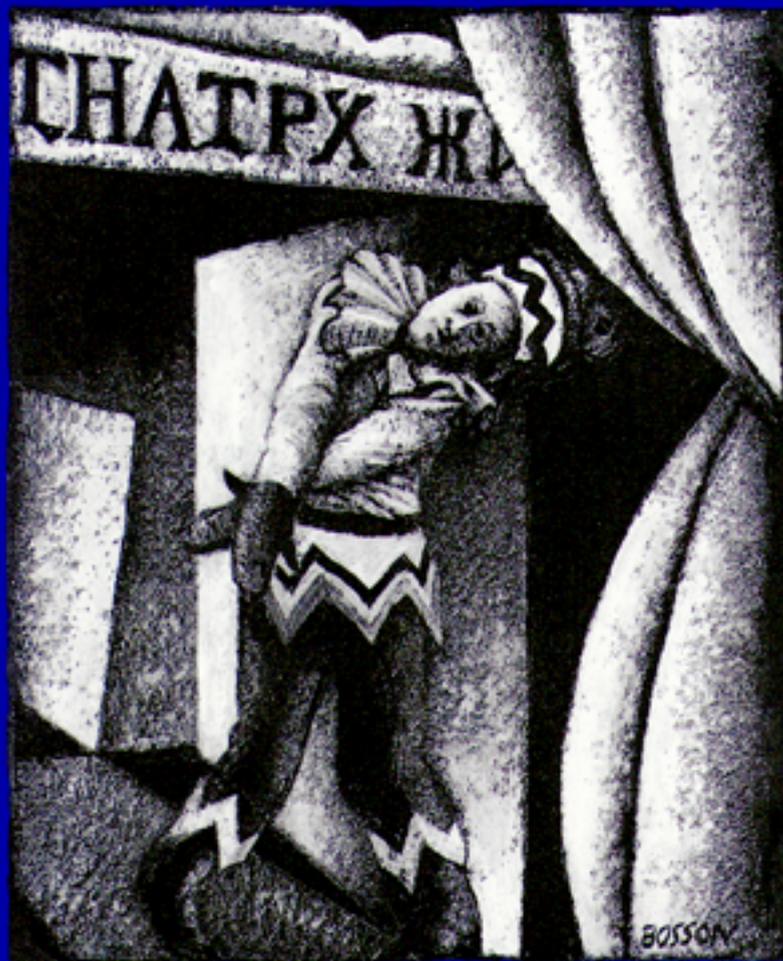


# The Wallace Stevens Journal



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## Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| The Lawyer in the Poet: Stevens' Use of Legal Terminology<br>— <i>Elizabeth Rosen</i>   | 3  |
| "Intangible Arrows": Stevens, St. Sebastian, and the<br>Search for the Real — <i>Richard A. Kaye</i>                                | 19 |
| Stevens and the Two Sublimes — <i>Paul Endo</i>   | 36 |
| What Figure Costs: Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West"<br>(An Anthropoetics) — <i>Thomas F. Bertonneau</i>                     | 51 |
| "Orchestrating" Stravinsky: <i>Petrushka's</i> Ghost and<br>Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C"<br>— <i>David M. Linebarger</i> | 71 |
| Poems   | 88 |
| Reviews   | 95 |
| Current Bibliography  | 98 |

Cover: *Petrushka*, Acrylic painting by Jack Bosson  
"Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,  
A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown."  
*from "The Comedian as the Letter C"*

## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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## The Lawyer in the Poet: Thoughts on Stevens' Use of Legal Terminology

ELIZABETH ROSEN

FROM 1916 UNTIL THE TIME of his death, Wallace Stevens assessed surety bond claims for the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. That a man widely acknowledged as one of America's premier poets spent his daylight hours in so prosaic an occupation has caused discomfort to some literary critics, who would prefer their hero to have had a more Olympian perch from which to view the passing scene. Frank Lentricchia, for one, writes ruefully of Stevens' need to hold what he clearly considers a day job of little significance; he considers Stevens' decision to become a lawyer a capitulation to economic necessity and he reads Stevens' later poetry as "his way of saying 'no' to the life he felt forced to lead" (239).

A very different view of Stevens' dual careers has been advanced by critics within the law and literature movement. Since virtually all of the critics in this school who have considered Stevens' work are themselves lawyers, it is not surprising that they see little ignoble in Stevens' legal enterprises. They are free of the romantic notion, exemplified in Lentricchia's idea of the poet, that law and business are anathema to creativity. They are also well situated, both by training and disposition, to see and sense the interpenetration of Stevens' day work at the Hartford with his night work of composing poetry. Language itself is the singular tool of law and of poetry. Anyone practicing either profession will eventually come up against the notion that language is not adequate to the mission we assign it. The lawyer watches language fail to anticipate the real consequences attaching to a clause in a contract; the poet contends with language's inability to recreate the physical world it seeks to represent. Stevens wrestled with both language's beneficence and its limits in both his careers. Indeed, in Stevens, critics concerned with the joint study of law and literature could not have found a more apt subject.

Two recent critics, Thomas C. Grey and Margaret Jane Radin, have examined Stevens' poetry in the context of his legal practice. Both have addressed their work to the question of how lawyers can read Stevens' work. In his book, *The Case of Wallace Stevens: Law and the Practice of Poetry*, Grey proposes that Stevens' poetry has a potent remedial effect for his fellow lawyers. He writes, "Wallace Stevens can speak to the lawyer or

legal theorist as a kind of therapist for the habitual and institutional rigidities of binary thought" (6–7). Grey positions Stevens' poetry within the current arguments about the relation of literature to legal rhetoric, and he claims that Stevens' poetry offers a method for mediating between them:

Legal theorists might well be shaken, and matured into a later reason (or "philosophic mind") by seeing jurisprudence alternately through the frames supplied by Stevens's two metaphors for theorizing—the eagle's survey of mountain peaks and valleys, the street-kid's scrutiny of neighborhood graffiti. And since theories are not natural but cultural objects, they *can* be transformed by such a reconception of the activity that produces them. (110)

Radin too uses Stevens' poetry didactically: Stevens' poetry, she claims, should become part of the legal canon because it can augment the traditional boundaries of legal thought. She describes the two types of legal students she encounters: the naive legal positivist and the naive legal realist. The positivist believes that lawyers are technicians who are bound by unassailable legal rules. The realists are "philosophic skeptics" who see legal rhetoric as wholly manipulable, and arbitrary or subjective in application (254). Radin finds in Stevens' poetry a limited antidote to either of these moral afflictions. She writes:

Stevens can lead us to how knowing feels: what it feels like to recognize our philosophical commitments, what it feels like to be committed to positions that paradoxically conflict, what it feels like to change our philosophical commitments. He allows us to affirm our yearning for the formally complete, yet also affirm our experience of essential incompleteness, without falling into an impotent skepticism. He allows us to find a pragmatic way of affirmation. (255)

While both Radin and Grey celebrate Stevens' work, the poetry itself is effectively subordinated to the study and practice of the law. Both Radin and Grey quite openly acknowledge that they are using Stevens' poetry as a remedial prescription for the institutional afflictions in legal thought. Still, in their zeal to vaunt the traditional boundaries that have separated law and literary study, Radin and Grey remain strangely territorial. They may in fact be moving the scholarship in a different but equally parochial direction. The critical impetus behind these two recent works seems only incidentally to read the poetry but more centrally to use the poems to analyze philosophic and linguistic problems of jurisprudential debate. Thus, rather than bridge a path between these two fields, law and literature

criticism surrounding Stevens has enunciated the divide. Stevens' usefulness as a poet appears coequal to his participation in the debates of legal theory and strategy.<sup>1</sup>

As an attorney and a student of literature, I am not heartened by the turn that legal criticism of Stevens' work has taken. Contrary to popular assumptions, those of us with dual careers may often feel like a trespasser in both camps. The proprietary impulses in both law and literature remain strong. Particularly in the field of legal and literary scholarship, I would prefer to see joint studies of the two fields that broaden, not limit, its potential audience. I therefore propose in this paper to take a backward step and assay a more modest goal: I would like to read the poems by asking, what vestiges of Stevens' legal training can be heard in the poems themselves? What elements of Stevens' legal background reveal themselves in his poetics? Stevens often uses words that carry with them specific legal meanings. I will take as a prescriptive Stevens' injunction "to speak the word / And every latent double in the word" (*CP* 387). I hope to use the law to expose certain resonances in Stevens' words, to make audible a different timbre in the music of his lines. And I hope, in this way, to assist both legal and literary readers of Stevens' work in hearing some of the latent doubles that he urges us to find.

For instance, in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens plays with the legal terms *res* and *transcript*. The opening of the poem charts the intersections of the poet's eye with the world it encounters. It begins, "The eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience. Of this, / A few words, an and yet, and yet, and yet—" (*CP* 465). David M. La Guardia aptly points out that the poem opens by rephrasing the famous opening of Emerson's *Circles*, where "[t]he eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end" (146). Every visual encounter Stevens records suggests a path away from the scene before him. Each new stanza brings him back to the vulgate of New Haven. In stanza IX, Stevens writes:

We keep coming back and coming back  
To the real: to the hotel instead of the hymns  
That fall upon it out of the wind. We seek

The poem of pure reality, untouched  
By trope or deviation, straight to the word,  
Straight to the transfixing object, to the object

At the exactest point at which it is itself,  
Transfixing by being purely what it is,  
A view of New Haven, say, through the certain eye,

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight  
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek  
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,

Everything, the spirit's alchemicana  
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout  
And through included, not merely the visible,

The solid, but the movable, the moment,  
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,  
The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.  
(CP 471-72)

This stanza recapitulates the path of the whole poem, complete with the necessary red herring of "the poem of pure reality," which finally cannot be attained. It leads to and from the return to the hotel ("We keep coming back and coming back"), to the temporary resting place, the way-station, not the ordained home that the poet seeks.

With stanza XII, the poem makes a significant turn: it focuses on the poem itself, on the creation of poetry. Stanza xii begins, "The poem is the cry of its occasion, / Part of the *res* itself and not about it." No lawyer reading this can fail to hear the doctrine of *res ipsa loquitur*. It means, quite simply, "The thing speaks for itself." It is a doctrine within the law of negligence that means, simply put, that the event could not have occurred unless someone was negligent. The doctrine of *res ipsa loquitur* usually refers to an event too strange to occur within the normal course of events. The very uncanniness of the event makes it exempt from the traditional rules of pleading and proof that most negligence cases require.<sup>2</sup>

*Res ipsa loquitur* forces the court to look at the event itself in isolation from the standard arguments of causation that attend most negligence cases. The plaintiff need not explain how the event has occurred; she need only assert the bald facts of the accident. Simple observation of the event, and the recording of that observation, not extensive theorizing on the genesis of the event, form the basis of the plaintiff's plea to the court. Of course, I do not mean to imply that the poem has anything to do with a negligence case; however, the structure of thinking that *res ipsa loquitur* demands, in its insistence upon abandoning standard arguments of causation, is central to the strategy of the poem. Stevens' use of the *res ipsa* doctrine asks that the reader begin to see in the simple fact of physical life the *means* of our own redemption. He asks the reader to escape the standard connections and causations that order our grammar of poetry, in much the same way that the plaintiff, in a case of *res ipsa loquitur*, asks the court to avoid extensive theorizing on causation. Physical fact becomes the paramount element in the *res ipsa* case, just as the physical sensations

of the speaker in "An Ordinary Evening" become the paramount element in his search for a new heaven. It is the poet that gives this inarticulate place its voice. Stevens speaks at the intersection of passing sensation and the permanence of recorded thought, and much of the poem is about the difficulty of that coincidence. We are asked to avoid the romance of a holistic theory in place of a provisional one.

In many ways, the design of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" mirrors the pleading in a case of *res ipsa loquitur*: Stevens meditates upon the fact of his own sensations, extricating them from the received constructions that have obscured them (" 'The search / For reality is as momentous as / The search for god' " [CP 481]). Stevens' strategy in "An Ordinary Evening" is to take the ordinary and find within it the extraordinary, to break the bonds of the normal so that the blank shock of the so-called commonplace can be seen. If the ordinary is truly seen for what it is, we can require no further proof of the extraordinariness of commonplace experience. The thing will speak for itself. Or, as Emerson writes so movingly in "Nature": "If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how men would believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile" (9).

Thus, when Stevens writes that the poem must be "the cry of its occasion, / Part of the *res* itself," he is directing his (and our) attention to that extraordinary event of the real, the real to which we must keep returning. In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens observes, "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (142). "An Ordinary Evening" is above all a poem of the earth, informed though it is by the blank spaces in the imagination once tenanted by heaven and hell. In order to apprehend its meaning, we must escape the teleological constructions that have ordered our experience. With "the cry of its occasion," Stevens heralds in the temporal paradox that is central to the poetic act. He writes:

The poet speaks the poem as it is,  
Not as it was: part of the reverberation  
Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues  
Are like newspapers blown by the wind. He speaks  
By sight and insight as they are. There is no  
Tomorrow for him. The wind will have passed by,  
The statues will have gone back to be things about.  
(CP 473)

How is it that the poem can avoid being a “thing about?” What will keep this writing from being a “newspaper blown by the wind?” The poem that after all takes place in time necessarily loses its presentness. Moreover, the moment it seeks to record has passed by. How does the poem make and keep the cry of its occasion? Eleanor Cook has noted that Stevens’ “leaves” are in some measure the leaves of a poet’s book (283). With that in mind, consider the remainder of the stanza:

The mobile and the immobile flickering  
In the area between is and was are leaves,  
Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees

And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings  
Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,  
Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,

In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,  
The town, the weather, in a casual litter,  
Together, said words of the world are the life of the  
world. (CP 474)

This seems like a beautiful if impossible prescription. Yet it demonstrates Stevens’ conviction that in the Alpha and Omega, in the very alphabet, lies whatever sanction we will find. Still, the temporal impossibility of remaining present in time, let alone recording that present, remains in many ways the central problem of this poem. Stanza XVIII opens:

It is the window that makes it difficult  
To say good-by to the past and to live and to be  
In the present state of things as, say, to paint

In the present state of painting and not the state  
Of thirty years ago. It is looking out  
Of the window and walking in the street and seeing,

As if the eyes were the present or part of it,  
As if the ears heard any shocking sound,  
As if life and death were ever physical. (CP 478)

In these lines we hear the central challenge of the poem, to make the poem the cry of its occasion, not simply to let it become one of the “things about.” The poet must find that “specious present” and remain in it, a seemingly impossible task, as impossible perhaps as creating the poem of pure reality.

It is in stanza XX that the temporal tension of the poem is cunningly symbolized in Stevens’ use of the term *transcript*, a term with specifically apt meanings that dramatize the difficulty of recording this “presence” in

New Haven. A transcript in the law is a written recording of oral testimony. The testimony is usually given by one present at a given scene. The speaker narrates an event, and that narration is inscribed (that is, put into writing by an official reporter). Because the law needs to fix the past so that it can have an agreed-upon version of the past on which the law may rule, the inscription, or transcript, then becomes the official version of that event. It supplants the real, not simply metaphorically, but because the law sanctifies only the testimonial version of the event. The writing *becomes* the official event for all future reference. A transcript then is, in effect, the event; it purportedly contains the real and, therefore, supplants it. Finding this transcript becomes the impetus of “An Ordinary Evening”—the writing becomes more than the real. In becoming a poem, the real becomes ordained. In the following lines, we see the poet writing the unsayable, trying to fix, in language, the ephemeral sensation of the real.

The imaginative transcripts were like clouds,  
Today; and the transcripts of feeling, impossible  
To distinguish. The town was a residuum,

A neuter shedding shapes in an absolute.  
Yet the transcripts of it when it was blue remain;  
And the shapes that it took in feeling, the persons that

It became, the nameless, flitting characters—  
These actors still walk in a twilight muttering lines.  
It may be that they mingle, clouds and men, in the air

Or street or about the corners of a man,  
Who sits thinking in the corners of a room.  
In this chamber the pure sphere escapes the impure,

Because the thinker himself escapes. And yet  
To have evaded clouds and men leaves him  
A naked being with a naked will

And everything to make. He may evade  
Even his own will and in his nakedness  
Inhabit the hypnosis of that sphere. (CP 479–80)

Stevens is here speaking of his own consciousness, and of the difficulty of fixing temporal sensation in language. The very next canto announces that impossibility: “But he may not. He may not evade his will, / Nor the wills of other men; and he cannot evade / The will of necessity, the will of wills— . . .” Thus, just as the poet finds the symbol that fixes the now, he undoes it. In “Adagia,” Stevens writes, “The eye sees less than the tongue says. The tongue says less than the mind thinks” (OP 195). Just as a

transcript can never be the real event, so, too, do these imaginative transcripts and transcripts of feeling fail; so, too, are these clouds of sensation evaded. Evading the restlessness of his own will becomes yet another red herring of the poem's construction. The speaker cannot avoid the mysterious commandments of his own attention. It is the profound difficulty of becoming a witness to the world that these lines dramatize.

Consider the legal meaning of *transcript* against the following lines from "Description without Place":

Description is revelation. It is not  
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,  
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,  
Intenser than any actual life could be,

A text we should be born that we might read,  
More explicit than the experience of sun

And moon, the book of reconciliation,  
Book of a concept only possible

In description, canon central in itself,  
The thesis of the plentifullest John. (CP 344–45)

The lines themselves are no "false facsimile." These words become "canon central"; they are sanctified pages, the version of the world ordained by words alone. It is the search to find that "cast / Of the imagination, made in sound" (CP 345–46) that animates the speaker of "An Ordinary Evening." The words must become the transcript of that evening; they must supplant the real, reordering it into "a renovation of experience" (OP 202).

In *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens observes, "in an age in which disbelief is profoundly prevalent, or if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost" (171). This insight makes explicit part of the strategy of "An Ordinary Evening." It is because we live in an age without sanction that the tracings of an individual will become all important. Indeed, it is the "will of wills" that disciplines the speaker's attention to articulate the "interior made exterior" that becomes the poem of "An Ordinary Evening." Because there is no template of behavior against which to measure our own, we must ourselves invent one from the cast of our own nature, there being nothing else from which to choose. Stevens' age proceeds without sense of a destined teleology, orphaned as it is from the beliefs that prescribed religious and consequently aesthetic

thought. Whatever order exists is the order we can find and describe and, in describing, create. Description is the provisional revelation of that order. Indeed, all revelation is provisional. The speaker of "An Ordinary Evening" articulates a new ritual for a secularized faith in which the sorting of one's own sensations, the searching of one's language for all its possibilities, becomes the transcript of our existence. That transcript, which is to say the poem itself, becomes the ordained version of reality. It charts the improvisational method through which the imperfect becomes our new haven.

In "Adagia," Stevens writes, "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" (*OP* 189). This statement, and its reflection in Stevens' term "the supreme fiction," has provoked much critical commentary, and controversy. Many critics have focused their attention on defining the content of this fiction, and this has led to widely divergent readings of the term, and of the poem that celebrates it. Is the supreme fiction a nihilistic straw man, designed to reveal the impossibility of any transcendent ideal, as J. Hillis Miller has suggested (Miller 145–48)? Is it primarily an aesthetic ideal, designed to subsume metaphysical concerns, as Frank Doggett has argued (Doggett 20–21)? Or is the supreme fiction a philosophically informed revivification of romanticism, as Joseph Carroll has argued (Carroll 6–12)?<sup>3</sup>

These disparate readings of Stevens' supreme fiction may, however, be less antagonistic than they first appear if one examines the supreme fiction as a type of legal fiction. Far from being a radical theory, the notion that one accept a fiction and believe in it willingly is a very natural outgrowth of Stevens' training and contemplation of the law. Indeed, the very structure of legal thought is the acceptance of fictions. Instead of insisting that Stevens' supreme fiction implies a particular course of belief, I would propose that it be read as an experimental method, in which varying hypotheses of interpretation can be weighed. A legal reading of this term may afford us a way not simply to join the battle of competing interpretations, but rather to overarc it.

It may help the student of Stevens' work to consider the specific activities of Stevens' legal practice in order to gain some insight into the meaning of this concept. All of law, after all, is a system of invented constructs designed to yield specific results in human conduct. Properly understood, the practice of law is in many ways the practice of supremely serious fictions. We invent, for instance, the fictitious persona of a corporation. A corporation is essentially a verbal phenomenon: such an entity does not exist in nature. But once invoked, this invention changes the way we analyze all manner of conduct by those who are deemed to be part of the corporation. The general laws governing ownership of property are sup-

planted—the corporate assets and liabilities belong properly to the fictional entity, not to the men and women who comprise the corporation. The fiction inspires, indeed, directs, a very real change in human conduct.

Moreover, attorneys, Stevens included, are by training advocates. Their work consists largely in searching the facts of a given case to find plausible legal theories that will support their client's case. This inquiry is not a search for the truth, but a search for the possible. It can concisely be described as searching "the possible for its possibles." Those theories that are both plausible and for the client, redemptive, have utility. They are not necessarily true, and here it pays to recall that a lawyer is an advocate, not an adjudicator. Utility is the chief attribute of legal fiction for the lawyer in serving the ends of his client's needs.

I would say that, for Stevens, the supreme fiction had a similar design. The specific content of the supreme fiction may well be less relevant than its utility. As a result, rather than take issue with the many divergent views of the supreme fiction that critics have suggested, I would counter that all of them are suggested by Stevens. The very structure of legal fiction, which I believe is the model behind the supreme fiction, is to "search a possible for its possibles." Thus, rather than hearing truly divergent reports from these critics, I hear suggestions that are indeed contemplated by the poem itself, and, with the proper perspective, can be harmonized.

Of course, the most obvious exposition of Stevens' idea that fiction informs poetic truth is "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." As Milton Bates has observed, legal fiction is a source for the redemptive power of fiction that Stevens advocates in that poem (Bates 201–03).<sup>4</sup> The poem itself presents the logical underpinning for Stevens' theory of poetry in a three-part formulation: "It Must Be Abstract, It Must Change, It Must Give Pleasure." The very structure of the poem is patterned after an appellate brief; each section begins with a proposition, stated in italics, and followed by "evidence" to support it, mirroring precisely the format of a legal brief. The correspondence between legal fiction and the supreme fiction is thus announced by the very form the poem takes. Moreover, once this intimate connection between legal fiction and poetic fiction is understood, Stevens' proposition in "Adagia" about the exquisite truth of belief in a fiction becomes not radical, but indeed, quite natural.

While Stevens never mistakes the operative power of the language of the law for the suggestive power of poetry, his use of the supreme fiction is intended to effect a very real change in human cognition. That change in cognition, as he learned in the practice of law, is the very function of fiction. Lon Fuller notes that legal fiction is an illustration of "the all-pervading power of the word":

That a statement which is disbelieved by both its author and his audience can have any significance at all is evidence that

we are here in contact with the mysterious influence exercised by names and symbols. In that sense fiction is a linguistic phenomenon. (11)

It is this last point in particular that illuminates Stevens' notion of fiction.

An example of legal fiction cited by Fuller and well known to all is that a man and a woman are one. Until recently, this was, besides being a statement of romantic sentiment, one of the legal attributes of marriage. Marriage converted two separate legal entities into one. Linguistically, it is of course a fiction. But what of its practical effect? It is a fiction designed to yield a specific result: that the property of a man and woman be deemed to be held by one entity, indivisibly. In fact, the verb *to deem* is the linguistic agency of fiction. To deem the existence of a unity between man and woman alters reality in a palpable way—it changes the consequences of ownership. In fact, that is precisely the point of legal fiction: its genesis is wholly dependent on its utility. The fictional idea comes into being to take us from one plane of thought (that a man and a woman are two individuals) into another (that a man and a woman are one, indivisible). In law, fiction is the means by which we arrive at a non-fictitious result. A man and a woman are *deemed* to be one, and the law allows them to function as one. The fiction itself serves a process of mental progression in that it supplies a step of logic that cannot be gotten another way.

In law, the change brought about by fiction is very real. It not only changes cognition but it changes fact as well. In Stevens' poetics, where the emphasis is on epistemological, not necessarily behavioral change, fiction is intended to have an effect no less real. In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," Stevens posits the following:

A man and a woman  
Are one.  
A man and a woman and a blackbird  
Are one. (CP 93)

What is the *effect* of this fiction? In the first sentence, we hear the familiar sentiment of the well-known fiction. But the second? The second is jarring in its impossibility—its linguistic impossibility. The fiction itself forces the reader to enact a cognitive change. It forces us to reconsider not only the first premise, but the very expectation that the sentence contains a premise. If we accept for the moment that it does, what of the content of this equation? If we accept the premise, as the first sentence implies we should, our entire system of categorization is undermined, and that is precisely the point. How can we refigure the blackbird to arrive at the promise of comfort that the sentence implies? Refiguring the blackbird, refiguring every categorization of thought that each of the stanzas of the poem

proffers is not only the poem's method but its purpose. "Thirteen Ways" is intended to force the reader to reconsider the very methods of perception. It uses linguistic fiction to force a change in our habits of cognition.

Fuller makes the point that "a fiction is dead when the majority of persons have learned to make the necessary correction intuitively" (118). It is in this context that Stevens' point that "the exquisite truth is to know it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly" has its redemptive power. Stevens uses fiction to forge a cognitive leap. It takes us from one plane of thought to another, just as the notion that a man and a woman and a blackbird are one brings us from logical impossibility to a reordering of our own fixed system of logic to achieve a reconfiguration of the world. The received assumptions that delimit our thoughts must be undone. It is in the positing of fictions that this liberation and reconfiguration become possible. Stevens' insistence on belief in a fiction is not a fanciful one—it is at the core of his pragmatism.

Some of the tangled analysis of Stevens' supreme fiction founders when it attempts to arrive at a definition of the supreme fiction, an admittedly tantalizing proposition. But the real value of the supreme fiction is not the content of the fiction, but the method of cognitive change that it necessarily demands. The supreme fiction is a construct whose existence is irrelevant; its utility lies in its ability to take us from one plane of thought to another, in the same way that legal fiction enacts a cognitive change that cannot be achieved through mere logic. Thus, when Stevens argues in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" that poetry must be abstract, he is insisting that poetry leave the realm of the literal so that it may disturb the standard categorizations by which we apprehend the literal world.

Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea  
Of this invention, this invented world,  
The inconceivable idea of the sun.

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun with an ignorant eye  
And see it clearly in the idea of it. (CP 380)

We must develop a new, and necessarily abstracted, category, apart from the received constructs of the past, in order to see the world as it is. The supreme fiction is a construct that allows us to imagine an escape from the teleological boundaries that authorize our cognition. Its utility lies in its ability to proffer such an escape. Of course, such an escape is both temporal and provisional, and thus Stevens offers only a suggestion of this path ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction").

Equally important, and tied to Stevens' legal training, is his insistence that poetry must change. The change that is sought, however, is not poetic

evolution, but cognitive refashioning. In the same way that legal fictions create behavioral revision, poetic fiction must change the way we conceive the world. That is the utility that calls it into being, in the same way that legal fiction is needed to mediate between falsehood and behavioral change.

The eye of a vagabond in metaphor  
That catches our own. The casual is not  
Enough. The freshness of transformation is

The freshness of a world. It is our own,  
It is ourselves, the freshness of ourselves,  
And that necessity and that presentation

Are rubbings of a glass in which we peer.  
Of these beginnings, gay and green, propose  
The suitable amours. Time will write them down.

(CP 397–98)

The freshness of a world is finally the promise and potential of our own perceptions. The casual metaphor, the expected connection, is only an evasion. It is only when we ourselves are changed by that instant incandescence of our own perception, altered through metaphor, that the utility of the supreme fiction has begun its work.

The final requirement of the supreme fiction is that it give pleasure. The pleasure that fiction yields is that it constantly shifts planes, it insists upon a continuous shifting and turning of our perspectives in an unceasing urge to discover the polymorphousness of thought itself. In stanza IX, Stevens writes:

Red robin, stop in your preludes, practicing  
Mere repetitions. These things at least comprise  
An occupation, an exercise, a work,

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:  
One of the vast repetitions final in  
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,  
Until merely going round is a final good,  
The way wine comes at a table in the wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf  
Above the table spins its constant spin,  
So we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,  
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,  
But he that of repetition is most master. (*CP* 405–06)

It is this “going round and round,” this constant querying, this almost infinite recalibration of position that allows us to experience the fullest range of potential pleasure. Stevens continues to push for a plurality in his modes of regard (not unlike the thirteen ways he offers in looking at the blackbird). The poem enjoins us to seek that “more than rational distortion” (*CP* 406) that will enable us to feel that venerable pleasure that faith once delivered. In this “place dependent on ourselves” (*CP* 401) we must find our own hymn. In so critical an undertaking, no postulate can be dismissed, no possibility turned out of hand.

Stevens, better than many, sensed that the real radicalism of poetry is that it exists in the mind alone. As a result, I think the pleasure that Stevens speaks of is necessarily momentary and transient. That pleasure may be aesthetic, it may be philosophic, it may suggest that transcendence itself cannot be achieved. The utility of the supreme fiction lies in its ability to encompass all of this; it is the action of the mind as it attempts to divine the world in words. In this way, I think that the disparate views of the supreme fiction, as enunciated by Miller, Doggett, or Carroll, each provide an answer in the tangled search for the possible. The model of legal fiction, with its emphasis on hypothetical reasoning, allows the supreme fiction to retain this mobility. Stevens’ supreme fiction is a construct that is open to yield as many “renovation[s] of experience” that the words themselves can supply. The value of the supreme fiction is lost only when its meaning loses the fluidity that fiction, which exists in the imagination alone, implies. Our pleasure is thus dependent upon the profound fecundity of imagination, which is our bounty in this “place dependent on ourselves.” The provisional fictions that the mind can invent and the pleasures that attend them are limited only by our failure to seek greater invention.

Stevens thus accomplishes what few in the law and literature movement attempt: he allows the law to speak poetically. He wrests the language of the law from any traditional locus. My purpose in proposing this method of interdisciplinary reading is to uncover for all readers yet another layer of meaning in the words Stevens chooses. Stevens’ poetry asks that we hear anew words that have become fixed in the transcript of our received ideas. He can make this demand in part because he recognized, as Wittgenstein argued, that philosophy (and, we may add, poetry) leaves the world as it finds it. The challenge in Stevens’ poetry is precisely to find that world.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Despite this criticism, I do wish to make it clear that both Radin and Grey offer valuable insights to all serious readers of Stevens' work. My objection is not to their skills at poetic analysis, which are formidable, but rather to the limitations they impose on the use to which their analyses ought to be put.

<sup>2</sup> The seminal case on the subject is *Byrne v Boadle* (2 H. & C. 722, 159 Eng. Rep. 299 (1863); Prosser and Keaton 243), in which a barrel of flour rolled out of a warehouse and fell upon a passing pedestrian. The pedestrian had only to plead the facts of the event in order to establish that the simple freakishness of the event ineluctably meant that the warehouse owner had been negligent; no further proof (of exactly who had done what) was needed. Another famous case of *res ipsa loquitur* occurred when a chair was thrown from the window of the defendant's hotel, and fell onto a passerby below. One can hear a faint echo of this case in the very lines Stevens uses.

<sup>3</sup> In specifically identifying these three critical views, I mean only to suggest the ambit of the argument, not to give a truly comprehensive view of the differing analyses that now surround the term. These three views are somewhat illustrative of the conversation as a whole and therefore merit a brief examination.

Miller in fact edges toward the kind of fluid reading of fiction that I am suggesting when he writes: "The critic can develop radically different notions of Stevens' aims as a poet, and for each of these it is easy to find apposite passages from the text" (146). Miller, however, goes on to find that "[s]uch poetry is not dialectical, if that means a series of stages which build on one another, each transcending the last and moving to a higher stage, in some version of the Hegelian sequence of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. At the beginning he is as far as he ever goes" (146). Rather than seeing Stevens' opposing hypotheses as fictions that allow the imagination to shift its moorings, Miller sees this oscillation as movement that in effect goes nowhere because it has nowhere to go.

Frank Doggett suggests that the supreme fiction can best be read as an aesthetic ideal. He argues that philosophic questions are dislocated from their setting in Stevens' poetry. Thus, while Doggett notes that Stevens has a fluency in notions of metaphysics, those philosophic concerns furnish merely a background for the active transformations of the poem (20–21). For Doggett, the philosophic content of Stevens' poems becomes simply a tool, a setting in which the aesthetic development of the poem can take place. The supreme fiction is thus not a philosophic construct but a wholly aesthetic one.

Joseph Carroll takes exception to this reading. He argues that "Stevens' poetry subsists within a genuinely philosophical atmosphere, that is, an atmosphere in which the metaphysical perspective crucially influences the quality of experience. The dualistic and transcendental paradigms are not for Stevens merely hypotheses propounded for the sake of their dialectic potential; they are primary modes of being" (11–12). The supreme fiction for Carroll thus promises a neo-romanticism, in which the poem becomes a medium through which spiritual redemption can be fulfilled.

<sup>4</sup> Bates's study of the poem correctly identifies some key authorities on legal fiction, and he aptly notes that as a lawyer, Stevens had daily contact with "patently false concepts" (201). He thus suggests the deeply analogous relation between legal and poetic fiction. However, because the chief focus of his analysis of the supreme fiction remains the fiction of religion, Bates's exploration of the real utility of Stevens' supreme fiction is cast in a light different from my own. I am particularly concerned with the *means* by which legal fiction subtly reorders cognition. Bates's study looks to the redemptive power of that fiction, and thus focuses on its *ends*.

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## 'Intangible Arrows': Stevens, St. Sebastian, and the Search for the Real

RICHARD A. KAYE

**M**ODERNISM'S ENGAGEMENT with the image and myth of St. Sebastian has an extensive, complex, and intricately interrelated history. A popular theme for Renaissance artists, the youthful Roman martyr Sebastian, who, according to the Church's official *Acta Sanctorum*, was punished for revealing his Christianity by being sentenced to an execution by arrows only to suffer a death by bludgeoning, has been a popular image with associations of decadence since the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Wilde adopted the name "Sebastian Melmoth" on his release from prison, having written a youthful elegy to Keats invoking the saint.<sup>2</sup> Rilke devoted a 1905 poem to the martyr, while in *Death in Venice* (1912), Thomas Mann's Aschenbach declared the saint the "most beautiful symbol" and a "new type of hero," an emblem of a heroism that was "not merely passive."<sup>3</sup> Proust, having attended, along with Jean Cocteau and Robert de Montesquiou, the 1911 production of Gabriele d'Annunzio's and Debussy's *Le Martyre de Saint Sébastien* at its premiere at Paris's Châtelet Theater with the famed Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein in the starring role, was continually captivated by the saint, inserting several references to the martyr into *Swann's Way* when describing M. Legrandin, who smiles "while his eyes remained full of pain, like the eyes of a handsome martyr whose body bristles with arrows."<sup>4</sup> T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of St. Sebastian," a sadomasochistic dramatic monologue with obvious debts to Browning's "Porphyria's Lover," reveals an Eliot of self-consciously dandiacal posturings. "[T]here's nothing homosexual about this," Eliot informed Conrad Aiken on sending his Harvard friend a copy of the poem in 1914, and although some may find Eliot's remarks disingenuous (how could the arrow-ridden saint *not* be homosexual in meaning?), Eliot was by no means the only modern poet to discover in Sebastian an erotically charged figure who could be adopted on behalf of a personal poetic credo.<sup>5</sup>

In a similar spirit of secular appropriation, Wallace Stevens adopted St. Sebastian for his poem "Holiday in Reality," where the martyr takes his place in a private cosmology that cannot be termed religious in kind but, rather, may be understood as part of the history of the poet's relation to the visual arts as well as to literary aestheticism. In Stevens' "Holiday in Reality," first published in *The Chimera* in the summer installment of 1944

and subsequently collected in 1947 in *Transport to Summer*, St. Sebastian makes an oblique if unmistakable appearance. The poem harbors a central, if somewhat surreptitiously deployed, motif of the saint that serves as a unifying image for Stevens' larger poetic propositions. Although critics greeted the publication of *Transport to Summer* enthusiastically—Louis Martz claimed it “may well stand as another landmark in American literature,” and F. O. Matthiessen pointed to “Holiday in Reality” as a highlight of the collection (reviewing the book in *The New York Times Book Review*, he quoted several of the lines from “Holiday in Reality” as evidence of Stevens' characteristic “lightness and ebullience”)—the poem has proven an elusive subject of critical interpretation.<sup>6</sup> To cite several of the poem's better critics: Bernard Heringman characterizes “Holiday in Reality” as concerning “synthesis,” revealing that “Abstraction, change, and pleasure are the three defining principles of Stevens' ‘supreme fiction. . . .’”<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, meanwhile, describes the poem as an “extraordinary fantasia upon the trope of whiteness,” while J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton argue that the work “finds that each individual's sense of the world differs.”<sup>8</sup> These analyses all are persuasive and even compatible, yet they are brought into sharper, more unified focus when understood in the light of the wider implications suggested by Sebastian as the aesthete's favorite emblem.

As many scholars, most recently Glen MacLeod in *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, have demonstrated, Stevens' relation to painting was crucial to his self-conception as a poet as well as to his larger poetic endeavor.<sup>9</sup> The poet's lifelong affinity for the visual arts was perhaps best characterized by Bonnie Costello when she noted that “Although Stevens's poems abound in references to particular artists and their works, it is finally the idea or ideal of painting, its struggle to define an imaginative space with a presence to rival natural experience, that attracts him. . . .”<sup>10</sup> As is often the case in interpreting Stevens' work, by teasing out the simple referentiality of the lines one may move toward a poem's larger meaning. It may be useful, then, to consider “Holiday in Reality” in terms of its engagement with Sebastian and the martyr's history as the patron saint of aesthetes, an idealized icon that generated considerable attention at the turn of the century. I quote the poem in its entirety:

I

It was something to see that their white was different,  
Sharp as white paint in the January sun;

Something to feel that they needed another yellow,  
Less Aix than Stockholm, hardly a yellow at all,

A vibrancy not to be taken for granted, from  
A sun in an almost colorless, cold heaven.

They had known that there was not even a common speech,  
Palabra of a common man who did not exist.

Why should they not know they had everything of their own  
As each had a particular woman and her touch?

After all, they knew that to be real each had  
To find for himself his earth, his sky, his sea.

And the words for them and the colors that they possessed.  
It was impossible to breathe at Durand-Ruel's.

## II

The flowering Judas grows from the belly or not at all.  
The breast is covered with violets. It is a green leaf.

Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring.  
Spring is the truth of spring or nothing, a waste, a fake.

These trees and their argentines, their dark-spiced branches,  
Grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic dust.

The bud of the apple is desire, the down-falling gold,  
The catbird's gobble in the morning half-awake—

These are real only if I make them so. Whistle  
For me, grow green for me and, as you whistle and grow green,

Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin  
And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real.<sup>11</sup>

The poem culminates in an evocation of St. Sebastian, generalized so that it denotes not so much a specific representation of the saint in art but an abstracted, animate body. This imaginary arrow-pierced figure is conveyed through a series of startlingly vivid representations of physical sensations inspired by the characteristic iconography of the martyr. Although these sensations do not emphatically evoke Sebastian until the poem's last two lines, the first two lines of the poem anticipate the martyr Sebastian through their reference to painting as well as to the month of January: St. Sebastian's traditional feast day is January 20. Several images in the poem, particularly that of a flowering Judas growing from a belly, or the allusion to the "umbilical" nature of spring, suggest an unclothed body exposed to view. Given the vagueness of the details relating to Sebastian, however, it is unlikely that the poet was trying to invoke a specific painting of the saint. Although Stevens might have been inspired by a particular representation of St. Sebastian while composing "Holiday in Reality," it is more plausible that he was bringing to the poem a general

sense of the iconographic history of the saint, as well as of the martyr's role as the object of cult-like worship on the part of turn-of-the-century aesthetes.

As Heringman notes, "Holiday in Reality" shifts in dialectical movement between the realms of imagination and reality, depicted in the poem as, respectively, a powerfully sentient world and an aesthetic articulation of sensation represented as spiritually stultifying. Barbara Fisher sees a number of contrasting worlds in the poem—"art and nature, self and cosmos, Europe and America"—together suggesting a paradoxical embedding of opposites.<sup>12</sup> Although in its initial evocation of winter the poem begins with an iconographic analogy ("Sharp as white paint in the January sun"), Stevens builds a sequence of descriptive observations that are notable in not being susceptible to representation through pictorial art. The line "A sun in an almost colorless, cold heaven" encapsulates this perspective, concluding as it does with an image of a heaven without color yet that can be felt palpably. This emphasis on a nonpictorial mimesis is reinforced by the descriptions of "down-falling gold," a "catbird's gobble," and "dark-spiced branches." Just as the phrase "down-falling gold" suggests a visually arresting movement that cannot be captured adequately in painting, a catbird's gobble and spiced branches involve aural and olfactory sensations beyond the painter's craft. The speaker's intimate demands ("Whistle / For me, grow green for me") strive to set the world into motion in a way that cannot be apprehended other than through the speaker's individualizing, awakening consciousness.

Such events in the sensually imagined life of the poet—constituting "a vibrancy not to be taken for granted," so individual as to be "not even a common language"—comprise a Stevensian argument on behalf of a more authentic expansion of experience. The speaker's address to a lover in the fourth-from-last line ("These are real only if I make them so. Whistle / For me, grow green for me") introduces a note of heightened eroticism. That erotic emphasis is powerfully reaffirmed in the poem's final allusion to St. Sebastian in the penultimate two lines ("Intangible arrows quiver and stick in the skin / And I taste at the root of the tongue the unreal of what is real"), which highlight a sense of experience as beyond figurative representation. These last lines capture the poem's central paradox: the overall effect of an image of St. Sebastian is physically, bodily potent yet also impossible to evoke in tangible terms. It is through the corporeally real that the poet discovers the sublimely "unreal" in a moment transcending the painterly.

Although Costello claims that the quivering, sticking arrows of Stevens' poem reveal that the "taste of reality is not entirely pleasant,"<sup>13</sup> the poet actually links such imagery to an exalted erotic satisfaction. Stevens often did employ metaphors of piercing in order to convey feelings of dread;

the eleventh stanza of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Blackbird" (1915), for example, imagines a man "pierced" by fear because he mistakes the "shadow of his equipage / For blackbirds" (CP 94). More often, however, Stevens employed the idea of piercing to designate the most profound apprehension of an experience, whether real or imagined. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), canto 3 of "It Must Be Abstract" explores, through images of a body charged with physical sensation, the fortuitous nature of the imagination's search for satisfying realization: "We move between these points: / From that ever-early candor to its late plural / And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration / Of what we feel from what we think, of thought / Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came. . . ." The canto concludes: "Life's nonsense pierces us with strange relation" (CP 382–83). In a gloss on canto 5 of "It Must Change," Stevens wrote, in reference to the planter, "He is . . . the laborious human who lives in illusions and who, after all the great illusions have left him, still clings to one that pierces him."<sup>14</sup> For Stevens, then, the search for the real, however illusory, reaches its culmination in a startlingly pleasurable sense that one has been pricked, a moment in which intellectual perception is joined to keen physical excitement.

Since his youth the poet had harbored a fascination with a carnally resonant imagery associated with the intensely felt sensation of a body being pierced. In an extraordinary journal entry dated September 15, 1902, the young Stevens recalled in lush detail an autumn visit to the New York Palisades, the famously scenic wooded hills at the mouth of the Hudson River:

There was no litter of broken bottles or crushed egg-shells on the brown needles—but a little brook tinkled under a ledge into a deep ravine—*deep en vérité*—; two thrushes fidgetted on the logs and in the boughs; stalks of golden rod burned in the shadows like flambeaux in my temple; I thought I heard a robin's strain. Oh! I can fancy myself at my ease there. How often I shall stretch out under those evergreens listening to the showers of wind around me—and to that little tinkling bit of water dripping down among those huge rocks and black crevices! It is really very undisturbed there. (L 60–61)

Stevens' giddy self-immersion in this landscape of sensually charged natural phenomena, convincingly detailed in its rusticity and not merely a poet's feigned pastoralism, is cast in terms that render the poet a child of nature, golden rods seeming to burn in his temples like the piercing *flambeaux* of a martyred Sebastian. As with the concluding sentences of "Holiday in Reality," the reader is left with an astonishing image of pagan self-delight. Significantly, another detail of the poem, the reference to

Aix-en-Provence in the fourth line, recalls Stevens' remark to Thomas McGreevy in a 1950 letter that "On my death there will be found carved on my heart . . . the name of Aix-en-Provence" (L 671). This was, of course, the home of one of Stevens' most cherished painters, Cézanne, but what is especially notable is that Stevens imagines his own demise in the vividly lurid terms of an aesthetically marked cadaver.

As a martyr who has been historically associated with Hellenic sensuality, St. Sebastian was of obvious appeal as a post-Romantic image of proto-modern connotations for modernist writers. A paganized Christian emblem with implications of erotic mayhem, Sebastian denotes, as well, a distinctly feminized aestheticism that held particular cult-like appeal in the 1890s. Popular in French painting in the works of artists of *fin-de-siècle* sensibilities such as Jean-Jacques Henner, Gustave Moreau, and Odilon Redon, St. Sebastian was (and has remained) a pervasive homoerotically charged image not only in the work of Wilde but in the writing of scores of other turn-of-the-century authors, among them the poet John Gray (sometimes considered the model for Wilde's Dorian Gray) and the English eccentric Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo).<sup>15</sup> The hero of Rolfe's "Venetian Romance" entitled *The Desire and the Pursuit of the Whole* (written in 1912 but first published in 1934) is composing a novel in which the hero, Sebastian Archer, is an Episcopalian cleric discharged by the Church and thus described by Rolfe's narrator as "pierced by archdiaconal arrows."<sup>16</sup> (Rolfe himself had authored two controversial 1891 sonnets on a St. Sebastian by Guido Reni in Rome.) Rilke's 1905 poem "Saint Sebastian" conceived of the martyr as the ultimate aesthete-narcissist, whose "eyes show deep distress" as he gazes disdainfully at his executioners, "those destroyers of a lovely thing."<sup>17</sup> The hero of the camp classic *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (1923) by the English novelist Ronald Firbank (whose novels Stevens once indicated he had read) imagines, while lying luxuriously in a bath "perfumed with *Kiki*," that "he was St. Sebastian."<sup>18</sup> The American photographer and author Carl Van Vechten executed a series of mock-heroic photographic images of St. Sebastian figures based on nude models during the 1940s, photographs that Van Vechten chose not to exhibit during his lifetime.<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Nabokov's first novel published in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), was a narrative detailing its narrator-biographer's protracted quest to discover the authentic version of the life of his dead half-brother, a novelist. In 1944, the same year that "Holiday in Reality" appeared in *The Chimera*, Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* was published in England. Its hero Sebastian Flyte, the dissolute scion of an affluent Catholic family, emerges as a martyr for Oxford-based aestheticism as well as for an entire aristocratic class in the years preceding World War II.

Against the grain of a widespread conception of St. Sebastian as either a gloriously camp, “decadent” icon or a pitiable figure of repressed homoeroticism, Stevens endorses a saint of intense physicality and sentient potency in “Holiday in Reality.” It is neither the aesthete’s death-haunted, Hellenized ephebe nor the violent self-flagellating martyr of Eliot’s “Love Song of St. Sebastian” that animates Stevens’ imagination. Rather, Stevens renders the imagined *experience* of a St. Sebastian—intangible, connected to the seasonal rhythms of renewal, resistant to aestheticizing impulses yet experientially available to the poet—rather than the immobile iconic image familiar from painting. Stevens depicts a martyr who must be embraced, if he is embraced at all, as a wholly personal apprehension. Thus the lines declaring “These trees and their argentines, their dark-spiced branches, / Grow out of the spirit or they are fantastic dust” pit personal experience, consecrated by both nature and spirit, against a morbidity that, although (in a term with strong *fin-de-siècle* associations), is “fantastic,” remains nevertheless “fake,” a “waste,” “nothing.”

In articulating a poetic response to what he understood as a narrowly realized aestheticism, Stevens may have been inspired by an 1897 letter by a prominent member of the English aestheticist movement, Aubrey Beardsley. Stevens was familiar with both Beardsley’s work and his reputation; as an aspiring poet he had been compared to the English illustrator in a 1915 postcard from the editor Harriet Monroe. “I don’t know when any poems have intrigued me so much as these,” Monroe had written to Stevens. “They are recondite, erudite, provocatively obscure, with a kind of modern gargoyle grin in them—Aubrey Beardsley in the making.”<sup>20</sup> In a 1924 review of *Harmonium* in *The Dial*, the critic Llewelyn Powys intimated that Stevens’ relation to Beardsley harbored hints of decadent self-posturing: “Just as in the ‘nineties, golden quill in hand, Aubrey Beardsley, seated under a crucifix, traced with degenerate wax-white finger pictures that revealed a new world, a world exact, precise, and convincing, squeezed, so to speak, between the attenuated crevices of a hypersensitive imagination, so in his poetry Wallace Stevens chips apertures in the commonplace and deftly constructs on the other side of the ramparts of the world, tier upon tier, pinnacle upon pinnacle, his own supersophisticated township of the mind.”<sup>21</sup> In a piece of correspondence dated May 7, 1897, which first appeared in a collection of Beardsley’s letters published in 1904, Beardsley wrote to John Gray (himself the author of an 1897 poem to St. Sebastian published in the volume *The Blue Calendar*) and mentioned an etching by Jacques Callot that Beardsley had previously discussed with André Raffalovich. Wrote Beardsley:

I don’t know at all where you would be likely to find Callot’s S. Sebastian. Perhaps Armand Durand have reproduced his etchings. You would certainly be very interested in this particu-

lar one. I see that a Callot has been brought out in Leroi's series of *Artistes Célèbres*. It is just possible you would find the S. Sebastian in it.<sup>22</sup>

Beardsley had been taken with the Callot's *Martyrdom of St. Sebastian*, an etching that is of some art historical interest for its unusual diminishment of the figure of the martyr Sebastian in favor of a panoramic view of soldiers taking part in his execution (see fig. 1). Beardsley admired the Callot image not for its representation of the saint but for another detail of the etching. "There is," Beardsley had written Raffalovich in a letter composed the year of his note to Gray, "a charming soldier in the background picking up the arrows that have missed the saint."<sup>23</sup> Beardsley's comments suggest the extent to which St. Sebastian had become the English decadent's camp *objet d'art*, an inside, coded joke. (In the wake of the Wilde trial, Raffalovich himself would later join an order of Dominicans under the coy *nom religieux* of "Brother Sebastian.")

The Armand Durand of Beardsley's letter was a celebrated Paris publisher (evidently no relation to the Paul Durand-Ruel who had established the Durand-Ruel Gallery), who dealt in art reproductions.<sup>24</sup> If Stevens had read Beardsley's correspondence, it is possible that through a series of associations he transformed the Durand of Beardsley's letter into the Durand-Ruel of the New York gallery with which Stevens was familiar.<sup>25</sup> Barbara Fisher argues that the reference to Durand-Ruel is a key element in the poem, demonstrating that "poetic consciousness breaks out of the gallery with its painted scenes. . . . [F]light from the gallery is flight from an aesthetic conceived and fixed outside the self."<sup>26</sup>

Stevens' reference to the Durand-Ruel Gallery in "Holiday in Reality" signifies, as well, the poet's sense of a misguided mission in the public display of art. An internationally known dealer for some fifty years, the New York branch of the Paris-based Durand-Ruel Gallery began as an effort at capitalizing on the growing American market for works by Impressionist masters. Through his friendships with Manet, Monet, Pissarro, and other artists, its owner Paul Durand-Ruel acquired a large body of Impressionist paintings at a time when such works were relatively inexpensive. Given New York's ascendancy as the lightning rod for contemporary painting in the late forties, Durand-Ruel's was unable to sustain a market in Impressionist works. In 1950, the gallery was forced to close its offices, an event that Stevens noted in a letter to Thomas McGreevy. After expressing regret that the gallery's failure suggested that "no one any longer wanted Impressionist pictures," Stevens remarked that Durand-Ruel's star had dimmed considerably in later years. "One never felt that his place was vital as one does, for example, feel that Rosenberg's is vital," noted Stevens. "The galleries were becoming a little faded and the windows seemed almost to be a bit grimy" (L 668). Clearly, Stevens had long

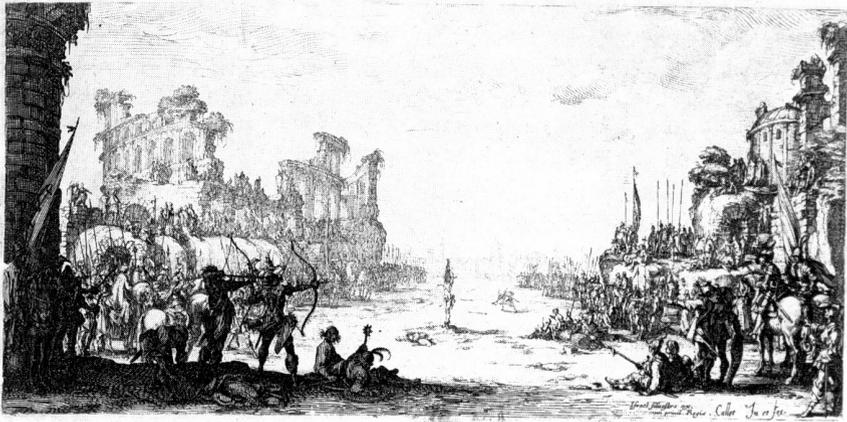


Fig. 1. Jacques Callot, *The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian* (c.1623)  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Jane Costello Goldberg, 1986.

been taken with the idea of Durand-Ruel's as a mausoleum to art rather than as a place of vigorous creative activity. His skeptical view of the prestigious New York gallery may be related to Durand-Ruel's role, as dealers engaged almost exclusively with Impressionist art at a time when Abstract Expressionism, a movement with which Stevens held considerably more in common than with French Impressionism, was experiencing its heyday in New York.<sup>27</sup> For the Stevensian aesthetic, Durand-Ruel's thus served as a token of a self-negating devotion to a stagnant artistic heritage.

Although the Paul Rosenberg Gallery, which Stevens praises in his letter to McGreevy, also dealt in Old Master and Impressionist works, the firm of Paul Rosenberg gave somewhat more attention to work by modern and contemporary painters. In addition to such European masters as Ingres and popular modern artists such as Picasso, the gallery's stable of artists included such key members of the American avant-garde as Max Weber, Abraham Ratner, Milton Avery, and, most significantly, Marsden Hartley, of whose work the Rosenberg Gallery was the primary dealer from 1940 until 1953.<sup>28</sup> Hartley had painted a 1939 satirical self-portrait of himself that included details from the traditional iconography of St. Sebastian. Entitled *Sustained Comedy—Portrait of an Object*, Hartley's painting is a playful exercise in camp self-fashioning, depicting a tattooed man with an earring, two arrows piercing his eyes, a thunderbolt entering his forehead, and, in a comic allusion to St. Francis of Assisi, small birds perched on his

shoulder (see fig. 2). With the martyr's shirt embossed with an image of preening athletes and his arms covered with tattoos depicting a sailor, flowers, and butterflies, the painting harbors a strong homosexual subtext, characteristic of much of Hartley's art. Stevens was undoubtedly familiar with the painter's work; one of Hartley's closest friends and a man who corresponded with but never met Stevens, the writer and publisher Robert McAlmon, mentioned his friendship with Hartley in a 1921 letter to Stevens.<sup>29</sup> By the 1930s, moreover, Hartley had emerged from avant-garde obscurity to a position of nationally celebrated painter, his exhibitions attracting enthusiastic reviews in such widely circulated publications as *Art News*, *Time*, and *The Christian Science Monitor*. Shortly before his death in 1943, the Paul Rosenberg Gallery held an exhibition devoted to the artist from February 2 to 27, 1943.<sup>30</sup> The following year, the Museum of Modern Art held a major commemorative retrospective of the artist's paintings. It is therefore difficult to imagine that Stevens, who so closely followed the contemporary art scene, would not have been highly familiar with Hartley's work. Stevens may have known of Hartley's self-portrait as a colorfully embellished martyr, although the painting reportedly was not exhibited before Hartley's death. (The artist evidently sold *Sustained Comedy* to the collector Mervin Jules after a friend advised the painter that the work should not be shown publicly.)<sup>31</sup>

By indirectly employing an image of St. Sebastian in "Holiday in Reality" in order to suggest a poetic resistance to an unsatisfyingly effete aesthetic, Stevens might have had in mind, as well, Walter Pater's depiction of a young hero named Sebastian van Storck in Pater's short story by that name, a tale that Stevens probably read. In a story published in the volume *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), Pater detailed the decline of an ethereal young Dutch man who, refusing to have his portrait painted, is said to have "the mortal coldness of a temperament, the intellectual tendencies of which seemed to necessitate straightforward flight from all that was positive . . . in love with death; preferring winter to summer. . . ." Avoiding marriage, Sebastian dies in a disastrous flood while struggling to save a child. The English aesthete's allegorical narrative begins with many of the allusions to painting, as well as to the colors and moods related to seasonal change and variations in weather, that characterize the opening of "Holiday in Reality":

It was a winter-scene, by Adrian van de Velde, or by Isaac van Ostade. All the delicate poetry together with all the delicate comfort of the frosty season was in the leafless branches turned to silver, the furred dresses of the skaters, the warmth of the red-brick house-fronts under the gauze of white fog, the gleams of pale sunlight on the cuirasses of the mounted soldiers as they receded into the distance. Sebastian van Storck, confessedly the

most graceful performer in all that skating multitude, moving in endless maze over the vast surface of the frozen water-meadow, liked best this season of the year for its expression of a perfect impassivity, or at least of a perfect repose. The earth was, or seemed to be, at rest, with a breathlessness of slumber which suited the young man's peculiar temper. The heavy summer, as it dried up the meadows now lying dead below the ice, set free a crowded and competing world of life, which, while it gleamed very pleasantly russet and yellow for the painter Albert Cuyyp, seemed wellnigh to suffocate Sebastian van Storck.<sup>32</sup>

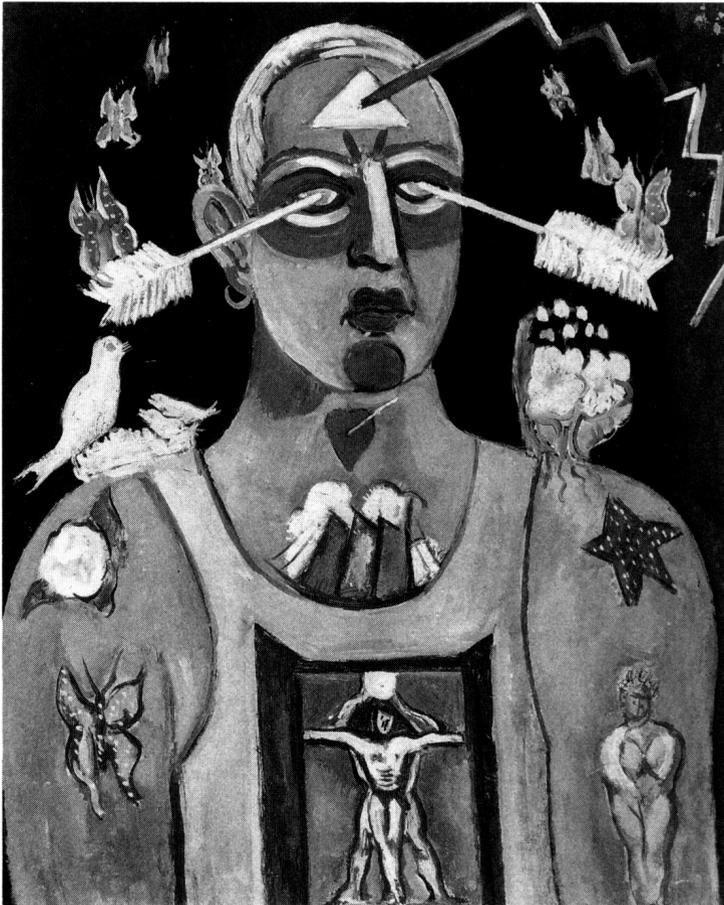


Fig. 2. Marsden Hartley, *Sustained Comedy* (1939)  
Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Gift of Mervin Jules

Pater romanticizes Sebastian as a voluptuously immobile adolescent of languid attitudes, for whom the seasonal transition from winter to spring and then summer is an unwelcome disturbance to his "perfect impassivity." Instead electing to eroticize a body awakened to the currents of nature, Stevens disavows a Paterian still life of the martyr Sebastian on behalf of a vitally changeable figure whose ecstasy has its source in the mutable rites of spring.

Most importantly, the speaker in "Holiday in Reality" abjures a sterile "Palabra of a common man who did not exist" in order to herald a tactile erotics with a female: "Why should they not know they had everything of their own / As each had a particular woman and her touch?" The feminine realm is integrally related to the world of the poem. As James Longenbach has noted, in "Holiday in Reality" the "sheer groundedness of the real is represented as inherently feminine ('Spring is umbilical or else it is not spring')." <sup>33</sup> Stevens' attempt to introduce a female figure into his "myth" of Sebastian had its precedent in a painting by the Paris- and New York-based Dadaist and Precisionist artist Francis Picabia, with whose work Stevens evidently was quite familiar. In a 1929 painting devoted to St. Sebastian, Picabia depicted a martyrdom in which a nude female figure is introduced into the canvas, where, superimposed over Sebastian, she appears to receive the arrows that penetrate the saint. (While several paintings of the martyr, including versions by the seventeenth-century Italian artist Francesco Trevisani and the nineteenth-century French painter Henner, do incorporate a figure of a woman, that of the "pious woman" Irene who was said to have revived the wounded Sebastian, Irene is, needless to say, always depicted clothed.)

Composed in pastel green and orange colors, the Picabia work is very much in the verdantly springlike hues that could be said to characterize Stevens' poem (see fig. 3). Its image of a primitivist saint, one hand demurely covering his middle and the other poised over his chest, flanked by an alluring female figure and a large bird, suggests an Edenic Adam and Eve. Huge green leaves surround the figures in the canvas. Like Stevens' poem, which itself had invoked a Biblical myth of Eden in its observation that the "bud of the apple is desire," Picabia's image empties Sebastian of much of his characteristic homoeroticism by recasting the martyr's iconography in the terms of a male-female idyll. "Holiday in Reality" not only expresses a doctrine of individual experience over an aestheticism understood as effete, the poem tends to confirm the Stevensian dictum, "It must be abstract," a central theme of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." The line in "Holiday in Reality" insisting "These are real only if I make them so" suggests that a figurative "realism" pales in comparison to an elevated abstraction of "intangible arrows."<sup>34</sup>



Fig. 3. Francis Picabia, *Saint Sébastien* (1929)  
Courtesy of Kent Gallery, New York

In "Holiday in Reality," a too-limited aestheticist view and an illusory common language are both contrasted with a nostalgically recalled "they" who once comprehended what the poet must work his way toward understanding, that there is no universal speech or man, a point sharpened with a rhetorical question: "Why should they not know they had everything of their own / As each had a particular woman and her touch?" With no more religious conviction than Pater, Beardsley, or Wilde, Stevens claims Sebastian as a saint whose imagined "experience" is related to the seasonal rhythms of renewal. And, indeed, a significant feature of the myth of St. Sebastian, usually neglected in literary as well as visual appropriations of his legend, was the claim that the heroic Sebastian actually sur-

vived his initial execution by arrows. Stevens locates in the Roman martyr not so much a symbol of carnal sentence as a fresh occasion for intangible bliss, a poetics of pagan *amours* beyond an unsatisfying fiction of universality or a routinized, barren aestheticism.

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Notes

For their help in the composition of this piece, I would like to thank A. Walton Litz, James Longenbach, Carter Foster, David Meynart, Elaine Rosenberg, Jonathan Weinberg, and the readers at *The Wallace Stevens Journal*.

<sup>1</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* (Januarri) Vol. 2 (Brussels: J. Reiter, 1863), 629.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1988), 74, 523.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice* in *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*, trans. H. T. Lowe Porter (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way* in *Remembrances of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), 138–39.

<sup>5</sup> T. S. Eliot to Conrad Aiken (July 25, 1914) in *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Volume I, ed. Valerie Eliot (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 44. “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” is reprinted on the subsequent pages, 45–47. Lyndall Gordon has argued that the sado-masochistic frenzy animating “The Love Song of St. Sebastian” is an aspect of the series of crises preceding Eliot’s conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. Gordon, *Eliot's New Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977). I would argue, however, that Eliot, like Stevens, knowingly employed Sebastian in distinctly secular terms, and that Eliot, in the tradition of Wilde, Pater, and others, saw the martyr as a largely literary emblem denoting a self-willed erotic dissolution.

<sup>6</sup> F. O. Matthiessen, “Wallace Stevens at 67,” *The New York Times Book Review* (April 20, 1947): 4, 26; Louis Martz, “The Unique Bird, Inimitable,” *Yale Review* 37 (December 1947): 339–41. These reviews are reprinted in part in *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 288–91, 298–301.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Heringman, “The Poetry of Synthesis,” in *Perspective: A Quarterly of Literature and the Arts* 7.3 (Autumn 1954): 167–74.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 262; J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton, *The Fluent Mundo: Wallace Stevens and the Structure of Reality* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 155.

<sup>9</sup> Glen MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). See also Michael Benamou, *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie Costello, “Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting,” in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 67.

<sup>11</sup> “Holiday in Reality,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954), 312–13. Further references to Stevens’ poems will be from this source and cited as *CP* in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 130.

<sup>13</sup> Costello, “Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting,” 81.

<sup>14</sup> *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1966), 435. Further references to this source will be cited in the text as *L*. I am grateful to Glen MacLeod for this reference.

<sup>15</sup> John Gray, "Saint Sebastian," in *The Poems of John Gray*, ed. Ian Fletcher (Greensboro, N.C.: E. L. T. Press, 1988), 182.

<sup>16</sup> Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), *The Desire and the Pursuit of the Whole: The First Complete Edition* (New York: George Braziller, [1934] 1994), 159.

<sup>17</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Saint Sebastian," in *New Poems*, trans. J. B. Leishman (New York: New Directions, 1964), 90–91.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Firbank, *The Flower Beneath the Foot* (New York: Penguin [1923] 1986), 60. Responding to Ronald Lane Latimer, who had posited a relationship between Stevens' poetry and the fiction of Firbank, Stevens acknowledged that he had read the Englishman's novels, although he insisted that he "had long since sent the lot of them to the attic" (*L* 287).

<sup>19</sup> These photographs are now part of the collection of Van Vechten scrapbooks in the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection at the Beinecke Library, Yale University. I am grateful to Jonathan Weinberg for bringing these photographs to my attention.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879–1923* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 78–79.

<sup>21</sup> Llewelyn Powys, "The Thirteenth Way," *The Dial* 77 (July 1924): 45–50; rpt. *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Charles Doyle, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, letter to John Gray (May 7, 1897) in *Last Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. Rev. John Henry Gray (London and New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1904), 91. This letter is also included in *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan, and W. G. Good (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970), 315–16.

<sup>23</sup> Beardsley, letter to André Raffalovich (May 7, 1897), *Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 314.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Durand-Ruel's father had the last name of Ruel and his mother had the maiden name of Durand. After his marriage, Durand-Ruel's father changed his name to Durand-Ruel. Paul Durand-Ruel makes no mention of the Paris publisher Armand Durand in his autobiographical memoir describing his family genealogy, published in English in *'One Hundred Years of Impressionism': A Tribute to Durand-Ruel* (New York: Wildenstein and Co., 1973). Nor does the entry devoted to the publisher Armand Durand (1831–1905) in the National Biography of France indicate a familial connection between Durand and Paul Durand-Ruel's father's family.

<sup>25</sup> A copy of the Callot etching of St. Sebastian was evidently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the early 1940s, although it does not seem to have been on public exhibition until 1982 (conversation with Prints and Drawings Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art). An article devoted to a drawing of Callot's St. Sebastian in the Crocker Art Gallery in Sacramento and that drawing's relation to the Callot in the Metropolitan appeared in the Summer 1941 issue of the *Art Quarterly*, published by the Detroit Art Institute. See N. S. Trivas, "Callot's 'Martyrdom of St. Sebastian,'" *Art Quarterly* 4.3 (Summer 1941): 205–09.

Joan Richardson suggests that Stevens' reference to Durand-Ruel was prompted by a postcard the poet received from Walter Pach in Mexico, dated January 27, 1943, laid into Stevens' copy of Henry Focillon's *The Life of Forms in Art*. The postcard read in part: "I have just looked at your letter again, and it says you want post cards of 'true things.' Well, what are they? It is true (or I see in the paper) that Durand-Ruel has been showing a Bouguereau—but is as false as ever though the critics mention it with Renoir." Quoted in Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923–1955* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 438.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous*, 130–31.

<sup>27</sup> See Glen MacLeod's chapter, "Stevens and the Abstract Expressionists," in *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*.

<sup>28</sup> Although the Paul Rosenberg Gallery was the primary dealer of Hartley's work, the painting of Hartley depicting himself as a Sebastian figure was sold to Mervin Jules by an earlier dealer of Hartley's work, Hudson Walker. See Jonathan Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice: Homosexuality in the Art of Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, and the First American Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 185.

For details on the history of New York's Rosenberg Gallery, I am grateful to Elaine Rosenberg, the present director of the gallery and the daughter-in-law of Paul Rosenberg, who, as a refugee from Europe, opened the New York branch of his family's Paris gallery in 1940. According to Elaine Rosenberg, as a refugee her father-in-law felt an obligation to promote the work of American artists along with the Old Master works that comprised the gallery's primary area of specialization.

Like the Durand-Ruel Gallery, the Paul Rosenberg Gallery originated in Paris, having been established there in 1887 by the Rosenberg family. In his memoir of the New York art world in the fifties, John Gruen notes that the close-knit New York artistic scene was composed of a limited number of important galleries, constituting two distinct wings: the more adventurous galleries dealing in contemporary artists and those comprising the "Establishment," of which the Rosenberg Gallery was a leading institution. While Gruen notes that the Rosenberg Gallery dealt in "European Old Masters," he observes that it also included a "hand-full of living artists" as well. John Gruen, *The Party's Over Now* (New York: Viking, 1972). The gallery proved itself as viable as Stevens believed it to be. Today, the Rosenberg Gallery still thrives, its focus primarily French and Italian artists from the 1400s to the early twentieth century.

<sup>29</sup> In a 1921 letter bemoaning the "god-awful isolation" of the American artist, McAlmon wrote to Stevens of his drinking escapades with, among others, "Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy, Marsden Hartley." Letter quoted in Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years*, 518.

<sup>30</sup> Entitled "Recent Works by Marsden Hartley," the exhibition may have included *Sustained Comedy*, a work then owned by the collector Mervin Jules, then associated with Smith College.

<sup>31</sup> Hartley's *Sustained Comedy—Portrait of an Object* was evidently not included in the Museum of Modern Art's memorial exhibition, as there is no reference to the work in the exhibition's catalogue, *Marsden Hartley*, Museum of Modern Art, October 24–January 14, 1944. Today, *Sustained Comedy* is owned by the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. For these as well as other details concerning *Sustained Comedy*, see Weinberg, *Speaking for Vice*, 185, 187. For details of exhibitions of Hartley's work, see Gail R. Scott, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Abbeville Publishers, 1988) and Barbara Haskell, *Marsden Hartley* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1980).

Martha Strom has suggested that Stevens read Hartley's 1921 volume of essays *Adventures in the Arts* in formulating his ideas about Crispin, a volume whose language Strom sees as echoed throughout "The Comedian as the Letter C." Strom, "Wallace Stevens' Revisions of Crispin's Journal: A Reaction Against the 'Local,'" in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), 136–37.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Pater, "Sebastian van Storck," in *Imaginary Portraits in Selected Writings of Walter Pater*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: New American Library, 1974), 73–74, 64.

Although the connections between "Sebastian van Storck" and "Holiday in Reality" are somewhat limited, in the years when Stevens composed "Holiday in Reality" the poet may well have been intrigued by Pater's evocation of seventeenth-century Holland in a tale which has numerous references to actual Dutch artists. As Glen MacLeod points out, "Stevens had a particular interest in things Dutch in 1942. He had always considered his own character

fundamentally Dutch and in early 1942, at the very time he was beginning 'Notes,' he was actively tracing his Dutch history." As MacLeod notes, two major poems of 1942, "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" and "Dutch Graves in Bucks County," repeatedly address the subject of Dutch heritage. MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 235.

<sup>34</sup> Randall Jarrell, in a polemical essay entitled "Against Abstract Expressionism" published in *Art News* in 1957, utilizes an image of St. Sebastian as the linchpin of his critique of the by-then-dominant school of artists represented by such figures as Pollock and De Kooning. Noticing in the middle of a dark passage in George de la Tour's *St. Sebastian Mourned by Sister Irene* "four parallel cylinders diagonally intersected by four parallel cylinders" a "sort of wooden fence" that make up the hands of one of Sister Irene's companions, Jarrell responded with a "mixture of emotion and empathy and contemplation" at what "has been put into—withheld from" these hands. Jarrell suggests that the effect is that one is "moved, and is unmoved, and is something else one has no name for, that transcends either affect or affectlessness. The hands are truly like hands, yet they are almost more truly unlike hands; they resemble (as so much of art resembles) the symptomatic gestures of psychoanalysis, half the expression of a wish and half a defense against the wish." Nonetheless, according to Jarrell, "these parallel cylinders are only, in an abstract expressionist painting, four parallel cylinders: they are what they are." Jarrell, "Against Abstract Expressionism," in *Kipling, Auden & Co.: Essays and Review, 1935–1964* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1980), 286.

## Stevens and the Two Sublimes

PAUL ENDO

**D**ESPITE ITS LONG-STANDING complicity with the timeless and the divine, the sublime has found itself readily adaptable to contemporary theory and its interest in the decentered subject.<sup>1</sup> The burden of discussion has been on demystifying the transcendental content of the sublime while preserving the undeniable power of its affect; this demystification must proceed by reinstating time as the constitutive medium of the sublime. Here Thomas Weiskel's model in *The Romantic Sublime*—which he sets against "idealist" accounts of the sublime (23)—proves particularly suggestive. The sublime, he explains, consists of a tripartite plot: it begins in a normative state in which subject and object exist in harmony; this relation is disrupted, through a surplus of either subject or object, and becomes "radically indeterminate"; finally, in the third, "reactive" phase, "the mind recovers the balance of outer and inner by constituting a fresh relation between itself and the [disruptive] object" (24, 25). The sublime, then, must be approached as a kind of cognitive catharsis, a movement through indeterminacy—through a state of suspense in which the self is threatened, the received limits between inside and outside effaced—into a freshly recovered balance, a reconstituted self. The sublime affect does not signal some mystical, religious intrusion from another order, the descent of the divine into the mundane, but is instead generated over the course of a broader, largely epistemological drama.

Wallace Stevens, according to Harold Bloom, is "the authentic twentieth-century poet of the Sublime" (*Poetry and Repression* 282).<sup>2</sup> The itinerary of the sublime, the move from less to more self, from incomprehension to comprehension, constitutes the very core of Stevens' poetic vision. "[U]nder every no," he writes, lies "a passion for yes" (*CP* 320). Stevens' cyclic myth of creation involves expelling old images in order to rethink the "first idea," to reassert the "passion for yes." The organizing themes of his poetry, reality and imagination, "no" and "yes," must be treated not as independent, antagonistic poles, but as points along a single trajectory. Neither reality nor the imagination exist as ends in themselves. Only by acknowledging this movement from no to yes can the temporality of the sublime be respected.<sup>3</sup> Bloom's own model, by identifying the sublime with the passage from "kenosis" to "daemonization," similarly avoids

reducing the sublime to a single moment, *either "kenosis" or "daemonization,"* either a metonymic emptying-out or a hyperbolic self-affirmation.<sup>4</sup>

During the passage from no to yes, the subject is in transit: it moves from the experience of indeterminacy, a kind of cognitive suspense, to a restitutive act of comprehension. As the subject gradually comprehends the hitherto incomprehensible, it undergoes what might be called an increasing "tightness" or concentration of the self. The sublime doubles as a scene of self-definition; beginning in a state of indeterminacy, the subject proceeds to differentiate itself and advance toward comprehension. As the self distances itself from the sublime threat, the object is slowly exhausted, drained of its power.<sup>5</sup> While both Bloom and Weiskel manage to circumscribe the field of the sublime, neither attempts to locate the exact time or precise point of the sublime moment proper. The sublime, that is, occurs somewhere in between Stevens' no and his yes, between Weiskel's second, "radically indeterminate" and his final, recuperative phase. In Stevens, it is my contention, the sublime is predisposed to two particular points along this passage: that instant when the self first trembles into existence and that moment, farther advanced, when the subject is able to comprehend the sublime threat while still recognizing its power. These two moments I will designate the "emergent" and the "dialectical" sublimes: the former features a pregnant moment when figure begins to emerge from ground and distinctions are intimated; the latter, a more critical stance in which the subject, although distanced from the incomprehensible, can still respect its negativity.

## I

In Kant's mathematical sublime, which contributed to Weiskel's tripartite formulation, the sublime plot is described in faculty psychological terms. The imagination is confronted by a magnitude it cannot comprehend; the supersensible reason—a reason that had apparently been lying in wait all along—intervenes, rescuing an imagination paralyzed by a form of sensory overload. But while the reason overcomes this magnitude, the imagination is not simply humbled, dismissed. For the sublime consists, Kant writes, of "the subjective play of the mental powers (imagination and reason)" (107); the sublime is an intrasubjective drama in which *both* the imagination and reason play leading parts. "The *quality* of the feeling of the sublime," Kant explains, "consists in its being, in respect of the faculty of forming aesthetic estimates, a feeling of displeasure at an object, which yet, at the same time, is represented as being final—a representation which derives its possibility from the fact that the Subject's very incapacity betrays the consciousness of an unlimited faculty of the same Subject, and that *the mind can only form an aesthetic estimate of the latter faculty by means of that incapacity*" (108; second italics mine). The sublime is a cooperative affect; it cannot be generated by any one faculty.

Kant's mathematical sublime imparts to the emergent sublime the lesson that incomprehension can never be total; the possibility of comprehension always already exists. The emergent sublime coincides with this first intimation of knowledge, when perceptions, still ghostly and inarticulate, begin to press against the horizon of consciousness and reason stirs within the imagination. The sublime is often associated outright with incomprehension, with a feeling of suspense, indeterminacy, or obscurity.<sup>6</sup> But to temporalize the sublime is to recognize that such a state—for instance, the incomprehension of Kant's imagination, Weiskel's second, disruptive phase, Bloom's "kenosis"—is not itself sublime. For the sublime presupposes a self subsisting, no matter how threatened, on some operational level: there could otherwise be no *experience* of the sublime. For Kant, even while the imagination flounders, the reason is nonetheless present, looming in the background.

Stevens' American sublime, according to Bloom, features a radical "self-rebegetting" distinguishing it from the mere "rebirth" of the English sublime (*Poetry and Repression* 244).<sup>7</sup> The distinction is of course one of degree: there can be no such thing as absolute auto-origination. Even when most challenged and humbled, the self already exists as a "fecund minimum": it is simply decentered, made less. Incomprehension already points toward comprehension. Something already exists. Only through such an opening or preconsciousness of an outside can the subject start raising itself out of its undifferentiated state; much as in Lacan's "mirror stage," the "I" is formed through a shuttling between itself and a specular image. Subject and object begin out of alignment; it is this difference, this lag that slides the self out of incomprehension in an asymptotic attempt to catch up to its object. As Lacan argues, the I is from the outset possessed of a "fictional direction" (2). The emergent sublime highlights this first stirring of the I. Stevens writes in "The Plain Sense of Things": "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (*CP* 503). Even in the landscape of "The Snow Man," the "Nothing that is not there" exists alongside "the nothing that is" (*CP* 10). In "A Clear Day and No Memories," Stevens speaks of a similar condition in which there is "no knowledge except of nothingness" (*OP* 139). Stevens' "nothingness" is rarely absolute. Thomas J. Hines remarks: "even at the extremes of decreation that are described in the winter phase of the imagination, the nothingness and barrenness presented serve to make visible that which would be less easily seen in a more cluttered scene" (263). "Barrenness" is not an empty, uniform surface but a background that sharpens perception and raises into relief every "exposing":

The barrenness that appears is an exposing.  
It is not part of what is absent, a halt  
For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.

It is a coming on and a coming forth.  
The pines that were fans and fragrances emerge,  
Staked solidly in a gusty grappling with rocks.

The glass of the air becomes an element—  
It was something imagined that has been washed away.  
A clearness has returned. It stands restored.

It is not an empty clearness, a bottomless sight.  
It is a visibility of thought,  
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once. (CP 487–88)

The self does not emerge *ex nihilo*, out of an immaculate transparency, but out of a possibility or horizon projected beforehand. The putative ineffability of the sublime is never *truly* ineffable; the potential for knowledge is always there in advance, as a “coming on.” In “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” Stevens and his muse co-exist within “the obscurity of an order, a whole, / A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous, / Within its vital boundary, in the mind.”<sup>8</sup> This “obscurity of an order” is like a Heideggerian fore-having, a pre-existing opening that prepares the way for future discoveries.

This phenomenon, in which the self seems to precede its own coming into being, like “A chorister whose c preceded the choir” (CP 534), exemplifies the elusive half-knowledge of the emergent sublime. Simone Weil’s term “decreation,” which Stevens cites in “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” can help articulate this state: “She says that decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers” (NA 174–75). The emergent sublime is a decreated state consisting not of “nothingness” but of the “uncreated”: comprehension is but a portent—imminent yet nonetheless *there*. The emergent sublime, by emphasizing this just coming into being, resembles what Helen Vendler has called Stevens’ “sublimity of inception” (693; cf. 693–98).<sup>9</sup> Changes are not yet complete: incomprehension is beginning to hint at images and forms. The “something,” in Jean-François Lyotard’s terms, is promising to become a “what.”<sup>10</sup> In the emergent sublime the self trembles on the edge of comprehension. Incipient revelations prepare to articulate themselves; as in “The Region November,” “things say / On the level of that which is not yet knowledge: / A revelation not yet intended” (OP 140).

Stevens’ emergent sublime spans that moment when his “yes,” although still suspended in solution, is beginning to crystallize out. Such intimations of a still-absent presence recur throughout his poetry. “A new

knowledge of reality" threatens to differentiate itself. At this point the self is still nothing but a "fictional direction." When the emergent does finally present itself, Stevens describes its action as a "cut" or "deviation" or "flick." For Stevens there are no straight lines in nature: life's first assertions do not follow neat up-down or left-right axes. In "What We See Is What We Think," a late return to the themes of "The Motive for Metaphor," the vital is associated with the asymmetrical and diagonal, with "an ambitious page dog-eared / At the upper right, a pyramid with one side / Like a spectral cut in its perception, a tilt" (CP 460). The cut is a trope for the unexpected, the improper; it is like a fresh introduction of the vital and the new. In "A Quiet Normal Life," "the oldest and the warmest heart was cut / By gallant notions" (CP 523). In "A Discovery of Thought," Stevens associates "the event of life" with the "accent of deviation," with the unanticipated traversing that evades closure (OP 123). The cut is like a surgical incision, clean and sharp, closing up behind itself and leaving no proof of its passing. Its "presence" is too ephemeral to be comprehended. If it is true that life is always acutest at its vanishing, then in the emergent sublime it is also acutest at its inception.

Like the "cut," Stevens' "flick" activates a similar constellation of associations. The "flick" assumes a crucial role in Stevens' optical imagery: it connotes that first influx of life or grasping after enlightenment. In "Prologues to What Is Possible," the "flick" inaugurates a drama of self-definition, of emerging sublimity:

What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed,  
Snarling in him for discovery as his attentions spread,  
As if all his hereditary lights were suddenly increased  
By an access of color, a new and unobserved, slight dithering,  
The smallest lamp, which added its puissant flick, to which he gave  
A name and privilege over the ordinary of his commonplace—

A flick which added to what was real and its vocabulary,  
The way some first thing coming into Northern trees  
Adds to them the whole vocabulary of the South,  
The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring,  
Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself,  
The way a look or a touch reveals its unexpected magnitudes.  
(CP 516-17)

The "flick" "Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself." The flick "adds," however, only obliquely, indirectly: it is like that initial division that renders comprehension possible. As a "prologue to what is possible," it cannot be thought within symmetrical absence/presence, incomprehension/comprehension oppositions. "Flickings," in the final

canto of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "directly *and* indirectly get[] at" (CP 488; my italics). The flick is like a rippling across the senses, a glance that is as fleeting as the force, the "breadth of an *accelerando*" (CP 440) that has moved on the very instant it is perceived. Stevens' "cut," "flick," and "accent of deviation" celebrate the sharp, cutting precision of an instantaneous illumination that can be "comprehended" only as an effect and never as a cause or moment in itself.<sup>11</sup>

In the final tercets of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens returns to his familiar prismatic imagery—crystals, glass, diamonds. But if "crystal" is for Stevens a figure of mediation, like Shelley's dome of many colored-glass, it does not repudiate color for the colorless and the immediacy of the transparent.<sup>12</sup> The "glass of air" instead becomes "a visibility of thought," embodying light without capturing it. Glass and crystal serve as the liquid medium for an inscription that virtually erases itself as it is announced:

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

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

Stevens' "crystal" hints at—as in "crystal ball"—a kind of encapsulation or containment. But this crystal-flick matrix *challenges* suggestions of containment, of the too comprehensible, and redefines the relationship between inside and outside, origin and derivation. Crystal is especially amenable to descriptions of the major man, that "glass man" who must remain unnamed, "without external reference" (CP 251). For as "the human globe," the "central man" not only contains light but at the same time liberates it, refracting it into "a million diamonds" (CP 250). At once transparent and opaque, crystal surfaces neither reveal nor obscure, preserving the status of the major man as process and not product, "feeling" and not "image" (CP 278). Light is unable to illuminate its contents, but "flicks" off its surface. In "It Must Give Pleasure," canto X, "gilded," suggesting both "glitter" and "gilt," evokes the same light and glancing effect, an effect doubled, moreover, by the twilight setting. Cook has written: "Stevens' closure avoids the 'choice between' stasis and movement, end and growth, closed and open. His choice of 'crystal' is beautifully apt" (*Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War* 263). Figured as a crystal, hard as diamond and yet brilliantly elusive, the "fluent mundo" is at once contained and dazzlingly elusive. In the emergent sublime, comprehension is never quite able to gain a solid enough purchase on the incomprehensible.

Stevens' figures of emergence, his image of the revolving crystal, of the "flick" and its first glancing, unpredictable cut all share a moment of unsettling, potent suggestiveness: in these sites floats a half-knowledge—neither distant nor close, neither absent nor present—that defies comprehension but is nonetheless more than merely incomprehensible.

## II

While the emergent sublime catches the self just as it emerges out of indeterminacy and pushes toward self-definition and comprehension, the dialectical sublime marks the last stage prior to the complete assimilation of the object. Comprehension is approached but the self remains disciplined, held in check by a still unassimilated remainder. There can be no such thing as a nondialectical sublime, that is, a sublime composed of either total comprehension or total incomprehension, all self or no self. Resistance—something "outside," what Adorno would call the "nonidentical"—is indispensable to the sublime affect. Keats's description of Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime" ("which is a thing per se and stands alone" [387, I]) is an oxymoron: the sublime does not stand "alone." It requires an *against*. The antithesis of the sublime is not the mundane, therefore, but complacency, that reification that lifts phenomena out of history and treats them as self-contained, monadic units.<sup>13</sup>

In Kant's mathematical sublime, the inundated imagination "hearkens" to "the voice of reason." The reason "saves" the imagination, transmuting its "inadequacy" into a proof of the reason's supersensible power: "The feeling of the sublime is . . . at once a feeling of displeasure, arising from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude to attain to its estimation by reason, and a simultaneously awakened pleasure, arising from this very judgement of the inadequacy of the greatest faculty of sense being in accord with ideas of reason" (106). Sublime fear is in a sense staged; if the sublime poses a threat to the imagination, then this fear is an elaborate feint designed to inflate the reason. The Kantian sublime has been maligned for precisely this faith in the recuperative power of the subject. It is accused, in other words, of paying insufficient respect to the *sublimity* of the sublime. Kant's sublime, states Rob Wilson, can be "unmasked as a fiction of self-empowerment, a hyperbole of ideal agency" (211). But this is not a simple philosophical case of positive negation: Kant's project did after all involve disciplining the self through a circumscribing of its faculties. If there is a "self-empowerment" in the Kantian sublime, *it is not epistemological in nature*. The reason's triumph consists not of comprehending the sublime object, but "merely" of discovering, in its attempt to think this object, confirmation of the internal "law" by which "ideas of reason" prove superior to an "object of sense" (106). The reason has no epistemological interest in comprehending an object, an outside. The sublime is an aesthetic judgment precisely insofar as it has

“no end belonging to the Object as its determining ground” (101): thus “true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging Subject, and not in the Object of nature” (104).

Kant’s mathematical sublime is not entirely incompatible with epistemological concerns, however. It is in fact possible to isolate a cognitive mini-drama within the larger movement of the sublime. For Kant, the imagination is responsible for comprehending magnitudes and, as the faculty of presentation, for presenting these magnitudes to the reason. Since the imagination cannot comprehend the infinite in a single intuition, there can be no positive, one-to-one presentation. But the imagination *can* resort to a “negative” or second-order presentation: the sublime, Kant explains, “can never be anything more than a negative presentation” (127).<sup>14</sup> It is this “negative” moment, this respect for the heterogeneity of the other, that characterizes the dialectical sublime: in its attempt to comprehend, the self encounters an outside that cannot be incorporated. The dialectical sublime features a subject compelled to stop short of asserting its own limitless power.

In “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” writes Bloom, Stevens’ project “is to define himself, not poetry . . .” (*Poems of Our Climate* 175). Stevens stages this self-definition in “It Must Give Pleasure,” VII–IX, but the sublimity of this passage issues from the subject’s *inability* to comprehend fully, to expand into an all-encompassing identity. Although desperate for the “fiction of an absolute,” for some hypothetical totalizing narrative, Stevens manages to hold on to the fictiveness of this absolute. By refraining from identifying with—that is, from positively comprehending—his supreme fiction, Stevens can regard it critically and keep it from reifying, from sliding into an illusory objectivity.

In canto VII, in response to his call for an apocalyptic “fiction of an absolute,” Stevens encounters a leaping, supernatural angel:

To find the real,  
To be stripped of every fiction except one,  
  
The fiction of an absolute—Angel,  
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear  
The luminous melody of proper sound. (*CP* 404)

“Stevens’s sophisticated regression,” Weiskel comments, “discovers the primordial self at the moment of being weaned, and the supreme fiction is that this self is ‘an absolute’ ” (52). This “sophisticated regression” is what Kant would have called a “subreption”: a dissimulation or self-deception enabling one to mistake the subjective for the objective. Stevens now maneuvers to comprehend this “outside,” to assimilate his angel and make it his own. Weiskel notes: “The later consciousness, or ego, is ag-

grandized by the perceptual power of its former state" (52). Stevens therefore lays claim to the angel, incorporating his powers as a confirmation of his own poetic strength:

Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?

Is it he or is it I that experience this?  
Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour  
Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have

No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,  
Am satisfied without solacing majesty,  
And if there is an hour there is a day,

There is a month, a year, there is a time  
In which majesty is a mirror of the self:  
I have not but I am and as I am, I am. (CP 404–05)

Stevens transmutes lack—"I have not"—into an assertion of plenitude—"but I am and as I am, I am." This is Wilson's "self-empowerment": expanding through all difference, the subject rolls over all uncertainty—Am I? Are? Is it he or is it I?—as it reaches for self-identity. Weiskel identifies in these cantos a structure he calls the "positive" or "egotistical" sublime, a movement that "subverts the negativity which is the ground of the 'other' by ignoring its consequences" (50). Weiskel's positive sublime—which is not in fact sublime at all—signals the terminus of the sublime journey: incomprehension has been utterly displaced. In the positive sublime, all heterogeneity is assimilated and the sublime threat is incorporated by the self without leaving any evidence of a residue. The positive sublime pretends to full comprehension; as Hegel would say, it closes its eyes to the negative and has done with it, passes on to something else. To positively comprehend an object is to invite complacency and exempt the subject from ever having to think and see. In this trajectory from otherness to identity, incomprehension to comprehension, the original power of the angel is completely forgotten. The positive sublime boasts a self more capacious than any thing it can possibly encounter.

According to Weiskel, Stevens "attempts to restore the priority of the positive sublime" (51). Bloom qualifies Weiskel's thesis: Stevens "in *one* of his aspects or perpetual phases is a last strong version of the egotistical sublime of Wordsworth and of Walt Whitman. As a regressive structure, Stevens's sublime refuses to grow up, but what does growing up mean in and for a poem anyway, except the loss of power?" (*Ruin the Sacred Truths* 119; my italics). But in cantos IX–X, which Weiskel does not analyze, Stevens concedes that knowledge cannot be purchased without loss of power: he is not without misgivings about his "I am." The sublime moment

proper, in fact, occurs only in these final two cantos, as the self reverses its path, stepping back from full comprehension into a recognition of the not-self. Indeed, visions of imaginative self-affirmation, although not infrequent in Stevens, are rarely suffered without qualification. As he argues throughout "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the imagination must be disciplined by reality. His attitude toward the imagination has always been ambivalent: "Although the romantic"—for Stevens synonymous with the imagination ("The imagination is the romantic" [OP 189])—"is referred to, most often, in a pejorative sense, this sense attaches, or should attach, not to the romantic in general but to some phase of the romantic that has become stale. Just as there is always a romantic that is potent, so there is always a romantic that is impotent" (OP 183). The imagination must always adhere to reality; therein lies its potency. If unchecked by reality the imagination is always in danger of straying. Imaginative activity often initiates in Stevens a kind of critical recoil, a self-chastening in which this "drift" is promptly corrected. By prematurely closing off his reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Weiskel fails to attend to these dynamics. He can isolate a "positive" moment only by regarding canto VIII *before* it begins its compensatory withdrawal—before, that is, it splits into the negative knowledge of the dialectical sublime. Weiskel accuses Stevens of championing the positive sublime, but he has been, quite literally, framed.

After the affirmations of his "I am," Stevens is already retreating in the final tercet of canto VIII. Yet residues of imaginative affirmation persist in the language of projection ("reflections" and "These external regions"):

These external regions, what do we fill them with  
 Except reflections, the escapades of death,  
 Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof? (CP 405)

But as "escapades" (from *ex-cappare*) suggests, Stevens acknowledges with a kind of whimsical guilt the escapist, even onanistic ("Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof") spirit of his "reflections." "At the end of this canto," Cook notes, "the Cinderella story reverses the angelic moment" ("Riddles" 241). As the riddling tone—as well as the generic deflation of lyric by fairytale—suggests, Stevens is seeking to prick the spell of his "I am." The riddle, remarks Frye, "is essentially a charm in reverse: it represents the revolt of the intelligence against the hypnotic power of commanding words" (137). Despite invoking this anti-charm, Stevens withdraws only partially from the "hypnotic power" of the ego. He does not reject outright this "angelic moment"; instead, his self-deprecation juggles a commitment to both the imagination *and* reason, an attitude uneasy enough to deter complacency. In the sublime, knowledge is never total enough to encourage self-satisfaction: in the emergent sublime com-

prehension exists only as a distant promise, while in the dialectical sublime it remains negative and self-critical.

Having descended from the heights of his "I am," Stevens adopts a more disengaged stance in canto IX. The issues of poetic creativity and election that had so vexed him in the preceding cantos are settled with the straightforward assertion: "I can / Do all that angels can." Stevens is wary, qualified—"These things *at least* comprise / An occupation" (my italics)—and guarded in his utterances:

These things at least comprise  
An occupation, an exercise, a work,  
  
A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:  
One of the vast repetitions final in  
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round  
  
And round and round, the merely going round,  
Until merely going round is a final good,  
The way wine comes at a table in a wood. (CP 405)

For Weiskel, such repetitive and circular patterns are symptoms of the positive sublime: "the ultimate form of activity in the egotistical sublime is circular" (64). But Stevens cautiously refrains from ceaseless self-propagation; he will not embrace the circle and its solipsistic implications. Vendler has attended to the "laborious" movement of these lines, a movement resembling "a treadmill rather than a merry-go-round, and the rhythm, constantly broken by commas, retards and contradicts the 'pleasurable' sense" (*On Extended Wings* 201). The "merely going round," moreover, is checked by the pseudo-philosophical tone ("therefore," "therefore") and the authoritative pronouncements ("final," "final," "final"). The attitude toward repetition is restrained; Stevens does not abandon himself unreservedly.<sup>15</sup> The revolving crystal of canto X resists a neat inside/outside logic, and here too Stevens' repetitions and spins are thrown off axis, nudged slightly out of alignment, into asymmetrical and "eccentric" orbits that repel all totalizing gestures:

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf  
Above the table spins its constant spin,  
So that we look at it with pleasure, look  
  
At it spinning its eccentric measure. Perhaps,  
The man-hero is not the exceptional monster,  
But he that of repetition is most master. (CP 406)

The dialectical sublime defies the monadic and self-enclosed and instead points beyond, acknowledging differences. "From this the poem

springs: that we live in a place / That is not our own" (CP 383). "The imperfect is our paradise" (CP 194). Many of the longer poems conclude with similar sentiments, with disengaged, valedictory musings presupposing a kind of constitutive dislocation (recall the "inhuman author" in "Credences of Summer," X, and "the non-physical people, in paradise," in "Esthétique du Mal," XV). In "Notes," a gesture toward absolute expansion is amended by withdrawal; Stevens will repeat this rhythm in the final moments of "The Auroras of Autumn." In canto VIII of "Auroras," he appeals to a redemptive "innocence of the earth." But it is an appeal undermined by contingencies beyond the human. Innocence is not capacious enough to absorb disaster: "Shall we be found hanging in the trees next spring?" (CP 419). Stevens' response is to admit an irreconcilable division between "people" and the "world": we are "An unhappy people in a happy world" (CP 420). He counsels a negative or diacritical attitude aware of a defining alienation.<sup>16</sup> Stevens' thought, cautious and self-vigilant by nature, is not surprisingly amenable to the dialectical sublime.

Wallace Stevens often yearned to "see the very thing and nothing else" (CP 373), to be "a bronze man" "Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time" (CP 425), but such instances of identification, two becoming one, would preclude the sublime. For the sublime affect presupposes a slippage or sliding within the subject that suggests something other, an opening beyond. The sublime has been associated with the experience of the absolute, be it absolute passivity (before God or nature) or absolute activity (the "egotistical sublime"). But the sublime coincides with neither incomprehension nor comprehension, neither absence nor presence; it can only occur *between* these points. Stevens favors two such places: in his emergent sublime—with its "crystals," "flicks," and imminent portents—there is a pregnant suspense in which incomprehension is only just breaking into knowledge. The subject has just begun, after a state of oceanic undifferentiation, to distinguish itself from not-self; the other subsists as an intimation, an elusive sense like the "hum of thoughts evaded in the mind" (CP 388). Alongside this emergent sublime lies a more advanced form of knowledge, a more ironical and dialectical attitude that is able to respect the non-identical and incomprehensible without wholly subsuming it, that is able to look the negative in the face.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Among the more prominent studies, see Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*; Lyotard; Weiskel; and Hertz. For a broad sample of recent work on the sublime, see the special issues of *Studies in Romanticism* 26.2 (1987) and *New Literary History* 16.2 (1985).

<sup>2</sup> For accounts of the sublime in Stevens, see Bloom, *Poetry and Repression* 267–93; Vendler, "The False and True Sublime"; Arensberg; Beehler; and Wilson 169–96.

<sup>3</sup> Deconstructive readings of Stevens, by attending unduly to his sensitivity, *avant la lettre*, to *différance* and “the intricate evasions of as” (CP 486), elide the restitutive pole of his vision, his “passion for yes.” Because implicated in a synchronic either/or logic, such approaches preclude the possibility of accommodating both the no *and* the yes within the medium of time. Joseph N. Riddel is here representative: “it is just the question of deciding which term is primary and which secondary that produces the contention in any reading of Stevens, since to read him properly means to decide on one or the other as the ‘centre that I seek’ ” (69).

<sup>4</sup> For Bloom and his poetics of influence, the sublime is a psycho-poetic response to the oppressive weight of past poetry. It is my thesis that the sublime is primarily cognitive in nature, and is best described through categories such as “incomprehension,” “comprehension,” and “differentiation.” In Stevens the sublime is not so much a response to precursors such as Emerson and Whitman as a response to the threat of a certain cognitive relaxation—that is, to the complacency invited by too easy patterns of thinking. The sublime is above all an attempt to defy reification and totalizing modes of thought, to ward off granite and statuesque monotonies with their attendant indignities: “How could there be an image, an outline, / A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?” (CP 278).

<sup>5</sup> When I speak of the sublime “object,” it is as Kantian *Objekt* and not *Gegenstand*. The “object” is simply an object of *thought* and not necessarily an extra-subjective phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> Ever since Edmund Burke, the association of sublimity with obscurity has proven an enduring one. For Burke: “A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea” (63). For Neil Hertz, the sublime features an “end of the line” scenario in which the author/reader experiences a moment of “opacity” in which appearance and truth, original and simulacrum cannot be disentangled (219–20).

<sup>7</sup> In his *American Sublime*, Rob Wilson largely endorses Bloom’s position: “the American sublime comprises, on some primary level, the all-too-poetic wish for a phantasmic blank ground, or *tabula rasa*, out of which a distinctly American poetic voice can begin” (11). For Wilson, however, the American sublime is an ideological construct, the expression of an “American will-to-sublimity” (11). The American sublime is creator and creation both; it “depend[s] upon an immense tautology, creating what it always and already assumed to be there” (12).

<sup>8</sup> I am following the text as it originally appeared in *The Hudson Review* 4 (1951) 22–23; CP has a full stop instead of a comma after “rendezvous” (524).

<sup>9</sup> For Vendler, Stevens’ “sublimity of inception” is an extension of his “stoic vision.” It “represents a slow lifetime’s acquaintance with the human less” (“False and True Sublime” 695, 698). For Stevens, she contends, the sublime must be humanized, saved from unrealizable ideals. “The absolute, finally, disappoints the connoisseur, who sees it as insufficiently nuancé, too heavy and final” (“False and True Sublime” 695). I will maintain that the sublime is indeed a rejection of the absolute (of both absolute incomprehension and absolute comprehension); it is motivated not by a respect for the shadings of human suffering and imperfection, however, but by a fear of complacency, a recognition that wholes and absolutes encourage a relaxation of critical vigilance. Only in what Stevens calls “the half colors of quarter-things” can one find “the exhilarations of changes” (CP 288).

<sup>10</sup> “The [sublime] event happens as a question mark ‘before’ happening as a question,” Lyotard writes. “*It happens* is rather ‘in the first place’ *is it happening, is this it, is it possible?* Only ‘then’ is any mark determined by the questioning: is this or that happening, is it this or something else, is it possible that this or that?” (“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 90).

<sup>11</sup> There is a similar association of the sublime with the sharp, precise, and determinate in Blake. For instance: “Minute Discrimination is Not Accidental All Sublimity is founded on Minute Discrimination” (643). Such statements belong to what Vincent De Luca has called Blake’s “iconic” sublime, a sublime generated by “an overdeterminate clarity of *presence*”

(43). There are no shadows, no hidden suggestions, only a blinding surplus of clear, distinct meanings. For Stevens, the “cut” disrupts not through an excess of clarity, but through a velocity so sudden and piercing that it takes one completely by surprise.

<sup>12</sup> Stevens often employs optical metaphors, but he does not invoke them simply as figures for fallen vision. They are not opposed, that is, to the immediacy of the “face-to-face” encounter. For Stevens’ engagement with the speculum topos, see Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War* 223–24.

<sup>13</sup> Stevens’ figure for such reification is the statue: his statues, in their “inhuman bronze,” are always “a bit absurd.” Stevens wanted the imagination to adhere to reality; by fixing the imagination, statues—like Plato’s “antiquated and rustic” chariot figure in *Phaedrus* (NA 4)—begin to lag behind reality.

<sup>14</sup> Lyotard’s writings especially stress the role of this “negative presentation”: “This dislocation of the faculties among themselves gives rise to the extreme tension (Kant calls it agitation) that characterizes the pathos of the sublime, as opposed to the calm feeling of beauty. At the edge of the break, infinity, or the absoluteness of the Idea can be revealed in what Kant calls a negative presentation, or even a non-presentation” (“The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” 98; see also Lyotard’s *Lessons* 150–52).

<sup>15</sup> Even in “The Pleasures of Merely Circulating,” with its ostensible celebration of repetition, there is an uneasy awareness that pleasure depends upon silencing deeper philosophical questions. Vendler has noticed “the dark intimations of particular dooms” (*On Extended Wings* 200).

<sup>16</sup> Outside of “The Auroras of Autumn,” “unhappy” makes five appearances in Stevens; on three of these occasions it is implicated in similar dialectical or “buried” relationships with “happy.” This instance from “Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas” is representative: “And, being unhappy, talk of happiness” (CP 257; cf. CP 331 and OP 124).

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## What Figure Costs: Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" (An Anthropoetics)

THOMAS F. BERTONNEAU

*But poetic language does not realize, even imaginarily, the fusion of subject and object; it only points to it. It is the ostensive nature of the language of desire that maintains the difference/differance of the sign by keeping apart desirer and desired. Although the mythology of deconstruction makes language emerge from the solar center, the evidence of lyric is that the primary locus of language is the alienated periphery.*

—E. L. Gans

"Lyric and the Transcendence of Politics" (1993)

*I do not mean to refer to [the gods] in their religious aspects but as creations of the imagination. . . . To speak of the origin and end of gods is not a light matter. It is to speak of the origin and end of eras of human belief. . . . To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences.*

—Wallace Stevens, "Two or Three Ideas" (1951)

**T**HIS ESSAY TAKES AS ITS SUBJECT Wallace Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West," from *Ideas of Order* (1936), but I begin with another, lesser poem, for reasons that will become evident. "The Guide of Alcestis" never achieved canonical status in Stevens' oeuvre, although it equals in its concentration and bizarrerie many of those brief lyrics among the poet's poems that did find their way into inclusion and permanency under his sanction. "The Guide" occurs in a letter to Ronald Lane Latimer, publisher of the poetry magazine *Alcestis*, dated Hartford, August 16, 1935; it later found a home in *Opus Posthumous*, where it bears the name "Infernale" (4–5). I cite the version from the letter here, to preface a discussion of "The Idea of Order at Key West," because it demonstrates three especially significant facts about Stevens' poetics which, with respect to the Floridian masterpiece, will be developed in detail in the main portion of my analysis. First the (brief) poem:

*(A boor of night in middle earth cries out.)*

Hola! Hola! What steps are those that break  
This crust of air? . . . (He pauses.) Can breath shake  
The solid wax from which the warmth dies out?

I saw a waxen woman in a smock  
Fly from the black toward the purple air.  
(He shouts.) Hola! Of that strange light, beware!  
*(A woman's voice is heard replying.)* Mock

The bondage of the Stygian concubine,  
Hallooing haggler; for the wax is blown,  
And downward, from this purple region, thrown;  
And I fly forth, the living Proserpine.

*(Her pale smock sparkles in a light begun  
To be diffused, and, as she disappears,  
The silent watcher, far below her, hears:)*

The soaring mountains glitter in the sun. (L 285–86)

Latimer's response to Stevens (they engaged in a flurry of letters in late summer and fall, 1935, and on into 1936) included a copy of William Carlos Williams' recently published *An Early Martyr and Other Poems*, which Latimer had just brought out through his Alcestis Press; Latimer also inquired whether Stevens had read Stanley Burnshaw's review of *Ideas of Order* in *New Masses*. "The review in *MASSES* was a most interesting review," Stevens replied, "because it placed me in a new setting. I hope I am headed left, but there are lefts and lefts, and certainly I am not headed for the ghastly left of *MASSES*" (L 286). By "ghastly left," Stevens meant the authoritarian left, with its brutal subordination of existing persons to indefinitely deferred utopian abstractions. Stevens would quickly reorient himself on what most critics prejudicially and pejoratively call "the right," although what he rejected was abstract extremism of any stripe, precisely on account of its human price. But politics aside, what is the significance of "Infernale" in its correspondential context? First, it shows Stevens dealing explicitly with an identifiable mythic figure, "Proserpine" as he calls her using the Latin name, or Persephone/Kore, as she was known to the Greeks. Stevens frequently invokes classical figures (Phoebus, Phosphorus, and some others) in his poems, but only in passing, as allusions. "Infernale" thus links Stevens to Williams and to Pound, fellow modernists for whom classical myth in general and the Kore-myth in particular were central, in an unusually explicit way. One can begin to wonder whether the absconded woman plays a role in Stevens' poetry as it does in Williams' or Pound's. Second, in "Infernale," Stevens reduces the Kore-myth to a minimal narrative: to the sudden, rapine disappearance suf-

ferred by Kore according to the ancients. Unlike the Hesiodic *Hymn to Demeter* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, however, "Infernale," in which a mocking bystander witnesses the disappearance, allows the volatilized protagonist, the one who has disappeared, to speak, which she does, cryptically, as is common in Stevensian prosopopeia. "Infernale" thus differs ethically from Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," but shares a theme with the poems of Williams' *An Early Martyr*: the humanity of excluded or persecuted individuals, like the "Martyr" himself or "A Poor Old Woman" or the victims of the regatta-cum-holocaust in "The Yachts." As Stevens explained in another letter to Latimer (October 31, 1935), at the time of *Harmonium*, he "believed in *pure poetry*, as it was called." It remained the case, however, that whereas "I still have a distinct liking for that sort of thing[,] we [nevertheless] live in a different time, and life means a good deal more to us now-a-days than literature does." Stevens records that he no longer approves of the "*decorative and formal*" (L 288), or of figure *qua* figure. "Infernale" thus marks a reassessment of the role of poetic language. Third, narratively, "Infernale" describes an uncanny trajectory from percept to concept somehow implicit in its immolatory subject-matter: it moves from the perception of a disappearance to an image of the sublime, "the soaring mountains" that "glitter in the sun."

I believe "The Idea of Order at Key West," to return to it, expresses an essential anthropological insight about the sacrificial origin (as it can be called) of figural language to which the orphaned "Infernale" provides a number of important clues. Stevens' explicit use of Proserpine or Persephone/Kore suggests, in particular, the heuristic value of a comparative approach to Stevens' poetry, to "The Idea of Order at Key West" in particular, using ancient texts within an encompassing anthropological framework. Other critics, it is true, have commented on the importance that the concept of humanity has in "The Idea of Order at Key West." Helen Vendler, for example, notes the "discontinuity between two orders" (*Words Chosen Out of Desire* 68), that of the natural and that of the human, in Stevens' poem, but without relating the notion of "discontinuity" to the notion of "violence." The woman, in Vendler's reading, suffers no peril, even though her song has some disturbing or uncanny qualities. The relation of these two notions, of "discontinuity" and "violence," must be demonstrated, however, if "The Idea of Order at Key West" is to make its full uncanniness felt. This is because the human discontinuity of radical expulsion (in the form of sacrifice or immolation) bears, as René Girard and Eric Gans have systematically shown, an originary relation to *the sign*, hence to *figure*, and is invariably undertaken for the purpose of generating unanimity in an incipient or threatened community.<sup>1</sup>

Although it has escaped the notice of most of his major readers, much of Stevens' poetry deals with the intuition that signification itself originates in an immolation, and that both sign and figure have been purchased

at a high, because human, cost. Thus Joseph N. Riddel (*The Clairvoyant Eye*) reads in "The Idea of Order at Key West" not much more than "the lady's song," "the maiden's discreetly controlled lyrics" (117), at the nebulous center of an impressionist sketch: "The poet receives the impression of a drama, and translates song into the sound of words, which become at once a projection of and comment on an experience" (118). Reducing the poem to such a bland, "philosophical" (118) statement in fact betrays it. Of course, Stevens *had been* at one time what Milton J. Bates calls a symbolist (a poet interested almost solely in chains of mental association and in a derealized world comprised of symbols), but in the 1930s Stevens began to think of his art in a way that made it less disconnected from life, more concrete, and more ethical, than he had previously conceived it. In the correspondential exchange to which I have already referred, Stevens remarks to Latimer that "My conception of what I think a poet should be and do changes, and I hope, constantly grows" (L 289); and it follows from this by a corollary that Stevens' idea of what poetry "should be and do" also fell subject to reevaluation and development. One can observe in Stevens' oeuvre, as one can also in that of his contemporary Williams, what amounts to an ethical transformation: an increasing reluctance to use figure casually accompanied by the critical sense that figure can only be used guiltily and complicitously; and, finally, a revelation of the "originary sin," as it could be called, inherent in the scene of representation, to which the lyric scene owes a substantial and in many ways unpayable debt.

The attention of human beings needs to be directed to themselves, to the way in which they constitute themselves, if they are to grow spiritually. Poetry has historically fulfilled this task, Stevens argues, but latterly has abandoned it. "[T]he real trouble with poetry," Stevens writes in another of his letters to Latimer (December 10, 1935), "is that poets have no conception of the importance of the thing":

Life without poetry is, in effect, life without a sanction. Poetry does not only mean verse; in a way it means painting, it means the theatre and all the rest of it. Given the real thing, people will stop short to take it in because everyone is dependent on it. The poet as a character has to be defined; poetry has to be defined. The world never moves at a very high level, but a few men should always move at a very high level; whether these two levels will ever sufficiently approach each other and poetry regain what you call its loss, remains to be seen. (L 299)

Again: "One of the most difficult things in writing poetry is to know what one's subject is" (L 297). Thus, in criticism of Milton, as Stevens observes, "instead of going off on a *myth*," the *Paradise Lost* poet's calling should have been, as a poet, to "stick to the facts" (L 300; emphasis added).

We can thus add the term *myth* to the terms *decoration* and *formality* as part of what Stevens was coming to oppose in poetry and literature. The escape from *decoration* and *formality* entails an escape from *myth*.

Consider then "The Idea of Order at Key West" in connection with a little-known fragment from the Alexandrian poet Callimachus' *Αἰτία* (*Aitia*), "The Lock of Berenikê." I make this juxtaposition, as the argument will show, by no means capriciously, but because structural similarities between the two poems suggests that the revelatory content of that by Callimachus bears on the "impulse-to-figure" (to coin a phrase) in that by Stevens. Thus some preliminary observations about "The Idea of Order at Key West" will provide the rationale for an analysis of "The Lock of Berenikê." The Callimachian insight about figure, especially about metonymy, will then further illuminate the Stevensian lyric from an anthropological perspective.

The whole of "The Idea of Order at Key West," couched as Stevens couches it in the past tense, springs from and commemorates an event: the singing of the quasi-present singer whose song rivets the attention of the lyric subject and his friend, "Ramon Fernandez," as they walk along the Florida seashore at dusk. Stevens repeatedly emphasizes the humanity of the chanteuse in contrast to the "inhuman," the non-humanity of her surroundings. Thus "She sang *beyond* the genius of the sea"; "The song and water" remain distinct and are "*not* medleyed sound"; again, "it was *she* and not the sea we heard" (emphases added). The setting, meanwhile, remains "*merely a place* by which she walked to sing" (emphasis added), the significance of the event resting on its human, not on its contingent geographical or meteorological elements. Three times, the lyric subject calls the woman a "maker," translating the Aristotelian word that English reproduces in the original Greek as *poet*. Noting that "she measured to the hour" the "solitude" of the vanishing sky, he describes her in Platonizing terms as "the single artificer of the world / In which she sang"; yet he adds, paradoxically, that although she indeed has created the world, "there never was a world for her" (*CP* 128–30), a troubling and at the very least a paradoxical attribution. Another of Stevens' remarks to Latimer, this one in response to a question about "To the One of Fictive Music," might well be relevant here:

The music of poetry which creates its own fictions is one of the "sisterhood of the living dead". It is a muse: all of the muses are of that sisterhood. . . . I don't think that I meant [by "the sisterhood of the living dead"] anything definitely except all the things that live in memory and imagination. (*L* 297)

The singer therefore qualifies as both "living" and "dead," an enrollee in that "sisterhood of the living dead" that constitutes "memory and imagination." It is also the case that, while the lyric subject walks in company,

the singer goes “alone,” so that there are two types of contrast at work in the text: the contrast, already noted, between the human (or rather the cultural) and the natural (shore, sea, and sky); and the contrast between solitude and community, between the community, that is, and the unique figure excluded from the community. Finally, the singer’s singing is revelatory, transforming not only the night scene, but, more importantly, the lyric subject’s sense of himself:

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,  
The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,  
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,  
And of ourselves *and of our origins*,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.  
(CP 130; emphasis added)

A preliminary hypothesis might account for “The Idea of Order at Key West” as follows: the singer’s singing, which emerges abruptly and articulately from the acoustic background of the natural surroundings (“what she sang was uttered *word by word*”), constitutes for the two witnesses (or at the very least reveals) the origin of their ability to witness a scene and make of it something significant—a poem, *this poem*, for example. The singer’s singing addresses the autoprobatory conjuration of significance: it produces the kind of attention that latterly can find significance in such an event. There is, moreover, something disturbing, perhaps even violent, about this event and its scene, for Stevens represents the restlessness of the sea metaphorically by a “mimic motion” and a “constant cry”; and it later becomes “the tragic-gestured sea.” The term *tragedy* derives from τράγοζ (*tragos*), “goat,” and implies the transformation of a sacrificial into a purely aesthetic act: the historical priority of σπάράγμοζ (*sparagmos*) to theater was well known to Aristotle (the “catharsis theory” of drama) and was made a modern shibboleth by Nietzsche. One ought to remark that the singer never becomes fully present, but manifests herself only in the form of various metonymies: her singing, her walking, and again all of those figural differences that differentiate her from her surroundings. Thus the singer herself has been sparagmatically dispersed, like the scapegoat of the Dionysian οργεία (*orgeia*). In “The Idea of Order at Key West,” then, Stevens links representation to the specific violence of radical elimination, or sacrifice; at the same time, he hedges his explication of this discovery, as though fearing that complete frankness about it might undermine the effectiveness of his poem. “The Idea of Order at Key West” is thus a poem about the cost of figure.

This intuition, which has appeared now and then in the history of lyric, might well be said to mark the modernity of that genre whenever it does appear. This is because it marks the critical attitude of the lyricist toward his own art, and his recognition that the origin of lyric is none other than

the origin of representation, hence of the cultural order, *in toto*. Indeed, in criticizing the ritual, the collective, model of representational order, the lyric subject necessarily privatizes and individuates himself, for ritual is collective and mandatory and criticism is individual and autonomous. Since arbitrary criteria determine the selection of the victim, no one is excused *a priori* from being a victim. The lyric poet comes to see himself as a predifferentiated potential victim. One of Sappho's poems, "Peer of the gods is that man," serves as a good, classical illustration, for it exhibits the same exclusionary structure as "The Idea of Order at Key West." Here, however, Sappho as lyric subject finds herself in the role of the tertiary, excluded party; and the fire that runs through Sappho's limbs as she watches a man make love to a girl whom she (Sappho) desires is, meanwhile, suggestively immolatory, as indeed is Sappho's reduction of *herself* to her constituent limbs in the same poem. That man is like a god to me, Sappho complains, and she images herself as a sacrifice *to him*. Sappho performs this identical gesture on *her* love-object, the young girl Anactoria, in another (her most famous) poem, "To Anactoria," of which Gans has written (unpublished manuscript) that the figural reduction is also a case of real, if minimal, dehumanization. The same topos of "two's company, three's a crowd" thus triangulates the internal structure of both Sappho's poem and Stevens'.

But the most explicit lyric revelation of the cost of figure bequeathed to posterity by antiquity must be Callimachus' "The Lock of Berenikê," from his *Aitia*, a long account of what might be called, borrowing a phrase from Stevens, antiquity's supreme fictions.<sup>2</sup> Callimachus, who was the librarian at Alexandria, probably composed the poem, known fragmentarily in the original Greek and integrally in Catullus' Latin translation, sometime in 247 or 246 B.C., for that is the date of the Third Syrian War (between the Ptolemies and the Seleucids) to which the verses make reference. Berenikê had married Ptolemy III Philadelphus just as he left Alexandria to prosecute the war; she vowed to Aphrodite, as the story goes, to dedicate a lock of her hair toward her husband's safe return from the campaign. Callimachus casts the poem as a sustained prosopopeia in which the lock itself, a metonymy or sparagmatic fragment of the whole person, speaks. (He borrows this trope from contemporaneous epigrammatic practice in which, as C. A. Trypanis notes, "the offering itself speaks" [Callimachus 81].) The Lock, moreover, explicitly speaks as a victim and explicitly denounces sacrifice as an ethically asymmetrical act in which the community gains at the expense of the victim. Considering the sacrificial organization of *all* historically documented ancient societies, including those directly antecedent to our own, this denunciation amounts to an extraordinary achievement, presaging the systematic demythification of the sacred that occurs in the Gospels.

The Lock begins by invoking the activities of a royal functionary who has announced a discovery in the skies:

Πάντα τὸν ἐν γραμμαισιν ἰδὼν δρον ἢ τε φηρονοαί  
qui stellarum ortus comperit atque obitus (1–2)

κῆμὲ Κόνων ἔβλεψεν ἐν ἡέρι τὸν Βερενίκης  
βόστρυχον ὃν κείνη πᾶσι θεοῖς (7–8)  
fulgentem clare, quam multis illa dearum  
levia protendens brachia pollicitast (9–10)

[Konon the astronomer, who has observed every star  
in the sky, determined their risings and settings:]

this Konon has also observed in the velvet night sky  
yours truly, a lock of hair from Bereníkê's head,  
glowing serenely, which she dedicated to All Goddesses,  
stretching out her slender arms in supplication(.)<sup>3</sup>

Bereníkê has offered her lock, “non sine taurino sanguine” (“[not] with[out] a great deal of bull’s blood”) (Lines 33–34), giving the dedication a hecatombic (sacrificial) context, and the Lock has submitted “under protest,”<sup>4</sup> having been offered no choice. Her apotheosis, in other words, requires her distressing separation from her “sister strands,”<sup>5</sup> a paradigmatic expulsion/immolation in which the singular *one* functions as a proxy for *all others*. Callimachus thus characterizes what court astronomer Konon’s propagandistic myth would call a divine elevation as, in fact, an expulsion, of no great desirability to its object. (Of positive displeasure to its object!) The Lock now finds herself “a new constellation ‘midst the old,”<sup>6</sup> naming some of “the old”: “Bordering on Virgo’s and the ferocious Leo’s / stars, and extending to Kallisto, the Arkadian bear, / I wheel to the west, preceding slow Boötes.”<sup>7</sup> Of these, “Kallisto, the Arkadian bear” ranks as the most important, since Callisto qualifies as a paradigmatic victim in the Girardian sense, with whom the Lock now has unfortunately all too much in common. Through no action of her own (Zeus has raped her), Callisto undergoes expulsion from the company of virgins who follow Artemis; whereupon, heaping cruelty on injustice, Hera, angry at Zeus’s infidelity, turns Callisto into a bear. When her child by Zeus, Arcas, fails to recognize and then kills her, Zeus compensates her, as the myth would have it, by elevating her into heaven as an immortal constellation. (This is the myth as it appears in Ovid and Apollodorus, two of its classical loci. Note the fundamental structural resemblance to the Proserpine or Persephone/Kore narrative, with its translation of the youthful female into a putative transcendental region.)

Having thus classed herself with the innocent victims (having called victimage itself into question), and having asked in advance the forgiveness of Nemesis for the temerity of what she proposes to say, the Lock goes on to state her case:

οὐ τάδε μοι τοσσήνδε φέρει χάριν ὅσσον ἐκείνηζ  
ἀσχάλλω κορνφήζ οὐκέτι θιζόμενος,  
ἦζ ἄπο, παρθενίη μὲν ὄτ' ἦν ἔτι, πολλὰ πέπωκα  
λιτα, γυναικείων δ' οὐκ ἀπέλαυσα μύρων. (75–77)

[I am not so happy at this state of affairs that I don't suffer terribly at my permanent separation, from my mistress's head, together with whom I have imbibed perfumes galore. (71–74)]

Sidera cur retinent? iterum coma regia fiam:  
proximus Hydrochoi fulgoret Oarion! (89–94)

[A prisoner of the stars!  
If only I could be on a queen's head again, Orion  
Could shine up to Aquarius for all that I care. (91–93)]<sup>8</sup>

The Lock's lament, that she can never be unshorn and return to her "sister strands," well instantiates Gans's assertion that poetic language fails to achieve the fusion of desiring subject and desired object and that, moreover, lyric poetry thematizes this failure. The Lock, to borrow a term from Stevens' "To the One of Fictive Music," belongs to "the sisterhood of the living dead," in that she belongs by coercive ascription to a no-longer-human, no-longer-actual category. (Lyric, meanwhile, as Gans analyzes it, is a coming-to-terms with the paradoxical structure of culture/representation in which the lyric subject, thematizing himself the way that ritual thematizes the victim, begins to understand what sacred centrality really entails and becomes the solitary self-asserting critic of it.) Callimachus' poem allows one to stipulate that the model, and certainly the origin, of this failure (in Gans's term) is ritual. For in ritual, the object of immolation stands all at once at the center of attention, *inside* the circle of sacrificers, and *outside* the community formed by that circle, by virtue of radical, arbitrary re-categorization. In ritual, paradoxically, the inside is the outside, which is why "expulsion" can be used interchangeably with "immolation." Such re-categorization occurs along the periphery, among the community, and, to judge by myth, invariably justifies the expulsion as agreeable to its object.<sup>9</sup> Once immolated, of course, the victim no longer manifests any physical presence at all, but endures, rather, as an absence. "Mock / The bondage," says the immolated woman of "Infernale," "of the Stygian concubine, / Hallooing haggler; for the wax is blown, / And downward, from this purple region, thrown; / And I fly forth, the living Proserpine."

As such, the victim is entirely beyond any conceivable appropriation, no matter how her immolation might be decorated and formalized (mocked) in rhetoric. In such a context, figure serves to prettify and moralize a brutal deed. The “moral” of the Callisto myth, for example, is that it was ultimately lucky for Callisto that all those terrible things befell her, because they issued in her immortality. “The Lock of Berenikê” thus functions as an anti-myth, taking the prerogative of speech away from the worshipful periphery and bestowing it on the luckless object of that fervently sentimentalized worship. This is not just a reversal of the figure, but a call for justice where justice has immemorially miscarried. Insofar as the promise to Aphrodite has been successful and Berenikê has gotten her husband back, the act of propitiation is justified. But what does the Lock, whose personification becomes the anti-figure revealing the personhood of all victims, get?

She gets the dubious immortality of having been constellated or *made a figure*. The cost of figure is here the arbitrary dehumanization and expulsion of one who properly belongs to the community. “Yet though all night I reel under the feet of the gods,” says the Lock in a complaint against the truly horrible insipidity of her involuntarily eternal condition, “dawn ever returns me to the mystic, white sea.”<sup>10</sup>

The Lock, whose voice no doubt makes the sky (in Stevensian language) “acutest at its vanishing,” qualifies, in an important sense, as the maker of her poem, for Callimachus’ text, like Berenikê’s promise, requires the Lock’s radical elimination; it is as though the radically eliminated fragment that the Lock becomes the nexus of figure and the figural nexus of Callimachus’ lyric verse. Indeed, the cutting of the lock has resonances with the exemplary metaphors that Aristotle gives in *The Poetics* under the category of “transference from one species to another”: χαλκῶ ἀπὸ ψυχῆν ἀρύσας and ἄτα ὦν ἀτειρέι χαλκῶ (“drawing off his life with the bronze” and “severing with the bronze”) (Aristotle 81).<sup>11</sup> Citing Empedocles’ *Katharmoi* (*Purifications*), Aristotle thus links figural language directly with the most common form of sacrifice in the Greek tradition, the hecatomb. In this light, the Callimachian Lock can actually be identified with the taurean victim in whose blood (ψυχή, “life”) she is made acceptable as an offering to “all goddesses.” (The transference here is the dubious one from mortal to “immortal.”) To make this ancient matrix for the reading of Stevens’ poem even more pregnant, it should be noted finally that Empedocles wrote his *Purifications* in protest against blood-offerings, to which, as a Pythagorean, he was morally opposed.

In a typical hymn (Homeric, Sapphic, or Callimachian), the worshippers address the divinity hopefully, thereby constituting a scene, but in “The Lock of Berenikê” the divinity addresses the worshippers, plaintively, elegiacally. As much in “The Idea of Order at Key West” makes obvious, this poem, too, is, using the term in its atmospheric rather than in its met-

ric sense, elegiac. (Stevens' recorded reading of the poem, which used to be available on a Caedmon LP, is simply lugubrious, a fact that reinforces the sense of the poem as "elegiac." The term *elegy* might be related to a well-known Greek verb meaning to collect, to recollect, and to speak.) It is in a mood of somberness then that Stevens' lyric subject asks his walking companion "Ramon Fernandez" (a fictitious personage, as Stevens had later to claim when it turned out that there was a real Ramon Fernandez and that he was a literary critic) to:

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)

Fernandez does not reply, but the poem itself does. What the singer's singing has brought to the lyric subject's attention after having brought itself to his attention is culture's mastery of nature through the establishment of a scene of representation whose necessary central element at once founds that scene and is excluded from it. Recall the transition from the sight "of a waxen woman" to the sight of "the soaring mountains" in "Infernale," with its reference to the Kore narrative. Note that it is "the lights in the fishing boats . . . tilting in air" that, as the lyric subject claims, have "mastered the night and portioned out the sea," repeating the prehistoric mastering of the night *by figure* in terms of the Zodiac, with its "emblazoned zones," and recalling Konon's "discovery" of Berenikê's lock among the traditional constellations. The sky itself, interpreted and thereby *ordered* through myth, functions as a kind of supreme fiction, no less artificial under its perceived form and meaning than the running-lights of the boats when they make their luminous congeries before the walker's vision. In itself, after all, the sky shows merely a jumble of lights; it takes a rather powerful imagination (as everyone knows based on childhood puzzlement) to impose the arbitrary (and highly sacrificial) shapes of bears, swordsmen, and serpents on the chaos of the starfield. Taking into consideration the Gansian axiom that "man is the only animal for whom collectively remembered scenes, or events, exist" and that "the originary event" that inaugurated representation "must be a *scene* retained in the memory of its participants" (*Science and Faith* 7), "The Idea of Order at Key West" can indeed be said to suggest the evenemential sequence by which such arbitrary yet significant shapes could have been imposed in the first place. "In THE IDEA OF ORDER AT KEY WEST," Stevens claims, "life has ceased to be a matter of chance" (L 293). Presumably, in becoming other than "chance,"

life might be regarded as the manifestation of an awakened conscience and its concomitant volition. The singing woman serves to provoke that conscience and its concomitant volition into being.

"She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang," the lyric subject says of the mysterious singer. "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 other words, a transference occurs from the primary significance of the obscure human figure to the secondary significance of whatever is adjacent to that figure on its scene. She fulfills the role of signifier, so to speak, and the whole world, from the immediacy of the beach to the "mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea" (CP 129), fulfills the role of signified. (Once more we note a resemblance to the denouement on "soaring mountains" in "Infernale.") But as signifier, the singer has a transient existence, marked by the reiterated use of verbs in various past tenses.

If it was only the dark voice of the sea  
That rose, or even colored by many waves;  
If it was only the outer voice of sky  
And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled,  
However clear, it would have been deep air,  
The heaving speech of air, a summer sound  
Repeated in the summer without end  
And sound alone. *But it was more than that,*  
More even than her voice, and ours, among  
The *meaningless* plungings of water and the wind,  
Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped  
On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres  
Of sky and sea. (CP 129; emphases added)

Even as she measures her own vanishing along with that of the day, the singer lends herself as meaning to whatever lies adjacent to her on the scene (the "theatrical distances" paradoxically limited by the "high horizons" and the dome "of sky and sea") that she finds. Had the singer not manifested herself, in the context of menacing mimic motions and cries, Stevens appears to be saying, nothing else would have become manifest, either.<sup>12</sup> The effect of her "phrases" is therefore to transform "meaningless plungings of water and the wind" into something "more than that." But nature, which has no significance in and of itself, only acquires meaning through its association with the human. This is what happens to nature here, through its association with a particular, although arbitrary and unidentified human. Vendler notes that a persistent "uneasiness" accompanies what she regards as the break between the natural and human orders that occurs in the poem. But Vendler's sense that the poetry drawn by the two watchers from the woman's keening and disappearance has to do with the human "mastery" of nature by figure (69) is slightly misplaced

or askew. For nature simply continues as it was and is. What is *mastered*, so to speak, is *human nature*, the human sense of itself: the immolation (for that is what we are arguing that it is) forces the attention of the watchers, who now apprehend nature as the “theatre” (Stevens’ recurring term) of the human. But it is the human that possesses significance, not in any direct sense the contingent natural background or stage. Natural phenomena take on significance and take on character insofar as they refer back to a now-absent human agent who revealed them originally first by being the central object and inspirer of a peripherally originated ostensive and then by mediating that ostensive outward from the center to the horizon. (This is a recursive path that can be adduced in numerous other poems by Stevens: “Anecdote of the Jar,” “A Primitive Like an Orb,” “The Course of a Particular.”) For “the locus *per se*,” as Gans argues, “is an abstraction; the place never exists without an occupant” (*Science and Faith* 15), who is not an abstraction, but a human being.

In Girard’s theoretical term, which supplements Gans’s minimal hypothesis of an inaccessible center, the central object functions as a “primordial signifier,” so that “[w]hat is essential is the cadaver as talisman . . . [that] culture always develops as a *tomb*” (*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* 83). Thus:

The signifier is the victim. The signified constitutes all actual and all potential meaning the community confers on to the victim and, through its intermediacy, on to all things. . . .

Articulated language and the exchange of words, like all other kinds of exchange, surely must also have its basis in ritual, in the screams and cries that accompanied the mimetic crisis [i.e., the moment of hominization through the production of the cadaver-sign] and that must be reproduced by ritual because they precede and perhaps condition the reconciliatory immolation. . . . There is no culture on earth that does not hold its sacred vocables or words to be primary and fundamental in the order of language. (103–04)

Wind, rain, horizon, and sound acquire the character of sparagmatic metonymies, like the remains of an immolation. This is the world that the singer, “singing, made.” The singer’s utterance, recorded as Stevens says *word by word*, articulates, as do Girard’s sacred vocable(s), the originary event being constituted around her. She, meanwhile, disappears, following the Proserpine of “Infernale” into “the purple air” or “the purple region,” as one supposes. One can legitimately recur to the “constant cry” in the context of which the singer begins to differentiate herself from her ground, thereby fulfilling the stipulation that Aristotle makes about the poet, that he “must be the ‘maker’ not of verses but of stories, since he is a

poet in virtue of his representation, and what he represents is an action" (37). This event is, minimally, a story, and provides the template for all other stories, no matter how maximal.

Two meditations from the "Adagia" come to mind:

The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support that they give. (*OP* 186)

The poet is the intermediary between people and the world in which they live and, also, between people as between themselves; but not between people and some other world. (*OP* 189)

Many critics (Riddel, Miller, Bates, and to some extent Bloom) have read Stevens' poetry as a "meta-poetry," have seen it as undertaking a critique, at the ontological level, of what, exactly, poetry *is*. Stevens' own claim, in the first of the two adages, that he is interested in the mind's own creations "not alone from the aesthetic point of view," prompts the question, of course, what the implicit other points of view might be. The assertion in the second of the two adages supplies one answer: for mediation "between people and the world [and] between people [and] themselves," or (to name it) representation, is a fundamentally anthropological (hence ethical) topos. Who investigates it engages, by definition, in a genuinely anthropological (hence ethical) enterprise. The recurring Stevensian notions of "theatre" and "horizon," present in "The Idea of Order at Key West," partake in the notion of mediation, present in the second of the two adages. "Theatre," with its documentable origin in the *σπαράγμοζ* (*sparagmos*), recreates the originary scene hinted at in the poem: it gathers the community together under the sign of the god, represents the god(s) by the metonymies of boon, catastrophe, and purification, and invariably includes some kind of radical expulsion (Pentheus dismembered by the Bacchants, Oedipus expelled from the city) as its climacteric. So gathered, the community experiences the essentially religious unanimity of being focused simultaneously on a sacred, or quasi-sacred, center. The acts on stage function as the signifier while the audience itself, as community, functions as the signified. In supplying the image of the radically eliminated fragment, the playwright-poet acts as mediator. The commemorative statues that turn up here and there among Stevens' poems relate to this definition of theatricality, for statues represent departed persons who participated signally in historical events. Statues are presences that advert to absences, of the illustrious departed. But, as Callimachus' *prosopopeia* of the radically eliminated fragment demonstrates, the actual enabler of mediation (hence again of representation), is the radically eliminated fragment itself.

On the periphery as in the audience, everyone is rendered equal by having the same relation to the object of attention, by participating representationally in the expulsion. Language and the possibility of dialogue then emerge, signified in Stevens' poem by the amity between the lyric subject and "Ramon Fernandez," and by the lyric subject's addressing questions to the latter. Fernandez's *pallor* would signify the emotional reaction produced by the awe of the *σπᾶράγμοζ* which he has witnessed, or in which he has, with the lyric subject, participated. The seriousness of the lyric subject's questions make it plausible that he, too, is pale, from the same cause. In this, the shared emotion, both are again communal equals. Only the object of expulsion, who is, of course, as human as everyone else, escapes this ethos of primordial equality. It is not possible to put questions to the immolatee.

Myth itself expresses some guilt about its vilification of the so-called polluter (Oedipus, for example, or Callisto), but typically justifies the expulsion, nevertheless. The scapegoat has endured tribulations, yes, the myth says, but he has also risen to Olympus in a flash of light, like Oedipus, or has become an immortal object in the empyrean, like Callisto. Such sacred "explanations" (like Eliot's metaphysical Christianity or Pound's vengeful neo-paganism) will obviously hold no water in a "skeptical age," as Stevens puts it. But it might well be the case that myths, however inadequate, were already an instance of the mind turning to its own creations and examining them. If that were so, then the collapse of myth, for all its positive and liberating effects, would leave a vacuum. It might be that "[t]o see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences" (*OP* 260); and this appears to be what has happened to the Floridian singer when she stops singing, thereby marking the end of the divine epoch. But what now? If the gods are no longer an adequate explanation, what is? If the gods did not invent poetry by granting inspiration ("It was the *spirit* that we sought and knew" [emphasis added]) to Orpheus, as it might be, or, in the historical period, to Hesiod, then who did? Obviously, men themselves. But again, how? In the same way that they invented representation itself: by substituting desire for appetite, by extending the duration of what Gans calls "the aborted gesture of appropriation." From Sappho *in propria persona* expressing her love (requited or unrequited) for the girls of her school to Coleridge's "damsel with a dulcimer" to Madonna in any of her personae expressing her love (invariably and urgently requited) for what-she-will—the singing woman typically functions as the emblem of desire; modeling desire, she becomes herself desirable. As a representation, of course, she cannot be appropriated in any worldly manner; she remains available only through contemplation. Gans argues that in this type of displacement into imagination, in an originary displacement into imagination, lies the founding of repre-

sentation. Desire is therefore, as Gans argues, originally linked to representation; and representation functions, furthermore, as the universalization of desire.

Sacred superlatives applied to divine figures, like goddesses, reflect the worldly inappropriability of representations: *altissima* ("most high"), *purissima* ("most pure"), ἀγνή (*hagne*) ("inviolable," used of Artemis), ἄρρητον (*arrheton*) ("not to be spoken of or to," used of Demeter), Καλλιστώ (*kallisto*) ("most beautiful," used of Aphrodite and, of course, the name of a victim of radical expulsion) (see Burkert, *Greek Religion* 265–75.) Figure, it would appear, serves to hold apart desirer and desired by displacing the latter beyond the grasp of worldly expectation; it also yields a primordial hierarchy, a fundamental taxonomy, in which the human community as well as the human imagination are aboriginally inter-involved. "The Idea of Order at Key West" occurs, of course, in an anthology entitled (by Stevens) *Ideas of Order*. If other poems in the same anthology referred to these intuitions, it would bolster the interpretation. Indeed, "Farewell to Florida," the first poem in the collection, appears to comment retrospectively on the event recorded in "The Idea of Order at Key West":

Her mind had bound me round. The palms were hot  
As if I lived in ashen ground, as if  
The leaves in which the wind kept up its sound  
From my North of cold whistled in a sepulchral South,  
Her South of pine and coral and coralline sea,  
Her home, not mine, in the ever-freshened Keys,  
Her days, her oceanic nights, calling  
For music, for whisperings from the reefs. (CP 117)

The controlling phrase is the first, for it describes the making of order through the establishment of a radical new type of consciousness; and by consigning the female figure, the singer, to a "sepulchral South," this poem supports the immolatory interpretation of "The Idea of Order at Key West" by linking it to Girard's remark about the cultural primacy of the *tomb*. The whispering reefs, meanwhile, function as a metonymy of her music by way of their contiguity with the woman's abolished presence, just as the boat-lights do in the other poem, so that the entire *mise-en-scène* becomes suffused with the *numen* of the victim. In their identity, scene and sign thus become symbol, thrown together and fused. It is no coincidence that a number of critics—in particular Bates—have called attention to the strong symbolist orientation of *Ideas of Order* as a whole, as well as to individual poems like "The Idea of Order at Key West." For a peculiarity of symbolist poetry, especially Mallarmé's, with which critics often link Stevens' own, is its strongly anthropological interest in sacrificial scenes. Mallarmé's collected poems conclude, by the author's design, with the sonnet beginning "Mes bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos" ("My

books closed on the name of Paphos”), a reference to the Aphrodisian orientation of Sappho’s lyrics. And in Mallarmé’s case, one could also mention his “L’Après-midi d’un faune,” “Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui,” “A la nue accablante,” “Ses purs ongles très haut,” and the prose poem “Le phénomène futur.” “Ses purs ongles très haut” is especially appealing because of its motion from a female figure, “défunte nue en le miroir” (“dead in the mirror”), to the “scintillations [du] septuor” (“the sparklings of the seven stars”). In fact, the Mallarmé poem might well serve as the mid-point between Callimachus and Stevens: for, like “The Lock of Berenikê,” “Ses purs ongles” reduces its human centerpiece to a sacrificial metonymy: *les ongles*, the nails, which, like bone or hair, endure long after the rest of the body has gone to dust. And in all likelihood this human centerpiece is Callisto, who became the *septuor* or, in English, the Great Bear. “Ses purs ongles” then transfers this metonymy (or constellation of metonymies) to the sky, again on the model of Callimachus’ apotheosis. “The Idea of Order at Key West” traces a remarkably similar (and tantalizingly sacrificial) trajectory.

It ought to be remembered, finally, that the twentieth century has been in many ways a primitive century, technologically dazzling but socially and politically atavistic. Despite its resolute secularity, the twentieth century has not outgrown sacrifice, and in several well-known cases has revived it on an unprecedented and massive scale. Once again to Latimer (March 17, 1936), Stevens confesses:

I believe in social reform [but] not in social revolution. From the point of view of social revolution, IDEAS OF ORDER is a book of the most otiose prettiness; and it is quite probably inadequate from any social point of view. However, I am not a propagandist. Conceding that the social situation is the most absorbing thing in the world today, and that those phases of it that you and I regret as merely violent have a strong chance of prevailing in the long run, because what now exists is so depleted, and because the other things are all that there are to look to, it is not possible for me, honestly, to take the point of view of a poet just out of school. (L 309)

The type of social reform that Stevens had in mind would necessarily begin with the individual’s understanding of himself as human, and with the corollary of that understanding, an acknowledgment of the other as human, too. As I have argued elsewhere, Stevens’ poetry in the period beginning with “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” becomes increasingly ethical in that it is concerned with human fundamentals, with what individuals owe each other, with what the notion of human dignity means. “The Idea of Order at Key West” points the way to this transformation. It can be contrasted with an earlier, insouciant poem like “Sunday Morn-

ing" from *Harmonium*, in which the poet dismisses the crucifixion as an irrelevancy and instead celebrates the secular delectations of the peignored lady. In retrospect, it might appear that the orderliness of the bourgeois breakfast table depends, distantly but certainly, on the unanimity and peace established by the Christic self-sacrifice. A later poem than "The Idea of Order at Key West," like "A Primitive Like an Orb," again deals with sacrifice, but explicitly draws the connection between order in the community and the exclusionary fate of the victim. A poetry that deals with expulsion and immolation as related fundamentally to the human "rage for order" qualifies, therefore, not as a mere exercise in antiquary erudition, but as a meditation on certain facts that, anthropological and therefore globally applicable, can never become irrelevant.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gans: *The Origin of Language* (1981), *The End of Culture* (1985), *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (1991), and *Originary Thinking* (1993). "Once we attempt to understand the origin of human beings as language-users," Gans writes, "we commit ourselves to the construction of a plausible model of the hypothetical event in which the use of language first began. In accord with the principle of parsimony, we must assume that language first emerged in a situation where its emergence was necessary. This means that language must have permitted the protohuman group within which it arose to survive a crisis that it could not [otherwise] have surmounted" (*Originary Thinking* 7). Gans hypothesizes, therefore, that "a circle of protohumans, possibly after a successful hunt, surround an appetitively attractive object, for example, the body of a large animal" (8), which would be the "focus of [potential] conflict" (7-8). Because the "fearful symmetry" of this situation prohibits any one member of the group from pursuing his attempt to appropriate the object to himself, because this would incite conflict with all others, "the sign arises as an *aborted gesture of appropriation* that comes to designate the object rather than attempting to capture it[,] [t]he sign [being] an economical substitute for its inaccessible referent" (9). The central object, meanwhile, "appears to possess a repellent, sacred force that prevents its [appropriation]" and that, indeed, prevents the center, where it manifests itself, from "occupation by the members of the group" (8). This maximally differentiated center is the originary site of the divine, as articulated in religion. Ritual is the attempt to recreate this "originary scene." Sacrifice is a radical form of ritual that can, however, be attested from an early date. René Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* (1966) and Walter Burkert in *Homo Necans* (1983) have pressed the thesis that sacrifice is the template of all mature culture. The Gansian hypothesis does not contradict those of either Girard or Burkert; it merely suggests what must be *prior* to sacrifice in its full form, namely the minimal institution of signification, which subsequently permits the designation, as in Girard's scenario, of a victim.

<sup>2</sup> The origin of fiction is, of course, myth. Gans reminds his readers that "[m]yth supplements absence with imaginary presence on a scene that may be indefinitely elaborated[; and] . . . as a general rule, myth is etiological: it explains the origin of a custom or technique through divine activities and desires" (*Originary Thinking* 94-95).

Whereas “[t]he place of myth in ritual is to give an account of its origin in the actions of the central divinity,” however, “the underlying etiology is that of the foundation of the human community itself” (95).

<sup>3</sup> Line 1: Callimachus; Line 2: Catullus; Lines 7–8: Callimachus; Lines 9–10: Catullus. English translation by Lombardo and Rayor. The discrepancy in line number stems from the difference between the fragmentary state of Callimachus’ Greek original, the liberties taken by Catullus in his Latin version, and Lombardo and Rayor’s attempt to reconstitute Callimachus’ original by interpolating Catullus’ version.

<sup>4</sup> Missing from Callimachus’ original; Line 40 in Catullus; Line 39 in Lombardo and Rayor.

<sup>5</sup> Line 51 in Callimachus; Line 51 in Catullus; Line 51 in Lombardo and Rayor.

<sup>6</sup> Line 61 in Callimachus; Line 64 in Catullus; Line 61 in Lombardo and Rayor.

<sup>7</sup> Missing in Callimachus; Lines 66–69 in Catullus; Lines 62–64 in Lombardo and Rayor.

<sup>8</sup> Lines 75–77: Callimachus; Lombardo and Rayor’s English; Lines 89–94: Catullus; Lombardo and Rayor’s English.

<sup>9</sup> As Walter Burkert explains in *Homo Necans*, “[t]he shock felt in the act of killing is answered later by consolidation; guilt is followed by reparation, destruction by reconstruction” (38). And while “a slain man is easily made a hero or even a god . . . apotheosis is always preceded by death” (39).

<sup>10</sup> Missing in Callimachus; Line 68 in Catullus; Lines 66–67 in Lombardo and Rayor. *Regarding the content of these lines:* As Gans argues, “[t]he beautified representation of the sacred object in ritual hides the fact that its purpose is to supplement the absence of this object” (*Originary Thinking* 124). In this sense, figure is merely the most pronounced case of language in general; insofar, then, as figure fulfills an aesthetic function, it reveals “not the power of the center but its desirability” (124). The transcendental character of the Floridian singer is an example of figure so defined, as is the “immortality” of Callisto in the myth addressed by Callimachus’ poem. An immortal, in the mythic conception, is a being *not present*, but resident somewhere else, perhaps in “Olympus.”

<sup>11</sup> In fact, Aristotle’s metaphors, as he calls them, are really metonymies, not a term that occurs in *The Poetics*; they are, moreover, metonymies of sacrifice: slitting the bull’s throat being one gesture, if the crucial one, out of many comprising the hecatomb. The term *χαλκῶ* (“bronze”) is a metaphor, in the manner of a euphemism, for *knife*. As metaphor, then, *χαλκῶ* mitigates the violence inherent in the situation described by the phrase. Figure therefore serves sacrifice by dissimulating and ameliorating it.

<sup>12</sup> As Girard has made abundantly clear, the restriction of the term *mimesis* to the meaning of “representation” alone is incorrect, and is part of a deformation that has subsisted in the lexicon at least since Plato. The other meaning of *mimesis* is “mimicry” or “imitation” in a behavioral sense: “[T]here is nothing, or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation” (*Things Hidden* 7). Thus “[i]t was Plato who determined once and for all the cultural meaning of imitation, but this meaning is truncated, torn from the essential dimension of acquisitive behavior” (8). Moreover, “[i]f *acquisitive mimesis* divides by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object,” as perhaps Stevens’ lyric subject and “Ramon Fernandez” converge on the singer, then “*conflictual mimesis* will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down” (26). A supplemental hypothesis to the one being proposed with regard to the Stevens poem is therefore that the poem represents a dissimulated rivalry between Stevens, a rivalrous or “strong” poet in Bloom’s sense of the word, and another poet, spurred by the sense that the same poetic scene cannot accommodate them both. In a humorous note to Latimer (March 9, 1936), Stevens

fabulates this anecdote: "The man with whom I have been in the habit of making my trips to Key West for a good many years got up a book called ORDEALS OF IDA. and then arranged with another one of my friends down there to thank me for having sent her a copy of my book. . . . Ida's principal ordeal was that she had to walk home. Fortunately, there was only one copy of ORDEALS OF IDA in existence, and it is questionable whether even that is any longer in existence" (L 309). The mock-book, too, has been immolated, Stevens hopes.

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# “Orchestrating” Stravinsky: Petrushka’s Ghost and Stevens’ “The Comedian as the Letter C”

DAVID M. LINEBARGER

*The contemporary poet, if he is not Petrouchka himself, sees  
what is tragic and eternal in Petrouchka.*

—Wallace Fowlie, “Petrouchka’s Wake”

**I**N A LETTER TO BARBARA CHURCH dated March 24, 1952, Wallace Stevens writes of his interest in “reproduc[ing] the effect . . . in words” of a specific musical passage from Ricard Strauss’ *Der Rosenkavalier*: “I am very keen about Rosencavalier, especially the music of the presentation of the silver rose. The glancing chords haunt me and sometimes I try to reproduce the effect of them in words” (L 744). This may not have been Stevens’ first attempt at such an endeavor. As I would like to argue here, Stevens’ first long poem, “The Comedian as the Letter C,” can be read in part as an attempt “to reproduce the effects” of Stravinsky’s famous ballet *Petrushka* (1911), a ballet whose music, according to Carl Van Vechten, “began the experiment which established a new principle in music” (*Music and Bad Manners* 217).<sup>1</sup>

My reading of “The Comedian as the Letter C” is informed by Martha Strom’s insightful readings of this most difficult poem.<sup>2</sup> “At first glance,” Strom writes in “Wallace Stevens’ Revisions of Crispin’s Journal: A Reaction Against the ‘Local,’” “the poem appears to be the tale of a man in search of a felicitous relation to his environment, but a closer look proves that its real subject is Stevens’ own specifically literary project. By writing this poem, Wallace Stevens defined his place in the American literary milieu of the early twenties” (130). While I agree with Strom’s reading, I want to focus more specifically on what might have been “Stevens’ own specifically literary project,” at least as it appears in “The Comedian as the Letter C”: to “reproduce the effect” of music “in words.”

In what was for Stevens an unprecedented effort at explaining the functions of sound in a single poem, Stevens repeatedly insisted on the important role of the “sounds of the letter C” in “The Comedian as the Letter C.” It is almost as if Stevens was disappointed that readers did not appreciate the sound effects he had so skillfully, laboriously, and playfully

brought to life, as if in his letters he hoped to provide hints toward a fuller appreciation of what he had accomplished. At the same time, he did not wish to make such comments public because “susceptible readers might have read the poem with ears like elephants’ listening for the play of this sound as people at a concert listen for the sounds indicating Till Eulenspiegel in Strauss’ music” (L 294).

By the “letter C,” Stevens claims that he really meant the “sound of the letter C,” and that he meant “to play on that sound throughout the poem” (L 294). In addition to the sounds of “K and S,” these sounds included all related sounds, such as “X, TS and Z” (L 294, 351). Writing to Hi Simons, who had just published an article on “The Comedian as the Letter C,” Stevens expands on the unique role the “sounds of the letter C” play: “as Crispin moves through the poem, the sounds of the letter C accompany him. . . . You have to read the poem and hear all this whistling and mocking and stressing and, in a minor way, orchestrating, going on in the background” (L 351–52). The resulting sounds of the letter C produce, as one might expect, a “strange and hybrid music” of “odd and piercing timbres,” as the music and literary critic Paul Rosenfeld describes the poetry of *Harmonium*, a poetry he hears with uncanny perception, at least in the case of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” as “half Stravinsky” (37).

#### *Stravinsky in Stevens’ Avant-Garde Circles*

It seems likely that Stevens, a frequent concert-goer, would have seen at least one performance, if not several, of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, though we have no evidence of this. We know that Stevens “used to like Stravinsky” and attend “Stravinsky concerts” (Brazeau 84), and we know that *Petrushka* was the most universally beloved and widely performed Stravinsky piece in America, appearing repeatedly in New York in 1916 (Century Theater) and 1919 (Metropolitan Opera) and across the country in almost every major city as well as many smaller ones. *Petrushka* had, in fact, become so popular and so widely acclaimed that soon after The Metropolitan Opera House, that “stronghold of the what-has-been,” had revived *Petrushka* for the 1925–26 season, Stevens’ good friend Pitts Sanborn would proclaim in May of 1926 in *Modern Music*: “*Petrushka*, now long familiar here, as elsewhere, has almost reached the status of a classic” (3). But even if Stevens had not attended a performance of *Petrushka*, he moved in avant-garde circles where an intense interest in, and often a sophisticated knowledge of, Stravinsky’s music was taken for granted.

Indeed, Stevens was blessed with the friendships of Carl Van Vechten and Pitts Sanborn, two avant-garde music critics intimately acquainted with Stravinsky’s music. Besides sharing a passion for promoting the avant-garde in music, Van Vechten and Sanborn were close friends—they traveled to Europe together, worked together, attended concerts together,

and drank together—and both were mentioned often in letters Stevens wrote in 1922 while he was at work on his Crispin poem.

Perhaps Stevens' most treasured friend up until his death in 1941, Pitts Sanborn was a highly respected music critic of the avant-garde in New York. As the musical editor for the New York *Globe*, Sanborn spent each summer in Europe as the paper's foreign music correspondent, and he often employed his close friend Carl Van Vechten to write articles on music. Unfortunately, almost all of Sanborn's papers were supposedly destroyed by his landlord (L 341, n 6). But a single letter Stevens writes to Sanborn in 1939 movingly suggests not only the close friendship between Stevens and Sanborn but their shared passion for music as well: "It depresses me to think that I don't see more of you. However, I go to New York much less often than I used to do and, when I am there, have so very little time for myself. . . . I should love to see you again, particularly if we could spend an evening together. Your pamphlet on Beethoven's Symphonies is on my table at home and occasionally I take it up just to hear you talk; it is naturally full of your intonations" (L 341–42).

When Sanborn returned from Europe a few months prior to Stevens' flurry of work on "From the Journal of Crispin," Stevens informed Harriet Monroe that he had met Sanborn to pick up some things from Europe. And after Monroe had written to Stevens inquiring about the long poem he had submitted to *Poetry* for the Blindman Prize, Stevens responded:

About the Crispin poem. Pitts Sanborn, one of my oldest friends, expects that he may be called upon to edit the Measure one of these days for a period and, as I am under many obligations to him, I have promised to let him have this poem if he wants it. During the summer, I re-wrote it and in its present form it would run to, possibly, the greater part of twenty pages of print. A long poem is what he wants, for of the three numbers that he would have to edit, this would account for one. And this promise I made to him long ago, when he went on that miserable sheet. So there you are. During the coming week, he sails from Havre bringing for me my autumnal bon-bons from the Place de l'Opéra not to speak of a number of books etc. which he has picked up for me. (L 229)

Besides promising "The Comedian as the Letter C" to Pitts Sanborn (though it was not published in *Measure* but first delivered to Carl Van Vechten), Stevens' setting of the first part of "The Comedian as the Letter C" in Bordeaux could be read as a private nod to Sanborn, not only a close friend but one of the elite few who could fully appreciate Stevens' "orchestration" of Stravinsky in "The Comedian as the Letter C." Sanborn, we might recall, dedicated a book of poems entitled *Vie de Bordeaux* to

Wallace Stevens ("in gratitude") and Carl Van Vechten ("why not?") along with four others. Moreover, he had just traversed the sea, like Crispin in part I of "The Comedian as the Letter C," traveling from Europe to America.

Reviewing *Petrushka* on January 25, 1916, for the *New York Globe*, Sanborn praised Stravinsky's score as "the most 'advanced' and to the student of of musical development the most interesting new music for orchestra to be heard these days in New York." After a brief summary of the plot to the ballet, Sanborn offers his impressions of Stravinsky's music:

Under the hurly-burly, the shrieks and screams and tripping of the triangle, snarls the diapason threat of inevitable tragedy. In all the strangeness of note combinations and of instrumental wail or dance or din the hand of the master is unmistakable. . . . It is in the infinite variety and suggestiveness of instrumental timbre and coloring, in the unhesitating contrasts of extremes in pitch and quality, in the audacity of a scoring that stops at nothing from mud to ether that the singularity and the force of this music inheres. (10)

Does not the above description of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* as a music of "shrieks and screams" and "strangeness of note combinations" suggest the sort of musical effects Stevens was after in his "orchestration" of the sounds of the letter C?

Surrounded by such champions of the avant-garde in music as Pitts Sanborn and Carl Van Vechten, Stevens would most likely be well-informed about the music of Igor Stravinsky, a composer we know Stevens admired. Sanborn's friend and colleague, Carl Van Vechten, authored several essays on Stravinsky and the Russian Ballet, and he wrote at some length, as we shall see, about the ballet *Petrushka*. As Van Vechten recalls in his charming portrait of Stevens in "Rogue Elephant in Porcelain," his initial contact with Stevens was most likely through Pitts Sanborn: "I may have heard Pitts Sanborn speak of Wallace Stevens for years, although I do not remember that I had, but when I saw his remarkable verses 'Carnet de Voyage,' in the September *Trend*, I became interested in the man and began to ask questions about him" (41). In 1922, some eight years later, and just about the time Stevens completed "The Comedian as the Letter C," Carl Van Vechten wrote Stevens a letter inquiring about the possibility of a book. Was it Stevens' completion of his first long poem that encouraged Van Vechten to suggest Stevens' first major publication? This would make some sense. And on November 18, 1922, Stevens wrote Van Vechten about the manuscript that would be published as *Harmonium*: "My poems are now ready. Shall I leave them at your house some time when I am in

New York? I should rather take them down with me than to send them by mail, for it has been an awful job to typewrite them" (L 232).

Some excerpts from Van Vechten's writings on Stravinsky and *Petrushka* will give a sense of his detailed knowledge of Stravinsky, which compared favorably to that of any critic in 1915–16, at home or abroad. By the time Stevens wrote "The Comedian as the Letter C," Van Vechten had already seen *Petrushka* performed more than fifteen times, and he had discussed the score with the work's first conductor in America and the man Stravinsky most trusted to conduct his music and handle his affairs, his intimate friend, Ernest Ansermet. From Ansermet, Van Vechten learned of the popular music sources for the barrel organ solo (a popular French song *La Jambe de Bois*) in *Petrushka* and the Lanner waltzes we hear in the third tableau to accompany the dancing of the Moor and the ballerina. Van Vechten even played through some recent Stravinsky compositions with Ansermet at the piano. "We gave," he reports, "what we smilingly referred to as the 'first American audition' on the grand pianoforte in his hotel room" (MBM 225).

Van Vechten had also studied and analyzed the orchestration of *Petrushka* in great detail, which, as I mentioned earlier, he hailed as a "new principle in music" (MBM 217). He describes Stravinsky's orchestration in *Petrushka* as follows: "The entire second scene of this mimed drama, is written for solo piano, occasionally combined with a single other instrument. At other times in the action the bassoon or the cornet, even the triangle has the stage. And when he wishes to achieve his most complete effects he is careful not to use more than seven or eight instruments, and only one of each" (220).

Referring to both *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*, Van Vechten hints as well at a private performance of these works at the piano: "It is quite certain that the music of either of these works is delightful when played on the piano; an average roomful of people who like to listen to music will be charmed with it" (MBM 187–88). (It is likely that both Pitts Sanborn and Van Vechten would have owned the orchestral score for *Petrushka* as well as the piano reduction for four hands, both published in 1912.) As late as 1954, Stevens still remembers Van Vechten in connection with modern music and the frequent gatherings he attended at the Arensberg salon during the *Harmonium* years. Here he is supplying information on the Arensbergs in response to a questionnaire. At these gatherings, Stevens recalls, "Mrs. Arensberg played the piano but not often. Yet she was as much interested in modern music as Walter came to be in modern painting [quite a statement, if true, considering Walter Arensberg's well-known passion for Modern Art]. . . . Perhaps Carl Van Vechten had some special interest for Mrs. Arensberg because of his own interest in modern music" (L 822–23). What I mean to suggest with these references to the Arensbergs

and Carl Van Vechten is not that Stevens heard a private performance of *Petrushka*, though he might have, but that he moved in an environment in which Stravinsky's music, and talk about Stravinsky's music, was often in the air. As Pitts Sanborn had suggested in *Modern Music* in 1924, the period of initial reception of Stravinsky's music in New York was for many a period Sanborn could only compare to religious worship, as a time when Stravinsky was considered either a "tonal Christ" or "merely an esoteric rite" (4).

*Amy Lowell's "Orchestrations" of Stravinsky and the Blindman Prize for Poetry*

As is well known, Stevens composed "From the Journal of Crispin," the first draft of "The Comedian as the Letter C," rather frantically and hurriedly in response to *Poetry's* announcement of the Blindman Prize in its December issue of 1921. Stevens immediately began writing to meet a January 1 deadline, "churning and churning" (L 224), as he put it, after reading the following announcement:

In our advertising pages the Poetry Society of South Carolina makes an announcement of great interest to poets. A prize of \$250, donated by W. Van R. Whitall, Esq., of Pelham, N. Y., is to be awarded annually, under the Society's auspices, for the best poem sent in competition before Jan. 1st of each year. Mr. Pelham [sic] makes sure of a competent choice this year by appointing Miss Amy Lowell to the honor of initiating the award by acting as the first judge. (Lensing 259)

Why might Stevens "churn[]" and churn[]" in order to produce such a daunting and involved poem so suddenly and in response to the above announcement? The most likely answer, I would like to suggest, is that Stevens was responding to Amy Lowell's widely publicized "orchestrations" of Stravinsky's music by presenting his own version of how one might poetically "orchestrate" Stravinsky.

In 1919 Amy Lowell had been invited by Harvard's music department to deliver a lecture on "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry," and in January of 1920 she published this lecture in the prestigious journal founded in 1915, *The Musical Quarterly*, to which Stevens subscribed.<sup>3</sup> In "Some Musical Analogies in Modern Poetry," an article Stevens most likely read with some care, Amy Lowell describes Stravinsky's influence on her own poetry: "I had not studied Stravinsky in vain; I knew that the shimmering iridescence of *vers libre* occasionally craves the relief of a rough, masculine, sometimes positively vulgar, tune" (154). In addition, Lowell mentions hearing a number of modern musical works in the "polyphonics" of John Gould Fletcher, among them Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (155).

After citing her poem "Marching Hessians," in which she places an "obviously banging marching tune" (146), Lowell goes on to say that she was not yet "satisfied" with such experiments. "I wanted to try something more, something less obvious than mere rhythm, and closer to the essence of musical speech, as it were. Stravinsky's string quartet 'Grotesques,' gave me the key. Could I reproduce the effect of music in another medium? Could I? Did I? The reader must determine" (148). We might wonder how Stevens, placed in the role of a "reader" who "must determine," would react to Lowell's "Stravinsky's Three Pieces, 'Grotesques,' for String Quartet," which she quotes in full in *The Musical Quarterly*. Here are some excerpts:

Stravinsky's Three Pieces 'Grotesques,' For String Quartet

First Movement

Thin-voiced, nasal pipes  
Drawing sound out and out  
Until it is a screeching thread,  
Sharp and cutting, sharp and cutting,  
It hurts.  
Whee-e-e!  
Bump! Bump! Tong-ti-bump!  
There are drums here,  
Banging,  
And wooden shoes beating the round, grey stones  
Of the market-place.  
Whee-e-e!  
Sabots slapping the worn, old stones,  
And a shaking and cracking of dancing bones;  
Clumsy and hard they are,  
And uneven,  
Losing half a beat  
Because the stones are slippery.  
Bump-e-ty tong! Whe-e-e! Tong!

And from the third movement:

An organ growls in the heavy roof-groins of a church,  
It wheezes and coughs.  
The nave is blue with incense,  
Writhing, twisting,  
Snaking over the heads of the chanting priests.  
*Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine;*  
The priests whine their bastard Latin  
And the censors swing and click.

The priests walk endlessly  
Round and round,  
Droning their Latin  
Off the key.  
The organ crashes out in a flaring chord,  
And the priests hitch their chant up half a tone. (148–49)

By informing readers beforehand of her intentions in writing this poem, Lowell produces a programmatic poetry based on a programmatic music, thus informing readers precisely how they are to read and what they are to listen for in her poem. It is just this sort of straightforward verbalization of program music (the program was announced at the Flonzaley concert where Lowell heard Stravinsky's "Grotesques" performed) that would have clashed with Stevens' aesthetic sensibilities (Damon 326). That is precisely why Stevens mentions Till Eulenspiegel in his comments on "The Comedian as the Letter C": he would have been horrified to have readers, as he puts it, "listening with ears like elephants'" to identify the meaning of the "sounds of the letter C," a prescribed approach to listening and reading that Lowell's poem encourages. Such a reluctance to inform readers about what they were about to read or hear is in keeping with Stevens' lifelong aesthetic philosophy, and it is of a piece with Carl Van Vechten's commentary on a performance of Stravinsky's three pieces for String Quartet:

His three pieces for string quartet were listed without programme at the Flonzaley concert and might have been played that way, I think, without causing the heavens to fall. But Stravinsky had told some one that their general title was *Grotesques* and that he had composed each of them with a programme in mind, which was divulged. When the music was played, in the circumstances, what he was driving at was as plain as A. B. C. There was no further demand made on the auditor than that he prepare himself, as Schumann asked auditors to prepare themselves to listen to the *Carneval*, by thinking of the titles. (MBM 177)

The probable reaction of Carl Van Vechten, an enthusiastic connoisseur of the avant-garde, to Lowell's poems would seem clear enough. Their meaning already explained beforehand, such poems would be too obvious, would place few "demands . . . on the auditor." In making the above comments, Van Vechten may even have Lowell's Stravinsky "orchestrations," first published in March 1916, a month before he wrote this article, in mind. We can also be relatively sure, I think, that Stevens' reaction would fall along similar lines. Alfred Kreymborg, who published much of

Stevens' early poetry in *Others*, accurately and tellingly characterizes Stevens' intense dislike of the obvious: "Behind the veils, there is always a meaning, though the poet employs supersubtlety for veiling the meaning as well. No one hates the obvious more" (*Our Singing Strength* 501). If "The Comedian as the Letter C" was composed as a response to Lowell's painfully obvious (at least to my ears) "orchestrations" of Stravinsky's music, we hardly need mention that "The Comedian as the Letter C" can be read as an extreme exercise in how *not* to write the obvious.

*Reading Crispin as Petrushka*

How does Stevens poetically "reproduce the effects of" Stravinsky's *Petrushka* in "The Comedian as the Letter C"? In his autobiography Stravinsky recalls how the puppet Petrushka and the orchestra are in conflict:

In composing this music, I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggi. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet-blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet. (4)

In creating Crispin, Stevens creates a Petrushka-like character, one who so often expresses himself, or is expressed, in wild cascades of sound effects, those many "orchestrations" of the sounds of the letter C. In "The Comedian as the Letter C" Stevens expresses as well a conflict similar to that between Petrushka and the orchestra. Just as Petrushka's cascading arpeggi exasperate, so do Crispin's exasperating sounds awaken the revengeful trumpets of judgment: "Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried / Celestial sneering boisterously" (CP 29). In addition to suggesting Petrushka's conflict with the orchestra, these lines illustrate the role Stevens wanted the sounds of the letter C to play. The sneering sibilants of "Celestial sneering boisterously" seem to be "hissing" and "mocking" (L 294, 352) at Crispin and his "pipping sounds." And as if to emphasize this Crispin/Petrushka analogy, Stevens alludes to these "boisterous" trumpets no less than three times in parts I and II of "The Comedian as the Letter C," as Crispin is "washed away by magnitude":

Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried  
Celestial sneering boisterously. (CP 29)

He was a man made vivid by the sea,  
A man come out of luminous traversing,  
Much trumpeted, made desperately clear. . . . (CP 30)

Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry,  
Came bluntly thundering, more terrible  
Than the revenge of music on bassoons. (CP 32)

Before discussing further how Stevens is creating a Petrushka-like figure in Crispin and how he is “orchestrating” the “sounds of the letter C” as a “hissing” and “shrieking” and “concussive” accompaniment to Crispin’s introspective voyagings, I first need to elucidate an important key to understanding Stevens’ Stravinsky-like orchestration in part I. The *sea* in part I puns on the letter C, and hence it represents the sounds of the letter C accompanying Crispin’s voyage, which in turn might be read as roughly analogous to Stravinsky’s orchestral score to *Petrushka*. Thus when Stevens wonders whether Crispin could “stem verboseness in the sea,” he is wondering as well whether Crispin could “stem verboseness” in the sounds of the letter C. Inundated by this *sea/C*, then, it is in part I that Crispin (and Stevens) most vividly experiences what we might call a Petrushkian nightmare, a nightmare in which the sounds of the letter C express Crispin’s sensibilities while simultaneously constituting a “Polyphony beyond his baton’s thrust.” Stevens’ rhetoric in this section, as well as throughout “The Comedian as the Letter C,” constitutes a sort of speech/music, wildly dissonant but skillfully orchestrated, “both the language of Crispin and the language which mocks Crispin, a subtle exercise in self-mockery on Stevens’ part” (Litz 128). And if we keep this *sea/C* pun always in mind, we can see just how accurately part II describes Crispin’s Petrushka-like experience in part I: Crispin “*was a man made vivid by the sea / . . . Much trumpeted, made desperately clear*” (emphasis mine).

“The Comedian as the Letter C” opens with a musical pun: “Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost.” Eleanor Cook correctly informs us that “[t]he most obvious secondary meaning of ‘nota’ is a note in music, here striking an opening note—C, we assume—and alerting us to musical tropes” (75). By alerting us to secondary meanings and musical tropes, Stevens offers us a clue as to how his text might be read. And by sounding the note C (he had already sounded the letter C in the title), Stevens suggests early on that the “sounds of the letter C” might play an important role in “The Comedian as the Letter C.” More significant, perhaps, is that Stevens’ “The Comedian as the Letter C” opens with a description of Crispin that suggests he has the puppet Petrushka in mind:

Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil,  
The sovereign ghost. As such, the Socrates  
Of snails, musician of pears, principium  
And lex. Sed quæritur: is this same wig  
Of things, this nincompated pedagogue,

Preceptor to the sea? Crispin at sea  
Created, in his day, a touch of doubt. (CP 27)

Stravinsky's ballet ends with an actual ghost, Petrushka's ghost, rising above the theater, desperately hoping he is the "intelligence of his soil" and not a mere puppet, embittered by his past life on stage and his present fate, ineffectually hurling snubs and insults at the audience and the magician who had brought him to life. Like the puppet Petrushka, who has little or no control over his fate, Crispin "is an instance of the modern predicament in which the power of the self to determine its plain fate seems to be minuscule indeed" (Fuchs 60). Inhabiting such a helpless state of affairs, Crispin's sense of identity, just as Petrushka's, fluctuates wildly between grandiose delusions and hissing self-abasement, reflected here in hyperbolic inanities of self-mockery accompanied and accentuated by a variety of hissing sounds. Martha Strom, in fact, counts fifty-six sibilants in the poem's first fifteen lines ("The Comedian as the Sounds" 22). As the "Socrates / Of snails, musician of pears," as a "wig / Of things" and "lutanist of fleas," Crispin's "intelligence" is quickly called into question. His Socratic probings are devoted to "snails" and "things," his absurd musicianship to a lutanist's plucking of "pears" and "fleas." Not a serious thinker, nor a serious musician, Crispin is a "wig," Stevens' synecdoche for a puppet's lack of a real brain.

The first question raised about such a questionable thinker and musician is, for Stevens, especially poignant and self-revealing: Is "this nincompoated pedagogue, / Preceptor to the sea?" Remembering that *sea* puns on C, we can reformulate this question to express more directly Stevens' rather obliquely expressed poetic anxiety. Crispin's question (and Stevens'), then, is whether he can teach (a preceptor is a teacher) the C to behave. The answer, almost destructively demonstrated in a wildly dissonant "orchestration" of "the sounds of the letter C," is no—but a no of such admirable virtuosity that yes remains a possible answer, not for Crispin perhaps but for Stevens. For Crispin, as for Petrushka, the orchestra is beyond his control—a "Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust." Crispin feels himself to be—and then vividly demonstrates that he is—more "nincompoated pedagogue" than "preceptor" when faced with this *sea* of C's of "Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh, / Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust" (CP 28).

The C-sounds in "Ubiquitous concussion" are worth exploring as an example of how Stevens might have intended the sounds of the letter C to be heard. The hard C's in "Ubiquitous concussion" can be heard as three auditory knocks to the puppet Petrushka's or the puppet-like Crispin's head: the hard *qu* followed by a sighing or hissing *s*, then two harder strokes of C in rapid sequence ("concussion") followed by the *sh* sound heard in the *ss*—perhaps the sound not of a cymbal crashing but the sound

“just after” (CP 93) the crash, or perhaps a more “subtle sound, / The shoo-shoo-shoo of secret cymbals round” (CP 401). As Stevens reminds us, however, it is not as important to pinpoint what these various sounds of the letter C represent (an impossible but not thankless task for readers of Stevens) as it is to be aware of their accentuating presence as they accompany Crispin throughout the poem.

The many sounds of “Ubiquitous concussion” in “The Comedian as the Letter C” may also be heard as analogous to the “Ubiquitous percussion” of Stravinsky’s score for *Petrushka*: bass drum, cymbals, gong, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, xylophone, glockenspiel, snare and long drum placed in the wings, and even the exasperating piano part (the piano is a percussion instrument) with its seemingly out-of-control racing up and down the keys. That Stevens would attempt roughly to approximate such sounds with his own racing up and down and around the sounds of the letter C is not so unusual for a poet who would later write: “If occasionally the poet touches the triangle or one of the cymbals, he does it only because he feels like doing it. Instead of a musician we have an orator whose speech sometimes resembles music” (NA 126). Just as the varied sounds of Stravinsky’s orchestra overwhelm the puppet *Petrushka* and express his despair, the sounds of the letter C inundate Crispin and he is “washed away by magnitude.” And “storming under multitudinous tones,” he struggles to define just who or what he is amidst “all that brunt.”

As the *sea/C* “Severs . . . selves” (CP 30) and an “ancient Crispin is dissolved,” the curtain closes on Crispin’s most vivid experiencing of a *Petrushkean*-like nightmare in part I. In part II (“Concerning the Thunderstorms of Yucatan”) Crispin is not so much overwhelmed by the *sea/C* as he is by Yucatan’s lush new reality of “savage color” and “Green barbarism.” In this new environment, Crispin’s “violence was for aggrandizement / And not for stupor, such as music makes / For sleepers halfway waking” (CP 31). Perhaps this desire reflects a wish to flee from the horrors of his recent *Petrushkean* nightmare as a puppet (“sleeper[] halfway waking”) who was so violently bandied about and expressed by the sounds of the *sea/C*. But such a desire, even if violently wished for, is not so easily attained. Unable to forget that “Against his pipping sounds a trumpet cried / Celestial sneering boisterously” in the sonic nightmare of a world he had just left behind in part I, Crispin can at first only imagine the Yucatan Thunderstorms as another version of those frightening trumpet blasts, an angst-ridden projection of his former life of “storming under multitudinous tones.”

Perhaps that is why the wind in Yucatan sounds like a “Tempestuous clarion, with heavy cry” (CP 32), recalling the trumpets that sneered at Crispin’s “pipping sounds” in part I. Crispin hears as well the thunder’s rumbling as a “gasconade of drums” (CP 32), a seeming echo of the

"Ubiquitous concussion" of part I, all the concussive (or percussive) hard C sounds that "slap" Crispin around. And this seeming "gasconade of drums" and the "Tempestuous clarion" that Crispin hears are not the only signs that in part II Crispin is still haunted by his Petrushka-like nightmare from part I. Subtly echoing previously heard sounds and rhythms, Stevens again gives voice to Crispin's (and Petrushka's) fear before the revengeful trumpets:

Sonorous nutshells rattling inwardly (part II)  
recalls  
Celestial trumpets sneering boisterously (part I).

The trumpets hardly need be present (and they are sounded twice in part II) for us to recognize this inward rattling as a Petrushka-like trembling and blasted emotional state while the trumpets blare his defeat and cry out his despair. The brief and tragic life of Crispin as Petrushka is all here: the strange "sonorousness" of a sounder of C's, the insignificance and hollowness and eccentricity (and masked outer shell) of a "nutshell," the "rattling" of sound effects (and death), and the "inwardness" of the "introspective voyager" caged in his cell for all the world to see.

Despite being hotly pursued by Petrushkian anxieties in part II, Crispin nevertheless does eventually become aware of a new self, a transformed Crispin, in his desperate quest to deny and transcend a past of Petrushkian poetics. The new soil has helped. Yucatan's wonders do not "sever" like the *sea/C*. And as his Yucatan sojourn winds down, Crispin becomes "studious of a self possessing him, / That was not in him in the crusty town / From which he sailed" (CP 33). Suddenly, Crispin's voice is equal to the voice of the thunder:

the thunder, lapsing in its clap,  
Let down gigantic quavers of its voice,  
For Crispin to vociferate again. (CP 33)

For the moment, at least, the thunder has "lapsed in its clap" (as the *sea/C* never did), and the fear that thunder might be a fantastical version of the "Tempestuous clarion" either "bluntly thundering" or "sneering boisterously" or seeking revenge "more terrible / Than the revenge of music on bassoons" has lapsed as well.

Significantly, I think, Stevens includes no reference to the boisterous trumpets in parts III and IV, for these sections are increasingly disengaged and distanced from the poetic project of "orchestrating" Stravinsky's music. As Strom has clearly demonstrated, part III ("Approaching Carolina") "imitates most accurately Stevens' own hesitations and ambivalences toward localism" (138). Part IV ("The Idea of a Colony") opens with a reversal of the opening lines that first suggested the presence of

Petrushka's famous ghost. Crispin is no longer the self-mockingly transcendent "intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost"; in part IV "his soil is man's intelligence." With this didactic expression of a new law, Crispin's introspective journey in the second half of "The Comedian as the Letter C" begins to explore "the realm of social possibilities, and the hero's investigation of life as poetry" (Litz 135). This does not mean, though, that Stevens abandons Stravinsky-like "orchestrations" of the letter C in parts III and IV ("clinking pannicles," "crepuscular ice," "sepulchral señors"). That such "orchestrations" of the letter C continue to appear as Crispin's introspective voyagings take him further from his "ructive sea" / C experience in part I suggests that Crispin's Petrushka-like speech/music still lingers as something dear or somehow essential to Crispin (and Stevens), a speech he cannot wholly abandon, travel where he may, try as he might.

As Crispin plunges more deeply into social realities in part V ("A Nice Shady Home"), a variation on the boisterous trumpets returns to express Crispin's (and Stevens'?) quiet despair at no longer being an "aspiring clown," at no longer being a Petrushka-like figure seeking to express himself poetically. Though the comfortable bourgeois existence hinted at in the title brings its own comforts, this quite different but still "suzerain soil" overwhelms him much as the *sea/C* did in part I. The more grandiloquent "Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh" of the *sea/C* has been exchanged here for a milder "concussion" of the quotidian, which "saps philosophers / And men like Crispin" (CP 42):

now this thing and now that  
 Confined him, while it cosseted,  
 Little by little. . . . (CP 40)

The concussive/percussive hard C's of quotidian existence ("confined," "cosseted," "condoned") seem muted or lightly brushed echoes of the harder-hitting percussion that "slaps" Crispin around in part I. The resulting despair, though, is just as real, and it is expressed in a questioning variation on the returning trumpets: "Was he to bray this in profoundest brass / Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems?" (CP 41).

The word "bray" was Stevens' original choice, as we find it in "From the Journal of Crispin," to express this seeming conflict between Petrushka and the orchestra: "Against the shepherds' pipes a trumpet brays / Celestial sneering boisterously" (OP 48). Stevens might have felt this initial version failed to express the conflict between Petrushka and the orchestra, between Crispin and the sounds of the letter C. His revision certainly does, for "pipping sounds" exasperate more than "shepherds' pipes." By returning to his original choice of the word "bray" in part V, Stevens not only underlines the repetition of this musical motive but seems to question

openly any display of despair on the part of the thoroughly quotidian Crispin of "A Nice Shady Home." Crispin's potential braying in "profoundest brass" seems a self-mocking allusion to the trumpet blasts that bellow out in screaming triple-forte trumpet arpeggios in Stravinsky's score to *Petrushka*: the first one descending and entitled "Curses of Petrushka," the second one a more rapid figuration alternately ascending and descending entitled "Despair of Petrushka." We might say that the puppet Petrushka in Stravinsky's ballet, through suffering the pangs of incipient self-expression and its inevitable rebuffs, has earned the right to scream out his despair; whereas the thoroughly quotidian Crispin of part V has, by abandoning his "aspiring" poetics, forsaken any claim to curse his fate in "profoundest brass."

Stevens concludes "The Comedian as the Letter C" with two possible anecdotes of Crispin, the first depicting him as a poet/musician who speaks with "portentous accents" and makes "Seraphic proclamations of the pure" (CP 45), the second mocking him as engaged in "Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops." Then "The Comedian as the Letter C" ends with a detached final line: "So may the relation of each man be clipped" (CP 46). Written about the same time as "The Comedian as the Letter C," the final lines of "Anecdote of the Abnormal" suggest that we might read the final line of "The Comedian as the Letter C" as one final allusion to Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, to the clipping of the puppet Petrushka's head at the end of the ballet and to Petrushka's ghost as he rises above the stage:

Crispin-valet, Crispin saint!  
The exhausted realist beholds  
His tattered manikin arise,  
Tuck in the straw,  
And stalk the skies. (OP 43)

The exhausted realist ("Crispin-valet") is a product of a life lived according to the dictum regulating Crispin's introspective voyagings in the second half of "The Comedian as the Letter C": "his soil is man's intelligence." The "tattered manikin" rising out of his body to "stalk the skies," on the other hand, may be Stevens' Americanized version of Petrushka's ghost, and it should remind us, I think, to recall not only the famous, final scene of Stravinsky's ballet but also the opening note of "The Comedian as the Letter C": "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost."

If Stevens does have the dramatic action of *Petrushka* in mind as he "clip[s]" his own Crispin and drops the final curtain on Crispin's "introspective voyagings," then as Petrushka's head is severed by the blackamoor's scimitar at the end of *Petrushka*, and as Petrushka's ghost rises above the stage, Stevens notes that Petrushka's fate may be Crispin's, as

well as his own: "So may the relation of *each* man be clipped" (emphasis mine). And if Stevens is closing out Crispin's life with a final, fitting allusion to *Petrushka*, an allusion that only a few members of the modernist avant-garde—Lowell, Sanborn, Van Vechten, and perhaps a number of others—would catch and appreciate in all its resonance, the poet Edith Sitwell's description of *Petrushka* in 1921 speaks not only for a generation of modernist poets but perhaps for Wallace Stevens most of all: "In the dead Petrouchka, we know that it is our own poor wisp of a soul that is weeping so pitifully to us from the top of the booth" (Hamm 189).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For other possible sources for "The Comedian as the Letter C" see Bloom (68–87), Buttel (195), Enck (84–85), Feshbach (811–18), Litz (120–23), and Riddel (94–95).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to placing "The Comedian as the Letter C" in its contemporary literary milieu, Strom is the only critic to my knowledge who has attempted to explore the role of the sounds of the letter C in "The Comedian as the Letter C" in any detail. See her "The 'Comedian' as the Sounds of the Letter C."

<sup>3</sup> In his article on "The Comedian as the Letter C," which includes references to Stevens' possible use of material from *The Musical Quarterly* in 1919, Sidney Feshbach writes in a footnote: "Holly Stevens informs me that she believes her father a steady subscriber to the *Musical Quarterly*. After a casual study of many volumes I am convinced the *Musical Quarterly* will be very useful in a study of the place of music in the poetry and poetics of Stevens" (817).

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## Poems

### A Place in the Real World

Far off over the blue  
water lies  
a telescoping ridge  
of white dirt.

This scimitar of land  
curves toward me  
and speckles scrubby green  
up the sand.

On this yellow, lined pad,  
legal-sized,  
the smell of salt lingers  
and lifts me.

There lives, in this quiet  
bay, nothing:  
no water, no dirt, no  
salt or sand.

If I have not been there,  
no one has.  
Inspect carefully this  
real place.

Craig Payne  
Ottumwa, Iowa

## The Eye of the Blackbird

From the porch, Alex sees the single oak tree  
in the empty field crowded with blackbirds.  
Their bodies form a picket line on the broad limbs.  
The blackbird is beside himself.

Alex moves in close to see there is a fourteenth  
way of looking at a blackbird, who even now  
at such a distance can detect the gray chugging  
roly poly fallen from a blade of winter grass  
and the somersaulting aphid looping  
from a transverse iris stem. Seeing the blackbird  
see this, Alex recognizes other moving things  
the blackbird's black watery eye reflects,  
such as a pink glimmer from the flank  
of a silver sliver minnow flipping effortlessly  
over the surface of an eddy and an oval  
luminescence from a firefly fluttering buoyantly  
above the unkempt lawn.

Alex knows inside the eye of a blackbird  
more than physiology takes place. On the watery  
surface of the cornea, for example, small expanding  
circles emanate from the minnow's leap to snag  
the firefly, and off a translucent petal of blackbird  
iris, the skittish aphid backflips into infinity.  
And it is a wonder, with the roly poly left to spin  
up one wall and down the other inside the bloated  
balloon-like vitreous humor, that the blackbird  
ever has any peace.

Mark Lewis  
Fayetteville, Arkansas

## Day of Unrest

The nagging sensation is there may be  
something amiss with even a Sunday.  
After a while the serum of neighbors talking  
outside after church starts wearing off,

and the fever inside us ebbs and flows  
like an oily ocean we've stopped going to.  
Meanwhile the invisible sculptor upstairs  
reshapes the beach he has grown tired of.

The pharmacy is closed today, but the cure  
is always on the shelf just out of reach.  
This means another case of having a holy day  
to wade through not feeling right.

We have more than the eternal recurrence  
of pulse and a rain-out movie ahead of us.  
Nothing a little numbness west of the heart  
can't cure, we say under our gray breath,

believing that a little setback or "warning"  
is just the prescription for a "total recovery."  
More and more, cause and effect have become  
unruly twin toddlers aboard tricycles,

one minute angry Indians circling the wagons,  
the next raising a war cry for lunch.  
The question of what caused the rip in our screen  
the mosquito is now crawling through

validates what we've been taking half-seriously  
lately under the gauze of our lucidity.  
Sometime later today when our predicament  
returns with the gravity of a Sunday night,

when we feel like the suicidal window-ledge  
walker who has just been coaxed back in,  
we'll have owning up to do about a past  
that now looks as pale as hospital bread.

Tony Sanders  
New York, New York

## Post Lapsarian

### I

I didn't know, not until now,  
why you stood so cold against my  
offering. When you began to  
give, did I haze the lines  
of the vision of your walking  
to me, offering to me what  
had already passed?

The air on top of me  
tasted sweeter at the turn

and it left its fingerprints  
on my face, on my shoulders,  
on my thighs, my breasts,  
in my stomach.

I could taste that apple  
juice again, if you would just  
tell me when.

### II

I promised that when  
we returned to the  
garden, you would step  
the mud clear silver,  
that sweat would smell honey,  
the air rush warm.

And now again, your voice,  
singing between my ears,  
goes round and round.  
The rubbing patterns  
afford such a classical sound,  
as they remember the music  
of the last dance we danced  
before our throats were full  
of air, and we were begging  
for a drink.

Nicole Walker  
Portland, Oregon

## Translation from an Imaginary Romance Language

The sisters who live in that house play jazz  
beside the ocean—because, they will tell you,  
it has a complex beat. They know their music  
won't make anything happen, nor war, nor peace.  
Theirs is a heaven for superseded theories.

The eyes of their husbands—all scientists—  
are blue & steely. They stand on the balcony  
overlooking the ocean & the house is asleep  
to the truth of the world. On the upper floors  
they keep an extensive library of World Classics.

The master of that sad house is thoughtful,  
thinking today of the astonishing length  
of the century & watching the sea stretch—  
an endless field—away from his tall windows.  
Red crabs scuttle up the beach to feast in the garden.

He dreams of the saints of the physical world,  
but his rooms are full of beautiful old furniture  
and paintings more perfect than the seven deadly sins—  
he would like to stay there forever, letting  
his thoughts stray through the rooms like fish.

But he will have to go down the hill & across  
the bridge with its contradictory inscription—  
*honor learning, delight in desire*—a final time,  
to travel in exile, always wanting shelter,  
to the Houses of Razzamatazz, of Angels, & of Ozone.

Joseph Duemer  
Clarkson University

## Before the Fire

In winter, bare limbs  
of necessity  
cut philosophers'  
sharp angles in the sky.

It is a relief  
after November's  
heavy drizzle, dank  
leaves turned mush and brown.

It comes, almost  
as a surprise, the mem-  
ory of spring, that  
mud and mess should ever  
be pleasing, should  
ever be—or that

bodies should expose  
themselves with such a-  
bandon, on the beach

(Lying as still as  
shells, as warm as sand)  
before the first cold

proclaimer of win-  
ter roars through—and fires  
the leaves into a  
frenzy of colors—

infuriating  
to the mind of win-  
ter, like a medi-  
terranean dance.

Jacqueline Vaught Brogan  
University of Notre Dame

### Sonata for One-Eyed Man and Trombone

Dream is memory unsummoned.  
And so he lay, sleepless in the heat  
Of an August afternoon,  
On a sofa in a room  
White with light.

Through the screen the world hung  
Flat and still as a photograph.

He had learned, in the silence  
Of so many afternoons, how suffering  
Moves the mind's eye inward.  
Thus the sound seemed at first  
His own voice, reverberating.

He rose on elbow, careful to hold  
The bandaged place, listened through  
The heat of the afternoon to sound  
Now sound of someone, alone,  
Playing a slide trombone.

Never mind the tune . . . bluesy, improvised,  
Ethereal. To him a summoning past the  
Frightened brain, beyond voice,  
Older than memory.

He sat up, stared with half-sight  
At the gauzy screen, as if music  
Would step upon the porch. Then  
Stood against the sofa seat, hummed,  
Stepped twice to the center of the room.

From the corner of his eye he saw  
A familiar shadow, vibrating like a  
Dancer, across the white wall.

Skip Lowery  
Daytona Beach, Florida

**Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutics of Nearness; Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, Celan.**

By Krzysztof Ziarek. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

Although Stevens' name appears in the subtitle of Krzysztof Ziarek's book, his poetry plays only a minor role in *Inflected Language: Toward a Hermeneutics of Nearness*, which is focused far more closely on the other three names of its titular list: Heidegger, Levinas, and Celan. Indeed, only 30 of the book's 206 pages are devoted to Stevens' work, a disappointing limitation for those of us interested in learning how to read his poetry together with the provocative contemporary work being done on the question of the ethical in language and human experience. The book's strengths and interests, however, lie elsewhere, and the Stevens chapter functions principally as an example of these other interests. Here is how Ziarek defines his project: "In the aftermath of poststructuralist debates, *Inflected Language* proposes to rethink the ontological and ethical dimensions of language by rereading Heidegger's work, more specifically his reflection on poetry, and by engaging Levinas's ethics and contemporary poetics." Taking his cue from the late Heidegger and from Levinas' encounters with the German philosopher, Ziarek understands the ethical as "the relation to the other" (and, more specifically, as "relations to alterity") and the ontological as "the relation between language and the world," and his goal is to explore the connections and implications between these two dimensions of language, connections that have often gone unarticulated in the language of much "poststructuralist" criticism. This reorientation of post-structuralism toward the question of the ethical is a very necessary expansion and corrective, one elaborated not only by Levinas and Derrida, but also by other commentators like John Llewelyn, John Caputo, Robert Bernasconi, Michel de Certeau, and Jean-Luc Nancy. It is, to my way of thinking, one of the most provocative directions of contemporary thought, and Ziarek is right to argue that it is "crucial to reappraise how the ontological and ethical thematics function in those philosophical and poetic discourses that specifically take issue with the metaphysical concept of the subject." Reading philosophy and poetry together, Ziarek's book is a significant and timely contribution to this important reappraisal.

Ziarek is very effective in elaborating how Heidegger's critique of metaphysics "calls for a different practice of thinking that acknowledges and preserves the alterity of what it examines," and how his analysis of Dasein moves beyond hermeneutics as interpretation and the production of meaning toward an other thinking—a thinking of the *other* that seeks to secure its otherness against interpretational reduction—that Ziarek calls a "hermeneutics of nearness." As he puts it, "If in *Being and Time* hermeneutics could still be taken to mean interpretation itself, the later texts shift the emphasis from the task of elaborating and illuminating to delivering and letting be," a task of thinking that "does not intend to interpret, understand, or extract meaning but induces language to 'pay attention' to the inscriptions of otherness, of the unsaid, in what it brings to words." And it is this attentiveness to the nearness of the other *as* other—a proximity that Levinas describes as "a relation with something which for ever remains other, with the Other as absence and mystery"—that marks the ethical dimension of language, and by focusing attentively to this nearness in Heidegger, Levinas, Stevens, and

Celan, Ziarek shows “why and how language, notwithstanding the pressure of thematization and the inevitable erasure of alterity that the process of signification and representation entails, can perhaps retain ethical and ontological significance.” This, we might say, using a Stevensian formula, is the pressure of alterity pushing back against the pressure of signification and meaning, and it is Levinas who articulates most fully this tension between language’s ethical register—what he calls “saying”—and its thematic or signifying register—the “said.” This tension provokes Ziarek’s readings, which seek (this is Ziarek paraphrasing Celan) “a poetically rigorous attentiveness to language, a reading of words against themselves, as Celan would put it (*Gegenwort*), turning signification against its own laws, its hereditary economics of difference.” It is only in this turning or “in-folding”—language’s essential exposure to the otherness of Being (for Heidegger) or the other *as* other (for Levinas)—that the other “inflects” language, not as another theme or subject, but as a rupture in thematization and subjectivity. Hence for Ziarek, language after Heidegger and Levinas must be thought ethically, as the letting-be of an inflection that is “not readable according to the logic of propositions or assertions but instead as their ‘poetic’ disruption”: that is to say, according to what Ziarek describes as the discursive mode of “perhaps.” Like “invention” in Derrida’s analysis of Ponge’s poetry, “inflection” must be thought beginning with the other: as the non-dialectical work of the other, or as the other’s work.

Ziarek’s most succinct formulation of this ethical inflection comes in his readings of Celan, for whom he notes that “the task of poetry is to secure this frail trace, the other’s sign, to make a place for it in a fissure between words, images, concepts, all too familiar to let the other remain other.” Inflected by a “turn of breath,” Celan’s poetry “accounts for the other in such a way that it does not count the other,” and thus his poems “do not speak about otherness, the ethical in language, or the relation to the other—they themselves are this relation.” This is, of course, the most provocative aspect of Celan’s work, summarized in Celan’s epigraph, “La poésie ne s’impose plus, elle s’expose,” and one that has been commented on throughout Celan criticism. What Ziarek specifies, however, are the connections between Celan’s poetics and Levinasian ethics, and it is this work that significantly contributes to thinking on both writers.

So the real focus of *Inflected Language* is the triad Heidegger-Levinas-Celan. Unfortunately, for readers of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, that focus uncomfortably leaves Stevens as the odd (or in this case, even) man out. Ziarek’s readings of Celan gain their force by employing the lens of Levinasian ethics and, implicitly, of Levinas’ readings of Heidegger. But when he comes to Stevens, Ziarek chooses not to read him through Levinas—a move that could provide some very fresh insights—but instead sees him only as an example of Heidegger’s thought, as a “poetic counterpart of Heidegger’s exploration of language, which corroborates and reinforces the latter’s insights.” Sticking most explicitly to “Description without Place” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Ziarek seeks to show “how Stevens’s late poems approach the relation of poetic language to reality as the problem of figuring and marking the otherness of Being, the effect that its withdrawal produces in poetry.” And he does this through an elaboration of what he calls Stevens’ “poetics of notes,” which “stresses the fact that the poetic text can only indirectly point toward its retreating source”—what Ziarek nicely charac-

terizes with the Stevensian phrase “the poem that never reaches words”—“undecidable finally as to its presence or absence.” This is all to the good, for by reading Stevens as an example of Heidegger, Ziarek is able to draw attention to how Stevens “foregrounds the difficulty of any notation of otherness.”

But he is not able to highlight how this difficulty of taking note of Being’s withdrawal makes Stevens’ poetry as ethically challenging as Celan’s, or as provocative as Levinas’ philosophy. Indeed, in spite of the Heideggerian language—or maybe because of it—Ziarek’s Stevens sometimes looks strikingly familiar, as when he describes Stevens’ work as illustrating “the extent to which language is enmeshed in its own heritage and dependent on its metaphysical provenance,” or when he observes that “Stevens the ironist indicates that the notation of otherness in language is only a possibility, a possibility that, as ‘Notes’ puts it, must be possible, but only in a modality of ‘perhaps.’” This Heideggerian Stevens looks again like the poet of Being, only this time the poet who writes about the “problem of figuring and marking the otherness of Being.” But if Celan, with the help of Levinas, can be seen as the poet who does not speak about otherness, but whose poems perform a relation before content, a preintentional saying that precedes and exceeds what they say, why not Stevens? That is, what might have happened if Ziarek had taken the next step: not just to read Stevens as a “poetic counterpart” of Heidegger, but to situate him within the neighborhood of Levinasian ethics or Celanian exposure? This is a highly promising direction for Stevensian criticism, but one that *Inflected Language* does not satisfactorily pursue, leaving us Stevens critics with the sense that there is much more work to be done on the question of the ethical in Stevens.

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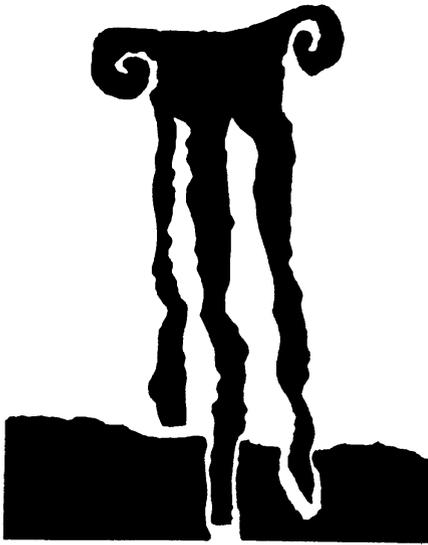
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me in the drift of continents.

If you wait long enough everything matters.

I love this place because every  
thing makes sense—almost, or hovers  
near sense. Everything eddies or pools or arcs  
overhead screeching notes that cut

wounds in the air where joy blossoms  
from that other world before it learns the habits  
of ordinary motion. I trust these lines  
cut in sand by water and wind map a real world  
irreducible to probabilities.

This sweep of beach alters my best days.

2.

Then tell me how the beautiful dead seabird  
can circle on the tensed surface of this  
small pool the color of thin blue  
alcohol. There must be music sufficiently  
abstract to note the pure movement  
of the tern's light body. The slight  
yellow beak lies part-way open, as if, mid-  
flight, the bird paused, its being

shaken as it fell from light.

I love this place because it makes me doubt myself.

Look how the tern's saturated feathers  
have begun to spread across the pool's smooth surface  
like petals, or shreds of high white cirrus.

Even this least death contains the world.

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