makes a sad little poem composed entirely of first lines from Hardy’s poems. The writers of classical antiquity chopped up their great epic poets to make their centos. I have done the same thing to Stevens, to see what would come of it.
Notes on the Reality of the Self (III)

JORIE GRAHAM

1
Shimmering, shadowy, sailing through air on
   no power of its own,
I watch it—green chiffon—being unraveled off the bolt,
by quick and expert hands so that the slowness
with which it flutters up into the open
air—voices in the next room—untangles it,
her hand helping it up by tossing the bolt
accordion-like back and forth—until it takes
the gesture up into itself, echoing folds as it begins to
fall—her white hand underneath, inside, but showing
   through the unfurling green,

five stem-like mossy fingers
   holding it up to
mother’s eyes—yes? you like?—green veil now coming
down to
still my skin, give it an
ardent silhouette—
down like thirst—how sharp can line become?—
how clean can outline’s cut away from
ground become?—like a whip
   cracked
all the way round—the earth
   must keep away—molting now,
field receding, peeled off sharp—
the cloth down now and in
their hands, doled out in lengths—arms opening,
   shutting—
(collect it in the fingertips)—then scissors out—
one cut, the rip, the green is
free?—(time; then something else the rip lets in)—
(I’ve seen it—I’ve seen it!); then as if shameful
folded up, paper pulled round,
twine, a knot, six yards awaiting in the dark
(my body a blade-edge) (world falling off all round)—
and in the distance: distance, hovering—
Then the mirror, raw philosophy.
The seamstress orbiting round, pins in her lips, try not to breathe. A lick of sunshine on the partly open bureau drawer. The analysis of its insides as the seam of sun falls in. Lemon-scent through the open blinds—
lemon-scent, though what you see is bougainvillea scaling in, high-heeled, where the wall breaks and view tongues in. Stirring of distance. Slice of bluebird then hum and buzz. Signora Anna slicing her chalkstick over the hip—the small of the back—voices in another room—lighting with pins at the breast—maternal—gust of homesickness when the others are called in—all of their faces shirring the mirror now—eyes sticky all over the glass now, the seen ripening with moving mouths,

fingertips—this silver wrapper wrapping the watching eye, the face, shoulders, neck—look!—down to the small of the instep—gossamer eye-cloth—Come, put it on, there, gently, what a blessedness this embroidery electric with being-seen (don’t blink)—this silvery hive of objectivity—(don’t blink)—ripping with the very edge of flesh, with mercy? sincerity? wrinkling with what can’t be killed, high-heeled; not a disguise, no, just not merely phenomenal, black bodice, dropped waist, the viscera of god’s-eye-view (don’t blink) tarnish, rust-spots, but only on the glass itself, other wise no dialogue—

no footprints leading to or from the place—

and do you have a picture of . . .
Notes on the Reality of the Self (V)

First it was the sensation of shadow without the actual shadow. A brushing-over-me by light which caused me to darken, or, no, a swooping volition in the light which caused it to thicken? darken?—not heavy, not material at all—like the foam of my expectation rising up, there, on my shoulders—(at first I thought the cry a bobcat)—no weight, not even quite a darkening, like something being scrawled on me—but quick, in passing, a glancing thought (if that)—not even the weight of something else’s dream making use of me for a fraction of an instant—no instant in it—like the lick of a suddenly possessive light, to clean me but only casually, as if by habit—What could I be mistaken for?—Until it came again—like a thought cast down quick, taking me in, a gray-green figure-eight-like weightless weight and then the screech—rusty—if a vein opening could make a catlike sound—so that I stopped and tried to find it, looking up, blinded by noonlight, thinking maybe what looked like tissue-wrapping—flying off—or was that cloud?—something calm yet plundering in the cry—drought all round us—till they came lower still this next (third) time, frenzied, a deep bare swooping meant for my gleaming retina? my neck?—the chalky lurching screech so mixed-in with the husky wing-hiss slamming down—eagles!—(where is the nest?)—(not knowing which way is away)—and scritch and wingbrush—(feathers cutting like broken straw)—and shadows embroidered-in with muffled meowling, rasp, wingscrape—covering me in my entirety until I’m wearing it at last—and nothing but it—(whatever it is that can’t be taken off)—
Notes on the Reality of the Self (VII)

(Stanislavski)

“In time, when your sense of tempo will be more firmly established, you will replace it by a more delicate mental beat.

(Even Grisha could not understand.)

This was repeated with syncopation.

Next we combined some beats—duples, triplets—these heightened the tremulousness—this in turn created new moods, corresponding emotions—We varied the strength and kind of accent—rich, thick, dry—then staccato or light—the loud, the soft. These produced the most contrasting moods. I lost track.

Syllables, words, speech, actions, movement in action—feelings, right feelings—the clean dry beats of hands and feet—love and jealousy—come into my room—the storm at sea—the storm at sea—once in the mountains—headaches—gnawing mice—

us making mincemeat for the pie—

I lost my baggage. Where is the stationmaster?

Is there plenty of time?

The character being played should not know what lies ahead. He has no notion of what the future has in store—

But how is it possible to forget what is coming? How, when you play the part a thousand times?

(the pause has no concern for time) (it lasts)

Then my attention was drawn to a simple morning coat. It was made of some remarkable material I had never seen before—
a sand-colored, greenish, grayish stuff,  
covered with spots, dust, mixed in with ash.

An almost imperceptible sense of fatefulness stirred in me.  
If one matched it with a hat, gloves—footgear,  
all grayish, greenish, faded, shadowy,  
one would get the sinister, familiar effect.

The wardrobe attendants laid aside the coat for me.

Then there was nothing to do but leave,  
the spotted morning coat held in reserve for me.

But from that moment I existed but I was not I.  
I listened but I did not hear.  
I did not finish anything I undertook.  
The question of who I was consumed me.

I became convinced I should not find the image  
of the person that I was:  
Seconds passed. What rose to the surface in me  
plunged out of sight again. And yet I felt

the moment of my first investiture  
was the moment I began to represent myself—  
the moment I began to live—by degrees—second by second—unrelentingly—Oh mind what you’re doing!—

do you want to be covered or do you want to be seen?—

And the garment—how it becomes you!—starry  
with the eyes of others,  
weeping—”
It was the transparence of the air she
Loved, the way the simple wings of dragonflies
Along the riverbank played out the native

Rainbows of the sun. She was the curious,
The restless one, the one who’d leave them all
Forever roped to lives & chores, the lot of them,

The whole wax museum she despised, each corpse
Locked into his woolen suit and shoes,
The locally famous & the bored. She’d had it

With the village men & their attentions,
Their leers & lassitudes, their lurid salutations—
So she refused them everything except

Her shoulder, cocked & shrugging, as she turned
To walk away. It was only her father she regretted
Leaving, as she stood on the platform

Of the town station, the two of them surrounded
By the brash violet of the heather in full bloom.
She knew she’d miss the fog of his voice

At night, as he sang to her accompaniment
Those arias he loved, of all the failed lovers . . .
Her father held her suitcase absently, our little

World slowing in its whirl, the stationmaster
Handing over her ticket as she told no one,
Bashfully, that she was off to be

The yardage girl at the London Laura Ashley.

***

It was the transcendence of despair she
Loved, the way black set off her violet eyes,
The carmined glyph of her lips forming

An extravagant sneer as the music
Of the nightclub pounded up through the chairs,
Her body taking each pulse full force,
Driving her through the crowd, wave after wave
Of histrionic zombies, phosphorescent
With sweat, the scent of sex on their breaths,

Driving her toward the stairway of the ladies’
Loo, where she sat before the once shattered & now
Reglued mirror of the vanity, waiting for night

& her head to clear; then, before her,
The very emblem of that past she’d overheard,
Recognized, the stark melody yet to come—

Assembling like any symphony of air,
Those odd, metallic notes of some familiar song,
Chimes of moonlight along crystal spheres:

& the image of a young girl playing
For her father every piece she’s ever known,
The frayed pages of music rising like wings

As he begins to sing in his shadowy baritone,
& the girl fades, not lost, reflected
In the opaque translucence of those polished keys . . .

By the piano’s black, shimmering lake of mirrors.

***

It was not the soul but its easy transience
She loved, slowly baring it to him,
First in her letters, then in calls, detailing

The gallery of masks all evil chooses from,
Each carved eyelid vivid in its stare;
At last, he’d come to take her home.

Yet isn’t it a daughter’s last prerogative
To disagree, to chart a new world without
The blunt lips and tedious tethers of a man—

Father, lover, son—or anyone at all?
He listened as good fathers do, still quietly
Believing he’d bring her to her senses,

Recalling simply the old riot
Of heather in its April bloom, its violet
Smear along the hillside, its fragrance drifting
Through the open windows of their sitting room.
Still, she was startled when he said so flatly
Within the year he would be dead, or dying,

& certainly the idea seemed something
He could more easily bear if she were there;
It was a silence & an end, she knew—

As she knew that one night soon she’d play
For him the endless score of his favorite
And expansively bloody song, the unraveling

Climax of an opera where the lines of time
Slowly braiding schemes and characters
Draw all into their final noose of circumstance,

& he’d sing to her that simple story,
Of the terror and pitch of love, of death knowing
Far more than the living should know.

The Idiom of Order

*The idiom of order is celebration . . .*

W. S. Merwin

DAVID LINDLEY

I
Imagine him set down in earth and air
and water, the old shaman on vacation
out fishing with the boys. Camaraderie
and two cases of scotch answer
the questions of philosophy. No doubt
things are what they appear to be—the
poet’s own complexity distorts
the flat sea surface. This also is
obscure—a man is fishing on the sea
listening to ancient voices
like a singer who awaits his song
or Homer in his blind remembering.

II
We’ve lost the primitive. We look out from
a height through glass across the city.
Somewhere down there off the Caribbean,
dark and bloody, we recognize the dream
as dream and neither darkness nor the light
restores the dreamer’s name to power.
Our heroes are defunct, and Homer’s grey-
eyed goddess recruits no oarsmen for our voyage.
We’re on our own and too much
wracked by reason for one numenous
and winged, though like Telemachus we seek
a hero’s fate, sailing from Ithaca.

III
Softly stepping out we see the birds
of morning in their flight and hear the sound
of bells, and in this resonance we feel
the promise of an incarnation, grey-eyed
and virginal. At evening when we turn
our mind toward this accident of being
where he walked we venture on the green
sward and observe the cold points of stars,
thinking of Christ on a green hill and the hero’s
ambiguity. In the end we remain
individual and obscure, surrendering
entirely to an inward vision.

IV
The poet recollects and sings, the air
is winged with words, an old mythology
of joy creates the world within a prayer.
The shaman’s song will shape this mystery,
will dance the circle of the sun and over
in the west will wound the day and day’s
indifference in clouds of Cuban
señoritas. What he sees is not the earth
but its beauty laid out under stars
beyond the poet fishing off the key
luminous and celebratory
the way he had imagined it to be.
I AM JUST OLD ENOUGH to remember when received opinion considered Wallace Stevens a lesser figure, because his poetry unlike that of Eliot and Pound did not contain history.

Things change. One generation of great professors tells its followers what to value, and in what terms, and the acolytes in their different ways pass the word on to their own students, and so to the world at large. Then another generation arises, with new great professors, who obscure the names of the old scholars entirely—though whatever is good in the art or artists which the old ones valued is never obscured. Art survives its admirers as well as its detractors. Maybe in that sense it always contains history.

In the process of the turning of the spiral mill of taste, recent years suggest what seems to me yet another way to value the genius of Wallace Stevens. In addition to everything else about him, I think he is our poet of the love of poetry. He is our poet of poetry as a pleasure.

That pleasure itself, as a feeling, does not change much with changing times, I think. It seems more or less a constant, though one that may adapt to new material or not, as does pleasure in music. And yet there are signs that an old poetry culture is fading—that world in which new books of poetry were reviewed routinely, in little magazines and in daily newspapers, a world in which people may have had a relatively firm grip on such concepts as “posterity,” or literature of the “New World,” or the poet as a rebellious hipster angel, or as a contributor to “the tradition.”

In the emerging new culture the word “poet,” for good or ill, does not always signify an activity in the way that the term “writer” does. “Poet” sometimes indicates a performer, a man or woman whose audience is largely not readers, but actual audiences. And sometimes, the word indicates an academic job description, an actual category of professional employment.

In this context, I think that the work of Stevens gives a particularly immediate, uncomplicated reminder of the human appetite for poetry, of its defining pleasure. His wonderful ear, the music of his poetry, various in each poem and varying over his career, always welcomes us into a shared delight in the ways that the grunts of language become the elements of art. The poet Mark Halliday has recently published a book proposing that the absence of other people from Stevens’ poetry is compensated by a distinctively friendly, collaborative relation to the reader. If the formal and musical qualities of the lyric poem comprise its shared, social element, Stevens’ elegance of sound is also a neighborly climate. His suavity
reaches back to something primal, something of the chant, the ring of celebrants, supple and turbulent.

But there is also the idea of Stevens himself as a person. His role as the poet of the love of poetry derives, as well, from the purity of his relation to his art, as we imagine it—the composing on the walk in to the office, the longhand lines to be typed up by the secretary, even the years of not writing. The poems of William Carlos Williams (though we don’t often think of them this way) are those of a doctor, often explicitly; and the poems of Marianne Moore certainly are those of a librarian. The poems of Stevens are more purely the poems of one who loves poetry, who perhaps escapes into poetry from law or insurance, but with no occupation indicated in the writing. Though he liked his job, the poems are of another place, another kind of venture, altogether.

He makes things sound good. He describes the ordinary so that it seems like the stuff of fable or fairy tale, or reminds us of the sounds of those genres embroidered through the ordinary: the thin men of Haddam, a town in Connecticut, and a few lines later the sentence, “He rode over Connecticut / In a glass coach”—glass coach, words that might describe the observation car a business person sat in while going by railroad from New Haven to New York.

“Hedonist’s Progress,” Yvor Winters entitled an essay on Stevens. The essay, astute and outrageous, is extremely critical of Stevens and his hedonism—but Winters had already written of Stevens identifying him as a great poet before Stevens had even published a book of poems. At that time, Winters himself was in his twenties. Reading “Hedonist’s Progress”—in which an older Winters continues to salute Stevens as one of the greatest of poets, while condemning his hedonism as a spiritual deadness—one gets a fresh, sharp sense of the moral importance of pleasure, and of poetry, and of the ancient link between them.

I disagree with Winters about late Stevens, but just the same he is onto something essential. And the spiritual wound he condemns may be an ingredient in the drama of seeking that makes Stevens a compelling figure. Hedonist or epicure or sybarite or amateur, he dawdles exquisitely, in our collective literary imagination, over the aromas of the different kinds of specialty dried fruit he ordered by mail, the complexly lascivious molecules of the varieties of pear and plum. This careful, slightly ridiculous delectation pleases us like some brilliantly demure clown’s gesture—somewhere between Chaplin and Oliver Hardy—eloquent of underlying need. The mixture of aplomb and pathos, the conservative and the dandy, joy and restraint, is dramatically appealing, as is the idea of the exotic hidden in the banal. In a mischievous image of Robert Hass’s, Stevens is imagined on the legendary walk to work “smelling of after-shave.”

I think that Stevens is the poet who makes us want to read, and makes us want to write; and when one considers the role of poetry in his clean-
shaven, urban and suburban, sad and unremarkable life, the art appears not like a shabby curate or a hapless ward, but like a thrilling lover.

Like Stevens, Frost and Williams each went through much of a writing life with less recognition than a thousand squirts and frauds have had. But Frost’s vocation, like his eventual public triumph, has a quality of hounded grimness; and Williams’ long effort one of exasperated urgency, if we compare those vocations, or our impressions of them, with the contrasting perception of Stevens as simultaneously maestro and amateur. His poems seem to ravish their own maker with some secret, abiding pleasure. They seem like the comfort and diversion of his loneliness, prior to whatever they become for us readers. And far from making me feel excluded, that sharp sense of pleasure for the maker establishes something like a welcoming halo around the lines.

This is partly a sensory matter. The variety and musicality of Stevens’ rhythms are so absorbing, so lush, that they bring me as close as I can imagine to the preposterous emotion of the pastoral: as if Stevens were the true inheritor of the zany old idea of the shepherd singer, an innocent master constructing his tapestry stanzas while strolling the fields.

No free verse in English is more firmly rhythmical:

That scrawny cry—it was
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,
Still far away. It was like
A new knowledge of reality.

(\textit{CP} 534)

And no iambic pentameter is more flexible, less metronomic—I mean not only the lush music of

Sister and mother and diviner love,
And of the sisterhood of the living dead
Most near, most clear, and of the clearest bloom . . .

(\textit{CP} 87)

but also the understated solo clarinet of:

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

Was like the conscious being of the book.
The house was quiet and the world was calm.

(\textit{CP} 358)
What are all three of these passages (different as they are) but heraldry, prayer, and celebration of the ineffable gift of the art of poetry, the sounds of certain words in a certain order, pronounced by a human voice?

Such lines are charms or spells, ritualized actions to bring about certain longed-for results. Wallace Stevens is the poet in our language whose art has in its purest form the gift of making us crave that bodily action of poetry itself. His large, convinced vision of its necessity, a vision in part anthropological and in part religious, contains something like the history of our species itself, our cries of indefinite craving.
Revery Is a Solitude in Which

STANLEY PLUMLY

THE QUALITY THAT SENDS me back to Stevens is the quality that first struck me in his work—and that deepens with the late poems. That quality is his tone. Not his tones, which are alternately playful, ruminative, oracular, speculative, sardonic, direct, colorful, blank, allegorical, emblematic, plain, majestic... But a single-minded, presiding posture—the posture of a large man walking to work on a snowy day lost in thought or sitting at his desk high in his office contemplating the celestial ennui of apartments—that is consistent from "The Snow Man" to "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." It's a quality of mind and feeling that sets him apart from his contemporaries, in a tone of voice pervasive in its role as the arbiter of experience, in a world that is itself a meditation.

Stevens' tone has to do, I suppose, with the degree of distance and artifice possible in poetry; the degree to which the fiction of the form becomes essential to the event; the degree to which the feelings of the poet and the texture of experience should be sublimated or elevated. So much of the discussion of Stevens has concerned questions of the reality of the imagination and the concretion of ideas—questions he himself debates as a matter of course—that the sense that anywhere in his writing there would occur the autobiography of an emotion seems off the point. He has been seen as the metaphysician who operates as an outsider to his experience; the connoisseur of chaos with ideas of order; the snow man, the man on the dump, the man made of words. Whoever their relative accuracy or self-acknowledgment, such versions speak at best obliquely or figuratively to the solitude and isolation, to the memory of feeling in his work.

For me what comes over in Stevens' poems is the distance they seem to have traveled before arriving at the page—it's a ruminative, meditative distance to be sure, a distance that creates, sometimes, an almost generic understanding of the poet in his poems, in which the individual is transcended in order that the object be more totally transformed. There's also the distance of a mythic reading of the unconscious, in which "Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights" pass back and forth through the channel of time in order to arrive at and depart from the first idea, the original feeling. It's as if Stevens has to disembowel himself in order to embody the objective world, which means that he must separate from the community of experience even as he debates doing it. It's as if Stevens were an ontological condition diagnosed by his poems.

Again and again, therefore, the poet allows himself to be mastered by the object, by the distance of the object, which only the pensive man, the man who sees that eagle float for which the intricate Alps are a single nest,
can see. It may be the distance between the idea of the thing and the thing itself. It may be the distance of silence, between the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. It may be the distance between the blackbird whistling and just after. It may be the long, long distance of knowing that within the stillness of the twenty snowy mountains at least the eye of the blackbird is moving. There’s a certain melancholy of tone that comes from reconciling to the fact that the imagination isolates even as it connects: that the greatest poverty is not to live in a physical world and to feel that one’s desire is too difficult to tell from despair.

In many ways Stevens’ tone is his secret subject, the distance between himself and the world, the difference between self and object, subject and object. A man and a woman and a blackbird are one, almost. In asserting the question and/or resolution of distances, Stevens’ wonderful rhetoric—his flawed words and stubborn sounds—reinforces the separations, the impulse to soliloquy inherent in his strongest lyric poetry. I’m moved by the fact that underwriting both the elegance and the purity of his rhetoric is a deeply passionate, repressed man whose struggle reaches us only ultimately. That distance, between the cry of the occasion and actual utterance, accounts for the intimate sublime of Stevens’ interiority, the powerful meditative and achieved state of his poems. His poems arrive as if they had written themselves and were remembering, with a certain sadness, the source of their making. Their particular longing is not necessarily to change anything or wish anything away or even to restore; their longing is for the alienating truth, the truth, for instance, that we live in a place that is not our own and, much more, not ourselves. It’s an ancient truth, so old as to appear mythic; so old that only the imagination can see it, and see the idea of it. The river is moving, says the poet, the blackbird must be flying. The two are not only connected in a plot and order, they are separated, utterly, from the human, or at least from human illusions, such as the assertion that God and the imagination are one. Life is bitter aspic, the poet says again, we are not at the center of the diamond.

The reality principle in Stevens is often masked by his sophistication, which in no way should detract from the paganism of his imagination. His attachment to objects is as magical as it is subjective, as primary as it is pristine. His ring of chanting men is devoted to the sun not as a god but as a god might be, naked among them. A vegetation god, perhaps, or a Quetzalcoatl. The trouble is, though, that for human beings the senses’ register of the real is impossible without an equal and opposite (metaphoric) response from the imagination. To say, as Stevens often does, that “sense exceeds all metaphor” is to engage in both rhetoric and metaphor. I think that sometimes Stevens sees himself as much burdened by the imagination as blessed, and that his attraction to the object-rich environment is his way of negotiating his ambivalence. And his ambivalence, his marvelous study and theater of ambiguity, his teasing of the plain sense
of things, all his extraordinary references: his whole esthétique is meant as a means to acquire emotional distance, a distance that is itself an ambivalence.

To need to speak at all, let alone to find the best words in their best order, is a kind of loneliness. The tone of the act of the mind in utterance, the act of the poem, the act of the voice calling from its distance—this tone, this distance is the correlative of the objective consciousness and the object-world. It demands not only solitude but separation. I believe Stevens honors this tone of voice more powerfully than any poets since Wordsworth and Keats, who are his ancestors. But Stevens further complicates his search when he ups the ante: we seek the poem of pure reality. Whatever its relative purity and relative reality such a poem can exist only as an urn reality, cold pastoral, forever at the lips. A House-of-Poetry poem that posits then rejects perfectibility. For Stevens poetry is also a domestic sort of house, with a private garden in the back where he can walk lost in thought. The house has a wife, a private muse, a beautiful muse whose profile was once an emblem on a coin. When the poet has visitors they sit in the garden. The house is separate and not to be entered. The house is large and white. Sometimes, looking from the garden, the woman can be seen at a window.
‘Things That Do Not Exist Without Words’

Remember how the crickets came
Out of their mother grass, like little kin,
In the pale nights, when your first imagery
Found inklings of your bond to all that
dust.

—“Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”

KATHLEEN FRASER

WHAT LOST LANGUAGE first awakened her and soothed her
to sleep? As early as she could remember, Harry Lauder’s brisk
Scottish tenor floated up the stairs on dark, snowy mornings . . .
later it was an Italian coloratura when the weather turned warm. Always
at 7:30 a.m., the radio’s tense male voice, like the bark of a dog, quoted
farm prices from Chicago and at 8 a rousing march boomed against her
er.

After breakfast, the dishes cleared, her father would read: “Though I
speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am
become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.” She and her brother
repeated the language of King James into memory. At lunch, she begged
for nonsense: “Jabberwocky,” songs from Through the Looking-Glass,
Edward Lear limericks—little fables packed with sound and silliness: “There
was an old man of St. Bees / Who thought he was stung by a wasp,” etc.
Gaiety spread across her father’s face, no matter how many times he
repeated it. Unrelieved responsibilities disappeared for a little—bills to be
paid, Sunday’s sermon yet to write. “Reason’s click-clack” is replaced by
the pure joy of “accurate song.”

(These memories do not exist without words.)

Surrounded by utterance, both common and uncommon, song entered
the child’s ear, defined her—an ever-present page lightly penciled with
the graph of her own uneven movement into personhood.

Then it was the first day of school. And when the seventh day arrived,
all doors to playfulness slammed shut. In seventh grade, Miss Elsie Foote
began to teach Poetry Lessons. What had been joyful became flattened and
pages of the slow, sleepy prelude to Longfellow’s “Evangeline” would be
committed to memory and recited by each student in front of the class.
Poetry’s instruction soon undermined that early appetite for words; there
was, instead of pleasure, the considerable question of getting it “right.”
She was kept after school, the last in the class to commit it to memory. She who had by now stopped listening was, in any case, “a most inappropriate [girl] in a most unpropitious place.”

Stevens believed that poets were born. What does it mean, to be “born” a poet, to be borne into poetic language as if the mind were waiting like a large empty page to be imprinted with the intaglio markings of a world crowding forward to make its impress? Is it a genetic propensity, a particular magnetic pull towards the rhythms and clinks of assonance and dissonance? Is it the fortune of close exposure to syllable’s infinite capacity for musical charge? Is the ground prepared in discretionary ways so that a particular child, opening into adolescent consciousness, hears the self multiplying, and needs to capture and free it? Surely, exposure to the “brillig, slithy toves” of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky,” or Hopkins’ “rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim” (“Pied Beauty”), Dickinson’s “and Doges—surrender— / Soundless as dots—on a Disc of Snow”— or Wallace Stevens’ “Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair” are causes for ecstatic response . . . if the mind’s ear has been tuned.

We are summoned into the physiology of listening by our mother’s heartbeat and the rude squall of our own arrival. If we survive, that listening develops into a sweeter capacity and the maternal “rou-cou-cou” and “Ti-tum-tum-tum” is soon nestling close to our ear, luring us into the beginnings of relation.

Recalling my own early listening during pre-school years, I seek some clue or “reconstruction” of who it was that found herself borne up into the untranslatable elation of a Wallace Stevens poem. Who was she, this listener at some improvised after-class party in the early sixties, suddenly dropped into unexplored chambers of feeling by a fugitive music that entered and made its claim? The once radiant page of the mind, for years “normalized” into standard-size foolscap, was again destabilized, its tactile surface brought alive, as if with the marks and artful fabrication of handmade paper.

Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
Why, when the singing ended and we turned
Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
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.

(CP 130)
In someone’s front room across from the Eighth St. Bookstore in Greenwich Village, two young men have been reciting together the final passages of “The Idea of Order at Key West” . . . their eyes are shy, shining, not quite looking at each other. They want to share this moment, yet to keep communion—each with his private place in which the poem’s words continue to resonate. They have read beyond fashion or obligation. They have traveled outside of habit and into the currents of their own responsiveness.

Ecstasy etymologically derives from the Greek ekstasis, from ex-, “out,” plus histanai, “to place.” Thus, it means something like “placed out.” Ecstasy is when you are no longer within your own frame: some sort of going outside takes place. (Jane Gallop, Thinking Through the Body 152)

She takes her monthly lunch allowance and buys the Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, and spends the noon hour in her office cubicle transfixed:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

(CP 76)

Jar and hill, never consciously present, are now suggested. Static of world subsides. The listener, until this moment amnesiac, grows attentive in the wilderness of her partial formation. But there is a double thrill. While his words shed light, they also resonate with inarticulate mystery. She becomes fascinated by how this happens, how a particular diction is constructed to surprise the mind’s dumb regularity.

She reads:

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw
Or heard or felt came not but from myself;
And there I found myself more truly and more strange.

(CP 65)

She understands, if primitively, that those half-formed words ghosting through her are her—“[come] not but from [her]self”—and that this unfinished self, this “strangeness,” might begin to commit itself to paper.

She reads:

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

(CP 75)

The walls of her cubicle give way, her father’s voice chants pure nonsense.
She reads on:

imperative haw
Of hum, inquisatorial botanist,
And general lexicographer of mute
And maidenly greenhorns . . .

(CP 28)

Each poem has moved her beyond the familiar “frame” of a day’s mechanical response. Bland unthinking becomes, for these moments, muscular. Thought is musically defined. She’s a field charged with sound.

The page begins revising its surface.

I have been talking about the long summons into the vocation of poetry, the mysterious yet concrete process of self-recognition that was—and continues to be—crystallized for me in the work of Stevens. He brings to poetry’s vocation the essential gift: the unequaled pleasure of reinventing one’s idiom—that secret encoding of self’s journey that supersedes a narcissistic, simple-minded lexicon of the “confessional” or a quickly depleted vocabulary of commonality. Instead, he clarifies the poet’s role as antenna and inventor—namer of subtle swift sightings that remain absent until caught in words.

Rilke speaks of this calling in his ninth Duino elegy:

Perhaps we are here in order to say: house, bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window—at most: column, tower . . .
But to say them, you must understand, oh to say them more intensely than the Things themselves ever dreamed of existing . . . Here is the time for the sayable, here is its homeland.
Speak and bear witness. More than ever the Things that we might experience are vanishing, for what crowds them out and replaces them is an imageless act. (trans. Stephen Mitchell)

In a contemporary passage—one that Stevens would have liked, I think—the Syrian poet Adonis has proposed this distinction regarding naming and poetic language. He writes:

In Arabic, things have a multiplicity of names. Let’s take the names of elements belonging to the material sphere, such as “earth,” “dust” or “rain.” To each of these elements corresponds forty names. And what belongs to the conceptual sphere, such as “exploration,” “knowledge” or “ignorance” can in turn often be designated by at least thirty names . . . The name does not designate the wholeness of the thing, but only one of its aspects;
the thing, therefore is an ensemble of situations and aspects, an ensemble of words.

The word is essentially a token and the poet writes with token-words. As a consequence, for the Arab sensibility, language is not language by virtue of its referent. But on the other hand, the thing is not a thing but by grace of the word that names it. It’s not that language “descends” toward things, but that things “ascend” or aspire towards language, which poetizes them. As if a thing might not exist except through locutions, or as if it might acquire presence only as it is interwoven with language or transformed into language. (trans. A. K. Berman)

It is this aspiration to locution that Stevens articulates, this lyric pressure of the moment’s assembled meanings that makes up his rendering of sensibility in flux. It is the construction of what he discovers and how he knows, through attentive observation, multiplied by the sound and velocity of what he imagines. His mind, “in the act of finding / What will suffice,” discovers a perpetual motion on the page and, for these reasons, is never caught in the fixed date of attitude or event.

With this description before one, it is particularly troubling—from a working poet’s perspective, as well as a reader’s—to note the narrow reception of Harmonium in 1923, remembering the enormous excitement upon first reading these poems in 1961, almost forty years after its publication. I believed, then, that I understood Stevens utterly, though I couldn’t have necessarily articulated the why and how of my ecstatic liftoff. For example, how did I read “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” at that time? It represented, I thought, early Cubist perspective—seeing and hearing from the invented vantage of thirteen discrete planes, instead of going along with the singleness of a common, unitary perception, a “first idea.” It was about refreshing one’s capacity to imagine the world through the artist’s ability—“to subvert the tyranny of old orders”—the blackbird, buried in the false bottom of the top hat, pulled forth . . . and pulled forth again.

Now I read that poem, with no less magic, but I hear its darker message as well. I see it not only as a tour de force of imagining, but also as a series of warnings signaling the inevitability of error, the flaw that waits patiently to undo one’s “idea of order,” the continuous hover of what we would have preferred to avoid. While Stevens intended each stanza as a kind of Mallarméan state of the soul, I think he’d find validity in both these other readings.

Reviewing early criticism of Harmonium, I believe that his judges were too quickly seduced by what Stevens liked to call his gaudy surface and not sufficiently cognizant of the darker intentions, the structural underpinnings so evident to us. Harriet Monroe once rejected new poems of his,
calling them “recondite, erudite, provocatively obscure, with a kind of modern, gargoyle grin in them.” A perfect list, apparently, of exactly what attracted me to them in 1961. Gorham Munson put a pejorative spin on Stevens’ irrepressible resuscitation of English by calling him “the first dandy of American letters.”

John Gould Fletcher warned: “I make bold to say that Mr. Stevens is the most accomplished and not one of the least interesting of modern American poets. But for the future, he must face a clear choice of evils: he must either expand his range to take in more of human experience, or give up writing altogether. Harmonium is a sublimation which does not permit of sequel.” The authoritarian ring of “he must either/or” and “which does not permit” sounds a little like Miss Elsie Foote, in seventh grade. We know, however, that Stevens worried about these questions and, for the most part, gave up publishing for nearly ten years after this public scolding. The ability to survive such drubbing should not go unremarked, nor the “zebra leaves” or the “gramaphoons” that followed, both because and in spite of it.

I like to think of Wallace Stevens walking through the vast park that separated his house from The Hartford Insurance Company. It seems such an austere and unexotic wilderness, compared to the “green freedom of a cockato” or the “sultriest fulgurations flickering” before the imagined eyes of an imagined “he” sitting in an imagined “Naples,” writing home about it. The concept of the “local” was so important to him; he was almost envious of what he saw as certain friends’ authentic otherness, rooted in its tropical specificity and slightly foreign vernacular. And yet, though he took small trips, especially to the South, he almost never chose to travel beyond the United States. He loved the company of his own mind most. Living there, he could—in a sense—have it all, entertaining every possibility of action and diction with the fullest liberty. Walking the two miles of Elizabeth Park, eyes turned inward, he cultivated the flora and fauna of language and produced uncommon graftings.

As if my own genetic codes had been researched with sudden cunning by the great botanist of language—and dozens of latent capacities newly identified—I was stunned by my most recent encounter with Stevens. Yet again I was unloosed from ordinary habits of reading, transported into the ecstatic, remembered and renamed by his music as I read—verified and marked by the “henna hackles,” the “ric-a-nic,” the “clearing opalescence” of his language. I found that all the old favorites remain passionately alive in my mind, each again the first love whose startling mystery evokes new self-knowledge and intense responsiveness. My pulse quickens, recognizing things that do not, cannot have existed without his words to locate them.
THIS IS NOT, AT LEAST INITIALLY, about Wallace Stevens’ Florida, nor perhaps even about Wallace Stevens. It’s certainly not about his poetry. Initially.

I’m writing this in a second-floor time-share in one of the national vacation capitals of tacky: Fort Myers Beach. There are no hotels here called Casa Marina or Star of the Sea. There are, strictly speaking, no hotels here. There are dozens of motels named Gulf Echo and Buccaneer Resort Inn and Azure Tides. And maybe two dozen multi-storied condos called Island Winds and Kahlua Beach Club and The Sand Caper. And there’s the Lani Kai, a multi-storied structure the color of day-old guacamole, neither hotel nor motel, that serves as weekend pleasure palace to the firm-bodied young. And there’s Sam’s Place/Day Wk Mo.

There’s nothing here that could be called elegance. Wallace Stevens would never have deigned to stay in any such lodgings. Nor would he have written five lines about anything you could see along Estero Boulevard, the only thoroughfare through Fort Myers Beach, where the license plates of cars are as likely to say Michigan, or Iowa, or New Jersey, or Massachusetts as they are to say Florida.

This is sno-bird city. The tone along Estero is definitely downscale. Middle to lower-middle class to lost and drifting. Dozens of shops specializing in swimwear and t-shirts and straw hats. Beachwear. Shops where the Lani Kai girls buy their perfect bikinis, and ample ladies from Ohio or the Bronx buy utterly tasteless wallpaper-figured jackets in silver or gold lamé to wear on the breezy deck at sundown over at Anthony’s-on-the-Gulf. Their men buy straws with loud, tropical hatbands; and dark tanning lotions; and polo shirts that say “Fort Myers Yacht Club” across a wreath of embroidered laurel.

So there are complacencies here, if not peignoirs. Certainly nobody’s dreaming across any seas toward “silent Palestine.” And any idea of order here is probably radically unrelated to Stevens’ in the Key West of the 1930s.

That’s the point.

That Wallace Stevens was a sno-bird. Albeit a rich one for whom Florida was, as he wrote a friend once, “very much a cloud of Cuban Señoritas, coconut palms, and waiters carrying ice-water.” A travel poster Florida where oranges never freeze, and people never tire of playing their roles as “The Cuban, . . . / The Mexican women, / The negro undertaker . . . , “the roller of big cigars.” Never emerge, in his poems, from Stevens’
abstractions of them, into any richness of reality, into any kind of fully charged empathy or dignity.

Even the woman in the peignoir in “Sunday Morning,” a poem in which there is everything else to admire, is no more than a foil to the speaker. And although Ramon Fernandez, in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” is allowed the dignity of a name, he, too, remains in the poem a faceless exotic to whom Stevens can address his grand closing peroration. One is tempted to say it could just as well be delivered to an orchid.

“[S]entimentality is a failure of feeling,” Stevens writes in “Imagination as Value.” “The imagination is the only genius . . . its achievement lies in abstraction.”

Here, I think Stevens has his finger firmly on his own pulse. And also later, in “Adagia,” when he says, “Life [read poetry?] is an affair of people not places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble.”

In short, Stevens, like any acutely conscious writer, was well aware of the weaknesses of his own work. A work rooted in a comfortable familiarity with places and objects, and thinned by an uneasy distance from people. While he valued and praised abstraction as the mighty achievement of imagination it is, it sometimes, ironically, undercuts the human aspect of his work, leaving it stranded in its magnificent music.

Florida is sharply chilly this morning. Business is slow. And there are a lot more men panhandling and visibly drifting along Estero Boulevard than there were a year ago. The mood here and elsewhere is probably not unlike the mood in the Keys in the 1930s. But this is not Wallace Stevens’ Florida. And neither are the Keys. His is a Florida made entirely of words, a Florida of tropical vocabulary and cadence and warm breezes, touching only occasionally, and from a great distance, the tawdry and sumptuous edges of the real.

**Floridiana**

Like a drunk off curbstone or a cow off a flat rock, all day rain pisses down; wind turning the Gulf yellow-gray; the islands to the north, disappearing. In the parking lot at Winn Dixie, one man’s kicking the shit out of another—fists and feet, brother. The lost, the venereal; living, if you can call it that, out of a rust-
bucket van under sabal palms; come to the end of something Floridian. Why lie about it? The day is vicious or indifferent. The voices of the lawyer-poets and tennis-poets and landlord-poets are so much bleached and broken shell here; so many red and pink stars of hibiscus in green heavens of hedge. All night I dream dream after dream of this; until the rain stops and pale morning comes and I waken to a boy’s voice on my phone; a former student looking for work in frigid Minneapolis. And I’m listening—the door to the room open—and I’m watching two white terns, close to shore, striking—first, one; then, the other—striking again and again, cold sparks on the water. I can taste the sharp salt, and hear the boy’s voice talking on and on and on.
READING POETRY HAS INVENTED my self, generally educated
me, and put me in touch with the consciousness of the race and
the local consciousness of particular times, especially the present.
Some poetry, read and imprinted, moves me when I am writing poetry. This
special reading turns out to have been for use—a syntax and form retained,
built into me. It was a practical reading, necessary (all paintings are about
other paintings, Rodin’s sculptures are about sculpture besides being about
the birth act, death, and sex). The continuum of the brief, obsessive, and
living human cry called poetry depends upon the process of use. I don’t
mean mimesis, I mean use. The complete act of this kind of reading is not
confined to one poet at a time but is comparative. A mixture occurs from
memory or from numerous fingerprinted languages absorbed and then
activated at the time of composition. Correspondences (mixtures) keep
falling out of trees on me like the ripe apples in a hurricane. The beginning
of “Mrs. Alfred Uruguay” is very much like Frank O’Hara:

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.” She climbed until
The moonlight in her lap, mewing her velvet,
And her dress were one and she said, “I have said no
To everything, in order to get at myself.
I have wiped away moonlight like mud. Your innocent ear
And I, if I rode naked, are what remain . . .”

(CP 248-49)

and is similar to O’Hara in such a way, and in such a way is different, that
the passage is of immense use to one who “hears” O’Hara (among some
others) as he writes.

It works both ways with these two poets (again, “works” means I have
read the following text in the presence of my own possible poem):

The blueness of the hour
when the spine stretches itself
into a groan, then the golden cheek
on the dirty pillow, wrinkled by linen.
Odor of lanolin, the flower
pressed between thundering doubts of self,
cleaving fresh air through the week
and loading hearts to the millennium.
Go, sweet breath! come, sweet rain,
bewildering as a tortoise
embracing the Indian ocean,
predictable as a porpoise
diving upon his mate in cool
water which is not a pool.

I intended that you might think this was Stevens. Many in the century
hear Stevens as they work (or as they read); perhaps he is the one everyone
hears a little if not a lot. The above passage is O’Hara, but because of the
exchange between it and Stevens, something previously nonexistent be-
comes available to the writer writing and this something is possibility, new
noise, multiplicative possibility, impressed and available for manifestation
as art.

These two passages are not unique for the purpose of this exercise. If
you would do it, you could go through the Collected Poems of the two poets
and make a book of such correspondences.

Most of what I say above and below refers to the syntax and form of
the poets mentioned, the fingerprinted language as I hear it when I write,
as its whole case.

Then there is the interchangeability of Stevens and Donne. Of great interest is
the incompatibility of the texts of Stevens and Ginsberg. The differences in the two “styles” could be the source of many
a poem, in the way what is between the lines of a newspaper story could
be.

A little further:

When the world takes over for us
and the storm in the trees
replaces our brittle consciences
(like ships, female to all seas)
when the few last yellow leaves
stand out like flags on tossed ships
at anchor—our minds are rested

Yesterday we sweated and dreamed
or sweated in our dreams walking
at a loss through the bulk of figures
that appeared solid, men or women,
but as we approached down the paved
corridor melted—Was it I?—like
smoke from bonfires blowing away

Today the storm, inescapable, has
taken the scene and we return
our hearts to it, however made, made . . .
Stevens? Looks like. Sounds like. It’s Williams. What good did it do you for the past forty years to delineate and emphasize their differences and set them facing each other like armies on a plain?

Stevens is a poet of emotion (a phenomenological, irrational matter) expressed in lyric form, like O’Hara or Williams, though what makes Stevens essential (and so effective in luring other poets to write poems) is the unique way his poetry is a place where emotion and thought meet. “Meet” is not good enough. Do fish in the ocean meet the ocean? Does the ocean meet with the fish?

I think there is a great hybridic poetry to be written, fish in the wide live soul, and to teach ourselves to write it Stevens is necessary, but only as inseparable from other poets.

Well, sometimes I am convinced they are all indistinguishable from each other, but that is a mad thought, or perhaps only a metaphoric thought. It helps me write poems. Try what I have suggested, don’t try its opposite. Of course when I write I do other things too.
In Respect of Wallace Stevens

ROBERT CREELEY

I RECALL BEING VERY INTENT upon Stevens in college days. The comment of Andrew Wanning to our class then, that all he could find to say about the later poems of Wallace Stevens was that they were very obscure, sticks in mind as an insistent evidence of that situation’s parochialism despite F. O. Matthiessen’s engaging respect for the same poet. (He reported a conversation with Stevens during the latter’s visit for a reading, being abruptly halted by Stevens saying, “What would the boys back at the office think if they could see me now”—which continues to be a good question.) It was Stevens who came through with a poem for our Cummings number of the Harvard Wake (No. 5, Spring 1946): “Unsnack your snood, madanna . . .” (“The Mind Hesitant” was one of Williams’ generous contributions to the same issue.)

Stevens, in Williams’ phrase, thought with his poem. That was then very interesting. This poet made an active poetry of literal thought, wryly, wittily, often with a seeming loneliness of poignant clarity. Wanning played us a record of Stevens reading in lieu of his own discussion of that “later” work. Stevens’ voice was very moving to me. I loved his pacing in the reading of “The Idea of Order at Key West” and for years after used it as my own way of substantializing the voice of those poems. A friend in college, Ann Hirshon, had a friend in turn who was a secretary in Stevens’ insurance company. She used to drive him to work. He would muse on how it was possible that she, at her rank, could afford a car when he, a vice president, by calculations of his own at least, could not. His daughter once told me that when they went as a family to Damariscotta, Maine, to visit with Stevens’ friend who had just opened the Holly Motel there, she was put to playing in the parking lot and no one thought to take her to see the ocean. Now, as she said, she lives on its edge.

So, whatever, he was always interesting, provoking even. One would love to know more, grimly, of the fight with Hemingway. His loyalty to Williams is curiously tempered as when he doesn’t show up at Williams’ reading at a local college, because it’s too close to where he lives.

“Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” was a lovely invocation of that vulnerable time. He was and is a great poet. His liking for Paul Valéry was a great pleasure to me. Just so the fact he never went to France because it might disappoint his imagination of it. He saw so clearly, with whatever necessary distortion, that what we see is ourselves. Susanna’s elders, as she herself, were then for me such an erotic quandary. There he could not help me.

Thinking back, Cid Corman certainly much loved him. It was he who published Sam French Morse’s long critical piece in an issue of Origin. Sam
I’d see in Gordon Cairnie’s Grolier bookshop on Plympton Street in Cambridge. It was Sam who put me in touch with William Bronk, possibly the most profoundly affected—his work builds upon and changes that of Stevens most obviously, in cadence and preoccupation. I wonder if they ever met one another. John Ashbery I think of equally from that time, but there the transformation of influence (if that’s the word) is more various. I had to give up my own use of his manner after a few early poems (which I do continue to like, incidentally, i.e., “The Lion and the Dog”).

I remember the note he wrote us with his contribution to the *Harvard Wake*, very brief, small somewhat thickly inked script, not crabbed but intense. Ah well! All such things were very valuable and continue to be. Years later, visiting Harvard, I was put up in the office, now museum of sorts, of my old professor, F. O. Matthiessen, and on the wall was a framed letter from Stevens in answer to one of Matthiessen’s, which must have offered some critical interpretation of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.” Stevens demurs, says it’s simply that ice cream seemed to be a good thing to be the emperor of, given choices. His was a consistently useful measure.

**Thinking of Wallace Stevens**

After so many years the familiar
seems even more strange, the hands

one was born with even more remote,
the feet worn to discordant abilities, face fainter.

I love, loved you, Esmeralda, darling Bill.
I liked the ambience of others, the clotted crowds.

Inside it was empty, at best a fountain in winter,
a sense of wasted, drab park, a battered nonentity.

Can I say the whole was my desire?
May I again reiterate my single purpose?

No one can know me better than myself,
whose almost ancient proximity grew soon tedious.

The joy was always to know it was the joy,
to make all acquiesce to one’s preeminent premise.

The candle flickers in the quick, shifting wind.
It reads the weather wisely in the opened window.

So it is the dullness of mind one cannot live without,
this place returned to, this place that was never left.
Money

“I am I because my little dog knows me.”
—Gertrude Stein

BOB PERELMAN

WALLACE STEVENS SAYS MONEY is a kind of poetry. So I offer to trade him Tennessee, States, and Water Works for Boardwalk and Park Place and the four Railroads. He thinks he’ll pass. Do it I say and I’ll quote you. Do says he. Mesdames, one might believe that Shelley lies less in the stars than in their earthly wake, since the radiant disclosures that you make are of an eternal vista, manqué and gold and brown, an Italy of the mind, a place of fear before the disorder of the strange, a time in which the poet’s politics will rule in a poet’s world. Yet that will be a world impossible for poets, who complain and prophesy, in their complaints, and are never of the world in which they live. Yes he says, gorgeous, I’m throwing in Pacific, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. Go on. I can’t I say. But do he says. Fair use I say. But all use is fair to one such as I says he, con-tin-u-e. No I say, 11 lines, any more and I’ll have to write to Vintage, which I really don’t want to do. But that’s nothing he says, 11 lines out of 187. He says I’ll give you Marvin Gardens, Ventnor, Atlantic.

That was the present, the poetic present tense: a nonfinancial play space, overheard.

Money has tenses: it has absolute meaning in the present; no past; and its future meaning (interest rates) reflects the degree to which the future is expected to resemble the present.

Writing has tenses: the past tense makes the most money (novels, reporting); the future is for prophecy (crop forecasts, pennant predictions); the present continually has to borrow credit. I am I because I say so and my little audience knows me.

Wow, says Basket. Wow, wow, wow!

How much money does it cost to know that Basket was a series of dogs owned by Gertrude Stein? Nothing, now.

I give I will give Basket the following bone (all past tense):

There was once a man, a very poor poet, who used to write poems that no one read. One evening, after working all day on an especially poor poem, he fell asleep in despair at the sterility of his imagination and the bleakness of his chances of making it as a writer. He had just typed the lines

The sky was mauve and as far away
as a ten dollar bill.
He awoke with a start. The dim light from a small full moon was shining down at a forty-five degree angle on his hands and the typewriter keyboard. He had slept two or three hours. Instinctively he looked up to the page—it was his last piece of paper—but it was gone. The moon shown on the bare roller.

Then he saw the page beside the typewriter. He must have taken it out before he dozed off, he thought. When he picked it up to put it back in the typewriter he noticed a small slip of paper sliding off the top—money! He stood up and snapped on the light. A real ten dollar bill, green and crisp.

He felt elated. His first reader! A realist who nevertheless appreciated his metaphors or similes or whatever they were! Real money!

Still inspired, the next morning he bought *The Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* and two pieces of paper. That evening he wrote a careful twenty line poem and went to sleep expectantly.

The next morning: nothing.

He put his last piece of paper in the machine and began a poem. The first line was

*The girl took twenty dollars from her mother’s purse*

followed by forty-nine more lines describing an approach to sex and the experience of alienation. It ended,

*Dew beaded the windshield.*

Sure enough, the next morning, there was a twenty dollar bill on the page, and a checkmark, which he took to mean “Good.”

He went out and bought *Ulysses* and *The Words* and, confidently, a single piece of paper. One was all he would need.

Late in the afternoon, he popped open a Bud and began to type away cheerily. He waited till he was two thirds of the way to the bottom of the page before mentioning the sum of forty dollars, which of course he received the next morning on top of the page placed neatly beside the typewriter. There was no checkmark, but he didn’t mind so much. He did have a slight headache, from the beer.

Needless to say, he made lots of money. The checkmarks were irregular, and in truth not all that plentiful—many of what he thought were his best passages were unmarked, while some of the low water marks apparently went over well—but he was pretty stoic about it. He was always paid in cash, even when he mentioned sums in five figures.

One day, when his library was almost complete—he had bought *My Life* and *Vice* that afternoon—he felt a strange stirring in his stomach or teeth or forearms, he couldn’t pin it down. He wanted to shop. He picked up the 1,600 dollars from the night before and went out to find a grocery
store and an electronics store: food and TV, why not? He was productive, well off, his work was read. Why not relax?

His first stop was The Good Guys. He had a long talk with the salesman about the makes. It boiled down to Mitsubishi vs. Sony. He was naive but the salesman was there to help. He decided on a Sony. He wasn’t going to get remote control but it was part of the package. How was he going to pay? Cash, he said. He worried that it would draw a funny look, but it didn’t. He reached into his pocket, and to his horror the bills he saw in his billfold were Monopoly money, two orange five hundreds, four yellow hundreds, and four blue fifties. He looked at the salesman, whose hair, he noticed, was exceptionally neat.

The poor poet thought of the sheet of white paper waiting for him in the roller. He had been thinking of getting a computer sometime soon but now he just wanted to get out of the store and relate to the somber physicality of the typewriter.

He had already waited a couple of seconds too long to pay. He gave the salesman an orange five hundred. “Where are you parked?” the salesman asked, as he handed the sales slip and the bill to a woman at one of the cash registers. “Oh,” said the poet, truly at a loss, “I didn’t bring a car.” “You can pick it up tomorrow,” said the salesman, “just bring your sales slip.”

Wow, says Basket, but only one wow.

I ask him about Gertrude. He says she wrote for money, too. Every word.
Not Less Because:
Some Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens

JUDITH KITCHEN

I was the world in which I walked, and what I saw

When I came down the stairs, dressed for the party as Little Red Riding Hood, my Aunt Margaret was in shorts and a tunic with a quiver on her back. She was Robin Hood—her hair pulled back and piled on her head so it would fit beneath the green felt cap. The scar on her cheek, suddenly so exposed, seemed almost a part of the disguise. I could almost hear the clank of swords, see the thrust and jab, the quick slash, blood. Oh, I know it really came from falling, as an infant, onto the hot air register—an angry cross burned into her cheek, fading over the years to something that gave her face its dignity. But this was a dress-up world and any minute the wolf would discover me and open his wide mouth. I'd be swallowed, lost inside a speechless shell, like Johnny Harr who was gassed in World War I and came home to live with his brother, a timid man with something inside trying to escape through his damaged vocal cords and restless fingers. Once he touched my cheek, and it burned for days. So

Nothing is lost, loud locusts. No note fails
to hold remembered sound. It all comes back in black and white. In muted color, from a sable brush. Pink roses climb the trellis to my window. Faint scent, and yellow hum. And in the evening through the screens, the moiré patterns shimmer on the lawn. Downstairs,

the music
Will be motion and full of shadows
and the shadows will be dancing on the walls. The music will come from the corner where a scratchy phonograph is piled with a stack of 78s. As they thunk down onto each other, the stack will rise, beginning to wobble so the sound will be warped. The dancers will wash past, all moving lips and teeth beneath their masks. There is only the dance—half moon, an archer’s bow, motion spun of shadow, frenzied light—but

The dance has no name. It is a hungry dance.
It is the dance of winter kites, caught in the tips of trees. It tugs and trails a useless string. It holds more than a lifetime of memory

And when the cock crows on the left and all my mother’s stories come to life, I’m on the farm where she grew up. I see the hens in a frantic pecking at her feet. Her gentle horse, all quivering mouth and snicker of hot breath on the sugared hand. The watering trough
that, in deep summer, defines dream—mossy cool, secret, serene. Most of all, I see her climb the ladder to the hayloft where, from her perch, she can watch the slant of sunlight catch the floating chaff, lifting it lazily through the heat like gauze, a curtain of shifting light. A summer smell, dry as tinder, sweet. And the rooster, voracious, like a prancing jester, who can only

*Play the present, its hoo-hoo-hoo.*

The present is a vivid past. It was April, the month before I learned to read. I was sitting in the apricot tree. Around me, petals fell like snow. I was wearing my red and white striped overalls. Words were simply sound. They made a presence in the April air.

*It is April as I write. The wind* comes up at night. In the morning, nothing has changed. If we wake early, we hear the bark of straggler geese—faint cry filtered through cloud. Spring is late. Snowdrops on the lawn, and the tattered skirt of snow at its edges, preserved in shadow. This is a season of indecision. The mind breaks formation, heads north into deeper silence.

*Silence is a shape that has passed* but not before the shape has been noted and held in the mind so the hands can reproduce it. It is absence of cricket, lull in birdsong as morning brightens, cessation of the incessant bleeping (like a blinking traffic light) of the garbage truck. The mind knows silence in the midst of sound. It is round. Smooth. A stone worn by water. Porcelain cup. Cylinder of ice. Thought, before words, lifting from its branch on sculpted wings as

*If thinking could be blown away* like a leaf. And if it could, I would lose it in a lacquered sky. All predicate and noun, twisted into a helix of meaning. I would not now be thinking of my Uncle Willy.

*It was his nature to suppose* and so he spent his time supposing. His thoughts churned—and he had time to let them churn as he sat all day in his nursing-home room, almost as stripped of character as his apartment had been. What he was was all inside. There were no colorful Mexican serapes or Egyptian footstools to testify to travel. In fact, he hardly traveled, except to see his sister or brother in the East. And there he spent his days stretched on the couch or at the kitchen table, a book in hand, a beer handy. He did not go far and, when he spoke, he spoke fitfully. His silences were punctuated with snorts—private laughter, internal amusement. Then he’d begin one of his “supposings” and out would come fully formed argument, usually on something one would never think to argue about. They were amusing, inconsequential little spurts of logic, applied to the inanities of the day. They made a
limited kind of sense, but today I am forced to admire the larger logic of which they were a part. In the wake of an amputation and a stroke, he has refused to eat. He clenches his fingers to make a fist and declares that

Death is absolute and without memorial.
Its finality is infinite. Honor his choice—for that is what it is: his last living testament to the imagination. He clenches his fingers to make a fist.

Let be be finale of seem.
The rest is all conditional. We step in and out of the past, project a future, a future perfect. In it, my mother will climb down the ladder and put another record on the spindle. The dancers will have been waltzing below me. One, two, three / you and me / where to now / why and how / life could be / if only . . .

If the day writhes, it is not with revelations
but with sunlight and shadow, with one question asking itself over and over. The meticulous clock, unsprung, spits out its seconds one by one. Who will miss him when he’s gone, when silence spreads out its colored beads and the hand lifts each of them gently and holds it to the light?

Dark things without a double, after all
are doubly dark—so truly dark they cast no shadow. Dark the way the bottom of a cistern is dark. A stone dropped is hiatus and then a faint echo and the echo is a hole between stars. The shutter opens inside the camera’s case. If there were an opposing value, it would not be light, but weightlessness. Hammers would float. The body would somersault in dazzling space. Yes,

The imperfect is our paradise
and that is where we find ourselves. We spend the days, working and reworking, hammering home our bent language. How we love our missed connections. How we adore what we have yet to say. We spin in ecstatic disarray, unpin our hair, dance in our bodies—our body’s delight. How perfect we are in our imperfections. How suddenly we love our worldly weight.
On Wallace Stevens and Painting

JOHN ALLMAN

ONE OF THE AREAS THAT STEVENS’ work pointed me to was the presence of poetry of imagery very like that found in the art of painting. Stevens’ own interest in composing poems as if they were compositions in painting can be seen in what amount to retrospective remarks he made on that connection in the talk he gave at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” which was later included in *The Necessary Angel*. In his talk he made reference to Leo Stein’s “On Reading Poetry and Seeing Pictures,” in which Stein describes his attempts to look at an earthenware plate as if it were a picture. Stein finally saw the plate go “over into a composition to which all elements were merely contributory . . . I had made a beginning to seeing pictorially.” Certainly, in many of his poems Stevens saw pictorially. That he was influenced in his use of color, image, and atmosphere by the likes of Monet and Matisse seems well established. But he did not so much engage in ekphrasis, the literary re-presentation of an artwork, as in something he might have called an interpenetration. In contemporary critical parlance, we’d call this “intertextuality.” (For an example of intertextuality in poetry and painting, see Michael Riffaterre’s “Textuality: W. H. Auden’s ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’” in *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading*, ed. Mary Ann Caws, 1-13. N.Y.: MLA, 1986.) But without going into detail about all that, I’d simply like to say that Stevens’ work encouraged me to interact with artworks, especially painting, in ways I’d call both ekphrastic and intertextual. I’ve been interested not so much in composition as in the creation of a field of associations and images—though it might be fair to say that a given painting triggered a compositional event I eventually offered as a poem. In the case of “Memories of Magritte,” I make reference to Magritte’s basic trauma—his mother’s suicide by drowning—and have in mind an assemblage of his images, as well as the fact that he led a rather routinized, bourgeois existence (not terribly unlike that of Stevens!).

**Memories of Magritte**

You imagine her dress transparent,
that woman as she strides past your stopped tram,
baguette upright in a white paper bag,
a drowned mother brought back
in flesh tones peculiar to afternoon light
after a game of chess in the park.
And in the shadow of a half-drawn curtain, at your easel, the painter nude, the painter tingling from a child’s memory of a mother’s body, ingenuous and direct in accuracy of thighs, buttocks lengthened into the long axis of fish, the shadow beneath her left breast like darkness of a mouth about to speak.

Vowels and feathers and black reflections of your half-finished coffee now a poster of peacocks and conch shells,

a half-retrieved summer when she slipped out of a purple maillot gleaming in moonlight on the porch,

and you wake half-erect, counting nicks in a molding, enumerating slats in the blind, coins distributed on the bureau.

A woman walks through an arched silhouette, into your mise-en-scène,
curled shaving of wood heard hissing from the carpenter’s plane.

She brushes past and you feel the hair rising on the back of your neck

easel + loss + silhouette

you feel the coarse fragments of mortar from that bridge they found her under, your feet muddied, the cloth covering her face.

Her realness like the sudden green glint of 1930s glass etched with avocados and pears, her footfall the echo of breaking branches, her scent the humid interior of bromeliads.
Mr. Stevens, Woman, and Surety

ANGELA BALL

How should he know
what she’s doing,
snowfield flooded
with accomplishment of white?
No thundering pondering but
a particular of rapture, her name
its center. Never a use.
What he wants he can’t say,
it’s such a simple thing.

Imaginary Window

BRUCE LLOYD

All day a gray ceiling sits
On the brown snow of the last storm
Pressing the lowered horizon
On the dark, nearby woods.

The dense fog allows no
Travel by road near the house; and
The mind, looking on, encounters
Itself dismissed while awake

Looking at the empty maples
Largely full of shifting mist.
A single bird’s call goes
Unanswered outside the double

Window. The mind sifts and floats
In a world unfamiliar and slow,
Glimpsing its own passage
As time partially there.

Winter light recedes with middle
Afternoon: the fog collects and lifts
Disclosing a sunlit, radiant land,
Seen, but still longed for.
Redness

PETER LA SALLE

For years we had no cardinal
In the patch of seaside scrub woods
Here at the summer place;
So how were we to know?

Now we see him splashing
(Such a yellow beak) in morning sunshine,
His dowdy mate almost shaking her head;
The children cry, “The cardinal! The cardinal!”

Old Mrs. Devereux who takes
Legendarily long evening strolls has taken
It upon herself to stop and instruct my wife:
They’re touchy, she has told her,

We’ll probably see him only the single season—
He’ll soon get his fill of our tiger-striped cat.
But we don’t care; we have him now, and the elderberry,
The crooked pines, none of it is quite the same.

The Apples on Cézanne’s Table

BRUCE ANDERSON

The lesser loves illumine their fates.
Had it prospered, had the health of dread
governed with slight perfecting gesture
or, foiled and set like young vintages,
let usufruct plead, how emphatic,
naive, but how staunchly complected
were wax bygones and bellies of clay
perched up in their hives of recompense.
The fools in truth acknowledge only
the life one might have lived with one’s kind,

ignore consent of itself ignored
or, at their most determined, recant
the vow that unaccountably set
sums against histories. Plain, too plain
for a creed’s original hunger

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were the faiths unspecified, serene,
the motley most were happy to wear.
The faiths writhed and bent to inhabit
such candor. Urged against them, consent
mistook as no fool their nuncio

in the old republic of all things
ignored. Merciful ease, the dotage
of gold forgiving debt, eldest loves,
conceits in plausible beards, the beards—
a thing that stays where it's put can bear
many, too many slights. The sooner
consent resume its choices, the hard
pale throats bring to high shrift, the better.
And makeweights, and partisans mused up?
The better, and flaws in paradise.

Edward Hopper’s Lighthouse at Two Lights, 1927

The world about us would be desolate
except for the world within us.

—Wallace Stevens

Tony Quagliano

a white lighthouse in the hard flat
white light of Maine
projected above the white clapboard

outbuildings, the dwellings
of the lighthouse man
bright on the hard coast

one warmer yellow house also
with an empty dark central window
a bit of low watery foliage

one brown chimney smokeless in summer
and in all, open empty windows
open empty doors

no one is pictured there
not in any of the doors
or any of the windows
where at most they would be between
the internal and external worlds
no one there to see what ships
go by at Two Lights
and for anyone on shipboard
no one there to be seen

Putting It Mildly
  In memory of Wallace Stevens, 1959
DAVID YOUNG

Into the uproar of April emerged Mr. Marblearch,
Ready again to be well aware of the weather,
For a normal informal part in the burgeoning season’s
Annual matters of magnitude.

Like a cat encountering cream he encountered the colors
And tapped his cigar so as not to endanger the flowers;
He paused in thought by a solemn and wild forsythia,
Fancies assailing his head.

“This sun,” Mr. Marblearch said, “is enlarged
Like the oldest thought enjoying its newest form
In an epochal fashion. Ahem. It is like a sublime
Balloon that will never burst.

“Furthermore,” he went on, beneath a magnolia,
“to have a sky in one’s head, a bush in the breast,
Is to partake of the pattern, the bee and the tree
Being in season.”

Marblearch colored in the season’s din
With the whole magnolia, alive on the grass
In the role of forsythia, feeling the morning sun’s
Ideas hot on his face.
Stevens Ghazal

DAVID YOUNG

The snowman makes himself into a ball, rolls here, rolls there,  
And is gone in the morning sun, a wink & a sigh.

And he never comes back but he always comes back,  
In the form of a cloud, a puddle, a star-stone,

In the face of a baby, the scream of a grackle,  
While a river of light pours blue from the clock,

He is mad in his lab, he is high with his kite,  
He snaps his suspenders & sweats through the circus,

And now he is leaving his office at twilight  
Remembering how to forget his own book,

The book he made great by defacing & losing it,  
Leaves in a shower, word-bonfires blazing,

Fragrance of autumn, smoke that goes next to the night  
Where the snowman stands in the polar & glittering silence.

Tom Strand and the Angel of Death

CHARLES WRIGHT

What does the Angel of Death look like,  
my friend’s son asked?

White, with a pointed head and an orange skirt, my friend replied.  
Down to the stem she swirls on,

I thought to myself, for no reason,  
seeing her rise from gorse and broom

Like a column of crystal.

Or like the sun, I should have thought,  
spinning above our heads,

Centrifugal force of all we do.  
This evening, under Mount Caribou, I remember her skirt and stem

In the black meadowgrass,  
eyes shaded against the dark,

Bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh:
Oil rag American sky,
August night wind rummaging back and forth in the pines,
Stars falling beyond the Yukon—chrome-vanishing stars,
Insistent inside the heart’s Arctic—Unbroken code,
this life that is handed us, this this . . .

**Wallace Stevens Returns from Paris Ruined**

PAUL MARIANI

Oh for a muse of fire to ascend
the brightest heaven of invention
etcetera & etcetera again.
Everyone at one time or another
cries out for help. A kingdom
for a stage, princes to act,
monarchs to behold our swelling scene.
And so with me, New World wonder
that I be. But here’s that Spaniard
Carlos down there in New Jersey,
singing the virtues of the Hopi
& the Navajo, or Rassles among
the indigenes of Maine, then off
for gay Paree to mouth of Boone.
And now, alack, I have come back,
a wide-eyed Crispin from across
a blazing sea, from a Paris gleaned
at last: my holy city with water
running through its veins.
I too have gone & have returned,
brine-drenched like some Nike-slippered Venus, free at last,
without a single thing to sing.
The Waterbury Cross

X. J. KENNEDY

Fall. You’re driving 84 southwest—
A hillock scarlet as a side of beef
Accosts your eyes. Gigantic on its crest,
An outstretched cross stands waiting for its thief.

Your fingers as though hammered to the wheel
Clench hard. Frost-kindled sumac blazes down
Like true gore pouring from a bogus crown.
The earth grows drizzled, and bedrenched.

Did even Wallace Stevens at the last,
Having sown all his philosophe’s wild oats,
Gape for the sacred wafer and clutch fast
To Mother Church’s swaddling petticoats?

Connecticut’s conversions stun. Is there
Still a wan Christ who clings to hope for me,
Who bides time in a cloud? Choking, my car
Walks over water, across to Danbury.

Wallace Stevens Walks
on a Geologically Young Beach
of Pebbly Sand

JOAN ELIZABETH WHITE

We keep coming back and coming back
to the real, he said. It’s a glittering
rug of sand; or is it a sunrise spread
of snow that has already fallen down
and winks like diamonds below a bright
blue air? The breeze can skip across
without a rippling. But, though the mind
may see a snow of crystalline cold
flakes, more solid are these roundly cut
and rubbed sand beads.

If I could pick these beads and have
them strung, he said, a souvenir,
I could give her a long and snake-like
delicate-colored coil for her neck,
of polished random minerals that shift
from shade to shade, if she would touch
and look, attuned, comparing them.
And the holding-string, so strong,
supple and fine, would be invisible,
the tensile thread of love’s life line.

Yet, after all, this is a snow
that melts; no basic slate but watery-pale
romance that shimmers, trickling off
before it dies—a vanishing . . .
until a green plant glares.

Like DeCLAIMaTIONs in a HymIE CEMeTArY

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

WheTher orlent or RETurned tO
sTAniNg poSTuRE
ACCUMULA TED
advice ment and bASiCAll y
panic-LIKE oSTenTi oN to seek DeEper
suCKing vellUms of
& spUrTi ng buBBles at tHe wHine.
It
iRra DiATes aLI aLOnG, tHe loNg-loST AcUmen
fOr flAR es aNd AnciLLary
pro CureMenTs. hEre
hiTs, HerE hurts—onLy
no, nOt very FuNny, been
breEdi ng tOO mUCH to NOTiCE the demARCation liNe
beHinD wHich sIts, Or
eNterS w ithOut knOWinG, trOOps
of the PURPliE PeLICAn.

tHey saNd tHe stonEs
witH spoKeN eYE s
mIrRoRs fOr retelliNg
thE poRTl oN so faR mIsheArD
(oNly tRU e beG ettin g)—
yeT wHiCh Swi nGs anTEr ior tO
a tHrow: thROMBoS lS
Dr. Bob and His Robot Friend

Every thing possible to be believe’d is an image of truth.

—Blake, “Proverbs of Hell”

VICKI PASKI-GARCIA

I. Schizotypal Permutations of St. Anselm’s Ontological Argument

“Empirical nincompoops defy
the common ordinance,
if not supernal law,”
said Dr. Bob, welding the head
to inspired,
idiomatic specifications.

(That night the stars aligned
with every vine
running veins across
his patio wall.
It was metaphoric,
thus faultless accord.)

“Liars!
It’s all in our minds,
not in the matter.
Otherwise, who could make
a pulseless stone a face,
or some nicely chiseled torso?
Where is the relation?

“Remember Pygmalion!”
(He bent ten red pipe cleaners
to form robotic hands . . .

A lead-free, sub-compact spacecraft
with tin can deflectors
[AKA amulets],
and bottle-green Leviathan eyes
to cruise the mystic deep—
this was next on his agenda.)

“Now here’s the truth
unequivocated:
The most perfect thing,
perfectly conceived
mandates its own being,
or immortality even.

ERGO
God is method to every madness
imaginable.

“Vast cosmogonies depend
on one arbitrary point of departure,
a first fervent word in the darkness,
imagining what must be believed.
Thus, deluded fiends
and unrequited lovers
may always speak
Conrad: with God in his own language.’’

Conclusion: The statistical probability of infallible intelligence is directly proportional to one’s degree of imperative involvement in a purely verbal construct.

II. The Robot Fails to Respond to Commands

“But sadly, the world was exactly like this when I got here—like bad modern verse papering cognitions over some terrible pit, it won’t support our weight.”

(The automaton bends to the left, then crashes.) “If it’s the thought that counts, then only real defeat reveals our ties to the blackest damnation.”

“Still, let’s recycle what we begin, as a form of simple cosmic courtesy.”

(He grabbed the mechanical man, stripping the thing for parts.) “A mobile’s less pretentious—by a million miles . . .”

“Perhaps tomorrow’s whirling solar storms portend a new, if not improved direction.”

Chinook

STUART FRIEBERT

Mild winter wind, coming down the mountain. For a moment, it is the mountain to the boy growing up in Alaska, ready to don a leather apron again, go clean fish for breakfast—a
half dozen salmon on his mind. He puts his finger to the blade. Thank you, he says, makes the first cut back to front along the belly line, comes up over the neck bones, looking the fish full in the eye: Have you died, too?

**Beggar’s Night**

**STUART FRIEBERT**

The freedom we have in these helpless costumes! No more than an earthly, physical sort, to be taken advantage of this cold night in October, the moon just about gone.

The idea of knocking on your neighbor’s door, freezing her soul, now that’s unintelligible pleasure. A brief moment, but full of human tremor. Cocteau put it well, Children and lunatics cut the Gordian knot, which the rest of us spend life patiently trying to untie.

We hold out our grabbags—a maneuver for forcing all hands together—and are seldom refused: the little Mars bar, the two brown pennies, the bruised apple plop in, and we turn to see all the other porchlights go off.

**Wind in the Chimney**

**AUDREY BOHANAN**

Anticipation bows the string, Always hoping to hear the next note Slightly in advance. The bell curves Of its frequencies pull up The wool around their shoulders— One thing leans a bit Into the next, drawn secretly To be more intimate without Forsaking separation. On a gray day
It’s the coffee pot that tags along
Behind them with a shadowed hum.

Outside, the wind downdrafts
A mare’s tail of smoke
Around a band of chickadees,
Not that they need an added touch
Of confederacy to set them off
As sequence on a wider surface.
By the light, the day is early.
Flatness is what spreads its weight
To make it prematurely long.
Perhaps your absence is the slow delay
That words put up with,
Waiting for the images
To dilate into sound.
To speak of loneliness would be
To measure how explicit
Is the space between us.

Water Vision

JOHN STEVENSON

On a certain birthday in Judea
John stood in the river Jordan
And the people came to him
Hoping to be relieved of their unbelief.

The water was so clear they saw
Features of the bottom far upstream.
At a place John met them in the middle,
The water was so pure they saw the clouds flow
Bank to bank across their shadows.

To the right lay wilderness
And to the left lay all their homes.
He was a hard man who
Roughly told them they were less
Than stones. But between his blasts
Of scalding breath,
John dipped his weathered hands and gathered
Forgiveness from the surface of the river,
Brought the people and the waters together,
Washed them and left them in the sun to dry.

The currents, like the desert air,
Made manifest by movement
The otherwise invisible
Against a background of the obvious;
Revealed the fish frightened away,
Reflected a dove descending.

Witch

JUDITA VAICIŪNAIȚĖ

Midday, the square makes you thirsty, it’s noisy
(the movie places—empty).
They’re swarming. And our cruel, inhuman curiosity
links thousands.
And the stake of shame reaches way up over the houses
like a strange, dry tree.
And my look is full of pride—
babbling nonsense, about to expire.
(Wards are crammed full of typhoid cases,
bathhouses, camp barbershops.
Hair’s cut, lies down like a harness rope, red.)
And anger pours out—
it’s so incomprehensible,
as if I’d been born on another planet.
And the raging voices blare out,
hoarse from blunted happiness.
The heavy chain rubs against my neck.
The executioner’s idle, bored.
(Hurls in a sort of insane thunderclap
the empty bottles he’s drunk under the table.)
Truth—from my child’s mouth,
turns savage, untouched.
Set on fire. My body longs
for the flame that washes clean.

Translated from Lithuanian by
Viktoria Skrupskelis and Stuart Friebert
I Will Turn You

JUDITA VAICIŪNAITĖ

I will turn you
into old hammered-out ornaments under the dust.
I’ll turn your skinny oblong blue plants—
into peat.
I’ll lift your split shield off the ground
in your silver workshops.
Just don’t let the jackdaws
scream so forlornly in your medieval towns.
Our distant, deadly parting
will not split
you and me apart.
You’re the light—of glass, set
in old metal, to me.

Translated from Lithuanian by
Viktoria Skrupskelis and Stuart Friebert

The Losing Struggle

A Chinese word for landscape is made up
of two characters meaning “mountains”
and “waters.”

Ross Terrill: 800,000,000

PETER DAVISON

To yield words easily gives pleasure
To the tongue that speeds their flow,
But, loosed, they linger on the surface
Like unexpected, unpenetrating rain.

Where are we to seek the words for life?
And how are we to see what must be seen
Before shaping our language to the sound of it?
What must be seen is every moment present

But hardly every moment seen. What I hear,
Like the muttering of a crowd, is seldom discerned
although the murmur is never interrupted.
My body secretes against its rarest need.
When released, by lightning or alarum,
I can run like a deer, ravage like a lion, overhear
the creak of a mouse’s toe on a wisp of straw.
Except for these times I sleep.

What are the repositories in myself
That bind me in the caverns of silence
And refuse to let me ramble at my will?
My ego stamps its foot at their refusal.

By the shore the sun embraces me.
The pleasures of water ripple through me
And take me by the singing throat.
The elms across the lake shine out like torches.

By another shore I watch the ocean scurry
Over its deeps of flounder and periwinkles
Bearing its rockweed aloft like torches.
As its tide falls and the sandbar emerges, birds alight.

Here by the sea I cannot see as far as the mountains,
Nor do they loom over my shoulder as they once did.
Change is everything here, here everything changes,
Changes with the phases of the moon.

I have come to worship the sun, clouds, clarity,
And as deeply I distrust the moon.
I cannot bear the monthly flow of blood.
Tide and change corrupt the imagination.

I spin my fancies finer and finer,
A quota of gossamer every working day
From an old spider who does not care for flies
And webs it for the sake of the design.

My name is death. I freeze the world in light.
I see my arm, poised at my side to move,
But never moving; and my eye, my eye
Is fixed on what exists beyond existence.
Domination of December

STUART PETERFREUND

The lightning and
a violent hailstorm
bring the end
of the sitzwinter
and the ground
grinds and groans
like the teeth of the dead
trying to get comfortable,
to get a purchase
on the dust
that was a tongue,
dancing its pretty way
across the lexicon.

With all but the oakleaves gone,
and the air too cold to hold
its water, I can look
across the plotline and see
into the next life, as it
can see into mine, and we
both stand there, crows
staring at one another,
each wishing that other
was not likeness, not boundary,
but food, unmiraculously dead,
yet still warm enough to worry
for its viaticum of oil and bone.

The Necessary Sound

SIV CEDERING

Look at the angel in the mirror,
even if her face chameleons
from lost child to old woman,
the transparency of features
peeling off, as if it’s spring
and the season unseasonably hot,
the garments flying.
Stare at the shoulders,  
watch the curbed wing of the blade,  
the bony angle pulling the skin  
taut. Whatever you think of angels  
has already been said by your hand  
holding the found feather  
up to the sun.

Half bird, half human,  
you listen for the necessary sound  
and mouth her name.  
The earth is your cradle.  
You are growing.

**Los Hombres**

**MARVIN BELL**

When X Rosenbloom died and was buried  
(the name is important, being to some minds  
the repository of immigrant grit, of purpose),  
Stevens wrote his “Tract,” a poem Williams  
had written as if it were a simple letter.

And in the third section of his late apologia  
(for which he held the rock as the particular,  
and it is worth noticing the thirdness of it,  
for who was more the syllogist than Stevens),  
he wrote his version of “The Descent,”

Williams’ deathward look into the abyss,  
which Stevens, finding the organic mysteries  
to be “anti-poetic,” occluded with icy stone.  
And with the stony look of eyes of coal,  
he, the pristine, baroque executive of tables  
(pages of illustrations and baptized examples),  
seeing the peacock feathers at sun’s edge,  
varied Williams’ cheer to the morning star,  
the celestial nuances of theme X,  
of selfsame solitude, and flesh made word.
Forum Shopping

THOMAS C. GREY

“Survive the severe judgments of time”—Critic B thinks Poet A might do it! Imagine, an old man with a scythe, bearded, in a hooded robe on a high mahogany bench, and what you’d go through to get to him: jurisdictional barriers (can’t be waived); papers sent back stamped “Wrong Size”; the clerk out to a very long lunch . . . Where is the courthouse, anyway?

“Propose the suitable amours,” a lawyer advises. “Time will write them down.” Gradually. Loose sand blows easy over children’s inscriptions; dust settles on poles of small pamphlets in a bookshop corner. Meanwhile the children run laughing and screaming quick from the bright wave’s edge; the smells mix, old paper and leather with the dust, and, through the window, sunlight filters quietly in.

Emperor

(O Lordosis and Osiris)

JAMES L. MCFHERSON

Inflexible of spine, Master of Hieroglyphs resembles in his mind a large Saguaro cactus—stark, chaste, implacable. But this is intellect only.

It takes a keen machete to cut a swathe through the multifarious.

Beyond this lush confusion, when nothing is left in the bold air but a blackbird scuffling among thorns and wind groaning like a guitar string,
music must swell to fill
the empty cockpit of dawn.

Like an artifact set in a wilderness,
silly and intractable,
it will give, for as long as breath is,
a solid semblance of order.

Spine is a word that begins with the letter S—
a comic swayback squiggle, midget and micropygian.
Yet it ends like a tree, like a tall pine
alone at the straight edge of forever.

An Ordinary Evening

*We must endure our thoughts all night, until*
*The bright obvious stands motionless in cold.*
—Stevens, “Man Carrying Thing”

DAVID GEHLER

October, late: the muscled larkspurs
relax their summer hold, dark spires

of heat uncoil from the chimneys,
while the ordinary evening spent

on the front porch seems to drain
away like water: a clipped sun

and cloudless sky, a twilight flushed
in cardinal red, and loosely brushed

in a bruising light. But it’s not weather,
or desire to hear the wind chime stir,
or passion for the piebald birch,
that brings us, finally, to the porch.

A block away, the churchbells tongue
the air with desperation, long

after the congregation’s gone;
and the drugstore’s light no longer spawns

its lather of moths.
Wind drags across the windows
of a Greyhound leaving town
without a traveler; huge and lone,
it toddles like an armadillo.
The evening ends by natural law.

The Role of Major Man

WILLIAM DORESKI

The face of Wallace Stevens,
pressed like a marigold, looms
at the bedroom window and sighs
because I’ve resisted the role
of Major Man, my appetites
slopping over like the sea off
Key West, where hurricanes revolve
about their deep and singular eyes
and fishermen plumb for the trophies
of their dreams. Posthumous Stevens
has no time for dreams, not with
distinguished professors stalking him,
their chainsaw intellects rasping.
I expect some night to hear him
lose his temper and rip the turf
from his grave and lather it,
like a mustard plaster, to a slab
of pink marble skyscraper,
collaging nature and culture.
And I expect whenever his face
exfoliates at my window
to hear roses lashed by the winds
of Elizabeth Park where a decade
after his death I saw him walk
comfortably in his pin-stripe vest,
portly as if he’d digested
an angel or two. Now he returns
almost daily to dissuade me
from embracing the calm of a pax
Americana in which I’d graze
deeply, sheep-like, and come up
drooling and goofy with sermons.
He’s afraid for me. His pin stripes
gasp like surgery. His voice suggests
the noise of leaves on macadam,
but I can’t hear it clearly,
the festering light in my bedroom
impervious to scrawny cries,
though resonant to the earthy flux
that slowly refreshes the ego.

Easter Sunday

PAUL R. HAENEL

I miss Him. But He’s here,
I’ve been told. The greatest guitar player
in the world. Wallace Stevens, his hand
at the helm in a world
where a litany is a litany of bad weather,
couldn’t compete with His fate. All my
life I’ve heard this. I don’t know

what to believe anymore. I struggle
down sand to the Potomac
and see young boys hooking
silver herring with horrible three-pronged hooks
and immigrant Indians scooting along the shore
on their haunches picking them up
to eat. Where is anybody to tell them
this is wrong? That this is not
the Ganges? That nobody starves in America?
Then one boy turns to me and holds a fish,
pierced through its middle,
high in the sunlight. I miss

Him. The most fat moon does not
resemble Him nor the least
sliver of heartbreak. If I talk enough
about Him He will say something
because I will have been so wrong. I hope
this.
In Hartford

PHILIP DACEY

Wallace walked with poetry in his head.  
He walked on Prospect Avenue to work. 
The prospect moved his feet and they, they moved 
In time to prospects good but getting better. 
The words were what he walked through, on his way 
To work himself into a form of play 
No one would understand who hadn’t walked 
Upright in a cloud of syllables 
Between two points that had none but their sound. 

His shoes wore thin. You could see right through them 
To a page angelic in its careless 
Love of curls and horns and letters languished 
In his ears, the tootings of the cars She 
Steered around him, though he heard and kept 
Their clamor constantly in the line he walked 
Straight to prove, indeed, his drunkenness, 
Dear drunkenness to sober up the stars.

And once, a widow saw him, rocking, stopped, 
And back a step to take it out, the X,  
Then striding on, he’d got it right, the Y, 
And strides on still, our Z, the natural end 
Of any A who takes his walking 
Seriously enough to fly.

The Piano Player in the Hotel Lobby Bar

(with a nod to Wallace Stevens)

AL ZOLYNAS

has given himself 
to one thing, to his own single art 
and cares naught for else, cares naught 
for the risk of lung cancer 
from the cigarette between his lips, cares naught 
for the consequences of late nights 
among strangers in this hotel bar, cares only 
for what flows miraculously
after hours of sacrifice
(to him not sacrifice, but life itself)
through his fingers, sweet
jazz, music of the moment, music timeless,
delicate and daring improvisations on
familiar melodies woven
from the warp and woof of the eternal
and shifting present,
plays with his entire being, body and soul,
and nothing is important but the playing—
and the listening,
and the playing that is the listening.

The Snowmobile

JORDAN SMITH

Another coastal storm forecast, and the sky
On the weather radar is a swirl of squalls,
Cyclonic, white and billowing, as sublime
In pure indifference as a car stalled
On the tracks on a cold morning, as a key
Sheared in a frozen lock, as anomie.

Snow, the newscast says, then freezing rain,
Then a temperature drop to near-record lows,
But now the air is clear, and things seen plain—
A neighbor’s ’50s Chevy, a pair of slow
Afternoon walkers, the church, the hardware store—
Have the certainty of things seen before,

Things in themselves, erased by the first flurry
Hard from the north, a white-out, bitter wind
Because the loss is bitter: that the world
Should vanish so completely as the mind
Drifts, whiteness where imagination
Draws itself a blank accumulation.

Then, from where the orchard was, the chirr
Of chainsaws, a motor cranking, and a light,
Solitary, intent through all the blur.
Beautiful, I think, though that’s not right.
There’s nothing beautiful about the snowmobile
My neighbor uses to skid logs through the field.
But this is winter's mind: necessity,  
The common work that gets done so the self  
Can sit in warmth, and without irony  
Pick one book from others on the shelf  
And read again of the nothing that is there,  
Beside the pile of split wood, beside the fire.

Beholding Nothing

WILLIAM HATHAWAY

You’ve got to have a mind like nuclear winter  
to watch slush slide to thud off a pine bough  
assuming its acid and ready to slither  
with salt down gutters and gurgle through  
sour pipes busted deep in the blackest places  
by the earth’s small shrugging often reminding us  
of restless anguish; it’s just water seep though  
and you have to have been melting a long time  
a lot faster than a frozen heart could fathom  
to not panic sipping the last ellipse of wine  
as cognac uncorks clearing your throat to whine  
how the land and the wind and the winter sun  
whisper grim secrets to you the only listener  
unlistened to in the candles’ sooty glitter  
so you murmur doom and love to the babysitter  
about that bomb while she just snaps her gum  
like a few leaves crackling in latest autumn  
while streetlight licks her hair in cold flares  
as she regards in black glass a pure reflection  
of everything that’s there or ever need be there.
The Course of a Generality

WILLIAM HATHAWAY

A poet’s poems should fly to all open hearts and minds, but the prose discourse of poets-as-generalists should aim inward to raise to their own irritable tribe the questions that Browning says poets should offer as pertinent to “the misapprehensions of the age.” A poet’s questions should nag the very ones who identify themselves as the Questioners of Authority—those who stand back from their Volvos to gaze on the effect of their bumped speech acts, tingling in the pleasant finality of a concreted thought. Generalists must enter the traffic of ideas in medias res, meandering far afield to let what burrs will stick to them, as Frost says. I too dislike it, but there is a place for the general if its validity is not particularized by a boneheaded relativism. As de Tocqueville says, the antidote to the poison of general ideas is to apply them to daily particularities. Certainly the reverse is also true and the practice of this habitual dialectic is the true relativism.

“What is madness but nobility of soul at odds with circumstance,” Roethke says in his poem of despair and revelation. The Circumstance, the overriding particularity, is Death—more precisely fear of death. The consideration of this speculation is what transpires with this circumstance when we “let be be finale of seem.” In other words, what has been the particular effect on American poetry from the loss of the general belief in a higher ordering power than the individual mind?

My zigzag tour of this haunted house will proceed as follows: I’ll start with a Wallace Stevens poem to illustrate The New World Order, then use a Post-New World Order poem by Robert Hass to show where we wobble at this moment. Then I’ll do a triple backflip and land straddling two of Tennyson’s flying swallows from In Memoriam to show the Old World Order. Finally, I’ll present two poems by Sharon Olds as typically illustrative of the zeitgeist of this particular instant. Here is Stevens’ “The Course of a Particular”:

Today the leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by wind,
Yet the nothingness of winter becomes a little less.
It is still full of icy shades and shapen snow.

The leaves cry . . . One holds off and merely hears the cry.
It is a busy cry, concerning someone else.
And though one says that one is part of everything,

There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.
The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,
Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.
It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves,
In the absence of fantasia, without meaning more
Than they are in the final finding of the ear, in the thing
Itself, until, at last, the cry concerns no one at all.

(OP 123-24)

Though winter’s leaves make a dreary weeping, the barrenness is lessened by abstract shades and shapes. But as the listener listens to the leaves without identifying his feelings with their crying sound, the listener’s ego becomes increasingly isolated from the landscape, and though the cry is vigorous and the listener can say to himself that the ego is part of all life, he really feels that nothing outside of him is talking to him, but to “someone else.” It requires too much exertion in this mesmeric winter-mind to relate the ego to the scenery, to feel part of a whole—as Pope, for one, points out in his “Essay on Man” people always have done intuitively. “Life as it is” becomes a vitality sensed beyond the ego.

Okay, at this juncture, Milton, Blake, Shelley, Carlyle—all the looming ghosts—reconnect in some larger dimension. But not Stevens, to whom no God talks to man through nature, nor does nature gospel to him any ideals greater than human imagination. Leaves don’t transcend themselves to signify anything but their own sound, which means absolutely nothing to the listener or any other human. Any connection the mind has with the vast indifferent reality outside the mind is an artifice of the ego.

An even more pointedly sinister revelation of this solipsism can be seen in the related poem “The Snow Man,” and in “The Emperor of Ice-Cream” categorical denial of extrinsic meaning is phrased as an imperative, an absolute proclamation. This seemingly anti-Platonist philosophy floats through all of Stevens’ weather reports. Stevens’ “necessary fictions” aren’t, in fact, like Plato’s “necessary lies” that bind a polity from savagery, but are unavoidable functions of the human psyche. Stevens is similar to Plato in the way Marx is to Hegel in the playing of hidden pea games with a dialectic. Stevens is not really a solipsist in the sense we’ve come to use the word in this generation of defective imagination. The imagination is Stevens’ “Supreme Fiction,” which contains the idea that after the last negation of meaning an instinct for affirmation persists. When the ego is completely disconnected from alien reality, which is absolute truth, it unavoidably reconciles the alien fact with its own desires through the imagination. Even absolute fact, or the absence of imagination, must be imagined and in that inevitable process reality is reconciled with ego. Hue, chroma, and perspective return and landscape once again affirms and solaces. BUT—too soon, the ego’s control of reality grows again into a
“violent order,” imposing its own false cliché of reality, and we have to escape this very real solipsism by returning to absolute fact.

So—I posit that this basically psychological Idea of Order, or variations of this thinking, reordered with various terminology, is the Modern Idea for the Age of Unbelief. “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” Stevens’ most famous anthology piece (which is mostly misinterpreted by educationalists who teach ideas as facts), seems to foreshadow in its ordering voice the transformation of this relativist dialectic into a false cliché of sentimental nihilism. The “Emperor” is a workingman who rolls cigars for a living, with a peripheral implication of that scepter-like pretension that smokers of big cigars affect. “Concupiscent curds” suggests plain lewdness and the wenches are probably prostitutes. Take everything absolutely as it is without giving any whore a heart of gold or babbling about unsung greatness of soul. Pleasure, as represented by ice-cream, is the only special quality of the occasion of this death and the only power we should obey. Forget supernatural myth—death is death—and all we can do in the face of it is FIGHT—FOR OUR RIGHT—TO PAR-R-R-TY!!

Or create each existential moment afresh by shaping the elusive present with litany as Robert Hass suggests in “Meditation at Lagunitas”:

All the new thinking is about loss.
In this it resembles all the old thinking.
The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea. That the clown-faced woodpecker probing the dead sculpted trunk
of that black birch is, by his presence,
some tragic falling off from a first world
of undivided light. Or the other notion that,
because there is in this world no one thing
to which the bramble of blackberry corresponds,
a word is elegy to what it signifies.
We talked about it late last night and in the voice
of my friend, there was a thin wire of grief, a tone
almost querulous. After a while I understood that,
talking this way, everything dissolves: justice,
pine, hair, woman, you and I. There was a woman
I made love to and I remember how, holding
her small shoulders in my hands sometimes,
I felt a violent wonder at her presence
like a thirst for salt, for my childhood river
with its island willows, silly music from the pleasure boat,
muddy places where we caught the little orange-silver fish
called pumpkinseed. It hardly had to do with her.
Longing, we say, because desire is full
of endless distances. I must have been the same to her.
But I remember so much, the way her hands dismantled bread, 
the thing her father said that hurt her, what she dreamed. There are moments when the body is as numinous as words, days that are the good flesh continuing. 
Such tenderness, those afternoons and evenings, saying *blackberry, blackberry, blackberry.*

The general question here regarding empirical reality and abstract forms is classical: Plato springs to mind, of course, but also Zeno’s bunch and old Heraklitus. But the course of this particular idea in poetry, its signifying etymology, need be followed only from Schiller’s *Über naive und sentimentale Dichtung* (1795) to be of much use in considering poetry in our century. In truth, most of what American poets numinously know of these Kantish notions are Emerson-embroidered fragments of Carlyle. Nietzsche’s name is usually intoned at the colleges where his obscure dismissal of the fundamental questions is treated as an irrefutable Answer. Hass is quite cleverly correct in succinctly stating that old and new are the same thinking. The idea that the very presence of the woodpecker probing the dead tree is a shadow of its essence, erasing transcendent contact with universal, eternal Forms, is Hass’s example of how the old thinking thought—as when Arnold noted that Sophocles heard the same sound of human misery in the sea that he heard. Arnold’s sentimental hearing, on one hand, is conscious of the sea’s separate existence and that meaning heard in it can be a limitless, abstract diffusion. Sophocles’ hearing, on the other hand, is a naive Oneness with Nature in which he cannot transcend himself. Hass gives us a vivid Audubonal image and then discursively defines it as a subliminal archetype—the quick object probes the dead object, making an intellectual/emotional complex in an instant of time.

In “Tears, Idle Tears,” Tennyson calls this inexplicable flash of despair in the face of poignant natural loveliness (Hass’s “falling away”) “Death in life” and interprets its source as regretful memories of good old days. Tennyson’s best poetry transcends its sentimentality by deftly communicating the universality of such ineffable yearning in particular images harmonized with astounding prosody. Twinges of empty gloom turn to brown study moods, then to stages of confused *accidie.* These are ordered phases in which particular memories conflict as discrete particulars, rather than synthesizing into meaning. The struggle climaxes in a revelation involving a pantheistic conflagration of ego, followed by numbness and, finally, a new spiritual serenity: Carlyle describes these “passages” in *Sartner Resartus* where he “just says no” (everlastingly) to nihilistic despair, passes through his CENTRE OF INDIFFERENCE to “the first preliminary moral Act, Annihilation of Self (*Selbsttödtung*)” to finally “say yes” to Nature as the “Living Garment of God.” To Carlyle’s old way of thinking about loss, a lifetime of coping with less is not satisfactory and he says that in the turmoil of his conviction, when his soul (Love) seemed finite and life
essentially meaningless, only a vestigial habit of religion kept him from suicide. The same struggle of faith is found in *In Memoriam*, and Tennyson was Carlyle’s favorite poet. As a poetic journal, Tennyson’s chronicle of despair is less phased and more up and down than Carlyle’s reinvention of spiritual rebirth as a spanking-new philosophy. In Number Eleven, for instance, there are already foreshadowings of the spiritual indifference: “Calm and deep peace in this wide air, / These leaves that redden to the fall, / And in my heart, if calm at all, / If any calm, a calm despair.” And in Number Thirty-Five the old, unqualified thought is nutshelled:

Yet if some voice that man could trust
   Should murmur from the narrow house,
   “The cheeks drop in, the body bows;
Man dies, nor is there hope in dust”;

Might I not say? “Yet even here,
   But for one hour, O Love, I strive
   To keep so sweet a thing alive.”
But I should turn my ears and hear

The moanings of the homeless sea,
   The sound of streams that swift or slow
   Draw down Aeonian hills, and sow
The dust of continents to be;

And Love would answer with a sigh,
   “The sound of that forgetful shore
   Will change my sweetness more and more,
Half-dead to know that I shall die.”

O me, what profits it to put
   An idle case? If death were seen
   At first as Death, Love had not been,
Or been in narrowest working shut,

Mere fellowship of sluggish moods,
   Or in his coarsest Satyr-shape
   Had bruised the herb and crushed the grape,
And basked and batten in the woods.

If he could be informed categorically that death is the very end, he would still insist on sustaining Love, but the seemingly eternal movements of nature would simply confirm meaningless disintegration and mock his hope. Without hope, his own Love would instruct him that the grief he hears (Sophocles/Arnold) in the sea will darken love to grief, since more and more, Love will be just loss. Besides, beyond that idle academic case,
if Love dies with the soul, Love really just amounts to getting drunk and having a sex party in the woods.

And here, we can jump back again to the new way of thinking about loss. In his second example, Hass separates the signifying word for an object, blackberry, from the object itself, which he must describe with another word, “bramble.” This alienation of particular meaning from particular object, leading to the loss of general identity, is familiar to Stevens’ course of a particular and even to Tennyson: “I sometimes hold it half a sin / To put in words the grief I feel: / For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within.” As Hass makes clear, it isn’t headline news that language alone can’t buy love any better than money. To understand the Tennyson lines, a reader must be capable of reading carefully, and to understand the Stevens poem the reader must have a relatively sophisticated education. But to really “get” this part of Hass’s poem, the reader must be a postgraduate of postmodern criticism, since so much depends on the allusion to the critical jargon-byte “signifies.” In rough particular, the “referent” is to the theory of Jacques Lacan that we learn language while learning that we’re separate from Mama and, since words aren’t as good as instant Mama-love, language is inherent with pre-Oedipal grief. In crude generalization, we know that such “Derridadaism,” as Geoffrey Hartman calls it, posits no totality of meaning in any “text” to the point of denigrating any intention of meaning to a relative aspect of deconstruction. The sounds of words themselves have been coursed to the same meaningless stasis as Stevens’ leaves. Such reading is so scholastically abstract that it is alienated from familiar patterns of experience that can simulate meaning only as discrete culturally politicized forms.

Hass reacts to the nihilistic despair in his friend’s voice with Carlyle’s “Everlasting Nay.” He sees the pointlessness of dissolving language and, as he names words as mere examples of potentially disembodied words, the word woman summons a particular woman to memory. Then he describes a coital sensation, a flash of yearning, in which childhood scenes of yore return with poignant beauty and nostalgia for their passage. The word triggered the woman, who once triggered other memory, and in tranquillity he resurrects all these kinetic particulars that have, in fact, hardly anything to do with each other and hold only the common longing of desire. But I do remember particular things about her too, Hass says, self-conscious finally of the failure of these loving memories to resolve together. And responding finally to a longing for a resolution of positive unity, since the poem has been impelled all along by a recoil from nihilistic solipsism, Hass turns to a proprioceptive intuition of Numinious transcendence. Nomen: the animist spirit in objects. Noumena: Kantian transcendentalist term for the unknowable things-in-themselves whose existence is a necessary presupposition. Like Carlyle, Hass declares everything a miracle and chants us to closure with a thaumaturgical Mantra.
Carlyle’s Numen was exactly the high sounding tunk-a-tunk that Stevens, the Modern harmonizer for an Age of Unbelief, constantly debunked and it might seem peculiar to see it ghosting about our postmodern workshops. But perhaps our new Critical Destructionists actually resemble Carlyle’s old antagonists, the Profit and Loss Mechanists? Have old clothes become new in the new Kitsch Boutiques? And let us not forget that for Stevens, Tennyson was the grandfather poet whose autocratic sentimentality still weighed palpably on a new post-WW I order. What poems could contrast more, particularly and generally, than Stevens’ “The Course of a Particular” and Tennyson’s concluding poems in *In Memoriam*, though both talk of nature and loss?

Thy voice is on the rolling air;
    I hear thee where the waters run;
    Thou standest in the rising sun,
And in the setting thou art fair.

What art thou then? I cannot guess;
    But though I seem in star and flower
    To feel thee somewhat diffusive power,
I do not therefore love thee less.

My love involves the love before;
    My love is vaster passion now;
    Tho’ mixed with God and nature thou,
I seem to love thee more and more.

Far off thou art, but ever nigh;
    I have thee still, and I rejoice;
    I prosper, circled with thy voice;
I shall not lose thee tho’ I die.

(130)

As the particularities of Tennyson’s love diffuse, a diffusion that as a shock to his absolutist faith has grief-rended him, a vast universal Love grows more and more. In Stevens’ poem, human compassion heard in the cry of the leaves diffuses until finally it concerns no one at all; a direct contradiction to the Tennyson/Carlyle manifesto that “Love involves the love before,” that the soul becomes mixed with God in nature and all about us pulses a living Numen, if we would but listen. For Hass, the particulars remain diffused, yet each discrete word and triggered memory can push his tenderness button and give him a love-rush.

Let’s assume that poets famous in their own time are generally saying things people want to believe in a way people want to hear them said. “Meditation at Lagunitas” is a poem as familiar to current graduate poetry workshoppers as “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine
Island, Minnesota” by James Wright was to my crew of Iowa poetry trainees in the ’60s. As Keats and Tennyson fixed blood-beat and inscape to Spenser’s old songs, so the new “creative writers” study Hass and Sharon Olds, whose “Where Will Love Go?” follows:

Where will love go? When my father died, I could no longer get into his body to swell his chest, draw light into his eyes and shine on the oily darkened slopes of his skin, then my love for him lived here in my body and lived wherever the smoke they made of him curled like a spirit. And when I die my love for him will live in my smoke and live in my children, some of it still rubbed into the grain of the desk he left me and the dark-red pores of the leather chair he sat in coldly when I was a child and then gave me passionately after his death—our love is locked in it together the way two alloys make a metal, we are there in the dark workings of his 40-pound 1932 Underwood, the black and silver trapezes deep in its heavy see-through body on the desk in front of the chair. Even when the children die our love will live in their children and still be here in the curved arm of the chair, locked in it, like the secret structure of matter, but what if we ruin everything, the earth burning like a human body, storms of soot wreathing her in permanent winter? Where will love go? Will the smoke be made of human love, will the sphere of cold turning ash, seen by no one, heard by no one, hold all our love? Then love is powerless and means nothing.

Well, Tennyson supposedly said at a dinner party that he figured he was the best English prosodist since Shakespeare and, in the embarrassed silence following this boast, said, “Of course I have absolutely nothing to say.” Sharon Olds is saying the same thing Tennyson said, that love will persist after death, diffused in a variety of numinous objects and elements, but since her vision is relentlessly material, the finite and fluid temporality
of all love-objects grows more and more to be a horrific mockery. As in Hass’s poem, all her objects are connected by a thread of subliminal association rather than thematic meaning. Love implausibly seeps through stuff like the famous dust through the worm but, as Stevens says, love is just a fiction. How this seems different from Stevens is that this poem has no vision beyond its particulars and finally reeks of a curious despair. In “The Course of a Particular,” the particular reaches a point where it isn’t talking to anyone any more, but in fact this is a transcendent revelation: that Great Nature has other business besides talking to us. Death is more than ever the mother of beauty for Stevens. For Olds it’s proof of the powerlessness of love. In “Things That Are Worse than Death,” she writes:

You are speaking of Chile,
of the woman who was arrested
with her husband and their five-year-old son.
You tell how the guards tortured the woman, the man, the child,
in front of each other,
“as they like to do.”
Things that are worse than death.
I can see myself taking my son’s ash-blond hair in my fingers,
tilting back his head before he knows what is happening,
slitting his throat, slitting my own throat
to save us that. Things that are worse than death:
this new idea enters my life.
The guard enters my life, the sewage of his body,
“as they like to do.” The eyes of the five-year-old boy, Dago,
watching them with his mother. The eyes of his mother
watching them with Dago. And in my living room as a child,
the word, Dago. And nothing I experienced was worse than death,
life was beautiful as our blood on the stone floor
to save us that—my son’s eyes on me,
my eyes on my son—the ram-boar on our bodies
making us look at our old enemy and bow in welcome,
gracious and eternal death
who permits departure.

This particular death obviously isn’t the mother of beauty Stevens meant. Nor is this a “nobility of mind at odds with circumstance,” but a humiliated mind overwhelmed by circumstances. Sharon Olds’s most famous poems are particularized to a point where they must be described as topical. This means that the readers who make poems famous are the sort of people who find it revelatory in the midst of our lives to discover that life can be so painful that death is a relief. This new poem about loss combines sensational imagery used for morbid spectacle with casual idiom in a way which most resembles apocalyptic poetry of the late Roman
Empire poets teetering on the edge of Christian conversion. As a new idea, it enters and is absorbed immediately into the solipsistic jelly of “my life.” There is a smug cliché inherent in the “Dago” lines, that by virtue of the complacent bigotry of American middle class living rooms this family in Chile is being raped. In the Topical School of poetry, narrative situations tend to be hypothetical case histories that illustrate general ideas about extrinsic politics, or intrinsic psychology. In such poems, Nature, all that is not self, must petition entrance to Self with a consequent loss of irony. Olds seems utterly oblivious, for instance, to the old heroic idea that dishonor is worse than death, or the old religious idea that the soul must be saved at the cost of death. In fact, the terrible torture of a child is absorbed into another occasion for self-righteous anger with the cultural vacuity and moral banality of her own upbringing. In general, the failure of contemporary poetry cannot be attributed to its obvious failure to capture the sympathy of the general population, but to a failure to spark an empathetic chord with real intellectuals who have been its only readers since the Moderns. In general, the new poetry about loss seems more like late Romantic poetry than like Modern poetry, though free verse clouds the particular sentimentality.

Life, we were told quite young, is not fair. Even though we know this, it always feels like it ought to be fair and no matter how old we get we keep feeling that death never seems fair. Because we never get used to this idea it seems new daily. The Philosophy of Ice-Cream, by its very relativity, works best in youth, health, and affluence. “The mind of winter” philosophies of solipsism and nihilism seem more exciting during phases when our proprioceptive vigor makes feeling bad feel good. Later, we become surfeited with cloying confection, the hilarity lags and there we sit, staring at gray, cold feet lit by a carelessly fixed lamp. Thinking of nothing. The general Principle of Pleasure, Carpe Diem, is a celebration of life through an acceptance of death. The Pleasure Principle, a circumstantial avoidance of pain, is a coping with life through a resignation to death. In an Age of Unbelief, as Stevens called our era, has the “bare bodkin” become a reasonable (“rubless?”) option for someone suffering the slings and arrows of outrageous high school? Rimbaud wrote the most powerful poetry of adolescent nihilism of our era and I’ve often wondered what his poems would have been like if he hadn’t quit writing at 19 to become a slave-trader. Are the only alternatives to lapse into stunned, tenured silence or have a religious conversion? Is a sense of the Sublime necessary to the poetic medium? When we talk about “political poetry,” do we mean poetry that has strong political themes, i.e., topically particular, or poetry that has nothing but those themes?
’This Is Not Landscape’: Wallace Stevens, Having Removed His Chapeau and Saluted the Ocean, Steps off the Cliffs of Moher

Who is my father in this world, in this house,  
At the spirit’s base?  
My father’s father, his father’s father, his—  
Shadows like winds  
Go back to a parent before thought, before speech,  
At the head of the past.  
They go to the cliffs of Moher rising out of the mist,  
Above the real,  
Rising out of present time and place, above  
The wet, green grass.  
This is not landscape, full of the somnambulations  
Of poetry  
And the sea. This is my father or, maybe,  
It is as he was,  
A likeness, one of the race of fathers: earth  
And sea and air:  
—Stevens, “The Irish Cliffs of Moher”

DAVID CITINO

WHO BUT THE GREAT sober comedian of modern poetry would dare begin a poem bearing a title of such stony weight with so homely a question? Who but Wallace Stevens could bring off so obvious a mix of near-imponderable abstractions—abstractions of “magnitude,” to borrow the term which Helen Vendler claims that Stevens borrowed from Keats’s sonnet on the Elgin marbles—and the personal specifics of place and kinship and desire? And then to toss in a word like “somnambulations,” as if the poet were daring the reader to object to the spending of five syllables on a single gaudy word in a short poem tight with monosyllables, “It is as he was.” Who would be so obstinately evasive as to end a personal lyric with “earth / And sea and air”?  

I’ve always been as fascinated by the contradictions in Stevens, the work and the man, as by the audacity of this poet who felt that when he sat down to write all things were possible only if all things were permissible. He is a spectacular poet in a number of ways: the writer who delights in making a spectacle of himself in language; the tightrope walker at work without a net high above the sawdust floor, the performer ever in danger of falling (or at least appearing to be in danger, the better to ooh and ah the crowd); the grandly sad clown he can become, paunchy Falstaff or W. C.
Fields, comical but grandiloquently fastidious, a showman making us laugh with his grandiose verbal and metaphorical improbabilities; the frequent tweaker of the nose of our (and his) middle-class sensibilities and expectations. And along with this big show is the buttoned-up, close to the vest, somber-suited executive at his serious desk with its In and Out boxes, an organization man filled with anxieties regarding profit and loss, actuarial tables and probabilities—as opposed to the “coppery, keen claws” of the improbabilities of his poems.

Instead of writing directly about the world, Stevens wrote his own mind, giving us “things exactly as they are” and yet at the same time things that are “changed upon the blue guitar.” Writing poetry, he imagined himself imagining himself writing poetry. He also helped to elevate irony to its current exalted position in American letters, a position it gives every indication of holding for some time. He may be the white-collar poet of this century, but he takes himself just seriously enough as artist and craftsman to avoid pretension.

Many of his lines have stayed with me since my first encounter with them—lines which seem so true or so outlandishly untrue that they become nearly proverbial, in a personal sense. I store them in that hard-to-reach mental desk drawer labeled “Things I Know But Don’t Always Remember That I Know”:

The malady of the quotidian . . .
(“The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad”)

Let be be finale of seem.
(“The Emperor of Ice-Cream”)

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
(“Anecdote of the Jar”)

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice.
(“Of Modern Poetry”)

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow . . .
(“The Snow Man”)

Complacencies of the peignoir . . .
(“Sunday Morning”)

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Susanna’s music touched the bawdy strings
Of those white elders; but, escaping,
Left only Death’s ironic scraping.
Now, in its immorality, it plays
On the clear viol of her memory,
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.
(“Peter Quince at the Clavier”)

These lines and others help to track the great trajectories of Modernism for me (as much as do parts of The Waste Land and Ulysses and The Waves), and they have, I would venture to say, become part of the image-hoard of contemporary poetry—and not only because they appear with frequency in anthologies. The dash and élan, the preposterousness of such expression along with the startling clarity of the phrasing carry the poems beyond the strictures of period and fashion. The wit and audacity of such lines may keep them forever modern.

And the titles:

Le Monocle de Mon Oncle
Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour
Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock
The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade
Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas
Long and Sluggish Lines
What We See Is What We Think
No Possum, No Sop, No Taters
Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb

Each of these titles is a poem in miniature; together they define a single and singular sensibility. Only a terribly wise poet could have fashioned such headings—and the poems to follow them. Only a wise poet who saw the necessity from time to time of becoming something of a wise guy. Such titles are position papers of a sort; they define an argument for me, a stance whereby the poet champions the active and dramatic apprehension of the world, an oratorical avidness for language and a lust to follow words where they lead.

Often they lead from, and back to, music. The composer Donald Harris, a friend of mine, has set to music “Of Hartford in a Purple Light,” a poem about the interplay of “lights masculine” and “lights feminine.” Like “Mother,” “Hartford” is concerned with rock, “The stone bouquet.” This musical composition of Donald Harris, which was featured on a radio
biography of Stevens done some years back for Connecticut Public Radio, becomes for me a collaboration which shows off to great advantage the strength of each artist, and I hear also in the beauty of what Harris has done Stevens’ genius for playing the instrument of language. A poem by Wallace Stevens sounds like a poem by no other poet. A poem by Stevens must never be read silently. Reading this poet requires a willingness on the part of the reader to enter into a collaboration, to “half-create” the art that is going on.

In “The Irish Cliffs of Moher” the actual landscape is not exactly taken for granted, but it is somehow assumed. The cliffs become setting, and then, to use I. A. Richards’ terminology, “tenor”—that half of the metaphor which is anchored in this world. But Stevens, as he does in so many poems, pushes the poetry further. The scene is transformed into “vehicle” as well, the natural scene compared to itself in a leap of the imagination, the speaker leaping off the cliff and jumping out of himself and the poem coming alive. This is typical of Wallace Stevens. This place “is not landscape,” we are told, but rather, “This is my father,” and, more: “It is as he was, / A likeness, one of the race of fathers . . .” Thus the rock becomes, beyond setting, the poet’s journey to the (Irish) end of the earth and the (personal) beginning of his world in a search for origins and destinations, “a parent before thought,” and it becomes the father of all fathers—all the while being maintained as metaphor, a “likeness.” What brass. What chutzpah. Wallace Stevens insists on having it all in a poem, and almost always he gets it.

I had been drawn to this poem for a number of reasons, not the least of which being the ease with which the speaker sweeps time before him as he goes about his search for something as irreducible as rock, as beauty, “My father’s father, his father’s father, his . . .” I knew Stevens’ poem before I visited, in 1973, the real cliffs of Moher, and, standing there looking toward America down the sheer rock face of the edge of the Irish West, I remember feeling curious for the first time about the real and the really imagined worlds in which poetry operates. Seeing the natural magnitude of this tourist attraction while carrying the artistic rendering of it in my mind, I was made to think of the ways nature can imitate art and art impersonate itself, and of the ultimate possibilities and ultimate failures of language, with which we attempt to contain something like truth between the white spaces of the nothing in which a poem must begin and end. I was made as well to think about the father I had recently become, and to search my mind for my own father.

This wandering/wondering led me to a poem, finished in 1974 or thereabouts (and published in 1976 in Descant—one of my first publications). It bears little resemblance to the poem which Stevens wrote, and is not even that sort of derivative homage a young poet writes to a lofty figure who soars the Empyrean heights. I can say, however, that I never
could have written it had I not seen Stevens’ cliffs of art before I came upon the cliffs of reality. It is a modest attempt to talk back to a great poet and to the world, the hope being that such backtalk can end in something rather like poetry.

The Cliffs of Moher

Poised before the waterfall of blue rock, a crooked man, his clenched red face a navel, deals a round of postcards to the tourists who ring him like cows around a night fire, mouths opening to small animal noises which perish terribly in wind.

Just the fisted face, cabbaged hands, black coat and peasant cap; he’s been here doing this, loving the rock’s slope for four hundred years, hopes to retire, when he’s saved a few quid, to stare at the final rise of Dublin tenement while waiting for death, after which he’ll stare for dark ages at the inside of a perfect pine door, admiring its endurance.

He, at least, isn’t my father.

The cliffs are, finally, everything you wished them to be: an absence of corners, a glut of gods, the raw bone of stone, a flash of white sea bird. It’s all done with mirrors.

Nothing can be as permanent as the claims of this day.
The Malady of the Quotidian

PAUL LAKE

I

IN POEMS SUCH AS “TINTERN ABBEY” and The Prelude Wordsworth created a new type of poetry. Harold Bloom has described this new poetry as one that took consciousness and the poetic imagination as its principal subject. Wallace Stevens, throughout his own long career, followed his great precursor’s example, and in poems such as “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” extended the tradition into this century, adding to it a mode of irony we have come to recognize as Modernist.

But Wordsworth also wrote a second type of poetry that finds no echo in Stevens, a poetry we find chiefly in Lyrical Ballads. M. H. Abrams in his essay “English Romanticism: The Spirit of the Age” describes Wordsworth as having two voices; he suggests that in this second voice Wordsworth undertook something different from the exploration of consciousness. Quoting the preface to Lyrical Ballads, he writes that Wordsworth also attempted “to represent realistic ‘incidents and situations from common life’ in ordinary language and to employ ‘humble and rustic life’ as the main source of the simple characters and the model for the plain speech” (Bloom 112).

In this essay I hope to explore this difference between Wordsworth and Stevens and, in doing so, to trace the source in Stevens’ poetry of what I will call, after Stevens himself, “The malady of the quotidian,” a malady that haunts his work from first to last. Wordsworth successfully fused his two voices in one poetic vocation and in his greatest poetry achieved a wholeness of utterance that eluded Stevens. Though it’s no longer fashionable to speak in such terms, I think Stevens failed to achieve a similar wholeness because he limited himself to a poetry of consciousness alone. The malady of mind and spirit that resulted derives at least partly from Stevens’ unwillingness or inability to engage “incidents and situations from common life.” Men and women, when they exist at all in his poetry, serve merely as objects of contemplation. Unlike the various vagrants and pedlars and leech gatherers one encounters in the poetry of Wordsworth, people in Stevens’ poetry exist primarily as things.

Let’s begin with Wordsworth’s famous formulation in “Tintern Abbey.” In that poem, Wordsworth writes that he is a “lover” of “all the mighty world / Of eye, and ear—both what they half create, / And what perceive” (Wordsworth 164-65). This is very different from Stevens’ formulation in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” In the following stanza, the woman Stevens describes does far more than “half create” the mighty world of eye and ear:
She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker . . .

(CP 129)

In this, as in other passages, Stevens advocates an idealism as radical as Bishop Berkeley’s. The world has no reality except as idea. In other poems Stevens suggests a consciousness-created reality strikingly similar to that espoused by some theorists of quantum physics. Consider these lines from “Description without Place”:

There might be, too, a change immenser than
A poet’s metaphors in which being would
Come true, a point in the fire of music where
Dazzle yields to a clarity and we observe,

And observing is completing and we are content,
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole.

(CP 341)

Reading a passage like the above, one might recall experiments in quantum physics in which an electron’s attributes are said not to exist until measured by an observing consciousness. Stevens’ lines also suggest another phenomenon familiar to us from science: the way photons of light exist as waves until their sudden collapse into particles as they hit the retina of a conscious observer. Yet prescient as some of Stevens’ poetic conjectures seem in regard to modern scientific theories, it is their relationship to Wordsworth’s very different ideas about the nature of man and the world that concern us here. Recall that Wordsworth described himself as a “lover” of “all the mighty world / Of eye and ear . . .” In his own lines, by contrast, Stevens is very much the neutral observer; he uses two forms of the word in the passage above. This might seem a minor point, but it has large ramifications for the rest of his work.

The lyrical “I” in Wordsworth’s poetry, as Abrams and others have pointed out, is Wordsworth himself speaking to a reader without a mask—a “man speaking to men,” in the words of his preface to Lyrical Ballads. Even The Prelude, for all its Miltonic ambition, is addressed to a particular friend: Coleridge. Stevens, on the other hand, speaks through masks; the self in his poems is most frequently a fictive self: scholar, rabbi, philosopher, the man on the dump, the man whose pharynx was bad, Crispin, the interior paramour.

In poem after poem, we find Wordsworth ranging over the landscape, encountering flowers, streams, rivers, cities, women, and men. The speakers in Stevens’ poems often appear to be observing the world through a
window or contemplating it over a book, as in “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm.” Nature in Stevens’ poetry is most often the sort the poet might have encountered in a garden or out the window of his Hartford home: flowers, birds, clouds, rain, sunlight, snow. Wordsworth writes a poetry of encounter; Stevens, a poetry of detached contemplation.

Nowhere is Wordsworth’s difference from Stevens more apparent than in Book Thirteen of The Prelude. Here Wordsworth writes of

those watchful thoughts
Which, seeing little worthy or sublime
In what the Historian’s pen so much delights
To blazon—power and energy detached
From moral purpose—early tutored me
To look with feelings of fraternal love
Upon the unassuming things that hold
A silent station in this beauteous world.

Thus moderated, thus composed, I found
Once more in Man an object of delight,
Of pure imagination, and of love.

(Wordsworth 579)

Milton Bates and others have commented on Stevens’ desire to create a “pure poetry” of the imagination, to make “medium man” or “major man” the object of his poetic contemplation; rarely are men and women the objects of love in Stevens’ poetry. Similarly, one doesn’t find Stevens contemplating “the unassuming things that hold / A silent station in this beauteous world” with “fraternal love.” In Stevens’ poetry, even a man or woman most often becomes merely another object of thought, an occasion for meditating on the ideal. By contrast, in The Prelude Wordsworth describes how he gained

A more judicious knowledge of the worth
And dignity of individual man,
No composition of the brain, but man
Of whom we read, the man whom we behold
With our own eyes . . .

(Wordsworth 580)

No composition of the brain, he writes, but the man whom we behold. When Wordsworth encounters the leech gatherer of “Resolution and Independence,” the beggars of the poem of that title, the various gypsies and vagrants and peddlars of The Prelude and the lyrics and ballads, he greets them with “fraternal love”; he speaks to them “without reserve” and sees into “the depth” of their “human souls” (Wordsworth 581). To use the terms of the philosopher Martin Buber, he meets them in an I-Thou rela-
tionship. Having mentioned Buber, I would now like to examine his ideas more carefully and then apply them to Stevens. Buber writes of two types of relationship: an I-Thou relationship and an I-It relationship. The I-It relationship does not apply only to inanimate objects. “Without a change in the primary word,” Buber writes, “one of the words He and She can replace It” (Buber 3). He further writes, “If I face a human being as my Thou and say the primary word I-Thou to him, he is not a thing among things, and does not consist of things” (Buber 8).

Applied to the poetry of Stevens, these words have a disturbing significance: the I-Thou relationship Buber describes is conspicuous by its almost total absence from Stevens’ poetry. Eschewing dialogue and narrative, Stevens writes a poetry of lyrical meditation, yet the lyrical “I,” as we’ve seen, is generally as fictive as the world it contemplates, a thing among things.

Buber supplies an interesting commentary on this situation. I will quote two passages at some length because of their remarkable bearing on Stevens’ entire corpus. Here’s the first:

The life of human beings is not passed in the sphere of transitive verbs alone. It does not exist in virtue of activities alone which have some thing for their object.

I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something. The life of human beings does not consist of all this and the like alone.

This and the like together establish the realm of It.

But the realm of Thou has a different basis.

When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object. For where there is a thing there is another thing. Every It is bounded by others; It exists only through being bounded by others. But when Thou is spoken, there is no thing. Thou has no bounds.

When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation. (Buber 4)

Now let’s turn to one of Stevens’ most ambitious poems, “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” I don’t propose to explain all of this perplexing poem; rather, I want to illuminate a few brief passages in the light of Buber’s thought. Stevens divides his poem into three principal sections. The title of the first is It Must Be Abstract. In Part X of that section, he writes,

The major abstraction is the idea of man
And major man is its exponent, abler
In the abstract than in his singular,

More fecund as principle than particle.

(CP 388)
The speaker then describes a Chaplinesque figure in pantaloons and concludes this section of the poem with the following lines:

It is of him, ephebe, to make, to confect
The final elegance, not to console
Nor sanctify, but plainly to propound.

(CP 389)

Yet for all of Stevens’ eloquent attempts to describe “major man” in this poem, he never gets beyond propounding “the idea of man.” In Buber’s terms, he addresses man as an It rather than a Thou. Buber writes, “No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou.” And then in a passage that seems almost as if it were written to explain Stevens’ lifelong attempt to create a “Supreme Fiction” that reconciles the real and the ideal, Buber comments,

Appeal to a “world of ideas” as a third factor above this opposition will not do away with its essential twofold nature. For I speak of nothing else but the real man, of you and of me, of our life and of our world—not of an I, or a state of being, in itself alone. The real boundary for the actual man cuts right across the world of ideas as well.

To be sure, many a man who is satisfied with the experience and use of the world of things has raised over or about himself a structure of ideas, in which he finds refuge and repose from the oncome of nothingness. . . .

But the mankind of mere It that is imagined, postulated, and propagated by such a man has nothing in common with a living mankind where Thou may truly be spoken. The noblest fiction is a fetish, the loftiest fictitious sentiment is depraved. Ideas are no more enthroned above our heads than resident in them; they wander amongst us and accost us. The man who leaves the primary word unspoken is to be pitied; but the man who addresses instead these ideas with an abstraction or a password, as if it were their name, is contemptible. (Buber 13-14)

As a judgment on Stevens, I think this is unduly harsh. Stevens has given us great poetry, and when we see the intellectual gusto and brilliant humor with which he presents his fictions, we must certainly temper Buber’s criticism with admiration and gratitude. Yet even a reader who loves Stevens’ work can’t help feeling the shock of recognition when reading the above passage. Stevens himself seems to have achieved a similar recognition in the opening of “Arrival at the Waldorf”:
Home from Guatemala, back at the Waldorf.
This arrival in the wild country of the soul,
All approaches gone, being completely there,

Where the wild poem is a substitute
For the woman one loves or ought to love,
One wild rhapsody a fake for another.

(\textit{CP} 240-41)

He goes on to speak of “‘The world in a verse,’” and of “‘men remoter than mountains, / Women invisible in music’” (\textit{CP} 241).

Returning to “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (Part X of \textit{It Must Give Pleasure}), we see Stevens addressing the world itself—that “Fat girl, terrestrial.” At the end of this section he concludes,

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

Until flicked by feeling, in a gilded street,
I call you by name, my green, my fluent mundo.

(\textit{CP} 406-07)

He looks forward to a time when he can escape his abstractions and address the earth herself by name—as \textit{Thou}.

Stevens rarely attempts to address another being as \textit{Thou} in his poetry—yet he sometimes seems conscious of a desire to do so. One of these moments occurs in Part VI of \textit{It Must Change}, from “Notes,” a passage that has been variously interpreted. Yet if we keep Buber’s comments in mind as we look at the passage, its significance will be clear. The section begins,

Bethou me, said sparrow, to the crackled blade,
And you, and you, bethou me as you blow,
When in my coppice you behold me be.

(\textit{CP} 393)

I don’t find the word \textit{bethou} in the \textit{OED} and take it to be a word Stevens coined on the order of \textit{befriend}. The sparrow insists—both to the “crackled blade” and “you, and you,”—that he be addressed as \textit{thou} (\textit{CP} 394).

In the next stanza, the “bloody wren,” the “felon jay,” and the “jug-throated robin” pick up the cry, “Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade.” Returning to a description of the sparrow in the concluding stanza of this section, the speaker of the poem adjoins the reader to “Bethou him, you / And you, bethou him and bethou. It is / A sound like any other. It will end” (\textit{CP} 394).

In his letter to Hi Simons of January 12, 1943, Stevens refers to this passage and notes that it is “an old-fashioned poem of the onomatopoeia
of a summer afternoon. I suppose that insistent be-thou is a catbird” (L 435). But there is far more involved in the catbird’s cry than onomatopoeia, as Stevens suggests later. For in his letter of January 28 of the same year, Stevens writes the following to Simons:

We have in our garden half a dozen evergreens in a group which, for convenience, we call our coppice; for no particular reason a change of sound takes place in the coppice. Of course, there may be a psychological reason for the development of the idea. The change is an ingratiating one and intended to be so. When the sparrow begins calling be-thou: Bethou me (I have already said that it probably was a catbird) he expresses one’s own liking for the change . . . Bethou is intended to be heard; it and ké-ké, which is inimical, are opposing sounds. Bethou is the spirit’s own seduction. (L 438)

Holly Stevens, who edited her father’s letters, notes that where Stevens wrote “Bethou me,” in his letter, he added in the margin, “Tutoyez-moi.” There’s no mistake: the sparrow—or catbird—asks to be addressed by the familiar tu rather than by vous; he asks to be addressed as Thou. It is interesting that Stevens suggests in his letter that there may be “a psychological reason for the development of the idea” of this change of sound in the bird’s cry. The meaning of this section is problematical in relation to the development of the whole poem. But two sections later in Part VIII of It Must Change, Stevens describes the attempt of Nanzia Nunzio to address Ozymandias; stripping herself naked before him, she declares, “I am the spouse,” and asks to be clothed in “the final filament, / So that I tremble with such love . . .” But Ozymandias replies that “the spouse, the bride / Is never naked. A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind” (CP 395-96). A clear suggestion that it is impossible to know or possess the other in her essential being; that a “fictive covering” forever prevents our addressing another as Thou.

II

I have admired Stevens’ poetry since I first began writing poetry in my teens. I used to accept the general opinion that Stevens was one of the great Modernists of this century, along with Pound, Eliot, and Williams, but I now see him as the last great poet of the Romantic tradition that began with Wordsworth and Blake. His poetry of consciousness seems an extension of Wordsworth’s, and his belief in the power of the poetic imagination and in the existence of ideal or “major” man seems closely related to ideas held by Blake. Unlike the other Modernists I’ve mentioned, Stevens wrote most of his best poetry in blank verse, a fact that perhaps explains why Hugh Kenner, one of the high priests of Modernism, dislikes his work so much.
As with Stevens, most of my own best work is metrical. Yet for all my admiration of Stevens’ formal mastery and verbal daring, I’ve never felt the desire to emulate him. I think this has to do in large part with the fact that Stevens failed (in Wordsworth’s words again in The Prelude) to dwell “Upon the vulgar forms of present things / The actual world of our familiar days” (Wordsworth 583). Much of Stevens’ poetry enacts an escape from reality into a more “noble” world of ideas and abstractions. Milton Bates in his book Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self shows how even in his love letters to his fiancée Stevens erected dream castles and created imaginary landscapes into which he wished them to escape. This same desire to escape vulgar reality appears in various forms in his poetry. In this mode, Stevens appears rather more like Shelley than any of his other Romantic forebears or Modernist contemporaries.

Dana Gioia in his essay “Business and Poetry” writes of how Stevens’ career in business provided him with the success and security one rarely associates with a life spent writing poetry. Gioia further suggests that a job in business might have “sheltered [Stevens] from the economic consequences of writing without an audience, and possibly even tutored him in surviving alienation” (McDowell 118). He adds that a poet in such a situation can write for himself, without autobiographical exposition, and develop difficult ideas and private symbolisms since he is writing primarily for himself. “The routines of office life might have been anaesthetizing,” Gioia avers, “but this very feature also had its advantages for a poet” (McDowell 115). Though I think Gioia is largely correct, I suggest that the routines Stevens chose for himself had less advantageous consequences as well.

In “The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad,” the poem from which I take my title, Stevens writes,

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.
I am too dumbly in my being pent.

(POETS READING STEVENS 107)

To read this as simply the speech of the man of the poem’s title would be naïve. Through his mask, Stevens has perhaps identified the source of the “malady of the quotidian” he writes of in the poem’s third stanza. The word quotidian has among its meanings, “belonging to each day,” “everyday,” “routine.” Stevens appears to recognize here that the routine he chose for himself has resulted in his being too dumbly “pent” in his own being. Later in the poem he wishes something could “penetrate” so that he might become less “diffident.”

But quotidian also has another meaning: “commonplace, ordinary.” As a reader, I have often wished that Stevens had been content to dwell more
in this realm of the quotidian. Instead, he fled from the commonplace and ordinary in a way that most of us couldn’t emulate even if we wanted to. His corporate position, his financial security, his impressive Hartford home insulated him from the economic and social shocks to which most of us are heir. Wordsworth spoke with beggars and vagrants; Stevens retired behind the walls of his Hartford office and study. Like others near the bottom of the American middle class, I find Stevens’ approach to the higher slopes of Parnassus barred by the avenging angel of necessity. For the kind of poetry I write, poetry that includes people whose lives are shaped by vulgar and commonplace realities, Wordsworth rather than Stevens offers a model.

I’ve found an even more useful model in Robert Frost, whose poetic career might be read as an attempt to extend and correct Wordsworth. Frost writes of the “humble and rustic” life of men and women without Wordsworth’s occasional idealizing sentimentality. Frost’s Nature is much less the anthropomorphic being of Wordsworth’s poetry than the more inhuman one revealed by modern science; it is a nature sometimes frighteningly indifferent to our wishes. In his attitude toward this world, Frost is more a Roman Stoic than a Romantic enthusiast—a poise better suited to this century’s more terrible history.

Yet despite his stoicism, Frost in his lyrics, narratives, and monologues presents us with people, often commonplace and ordinary, endowed with a substance and depth like our own. Whether in his own person or through an imaginary character, Frost is able to speak to our essential being—as a “man speaking to men.” That seems to me an accomplishment far greater than the creation of any fiction, no matter how beautifully written or supremely conceived.

Still, I’m grateful to Stevens for showing us how far a poet might venture into the abstract on the winged horse of the imagination. For all his refusal to embrace the quotidian, his poetry possesses immense intelligence and humor and, at times, great feeling.

I can almost hear Stevens’ mocking voice as he looks down from the ramparts of his Supreme Fiction and, in the words of an early poem, “Gubbinal,” answers my criticism.

That strange flower, the sun,
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.
That savage of fire,
That seed,
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

(CP 85)

I hope he’s escaped the quotidian at last and found a more celestial jungle-world where his fierce, lyrical being is at home.

Works Cited


Wallace Stevens’ Magnificent Fury

KENNETH ROSEN

IN ONE OF THOSE ODDLY ex cathedra letters to Henry Church, his friend the baking soda millionaire and arts patron, Stevens wrote that “The belief in poetry is a magnificent fury, or it is nothing” (L 446). His subject was lecturers on poetry, so the sentence is less cagey than it at first appears; i.e., it’s not poetry that’s a magnificent fury, but belief in it, and it’s belief that’s furious or nothing. At about this same time—actually, in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” a paper he delivered at a Princeton University conference funded by Church and his wife Barbara—Stevens noted with pleasure a reviewer’s use of a line from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65, “How with this rage can beauty hold a plea.” The line was used to praise an Englishman’s explosive paintings of flowers. Stevens commented, with a similar oxymoron, “What ferocious beauty the line from Shakespeare puts on when used under such circumstances!” (NA 35). What all this suggests is enough of a preoccupation on Stevens’ part to dislodge “magnificent” from reference limited to the scale and focus of “fury,” and to invest it with ideological content of the sort associated with terms like beauty and nobility, terms that for Stevens, on the human and expressive level, meant desire and intimacy. Under these circumstances “magnificent fury” can be viewed as an oxymoron too, or to depict a dialectic, “magnificent” on the one hand, “fury” on the other. Their synthesis is poetry. Without them there is nothing.

Again, Stevens’ letter referred merely to professing poetry, but his rhetorical figure and apocalyptic alternative, magnificent fury or nothing, characterize something essential to his alluring, densely enigmatic work. Missing is Stevens’ humor, the endearing humanity of his evasions, his mystifications, covert grudges and desires, and the uncanniness of his instinct for beguiling the reader’s inner voice. Yet these too can be construed as consequences of fury entangled with magnificence, by which Stevens meant engaged in rapt argument with titans or gods, or issues of equivalent scope. At another level of consciousness, the twilight realm of crafty defensiveness wherein the psyche hides its hurts and motives as if a wounded animal, Stevens’ idea might have been advanced to justify his poetry’s harshness, its willful cruelty and difficulty—not to Church, but to himself. In “Poetry Is a Destructive Force” (CP 192), magnificent fury includes relish of murder, or murderous revenge.

That’s what misery is,
Nothing to have at heart.
It is to have or nothing.
The syntax at the outset is disorienting. Neither “It” nor “That” have antecedents. What emerges as important is their opposition, that it’s either “That” or “It.” “That” is “misery,” while “It” is “to have.” Being the opposite of “misery” and of “nothing,” “It” means having something “at heart.”

It is a thing to have,
A lion, an ox in his breast.
To feel it breathing there.

A lion is “a destructive force,” so by reference to the title, poetry is a lion with an ox for stoutness of heart, and also an ox in the heart and stomach, killed and eaten.

Corazon, stout dog,
Young ox, bow-legged bear,
He tastes its blood, not spit.

“Its” refers to blood pumped by the bear-like lion’s ox of a heart, or to the “young ox” chewed and swallowed still bleeding.

He is like a man
In the body of a violent beast.
Its muscles are his own . . .

Finally, “He” with the young ox at heart and a violent, muscular body, is poetry. Having nothing at heart, poetry was blandly an “it,” but here “He” is a lion that is like a man with dangerous capacities, a beast that enjoys the relief of murder. Contrary to William Shakespeare, Sigmund Freud, and truth-will-out schools of thought and therapy, murder and a poetry that conceals the truth cure insomnia.

The lion sleeps in the sun.
Its nose is on its paws.
It can kill a man.

The lion is the apotheosis of reality and the sun itself, but its sun-warmed somnolence comes because it can kill. Without “magnificent fury,” there is nothing, not for Stevens, nor the lion, merely misery and no repose.

Interpretive difficulties entangled with aggression are constant, conscious, and deliberate throughout Stevens’ poetry. Poems in his first collection, Harmonium, mock his “golden quirks,” flaunt claims to “Paphian” (CP 4) coarseness, indifference to accessibility, or to squeamish readers’ needs. “Paphian,” for the classically trained, evokes Venus ferried to Paphos by attendant swans. “Paphian,” in an unabridged dictionary, is said to mean illicit love, wantonness, or prostitute. As Stevens boastfully assures “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman,”
This will make widows wince. But fictive things
Wink as they will. Wink most when widows wince.

(CE 59)

He wrote Harriet Monroe, who apparently didn’t get the reference, that some readers would recognize Jacques de Voragine as author of the 13th-century *Legenda Aurea*, scabrous legends of the saints, or maybe he hoped they’d ignorantly pun on voraginous, or voracious gulf, in “Colloquy with a Polish Aunt”:

> How is it that my saints from Voragine,
In their embroidered slippers, touch your spleen?

(CE 84)

“Voragine may warrant a charge of obscurantism on my part or of stupidity on the other fellow’s part, as the wind blows,” a recklessly unfeeling response to a supportive editor’s query (L 216). Besides the letter’s litigious diction, “warrant” and “charge,” what’s interesting here and throughout the early poetry is the intractability and spleen in Stevens’ recondite allusions and diction, in his minimalist yet labyrinthine syntax, and in his disdain for the specific occasion as a poetic subject, and how these dismissive reflexes become the muscles of his magnificent fury, the lion’s body he’d inhabit as if his own.

Initially the difficulties in Stevens’ poetry were praised by his academic supporters as the expression of an intellectual, aristocratic reserve. His glossy opacities complemented a critical ideology intent on divorcing literary utterance from Victorian moralism, and on achieving this and rescuing art by scuttling psychological motive and personal agenda altogether. Thus R. P. Blackmur’s early appreciation, “Examples of Wallace Stevens,” first printed in 1932, listed a horde of *Harmonium*’s peculiarities: “fubbed, girandoles, curlicues, catarrhs, gobbet, diaphanes, clopping, minuscule, pipping, pannicles, carked, ructive, rapey, cantilene, buffo, fisces, phylactery, princox, and funest,” and cited with approving amusement, “Thrum with a proud douceur” and “a pool of pink, / Clippered with lilies scudding the bright chromes” (CE 17), as examples of the manner contributing to Stevens’ “low reputation among those who dislike the precious and finicky, and [his] high one among those who value language’s ornamental properties without regard for its meaning” (71). Blackmur exalted in the way Stevens’ vocabulary was consistent with dictionary definition and hence exegetically functional, but without motives for their hectic coloration, the poems languished as contraptions of remarkable internal cleverness, psychologically empty and remote from the concerns of life. Years later Stevens would write that his own “real” life could appear, if once disclosed, frightening and proximate: “a beast disgorged, unlike, / Warmed by a desperate milk” (CE 404). He also wrote, “It is often said
of a man that his work is autobiographical in spite of every subterfuge. It cannot be otherwise” (NA 121).

For an insurance lawyer, responsible for implications buried in contracts and clauses, and for weaving evidence and precedents into protective arguments, a bonded client seeking relief from a disaster could be viewed as “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” for whom Stevens’ office would be obliged to secure the existence of heaven. His address to such a woman is a burlesque of lawyerly double-talk:

Take the moral law and make a nave of it
And from the nave build haunted heaven. Thus,
The conscience is converted into palms,
Like windy citherns hankering for hymns.
We agree in principle. That’s clear. But take
The opposing law and make a peristyle,
And from the peristyle project a masque
Beyond the planets. Thus, our bawdiness,
Unpurged by epitaph, indulged at last,
Is equally converted into palms,
Squiggling like saxophones. And palm for palm,
Madam, we are where we began.

(CP 59)

All things are equal, argues the poem, and a heaven loaded with palms can be built from either “a nave” or “a peristyle.” The alternatives are subtly gendered, vestibule (female/“nave”) or colonnade (male/“peristyle”), and the female heaven is like a cithern “hankering for hymns” (terrible pun), while the male heaven is a place where palms squiggle obtrusively, or “like saxophones.” Also embedded in the poem is an admission of secrecy, of “bawdiness, / Unpurged by epitaph.” “[P]eristyle,” repeated twice, another pun, means a colonnade of pillars, but also periphrasis, a style of concealment and elusiveness. Heaven is where “bawdiness” is “indulged at last.”

Double-talk is a form of aggression, yet for all of Stevens’ secretive and mischievous verbal muscle-flexing, his work creates the opposite long-term effect, far from lurid and aggressive, or coldly aloof. “Dazzling elegance,” wrote Randall Jarrell, praising the “philosophical breadth of sympathy, . . . dignity and magnanimity” (208) of the Collected Poems. Surely these moral properties reflect Stevens’ most distinctive achievement, the elevated, idealistic intimacy that is the source of his poetry’s hypnotic and compelling character. But maybe “destructive force” has a role in Stevens’ instinct for intimacy too. Maybe it was comprehensive rage, precluding conventional interpersonal affiliation and necessitating extraordinary aesthetic exertions, that fostered Stevens’ exceptional relationship with the reader, his poetry’s aura of courtliness, insight and
concern. Maybe the glow of intimacy that illumines the poetry was evolved to compensate for its raging aggravations, and at last did this so artfully that sympathy replaced the fury that had been a poem’s occasion.

This gets to be a difficult idea to keep in focus, the sympathetic and intimate part being such a shadowy, nebulous component of a poetry often conspicuously willful and contrary, and yet whose reputation for “wit and grace and intelligence,” as Jarrell put it, one would readily concede. (Jarrell, however, also advised readers to look “by the bad with a sweet uncaring smile” [208].) Still, one can endorse the virtues Jarrell esteems and productively contemplate “the bad” and more troublesome paradox: specific poems are angry, even vicious, yet contribute to one’s sense of philosophic breadth of charity and dignity.

Stevens explores a version of this paradox in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” the paper he gave at Princeton. First he traces the decline of the equestrian figure throughout cultural history, from Plato’s winged horses and charioteer representing the soul, to the merry-go-round depicted in a painting by a contemporary realist. He argues that the possibilities for nobility, demoted and nearly destroyed over two and a half millennia by the corrosive pressures of reality, could still reside in the sound of words, in “a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them” (NA 32). Later in the same paragraph he insists that what he’s after “must not be fixed.” He adds: “nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix it is to put an end to it” (NA 34). The basis of intimacy, last refuge of nobility, is an alluring blurredness, a poetry that “is not only our own thoughts but the thoughts of men and women ignorant of what it is that they are thinking” (NA 32). Nobility is intimacy achieved by a perfect indistinctness and by thinking the thoughts people don’t know they are thinking in words that are final yet unalterably vibrant.

Intimacy is the goal, indistinctness the means. This is often accomplished in Stevens by a sleight-of-hand, by the poems’ unusual adroitness in conveying a subjective order of meaning, a privileged sense of intention and significance that virtually replaces literal meaning and other objective properties. Stevens performs this feat, displacing his text with an insinuated subjectivity, just as he said, by being the acutest poet, i.e., by mobilizing an extraordinary arsenal of nuance, allusion, concentrated effect, symbolic consistency, and musical delicacy, all with a vibrant blur of signification. Eventually, exerting his art created effects that seemed effortless and transparent. But the obscurities of Harmonium are aspects of the same goal, to be intimately hidden if not invisible, as affirmed in “To the One of Fictive Music,”

That music is intensest which proclaims
The near, the clear, and vaunts the clearest bloom . . .

(CP 88)
Later the word “transparence” came to signify the desired mastery, absence of strain, and the sleight-of-hand itself, the magic maneuver whereby the objective, visible, and literal gave way to the subjective, intimate, and invisible. But at first Stevens’ art was yoked to concerns, gestures, and reflexes whose unpleasantness must have struck him as requiring strenuous poetic amelioration. At heart appears to have been a bitterness and fury he strove to represent as noble and magnificent.

“Invective Against Swans,” a rarely discussed poem from *Harmonium*, unfavorably assesses the worth of swans, here called “ganders,” versus the worth of the soul. The poem is addressed to the ganders, but as if in a biblical diatribe, over their heads, dismissing their advantages and extolling the soul’s superiority. At the same time, the poem laments how the soul is lonely, a writer of dubious accomplishment, “one who scrawls a listless testament / Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures” (*CP* 4). Yet because a writer, the soul can bequeath the ganders’ “white feathers to the moon” and their “bland motions to the air.” Moreover, the soul is attuned to the passage of time, the death of summer, and the way the crows soil public statues.

The crows, or one of them, may be avatars of the soul, which surely displays ambivalent sympathy with their behavior, the word “anoint” conveying a vague ironic relish. The statues, public or political art, decorate the swans’ territory, and are monuments to their terrestrial preoccupations. Asserting the poem’s subject, the vicissitudes of male rivalry, requires resisting how the poem conceals its emotional trouble by its stately mode, its unhurried iambs and pentameter, its couplets, rhetorical swell, and rhyme scheme, its biblical and hermetic diction, its masterful, yet tidy conclusion:

The soul, O ganders, flies beyond the parks
And far beyond the discords of the wind.

A bronze rain from the sun descending marks
The death of summer, which that time endures

Like one who scrawls a listless testament
Of golden quirks and Paphian caricatures,

Bequeathing your white feathers to the moon
And giving your bland motions to the air.

Behold, already on the long parades
The crows anoint the statues with their dirt.

And the soul, O ganders, being lonely, flies
Beyond your chilly chariots, to the skies.

(*CP* 4)
“Invective against Swans,” though only the second poem in Harmonium, depends for much of its meaning on code words that recur for the next forty years in Stevens’ work. Though not clarified in any particular context, their significance is consistent: in this case, bronze, sun, moon, and crows. Stevens’ poems depend on each other. After the title of this one, renaming the swans “ganders” conveys his antipathy and makes a pun: the swans gawk and are gawked at, as in gandering. This oblique touch of abuse is tied to the poem’s central concern, the soul’s superiority, which most readers will understand and retain. They won’t understand why the swans are addressed with bitter mournfulness, when the title said they’d be attacked. They may not know “Paphian” or successfully look it up. It’s not in abridged or college dictionaries, and it’s an adjective, so not obviously critical. They won’t thread the torturous syntax of lines four and five in order to understand that the soul is a kind of writer who holds his own listless testament, his act of judging and bequeathing, in ambiguous contempt. They will understand loneliness converted to strength, pathos converted to power, the soul’s triumph despite the advantages of ganders, and they will savor the soul’s righteousness and scorn. Though a homely story, a fable of indefinite religious flavor, it will feel noble, and within this aura of nobility readers will sense their innermost yearnings addressed, their desire to be liberated from homeliness, to triumph over others and to make those others stare, and finally, to fly away.

Stevens fully appreciated the implications of this rhetorical alchemy, and scorned its risks. “The Comedian as the Letter C,” his earliest, lengthiest, and most rambunctious allegory of self-creation, is candid about Crispin’s intrinsic anger, and his need to express and convert it:

He perceived
That coolness for his heat came suddenly,
And only, in the fables that he scrawled
With his own quill, in its own indigenous dew,
Of an aesthetic tough, diverse, untamed,
Incredible to prudes, the mint of dirt,
Green barbarism turning paradigm.

(CP 31)

Later in the poem it is thunder, the “note of Vulcan” and rage, that is specifically pleasurable to Crispin, and that creates the undifferentiated, subjective awareness he finds liberating:

And while the torrent on the roof still droned
He felt the Andean breath. His mind was free
And more than free, elate, intent, profound
And studious of a self possessing him,
That was not in him in the crusty town . . .

(CP 33)
The risk of the enterprise, balancing magnificence and fury, is failure. Crispin’s enterprise will result in poetry or nothing:

if the music sticks, if the anecdote
Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
Philosopher, beginning with green brag,
Concluding fadedly, if as a man
Prone to distemper he abates in taste,

And so distorting, proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?

*(CP 45-46)*

This dialectic yoking of fury and magnificence revolves around a strategy of concealment:

What counted was mythology of self,
Blotched out beyond unblotching.

*(CP 28)*

What Stevens here termed “blotched,” he later referred to as “transparence,” meaning poetry’s capacity to escape the fixities of meaning that would still the vibrations that gave words their perfect finality, and also to vanish under scrutiny, this being the aesthetic sleight-of-hand on which the dialectic of magnificence, fury, and intimacy depends—a necessary, but misleading, phrasing, since for Stevens, magnificence and intimacy were equivalent. As indicated earlier, his term for this in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” was “nobility,” which as he declared encompassed the soul’s self-expression at its “height and depth” *(NA 34).*

“Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” argues that the magical maneuver itself, this verbal disappearing act, is an ultimate good. The ability of words to vanish and be replaced by a subjective order of meaning comforts our solitude and dissolves individual differences.

Here, now, we forget each other and ourselves.
We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous.

This is, therefore, the intensest rendezvous.
It is in that thought that we collect ourselves,
Out of all the indifferences, into one thing . . .

*(CP 524)*

Stevens uses “indifferences” to express how humans are kept apart by an interior unresponsiveness, which is their ultimate “poverty.” That’s what
gets addressed by the “intensest rendezvous,” within which “we collect ourselves,” the poem:

Within a single thing, a single shawl
Wrapped tightly round us, since we are poor, a warmth,
A light, a power, the miraculous influence.

(\textit{CP} 524)

Though “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” is first-person plural, it is desolate and solitary. Its formal solemnity is for the inner ear, its intimate oratory and grand companionship for the inner being. The notion of poetry performing a communal or public function, declaimed or uttered in unison, is quite remote. Disdain for public or nonsubjective art, particularly statues, as noted in “Invective against Swans,” recurs throughout Stevens’ poetry. General Du Puy’s equestrian figure, in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” with his steed’s foreleg in the air as if “at the final funeral / The music halted and the horse stood still” (\textit{CP} 391), lacks crows to anoint it, but becomes a setting for geraniums, a flower Stevens had commended for its “civillest” odor. The notion of a public poetry comes up once, at the conclusion of “Evening without Angels”:

Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.

(\textit{CP} 138)

If this is the moon to which the writer-as-soul dismissed the gestures of the swans, then Stevens intends it to be absurd as the object of public esteem and inspiration. Despite how irresistibly the lines rise, they collapse on the word “moon.” Disparagement of the public chorale, “the voice that is great within us,” dismissal of its magnitude and truth, depends on one word, “moon,” partly on its fatuous music, partly on its association with romantic indulgence, or on values that reside in an unverifiable, but constant subjective order: precarious, but immutable; obscure, but noble. Greatness of voice and scorn for the moon are mutually canceling. The reader ascends to something greater than an account of an incident, people singing to the moon, to a superhuman view of that incident, a passionate disinterest, and a subjectively immense superiority. For the reliable significance of such code-words as “moon,” intimacy and privilege, the reader will sacrifice, at the poem’s virtual climax, the community of moon-gawkers and their social chorus, all to share remote grandeur and lonely certainty. One word subverted the literal and replaced it with the subjective, but the reader is an initiate, an insider, part of smaller, superior community. Later, as Stevens grew older and his fury avuncular, novices would be derided as “beards” and “ephebes,” and the true reader, as if aging too, would enjoy vicariously the master’s derision of the new initiate.
While a poem can’t be totally unintelligible and create a subjective response, Stevens praised luminous impenetrability in “Nuances of a Theme by Williams” (CP 18), which serves as a remarkably thorough, early key to his concerns and procedures. It begins with the four-liner William Carlos Williams had called “El Hombre,” but omitting Williams’ title:

It’s a strange courage  
you give me, ancient star:

Shine alone in the sunrise  
toward which you lend no part!

I
Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,  
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part  
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

II
Lend no part to any humanity that suffuses  
you in its own light.  
Be not chimera of morning,  
Half-man, half-star.  
Be not an intelligence,  
Like a widow’s bird  
Or an old horse.

(CP 18)

The italics are those of Stevens, his quotation of Williams, and when the poem continues with his own words, Stevens imitates for awhile Williams’ practice of beginning lines with lowercase letters, as if “suffused” by his friend’s example. The differences between the poets’ positions with respect to Venus, the morning star, as well as Stevens’ smoldering animosity, are set forth in deliberately cryptic terms. Stevens’ section opened with a vow of secrecy. Part of his antagonism may reflect proprietary or territorial feelings about stargazing, solitude, and calm suffering. His first published poem, “Autumn,” addressed this subject in the literary magazine of Reading Boys’ High School in 1898.

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

And I keep, sorrowing,  
This sunless zone,  
Waiting and resting here,  
In calm alone.

(SP 16)
Certainly a pathetic, embarrassing, late-Victorian poem, whose defects Stevens had spent two decades correcting and mastering. “Nuances of a Theme by Williams” is a demonstration of that mastery. The title alludes to the musical practice of penning “variations” on other composers’ melodies. “Nuances” is comprehensively condescending, connoting superior mental agility and connoisseurship, “nuances” being what others fail to notice. Likewise “Theme” presumes intellectual penetration, while the peremptory “Williams” is businesslike, as in a memorandum heading. The title is busily prolix and brusque, yet also languid and self-possessed. The reader is unprepared for the hurried intensity that follows. First there was Williams’ brief expression of gratitude for comfort from despair and loneliness, and then Stevens’ triumphant secrecy and isolation, announced with an emotional force that breaks from both Williams’ little poem and his own title’s grandiose self-possession. Stevens’ instructions tumble forth so fiercely, it’s hard to remember a claim to anything as subtle as a nuance. In the aftermath of the concise assemblage, the big title appears emotionally ambiguous, an ironic flourish and hence protective, yet also a disguise or sardonic dismissal of his own poem’s emotional content. Stevens’ repetitiveness, his pleading and urgent insisting, warns of a peril, the threat of a “humanity that suffuses / You in its own light.”

Though “suffuse” is not the same as suffocate, it suggests as much. It describes the blending of an external and internal cause, implying bewilderment, an excitement that overwhelms, scattering mental poise and flooding with blushes. Stevens’ illustrations of failures to avoid, the starman, the widow’s bird, and the old horse, are each examples of emotional suffusion, the betrayed and self-betrayed. His anger and remorse, resolve not to love, trust, or be trusted, resemble a love complaint, a promise never to fall again.

Williams’ poem had been a small, self-restoring apostrophe. It confessed to a sense of neglect and uncertainty, but “suffused” the star by personifying it and by projecting onto it his own dilemmas and solutions. He made it half-man, half-star. Stevens distances himself from the corruption of the sky by what he derides as “an intelligence,” or that Victorian shibboleth, the pathetic fallacy, by an unexpected move: he becomes the star. The mutual subject, and the dominant one, for both poets, is courage, and the reestablishment of self-esteem. For Williams the arena is social, the role one’s allotted in playing a part. For Stevens the arena is antisocial, and erotic in the sense of Eros being self-sufficient rather than sexual. His stance involves nakedness and display, or “shining,” and protects the roots of his being, his “inner part.” The star is barely the object of address, and Stevens as star is transcendentally independent. Venus, the end of the night, and sunrise, are as good as gone. Contradictory instructions, to “shine nakedly” and reveal or reflect “nothing,” obliterate the literal. In the trans-
figuring force of the emotionally obscure, or Stevens’ subjective order of meaning, it is he himself he is instructing to,

Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,  
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part  
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.

In contrast, Williams’ four lines appear subdued, mono-dimensional, lukewarm. Stevens’ fire and bronze are antithetic to precisely the emotional mimesis that was Williams’ method: “It is a strange courage you give me ancient star.” Williams had been miserable because he could lend no part. Stevens will lend nothing. Social and personal concerns, such as making a pet of the star, are dismissed as those of an old woman. Stevens disdains empathy. He invites his reader to share his fury and celestial splendor. Despite explication, his lines constantly recover their glitter of mystery. Despite abusiveness, his stance appears noble.

Less noble, however, is his attack on Williams a while later in the last section of the three-part poem, “A Thought Revolved.” Here Stevens returns to his irritation with Williams and their star in a mood more violently aggravated. Stevens transposes the subtitles of the poem’s last two sections, so his furious satire on “the moralist hidalgo” is entitled “The Leader” instead of the more revealing and appropriate “Romanesque Affabulation.” In the miscalled “Romanesque Affabulation,” now penultimate, Stevens profiles with sincere fervor an ideal “earthly leader.” In the last section, now “The Leader,” he derides the socially concerned hidalgo, whose sincerity is an excretion, an offense to nature.

Behold the moralist hidalgo  
Whose whore is Morning Star  
Dressed in metal, silk and stone,  
Syringa, cicada, his flea.

In how severe a book he read,  
Until his nose grew thin and taut  
And knowledge dropped upon his heart  
Its pitting poison, half the night.

He liked the nobler works of man,  
The gold façade round early squares,  
The bronzes liquid through gay light.  
He hummed to himself at such a plan.

He sat among beggars wet with dew,  
Heard the dogs howl at barren bone,
Sat alone, his great toe like a horn,
The central flaw in the solar morn.

(\textit{CP} 186-87)

What connects this invective to the New Jersey poet-physician of Spanish-English descent, namely those clues in the opening lines and the last one, are Stevens’ allusions to his own “Nuances of a Theme by Williams.” \textit{Syringa} is the Latin name for lilac, a blossoming thyrsus or erotic sign. It also refers to the doctor’s tool, the syringe, and the Panpipe, the syrinx. Other displeasing qualities assigned the hidalgo are the cicada’s distracting noise, the flea’s puny nuisance, his relative thinness, his affection for public art or even socialism, self-satisfaction and pity for the poor. The “toe like a horn” suggests ugliness, yet also a connection with the fabled source of true dreams, as if underlying Stevens’ anger at Williams were envy, and greater anger with himself.

Stevens’ letters to Williams are mostly affable, but sometimes strained, edged with uneasiness, forced cheer or even hypocrisy. In 1927 Stevens wrote congratulating Williams for receiving the Dial Award: “Your townsmen must whisper about you and, as you pass the girls, they surely nudge each other and say ‘The golden boy!’” (\textit{L} 249). Stevens was nearly forty-eight, or three years older than Williams. A month earlier he had written Marianne Moore, poetry editor of \textit{The Dial}, declining to write the announcement for Williams’ prize. Stevens’ “A Thought Revolved” was published ten years afterwards, in 1937, as part of \textit{The Man with the Blue Guitar}. There’s a letter in 1942, five years later, in which Stevens writes, “Don’t worry about my gray hair. Whenever I ring for a stenographer she comes in with a pistol strapped around her belt. Best regards young feller and best wishes” (\textit{L} 400). In both ostensibly friendly instances, Stevens’ thought revolved around sexual success, attractiveness to women, or affirmed the menace of own his potency. Thus a persisting, pivotal issue was masculine rivalry.

Yet even the invective of “The Leader” stimulates a subjective response. Williams, as poet and public figure, doctor to the poor and poet to the rhetorically humble, is visible only as the obscure Romantic antagonist of Stevens’ chronic grievances, part of a poetic myth and code, which register here and elsewhere primarily on the subjective level. Stevens’ fury, though discerned and felt, is barely visible, certainly not subject to verification or assessment. All that’s tangible is aggravation, a well of trouble fed by veiled allusion to personal vexations, the elusive spring whose meaning the poem, with its versy tetrameter and rhymes, declines to specify. If it did, readers would have to contemplate the merits of Stevens’ charges. Instead they contemplate Stevens’ opaque misery, and confront a shadowy reflection of themselves, smarting but not outsmarted. As for Williams, he seems not to have taken Stevens’ hidalgos, Cuban Doctors, dangerous Ramons, and comic Fernandos at all personally until 1945 when he read...
of the “hard hidalgo” who “Lives in the mountainous character of his speech,” appearing in “Description without Place” (CP 345). For the most part Williams expressed his distress gently, going so far as to write a poem about a mountain hike with Stevens and evoking the tousled head of Stevens’ grandson, as if to coax Stevens from his bitter and astringent epistemology. Williams’ rebuttal appears in “A Unison,” which begins:

The grass is very green, my friend, 
and tousled, like the head of— 
your grandson, yes? And the mountain, 
the mountain we climbed 
twenty years since for the last 
time (I write this thinking 
of you) is saw-horned as then 
upon the sky’s edge—an old barn 
is peaked there also, fatefully, 
against the sky. And there it is 
and we can’t shift it or change 
it or parse it or alter it 
in any way.

(Williams 238)

The aggression that pervades Stevens’ poetry is always ambiguous, troubled or jubilant, remorseful or vicious, and sometimes all of the above. Besides personal riddles, he liked paradoxes that obliged the mind to stumble, or tormented it with contradictions that frustrated thinking:

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

(CP 91-92)

This is chaos. Where does beauty live if not in the body or the mind? Is it a fitful portal? No, tracing it is fitful. If immortal in the flesh, it’s not even in Plato’s outer space. To tease an aesthetic theory from this, the conclusion to “Peter Quince at the Clavier” (CP 89), is secondary to acknowledging the oppressive, mischievous confusion of Stevens’ antinomies. This pell-mell tripping over the argument, and excursion into the tale of Jewish elders ogling Susanna bathing, is provoked by the thought of a woman whose skin is like “blue-shadowed silk” occurring to Peter Quince, the desirous oaf at the clavier. The scene is decorous, the impulse rapacious. Stevens has retraced, even satirized Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which begins by appreciating the feminized urn (an “unravish’d bride”), travels to ancient Greece, then abandons logic to assert the equivalence of truth and beauty. Peter Quince, it’s intimated, would prefer
capturing a maiden loth, hearing the melody, and kissing his prize. But in fact he doesn’t. Quince scrapes at the idea of her, at the portal she’s impressed on his mind, “on the clear viol of her memory” (CP 92). And Quince’s lines also resist the mind. They tease us out of thought as doth Eternity.

Quince is one of Stevens’ exuberant bunglers, a predecessor of that more advanced, yet simpler case of paradoxical misery, Ludwig, the “turbulent Shlemihl,” who in “Chaos in Motion and Not in Motion,”

Knows desire without an object of desire,
All mind and violence and nothing felt.

(CP 358)

The eponymous Quince was the carpenter who directed the sketch of Pyramus and Thisbe in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, absurd as a stage director as at the clavier. As a self-caricature, his improvident enthusiasm is related to Stevens’ painfully engorged self-awareness, with its tendencies to erupt in buffoonery or aggression.

Stevens’ aggression is connected to his extensive interest in concealment, and the two are often explicitly linked. Exotic diction frequently refers to duplicity (fubbed, cozening), especially forgery (loges), sexual mischief (lascive, Paphian) or smoldering disappointment (blague). Archaisms, foreign languages, puns and equivocations, syntax entangled with repeated negatives, deceptive dependent clauses and omissions, veil Stevens’ deepest concerns; thus “blague” for embarrassment and “myosotis” for forget-me-not. He employed a collection of words that also mean their antonyms, such as cleave, transport, ravel, and secrete, and he constructed many of his own from his equivocal use of clear, candor, render, blotch, gander, gildered, and cure. His need to conceal, and to represent his animosities as good-natured, has an American flavor, his reticence aligned with the business ethos of “Don’t complain, don’t explain.”

Concealment is emotionally convenient and domestically practical. Secrecy plays a central role in “The Poems of Our Climate” (CP 193), which opens with his most gorgeous, specifically domestic metonymy:

Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air . . .

Yet this immaculate household order “concealed / The evilly compounded, vital I,” the self that needs it both ways, to escape from order and then return to it:

There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.

(CP 193-94)

The words and then are elided by the comma between “escape” and “come back.” One escapes to “paradise” which is the “imperfect,” and then comes home to “Clear water in a brilliant bowl,” the merely perfect. The extra or elided words reverse an apparent meaning that makes a ragged, fraudulently pious sense and partly conceals a yearning for irregularity. Clarification of Stevens’ intent results from pressure from a more obscure, subjective order of meaning, a sense of Stevens that is nourished by disruptions of the literal. He alludes to the psychic toll exacted by monogamy and romance under one roof in a late poem’s title, fusing concealment and bellicosity, “Celle Qui Fût Héaulmiette,” or “She that Was the Helmetmaker’s Wife” (CP 438), which comes from a troubadour’s song. She, of course, was Venus, and no one suffered anxieties of influence, of being suffused by unwelcome light, like Vulcan her husband, and one of Stevens’ last poems, “St. Armorer’s Church from the Outside” (CP 529), summarizes his life and career in comic allegory, as if they revolved around aspects of deliberate belligerence and holy secrecy; i.e., as if forging protective armor qualified one for sainthood and commemoration by a cathedral.

Works Cited


Gravity and Ghosts: The Physics of Wallace Stevens’ ‘Large Red Man Reading’

MARK IRWIN

Who could resist the memorability of the title “Large Red Man Reading”—a title that is at once as human as it is mythic, and as sweaty as it is serene? Stevens was masterful in his use of titles, and “Large Red Man Reading” conveys the visual, the philosphic, and the mythic, three concerns which almost become formulaic in his greatest poems. We throng toward the title with an almost tribal, instinctual thirst. It is as if Stevens hit some genetic taproot, and the blood we taste is as visceral as it is geologic and anthropomorphic. The “Red Man” conjures up notions of blood, clay, and primal ancestry; and the reader becomes an effortless, yet painful part of the ceremony.

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,
That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly
And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:
Poësis, poësis, the literal characters, the vatic lines,
Which in those ears and in those thin, those spended hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked.

(From CP 423-24)

Stevens approaches his theme (that it is humans that ascribe both character and emotions to things) with a savage respect. What is both fascinating and unusual about his approach is the contradictory use of color. As the ghosts return to the earth “to hear his phrases,” first the “Large Red Man” reads from “the great blue tabulae.” (“They were those from the
wilderness of stars that had expected more.”) As the poem continues, and
the ghost-listeners become more desperate for human “expressings,” the
“Large Red Man” reads from “the purple tabulae.” These tabulae contain
the very “outlines of being” and the “syllables of its law: / Poesis,” the
Latin word whose origin is the Greek poiein, to make. This large red man
would seem to modify and accentuate Descartes’ memorable phrase to a
gutsier “I make, therefore I am.”

But back to the colors: Red, blue, purple. As the poem progresses, the
colors, their values, become more cool and recede from both the ghost-listen-
ners and the reader. Yet visually, as they recede, their spectral value
continues to shade from red (long wavelength) to purple (very short,
intense wavelength). It is at this contradictory point of recession and
intensity that we learn the very “outlines of being and its expressings,” to
make, to create, which is “vatic,” a prophetic task whose poetic lines
advance away from reality and shade toward the future. These vatic,
futural lines fill those ghostly ears and “spended hearts” and take on color,
shape, and size “of things as they are / And spoke the feeling for them,
which was what they had lacked.”

Disappearance brings things to life. The statuesque nature of the large
red man accentuates the impermanence of the ghost-listeners. We expect
them to vanish as the “poem of life” ends. I have never been able to read
Stevens’ poem without thinking of Kafka’s brilliant prose piece “The Wish
to be a Red Indian.”

If one were only an Indian, instantly alert, and on a racing horse,
leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the
quivering ground, until one shed one’s spurs, for there needed
no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and
hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath
when horse’s neck and head would be already gone.1

The Indian’s great-sympathy-for and at-oneness-with things allow him
to vanish into their essence. Unlike the whiteman, who is separated from
the horse (and thus from the earth) by the saddle, the Indian achieves an
astonishing connectedness. Similarly, the “Large Red Man,” by reading
from the “poem of life,” by naming and praising, speaks feeling for those
things that now connect, and once connected, those spirit-ghosts to life. It
is a human task to name, to give emotion to things, and by doing so we
recite the pleasures of life.

Disappearance brings things to life. Or, the vanishing snake is more of
a snake. I love how desperately Stevens’ ghosts want to arrive, and how
the word is both their anchor and kite.

The origin of the ancient Greek word for truth, aletheia, reminds us of
one of the poet’s tasks (which is also an orphic task): to give memorability
to things, to bring them out of forgetfulness. The alpha-privative α (out of)
combined with the word Lethe (the river of forgetfulness) begin to comment on the nature of art itself, which is a function of truth.

Heidegger, in “The Origin of the Work of Art,” tells us “the nature of truth, that is, of unconcealedness, is dominated throughout by a denial.” In “Large Red Man Reading,” Stevens attempts to unconceal and seems to consent to this denial, for there are two groups of ghosts: there were “those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.” But then there were those “that would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost / And cried out to feel it again . . .” The large red man reads and thus it is his/their language that becomes the arbiter between denial and truth, or between not belonging and belonging to the earth through language, a language of memory and of hope—a hope to remember. The “vatic lines” will then secure old and new hearts, and the future of language.

But is this denial not the poet’s entropic challenge: to embrace chaos and to return the world, what is ours? Is this not an idea of order?— “The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,”

And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

(CP 130)

Notes

Reviews

The Senses of Nonsense.

In her very useful book, Alison Rieke discusses some texts by James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, and Louis Zukofsky that are unarguably more difficult than most to understand: *Finnegans Wake, Stanzas in Meditation, “Esthétique du Mal”* (and other poems), and *A*. These works and the title, *Senses of Nonsense*, predict theories regarding the misty boundaries of communication between public and private, the challenges to the limits of written language for embodying and representing sounds, images, and objects. For example, the fugue form is connected to three of the four authors: Marcel Brion has compared Stein’s handling of language to Bach’s fugues (a comparison denied by Toklas); Zukofsky refers to and uses Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*; and Joyce’s “Sirens” chapter in *Ulysses* imitates the *fuga per canone*. But we must notice that whatever comparisons with musical forms are suggested or found in Stevens’ poems, he seems not to have composed an entire work using words solely as notes without denotative definitions or conventional syntactical relations (except for his early “Colors”). This book does not deal with communication, language as music, or with “nonsense.” Instead, it explicates some difficult works by these difficult authors.

Why was “nonsense” invoked? and how relevant to Stevens? The question of “nonsense” in modernism was initiated by Wyndham Lewis’ attacks in *Time and Western Man* (1928) against Bergson, time-man, and, by his lights, the “child-cult” of Stein, Anita Loos, Charlie Chaplin, and Joyce. The attack and at times tone of Lewis are continued in Hugh Kenner’s *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (1975), which was dedicated to Guy Davenport, to whom Rieke’s book is also dedicated. Kenner wrote that “Stevens distilled . . . a species of nonsense verse fit to accommodate the most persistent of his lifelong pleasures, the adolescent’s delight in queer words.” Having used a nasty satiric tone betraying some personal animosity, Kenner must add a year later, in a short piece published in the excellent journal *Parnassus* (1976), that “In calling this Nonsense we don’t belittle it but establish its genre.” Nonsense! Of her four people—Joyce, Stein, Stevens, Zukofsky—the first two were denounced by Lewis and the third by Kenner. Rieke does not make direct use of Kenner on Stevens, despite bibliographical reference to the relevant texts; however through analysis of Stevens’ sources, she may have answered him by showing it was not Edward Lear’s “nonsense verse,” but his travel prose that directly influenced and can be used to explain aspects of “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.”

What does she think are the causes of their mysterious ways? That Joyce was in literary competition with theology and religion; that Stein was revealing and hiding her sexual life (which theme is omitted from the analysis); that Stevens needed mystery to cause the poem and the readers to participate in poetry itself; and that Zukofsky made sacred his experiences by rewriting them within literary tradition in “‘an art of honor, laud.’” Correct enough, I suppose, but these explanations do not cover adequately the depth of the needs by these authors for writing obscurely. In sum, the book is not about “nonsense” or the
authors’ motives, but about extremely difficult texts, and it demonstrates one approach that opens the way for greater understanding and stronger responses. i.e., via source studies.

The texts chosen (except for Stein’s) are helped greatly with source study because their words are saturated (a useful term that appears for the first time in the very brief conclusion) and supersaturated with other texts, making for the obscurity of three of the authors (as does the extreme sublimating for Stein’s). Rieke is best with Stevens’ texts, next Joyce’s. One reason is their surfaces. Both Stevens and Joyce have texts that, regardless of their difficulties, once touched continue to attract, i.e., are powerfully centripetal. They give to readers immediate pleasures without reference to the other texts they contain. Writers must build from this point of contact with their readers, and, according to Rieke and others, Stein refuses in “Stanzas in Meditation” to do so, and soon wearies my mind by her floating words, minimal and continuing anyhow (the readers for whom this works will find the smallest most obscure Beckett fragment overwritten!): no pleasure here.

Stevens sought to preserve his poetic mystery. Rieke writes, “An intentionally enigmatic poet, he incorporates features of nonsense with the motive of concealment.” She wants to take Stevens at his word, quoting his injunctions against interpretation and regretting writing against them. She does not note that as much as he resisted explaining his poems, he also wrote many letters doing just that. She does not confront how or why he worked with his many self-contradictions.

Stevens was always a reader and an Alexandrine poet, who held from the beginning a profound poetic belief that he must begin with everyday actuality and develop from that a poetic reality made of words garnered from dictionaries and thoughts from literature. Rieke charts some of his vicarious travel reading, starting from Westerly Terrace, Hartford, and recalling the pun of Reading, Pennsylvania. “The figure of the reading poet as traveler stands or rather sits—in his room—at the center of a world of fulfilled and unfulfilled desires, foremost among them a desire to attain the supreme fiction, the equivalent of paradise or heaven in a world bereft of his old gods.” With texts, letters and postcards from traveling friends, and maps, he overcomes the distances from the actual room to the poetic room he can imagine. Like Keats on reading Chapman’s Homer, Stevens as a reader was “Much . . . travell’d in the realms of gold.” “Sonic dazzle and glitter enable him to leave his local scene behind, the scene which Stevens repeatedly sets up as the poet’s point of entry into the act of writing as a metaphor for travel.” By looking carefully and sympathetically into his sources, Rieke is able to suggest ways in which the words he uses “come from” the sources. With the assistance of her analysis, we can see the similarities and differences between the texts of the sources, say, by Edward Lear and Leigh Hunt, and the poems; these in their turn heighten our awareness of the causes of the poems, their materials and the uses. This research does not close down the poems, like a store that has no more inventory, as Stevens feared, but opens our understanding to the pleasures of traveling within them, as I believe Stevens must have hoped. She demonstrates, without any arguing about method, that her use of close readings of “Esthétique du Mal” and “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” with their travel sources is an analytic analogue for Stevens’ use of close readings.
of these same sources in his poetic synthesis. A subtle and hard-working reader, Rieke catches the dramatic purpose in Stevens’ use of dictionaries when, within a poem, he trades Old English monosyllables for foreign imports.

I regret that she does not explore Stevens’ notion of participating in poetry. Her explanation accepts, as it were, Stevens’ continuity with the Symbolistes, his version of their goals and his means of travel—travel in and with books. But as a motive for mystery, for making such very difficult poems, it should be related to what Stevens lived every day within his family and insurance work, i.e., his ethical and practical life, for his “travels” toward some “distant” things he desired was away from some very “ordinary” things he had chosen very carefully for himself and held to and to which, surely, he owed the presence of his imagination. Rieke does have some of these concrete details but not enough for understanding Stevens’ motives, especially those motives which included believing in starting with the experience of the immediate and actual and allowing practice to narrow to mean mainly certain exquisite experiences of the power of words in his thoughts.

While describing some of literature’s wildest texts, Rieke maintains expository clarity and basic common sense, rarely inflating value with fashionable jargon. Her Stevens chapter is very useful (her Zukofsky, a discovery). In particular, the material on Stevens—including her responding to his saying that he was interested in mystery, his comments against interpretation, his desire for an ideal identification with poetry—is superb. And her analyses of “Esthétique du Mal,” “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” and other poems, plus her expansion of one’s reading interests, especially to include in the future more Zukofsky, make the book very useful to have available on a nearby shelf. Not a trivial pleasure is that the University of Iowa Press has produced a well-designed, cleanly printed book.

Sidney Feshbach
James Joyce Society of New York

The Higher Humanism of Wallace Stevens.

This brief, blurred study does not provide a coherent perspective for viewing Wallace Stevens, although its opening sentence is direct enough. McMahon announces, “This study of Stevens has a particular purpose: to seek the positive idealism in his metaphysical speculations.” However, what follows is no unified quest. Comments on The Necessary Angel are followed by some intelligent but not revolutionary close readings, a gallop through the letters in search of references to the higher humanism, and then a rather general approach to Stevens and certain elements of philosophy. The “higher humanism” turns out to be a Husserlian mysticism—fair enough, and certainly a position worth exploring. But the chapter on Stevens and Husserl, which should draw the book together and probably conclude it, is short and unpersuasive. The reader is left feeling that major promises have not been kept.
Philosophical criticism has a tendency to lumber, because there is no agreed-upon body of knowledge shared by critic and reader. Therefore, the critic has to move back and forth between the unfamiliar concepts and the work under discussion, without seeming to leave the application behind. Sound philosophical criticism tends to be dense and a little hard to read. Thomas Hines's very solid book, *The Later Poetry of Wallace Stevens: Phenomenological Parallels with Husserl and Heidegger*, is an example. McMahon avoids the problem by leaving the philosophy at a general level; the text does not resist the reader, but neither does it greatly enrich his or her reading of Stevens.

The longest chapter is "Towards a Stevens Credo." (Chapters range from ten to fifty pages, with no clear reason for the disparity.) "Credo" begins with a dash through critics somehow related to McMahon's views on the higher humanism. The selection seems quirky, to say the least; McMahon initially comments that he does not intend to draw from critics who could be said to support his view, and makes a point of not citing Joseph Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*. Yet the critics he does discuss are selected because their work contains material that has a bearing on the higher humanism McMahon ascribes to Stevens. Thomas Hines is not cited, although his work covers some of this area, and use of his work on Stevens and Husserl would have enriched McMahon's study. Helen Vendler is not mentioned, although much is made of Stevens and desire. Among those critics cited who have written more than one book about Stevens, only the first tends to be introduced.

These critics establish a foundation for describing what McMahon conceives of as the "positive idealism" in Stevens' work. McMahon then turns to his "credo," which amounts to twenty-nine numbered "key principles of Stevens." Some of these are thought-provoking ("Philosophic archai of belief systems now need to be chosen from recognized fictions of poetic-philosophic imagination") and some are empty truisms ("The icon of a symbolic female plays a major role"; "Death and evil can be reinterpreted in a new key"). McMahon explains these concepts to a greater or lesser extent, and then concludes with a comparison of Stevens' philosophical position with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

Whether this is partly the problem of the series or exclusively a difficulty of this book, documentation is frustrating. Neither index nor bibliography is offered. The placement of footnotes at page bottoms helps conceal the fact that the sources are old, a 1980 book being described as "a recent study." This kind of thing issues the mildewy scent of a manuscript that has been left in a drawer for too long before publication.

The main problem, however, is not the age of the sources or the lack of documentation, but rather the unfocused quality of the book. The readings themselves, while not strikingly new, are graceful and clear and would provide students with an entrée to the work. But these readings, for the most part, only nod in the general direction of "positive idealism." And after McMahon discusses six early short poems, six late short poems, "Esthétique du Mal," "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," he launches into the heavier philosophical sections with a more complex vocabulary. (There is one constant: overuse of the word "radical." How many "radicals" does it take to define the quintessentially conservative Stevens
McMahon is presenting?) The philosophical sections seem to be building toward a climax that remains elusive. The Gadamer comparison does not provide a sense of closure; for this reader at least, the higher humanism is never adequately defined.

Janet McCann
Texas A&M University


Six books of poetry are condensed in this volume of new and selected poems, The Planet on the Desk. The result is convincing proof that Young, in spite of relative critical neglect, is one of our best poets. Certainly, he has carried the spirit of Wallace Stevens forward into our literature more consistently and originally than any of his peers. Which is not to say that he is some mere epigone of Stevens. Young has in fact struggled more profoundly with the aesthetic and moral problems of Stevens’ idealism than any other poet who can claim Stevens as an ancestor.

The earliest poems in the collection date from the 1960s, the latest from merely yesterday (literary time having something of the abstract quality of cosmological time). One striking fact about Young’s poems over the years, though, is the way in which they seem to reflect the literary movements and tastes of their times while maintaining an original and distinctive tone of voice. That Young alludes to Stevens in the title of this volume, meant to collect the best of thirty years work, is obviously not an idle gesture. Indeed, this special issue of The Wallace Stevens Journal reprints two of Young’s poems, “Putting it Mildly,” from his first book, and “Stevens Ghazal,” from the New Poems section of The Planet on the Desk, that “address” Stevens directly. This pair of poems frames Young’s ongoing conversation with Stevens—a conversation we are privileged to overhear, if we have the ears for its vocables.

To read The Planet on the Desk is, then, among many other things, to review the literary culture of the last thirty years, and in this sense, and this sense only, the poems often reflect a period style. That is, there are poems here that serve to distill the essence of the times in which they were written. In a poet of less skill than Young, this would be not merely a flaw, but a fatal liability; as it is, Young’s voice is able to sing the songs of the last three decades without losing its distinctive timbre. In the sixties Young often wrote poems in the flat diction that represented a stylistic break with the tightly woven textures of the fifties: “Like an old pot on the stove, / My head simmers and rattles . . .” Even here, of course, the poet can click his consonants with the best, and there is also a play of sound in some of the early poems that can put one in mind of Stevens—in this, for example, the first stanza of “Poem about Hoping,” where Stevens’ bass voice also rumbles behind the language in the poet’s fascination with place names and specific natural objects that hover near metaphoric intent—that hover, too, near actuality.
Rabbits in Alabama hop
Into clumps of Syrian grass
To nibble the stalks, thinking of
Sorghum, hardly noticing autumn.

But David Young has done much more over his poetic career than converse with the ghosts of Stevens’ poetry. More than almost any other recent poet, Young has been interested—inside his poems—in the nature of poetic language, which is the same, surely, as being interested in the epistemology of language-in-general. In the earlier poems this interest has various effects, sometimes leading Young to write in the plain speech poets were just learning from William Carlos Williams—“Jewelers snooze on the grass, / one eye open for the tall / constellation-poppies”—but at other times leading him toward the surrealism of Eastern European models: “A tear is floating over Moscow / swollen, seeking a home, a mirror.” Surrealism works, when it does work, not because the images are startling or bizarre, but because they are an accurate representation of some inner state of human consciousness. Like that of Stevens, Young’s epistemology is essentially idealist, especially in the earlier poetry. Throughout his work there is also a fascination with—or even a distrust of—language that seems partly derived from the literature of postwar Europe, and partly from the Zeitgeist of the American sixties. His language debased by politics, the poet (sometimes) may turn inward:

Of course the opening stanza
is like a cheap decal
of roses and tulips
on the side of a laundry hamper.
But as the poem progresses
you see something crawling
from one of the flowers.
An insect? Bend closer.
It is a very small man, holding a flashlight.
He snaps it on and swings the beam toward you.
You are blinded.

The reality principle of this poem, “Notes on the Poems,” is embodied in the pronoun you (the reader? a lover?), and in the homely laundry hamper, perhaps, with its musty contents. In any event, it all disappears in the flash of light at the end of the poem. “Notes on the Poems,” written in numbered sections, turns poetry ironically back upon itself, the curve of that flashlight beam circling the universe to arrive at the back of the tiny man’s head.

Sometimes philosophical idealism leads Young into whimsy, which is closer to surrealism than we usually admit, as with the image of the little man, or this, from “Love Song”:

I guess your beauty doesn’t
bother you, you wear it easy
and walk across the driveway
so casual and right it makes
my heart weigh twenty pounds
as I back out and wave
thinking She’s my summer
peaches, corn, long moondawn dusks
watermelons chilling in a tub

Though the dropped endings of the adverbs seems dated, we can hear the speaker of the poem longing for the sensual reality he can hardly believe in—
watermelons chilling in a tub
of ice and water: mirrored there
the great midsummer sky
rolling with clouds and treetops
and down by the lake
the wild canaries
swinging on the horsemint
all morning long.

The world is mirrored in ice water, but its sensuality is undeniable; it is this sensuality that keeps Young’s poems from thinning out into airy philosophical speculations, and it is this same sensuality that carries through into his later work. In the prose poem “Four about Heavy Machinery,” from Young’s 1977 collection of prose poems, Work Lights, the reader is confronted with “A huge cement truck” that turns the corner, and you get the full impact of its sensuality. Those ruts in the road or on the lawn! Even at night the cement plant has a strange energy, drawing adolescents to stare through its fences, causing the watchman to shine his light nervously among the parked and sleeping mixers.

The language is still abstract—“in the road or on the lawn,” “a strange energy,” “drawing adolescents,” and so on—the images are generalized rather than particular, having the quality of dream. This, too, as with the earlier stylistic shiftings, was a sign of the times, but Young was up to the style, not dominated by it. If the voice is the voice of a decade’s poetry, it is also, distinctively, this poet’s voice.

Unlike the “new and selected” poems of many writers, the reader will not want to skim quickly over the early sections of The Planet on the Desk—perhaps the weaker poems have been edited out for this collection—as they should be—but the poems that remain produce the impression of a poet who began at a very high level. And then got better. With the publication in 1979 of The Names of a Hare in English, Young’s poetry rose to a new level of sophistication.

In this collection, the poet’s concern with the nature of his medium, and with the ways in which that medium—language—meets the surfaces of the physical world, already apparent in the earlier work, becomes explicit. This is most evident in the transformed sense of poetic form Young demonstrates from this point on. (And it is here, too, that my thesis about this poet’s “period voice” least applies—he is engaged in making the voice of the period in these poems.) The poems are too long to quote in a review, but merely listing a few titles will indicate the formal experimentation of this work: “Two Views of the Cathedral,” (recalling, perhaps, Monet and his epistemological concerns), “‘Other Forms Were Near’: Five Words,” “How Music Began,” “The Picture
Says,” “A Lowercase Alphabet” (in which each letter gets a line), and “The Names of a Hare in English”:

The hare, the scotart,
The bigge, the bouchart,
The scotewine, the skikart,
The turpin, the tirart,
The wei-bitere, the ballart

and so on for more than thirty lines. From this list, obsessively trying to name just one single object in the world, the poem moves easily into speculation and meditation. It is with this volume that Young seems to find for the first time a satisfactory balance between what Stevens boldly called reality and what everybody calls imagination; if Young’s earlier work was dominated by the abstractness of the imagination, he now moved into a newly discovered relationship with the actual world. It was the discovery of new and more adequate poetic forms that made this possible.

In succeeding books (Foraging from 1986, and Earthshine, from 1988) Young made good on the discoveries of The Names of a Hare, continuing to borrow forms from poets like Vasco Popa, Miroslav Holub, Chezlaw Milosz, and Wallace Stevens, but continuing, also, to make them his own. His formal imagination continued its restless probing of the relations among language, thought, and the world of exterior objects. At the same time, a newly personal tone began to replace the idealism and abstraction of the earlier work. This is not to suggest that Young ever became a “confessional” poet, only that the specific objects of an individual life increasingly entered the poems:

The small hotel in Gort, ale and roast lamb,
the midday drowse. Who breathed this air?
Who climbed these stairs? Time floats,
one face of a diamond, scraps of paper in the street.

These lines, from “Two Trips to Ireland,” seem to admit more of the poet’s day-to-day life than much of the earlier work; at the same time, Young is still a philosopher: earlier in the poem just quoted, he writes,

Well-eye, gazing at daytime stars,
rain-speckle, patches of blooming mists
a hillside white with water spill
a shower blowing inland at the coast . . .

All this water must mean something!

Whatever voice he has employed, David Young has always exhibited an epistemological imagination. This is what makes him a “formalist” in the deepest sense; there is nothing “neo” about this formalism, however, for it is the formality of the human imagination embodied in language. This is nowhere more evident than in the selection of new work in The Planet on the Desk. Consisting entirely of poems written in the form of ghazals (a form borrowed from Persian poetry and made famous in American literature by Adrienne Rich who used it in the sixties to extend her break with fifties formalism), these poems represent another new level of achievement in Young’s poetry. This traditional form, ready made for free-verse with its unrhymed, thematically
connected closed couplets, allows the poet to play between freedom and restraint. (Though the ghazal has no set length—many of Rich’s were five couplets long—all of Young’s are made from seven couplets, mostly closed.) The quality of these poems is difficult to describe—they appear to be the traces of sensual thought in human language. “Bird Ghazal” concludes:

Cloud causeways rimmed with ice-burn. Meager daylight.
A duck lands skidding on the pond’s buffed surface.
These fearless black birds haunt the hotel pools.
They sail through our hegemony, omens & denials.
Otherness, otherness. Why do we stare so fondly?
A plume of sea gulls trails a garbage barge.

Joseph Duemer
Clarkson University


Christoph Irmscher’s study Masks of the Modern: Literary Self-Stylization in T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams presents an illuminating examination of modernist aesthetics and the ways in which concepts of identity and authorship inform the works of these four American poets. Irmscher adapts insights from social anthropology and contemporary critical theory to shape his views on the powerful images of role-playing, the mask, and the connections between theory and theater within modern poetry. As the book’s English abstract points out, the work begins with the paradox of difference at the root of modernism, the self-reflexivity within modernist authors in which poetry becomes a project of “self-portraiture,” a seemingly endless en-visioning and re-visioning of the modern poetic self. Accordingly, the metaphor of the “mask” becomes a way into discovering the tensions and shifts in the works of these authors as they attempt to reconcile the dilemmas of personal and poetic origin or “descent,” and of their position as “professionals,” both craftsmen and critics in the business of literary production.

Of particular interest is Irmscher’s chapter on Wallace Stevens and the problematics of paternal descent, a chapter that highlights both the intricacies of Irmscher’s theory and the insights such a paradigm can reveal. Irmscher traces Stevens’ often strained relationship with Garrett Stevens and with the idea itself of paternal origin, an idea (as Harold Bloom has pointed out) that is at once creative and threatening to the male poet. Both Stevens’ long interest in genealogy as well as his intense focus in later poems on parent imagery point to a complex project of “piecing the past together” in order to discover the mystery of origin and assume the father’s voice for his own. Irmscher draws on the myth of the Sphinx—particularly Stevens’ rendering of the Sphinx as a father image and oppressor, and the implication of Oedipus’ parricide—to unpack the rich implications of the metaphor. The riddle that the Sphinx poses and that Oedipus must solve has, ironically, its origins in
Oedipus himself—Oedipus is at once the riddle and the answer and, through self-recognition, is able not merely to solve the mystery but to appropriate the (paternal, poetic) power to pose riddles as well.

The paradox, of course, is that by recognizing one’s origin (the past revealed in the future or the father within the son), the poet thereby becomes at once “less than” himself and “more than” himself—reduction leads to production in this filial drama of identity and mastery. Irmscher’s extended discussion of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” unveils the difficulties of this task of self-authorship, role-playing, and origin, and his final chapter on Stevens’ solution to the problem of poetic “profession” further highlights the ways in which the modern male poet finds himself enmeshed in a succession of masks, a project of “self-staging” that is at once literary and psychological, and never short of profound.

Critics have long seen a troubled core in American modernism, which may account for both the obscurity and the resonance of the greatest works of these four major authors. Irmscher’s study helps expand our understanding of poetic self-reflexivity by revealing more of its intricate psychological facets through the unique concept of “self-stylization.” Scholars of Stevens in particular can view this volume as an interesting contribution to the growing field of international studies in Wallace Stevens.

Melita Schaum
University of Michigan-Dearborn
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