

The Wallace Stevens Journal



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From *Auroras*, a series of 13 lithographs
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The Wallace Stevens Journal

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"I lied in my ad. I hate Wallace Stevens."

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Wallace Stevens, Modern Physics, and Wholeness

DANA WILDE

I. The Role of the Poet

IN HIS ESSAY "THE NOBLE RIDER and the Sound of Words" Wallace Stevens states with remarkable directness his idea of the poet's place in society: "His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives" (NA 29). For Stevens the modern poet's role is exceptionally difficult because the modern "pressure of reality" is large and complex, and ultimately violent. Stevens characterizes the pressure of reality as "the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation" (NA 20). Since "[o]ur difficulty is not primarily with any detail[,] [i]t is primarily with the whole" (NA 8), the whole pressure of reality in the modern age is enormous, not to mention incoherent: "The spirit of negation has been . . . active, . . . confident . . . and . . . intolerant" in the modern age; "All the great things have been denied and we live in an intricacy of new and local mythologies, political, economic, poetic, which are asserted with an ever-enlarging incoherence. This is accompanied by an absence of any authority except force, operative or imminent" (NA 17).

The poet, Stevens suggests, is in this context an active and important agent—one who gives "revelation[s]" (NA 33), in fact—in the human world. In this sense the poet is engaged intimately in the evolving cultural context. Insofar as he formulates metaphors, ideas, and theories that help people live their lives, he helps make meaning for the culture and participates in the complex of ideas that forms the worldview, or larger "fictions," of his age.¹ The fictions are ultimately, in terms basic to Stevens, reality—political, economic, poetic, social, and so on.

In this sense it might be said that the poet is part of the "metanarrative" of the age, but this term seems designed to expose or negate or decreate the fictions (to use Stevens' words) of a culture rather than help compose them. As indicated above, Stevens is critical of this decreative tendency. Instead his writings implicitly urge on us creative activity, and "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" suggests the poet is part of a creative, constructive activity on a world-scale. The poet, in other words, affects and is affected by his age.

Stevens was affected in particular by modern philosophical ideas, especially those influenced by modern physics. As a result, Stevens' poetry runs parallel to and in some ways intersects with some quantum physicists' ideas about the relation of the individual to reality and society. In fact, these parallel and intersecting ideas have remained in the evolving cultural context over the past forty years, and in some particular cases seem to converge; Stevens' poetic ideas and figures in certain respects imply the same ideas as those implied by some physicists, supporting Stevens' assertion that the human difficulty "is not primarily with any detail," but with the whole.

II. Stevens and Schrödinger

There is little doubt that Stevens had some familiarity with quantum physics, although few of his references to it are direct. Joan Richardson in her biography of Stevens tells us that through reading European periodicals he was aware of developments in modern physics from at least the 1930s on (156 and *passim*). Further, his references in "A Collect of Philosophy" and other prose pieces name physicists in connection with their ideas' influences on philosophy; and he quotes Samuel Alexander, André George, and C. E. M. Joad on the relationships between mind and reality suggested by certain interpretations of quantum physics.

Lisa Steinman in her book *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poets* helpfully documents Stevens' place in the American cultural context, but in that book and in another essay she leaves the impression that Stevens directly used ideas from modern science; this is somewhat misleading. Stevens' references to science and modern physics are almost all ancillary to the broader connections he is trying to make between poetry and philosophy. It is not that he used the ideas of physics, but that he identified poetic ideas in the philosophical implications arising from modern physics. In a letter (which Steinman cites) to Barbara Church, Stevens wonders if the philosophy of the sciences will turn out to be an antagonist or even a substitute for other poetic concepts—if it will turn out to be a poetic concept itself. He then says:

Jean Paulhan isolates the philosophy of the sciences. The quantum theory to which he refers is not a thing to be assimilated offhand. But I love his "approximations macroscopiques" and must think how to use them together with Jean Wahl's fausses reconnaissances. Is not the idea of the hero an "approximation macroscopique"? (L 725)

It is not clear from this that Stevens understands anything about quantum theory at all, only that its philosophical implications seem poetic and related in figurative senses to other poetic ideas. His interest is in the poetic

idea, not in quantum theory. Most of his references to science occur in this context. What is important here is that Stevens attended to the implications of modern science, and that his attention emerges in his poetry and ideas about poetry.

One of the most influential and fascinating ideas to arise from quantum theory is the idea of complementarity, which, again, Stevens may or may not have understood, but which finds parallels in his thought. In simple terms, results from subatomic experiments led Neils Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, and others to conclude that there is no such thing as a detached, objective observer in a scientific experiment. Physicist Heinz Pagels summarizes the idea of complementarity in this way:

Bohr's theory of complementarity asserts that there exist complementary properties of the same object of knowledge, one of which if known will exclude knowledge of the other. We may therefore describe an object like an electron in ways which are mutually exclusive—for example, as wave or particle—without logical contradiction provided we also realize that the experimental arrangements that determine the descriptions are similarly mutually exclusive. Which experiment—and hence which description one chooses—is purely a matter of human choice. (75)

Because the choice of experimental method can affect the outcome of a subatomic experiment, it is clear that the experimenter, or observer, participates in the experiment, and moreover, the experimental instruments also play a role in the outcome. In these terms, the observer, the object observed, and the apparatus form a kind of whole of parts that seem objectively separate.

The idea that the observer participates in forming the end result is of course essential to Stevens. The singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," for example, is one part of a complementary arrangement. She and the sea are distinctly separate, but at the nexus of her singing they form a whole: her imagination is an ordering force, like the experimenter who chooses the configuration of the experiment, and the sea is like the unknown, or yet unordered, quantum reality; her imagination forms the song, which might be viewed as a parallel to the results of the quantum experiment.

In quantum theory, reality is identified and ordered—or becomes real—either at the moment of measurement (according to Heisenberg) or at the moment the measured activity is realized in the experimenter's brain (according to John von Neumann).² In Stevens' parallel terms, the physical world is formless until the imagination gives it form and order; at the same time, neither imagination nor physical world is complete without the other, as is summarized in one of the "Adagia": "Poetry is not the same thing as

the imagination taken alone. Nothing is itself taken alone. Things are because of interrelations or interactions" (OP 189).

The ramifications of an idea like this are played out in a wide variety of ways in Stevens' poetry and in the interpretation of quantum theory, and they lead to startling and (from some perspectives) disturbing places. A good example of the philosophical implications is outlined in *Mind and Matter* by Erwin Schrödinger, who devised the "wave function," one of the fundamental mathematical descriptions used to interpret findings concerning quantum behavior.

It should be noted that many of the experimental results, and hence ideas, arising from quantum physics run counter to previously established ideas of classical physics. Where classical physics takes the external world of objects for reality, quantum theory implies that reality is comprised of an interaction between object and subject. Eventually the terms "object" and "subject," which are derived from philosophies based on the classical view of nature, become outright hindrances in understanding what is happening in the world, and are dropped, as we will see in Schrödinger and later, David Bohm. The same is true for Stevens, where these terms crop up only at intensely difficult or regressive moments. They emphasize the distinction between observer and observed, imaginer and nature, in a contrast that complements, in Stevens' works, the idea or possibility of an essential unity between the two: "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality" (OP 187), Stevens says.

Schrödinger, basing his reasoning on the findings of quantum physics, emphasizes this very point in even more definite terms: it is clear to him, at least, that mind and the external world are one. "Mind has erected the objective outside world of the natural philosopher out of its own stuff," he says (*Mind and Matter* 121). He calls this a gigantic task, and explains that the reason we feel separate and distinct from the external world is that the mind has protected itself from the enormity of the task by excluding itself from its own conceptual creation; "hence the latter does not contain its creator." A serious problem arises: how does the mind do this?

While the stuff from which our world picture is built is yielded exclusively from the sense organs as organs of the mind, so that every man's world picture is and always remains a construct of his mind and cannot be proved to have any other existence, yet the conscious mind itself remains a stranger within that construct, it has no living space in it, you can spot it nowhere in space. (*Mind and Matter* 122)

The answer, in brief, is that there is no discrimination to be made between subject and object: "Subject and object are only one" (127). "The reason why our sentient, percipient and thinking ego is met nowhere within our

scientific world picture can easily be indicated in seven words: because it is itself that world picture. It is identical with the whole and therefore cannot be contained in it as a part of it" (128).

Now these remarks are remarkably like any number of indications Stevens gives about the relation of the self to the world. The poem "Theory," for example, from as early as *Harmonium*, begins: "I am what is around me." This is tantamount to mind or ego erecting the world out of its own stuff. The poem goes on:

Women understand this.
One is not duchess
A hundred yards from a carriage. (*CP* 86)

The idea that spatial separation has an impact on the nature of reality sneaks into this idea of unity, introducing the same kind of difficulty into the situation as Schrödinger's: the world seems to depend on physical proximity, and to some extent does, implying that whatever is separate is unalterably separate. But in the poem the original assertion stands, and we understand that self and surroundings are inextricably contextual. Being duchess is a construct of the mind that depends on carriage as much as ego. In a broader sense, the feminine element of the poem suggests that sensibility that contains things, rather than observes things, and the self that contains actually *is* its surroundings. You cannot spot the self here because it is identical with, even if observing, its surroundings, parallel with the experimenter in a quantum experiment whose choices influence the results.

Still, the unity of mind and matter is not classically apparent, and in Stevens there is persistently the sense that the apparent gap can be narrowed but never closed to an actual moment where unity is more than perceived, but, further, immediately experienced. Throughout the *Collected Poems* there are moments in which the self becomes aware of the possibility of this unity or wholeness, and other moments in which the self seems separated to the point of isolation from the world. In the bleak last section of "Sunday Morning," the woman is a figure caught between an old, ineffective mythology and an unassumed new one, living "in an old chaos of the sun, / Or old dependency of day and night, / Or island solitude, unsponsored" where "in the isolation of the sky," pigeons "sink, / Downward to darkness" (*CP* 70). She seems isolated by her abandonment of old religious myth but simultaneously by an inability to construct an effective version of the world. In a contrasting instance, the nun in "A Pastoral Nun" says "poetry and apotheosis are one":

If I live according to this law I live
In an immense activity, in which

Everything becomes morning, summer, the hero,
The enraptured woman, the sequestered night. . . .
(CP 378)

The nun here has become aware, by her construction, of an essentially unified “general being or human universe,” although she is still not quite in the totality: she speaks, like an observer, tentatively (“If”) of her law. A few pages later in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” the speaker highlights the tentativeness of the possibility of a unifying experience; note the word “perhaps” in these phrases from section VII of “It Must Be Abstract”:

Perhaps there are times of inherent excellence, . . .
.....

Perhaps there are moments of awakening,
Extreme, fortuitous, personal, in which

We more than awaken, sit on the edge of sleep,
As on an elevation, and behold
The academies like structures in a mist. (CP 386)

There may be moments of vision, in other words, but they are uncertain matters of chance. The observer is on the edge of a sense of unity like the one the pastoral nun describes, but still too near the isolation of the woman in “Sunday Morning” to experience fully the conscious mind as an inherent part of the construct, in Schrödinger’s terms. It is still there, unseen yet observing.

The analogue here to the central figure of the complementarity principle lies in modern physics’ implication that the observer, observed, and apparatus are distinct yet complementarily unified, the observer perceiving (or more precisely, later thinking of) himself as separate, yet participating in the construction of reality. For science and for Stevens, the question concerns abstracted reality and imagined reality: where we think we are, and where we actually are. Schrödinger, elucidating quantum findings, implies that reality is of the mind. The same is true for Stevens, over and over. “We live in the mind,” he says (OP 190); “What we see in the mind is as real to us as what we see by the eye” (OP 188), and what we see by the eye (as science also verifies) is composed by the mind as imagination rather than mind as abstracting, rationalizing intellect.

Toward the end of his book Schrödinger criticizes classical science by saying it lacks aesthetic and ethical values, a notion that in recent years has become a point of considerable importance in some scientific circles. In fact there is the sense that a science that regards the world as a set of disconnected material objects, with disconnected and separate observers, has given rise to a philosophy that lacks any moral content.³ This lack,

because of the nearly preeminent influence of scientific thinking in the modern world, has also infected society with a general sense of valuelessness and meaninglessness. Schrödinger, having argued from science along the same lines Stevens suggests in his poetry, uses terms Stevens himself might have used in attempting to put his criticism of science into focus:

No personal god can form part of a world model that has only become accessible at the cost of removing everything personal from it. We know, when God is experienced, this is an event as real as an immediate sense perception or as one's own personality. Like them he must be missing in the space-time picture. I do not find God anywhere in space and time—that is what the honest naturalist tells you. For this he incurs blame from him whose catechism is written: God is spirit. (*Mind and Matter* 138–39)⁴

Stevens in his early poetry does away with the idea of “god” (see, for example, “Sunday Morning”) as an old habit of thinking that has lost meaning. But in a similar sense science has removed everything personal, according to Schrödinger. Implicit in Schrödinger’s words is the need to replace the existing habits of mind, whether of “god” in the old sense, or of the classical science that Schrödinger, Bohr, Heisenberg, and others have seriously upset. Going a step beyond Stevens, Schrödinger in this passage assumes that the experience of God is real or actual; Stevens never explicitly assumes or depicts the reality of this sort of experience.

Schrödinger is however not very far beyond Stevens when he indicates, in contradistinction to classical scientific belief, that the idea “God is spirit” has some kind of validity. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” Stevens says:

the imagination gives to everything that it touches a peculiarity, and it seems to me that the peculiarity of the imagination is nobility, of which there are many degrees. This inherent nobility is the natural source of another, which our extremely head-strong generation regards as false and decadent. I mean that nobility which is our spiritual height and depth. . . . As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. (*NA* 33–34)

“Vibrations, movements, changes” refers to an earlier quotation from Joad, who said, “Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal’ ” (*NA* 25). Stevens’ words are related to Schrödinger’s not only with reference to the implications of modern physics, but also through the concepts embodied in the words “spiritual” and “nobility.” “Nobility,” in this context, is defined as “our

spiritual height and depth," and cannot "exist" in the space-time world of classical science since it is not an object but a subjective experience. In this way Stevens' cultural criticism parallels Schrödinger's criticism of a philosophy that excludes the personal. The classical habit of thought, in other words, excludes the ethical and moral as well as, probably, the aesthetic or poetic.⁵ This is a way of saying, on the parts of both writers, that classical science excludes a significant aspect of what is real.

Stevens is almost but not quite in the range of Schrödinger's real "experience" of God. Schrödinger's assertion of a real contemplative experience is beyond the accepted conclusions of most quantum physicists, as well, including most of those who press the discussion of "what is real" to the apparent limits of the physical world. But the main point is that Stevens' ideas about the relation of poetry to culture and society in general, concerning particularly the relation of mind to matter, spring in part from, and have implications parallel to, contemporary philosophical ideas arising from modern physics. In both cases, there is considerable discussion of how the individual mind relates to and helps form reality. These ideas continue to be developed after Stevens' death in 1955 and the publication of *Mind and Matter* in 1958.

III. Stevens and Bohm

David Bohm, roughly a generation younger than Stevens and Schrödinger, developed the scientific and later philosophical discussion in two ways. He generated a mathematically coherent way of interpreting the wave-particle problem, and he interpreted his findings to mean that the entire universe is not a classical concatenation of many parts, but a single entity in perpetual flux, an idea whose details have important parallels in Stevens' thinking.

Bohm's summary of quantum theory's main findings includes the points that 1) subatomic particles paradoxically exhibit the properties of both waves and individual particles, depending on what kind of measurement is chosen to detect them, and 2) subatomic particles seem to be connected non-locally, that is, they seem to understand or communicate or respond to each other instantaneously (without lapse of time) over even great distances (*Unfolding Meaning* 6–7).

To say that subatomic activity—or specifically, light—has a dual wave-particle nature means simply that the activity of photons can be represented by mathematical equations that describe the behavior of waves, on the one hand, or by equations that describe the behavior of individual particles, on the other, but not both at once. Bohm proposed a solution to this problem by developing mathematical equations showing that there are real particles that are influenced by a real wave (sometimes called a "pilot wave") acting at the subatomic level. Bohm calls the interaction

between the wave, which is the influencing factor, and the particle, which is influenced, the “quantum potential.” The quantum potential is active everywhere at all times, and accounts for the nonlocality of subatomic activity.

All this suggested to Bohm, by intricate mathematical reasoning, that the wave-particle nature of reality is another way of describing a universe that is constantly in flux, an idea not far from Heraclitus. In fact, by the 1970s, Bohm would write: “Not only is everything changing, but all *is* flux” (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order* 48). This is a development of the idea Stevens quotes from Joad in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”: “‘Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer’ ” (NA 25). Bohm here tacitly answers Joad’s question by picking up the idea that subatomic particles constantly converge into knots of material reality, like vortices in a stream of water, and saying it is the flux itself that vibrates, moves, changes.

The next question might be: what is the flux? And one of Bohm’s answers would be: it is process. The quantum potential, or the influence of the wave on the particles, is like a stream in which vortices constantly appear and disappear. Since the entire universe seems to be composed of this flowing movement, in Bohm’s model mind and matter are also generated in this way. “[A]ny describable event, object, entity, etc., is an abstraction from an unknown and undefinable totality of flowing movement,” Bohm says. Mind and matter, as well as knowledge itself, are examples of those abstractions. The ground even of intelligence, then, is not physical, but in the unknown flux (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order* 49, 52). This is a way of saying that everything of which we are conscious is a seeming.

In this picture, consciousness also is an abstraction, but with the special disposition that it is the awareness of meaning. The human mind is like a vortex of energy and matter that perceives meaning. Since the wave-particle nature of reality implies interactions between wave and particle, the mind is similarly an interaction with the world at large. The mind has the capacity to act on the world, as the wave acts on particles. The mind’s activity is, according to Bohm, the creation of order.

Put another way, the mind is an “explicate” example of the quantum potential in action. For Bohm, any vortex (such as a mind, for example) is a result of a potential that is enfolded, or “implicate,” in the flux, and on coming into a visible or intelligible form, that vortex is said to unfold, or become explicate, the way a metaphor (for another example) can be unfolded for its meaning. Because whatever is unfolded is an abstraction from the flux, the result of this logic is that “everything, including ourselves, is a generalized kind of meaning” (*Unfolding Meaning* 86), for which we might

also use the less slippery (if still abstract) word "order." The mind, then, has the capacity to make order by unfolding meaning. What Stevens says of this, Bohm might, as well: "Everything tends to become real; or everything moves in the direction of reality" (*OP* 191). Everything, that is, is unfolding.

By this point it must be clear how Bohm's ideas parallel the ideas basic to Stevens' poetry. In the "Adagia" Stevens says, "The reason is a part of nature and is controlled by it" (*OP* 196), expressing in the poetic idiom the idea that "the mathematical calculus of the quantum theory gives a statistical relationship between outgoing and incoming waves" (*Quantum Implications* 34). The "reason," being an abstraction from the flux, is controlled by "nature," being, in this sense, the flux itself; reason responds to nature as a particle does to the pilot wave, and also acts on nature, like a wave. Further, "the very form of the connection between particles depends on the wave function for the state of the whole" (37). For Stevens, in a parallel sense, "In the world of words, the imagination is one of the forces of nature" (*OP* 196). The imagination is an ordering force, like the force represented in the wave function. Words themselves are unfoldments of implicate sensibilities: nature is to the imagination as the poetic imagination is to words.

In "The Idea of Order at Key West," to return to an example already invoked, the sea that we think of as grinding and gasping without form or even reality, in Stevens' terms, is like a particle—it is "merely a place by which she walked to sing" (*CP* 129). The singer's imagination is like the pilot wave interacting with the particle, and the result is the song, which is an unfolding of the meaning, or (to use the figure above) a vortex: reality. For the observers in the poem, the entire situation is reordered, transformed: "the glassy lights . . . / Mastered the night and portioned out the sea, / Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles, / Arranging, deepening, enchanting night" (*CP* 130). The quantum potential works not only on the singer and the sea, but non-locally and instantaneously on the observers, as well, simultaneously and for all practical purposes (since it continues after they "turned / Toward the town") eternally. The making of song or poetry is the making of meaning, which is reality; it is the unfolding and making of reality.

An even better example is Stevens' "Description without Place," which Frank Kermode calls "an important 'doctrine' poem" (*Wallace Stevens* 99, 120). The parallel between Stevens' poetic theory and modern physics' philosophic theory seems contained almost whole in the first stanza:

It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
As the sun is something seeming and it is. (*CP* 339)

"It is" immediately gives the poem an ontological cast tantamount to a proposition about reality. The word "possible" implies potential, suggesting in the context of this discussion a scientific potential, the "quantum potential."⁶ Then we hear that the possibility is that "to seem" is "to be." This accords nearly exactly with the quantum physical finding that all matter and (in Bohm's terms) all mind is an abstraction or an appearance or configuration of energy, vibrations, movement. The inclusion of the sun introduces the poetic element, a simile for the identity of seeming and being, or appearance and reality.

In the next stanza, straightforwardly, "What [the sun] seems / It is and in such seeming all things are." The phrase "all things are" recalls the recurrent Stevens phrase "things as they are" (see, for example, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"), and introduces the same sense of unity to reality that Bohm's ideas suggest when he says everything is an abstraction from a single flux. A few lines down, "It was a queen that made it seem," suggesting a human figure that participates directly in the seeming, like the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West," and contributes order to the whole. She does this, furthermore, "By the illustrious nothing of her name," which is to say, by naming with word or words: words become a force of nature, or in Bohm's terms, the wave action of the quantum potential. "This green queen" ("green" suggesting she is a part of nature, not separate) "In the seeming of the summer of her sun / By her own seeming made the summer change." Her presence, in other words, is interlocked with the natural, unordered scene, and simply by her participation there, like the observer of an experiment, she influences and gives an order to "a seeming" that becomes in her presence "the sun."

Canto II begins, "Such seemings are the actual ones," implying the reality of the world as it seems. The vortices in a stream, to use Bohm's metaphor, are real things, even though they are only a configuration of water and its flowing movement. "[T]he way / Things look each day" is the actual reality. A few lines later we are introduced to Stevens' idea of "the major mind," a phrase representing the preeminent ordering force of the human imagination. In this poem, the idea is expanded from the personal mind (of, for example, here, an individual woman, "the queen") to an entire era: "An age is a manner collected from a queen." The queen becomes a figure of the imagination of an age, implying in the context of this discussion that an age, or perhaps a culture, has an imagination of itself and its own time and surroundings, as does an individual:

An age is green or red. An age believes
Or it denies. An age is solitude
Or a barricade against the singular man

By the incalculably plural. Hence
Its identity is merely a thing that seems. . . . (CP 339–40)

Although it is “merely” a thing that seems, we already understand that seeming is the real; and the reality of the modern age, which Stevens characterizes in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and other essays, is of denial or “decreation,” where things seem to be coming apart (NA 174–75). The singular man, who can be a “whole man” (see *OP* 284–88), can be barricaded or imprisoned by a plurality, or a concatenation of fragments. In Stevens as in Bohm, the modern age pressures the individual with bombardments of scattered information, ideas, and events that spring from an imagination of the world as a mechanism of parts. The belief of the age is the character of the age.

Canto III of “Description without Place” specifies some of the “potential seemings” of or for individuals. They are “on the youngest poet’s page, / Or in the dark musician.”

There are potential seemings turbulent
In the death of a soldier, like the utmost will,

The more than human commonplace of blood,
The breath that gushes upward and is gone. . . .
(CP 340–41)

These stanzas specify common, terrible images in the difficult period of the world wars, and evoke a sense of death. Then, hopefully, “There might be, too, a change immenser than / A poet’s metaphors in which being would / Come true, a point in the fire of music where / Dazzle yields to a clarity.” At this point,

observing is completing and we are content
In a world that shrinks to an immediate whole. . . .
(CP 341)

Observing is completing in the quantum experiment, where von Neumann maintained that nothing was real until it was measured and observed. This brings the poem back from a characterization of an entire culture to the creative capacity of the individual. The “content[ment]” is an uneasy “shrink[ing],” recalling the tentativeness of the “times of inherent excellence” in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” The world is an “immediate whole” here, but the word “shrinks,” instead of, perhaps, “enlarges,” indicates again Stevens’ capacity to come to the edge of the sense of a unifying whole but never actually enter or express it.

Following the images of death, the difficulty of the individual human mind creating reality in life becomes a difficulty of what life and creation

mean when counterpoised, as they inevitably must be, against the possibility of death and destruction.

There might be in the curling-out of spring
A purple-leaping element that forth

Would froth the whole heaven with its seeming-so,
The intentions of a mind as yet unknown,

The spirit of one dwelling in a seed,
Itself that seed's ripe, unpredictable fruit. (*CP* 341)

In these lines the "curling-out of spring" is a metaphor for the creative force. The life-giving potential of that force could generate all of heaven, or all of spiritual reality: it contains heaven, or the spirit, the way a seed contains a fruit and, further, the way the fruit contains its own seed. The creative force, paralleling the human imagination, is the unfoldments of nature out of the flux, and the image of seed and fruit is a sort of Emersonian example of Bohm's sense of the implicate potential of, for example, a seed to become the explicate form of a fruit. The potential of the fruit is enfolded in the seed and similarly, in a kind of perpetual movement from one to the other, the potential of the seed is enfolded inside the explicate physical fruit. Bohm calls this constant movement of enfoldment and unfoldment the "holomovement." Stevens evokes the entire sensibility in these lines, moving from the unfoldments of an age (in the individual thinkers and their deaths), to their enfolded imaginative potentials for spirit and heaven (which seems to be a figure of, on the one hand, the imagination and, on the other, eternity or perpetuation), to the precise metaphor of the most recognizable form of holomovement, fruit and seed.

The potentials for human imagining are then particularized in examples of exceptionally forceful imaginations: Calvin, Anne of England, and Pablo Neruda, and then by contrast, Nietzsche and Lenin. In canto IV Nietzsche (for whom Stevens professes no great admiration; see his letter to Henry Church in 1942 [L 431–32]) is represented as "gildering the pool," and Lenin is represented as slouching, disturbing swans and wearing decadent clothes. The last image of the section is of Lenin thinking dreamily of "apocalyptic legions" of the future. Although here "The distances of space and time / Were one" (*CP* 342–43), corresponding exactly to Einstein's unification of space and time in relativity theory, Lenin seems unable to exist or imagine reality in the present. His seemings, in other words, are detached and almost fanciful. Nietzsche and Lenin become, here, figures of the "drift of incidents" (*NA* 19) or trends rather than part of the complex of ideas that help construct a culture in which people can live their lives better. Neither figure contributes anything enduring or truly forceful to the complex of culture, but they gilder lakes and ruffle swans, not even

keeping up imaginatively with powerful trends of thought such as modern science.

Canto V begins:

If seeming is description without place,
The spirit's universe, then a summer's day,

Even the seeming of a summer's day,
Is description without place. It is a sense

To which we refer experience. . . . (CP 343)

"[D]escription without place" indicates the application of words, as earlier the queen's name, to that which as yet has no form or reality because it as yet has no participant, or spirit. The summer's day, which we would in objective classical science take for reality itself, is a seeming, or is literally placeless (cf. Schrödinger's description of the conscious mind), and exists only in its description. It is a figure that we imagine or visualize as a way of ordering what we sense or seem to experience. This is very convoluted language, and it seems to parallel Neils Bohr's contention that there is no reality that can be talked about, but only measurements. One of Bohr's principal philosophical issues is that the language of classical science (which was and still is, in a manner of speaking, the popular intellectual language) is inadequate to describe or create an accurate picture of what quantum mechanics describes through statistics. To Bohr there is no deep reality, only descriptions of statistical measurements. They are descriptions without place.

If the summer's day is a description without place, the description has some describable origin: "Description is / Composed of a sight indifferent to the eye. / It is an expectation, a desire, / . . . A little different from reality: / The difference that we make in what we see" (CP 343-44). Description is composed, in other words, of the poetic sensibility, the blessed rage for order in action. It is the activity or process of the personal self or mind: all is process.

The problem of time returns, as now "The future is description without place." Referring to stars and planets, ancient figures of the passage of time, the poem seizes the folding and unfolding suggested earlier by saying the future is "a wizened starlight growing young" (CP 344), implying a backward movement in forward-moving time. The parallel to this in modern astronomy is that ancient, "wizened" light generated by stars thousands and millions of years ago constitutes our present (and future) experience of them. "[D]escription without place" refers not only to space, then, but also to time: what we see exists in Einstein's unified space-time continuum, and whatever seems, wherever and whenever it seems, is.

Thus, in canto VI, "Description" (which seems) "is revelation." "It is an artificial thing that exists, / In its own seeming, plainly visible, / Yet not too closely the double of our lives." The speaker of the poem retreats from asserting an absolute unity between the description and the self, and (therefore) space-time. The situation is "Intenser than any actual life could be," but there is still a sense of an observation, of a distinction: even though it is clear from the evidence that an experimenter participates in and influences the experiment, the idea of complementarity arises from the observation that the elements of the experiment are distinct, and the use of a word such as "influences" similarly implies separation, "not too closely the double of our lives" (*CP* 344)—not identical.

The "artificial thing that exists" is, appositively, "A text we should be born that we might read, / More explicit than the experience of sun." The word "text" unveils another sense of description, revealing whole bodies of words that unfold specifically to a "canon central in itself, / The thesis of plentifullest John." John is the giver of revelation, from the first line of the section, and the idea of text and word now takes on religious significance, where the word or logos or spirit is made flesh. The description, the word itself, is the spirit, or the reality, or ultimately, the seeming where we live, or exist.

Thus the theory of description matters most.
It is the theory of the word for those

For whom the word is the making of the world.

"Word" now is a figure of creativity in a religious sense and also in a poetic sense; they seem interchangeable here. Moving from Einstein's unified distances of space and time to poetic description to religious description, the world becomes no place at all, but a description, or perhaps, a worldview. To paraphrase Bohm, the world responds in accordance with the description, or theory, with which it is approached.

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self. (*CP* 345)

This described, unsolid world is the quantum world of vibrations, energy, flux; it is the world of Christian spirit; it is the world of an ordinary evening in New Haven.

In the last few stanzas, literal places and times are evoked as a testament, perhaps, to the solidity of the unsolid world. "The hard hidalgo / Lives in the mountainous character of his speech; / And in that mountainous mirror Spain acquires / The knowledge of Spain." Similarly, what is said of the past and future is a description without place, and it unfolds to a worldview or a generalized sense of reality, as suggested in the early

sections where an age is green or red. At the end, the generalized future must

Be alive with its own seemings, seeming to be
Like rubies reddened by rubies reddening. (CP 345–46)

The “red” of the earlier section is now much more precise, solidified in rubies, representing a particular age, perhaps, with particular descriptions, or theories of poetry. In this final image, the rubies enfold and unfold their own reddenings, implying—or making explicate—the holomovement between imagination (or in this context, consciousness) and the physical world.

“Description without Place” is the poetic expression of the modern sense that the world is composed by the mind. There is no “place” at all (cf. Schrödinger) except as it is described or imagined, in the same sense that there is no quantum “event”—or reality—until it is measured. The problem of reality for Stevens, as for Bohr, Schrödinger, and Bohm, is the problem of describing, and therefore giving reality and meaning to, the interior experience of “things as they are.” “Man’s truth,” Stevens says in “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” might well be “the final resolution of everything” (NA 175). It is not just a poetic truth, or a scientific truth, or a social truth, but a truth of the whole of human experience. It relies on the human imagination to unfold its reality in description.

The point here is not that Stevens was aware of Bohm’s ideas; he could not have been, since they were not articulated in any detail until long after Stevens’ death. The point is that the implications of Stevens’ poetry and of Bohm’s ideas are parallel, and that the current of thought develops along remarkably similar lines in different disciplines. It is an instance of the convergence of concurrent cultural ideas, and, further, it is probably an example of the kind of wholeness Bohm posits regarding the universe generally and the interrelated parts particularly, including relationships between human beings.

Ultimately Bohm became concerned with the idea that the classical scientific world view is destructive rather than constructive. It emphasizes analysis and parts, which is an act of “fragmentation,” and in so doing encourages all those who subscribe to it (which, four hundred years after Descartes, is nearly everyone in Western culture) to view the world in a fragmented way. Examples that this has happened are abundant, and we need only return to Stevens’ definition of “the pressure of reality” (NA 16) to get a sense of things fragmented and out of control. Bohm’s point is that the theory or approach creates the situation; his explicit words might have been written by Stevens in a prosaic moment: “nature will respond in accordance with the theory with which it is approached” (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order* 6).

In parallel but inversely hopeful passages from “Effects of Analogy,” Stevens says almost the same thing of poetry: one theory of poetry “relates to the imagination as a power within [the poet] to have such insights into reality as will make it possible for him to be sufficient as a poet in the very center of consciousness” (NA 115), and subsequently, men’s “words have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence” (NA 130). For both Bohm and Stevens, the theory articulated—scientific or poetic—influences the world.

In both lexicons, the articulated theory results in “order,” particularly, in this case, generalized kinds of order. Although Stevens is generally taken to be a very personal, self-contained poet, there remains nonetheless his assertion in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” that the role of the poet is “to help people to live their lives.” Similarly, Bohm expresses a profound concern about the fragmenting effects of science and proposes a scientific worldview that proceeds from the idea that the universe is whole, rather than a concatenation of parts.⁷ This idea has been taken up by other physicists as well, notably Henry Stapp and Fritjof Capra.⁸ Like Bohr and Heisenberg, Bohm takes a particular interest in the role of language in this re-visioning, and he suggests a deliberate change from an object-oriented grammar to a verb-oriented grammar, which he calls the “rheomode.”⁹

In a broad sense this converges again with Stevens’ insistence on poetry as the central human activity. Order comes through words, if it comes at all. Bohm calls for a new expression and therefore understanding of the parameters and possibilities of science that will transform culture from fragmentation to wholeness.¹⁰ Stevens points out that we have a “deepening need” for our thoughts and feelings to be expressed accurately and imaginatively. In both instances, the call is for creative intelligence to bring its potential to bear on the world through language. Again, Bohm says in 1980 what Stevens might have said earlier: “thought with totality as its content must be considered as an art form, like poetry, whose function is primarily to give rise to a new perception, rather than to communicate reflective knowledge of ‘how everything is’ ” (*Wholeness and the Implicate Order* 63). The ideas of science and the ideas of poetry coincide intimately here: the human mind creates reality.

IV. Stevens, Science, and Unity

There is in Stevens, however, the persistent sense, as in much modern poetry, that language is ultimately inadequate to accomplish any final resolution or establish a final order of reality. The speaker of “The Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour” is content with “being there together” (CP 524), short of having achieved a total unity, or sense of unity, implying that language, powerful as it is, does not eliminate the self’s sense of

separation and does not achieve or create an actual, final, experienced unity. Where Bohm hopes for an imaginative, creative expression of wholeness that will transform reality on a social level, Stevens pushes into a further range so personal that the efficacy of words breaks down, and a suggestion of the mystical appears.

The range is, in fact, just short of Schrödinger's reference to the reality of the experience of God. Stevens, as we have seen in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," eventually applies the word "spirit," although he immediately withdraws it again to return to his rationally safer word "nobility." In a more explicit treatment in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," he retreats in the same way. Mentioning M. Brémond, who "made it clear that, in his opinion, one writes poetry to find God" (*OP* 227), Stevens immediately shifts the ground of the discussion from "God" to "meaning in poetry" (something Bohm might also have done). He goes on to say:

All mystics approach God through the irrational. Pure poetry is both mystical and irrational. If we descend a little from this height and apply the looser and broader definition of pure poetry, it is possible to say that, while it can lie in the temperament of very few of us to write poetry in order to find God, it is probably the purpose of each of us to write poetry to find the good which, in the Platonic sense, is synonymous with God. One writes poetry, then, in order to approach the good in what is harmonious and orderly. . . . Because most of us are incapable of sharing the experiences of M. Brémond, we have to be content with less. (*OP* 227–28)

Stevens comes up to and suggests a potential mystical, or contemplative, experience, but unlike Schrödinger, he "descend[s] from this height," an example of his participation in the classical rationalist trends of his era. Paradoxically, it is the eminent scientist who asserts the reality of mystical experience.

The difficulty, perhaps, lies at least partly in Stevens' primary reliance on language to give form or ultimate unfoldment to poetic sensibility. The contemplative experience, W. T. Stace and Evelyn Underhill tell us (in accord with Schrödinger's remark), is universally characterized by contemplatives as "ineffable."¹¹ Stevens reaches neither a state of ineffability nor the unifying vision of reality that Stace says is the primary and intensest character of an authentic mystical experience (*Mysticism and Philosophy* 79). In the final version, being there together, still aware of separation, is enough.

As evidenced in his remarks about Brémond, however, Stevens does not discard the idea of a final resolution in contemplative terms. The pastoral nun declares that "poetry and apotheosis are one" (*CP* 378), and in "Notes

toward a Supreme Fiction" there are several moments of "awakening" (as pointed out above). In section VI of "It Must Give Pleasure," the Canon Aspirin comes up to the edge of the contemplative experience:

When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep
And normal things had yawned themselves away,
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.
Thereon the learning of the man conceived
Once more night's pale illuminations, gold

Beneath, far underneath, the surface of
His eye and audible in the mountain of
His ear, the very material of his mind.

So that he was the ascending wings he saw
And moved on them in orbits' outer stars
.....

The nothingness was a nakedness, a point

Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.
He had to choose. . . .
.....

He chose to include the things
That in each other are included, the whole,
The complicate, the amassing harmony. (*CP* 402-03)

Here the drift of incidents yawns itself away, and the Canon experiences a nothingness that is tantamount to a place without description, ineffable in the sense that it is no longer factual. He seems to encounter "the very material of his mind," which in Bohm's terms would be equivalent to reality itself. This is a nothingness, and the phrase is repeated, this time stressing not the factual, but thoughts—"thought could not progress as thought." The Canon chooses to include "the things / That in each other are included," like seeds enfolded in fruits. These are "the whole, / The complicate, the amassing harmony." The word "complicate" rings here with Bohm's words "implicate" and "explicate." The Canon Aspirin is engaged in what is very nearly a mystical experience of the universal, ineffable nothingness of traditional mystics, an experience traditionally characterized by a sense of unity, wholeness, "amassing harmony." It is almost a final contemplative resolution, but not quite: it is not the speaker of the poem, and of nearly all of Stevens' most powerful poems, who experiences this, but a character in the poem. Stevens himself, insofar as

we can take him to be the speaker of his poems, is outside the experience. It is not his, but only described by him, in the sense he probably intends when he says “most of us are incapable of sharing the experience of M. Brémond.” Words fail the Canon when he comes up against the nothingness of his own mind and reality, but the speaker of the poem still speaks, however distantly.

Further, Stevens recognizes and characterizes the experience in both “Effects of Analogy” and “The Relations between Poetry and Painting.” In “Effects of Analogy” he distinguishes between two theories of poetry: “The adherents of imagination are mystics to begin with and pass from one mysticism to another. The adherents of the central are also mystics to begin with. But all their desire and all their ambition is to press away from mysticism toward the ultimate good sense which we term civilization” (NA 116). Schrödinger, in creating a sense of reality in which mind and matter are unified, passes from a mysticism of unity to another mysticism where God is apprehensible. This is a way of saying that Schrödinger’s theory of reality, based on quantum physics, is a theory of poetry. Bohm, not using mystical terms but implying mystical sensibilities in saying, for example, that “all is flux” and that creativity “is ultimately the action of the *infinite* in the sphere of the finite” (*Unfolding Meaning* 99), also expresses a mysticism, but presses toward the good sense derived from this mystic sensibility—that things are unified not fragmented—toward an improvement in civilization. Bohm’s theory of reality, too, is a theory of poetry in Stevens’ terms.

Stevens himself seems to fall somewhere in between. Toward the end of “The Relations between Poetry and Painting,” the last and latest essay in *The Necessary Angel*, he seems to delineate his most extreme sense of the mystical aspect of his poetry:

The theory of poetry, that is to say, the total of the theories of poetry, often seems to become in time a mystical theology or, more simply, a mystique. The reason for this must by now be clear. The reason is the same reason why the pictures in a museum of modern art often seem to become in time a mystical aesthetic, a prodigious search of appearance, as if to find a way of saying and of establishing that all things, whether below or above appearance, are one and that it is only through reality, in which they are reflected or, it may be, joined together, that we can reach them. (NA 173–74)

This passage seems to summarize Stevens’ sense that the poetic and the mystical are very nearly identical, and it is couched in the central figure of “all things being one,” a point common to contemplative philosophy and some interpretations of twentieth-century physics. Stevens recognizes

that appearance, at the macroscopic level of human events or the microscopic level of quantum events, is all there is to the exterior world, and that reality inheres in that place or moment where they are joined together: this is the "irrational element in poetry" (OP 224). Reality is the mind creating order of appearances. This is a contemplative idea but not, in Stevens' case, derived from a contemplative experience. He recognizes the unity of things in the same sense as Schrödinger and Bohm, and he writes from a meditative, still separate rather than direct, experience of it.

This is a way of saying that Stevens' ideas about poetry and creativity run in the same current with quantum physics, contemplative philosophy, and other arts. In keeping with the social and political concerns of his age, the ideas are played out not only along the lines David Bohm will develop later in the 1970s and 1980s, but in the relationship between mystical theology and social action as well. This is evidenced in Stevens' high regard for Simone Weil.¹² Weil's spiritual experiences and conversion to Christianity culminated finally in her death during a fast in protest of the Second World War. Stevens invokes an idea of hers, alluded to previously here, a few lines after the passage given above:

Conceding that this [remarking on Cézanne and Klee] sounds a bit like sacerdotal jargon, that is not too much to allow to those who have helped to create a new reality, a modern reality, since what has been created is nothing less.

This reality is, also, the momentous world of poetry. . . . Simone Weil in *La Pesanteur et La Grâce* has a chapter on what she calls decreation. 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. The greatest truth we could hope to discover, in whatever field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything. (NA 174-75)

Simone Weil becomes a figure of rational intelligence, of spiritual height, of social conscience and action, of creativity in formulating the poetic idea of creation and decreation, and ultimately of mystical awareness. Moreover, the entire passage recalls the earlier passages from "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" concerning the drift of events, the pressure of reality, and the intensely personal assertion that a poet's role is to help people live their lives. In that passage, Stevens' words "an absence of any authority except force" (NA 17) gain further clarity, as they recognizably reflect Weil's ideas about the dehumanizing use of force, which are outlined in her essay "The Iliad or, The Poem of Force."

In the most real, or poetic, sense, Simone Weil is here the figure of that whole modern reality. Her poetic idea, and by implication the events of her own life, reflect “the momentous world of poetry” that is always in the process of establishing that all things are one. In the “Adagia” this sensibility is expressed as: “The mind that in heaven created the earth and the mind that on earth created heaven were, as it happened, one” (OP 201). The spiritual world is bound up inseparably with the material world, an idea central to Weil’s social and contemplative thought.

This is a way of saying that Wallace Stevens, along with Bohm, Schrödinger, Wolfgang Pauli, and others, was quintessentially modern; not by vogue or superficial trend, but in the deepest layers of his thinking and feeling about the universe he was in accord with the dominant and most radical shaping of modern culture and thought, which was (is) scientific. That strand of modernism leads not to purely social-political meaning, nor to nihilism, but to a classic modern uncertainty sprung from the willingness to pursue any promising proposition through to its final implication. Stevens and Schrödinger suggest, in other words, that the modern ethos is not as absolutely materialistic as we think. Material science seems to have come to a stop at its analysis of physical facts, but Stevens and some physicists point toward a contemplative interpretation of the facts and recreate a way of speaking of God without recourse to the stagnant religious myths of the premodern culture.

The phrase “theory of poetry” unfolds in this context as a blanket term for the modern idea that man’s truth is the final resolution: human participation in, rather than objective observation of, the universe is a scientific, aesthetic, and contemplative idea, and has taken root and grown in the complex of ideas current in modern Western culture. In the twentieth century, the “beyond” is here and now, and one implication of this is that people’s lives are influenced by the whole complex of forceful imaginations in poetry, science, mysticism, politics, and so on. Werner Heisenberg suggests:

The spirit of a time is probably a fact as objective as any fact in natural science, and this spirit brings out certain features of the world which are even independent of time, are in this sense eternal. The artist tries by his work to make these features understandable. . . . [T]he two processes, that of science and that of art, are not very different. Both science and art form in the course of the centuries a human language by which we can speak about the more remote parts of reality. . . . (*Physics and Philosophy* 109)

Reality is the human mind ordering, describing perceptions, whether we think of this as a poetic idea or as a scientific idea:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade. (CP 489)

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Notes

¹ Ezra Pound's use of the words *paideuma* and *zeitgeist* helpfully corresponds to Stevens' sense that there are cultural influences of greater and lesser importance to the individual. By *paideuma* Pound meant "the tangle or complex of inrooted ideas of any period," and by *zeitgeist* "the atmospheres, the tints of mental air and the idées reçues, the notions that a great mass of people still hold or half hold from habit, from waning custom" (*Guide to Kulchur* 57–58). *Paideuma* indicates the constructive part of the whole, and *zeitgeist* relates ideas and vogues of thought to the "drift of incidents."

² See Stapp's summary in his "Consciousness and Values in the Quantum Universe."

³ On this criticism of classical science see especially Capra's (1988) and Stapp's (1985) articles. This topic recurs frequently in David Bohm's writings.

⁴ Compare Schrödinger's words with these of Stevens, from "Less and Less Human, O Savage Spirit":

If there must be a god in the house, let him be one
That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness,
A vermilioned nothingness, any stick of the mass
Of which we are too distantly a part. (CP 328)

See also Arthur Clements' discussion of contemplative poetry and modern science, with particular reference to Schrödinger's contemplative writings, in *Poetry of Contemplation*, Chapter 5, esp. 225–36.

⁵ Stevens denies in this essay the poet's moral role, but his assertion that the poet helps people live their lives is surely a broadly moral concept.

⁶ To be clear, Stevens did not consciously imply this idea because the term did not exist in Bohm's lexicon until a few years after Stevens' death, not to mention at the time this poem was written in the 1930s.

⁷ See his book with F. David Peat, *Science, Order and Creativity* for an extended discussion of this.

⁸ See especially Capra's *Tao of Physics*, *The Turning Point*, and his summarizing essay, "The Role of Physics in the Current Change of Paradigm."

⁹ See *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, Chapter 2.

¹⁰ See, again, *Science, Order and Creativity*.

¹¹ See Stace and Underhill for analyses of the contemplative experience, and see Clements' *Poetry of Contemplation* for an extended discussion of how these analyses can be applied to poetry. Clements' discussion of the relation of modern poetry, modern physics, and contemplative experience is also germane here.

¹² *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923–1955*, 204.

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'As at a Theatre': Wallace Stevens' Dramatistic Poetry

MAUREEN KRAVEC

There is a perfect rout of characters in every man—and every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new + old. But an actor and his trunk are two different things.

—Wallace Stevens, from his journal

WALLACE STEVENS FIRST stepped into the modernist arena, not as a poet but as an avant-garde playwright. Yet we tend to accept Hugh Kenner's assessment that Stevens is the quintessentially undramatic poet: "in Stevens' world, there are no actions and no speeches, merely ways of looking at things," and nothing for mimesis to imitate except "old poems" and "the movements of the mind transposing and reconstituting what is seen" (78). If Stevens failed as a dramatic, narrative poet, though, his failure is one of the greatest ironies of modernism. Thespian metaphors appear throughout his works.¹ Together with other playwriting techniques and Stevens' own comments about drama and dramatic poetry, they suggest he was attempting to forge a new genre fusing lyric and dramatic, Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Indeed, several critics have discovered dramatic elements in the poems, including mask and masque, dramatic monologue (or, in Margaret Dickie's view, "inverted dramatic monologue"), dramatic sound devices, and staging directions.²

Stevens did not create his ideas in an intellectual vacuum but rather within a continuum of developing dramatistic theory that begins (at least as far as Stevens is concerned) with Shakespeare, evolves through Dryden, Wordsworth, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, and finds modern expression in the socially conscious dramatistic criticism of George Santayana, Kenneth Burke, sociologist Erving Goffman and his followers, and, recently, in Charles Altieri. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke sets forth a dramatistic theory of rhetoric. Goffman (quoting Stevens' mentor George Santayana in his frontispiece) carries the concept into sociology. Stated simply, dramatistic (sometimes called "dramaturgical") criticism offers "the analytic perspective that social life resembles theater or, more accurately, drama" (Young 9). According to Goffman, in both the world of the theater and the

“stage” of everyday interpersonal interaction, “Anglo-American culture” values “real, sincere, or honest performance.” “Real” performances are “an unintentional product of the individual’s unself-conscious response to the facts in his situation. . . . [T]here are many individuals who sincerely believe that the definition of the situation they habitually project is the real reality” (Goffman 70). Even as a young man, Stevens saw life within a dramatic framework. In 1906, he wrote the journal entry comparing each man to an actor with his trunk. He could have gleaned this concept from Shakespeare (“All the world’s a stage,”) or from Wordsworth, who describes how

with new joy and pride
 The little Actor cons another part;
 Filling from time to time his “humorous stage”
 With all the Persons, down to palsied Age,
 That Life brings with her in her equipage;
 As if his whole vocation
 Were endless imitation.
 (“Ode: Intimations of Immortality”)

Later, in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” the male-Cinderella figure rides, perhaps like Stevens on his journeys for the Hartford Insurance Company, “over Connecticut / In a glass coach” fearing the shadow of his Wordsworthian “equipage” (CP 94). By now the poet surely had experienced firsthand the complications involved in “conning” conflicting parts in the drama of everyday life. Furthermore, Stevens’ theorizing progressed far beyond the merely personal. By the time he wrote “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” he had expanded his vision to assert a social dimension of drama. Although one hesitates to oversimplify, Stevens’ development tends to follow the same trajectory as Shakespeare’s: from an early phase of clever, parodic comedy through a middle tragic period to a final one of philosophical comedy. The choice of Peter Quince and Ariel, the genii who preside at the beginning and end of his career, reveals much about his growing confidence in his craft.

Stevens made his mark as a dramatist near the end of World War I, an era of great literary and political change. His first play, *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, won first prize in a field of about eighty one-act plays (Brazeau 11 n), and Harriet Monroe lionized him, “and there, in Wallace Stevens’ play, was the poetic drama” (34). In all, Stevens wrote three stage dramas, including *Carlos among the Candles* and the delightfully bizarre *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*; the latter’s botched staging marked the end of his thespian career. A. Walton Litz traces Stevens’ brief playwriting career in *Introspective Voyager*, recognizing diverse influences: Yeats, the commedia del arte, Japanese Noh theater, and American playwrights in Stevens’ circle, Alfred

Kreymborg and Charles and Louise Eliot Norton.³ Litz follows through Stevens' letters his increasing unease with the genre as his plays were staged and reviewed. The Wisconsin Players, who performed *Carlos among the Candles* and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, failed to render the desired stage effects. Crestfallen, Stevens wrote Harriet Monroe about the critics' responses to *Carlos among the Candles*:

They were justified—would have been in saying almost anything. One is tempted to put the blame on the performance. But the important thing is to learn something. After raving about the performance, the possibility remains that there was little or nothing to perform . . . A theatre without action or characters ought to be within the range of human interests. Not as a new thing—a source of new sensations, purposely, only; but naturally, normally. Why not? But no, as we say: the theatre is a definite thing; a play has a form and requirements, like a sonnet—there must be passion, development and so on. (L 203)

The negative reviews eerily presage Kenner's critique. Although Stevens goes on to blame the amateurish Wisconsin Players for botching the staging of this highly abstract play, he astutely ascribes some of the problems to a discrepancy between the sort of theater he is trying to create and audiences' and critics' conservative expectations of "form and requirements."

In America, the rush toward realism soon trampled the early flowers of poetic drama; from the perspective of history, Stevens had realistically assessed his prospects of creating a new form of drama. Yet in 1935 he wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer, "I think it quite likely that I should have been more interested in the theatre if those two experiments [*Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* and *Carlos among the Candles*] had not given me the horrors" (L 291). Litz traces in the three plays techniques, images, and themes that preoccupied Stevens throughout his life: the vivid color symbolism in all three; the *orientalisme*, the juxtaposition of action and detached philosophical commentary in *Three Travelers*; the Shakespearean candle image and an ambivalence toward aestheticism in *Carlos among the Candles*; the abstract characters and the preoccupation with creating a new poetry for a new age in *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*. This latter play, which its set designer, Walter Pach, called "a book review" (Morse, *OP* xxix), provides a fascinating glimpse of a poet bidding adieu to his youthful *fin de siècle* predilections, on the verge of forging a voice to fit his own times.⁴

Although Stevens stopped writing stage plays after *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, his first book of poems transfers a number of playwrighting techniques to lyric poetry. James Baird has noted how the poems, particularly those of *Harmonium*, capture the spirit of comic masque (193–216). Since Stevens' dramas had been so masquelike, it is no surprise that he borrowed

from the genre in writing his poems; however, mask and masque were important concepts not only among Stevens' small circle of playwrights, but also in a broader literary and critical context. Stevens' predecessors and contemporaries, including Robert Browning, Tennyson, Eliot, and Pound, used the masks afforded by dramatic monologue, and Stevens was aware of their work even if he did not always wholeheartedly admire it. And others, including Burke, Yeats, Nietzsche, and—perhaps most importantly for Stevens—his mentor George Santayana, did not limit their discussion of mask to dramatic monologue.

Action may be construed as symbolic speech (a definition reinforced by recent Supreme Court decisions on flag-burning); can rhetoric, then, be considered a form of action? A dramatic poetics supports this possibility. Kenneth Burke, whose dramatic theory, outlined in *A Grammar of Motives* and other works, has influenced contemporary rhetorical theory, created a "pentad" of terms for analyzing any human, symbolic act as drama. The "action," the act itself, operates in concert with the "scene," the environmental perspective; with the "agent," the derivational or efficient cause; with the "agency," the force that enables or assists the action; and with the "purpose," the agent's motivation (*A Grammar*, Introduction xvi). Rhetoric is the instrument humans use to achieve balance between self and society, to establish identity and order. Thus, rhetoric may perform social, philosophical, and dramatic action. Burke was a younger contemporary and, although the two were working at the same time, Stevens' letters contain few references to the rhetorician. But in 1951, Stevens, describing an enjoyable visit to Bard College, where he had received an honorary degree and where Burke also had been slated to speak, had only one complaint: "The only drawback was that I had been unable to hear Kenneth Burke" (L 712). Interestingly, Burke perceived an affinity between Stevens and Shelley, whom he placed within and yet partially without the dramatic mode (224–26).

For Friedrich Nietzsche, too, a "theatre without action or characters" would be entirely possible. Nietzsche, whose work B. J. Leggett argues provides an important "intertext" for Stevens, asserts the primacy of consciousness over Aristotelian action in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. Drama stems from a dialectic between art and society—a tension between the forces of Apollo and Dionysius, appearance and reality, dream and waking, individual self and its dissolution, the visual and the musical—a dialectic that generates change and life. Self is a mask, an illusion of consistency in a constantly shifting matrix of mind and matter. Stevens, who sought the momentary balance between reason and imagination, appearance and reality, found Nietzsche's obsession with the Dionysian rather excessive, "as perfect a means of getting out of focus as a little bit too much to drink" (L 432); yet, in the same letter, probably alluding to

Hitler's interest in Nietzsche, Stevens admits his own, noting he "had better wait until after the war" to resume hunting for a book by Nietzsche he apparently wanted to read (L 431). Stevens' own poetry, drama, and criticism, with their abstract interplay of ideas, creations and deceptions of character, perceiver and perceived, indicate an affinity with Nietzschean rather than Aristotelian drama. For Stevens, as for Nietzsche, the individual self is little more than a temporary mask over the universal, Dionysian reality, which finds its harmony in chaos.

Two other contemporaries of Stevens might have influenced his developing theory of masks. The Irish poet William Butler Yeats, whose influence on Stevens Terence Diggory has explored in depth, extracts from personal conflict universalized personae of the Lover, Poet, Jester, and Fiddler. In *A Vision*, Yeats limns a Stevensian dialectic between "concord" and "discord," dividing the self between "will" and "mask" (74–79). Yeats's abstract, symbolic dramas certainly exerted a major influence on Stevens and his circle. George Santayana, perhaps an even more direct influence on Stevens, describes a dramatic poetics in his essays "The World's a Stage" and "Masks," both published in 1922. "The World's a Stage" asserts that "Nature, like a theatre, offers a double object to the mind. There is in the first place the play presented, the overt spectacle, which is something specious and ideal; and then there is something material and profound lying behind and only symbolically revealed, namely, the stage, the actors, the author" (126). In a passage Goffman later quotes in *The Presentation of Self*, Santayana calls masks

arrested expressions and admirable echoes of feeling, at once faithful, discreet, and superlative. Living things in contact with the air must acquire a cuticle, and it is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts; yet some philosophers seem to be angry with images for not being things, and with words for not being feelings. Words and images are like shells, no less integral parts of nature than are the substances they cover, but better addressed to the eye and more open to observation. I would not say that substance exists for the sake of appearance, or faces for the sake of masks or the passions for the sake of poetry and virtue. Nothing arises in nature for the sake of anything else; all these phases and products are involved equally in the round of existence. . . . ("Masks" 131–32; qtd. in Goffman, n.p.)

Stevens himself uses the word "mask" twenty-three times in his poetry (Walsh). The brash masks of *Harmonium* are indeed like shells: the "dry shell" perhaps that the Parakeet of Parakeets munches as he perches, "deploying" his "panache," "a pip of life amid a mort of tails" (CP 82); or the selves Crispin tries on and ultimately discards as he sails his alphabet-

soup sea, inventing a “mythology of self.” This fledgling poet, “lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane, / The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak / Of China, cap of Spain” (CP 28), searches for “something given to make whole among / The ruses that were shattered by the large” in “the Caribbean amphitheatre” (CP 30). Not resting in the identity he finds there, he continues his “observant progress” through the gallery of forms: “How many sea-masks he ignored” in his search of “the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment” (CP 34). Finally, perhaps presaging Stevens’ later interest in Shakespeare’s Prospero, Crispin finds in the South “a comprehensive island hemisphere” (CP 38).

At the end, Crispin colonizes—settles in and for—a realm where the poem—the “plum”—“Harlequined and mazily dewed and mauved / In bloom . . . survives its own forms.” But he nevertheless continues to question whether he has found the appropriate form, the truest mask, to present this discovery to the world: “Was he to bray this in profoundest brass . . . Scrawl a tragedian’s testament? . . . Should he lay by the personal and make / Of his own fate an instance of all fate? . . . What are so many men in such a world? / Can one man think one thing and think it long? / Can one man be one thing and be it long?” (CP 41). Although Crispin rests at the end with his curly-haired progeny (his own name comes from the Latin *crispus*, “curled”), his narrator and stage-director, echoing Puck’s apology to the audience at the end of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, reasserts his tentativeness, his uncertainty:

Or if the music sticks, if the anecdote
Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
Philosopher, . . .
.....
Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,
Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,
Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
By apparition, plain and common things,
.....
Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,
And so distorting, proving what he proves
Is nothing, what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end? (CP 45–46)

And then, with an abrupt pun, Stevens gives his protagonist a rather unkind cut: “So may the relation of each man be clipped.”

In “The Comedian,” Stevens creates an alter ego very much like the actor with his trunk: he does not have to “be one thing and be it long,” and he can simultaneously be and yet not-be both playwright and actor. Yet this “magister of a single room” (CP 42) actually harks back to the

earlier dramatic protagonists of *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick* and *Carlos among the Candles* and forward to "The scholar of one candle" (CP 417). Christolph Irmscher, drawing from the social anthropologist Helmuth Plessner, argues that Stevens actually uses theory as a mask: this technique allows the poet to take an "ex-centric" stance. The poet, says Irmscher, "instead of succumbing to the experience of epistemological 'eccentricity' so typical of the modernist period, actively brings his own 'ex-centricity' into play by *turning into the actor of his own text*" (125). "Actors . . . actively adopt an 'ex-centric' position and remain at once inside and outside the role they play, bringing into play the very idea of division itself" (125–26). Stevens already had experimented with inventing dramatic masks to act out a conflict between theories. For example, in *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, the symbolic, abstract characters critique his own early poetics as propounded by Claire Dupray. The experiment with voice and mask continues throughout *Harmonium* in such poems as "Bantams in Pine-Woods" and "Metaphors of a Magnifico," and in imperative-mood poems that read like stage directions. Helen Vendler states that in the best known of these, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," "it is as if Necessity itself is speaking an immortal theatre-direction" (51). Vendler recognizes Stevens' "liking for the impersonal as a strategy of lyric (or as a secrecy of lyric)" (48), and likens his technique to that of his early favorite Keats, master of negative capability and of the impersonal personal.

Harmonium sounds the clarion call for a new poetics, yet Stevens' bantams and peacocks perch atop the shoulders of their predecessors. Stevens did not invent a new form, but he can be said to have transformed, abstracted, and purified the dramatic monologue, that form that, as Robert Langbaum argues, the Victorians had used so effectively to make tentative assertions about their rapidly changing world. Margaret Dickie describes Stevens' use of "a truncated version of that form, often inverted, in which he gives voice first and most prominently to the monologue's listener, thus creating . . . the tension between sympathy and judgment" (23) that is the essence of the genre. This interest in the reader, the audience, pervades Stevens' work from "The Snow Man" through "Of Modern Poetry" to "Large Red Man Reading."

While it is commonplace to locate Stevens in the romantic tradition, in many ways the poet of "Sunday Morning" also carried the metaphysical baggage of the Victorian poets, most of whom, Langbaum notes, inhabited "a culture without a metaphysically objective morality" (210):

The classical poet could afford to distinguish between the subjectivity of his lyric poetry and the objectivity of his narrative and dramatic poetry, because he had no trouble being objective when he wanted to be. It is only when meaning is in the epistemological sense a personal creation that the distinction be-

tween the subjective and objective statement breaks down and the poet feels it necessary to mask the subjective origin of his idea, to expend art to objectify it. *Insincerity* together with its offshoot Yeats' *mask*, in fact the whole literary attempt since the late nineteenth century to escape from personality, have created a literature in which sincerity and autobiography are encoded, written backwards. (35)

This encoded autobiography appears strikingly in another early poem, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," first published in 1915, concurrently with Stevens' play writing. Like Carlos and Crispin, this stagemaster seeks harmony, and he too is a comically officious amateur; in his previous existence in Shakespeare's play he has raged for artistic order amid a crew of actors as bungling as the Wisconsin Players who botched *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, who need Peter Quince to explain to them the meaning of their own lines. Like *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, Peter Quince's production of *Pyramus and Thisbe* presents a tragedy of love and suicide totally devoid of the expected pathos. In Stevens' poem, Peter Quince's goal is more personal and less than exalted: as Crowder and Chappel note in their discussion of this dramatic monologue, he wants to seduce his primary audience, the woman in the blue-shadowed silk, but his clumsy appeal to *carpe diem* is hardly romantic. (Perhaps this is why, in the poem, his audience expresses no reaction—although in the *carpe diem* tradition the lady is typically silent.) "Death's ironic [and unharmonious] scraping" undercuts his equation of music and feeling; Susanna's discovery is punctuated by a cacophony of "roaring horns" and "crash[ing]" "cymbal[s]" (CP 91)—a homonym that recognizes the poem's own failure to achieve its artistic ends.

This is the same inversion of intent that happens when, in Shakespeare's comedy, Puck sprinkles his fairy dust into the wrong lovers' eyes, or when, in Stevens, a bowl and a cat attempt to become literary critics. The result is the "very tragical mirth" (V.i.56) that Peter Quince covers with his fine-sounding assertion about the permanence of art. Like a good actor, he projects such sincerity in his performance that he has convinced most readers (if not the woman in blue silk) he has found what Theseus in Shakespeare's plays calls "the concord [synonymous with "harmony"] of this discord" (V.i.66). John N. Serio notes that, despite this paradox, readers respond to both the play and the poem by discovering an "expression of the music of genuine feeling" (20). Stevens, perhaps still unsure of his power to convince, hides behind the clown-mask of Peter Quince. The *concordia discors* Stevens achieves depends on its successful fusion, despite the imperfections, of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Leggett believes the poem "reads like an exposition of Nietzsche's attempt to see the fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian energies in Greek art" (46): of the Apollonian

dream of appearances, including the illusion of a unified self, and the rending of the veil of appearances. As Leggett notes, the quintessence of the Dionysian is music. The Dionysian also allows for a blurring of the distinction between perceiver and perceived—a duality that appears again in “The Snow Man.”

After the brashness of *Harmonium*, Stevens bids farewell to the gaudy Floridian masks and replaces them with the more realistic scenery of *Ideas of Order*, published over a decade later. Perhaps “The Idea of Order at Key West” measures Stevens’ increasing confidence as a poet: unlike such earlier alter egos as Crispin, Quince, and Claire Dupray, the singer makes of wind, water, and air a stage for a totally enthralling performance in which “The sea was not a mask. No more was she” (CP 128), though of course she *is* a mask for the poet—who conveniently hides behind the persona of the listener. Even this tentative confidence soon disappears under criticism that Stevens’ poetry failed to address reality in the form of the pressing social problems of the 1930s. Stanley Burnshaw’s attack in “Turmoil in the Middle Ground” (October 1935) clearly shook the poet’s confidence. It provoked not only a specific answer in “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue,” but experimentation with a broader stage and cast of characters. Dramatic tropes begin to appear more frequently during the period from 1937 to 1945, as Stevens becomes fully convinced of the dramatic power and social necessity of poetry.

Owl’s Clover may not be Stevens’ most artistically integrated poem, but it is a matrix for much of Stevens’ later poetry. In it, Stevens rediscovers Shelley—a social radical to whose poetics of mutability, at least, Stevens could relate more easily than to that of his contemporary Marxists with their “Concerto[s] for Airplane and Pianoforte” (OP 79). Both the winged, ethereal horses of “The Noble Rider” and the subman, who may be a negative counterpart of the later Major Man, appear in *Owl’s Clover*; Stevens invokes a chorus of “celestial paramours” to renew art and reality:

Astral and Shelleyan, diffuse new day;
And on this ring of marble horses shed
The rainbow in its glistening serpentines
Made by the sun ascending seventy seas.
.....
Speak, and in these repeat: *To Be Itself*,
Until the sharply-colored glass transforms
Itself into the speech of the spirit. . . . (OP 79, 83)

Stevens too wants to see a new, fresh reality, but he proposes an idealized, abstracted Shelleyan alternative to the Marxist duck on the dinner table or the chicken in every pot. The “subman,” who transcends individual identity, is “born within us as a second self, / A self of parents who have never

died, / Whose lives return, simply, upon our lips, / . . . He turns us into scholars, studying / The masks of music. We perceive each mask / To be the musician's own and, thence, become / An audience to mimics" (*OP* 96–97). This poem strikingly contrasts scenes of contemporary poverty and misery with vistas of transcendent art as Stevens experiments with lofty abstractions reminiscent of Shelley's closet-dramas.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" offers perhaps a more successful rendering of this new, broader view of dramatic poetry. As in the early satiric poems, Stevens uses comedy as a weapon to deflate "that 'cult of pomp,' which is the comic side of the European disaster" (*NA* 28). But he also begins to celebrate the tragedy and triumph of thousands of small personal sacrifices. In "The Man with the Blue Guitar," like "Peter Quince at the Clavier," the "play" of musicianry and stagecraft are inseparable: Stevens begins by admitting his failure to "patch"—with a pun on the clown—a real man, then offers to "sing the hero[]" (*CP* 165), longs like Hamlet to "play man number one" (*CP* 166), and reaffirms Peter Quince's desire for "Poetry / Exceeding music" (*CP* 167) as

The maker of a thing yet to be made;

The color like a thought that grows
Out of a mood, the tragic robe

Of the actor, half his gesture, half
His speech, the dress of his meaning, silk

Sodden with his melancholy words,
The weather of his stage, himself. (*CP* 169–70)

A precursor to Major Man, a heroic, Promethean "giant that fought / Against the murderous alphabet" (*CP* 179), emerges. But the poet contrasts this lugubrious tragedy with farce, discovering power in comedy: "He held the world upon his nose / And this-a-way he gave a fling. / His robes and symbols, ai-yi-yi— / And that-a-way he twirled the thing") (*CP* 178). Again he alludes to masks as a way of shaping new identities, finding a new balance: "To say of one mask it is like, / To say of another it is like, / To know that the balance does not quite rest, / That the mask is strange, however like," yet, strange as it is, it provides a "fertile glass" for self-study (*CP* 181). Immediately another mask appears: the poet like an old Samuel Beckett clown, suburbanite of the "centuries," watching—or enacting—or both—a perceptual crucifixion in Oxidia-Olympia: "his eye / A-cock at the cross-piece on a pole / Supporting heavy cables" (*CP* 181).

In Stevens' World War II poems, the stage, the theater (of war) and Major Man are the dominating images. The tone is tragic, yet affirming. In the 1942 essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the poet whom

Monroe had hailed more than two decades before as the new hope of poetic drama laments its absence in a culture in which the Dionysian “reality”—a reality inseparable from the imagination, the collective dream, of society, has disappeared:

Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality; that is to say, the imagination and society are inseparable. That is pre-eminently true in the case of the poetic drama. The poetic drama needs a terrible genius before it is anything more than a literary relic. Besides the theatre has forgotten that it could ever be terrible. It is not one of the instruments of fate, decidedly.
(NA 28)

His ideas bear remarkable similarity to those expressed by his fellow experimental playwright Percy Bysshe Shelley in *A Defense of Poetry*. Both poets recognize the intrinsically social and spiritual nature of drama. In a passage strikingly similar to Stevens,’ Shelley insists that poetic drama makes an integral contribution to the “social good”:

The drama being that form under which a greater number of modes of expression of poetry are susceptible of being combined than any other, the connection of poetry and social good is more observable in the drama than in whatever other form. And it is indisputable that the highest perfection of human society has ever corresponded with the highest dramatic excellence; and that the corruption or the extinction of the drama in a nation where it has once flourished, is a mark of a corruption of manners, and an extinction of the energies which sustain the soul of social life. But, as Machiavelli says of political institutions, that life may be preserved and renewed, if men should arise capable of bringing back the drama to its principles. (20–21)

That Shelley was clearly on Stevens’ mind in 1942 is evident in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” Although both Shelley and Stevens have been labeled romantic poets—primarily concerned with lyric self-expression—both sincerely believed in the poet’s sacred, Promethean duty to oppose tyranny. Perhaps this is why in an era of social crisis, Stevens apparently turned to Shelley’s *Defense*. Indeed, Stevens might have chosen to echo Shelley very deliberately, since Shelley represented to the New Critics all that was wrong with literature. As Alan Filreis has pointed out, Stevens felt uncomfortable at being linked to Allen Tate’s circle and thus allied with a faction that generally minimized poetry’s social-historical role (28–147).

Shelleyan rhetoric might have offered a subtle weapon of revolution. In “The Noble Rider,” Stevens comments, “The spirit of negation has been so active, so confident and so intolerant that the commonplaces about the

romantic provoke us to wonder if our salvation, if the way out, is not the romantic" (NA 17). Yet when in "The Noble Rider" Stevens calls for a "terrible genius" to revitalize the poetic drama, he realizes that he is not that person, and that the problem might not be the result of a purely personal failure of consciousness. Shelley insists that poetry written during a tyrant's reign, however lovely, suffers from a certain "want of harmony" (21). Stevens believes the war-poet must resist the politicians' demands for a propagandistic, Ozymandian poetry: the "social obligation so closely urged is a phase of the pressure of reality which a poet (in the absence of dramatic poets) is bound to resist or evade today" (NA 28). In a tyrant-ruled world, perforce devoid of poetic drama (or true dramatic poetry), Stevens continues, "I think that his [the poet's] function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people live their lives" (NA 29). The enigmatic coda to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" seems at first to take an offensively cavalier attitude toward the soldier's physical suffering: "The soldier is poor without the poet's lines. . . . How gladly with proper words the soldier dies" (CP 407-08). Yet, if the poet enacts his role to "help people live their lives," the coda makes sense:

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

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

Yet it depends on yours. The two are one.
 They are a plural, a right and left, a pair. . . . (CP 407)

The poet depends upon the soldier to create a free world where the poet can serve "the bread of faithful speech" (CP 408) that will give the soldier courage to build new connections—new orders, new harmonies—among seemingly disconnected political factions and sundry other particles of reality. The coda recalls Broomstick's statement of the poet's vocation: to find new "relations of man and moonlight, women and moonlight, man and mountains, women and waves, and so on," heretofore "undefined," and transform these common objects into particles of "the universal comedy" that transcends tragedy (OP 171). And again, Shelley has said much the same: the poet's "vitally metaphoric" language "marks the before unappreciated relations of things and perpetuated their apprehension"; thus, the poet's words can transmute the life of society, for if words become "through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts; and then if no new

poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been this disorganized, language will be dead to all the noble purposes of human intercourse" (51). This word-war theme pervades Stevens' World War II poetry.

Charles Altieri, who understands Stevens' desire to become a dramatic and ethically responsive poet, cites another World War II lyric, "Of Modern Poetry," as a key to Stevens' poetics:⁵

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.
Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.
It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.
It has to face the men of the time and to meet
The women of the time. It has to think about war
And it has to find what will suffice. It has
To construct a new stage. It has to be on that stage
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens,
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one. The actor is
A metaphysician in the dark, twanging
An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives
Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses. . . .
(CP 239-40)

This is the same "dark" that Matthew Arnold fought on a more personal, and less optimistic, front in "Dover Beach." While Arnold seemingly abandoned faith in language, finding only an individual solution, Stevens (and Shelley) have faith that the same language that can corrupt a society can, turned slightly, save it: that the poet as a "metaphysician" can withdraw the dark veil and offer a vision of "a new reality" (OP 119). Shelley, who like Stevens was a poet who chose to stand "always in the sun," believes that poetry can create such a new stage for reality, as it

defeats the curse [of a limited, subjective point of view] which bids us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or with-

draws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity that obscures from us the wonder of our being. (42)

Occasionally, Arnoldian doubts undercut Stevens' romantic optimism. According to his *Ozymandias* (whose objectivity, as a persona in what Dickie calls "inverted dramatic monologue," must itself be subject to doubt): "A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396). While "Another sunlight might make another world" (OP 118), then again, it might not. But, Stevens concludes, "What difference would it make, / So long as the mind, for once, fulfilled itself?" (OP 119). In casting the *figured curtain* of metaphor, Stevens transforms a generation, most of whom, in their "commonplace costume" of American popular culture, would remain "ordinary [men and] women" (CP 10). Some of them were indeed the sons of those very Poles from Jersey City whose paltry concertina-music Stevens ridicules (CP 210); but Stevens composes from them both an audience he can address and a protagonist he can praise: the aggregate "Major Man," an unbound Prometheus capable of defeating the tyranny of the absolute.

Stevens' World War II poems transcend the image of the egocentric actor, ridiculously posturing on his own melancholy stage, to create the looming, heroic figure of the composite Major Man. A descendant of Nietzsche's Superman, Major Man, a grandiose abstraction, comprises all the individuals, great and small, who faced the pressures of World War. As in true Dionysian art, the individual self and its boundaries give way to a greater reality. In "United Dames of America," each individual consciousness is drawn toward a central vortex: "Could all these be ourselves, sounding ourselves, / Our faces circling round a central face / And then nowhere again, away and away?"—not the face of a hermit or a politician but of "The actor that will at last declaim our end" (CP 206). Was Stevens approaching the "oceanic feeling" that always eluded Freud when he created a giant composed of a collage of tiny individuals, a man made out of words who could find sustenance in "the bread of faithful speech" that the poet could contribute to the war effort?

In "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War," Stevens explains the birth of the hero who is "not a person" but who "seems / To stand taller than a person stands" (CP 277): "The common man is the common hero. / The common hero is the hero. / . . . But then there's the common fortune" (CP 275). "This actor / Is anonymous and cannot help it" (CP 279). And he might be (in rhetoric like Irmscher's and reminiscent of the Marxists' "Concerto for Airplane and Pianoforte") "the eccentric / On a horse, in a

plane, at the piano"—a Peter Quince as well as a foot soldier (*CP* 274). Again, Stevens' journal (1906) reveals the Shelleyan origin of Major Man.

People are not particularly interested in humanity nowadays, as Schiller was, or Desmoulins or Shelley—or anybody. We study the individual + that individual is one's self + through one's self to one's neighbor. As for humanity at large, we are content to write Johnsonian letters to the *Post*—but never to read them. We go slumming in a quarter, we help starving Asiatics—true; but we do not pursue the ideal of the Universal Superman—at least not to-day. But we may the day after tomorrow. (*L* 89)

In "Repetitions of a Young Captain," a Shakespearean "tempest" breaks upon the theater of war; the moonlight that illuminates the scene recalls Broomstick's speech about the need to find new relationships between humans and "moonlight"—the natural world:

A tempest cracked on the theatre. Quickly,
The wind bent in the roof and half the walls.
The ruin stood still in an external world.

.....
It had been real. It was not now. The rip
Of the wind and the glittering were real now,
In the spectacle of a new reality. (*CP* 306)

War destroys the edifices of Western culture; destruction changes the nature of reality. Paradoxically, although "Poetry Is a Destructive Force," its stage is a coliseum where "The lion [who] sleeps in the sun," Dionysian beast that it is, can spring at any moment and kill complacency (*CP* 193). The poet must not only let loose the beast, but also console the audience:

The people sat in the theatre, in the ruin,
As if nothing had happened. The dim actor spoke.
His hands became his feelings. His thick shape

Issued thin seconds glibly gapering.
Then faintly encrusted, a tissue of the moon
Walked toward him on the stage and they embraced.
(*CP* 306)

After the Allies ended the greatest tragic spectacle Stevens' generation had witnessed, the poet continued to think of his poetry in dramatic terms. The drama becomes personal: the stage shrinks from macrocosm to microcosm. Comedy resurfaces—not the satire of *Harmonium* but a sort of metaphysical comedy drawing more from Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*

and *The Tempest* than from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The poems seem to transcend self and ego enough to accept that these might not endure: "it was not important that they [and, perhaps by extension, their maker] survive" (CP 532). Or, in Irmscher's terms, "through the artificial face of a mask . . . human beings can most truly 'face' their own condition of artificiality and turn into the ever so different actors and agents of their own lives, thus actively *making* themselves into what would otherwise just *be* and creating themselves in their own distinctive and yet ever so different images" (126). The late poem "Prologues to What Is Possible" is Crispin's last voyage; the poet fears crossing the bar on the voyage out from the cherished notion of an individual self: "What self, for example, did he contain that had not yet been loosed" (CP 516) from this actor's trunk?

This aging Carlos saves himself by lighting "the smallest lamp . . . / [which] Creates a fresh universe out of nothing by adding itself" (CP 517): "How high that highest candle lights the dark" (CP 524). Alicia Ostriker notes that this line comes from that spoken by Shakespeare's female attorney Portia, a suitable interior paramour indeed (*The Merchant of Venice* V.i.90; qtd. in Ostriker 252). This descendant of the celestial paramours in the Shelleyan "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" holds the candle of social justice: "So shines a good deed in a naughty world." Stevens attempts to fend off the specter of the waiting Madame LaFleurie by a sheer act of will. He rejects tragedy: "Sordid Melpomene, why strut bare boards, / Without scenery or lights, in the theatre's bricks, . . . The muse of misery? Speak loftier lines" (CP 427). Of course, Melpomene is present in her absence through the very evocation: these late poems are full of doubt and loss ("I wonder, have I lived a skeleton's life, / As a questioner about reality, / A countryman of all the bones in the world?" [OP 117]). Visions of childhood paradise lost, of fathers and mothers earthly and divine, haunt the late poems despite their positive assertions.⁶ In "The Auroras of Autumn" the reference evokes a Hamlet-tragedy: "This drama that we live" (CP 419), "the guilty dream" of those who are "as Danes in Denmark" (CP 419), the family holidays of bygone days, where:

The father fetches pageants out of air,
Scenes of the theatre, vistas and blocks of woods,
And curtains like a naive pretence of sleep.

.....
What festival? This loud, disordered mooch?
These hospitaliers? These brute-like guests?
These musicians dubbing at a tragedy,

A-dub, a-dub, which is made up of this:
That there are no lines to speak? There is no play.
Or, the persons act one merely by being here. (CP 415–16)

And, if "The color is almost the color of comedy," it is nevertheless "Not quite. It comes to the point and at the point, / It fails. The strength at the centre is serious" (CP 477).

In these late poems, Ariel, more adept at his art than Peter Quince, is the presiding genius; Ariel, who can spin the great globe on the table like a crystal ball, is "glad that he had written his poems" (CP 532). If Stevens chooses to evoke the ageless spirit Ariel, though, he also acknowledges his entrance into the Shakespearean seventh age in the magician Prospero, "the old man standing on the tower, / Who reads no book" (CP 374), giving his creations a farewell blessing. In "Credences of Summer," he creates the "happiest folk-land" of "mostly marriage-hymns" (CP 373) where "The personae of summer play the characters / Of an inhuman author, . . . / Complete in a completed scene, speaking / Their parts as in a youthful happiness." Strangely, perhaps, he sits apart from his creation: "He does not hear his characters talk" (CP 377-78). The land reverberates with summer-sounds, like Prospero's island "full of noises" emanating from the celestial theater he has created: "Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not. / Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments / Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices" (III.ii.135-38). Here, a Keatsian (Peter Quincean) spirit-music makes no audible sound: "And the secondary senses of the ear / Swarm, not with secondary sounds, but choirs, / Not evocations but last choirs, last sounds / . . . Pure rhetoric of a language without words" (CP 374).

A language without words . . . a theater without action or characters . . . a poem that takes the place of a mountain: in the late poems Stevens vehemently asserts he has created such a world. From the early drama, when Broomstick called for a poetry that would discover new connections between humans and the natural world, to the greeting the tiny chorister offers the rising sun, still "surrounded by its choral rings, / Still far away. . . like / A new knowledge of reality" (CP 534), Stevens remains a dramatic poet. Breaking the traditional generic boundaries of "lyric" or "dramatic," he continued to experiment with fusing the two forms, casting and recasting the "figured curtain" of metaphor to reveal fresh stages of perception, creating out of reality a myriad of braver, newer worlds.

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Notes

¹ Thomas Walsh's *Concordance* reveals a host of theatrical terms; however, counting is complicated by the many puns: certain words, such as "line," "chorus," and "play," may carry only a secondary reference to the theater. Nevertheless, the following list indicates Stevens' penchant for theatrical terms: act 9; actor 8; actors 1; character 9; characters 14; cloak 9; comedy 5; comedies 1; comedian 2; comedians 1; comic 7; costume 54; costuming 51; gesture 9; gestures 7; gesturing 1; hero 40; heroic 12; line 19; lines 18; mask 16; masks 7; masque 1; masquerade 2; masquerie 1; performed 1; play 30; scene 20; stage 5; theatre 14; theatrical 15; tragedy 12; tragedies 1; tragic 17; tragedian 3; villain 0. The absence of "villain" may be one reason so many critics have failed to see the dramatic in Stevens. Perhaps, for his art, "The death of Satan was a tragedy / For the imagination" (*CP* 319) indeed, removing from it the conventional "villain" and attending conflict.

² A quarter-century ago, James Baird in *The Dome and the Rock* discerned a masquelike quality in the poetry. More recently, Christoph Irmscher has proposed Stevens used theory as mask: hence, the multitude of dramatic masks the poet assumes to expound various ideas. Ashby Crowder and Charles Chappell have suggested that certain poems, notably "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "The Idea of Order at Key West," should be read as dramatic monologues. In a recent study yielding a fresh perspective on Stevens' monologues and dialogues, Margaret Dickie has called his version of the form "inverted dramatic monologue." B. J. Leggett discusses a synthesis of Apollonian and Dionysian, lyric and dramatic modes in "Apollonian and Dionysian in 'Peter Quince at the Clavier,'" and further examines Nietzsche and Stevens in *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext*. Among the concepts he emphasizes is the ultimate fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian art in Stevens' poetics. Marie Borroff finds a dramatic effect in Stevens' sound symbolism. And Charles Altieri has discovered not only the dramatistic nature of Stevens' work, but also the ethical and social implications.

³ Glen MacLeod offers further information about Stevens' circle, and Terence Diggory details the influence of Yeats's abstraction and symbolism, particularly in both poets' uses of color.

⁴ "Theatrical Demonstrations" in Litz's *Introspective Voyager* (54–60), and my article "Bowl, Cat and Broomstick: Sweeping the Stage of Souvenirs" contain more thorough discussions of the play. My article also examines the play's apparent relationship to John Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesie*, which, along with the works discussed in the present paper, is a source of Stevens' dramatistic poetics.

⁵ Altieri also discusses Stevens' dramatistic poetics, and its ethical implications, throughout *Act & Quality: A Theory of Literary Meaning and Humanistic Understanding*.

⁶ I wish to thank Laura Quinney for drawing my attention to the pervasiveness of the "family tragedy," particularly the loss of the mother, in Stevens' later works. Her comments and her essay "Disillusion as Disappointment," which she presented at the 1995 NEMLA Convention, helped me to see beneath the cheery masks of Ariel and Prospero a heroic effort to deny or at least hold at bay the forces of Madame LaFleurie.

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Another Way of Looking at "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"

STUART M. SPERRY

Above the forest of the parakeets,
A parakeet of parakeets prevails,
A pip of life amid a mort of tails.

(The rudiments of tropics are around,
Aloe of ivory, pear of rusty rind.)
His lids are white because his eyes are blind.

He is not paradise of parakeets,
Of his gold ether, golden alguazil,
Except because he broods there and is still.

Panache upon panache, his tails deploy
Upward and outward, in green-vented forms,
His tip a drop of water full of storms.

But though the turbulent tinges undulate
As his pure intellect applies its laws,
He moves not on his coppery, keen claws.

He munches a dry shell while he exerts
His will, yet never ceases, perfect cock,
To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock.¹

IF "THIRTEEN WAYS OF LOOKING at a Blackbird" is the best known of Stevens' bird poems, "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" has proved his most intriguing. It is also one of the most consistently misinterpreted of his shorter pieces. Well before the poet's death, William Van O'Connor seized on a number of details, such as the echo of biblical language in "parakeet of parakeets" ("King of Kings" or "Lord of Lords"), to create for the poem a theological, or rather an antitheological, context of meaning. "Why parakeet instead of parrot?" he asked. "Because parakeet suggests Paraclete. Why 'forest of the parakeets'? Because men make God in the image of man," he replied. "Why parakeet and not some other colorful bird?" he went on to ask. "Because the parakeet speaks, and speech is the source of our delusion of understanding the meaning of the uni-

verse,"² he concluded ever more dubiously, for, beyond the question of whether human speech can logically be blamed as the source of such human delusion, parakeets cannot truly speak but only imitate or "parrot" what they hear.

A decade later, Daniel Fuchs, in emphasizing Stevens' "sacred irreverence" as an aspect of the poet's comic spirit, seized on another detail—the blindness of the bird ("His lids are white because his eyes are blind")—to read the poem as a comic caricature of an unseeing and uncaring Christian divinity. "Here the omnipotent, the omniscient, is seen as an impassive principle of pure intellect," he declared. "For all his magnificence, the king of the parakeets remains a caricature of a god of reason, an unmoved mover indeed," the "description of a blind god."³ A decade further on, Adalaide Kirby Morris incorporated these emphases and details in her own reading of the poem as a biting satire directed against the idea of a Holy Ghost seen in its entirely negative aspect. The parakeet, she wrote, "resides 'above the forest of the parakeets' and 'moves not': he is not immanent in the world, neither comforter, nor advocate, nor teacher. With white lids masking blind eyes, he is neither seen nor seeing." Thus, she concluded, "is the Paraclete reduced to the absurdity of a parakeet."⁴ By the following decade the antitheological context had become so established that Eleanor Cook could refer to the poem in passing simply as one of Stevens' "antiheaven" or "antireligious" pieces.⁵ More recently, Barbara Fisher has followed up these earlier readings in describing the poem as "Stevens's travesty of the Paraclete" and "a devastating critique of formal religion."⁶

The attempt to read "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" as a satire upon a cold and uncaring Christianity misrepresents both the poem and important aspects of Stevens' thought and temperament. For one thing, it has long been a *donnée* of Stevens criticism that, from his post-Arnoldian perspective, he looked upon the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit considered as intercessor or comforter, as an appropriate figuration of the necessary role of modern art and, specifically, of poetry.⁷ As every student of the poet knows, major passages of his critical and reflective writing are essentially variations on such favorite aphorisms as "God and the imagination are one" or "God is a symbol for something that can as well take other forms, as, for example, the form of high poetry."⁸ The poet's religious skepticism, evident in the poetry as early as "Sunday Morning" and traceable throughout his letters, was nevertheless qualified by a humanism that often expressed itself through Christian metaphors and analogies. The major argument of the essay "Imagination as Value"—that it is the poetic faculty that endows life with meaning—is a case in point, a contention amplified by such a typical declaration as: "If the imagination is the faculty by which we import the unreal into what is real, its value is the value of the way of thinking by which we project the idea of God into the idea of man."⁹

If Stevens is capable of the occasional splenetic attack on Christian commonplaces of the kind we find in "The Mechanical Optimist," the Audenesque first part of "A Thought Revolved" (CP 184–85), the tendency is not characteristic. In what to date is the longest, most detailed, and most generally admired reading of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws," Louis Leiter discovered a continuous series of ambiguities and oppositions, of "contradictory . . . [and] conflicting meanings," which place the poem "beyond the demands of any message," a conclusion not easily reconcilable with the notion of antireligious satire or parody.¹⁰ If for the skeptic the idea of a Christian God is necessarily unseeing, it is also true that the epitome of the poet, the type of Homer or Milton, is traditionally blind. It is significant that Barbara Fisher begins her discussion of the poem by considering it within the larger conception of parody. The parody the poem generates, however, is not one of religious orthodoxy. Stevens' splendid cock emerges, rather, as an image of the poetic self within a trenchant, witty comedy that dramatizes the major characteristics of the poet and his verse, a comedy bordering at times on self-caricature.

"The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" mediates between a host of oppositions: seeing and unseeing, sensation and intellect, prodigality and denial, aestheticism and asceticism—the latter in particular defining the central polarity along which Stevens' sensibility characteristically fluctuates. Surrounded by a luscious efflorescence of tropical colors and fruits, a setting that inevitably recalls the "pungent oranges and bright, green wings" (CP 67) at the outset of "Sunday Morning," the bird remains strangely impervious to its surroundings. Instead of fruit "He munches a dry shell," his gaze directed inward in contemplation as he rests, still and unmoving, on his claws. It is hard to escape the irony that to all the obvious attractions of his environment the bird is blind; yet the greater irony, that his primacy is in some way owing to that blindness, is less apparent. For there is no doubt that amid a forest filled with his kind, this bird is preeminent. He "prevails" from a position "Above" his fellows. Amid "a mort of tails," he exists as a saving "pip of life." Stevens plays on the double meaning of "mort" as both "death" and "great quantity or number." Similarly, in its more familiar sense "pip" refers to a spot of color but also, as Leiter was perhaps the first to point out,¹¹ to a serious and contagious disease of fowl. What for other birds may prove a fatal ailment is for this bird a "pip of life." Amid a universe of multiplicity, sickness, and death, he emerges as a symbol of redemption.

In what, more exactly, does the superior attractiveness of the bird consist? Parakeets are cacophonous, and this cock has the seeming added disadvantage of his blindness. Nevertheless the bird's superb display of plumage expands and dilates in "Panache upon panache" in a way that commands our delight and admiration. Indeed, as we have partly seen,

the outer display seems all the richer for the bird's blindness and inner concentration for, as if by some principle of inverse relation, "the turbulent tinges undulate / As his pure intellect applies its laws." While the bird remains outwardly still and unmoving, the most brilliant coruscations are concentrated, like "a drop of water full of storms," at the "tip" of his tail. "Tip" is a word charged throughout Stevens with particular, most often erotic connotations,¹² while its use here suggests, by analogy of rhyme, the "pip of life," the flash of color that had earlier characterized the bird's appearance. The bird transcends its habitat and fellows not merely through the brilliance of its display but through its power, to borrow a famous phrase from Walter Pater, to provide "the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy."¹³

It is easier to argue against the established interpretation of the poem as antireligious satire than it is to articulate the quite different view of it I am seeking to define—as an instance of self-enactment or self-characterization. One way of elaborating this latter reading is to consider the extraordinary prevalence of birds throughout Stevens' verse. Among modern poets generally he is a principal, virtually unrivaled, exponent of birds and bird imagery.¹⁴ Throughout his poetry birds flaunt, soar, sink, hover, crow, whistle, cry, coo so as alternately to dazzle, intimidate, or bore us—in ways that almost invariably suggest a metaphorical connection with the conception or effect of poetry.¹⁵ As early as "Ploughing on Sunday" with its opening refrain,

The white cock's tail
Tosses in the wind.
The turkey-cock's tail
Glitters in the sun (*CP* 20),

the continuous flash and glitter of the birds' feathers symbolize the universal movement and play of natural beauty that inspire the poet-ploughman tilling the Sunday fields of North America. In "Some Friends from Pascagoula," the hapless Cotton and black Sly are successively required to "Tell," "Describe," "Say," "Speak" of the flight of the eagle as it drops on its "dazzling wings" (*CP* 126–27) down from sky to sea: the point of these repeated adjurations being that the flight of the bird, like the movement of the poem itself, is unique and indescribable. By contrast, the "Damned universal cock" that struts and flaunts its "blazing tail" (*CP* 75) in "Bantams in Pine-Woods" suggests a parody of the egoism of poetic artistry, that of some potential rival as well as Stevens' own. Later on, the birds that flow across the sky "like dirty water in waves" (*CP* 200) in "Dry Loaf" or the "thin bird" (*CP* 304) that hovers but never settles above the perpetually breaking surf in "Somnambulisma" portray, in darker, evolutionary terms, the perpetual suggestiveness of natural form and move-

ment, a potentiality of metaphor that, lacking some defining or interpretive act of consciousness, is forever fated to pass away into the wash of oblivion. Far more intimately, and in a series of later poems—"The Dove in the Belly," "Song of Fixed Accord," and "The Dove in Spring"—Stevens adopts the dove, as critics have partly pointed out, as a symbol of the creative spirit and as a way of dramatizing his ever-changing and mysterious communion with his own poetic psyche.¹⁶ Examples could be multiplied of Stevens' use of birds and bird imagery as ways of characterizing the inception, movement, or effect of the poetic process. "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" differs from all these instances in being the most striking and particularized of all of Stevens' avian portraits, the one most involved in ambiguities and contradictions. Yet the underlying logic and continuity of the bird metaphor remain. In its particular combination of inner withdrawal and outer display, of blindness and flamboyance, Stevens' parakeet suggests the poet's partly quizzical view of the character of his own poetic craftsmanship, in particular the artistry of *Harmonium*.

Beneath the surface of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" there are at work two closely interrelated romantic paradigms. The first is the notion of paradise lost and found: the notion, familiar through all the greater romantic poets but most notably in Wordsworth, that the poet loses the power to transform the outer world of society by such means as political action only to rediscover that ability in the inner world of his imagination.¹⁷ Despite recent attempts to relate Stevens more closely to the events and preoccupations of the outer world, the realization is one that grows and deepens throughout the whole of his career. The second romantic prototype is the conviction of belatedness or posteriority. In Stevens' poem the first notion is conveyed within the remarkably complicated, even contradictory syntax of the third stanza, which might be simplified as follows: "He [the bird] is *not* paradise . . . / *Except* because he . . . *is*." The bird both is and is not paradise. He is not paradise by virtue of his role ("alguazil" signifying an officer or justice) or because of the aura of "gold ether" that surrounds him. His distinction derives from his brooding and stillness, those qualities of inwardness that, by a paradox, are directly related to the brilliance of the bird's display. From first to last Stevens' bird never fails to dazzle us: in the poem's concluding lines we are told that he "never ceases, perfect cock, / To flare, in the sun-pallor of his rock." The lines look forward, as critics have pointed out, to the image of the rock in the later poetry and in particular to "The Rock," the title poem of the last of Stevens' individual volumes. However, the best gloss on the final lines of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" occurs in the poet's remarks in acknowledging the honorary degree he received from Bard College in 1951, words he thought important enough to repeat in his "Introduction" to *The Necessary Angel*, his volume of essays published the same year:

"[Poetry] is an illumination of a surface, the movement of a self in the rock" (*OP* 257, *NA* viii). Or as he was to put it later, more simply and bleakly, in "The Poem as Icon," the second part of "The Rock": "the poem makes meanings of the rock" (*CP* 527).

Stevens' "Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" is not a parody of a blind and indifferent Christian deity. Like Shelley's skylark, Keats's nightingale, and Yeats's golden handiwork, Stevens' bird is the figuration of an ideal of poetry, if only a necessarily limited one. Stevens' bird cannot soar like Shelley's "Sprite" or sing "in full-throated ease" like Keats's. The aura of "gold ether" that surrounds him is sadly diminished by the "coppery, keen claws" on which he rests. Indeed it is not pushing things too far to see in the progression from gold to copper the notion of decline from a golden age to a brazen one, at the latter end of which the bird is situated. Yet for all his limitations, the bird never ceases to perform in the way he can. He flaunts and flares and flashes. Against the bleak background of the rock illuminated by the ominous "sun-pallor" of declining day, he casts his colorful and intricately shifting patterns. He brings value and meaning to our brief existence in the way that only poetry can.

Several years after Stevens' death Irving Howe took the occasion of a review of *Opus Posthumous* to compose a thoughtful reappraisal of the poet's achievement in an essay he entitled "Another Way of Looking at the Blackbird." While acknowledging the brilliant early criticism of R. P. Blackmur, Howe lamented the then common tendency to read the poet either as a flippant dandy or as a versifying philosopher, conflicting evaluations that both misread the poetry by oversimplifying it. Among Stevens' early critics Howe was among the first to identify the real ground of Stevens' achievement, "because," Howe wrote, "his main concern is with discovering and, through his poetry, *enacting* the possibilities for human self-renewal in an impersonal and recalcitrant age. . . . [A]nother way," he concluded, "is needed for looking at the blackbird."¹⁸

It is curious that in the course of his revaluation Howe should identify Stevens with the blackbird and with a comic poem that, however brilliant in technique, is centered in the poet's fascination with the uses and limits of perspectivism.¹⁹ By contrast, no short poem in the *Harmonium* volume better conveys Stevens' self-consciousness as poet, his awareness of the power and limitations of his own artistry than "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws." No early poem better captures the uneasy alliance between hedonism and asceticism so basic to his nature, the mysterious way the artifice and fascination of his verse depend for their appeal on a power of intellectual concentration on the way to creating what Harold Bloom has described as "Stevens's intricate variations on his meditative ecstasies of apprehension."²⁰ Few poems better reveal Stevens' sense of his own peculiar talent, that combination of involvement and apartness, insight and

inner withdrawal that marks his genius. Stevens' cock is an image both of the poet and the life of his verse; and the time has come for a new way of looking at the bird. The trope spans virtually the entire length of the poet's career, for it reappears as the central image in "Of Mere Being," Stevens' "great death-poem," as Bloom has called it, and the poet's "final revision"²¹ of the earlier lyric. The "gold-feathered bird" that appears "In the bronze decor" (or "distance")²² to sing, rather like Wordsworth's Solitary Reaper, a "foreign song" is, in its strange removal and impassivity, the final image of the poet's muse. This time the bird sings. "Its feathers shine." And when the "fire-fangled feathers dangle down" (*OP* 141), we know a greater end is near.

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Notes

¹ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 82. Hereafter cited in the text as *CP*.

² William Van O'Connor, *The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1950), 133.

³ Daniel Fuchs, *The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1963), 81–82.

⁴ Adalaide Kirby Morris, *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 118.

⁵ Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 100.

⁶ Barbara M. Fisher, *Wallace Stevens: The Intensest Rendezvous* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 24–26. There have been a number of other proponents of an anti-religious view of the poem, both early and late. See for example John J. Enck, *Wallace Stevens: Images and Judgments* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 80–81; Margaret Peterson, *Wallace Stevens and the Idealist Tradition* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 97–99; and James Longenbach, *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 62–63, 80–82, who reads the poem within the context of the First World War as an attack upon a blind idealism.

⁷ This is a general argument of Adalaide Kirby Morris's *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith*.

⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*. Rev. ed. Ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 202, 193. Hereafter cited in the text as *OP*.

⁹ Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 150. Hereafter cited in the text as *NA*.

¹⁰ Louis H. Leiter, "Sense in Nonsense: Wallace Stevens' 'The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws,'" *College English* 26 (April 1965): 551–54.

¹¹ Leiter, 552. See also Fisher, 25.

¹² See in particular "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle" and the allusion to "a certain tip / To which all birds come sometime in their time. / But when they go that tip still tips the tree" (*CP* 17). Harold Bloom has commented on the "phallic innuendo" of these lines in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 42–43. "A blonde to tip the silver" ("The Comedian as the Letter C" [*CP* 42]), "Each man himself

became a giant, / Tipped out with largeness" ("Gigantomachia" [CP 289]), and "tips of cock-cry" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" [CP 470]) are all in different ways suggestive.

¹³ Walter Pater, "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance in Victorian Literature: Prose*, ed. G. B. Tennyson and Donald J. Gray (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 1129.

¹⁴ See, for example, the prominence accorded Stevens throughout Leonard Lutwack's recent *Birds in Literature* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994). Lutwack briefly considers "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws" (148) but only to cite the usual interpretation.

¹⁵ The most notable exception is "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," where Stevens' blackbird emerges as a symbol of mutability and death.

¹⁶ Helen Vendler touches on Stevens' dove as "the Holy Spirit of transcendent inspiration" in *Wallace Stevens: Words Chosen Out of Desire* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 56.

¹⁷ The classic elaboration of this concept is M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

¹⁸ Irving Howe, "Another Way of Looking at the Blackbird," *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens*, ed. Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), 57, 55 (Howe's emphasis). The review originally appeared in the *New Republic* 137 (4 November 1957): 16–19, and was reprinted in Howe's collection of essays, *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics* (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), 158–67.

¹⁹ For perspectivist readings of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," see B. J. Leggett, *Early Stevens: The Nietzschean Intertext* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 169–77; and Daniel R. Schwarz, *Narrative and Representation in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 38–57.

²⁰ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 61.

²¹ Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, 343.

²² On the relative merits of the alternative readings, see Tim Armstrong, "Stevens' 'Last Poem' Again," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 12.1 (Spring 1988): 35–43.

Fictive Music: The Iridescent Notes of Wallace Stevens

WILLIAM DORESKI

MUSIC, FOR WALLACE STEVENS, is a source of narrative and fictive ideas that differ from the conventions of Aristotelian literary genres. Stevens found in music not only sensuous euphonies but a manner of temporal progression—a narrative strategy—that complements the irrational juxtapositions of lyric. This enabled Stevens, whose sensibility seems drawn to the lyric mode, to develop long poems and sequences that do not rely on the usual strategies of narrative, dramatic, and epic poetry. Examining his use of this musical progression helps shed light on his conceptions of narrative development and suggests how they appropriately complement the kinds of stories told by his oblique and sometimes fragmentary poems.

Many studies of Stevens have examined his interdisciplinary (and characteristically romantic) interest in challenging the boundaries between art forms. Most recently, Glen MacLeod, in *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, has examined his interest in the world of painting and has touched upon some of the most important ways in which that non-temporal art directly influenced him, especially in his relationship to surrealism and the concept of abstract art. However, little criticism has focused on the ways in which Stevens' rhetorical strategies and word choice—his "iridescent notes" (L 274)—claim affinity with music other than as a metaphor or as a large formal template.¹ Generally, Stevens' critics have contented themselves with noting that he proposed the title "The Whole of Harmonium" for his collected poems and arguing that this indicates a conscious attempt to imitate musical structure. Joan Richardson goes only slightly further by claiming that "*The Collected Poems* presents an elaborately conceived opera, which at the same time preserves classical sonata form" (101).²

Much Stevens criticism concerned with musical structure is written from a musicologist's point of view. Barbara Holmes, for example, attempts to establish "the musical basis for Stevens' deliberately repetitious strategies" by linking specific poems to specific composers; but rather than engaging the language of the poems she applies musical terminology to them, which generates a discussion that is itself metaphorical (3). The chapter on Stevens in Lawrence Kramer's *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* compares him with Charles Ives, which would surprise Stevens, and con-

centrates on the mimetic dimension of his poetry rather than on its expressive function. Despite the difference in media Kramer asserts, for example, that "The rhythms of naming and un-naming in Stevens and of mutual origination in Ives can be taken as mirror images of each other" (194). More useful is Kramer's discussion of "the play of likeness and difference among particulars," which in the work of Stevens generates a linguistic self-consciousness powerful enough to achieve both abstraction and harmony (5). The formal shapes of Stevens' poems bear no direct analogy to specific musical compositions, nor does Kramer claim otherwise. As he suggests, critics who look for this direct analogy "might as well be a on snipe hunt" (7). Yet by comparing strategies in Ives's "Concord Sonata" to Stevens' "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" Kramer finds a rhetorically determinate patterning, "a flowing movement back into origin as the local is stripped away to reveal its ground in the absolute" that seems to bear comparison with Ives's vision of "place and spirit as interchangeable grounds for each other" and the "seamless" "fusions that he creates for them" (194). This is a powerful comparison of strategies, but despite his delvings into Stevens' imagery patterning, Kramer finds no point of resemblance at the linguistic level, so the complexities of Ives's discordant tonal memory find no analogy in Stevens' language practice. Furthermore, Kramer's use of the concept of fusion as a common problem in Ives and Stevens seems to belie the poet's willingness to embrace indeterminacy and to acknowledge the arbitrariness of his medium.

Discussions of Stevens' metaphorical use of music are often more precise, if only because they have not trespassed too far into musically specific issues.³ John Hollander, for instance, in *Melodious Guile* presents a brief but convincing argument about music metaphor as a source of formal patterning in "Autumn Refrain."⁴ And Sebastian D. G. Knowles in his foreword to a special issue of the *Wallace Stevens Journal* on "Stevens and Structures of Sound" complicates the issue of Stevens' mimetic, or metaphorical, use of music by noting:

Stevens . . . escapes the necessary clutter of language through music. Music has its own conditions, its own contingencies; but Stevens and the modernists are not concerned with the very core. Music, for the modernists, is both tenor and vehicle. When music is the vehicle, in *Ideas of Order* and beyond, it carries the freight of Stevens' changing philosophy of poetry. When music is the tenor, in *Harmonium*, when music is the primary purpose of the poetry, then the greatest and most certain function of the poet here is in fact mere sound. (113)

Knowles justly emphasizes the importance of music throughout Stevens' career. But although his poetics surely change between *Harmonium* and

Ideas of Order I would not so decisively divide his work in its relationship with music, nor would I relegate this relationship primarily to the realm of metaphor. Furthermore, I am not convinced that Stevens either wished to escape the clutter of language or impose too symmetrical an order on it. In "Farewell to Florida" he desires "To be free again, to return to the violent mind / That is their mind," the mind of "men and clouds" as well as "a slime of men in crowds" (CP 118).

Stevens' mature work, including much of the poetry in *Harmonium*, embodies his desire to return to the violent mind and generate a high degree of irrationality, which he defines as "poetic energy" (OP 225). By releasing this energy through disruptive rhetoric his art will escape simple representation and generate a relationship to reality comparable to the non-figurative expression of music. Yet at the same time he intends to respect his own admonition that "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality" ("Adagia," OP 187). This desire to embrace and honor irrationality, not as opposition to reality but as a superior vision of it, transcends the distinction between the mimetic and formal functions identified by Kramer (5). If, as Pater claims, "all arts constantly aspire towards the condition of music," meaning an abstract rather than strictly mimetic function, Stevens understood and practiced that process in a complex way. His poems embrace neither a simple rhythmic tonality (which would over-privilege their formal dimension) nor a surreal plunge into discord (which would simply muddle their mimetic dimension), though he appreciated both Tennysonian euphony and the surrealist regard for the unconscious.⁵

Stevens frequently declares an allegiance to the new, but his taste in analogous arts is fairly conservative: he is only moderately drawn to twentieth-century music. Stravinsky, for instance, is mentioned only once, and incidentally, in Stevens' letters.⁶ Further, he worries about the tendency of the painting and music of his own time to become less connotative, and therefore more denotative, just as he worries that science and Freud may have introduced too insistent and dogmatic a note of reality into intellectual discourse and the arts: "To the extent that this painting [of Braque and Picasso] and this music [of the "Austrians"] are the work of men who regard it as part of the science of painting and the science of music it is the work of realists" (NA 15). Although Stevens concedes that this work has "the effect . . . of the imagination," he further remarks that "It may be that Braque and Picasso love and feel painting and that Schönberg loves and feels music, although it seems that what they love and feel is something else" (NA 16). On the other hand, he approvingly cites Otto Gombosi's notion that "At sixty-four Bartók was not old. Torn and tormented, he was still an *avant-gardiste*—in a way the only one of our time" (SPBS 81). Stevens' relationship to his contemporaries is ambiguous, while he enjoys

a more comfortable relationship with certain nineteenth-century romantic composers:

in a few weeks time my imagination will be such a furnace that I can stroll home from the office and fill the house with the most iridescent notes while I am brushing my hair, say, or changing to the slippers that are so appropriate to the proper enjoyment of Beethoven and Brahms on the gramophone. (L 274)

Conservative though Stevens' taste may seem, I would argue that fueling the furnace of his imagination with this familiar music reveals the enduring viability of its aesthetic stance and technique. It seems reasonable to assume that a poet who values the irrational element finds it entwined even in the logical unfoldings of compositions by these great Romantic composers. Musicologists, after all, frequently call attention to energies in familiar works that challenge lines of development already established in audience expectation. Charles Rosen in *The Classical Style* detects a challenge to temporality and rhythmic continuity in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata when he points to the ways in which this admittedly untypical piece foils linear expectations (396). And Rosen may be describing an effect of temporarily restrained or suspended energy comparable to that of Stevens' sequence poems, such as "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and "The Auroras of Autumn," though in terms not directly applicable to Stevens, when he remarks that the opening movement of the *Appassionata* is "almost rigidly symmetrical in spite of its violence, as if only the simplest and unyielding of frames could contain such power" (400). Though we should probably not refer to these unexpected tensions or shifts of direction as irrational, since non-programmatic music makes no claim on rationality, it is this refusal to conform to simple linear development that Stevens finds beguiling and possible in poetry.

In noting this paradoxical relationship between rigidity of form and the passion of the content as experienced by the listener, Rosen describes a close parallel to Stevens' concept of poetry as a matter of simple form, requiring little discussion (which distinguishes him from Williams, as he was delighted to note), and a grave concern with the *subject* of the poem.⁷ This apparent disparity between form and passion cannot entirely describe the irrational element in poetry, or of the unexpected in music, but it does point to the importance of emotional and irrational subject matter in romantic art, perhaps suggesting why opera and program music blossomed in the nineteenth century. Consistent with this romantic preoccupation, Rosen finds the content, or subject, of Beethoven's music to consist most often of powerful emotional states, such as "enthusiasm and excitement" (*Wellington's Victory*), and his technique to require metaphorical description such as "the dramatic entrances of the soloist," or an "opening

[of the Fourth Piano Concerto in G Major], at once poetically resonant and reticent" (391). The ability to embody such paradoxes and express irrational energies seems to Rosen an intrinsic quality of the tonality that makes the music of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and others possible. Paradox is central to his definition of tonality, which he argues "is quite evidently based on the physical properties of a tone, and it equally evidently deforms and even 'denatures' these properties in the interests of creating a regular language of more complex and richer expressive capacities" (25). As Stevens claims in "The Irrational Element in Poetry," the "history of the irrational element in poetry . . . is, after all, merely a chapter in the history of the irrational in the arts generally" (*OP* 225). And when Rosen in a sweeping statement argues that "The two principle sources of musical energy are dissonance and sequence," generating a tension between resolution and continuity, he implies that deformation and denaturalization are central to the post-Renaissance idea of art (120).

That the irrational deforms and even "denatures" in order to generate a richer language is one source of its attraction. More than a rhetorical procedure, however, the irrational is central to the source of poetry: "the choice of subject-matter is a completely irrational thing," Stevens asserts (*OP* 226). But to exploit the irrational he had to find bolder means of releasing its energy. The means had to be structural, that is, pertaining to the rhetorical strategies of the poems, rather than formal, pertaining to the shape of the poem, because Stevens recognizes, as Beethoven does, the paradoxical relationship between simple form and passionate content.

Because music unleashes the irrational by manipulating the structure of its temporal unfolding, and because fictions, supreme or otherwise, require the illusion of progression, Stevens after much experimentation found temporal procedures analogous to musical structure superior to conventional literary strategies. His exercises in the latter proved relatively unsuccessful. "The Comedian as the Letter C" and parts of "Owl's Clover" lack the firm grounding in juxtaposed lyric elements that give poems like "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" a strong sense of irrational temporality in which time and narration unfold according to new laws peculiar to the particular poem (or poem of the particular). In comparison to "The Auroras of Autumn," the irrational elements of "The Comedian" seem decorative rather than intrinsic. The abuse of the irrational, the release of uncontrolled or uncontrollable energy, could be disastrous, as when Stevens complains of "the irrationality provoked by prayer, whiskey, fasting, opium, or the hope of publicity" (*OP* 225). But although the irrational is an established part of art, its absence from critical discussions of poetics means that a poetry that fully exploits its own energy seems to challenge received poetic traditions.

A fully developed poetics of the irrational, designed to release rather than inhibit aesthetic energies, generates its own kinds of narrative. The stories Stevens tells are primal, originary, or generative. He has faced a world in which conventional myths of origin had been consumed by entropy (as described in "Sunday Morning"), so he attempts to tell stories that will generate and contain in modern terms the primal myth of origin. These stories will then have a more vital relationship to reality than narratives that fail to account for the irrational and the imagination. These new stories unfold in "fictive music," which, although not fully defined in practice until later in his career, he has conceptualized by the time he has written "To the One of Fictive Music." Here Stevens describes fictive music as the song of the imagination, the voice of the "unreal" that renders what is familiar ("The near, the clear" [CP 88]) through "musing on the obscure," telling a story that privileges "The imagination that we spurned and crave" (CP 88). In this relatively early poem Stevens has not yet fully committed his poetics to the irrational, the element that would make fictive music a distinctly harmonic narrative voice. But he has taken a large step in that direction by linking the imagination more firmly to reality, paradoxically by means of the irrational.

A. Walton Litz has most fully described the significance of the title phrase and its link to the actual world of musical terminology: "The title has the form of an invocation, an address to the deity, and the phrase 'fictive music' may recall the term *musica ficta* which was used by medieval theorists to describe accidentals that lie outside a harmonic system" (118). Poetry itself is the "accidental" that lies outside of the harmonic system of nature, and fictive music is the music of irrational imagery, odd juxtaposition, rhetorical innovation, and varied repetition. It uses tactics always available to poetry but freshly liberated by Stevens' faith in the irrational and his freedom from outmoded myths of origin. Though a series of language strategies, fictive music is a medium Stevens metaphorically identifies with actual music—temporal yet less committed to conventional narrative coherence, and far less indebted to the rational, or the "denotative." The point is not whether music actually works this way; rather it is that for Stevens music represents this irrational yet temporal movement, which he consistently identifies with the imagination.

Furthermore, music, because temporal yet detached from the problems of chronology, offers Stevens a model of art less dependent on the illusion of representation and the kinds of openings and closures that in the narrative poem or prose fiction—or even many lyrics and meditative poems—suggest historical or ongoing progression.⁸ For example, he frames his poems in modes analogous to some of the late sonatas of Beethoven, with their dependence on fundamental tonal relationships and refusal of decorative elements, "so that the structure is made to appear naked and imme-

diate, and its presence as a dynamic and temporal force becomes radiant” (Rosen program notes). This is an important step toward a narrative of perfect imaginative embodiment, one that would not unnecessarily bend under the “pressure of reality” (NA 13). The strong element of the irrational courted by Stevens requires a mode of narrative as detached from the quotidian model as possible. At the same time, his understanding of poetry as a temporal art precludes abandoning structural coherence to the degree that Pound does in the later *Cantos*. The process of re-inventing narrative as a musical gesture occurs in “The Idea of Order at Key West,” in which a musical instrument, the human voice, sings independently of the natural order and invents a “mimic motion” that does not replicate the ordinary human voice yet is intelligible, a voice of pure music:

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean. (CP 128)

The “veritable ocean” is not only the actual sea but also the plenitude of the imagination. In this dualistic construction the natural sea, the poem goes on to inform us, is not a mask for the imagination, nor is the human actuality of the singer; rather the relationship between the imaginative song and the seascape in which it occurs is arbitrary, subject only to the sensibility of the singer. “The Idea of Order at Key West” characteristically unfolds in a series of negatives or qualifications. By asserting what the song or its relationship to nature is not, the poem defers ordinary narrative development until the late declaration that “She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang.” This is a highly ambiguous statement, since it claims little more than what we already know, that the world in which she sings is not the quotidian world. Her song is fictive music, and her narration refuses ordinary development. The poem begins after the song has begun; its middle sections are rhetorically elusive. It concludes by introducing an irrelevant figure, the aesthetician Ramon Fernandez,⁹ who apparently cannot answer the impossible question—“tell me, if you know, / Why . . . the glassy lights . . . / Mastered the night”—posed in the crescendo of rhetoric that constitutes the ringing but elusive penultimate verse paragraph. The few lines of closure describe most vividly the quality of fictive music:

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)

It should be noted that while fictive music sings of our origins it does not itself have an origin. The poem begins with the song already in progress and concludes with the song's effect continuing. Thus fictive music frames itself at the opening of the poem with its own presence, and in the closure with a description of itself. The story unfolds in rhetorical ambiguities, negatives, qualifications, and unanswerable questions, yet it has an insistently quotidian setting, an actual sea in the background, lights of fishing boats, and a narrative voice to raise questions about the irrational voice that sings. "The Idea of Order at Key West" introduces the notion of the imagination as a force that creates order through musical gestures. It remains an idea of order because it is necessarily abstract. It does not refuse imagery—it is an image—but is abstract because irrational, not anti-rational but beyond or aside from rationality.¹⁰ Fictive music, the voice of the imagination, consists of "ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds" because its task is not to depict reality, nor to ignore it, but to defamiliarize it through a haze, a ghostliness, of musically emphatic language. As Stevens says of the imagination in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "It has the strength of reality or none at all" (*NA* 7). Ambiguous rhetoric, negative constructions, repeated qualifications confound denotative reality but do not efface it.

Stevens' language tactics embody the music of the imagination and make possible the narration of new origins, reinventing human experience in a world in which old ideas of origin have faded and taken old concepts of reality with them. That fictive music has to avoid origination is more a historical necessity than a philosophical crux. Fictive music has survived the entropy of religion and outdated political and social orders, since the imagination is different in kind from the institutions it and the lesser (more rational) senses create. Institutions have to subject themselves almost entirely to the pressures of reality, and inevitably collapse under them. Thus both their origin and their eventual collapse seem intrinsic. On the other hand, fictive music, the voice of the imagination, because irrational, refuses to surrender to the pressure of reality, and therefore does not have to subject itself to either origin or termination.

In "The Idea of Order at Key West" the tension between fictive music and the temporal quotidian frames the poem, but most often Stevens frames poems rhetorically rather than topically. Rhetoric can frame the poem even when the story told is about the unfolding of rhetoric rather than the ostensible subject. In "The Creations of Sound" the unfolding of the rhetoric generates the fictive music and demonstrates that manipulation of rhetorical form can itself constitute a narrative. Here the rhetorical procedure is determined by an "if . . . then" paradigm elaborated as a problem in identity, authorship, and the relative independence of the text.

The poem opens by asserting that if and when poetry assumes the irrational form of music it defies the conventions of authorship and substitutes for them an idea of textual authority more self-contained, more independent of nature, and more purely a creation of sound itself:

If the poetry of X was music,
So that it came to him of its own,
Without understanding, out of the wall

Or in the ceiling, in sounds not chosen,
Or chosen quickly, in a freedom
That was their element, we should not know

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

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

At a distance, a secondary expositor,
A being of sound, whom one does not approach
Through any exaggeration. (*CP* 310–11)

This entire five-stanza sentence elaborates an “if . . . then” construction (“If the poetry of X was music, / . . . [then] we should not know. . .”). The problem with authorship, the poem argues, is that X is too particularized, “Too exactly himself.” Such actuality inhibits words by bonding them to ordinary intelligence, leading to exaggeration. The rhetorical shaping of these stanzas with grave impersonality (calling the poet “X”) and patient argument embodies one of the ways in which rhetoric can free words from allegiance to ordinary intelligence. This unfolding of a theme through an elaboration of rhetoric, because it relies on varied repetition (lines four and five, eleven and twelve), solemnly Latinate internal rhymes (“obstruction,” “accretion”), and other rhetorical tactics, and because it leads to the embrace of the irrational, constitutes fictive music. The narrative moves not from beginning through middle to end but from hypothesis through rhetorical elaboration to the irrational, as the next stanza demonstrates:

Tell X that speech is not dirty silence
Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.
It is more than an imitation for the ear. (*CP* 311)

In this context the irrational image of “silence made still dirtier” makes sense because it embodies the speech of the poem itself, which does not

clarify but complicates its subject. X, however (whom Harold Bloom identifies as T. S. Eliot [151], but whom Alan Filreis suggests is Allen Tate [126]), “lacks this venerable complication,” so his poems “are not of the second part of life,” are, apparently, too committed to denotation to “make the visible a little hard / To see” or to “eke out the mind / On peculiar horns.” The latter instrument is one of Stevens’ favorites (see “On an Old Horn” [CP 230]) since the “particulars of sound” it produces seem so independent of the ordinary exertions of the will.¹¹ To truly “say ourselves” rejects the poetry of denotation and embraces “syllables that rise / From the floor,” freed of the author-identity, freed even of the speaking voice, like the music of a horn.

In Stevens’ later poems, those after “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” fictive music achieves harmonic effects that can be almost as startling as the stories these poems tell. “The Course of a Particular” frames itself in a cry of nature and the quotidian. This “cry concerns no one at all” (OP 124) since its particularity limits its temporal progress, which is determined solely by its own essence. This self-limited, self-contained cry serves as a model of objective existence and consequently embodies a paradox:

And though one says that one is part of everything,
There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved;
And being part is an exertion that declines:
One feels the life of that which gives life as it is.
(OP 123)

That is, this poem tells a story of the conflict between ideas of origin—how origin is so primal a gesture that it cannot transcend anything, can only be itself. The cry of the leaves like a birth-cry occurs only once per state of being, and refuses generalization. This cry frames its own narrative, concluding where it began, so that the temporal progress of the poem bears no organic relationship to its subject, organicism being one of those entropic myths Stevens has rejected.

The irrational pervades “The Course of a Particular” as a series of familiar rhetorical gestures, such as the tripled negative construction of “It is not a cry of divine attention, / Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry” (OP 123). As in “The Creations of Sound,” an apparently rational delineation, adroitly defamiliarized, elicits an irrational image: “the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.” Who but Stevens would think to suggest that leaves could transcend themselves and that this would engender a particular sort of cry? The implied possibility demonstrates how irrational all those negatives are, how irrelevant the image of “the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes.” As Bloom points out, “Stevens is never more cunning than in this poem, as the reader is gradu-

ally startled into realizing that all of the poem's negations of the cry count for little compared to the phenomenal truth that "the leaves cry" (354). The notion of fictive music shapes the poem through varied repetition, balanced triplets, and a sometimes insistent alliteration ("the final finding of the ear"), generating an audibility distinct even in the mind's ear.¹²

Temporal dislocations are most obvious in Stevens' longer poems, which generally refuse narrative continuity in favor of lyric or meditative contingency. "The Auroras of Autumn" offers a flamboyant model of fictive music and self-devouring narrative. In overall form and in the structure of individual sections it embodies a theme and variation form analogous to many musical sequences, though formally corresponding to none in particular. The opening section posits a theme of which the nine following sections are variants; further, each section states a sub-theme in its opening or framing tercet that the seven following tercets vary. The result is a brooding poem of somber and meditative self-probing: as Vendler suggests, Stevens' version of *Il Penseroso* (*Wings* 231). Its tone is suggested by Stevens' comment in a letter to Mona Van Duyn that the lights of the aurora borealis "symbolize a tragic and desolate background" (*L* 852).

"The Auroras of Autumn" confronts the serpent, which—although a creature of light afire in the dark and the emblem of being—represents the exfoliation of selfhood through dark exigencies of change. The general theme is the irrational, undulating movement of temporality itself. The variations explore the ways in which vicissitudes of flux and entropy shape the archetype of being (the serpent, the "image at the end of the cave"), ideas of home ("A cabin . . . on a beach" [*CP* 412]), archetypes of mother (the face that "fills the room" [*CP* 413]) and father (a paradigm of origination, which the poem critiques), family interaction and exchange and its relationship to the origin of art, imagination as a source of art and ideas of temporality, innocence, or the still point of origin, companionship, human intercourse, the subject of art ("This drama that we live" [*CP* 419]), and, finally, community or the wholeness of life ("unhappy people in a happy world" [*CP* 420]). The poem argues that temporality and movement beget form. Such begetting does not constitute origin, though; rather it embodies the principle of change that links nature and the imagination. More importantly, it expresses that principle in irregular patterns of modified repetition, reversals, self-qualifications, self-doubt, and rhetorical questions. The poem does not effect or even attempt a totalizing synthesis but revels in fragmentation. Any attempt to read it by fictionalizing its difficult juxtapositions into states of equilibrium is doomed to failure. Like several other of Stevens' major late works, "The Auroras of Autumn" does not concern itself with aesthetic fusion of unlikenesses but rather manipulates the contingencies of language, which are as arbitrary and artificial as musical form.

The begetting of arbitrary form described in section I becomes a serpent's undulation "wriggling out of the egg," "gulping after formlessness," attempting to free itself of historical temporality through the self-sustained movement of abstract music. As this self-created figuration of light cracks the shell it becomes an entity. Dimensions emerge and light reveals "In the midmost midnight" the boreal serpent nesting in a "maze / Of body and air and forms and images" (CP 411). The serpent embodies being itself rather than a particular being. But this is being in a primal state, and it generates fear. James Longenbach describes the opening of "The Auroras of Autumn" as a dramatic encounter between the poet and nature: "Confronted by the terrifying lights in the sky in which 'the serpent lives,' Stevens wonders if by the powers of imagination we could find a 'time of innocence' " (288). But innocence, in this poem, is only a stage of the serpent's long uncoiling. By no means is the realization of its presence entirely apocalyptic. Its bodiless condition, its surface "flashing to wished-for disappearances," makes its "meditations in the ferns" a productive and necessary source of imagery, so that its movement toward the sun, the fire of the imagination, generates faith in form, rendering it a visible link between nature and humankind, "The moving grass, the Indian in his glade" (CP 412). This is one of the sources of the fragile "affirmation" noted by both Longenbach and Vendler.

Section II frames itself in closure as sub-theme and rhetorical tactic ("Farewell to an idea . . ."), as do several other sections. Some both open and conclude rather heavily: "The wind will command them with invincible sound" (III), "And he feels afraid" (VI); others open with dispiriting rhetorical questions or statements: "Is there an imagination that sits enthroned / As grim as it is benevolent" (VII), "An unhappy people in a happy world" (X). Closure, the rhythm of termination, like the doom of sections III and IX, knocks heavily at the door. To establish the vulnerable (in fact, already violated) location of that door, section II concerns itself with the apparent origin of home (which has left its originating idea behind it), and makes clear how temporality engenders form. The cabin is white because its color represents a process, a theme, a consequence, not because anyone arbitrarily chose to paint it white. The apparent finality of choice is an illusion. The flowers, too, are white, and function the way musical notes do: reverberating in harmony with each other and with their essence, their whiteness. This whiteness leads to "something else," something back along the line of temporal progression, something different in scale from either the flowers or the house. In this moment of musical origin only that that participates in this backwards and forwards temporality (that is, either bidding farewell to an idea or recalling seemingly past manifestations of whiteness) becomes visible (or audible), so that, on the one hand, "being"

itself is a matter of being white, the color of erasure and absence, and, on the other hand, in terms of light, an amalgamation of all colors.

As conventional time passes and "A cold wind chills the beach" (CP 412), the pressure of reality increases and the whiteness, a coloration of the imagination, fades. The man on the beach then concentrates on the actual world while noticing that temporality does not, in fact, hinder movement but facilitates it, "the north . . . always enlarging the change," while the white, as it fades, breaks into constituent colors, "blue-red sweeps," "polar green, / The color of ice and fire and solitude" (CP 413). The deserted cabin, it seems, serves as an apparent point of origin—a home, a source—but as its color breaks prismatically its inhabitant has to face his own constituent elements, his loneliness and opposing humours. As the poem as a whole, especially this section, suggests, individuality exacts the price of estrangement, though it compensates with glimpses of a cold beauty, ice, fire, the wind, the "Arctic effulgence" of section VI, a "haggling of wind and weather" (CP 417, 421).

The mother and father sections, which may describe the world before the desertion of the cabin, also begin by saying farewell to their respective ideas, but undulate in terms of domesticity as a permanent possession of the imagination, and creativity, inherited from the father, as a source of change, motion, and the tantalizing idea of origin. Section V brings mother and father together in familial exchange and suggests that art finds its origin in ideas of temporal movement generated by the family itself. As Stevens notes in *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Subjects* (quoting Henry James), "It is art which makes life, makes interest, makes importance . . . [.] and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process" (SPBS 77). Life and art even in the domestic sphere are inextricable, and the process of human interchange inevitably leads to the generation of specific works of art. The mother, section III suggests, occupies the richest domestic role, but she too fosters the imagination because she embodies the idea of possession and of being possessed. That she "is dissolved, . . . is destroyed" reminds us that her form, her face, participates in temporal progression, while her hands "are a motion not a touch" (CP 413). The house she fills the rooms of "will crumble and the books will burn," but the house in the imagination participates in a relationship with nature, somewhat adversarial (since the wind will "knock like a rifle-butt against the door" [CP 414]) in which domesticity allows itself to be commanded by grandeur and "invincible sound," a music that, like the music of an aeolian harp, is only partly shaped by human desire.

The father, a darker and more obviously archetypal figure than the mother, seems both more under the sway of the pressure of reality and more in control of it. Though he is the origin of motion, he has not yet fully learned to make music, to "choir . . . with the naked wind" (CP 415).

His throne requires such music, and his discerning ear hears the beginning strains of it, but he requires a troupe of masked players, as Hamlet's uncle did, to sing for him the tragedy of motion and change, which he understands scientifically as measurable phenomena but only in terms of his creative role, not as the forces that link him to the naked wind. The mother, on the other hand, instead of masked players "invites humanity to her house" (CP 415). In response, perhaps, the father brings storytellers and musicians to interpret or muffle the tales, just as Stevens' lyrical strategies often both interpret and mute the tale he tells. The various art forms conjured by the father are all ritualistic, musical, and not at all committed to the depiction of reality. The musicians, however, who "strike the instinctive poem," form the center of the performance. The festival, disorganized and discordant, drifts toward tragedy, but lacks language—"there are no lines to speak" (CP 416). But the presence of the artists suffices, for the moment.

This theater of the absurd, as section VI indicates, represents the irrationality of the imagination as the essential element of art. The theater is made of cloud, it floats through cloud, and yet it is made of rock, "mountains running like water . . . / Through waves of light" (CP 416). As with the white of the cabin, its color is all colors, changeable and spawning forms. These forms, product of temporality, are always in motion, the capitol that "is emerging or has just / Collapsed" (CP 416). Until the individual artist, the responsible, capable imagination, perceives this constant movement it does not quite exist. When he "opens the door of his house" (CP 416) and perceives that his old domesticity has dissolved in fire, and reads in that fire the cold effulgence of change, of himself, he learns that the imagination is a source of fear as well as beauty ("Death is the mother of beauty," "Sunday Morning" reminds us), and is prepared for the key question raised in section VII.

Rhetorical though the question is, Stevens must ask it. Is death the grim side of the imagination? "Sunday Morning," "Le Monocle de mon Oncle," "Esthétique du Mal," and other of Stevens' earlier poems affirm that such is the case. And a closely related poem, "Metaphor as Degeneration," argues that "images" (like that Platonic serpent formlessness), "these reverberations, / And others, make certain how being / Includes death and the imagination" (CP 444).¹³ But because "The Auroras of Autumn" links the imagination to the problem of origin, the question assumes new resonance. The answer is that the imagination, because it is the psychic embodiment of change, because it not only enables us to perceive temporality but generates it, dooms us to individuality and necessitates our awareness of death as a correlative to our passion for origin:

It leaps through us, through all our heavens leaps,
Extinguishing our planets, one by one,
Leaving, of where we were and looked, of where

We knew each other and of each other thought,
A shivering residue, chilled and foregone,
Except for that crown and mystical cabala. (CP 417)

Besides the “shivering residue” of our memory of each other remain only the traces of secular or religious history with which we have tried to explain death and temporality. Whether or not this death scene represents Stevens’ response to the atom bomb, as Charles Berger has suggested, the relationships among change, negation, and history are the issue. At this bleak moment, constant change signifies “destruction and decreation,” in Helen Vendler’s phrase (*Words* 40). The only emblematic still points (“crown and mystical cabala”) derive not from nature but from the most dated of social and cultural rituals. The autumnal tone of the poem is bleakest here, justifying Vendler’s description of “The Auroras of Autumn” as “Stevens’ great poem of the void” (49) and Bloom’s complex reading of it as a romantic crisis poem (256).

However, the poem does not abandon us to chance, fate, or destiny, nor does it bottom out in the void. The tone of the imagination is not utterly stark or tragic. But it is “mournful” because it is drawn to “What must unmake it” (CP 418)—the production of sublunary mortal communication, which is “flippant” in refusing finality. Whether “flippant” means “pert” or as Bloom suggests “takes its archaic sense of ‘voluble’ or ‘talkative’ ” hardly matters, since either way it indicates a stubborn plenitude, a self-renewing attitude (275). The poem recovers its balance. “There may be always a time of innocence,” section VIII notes. Although innocence cannot be localized or temporalized, it is part of temporality itself. The point that innocence is no less real for being ideal renders it permanently available without regard for its truth or utility. Its existence makes it ontologically compatible with being:

It is like a thing of ether that exists
Almost as predicate. But it exists,
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is. (CP 418)

The lights that are not an illusion but innocence—the auroras of autumn—embody the neutrality of nature and bear no moral taint. That is the function of nature in Stevens’ late poems: to exist without moral reservation or scruple, and thus provide a model of innocence, a state of being that if not always temporally functional remains latent and available, fostered by the mother archetype, and fully a part of our self-creation. The community of realists that lacks access to innocence, the imagination, and

the irrational grows fat and “sticky with sleep” (*CP* 419). When the imagination enters this community it strikes only one person at a time, making “a freedom of the two,” and isolating the individual. Commitment to the imagination is risky. Those who make such a commitment could end up “hanging in the trees next spring.” However, for the sake of those who have the courage the stars appear in gaudy dress; and the glory of their presence, this section concludes, may occur

in the simplest word,
Almost as part of innocence, almost,
Almost as the tenderest and the truest part (*CP* 420)

of one’s being. Almost, because the concluding section X suggests that the pressure of reality presents “too many mirrors for misery,” too much opportunity to be unhappy. Yet this vision of “unhappy people in a happy world” cannot represent the entire truth. The serpent, with its “finding fang,” requires more, something to “roll / On the expressive tongue” (*CP* 420), something worthy of language. In reiterating the phrase “unhappy people in a happy world,” the poem finds an element of ritual, or contrivance, and in this contrivance, these syllables, detects “the spectre of the spheres,” the desire to “contrive a whole.” This desire for wholeness, for a comprehensive view, is the genius of the human race. The imagination makes available “all lives,” even in the presence of reality—“hall harridan, not hushful paradise”—and the light of the auroras renders them readable in terms of nature, where “the full of fortune and the full of fate” parallel “a haggling of wind and weather,” forces as devoid of moral consideration as human innocence itself.

This powerfully comprehensive poem undulates in narrative terms that resist dramatic development in favor of lyric contingency, suggesting the tendency of some musical sequences to defer dramatic possibilities and avoid closure in order to facilitate other kinds of tonal or thematic developments.¹⁴ Even its tenses shift in such a way as to discourage any sense of ordinary temporal continuity. The poem embodies its own argument: its temporal sequence generates lyric juxtapositions that are more formal than conventional narrative, more meditative, less beholden to conventional narrative sequence. Yet to some extent the argument of the poem depends on the understanding that a still point is not possible because there is no center, therefore no point that is not in motion. The discontinuity and tension between the form or ethos of the poem (lyric meditation) and its argument generate a harmony all the more beguiling (and all the more committed to reality) for its irrational movement. The poem is lyric, musical, and reflexive not only in the way it juxtaposes imagery, however, but in its aggressive use of conventional language devices—particularly, as mentioned earlier, its use of various kinds of internal rhyme and echo.

Further, familiar rhetorical devices such as parataxis, catachresis, and especially antanaclasis (“Contriving balance to contrive a whole”) play especially complex roles not only in the intellection of the poem but in its harmonizing. Characteristic of the lyric and comparable in themselves to musical tactics, these devices are used not to argue or persuade, as rhetoric otherwise does, but to defer argument and persuasion (which mime strict chronology in their temporal thrust) and to mimic instead the sense-defined temporality of perception. Far from decorative, these rhetorical devices serve to expose the structure as “naked and radiant,” in Rosen’s words, by deferring the flow of conventional narrative in order to reveal temporality as only one artifice among many.

Although relatively little discussion of music occurs in this poem, Stevens’ strategy for constructing a sequence that makes an argument but avoids conventional narrative is analogously musical insofar as he finds the motivating energies of music and poetry compatible. That is, he relies most heavily on those strategies and devices that, although part of the repertoire of language, are most clearly analogous to the familiar concert music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and rejects many of the strategies more commonly associated with narrative poetry, drama, and the novel. Most particularly, while constructing a poem that moves in time, as all language must, he constructs it on the principles of self-reference and patterned unfolding that generate tune and harmony in music, rather than on the historical principle that underlies conventional narrative. Peter Latham’s jacket notes on Brahms’s second symphony describing “the slow movement” that “at a first hearing . . . presents some difficulties owing to the compactness of the thinking and the weaving together of simultaneous melodies” not only uses language appropriate to a critical discussion of “The Auroras of Autumn” but also reminds us that the music of the last century intrigues because its tonality and dissonance, harmonic structure, and rhythmic complexity generate inexhaustibly rich expressive qualities. All of these characteristics have some counterpart in Stevens’ poetry.

Rhythm embodies temporality and forms the clearest link between the two arts. The tension in poetry and music between what Kramer calls “discursive rhythms” and “cathetic rhythms” is highly variable in both arts. Stevens in his later work, especially, emphasizes the “cathetic rhythm,” which is associative and psychological rather than strictly temporal (Kramer 19–24). Although “The Auroras of Autumn,” like all poetry, is temporal in its unfolding, it demonstrates as well as argues that temporality is itself a human convention, a product of perception and the imagination, and can be manipulated. Representation of conventional temporality—the apparently simple progression of time—would concede too much to the pressure of reality. Temporality begets form not through mimetic organicism but out of the contingent resources of the imagination.

As a literary strategy, chronological narrative undermines that insight, which is central to Stevens' poetics. On the other hand, representation of non-chronological temporality arguably is not representation at all. Therefore it avoids not only conventional narrative but the vexing issue of the relationship between sign and object, killing the metaphor of organicism at the root. The refusal of chronology demonstrates that the imagination creates and is not created by the temporality it perceives.

Stevens' taste in music may not have extended to the avant-garde, but I believe he was alert to the dissonance at the heart of classical and romantic tonality (as Rosen describes it) and to the way the rhythmic complexity and passionate phrasing of this music extends and challenges simple ideas of temporality. He interpreted these functions as the irrational element in music, its energy. I have attempted to demonstrate that Stevens' embrace of music and musical devices signals his rejection of the conventional attempt to render language representational. Music serves as a source of narrative ideas unimpeded by conventional literary norms and as an aesthetic model of temporality apart from dramatic mimesis. The irrational is not an embrace of surreal subject matter but a matter of deforming temporality and emphasizing the disparity between relatively stable, even rigid form (if blank verse used so flexibly and innovatively can be said to be rigid) and passionate subjects. The energy released by this denaturing of temporality becomes rhetorical and creative in the most basic sense of challenging received ideas of order and origin. The stories told in Stevens' poetry proceed from the assumption that the old ideas of origin no longer work; therefore generic narrative strategies, which serve as metaphors for development from a point of origination, could not serve him. The fictive music in which Stevens writes his mature poems represents an idea, not an imitation, of music. Stevens believes that the poetry of the irrational, of fictive music, "is a text that we shall be needing . . . / That comes from ourselves" (CP 495), because the pressure of reality itself generates our need for poetry more deeply rooted in the imagination, better equipped to negotiate with the real.

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Notes

¹ Stevens in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting" makes clear his belief in the possibility of commerce between the arts and yet expresses a skepticism toward the generalizations on which such critical commerce bases itself (NA 160). Parenthetical abbreviations refer to *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (CP), *The Necessary Angel* (NA), *Opus Posthumous* (OP), *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (L), and *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets* (SPBS).

² Richardson's musical analogy is broadly metaphorical, however, rather than analytical, as her subsequent discussion indicates: "*Harmonium* is the overture, presenting each of the themes and rhythms but in snatches and quick phrases sonorously overlapping and clashing together" (102). She goes on to describe *Parts of a World* in comparable terms, finding it an

operatic drama in which a clash of themes parallels the somewhat different concept of musical themes, and after various "arias and recitatives" results in a "climax following the poet's 'rage against chaos'" (102).

³Sometimes, however, these discussions drift entirely away from music. For instance, Northrop Frye in "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form" notes a pattern for describing the parallels between Stevens' poetry and musical form but writes an essay mainly concerned with explication of Stevens' ideas about the imagination and reality, and becomes almost theological in its approach, returning to the "metaphor of theme and variation" only in its final paragraph.

⁴Unfortunately, Hollander devotes only a few pages of his book to Stevens, but his general discussion encompasses many of the concerns of Stevens' poetics. For example, Hollander's strictures on the interpretation of poetry through the metaphors of music require careful consideration. He notes that "poetry is a musical faker rather than a prosaic liar" and that "at least as far as musical analogies for linguistic structures are concerned, the concept of euphony leads to interpretive error" (5). Hollander's point is that in poetry form and content are neither distinct nor identical. Instead, "poetry involves 'form as content,'" so that any critical analogy between musical form (which is un beholden to sense) and poetic form necessarily distorts the manner in which language schemes and sense or meaning combine to generate formal characteristics. It is Stevens' commitment to irrationality that flexes the entwining of form and content and allows his poetry the freedom to generate significantly fresh effects.

⁵Glen MacLeod in "Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction" argues that Stevens derived his concept of the irrational from surrealism, although Stevens' concept of the relationship between the imagination and reality is quite different. I differ from MacLeod in that I would argue that the opposition between the imagination and reality does not disappear in Stevens' concept of the irrational; rather it becomes fluid, and shifts as the pressure of reality increases or decreases. That is, the irrational is not entirely a philosophical concept but in part a social one, subject to war, economic depression, and other external issues.

⁶For confirmation of Stevens' unadventurous taste see Michael O. Stegman's 1969 discography, which lists, for example, thirty-two Beethoven titles and three Stravinskys. Although twentieth-century composers are well represented, they are, as Stegman remarks, predominantly those who "would now be considered the most conservative ones" (80). See also Stegman's later article on musical compositions relating to Stevens' poetry.

⁷In a 1940 letter to Henry Church concerning the possibility of a chair of poetry at Princeton and a new lecture series, Stevens remarks that "poetry means not the language of poetry but the thing itself, wherever it may be found. . . . The subject-matter of poetry is the thing to be ascertained" (L 377).

I take Stevens' admonition in "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" to "Be not an intelligence, / Like a widow's bird / Or an old horse" (CP 18) to express his doubts about a poetry too dependent on form. In a letter to Richard Eberhart, Stevens remarks that Williams "rejects the idea that meaning has the slightest value and describes a poem as a structure of little blocks" (L 803).

⁸Anca Rosu argues that issues of opposing sounds—noise versus music, for instance—are central in Stevens' work because "such reigning oppositions . . . are essential to a logic of poetic representation that Stevens wants to call into question in a certain radical way, such that epistemological breakdown or dissolution becomes . . . the great subject of his poetry" (178). Rosu goes on to argue that Stevens' dissolution of such oppositions exposes "the unrepresented, the (otherwise) unrepresentable—in its place." I do not differ with this argument, but it is essentially about epistemology rather than Stevens' aesthetic or linguistic procedure. Rosu's actual readings of poems, however, offer some very useful linguistic insights.

⁹ Stevens even denied this actual person's ontological status (L 798 n).

¹⁰ MacLeod in *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* argues that insofar as the art world in the late 1930s and early 1940s came to accept "abstract" as meaning "concrete" or "real" Stevens' use of the term indicated a movement toward or reconciliation with rationalism (103–21). I would argue that for Stevens "abstract" always meant a certain view of reality, not from opposition but from a point not entirely crushed by its pressure.

¹¹ Filreis argues that "The Creations of Sound" responds to Tate's "Seasons of the Soul," a poem that Stevens thought an example of " 'poetry written under glass' " (Filreis 126). The specific complaint, as outlined by Filreis, is that "Tate's poetry is all sound" (127), a criticism common to many of Tate's detractors. Filreis' observation that "The Creations of Sound" "embeds its critical response . . . in the precise imprecision of its tercets" (128) is particularly acute.

¹² Anca Rosu refers to this process as the generation of "sound images." Her discussion of "Autumn Refrain" notes that Stevens directs his speaker to "the perception of a sound he has never encountered except in poetry," and that this sound "is only the fiction or 'image' of a sound which could only mentally be 'seen' " (179).

¹³ Consisting, like each of the ten sections of "The Auroras of Autumn," of eight three-line stanzas, "Metaphor as Degeneration" structurally and thematically looks as if it may have been composed as part of "The Auroras of Autumn," then cut perhaps because of its lesser density. "The Auroras of Autumn" appeared in *The Kenyon Review* in the winter 1948 (10.1: 1–10) issue and "Metaphor as Degeneration" in *American Letters* a year later (1.5 [April 1949]: 9).

¹⁴ Lawrence Kramer describes this effect in musical terms in relation to *The Well-Tempered Keyboard*: "If one listens to this sequence with an ear to its harmonic effect, the shock built into the semitonal movement quickly dissipates. It is impossible to hear each new group as a flat supertonic of its predecessor, at least more than once or twice; the relationship is too distant, too much like non-relationship, to have any tonal reality. The effect of Bach's traversal is, as he intended it to be, didactic, not dramatic—a fact particularly highlighted by the absence of any closural feeling at the end of either series of preludes and fugues" (100–01).

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Checklist: Second Purchase, Wallace Stevens Collection, Huntington Library

ROBERT MOYNIHAN

Introduction

JUST HOW EXTRAORDINARY Wallace Stevens was as reader and book collector may be judged from a comment in *The Power Elite* by C. Wright Mills: "Executive circles do not overlap very much with those of artistic or literary interest. Among them are those who resent reading a report or a letter longer than one page, such avoidance of words being rather general."¹ Stevens, even among readers and book collectors, rises to other levels, just as would be expected from the major American poet of this century. As for his business associates, he never celebrated his poetic quest in any manner that would threaten his a-literate but essential corporate alliances. Leafing through these books or even the list of holdings renews the wonder at Stevens' individuality and toughness: his reading led to literary creation in the fullest sense—the overthrowing of accepted ideas and the destruction of the commonplace. He consistently ran against the grain of his peer groups, both writers and businessmen.

As with the checklist of books from the first purchase by the Huntington Library in 1976,² some pattern is evident, not the easy one of "influence," but of what might be called the habits of a dialectical reader. Book collecting in and of itself may be a form of quest, a drive to control the mental milieu. With Stevens, however, much more is at work. A desire to know and to order may be implicitly present, but Stevens' reading and collecting take unexpected turns. A perusal of Stevens' own comments in the marginalia of the Huntington's first purchase shows that he usually marked to refute, only secondarily to assimilate, and almost never to imitate. His stance before a text was dialectical: he questioned everything and rejected more than he accepted. Simply put, Stevens' art is not derivative; it is the opposite of academic close reading and memorized reference.

Even though Stevens selectively mistrusted the professoriate, in his mature days he read its commentary with consistency. One of the surprises of this collection is the number of works by the leading critics of the day, in and out of academe: Stanley Edgar Hyman, Edmund Wilson, Austin Warren, I. A. Richards, F. R. Leavis, Kenneth Burke, William Empson, R. P. Blackmur, Yvor Winters, H. E. Holthusen, Elmer E. Stoll, Campbell and Robinson of *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake*, the criticism of Allen Tate and of T. S. Eliot, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* by Cleanth Brooks, and

collections edited by J. L. Hevesi, Augusto Centano, and D. A. Stauffer. This second acquisition by the Huntington in 1990 shows that he thought highly enough of the inimitable F. O. Matthiessen to own the works on Henry James, T. S. Eliot, and even the memorial volume, at moments touched by political radicalism, edited by Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy. Stevens also read enough academic philosophy to become aware of its major twentieth-century convulsions. In this group of the second purchase are books by Alfred North Whitehead, Karl Jaspers, Schopenhauer, a work on positivism by Richard Von Mises, an introductory *Recent Philosophy* by John Laird, and even a popularized work by Bertrand Russell.

Can one say, however, that this reading was essential to Stevens? Probably not, even though one of the current academic fancies is that the reading of philosophy forms writers and poets, or at least carries them to higher levels of opacity. More important to Stevens the writer, perhaps, is the work of poets of all ages and of his own contemporaries. It is a record of wide but not exhaustive reading. He collected a good deal of T. S. Eliot, and the pages remain uncut if delivered that way. Eliot therefore became the best of recognized but unadmitted rivals: an investment. Stevens collected a good many of the publishings by the Hogarth Press, the novels of Virginia Woolf, and translations of Russian works. Apparently he subscribed to James Laughlin's "Poet of the Month," and he bought or kept the works sent him of Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Conrad Aiken, Ezra Pound, Dylan Thomas, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Rilke, John Berryman, Garcia Lorca, and Goethe. His persistent passion over the acquisition of the last, a German edition by the great Kurt Wolff, is fortunately a matter of published record.³ This list also shows reading (now unfortunately in some broken sets) of the fiction of Proust, Hardy (some even underlined), E. M. Forster, Kafka, Turgenev, and Gide.

One of Stevens' more celebrated interests is pictorial art. Expectedly, the book of his friend Walter Pach appears, so too *The Language of Drawing and Painting* by his Harvard undergraduate housemate, Arthur Pope. Less expected is the sighting of Sir Herbert Read's *Art Now*, Robert Byron's *Appreciation of Architecture*, and A. K. McComb's *Baroque Painters of Italy*. Another of his consistent interests is music and musical biography. One of the most heavily marked books in the Huntington's first purchase is the volume of Ferruccio Busoni's letters detailing the rents and tears between the divided life of a performing virtuoso and composer. The second purchase shows the continuing interest with S. Sitwell's *Mozart*, C. F. A. Williams' *Bach*, and an autographed copy of Artur Schnabel's *Music and the Line of Most Resistance*.

Another consistency in this collection is Stevens' commitment to history and order of the native place. Some of the volumes here may be an inherited part of the family's older collection, but Stevens bought and marked R. W. Albright's book on Reading, Pennsylvania, to add to the

related works of E. T. Clark, W. K. Frick, Jacob Fry, M. L. Montgomery, I. D. Rupp, C. Weygandt, R. C. Wood, and J. B. Nolan. Again, however, one may note the opposition. For every such work in the collection is another of foreign travel or customs.

Anyone wishing to learn something of Stevens' cultural milieu would do well to look at the collection of journals in this checklist, particularly the 1939–1940 volumes of *The Kenyon Review* and the 1919–1920 *London Mercury*. The issues not merely advertise and review books Stevens bought but also range widely in intellectual and literary matters. Number four of the first volume of *The Kenyon Review* provides some measure of the aesthetic setting at the end of the 1930s, and John Crowe Ransom, writing of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, could as well be describing the urgency of Stevens' poetic acts: "If Joyce's art is almost completely irresponsible, any poem is, and by definition should be, bent on introducing into discourse something of what prose defines as irrelevance" (428). Delmore Schwartz delivers a telling polemic on the politics of a consistently figural presence in this collection, T. S. Eliot, and the Anglo-Louisian's flirtation with *L'Action Française* in the pages of *The Criterion*. Schwartz labels Eliot's defense of Charles Maurras "extremely weak" (445). F. O. Matthiessen's remarks about Mark Van Doren's *Collected Poems* are dispraise by dilution, yet the conclusion of the review signals one of Stevens' concerns in his major work. Van Doren "has kept up standards by his patient attention," but is most important as an exemplar "of the kind of strength that comes through the unflagging exercise of a skill. He has made a poem . . . in which he argues that the parched drought of the throat can be broken only by active renewal, by the tongue's attempt to startle the silence by awakening some spring of joy" (457).

As for the realm of Lilliputian or self-interested literary-politico criticism Stevens abjured throughout his life, Robert Penn Warren writes that Stevens' "reputation is growing but [his] new work can scarcely be said to make a gain over the poems in *Harmonium*" and that Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Van Doren have no "central" position (394–95). In another piece, Harold Monro calls the work of Williams "inexcusable rubbish" (447). In a review of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Christopher Isherwood regrets Steinbeck's descent into bathos and the intrusion of an evangelical, hectoring voice. Perhaps the best article in this number of *The Kenyon Review* is "Surrealism as a Public Art," with illustrations of Miro, Dali, Giacometti, and di Chirico. The aesthetic ally of Stevens, James J. Sweeney, sounds a theme consistent in American art and life, the anxiety of pleasure, or in Sweeney's sentence: "The mind fears the senses" (429).

One wishing to establish the literary-social context for the younger Stevens might look at the four issues of *The London Mercury* of 1919–1920, a canvass of the civil and literary. Aldous Huxley reviews G. Gregory Smith's *Ben Johnson* and quotes from *Discoveries*—one of Stevens' heavily

marked Harvard volumes of the Huntington's first purchase: "The true artificer will not run away from nature as he were afraid of her" (185). J. C. Squire expects the survival of art even after the immediate postwar gloom in 1919: "where," he asks, "is Phillip IV, except in his horse-face on the canvasses of Velasquez?" (46). Another review praises Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* for being "impeccably lucid" (340), and an essay on William Blake observes "the weakness of many mystics, the desire for a vast geometrical system" (288). A "Letter from America" is positive only about Vachel Lindsey and complains that the nation has "destroyed religion for getting-on," while "Energy here cannot work distinctively; it is forced at its very birth into one or another prepared channel" (232). The same volume prints Lindsay's "Bryan." Its "brag and chant" stand strongly against the multipage pathetic effusions of J. C. Squire's verse. As for another interest of Stevens, one may note the critical praise given Arthur Waley's *Translations from the Chinese* for exactitude and economy and the spur this may have been for Stevens' own gathering of Chinese and other proverbial lore. That *The London Mercury* remained in Stevens' memory is a matter of his own reference in the *Letters* (347), where he once again patiently descends to the level of mere reference in response to the somewhat literal questions of one of his would-be interpreters. More importantly, however, *The London Mercury* widened the dimensions of esteem for an American reader, publishing contemporary American work that stood strongly against derivative English poetry, and, further, defined the commercial state of American interests that Stevens transcended.

Perhaps one cannot read through a collection of this kind without forming some personal preferences. In this list is a small number of special editions and antiquities, such as John Glanvill's 1688 translation of Fontenelle's *Plurality of Worlds* reissued in an elegant Nonesuch Press reprint. In a dialogue between the savant who professes the Copernican system and the Ptolemaic countess, the former opines: "the Universe may be framed in such a manner, that from time to time it may produce new Suns." The neophyte responds about the wonders of newly informed sight: "the Worlds, the Heavens, & celestial Bodies [are] so subject to change, that I am come to my self again" (137). As for less remote matter from the small cosmos of letters, I suppose I would choose the essays by Francis Ponge and Paul Valéry in the collection by J. L. Hevesi. Those seeking "influence" for one of the last works in Stevens' canon, "The Rock," will find some impudent ramifications in Ponge.

One minor caveat should be made about this collection. It includes a few children's books by Witter Bynner, Rhoda Power, and Lionel James, and I conclude from the dates of publication that these were given Holly Stevens by her father. Even a "Cock Robin" surfaces under the entry *Elegy*. The book by Power, nonetheless, is an irreverent but inevitable affect for a few lines of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Power's work is one of those rarities, a child's book that is not condescendingly moronic, and in

its collection of folk tales, dedicated to one Bambina, is a story of "Why Hens Scratch on the Ground" with some crude onomatopoeia between hen, cock, and an interrogating hawk. Their *Tuks* and *ooks* are touched by a later verbal Midas:

Ah ké! the bloody wren, the felon jay,
Ké-ké, the jug-throated robin pouring out,
Bethou, bethou, bethou me in my glade. (CP 394)

At any rate, the dilution of a few of Holly Stevens' personal remnants might move any commentator to pause and celebrate the boundaries of a once-shared imagination between parent and child, one here so unexpected, so poignant, and so transformed in later poetic act.⁴

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Notes

¹ C. Wright Mills. *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 130.

² See Milton J. Bates, "Stevens' Books at the Huntington: An Annotated Checklist." Parts I, II, Errata. *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 2.3/4, 3.1/2, 3.3/4 (Fall 1978, Spring 1979, Fall 1979): 45-61, 15-33, 70.

³ "Letters to Ferdinand Reyher," ed. Holly Stevens. *Hudson Review* 44 (Autumn 1991): 403, 404.

⁴ I thank the following for their help in preparing this checklist: Julia Boken, Kelli Ann Bronson, Achim Koedderman, Thomas V. Lange, Jane Marden, Helen Reed, and John N. Serio. The staff members of the Huntington Library have been unstintingly alert, informed, and helpful, and I thank them all for their expert aid and numerous acts of courtesy.

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Poems

Documentary on the Poet Wallace Stevens

Seaweed on the screen
as a low voice recites.
Colored gowns, hands, eyes,
mysterious, like palm trees in darkness.
Misery itself,
bare, empty-mouthed.

A blue-haired neighbor remembers:
"look at this man this is a great poet."
One poem has the side of a house laughing.

To explain a poet
there are men clapping
in Harvard Yard in black and white,
something about the first exchange of sonnets . . .
moments like great chunks of ice
that can cut
or cry out for love,
something to round corners,
shaping ice into woman, his wife,
the blue guitar.

The biographer wears a pretty blue scarf,
speaks of unalterable mistakes . . .
shards spread out on the floor
we will never piece together
to make a glass, a flower.

A mirror on the poet discovers
another mirror, soap, a sink,
two toothbrushes.
Someone says: "Divinity stripped of theological trappings"
and there are waves,
birds on a shore, or so many people
with marmalade,
toast fluttering off the plate.

A man in a big leather chair,
with his thumbs, explicates.
Words everywhere . . .

on walls, telephones, museums,
riddling over the air
in eyes, newsreels,
wheelchairs, TravelLodges,
and Key West.

Fat hands wrapped around a book,
a woman sings on the water,
alone,
light splashes on the sea at night,
red jellyfish in the sky.

Then day,
as the last lines of the hour roll out.
There is wind, hard, ornate, successful,
against petals, newspapers,
grass too tall to walk on.
There are dunes with a blue sky,
a cottage with old flowered wallpaper,
heavy sand on the floor,
and a desk, old and sluggish,
with reams of paper—poems on them,
shoes with blue specks in the corner,

and again the wind,
white pages lift in the air like gulls.

Joe Heithaus
Bloomington, Indiana

The Muezzin on the Dump

—*at the Palaz of Hoon*

I have thought more than most how one must leave
To meet the mother of beauty on the *aptest eve*,

Which is why, in the morning, I turn to the East
For the rise of the sun, my *invisible priest*,

And chant in a deep Emersonian drone
The words I have written to *stanza my stone*.

Anthony Harrington
Norcross, Georgia

An Animal Eye

Foolish to take the boat out in storm.
The lake shudders as the keel
drags through shallows. Driven
sleet blasts the cabin windows. Anchored,
the hull slews, topples gear from shelves,
and ships water in the cockpit.

Can't get the sails up. He revs
the tiny engine and motors upright,
free of the sultry blue-black muck,
but the invisible shore despairs,
and the color of the water sheens
with impeccable opacities,

sifts through metallic lacquerings,
invisible, smelted from the air.
He drops anchor again, ducks inside
the cabin and listens to sleet
crisp the decks, sizzle in the water.
The gas stove boils a pot of tea,

so he drinks with gratitude
and feels the warmth sever him
from the storm, free him for the vast
imaginings of the sky.
Though impoverished by the residue
of survival, the simpler chords,

he gladly weighs anchor and sails
sedately back to the long plank pier
where the harbor master greets him
with a stark drawn face and thermos
of martinis. He looks back over
the cold blue lake, an animal eye,

and allows its indifference
to congeal in restless textures—
the same emotions he can't admit
exclude him from the affairs
of people because of landscapes
too solemn to resolve in words.

William Doreski
Peterborough, New Hampshire

Of Hartford in a Purple Light

Your gaze in these gray photographs has the woolen confidence, the cool approach

of Executive Row. No poetry clouds, crowds the marble hall outside your office door.

You liked it that way.
And when the time came
after hours

or years
to conjure that rare view,
the sacrament of order,

you measured out a world in words.
Your thoughts grace the air:
in Hartford the sky takes on

a deepening, evening hue—
light perceived as shadowed,
faintly perfumed: purple, not blue.

Andrew A. Jantz
Arlington, Massachusetts

St. Peter Greets Wallace Stevens at the Gates of the Supreme Fiction

You're not the first to have guessed wrong.
A pleasant surprise, *nu*?
Go on over to Third and Abstract.
Shelley's been waiting for you.

Anthony Harrington
Norcross, Georgia

'his flawed words and stubborn sounds'

And the yard it is green
And in it it
 is raining
& outside, in, it is Bach
again, playing
 —no,
 composing,
as for the first
 time,
 Sneezing,
the minor poet no less
 the minor key;
"a melancholy of tone"
Plumly wrote imagining
 Stevens
—only a *longing,*
 noted,
for what the photographer catches—
a fish,
 object for Braque:
"I do not do as I wish; I do
 what I can."

Peter Money
Berkeley, California

An Earlier Sunday Morning

Under the echoes of old bronze Lutheran bells
Solid burghers of Reading, Pennsylvania,
On the way home from church to breakfasts of
Scrapple and eggs and toast—each wife behind
By a pace as befitted her place as *die Frau*—

Nodded to where, on vacation from Harvard,
The son of Lawyer Stevens rocked on the porch,
Picking out on his mind's blue ukulele
Tuneful new hymns as he sang to himself:
Tunk-a-tunk-tunk and *hoobla-hoobla-how*.

Anthony Harrington
Norcross, Georgia

The Sophist's Dilemma

Like an insect's stinger,
the church steeple punctures the sky.
Dusk sifts through backyards
where porch lights burn, and the star's
dead light returns, disillusionment finally conquering
even the most congenial boy scout
sometime around the age of thirty.

Along rows of houses, orange windows glow
and a man sits half-asleep in front of the television,
something in the workday still banging in his head
as if he's holding onto a frazzled rope, swinging inside a bell.
The knot of his hand
grips the chair as he contemplates the walk
up the stairs, as if he were a circus animal
performing a silly charade of an act,
his real capability held sadly behind the eyes.

Peter Bethanis
Carmel, Indiana

Not Tallapoosa but Picayune

lost vehemence the midnights hold
—"Stars at Tallapoosa"

In white-on-blue a highway sign proclaimed
"Sweet Jesus Is Lord Over Picayune."
Blatant bragging bending me out of shape
as I did Caesar's bidding counting heads

from door to door. I went blind, halt, and lame
stumbling between windows dimly glowing
where Caesar's folk worshipped shadow-flickers.
Counting them resembled shadow-boxing.

Stonewalled, I twisted a stiff neck skyward
toward piecemeal blazings on a royal field.
The zodiac glistened like ready cash,
bright monies, coin of the realm, of the real.

Eugene Hollahan
Atlanta, Georgia

Elegy in Two Parts

I

The again unused wedding dress, white light
spun into fiber, droops in the closet,

gowned in a stagnating envelope of air
under a clear, plastic wrap.

Protected from dust, from the skins
wrestled out of towels and bed sheets,

let the wedding dress remain as is,
lacking the nostalgia of garments worn.

II

Untouched by the falling sun,
the herons rising with the wisdom

of fish in their beaks, the sawgrass
continues, remains aloof.

Do not be concerned.
This is how eternity is,

the sawgrass endlessly bristling
in the wind, the water remaining hidden.

C. Dale Young
Gainesville, Florida

Turnabout

Winding across the water
toward an ample horizon, nine turnabouts
filled with children make their passage
for a great green island
through the drift and fall of the Sound,
through the nave of a radiant sun.

The children carry sandwiches and sun
hats in carefully packed satchels, water
in thermoses chock full of ice that sound
like the tick of reckless clocks. Unsure about

the new terrain, they wade onto the island's
shoulder of reeds. In this passage

through summer's gullet, the green passengers
will be flustered by the afflatus of sun-
maw and thirst, all the machinery of island
solitude, moon-blotch and mildew, water
stain and regret. At just about
midnight, in the consuming dark, when the sounds

of tree frogs foreshadow the soundings
the children take in their passage
through sleep, halting about
the peristaltic chambers of dreams, the sun
chums the waters
of plump and brilliant lands

in far-away places. Each child in his island
repose, his small portion of the dark, sounds
like a muttered prayer as he plumbs the waters
in the firmament of sleep. And so they pass,
all new under the sun,
into the orbit that sails about

luminous worlds one cannot hold, about
the slow hunger for more, for islands
in pearls in distant, sun-
stained gulfs. In this circling, soundless
zone, they will grope for other hands and pass,
yawing, through ambiguous, flock-flecked waters.

Sidney Wade
Gainesville, Florida

The Lighter Ferries

—after Wallace Stevens

Then from distance they appear,
ferries in the pulmonaries.
They filter
through the arteries.

Sifting through osmotic walls,
breaking clean the water's green

reflective
plane, their edges harden.

The ferries whisper through the ear:
the Yalova, the Kanlica,
small gardens
bending in the breeze

below their bridges' windowsills.
They carry roses and fire hoses
in equal
measure on their decks.

They meander past the Golden Horn,
the Palace and the Gate of Sand.
The passengers
are clothed in black.

One spreads his rug, exhales his prayers.
The fragrance of the blooms above
his head is
thick with perilous

insinuations of desire.
The weight they carry is coronary:
the cargo
that is always pressing

on the chambers of the heart.
The ferries ply the tributaries,
the gray and
vesselled metaphors

of flesh and breath and cartilage.
With heart and eye, I amplify.
I feel them
pumping in the dark.

Sidney Wade
Gainesville, Florida

Reviews

Harmonium. Poesie 1915-1955.

By Wallace Stevens. Edited by Massimo Bacigalupo. Turin: Einaudi, 1994.

Here is a 700-page book Wallace Stevens would have loved: elegantly bound and boxed in Einaudi's most prestigious series, "I Millenni"; airy, printed in leisurely ease, each poem with its own page (or pages), the Italian facing the original more as an act of courtesy than as a way of explanation; beautifully illustrated with reproductions of folk paintings and artifacts from Stevens' beloved rural Pennsylvania (no Klee, no Picasso; remember his unwillingness that "The Man with the Blue Guitar" be related to Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*, another "shearsman of sorts"); perhaps the most luxurious edition since his own handsomely produced *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, and, without a doubt, the most expensive commercial anthology of his poetry (approximately \$70). The fact is all the more remarkable if one considers that, until a few years ago, Italian scholars and poets had been kept busy studying or absorbing the lessons of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (or, to a lesser extent, those of W. C. Williams, Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell), virtually ignoring Wallace Stevens' more playful teachings. Lost among these poets' often reprinted, seldom thinner volumes of translations, Poggolini's acclaimed *Mattino domenicale ed altre poesie* (Turin: Einaudi, 1954)—the first Stevens collection in a language other than English (to the great satisfaction of the author, who wrote "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" for his translator)—could not do much to create a lasting Italian public for the master of Hartford. Eugenio Montale, Italy's premier poet, who briefly reviewed the book in the *Corriere della Sera* (January 29, 1954), found Stevens "a lyricist of far from negligible importance," mentioning the supposed influence of Hopkins and Yeats, as well as the pervasive presence of "post-impressionist modern painting" and French poetry in his verse, and quoted the first stanza of "Sunday Morning" "in Poggolini's beautiful translation," ending with the slightly ominous remark, "The reader will go on by himself, if he has the courage to do so" ["Il lettore proseguirà da solo, se ne avrà il coraggio"].

With some notable exceptions (like Glauco Cambon's 1954 translation of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" in the journal *Letteratura*, and a handful of short essays by Cambon, Pagnini and others), apparently nobody had much courage until the mid-eighties, when Massimo Bacigalupo published his annotated translation of Stevens' last poetry, *Il mondo come meditazione: ultime poesie 1950-1955* (Palermo: Acquario, 1986), which sparked the present revival—or (re)discovery—of the poet: a new, densely annotated translation of "Notes" and the complete *Auroras of Autumn* by Nadia Fusini (Venice, 1987 and Milan, 1992), the essays of *The Necessary Angel* edited by Bacigalupo (tr. Gino Scatasta, Milan, 1988), the long-due reprint of Poggolini's *Mattino domenicale* (1988)—and finally, this massive *Harmonium* (of course, the title is reminiscent of Stevens' declared intention to entitle his *Collected Poems* "The Whole of Harmonium"). The volume is fully inclusive (only "Infanta Marina," "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," "Credences of Summer," "In a Bad Time," "The Beginning," and, more regrettably, "Saint John and the Back-

Ache" do not answer my private call—apart from "The Pleasures of Merely Circulating," all poems already available in Italian), with a lucid introduction (stressing the "Americanness," and "naturalness," of Stevens' poetry, rather de-emphasizing its "philosophical" import), biographical and bibliographical essays (inevitably, the latter is also a sketchy, often humorous history of post-war American criticism), and some seventy pages of marvelously unobtrusive commentary, which aims not so much at trying to explain the frequently inexplicable as at enabling the reader to enjoy what is always enjoyable.

A family friend of Pound and an editor of *Paideuma*, Massimo Bacigalupo, who was born in Rapallo in 1947, is known to the American reader mostly for his work on the *Cantos: The Formed Trace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), while in Italy his name is now probably more readily associated with a formidable series of translations, including the first complete Italian rendering of Wordsworth's 1805 *Prelude* (Milan: Mondadori, 1990) and, most recently, a wide-ranging choice from Emily Dickinson (1995)—the last a pairing that cannot be random, Stevens striking the perfect balance between the romantic's expansive, uninterrupted song and Dickinson's abrupt, elusive utterance. Bacigalupo translates all the poems in the Italian *Harmonium* except "Peter Quince at the Clavier" (given in Poggioli's translation as an homage to the predecessor), "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (in Cambon's version), and "To the One of Fictive Music" and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," newly translated by Giovanni Giudici (born 1924), one of the few truly significant living Italian poets, whose antilyrical muse and muted self-irony have much in common with the chosen lyrics. (Not all readers might find the rhyme *aspetto* [look] / *sorbetto* [seem / ice-cream] to their taste, but I believe Stevens would not have objected.)

In a brief afterthought on his translations, Bacigalupo wittily quotes the "humble" wish of Stevens' Ariel that his perhaps perishable poems "should bear / Some lineament or character, / Some affluence, if only half perceived, / In the poverty of their words, / Of the planet of which they were part." Whether or not Ariel's (and Bacigalupo's) "poverty" be taken at face value, the criterion applied throughout in his *Harmonium* is that of the utmost fidelity—line by line, word by word, almost—to the original, which, judging by some slight departures, is the safest one, but also—given the premises—the most aesthetically rewarding. The search for rhyme could be particularly treacherous; in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," for instance, where "things as they are" is rendered "la cosa come fu" ["the thing as it was"] to match "la chitarra blu" ["the blue guitar"], there is too much of a sacrifice for the sake of a neater Italian couplet: Stevens is ostensibly a poet of the *present* tense, with no interest in—and perhaps no understanding of—"things as they *were*." (To be fair, the license is dutifully explained in the commentary.) Altogether a different, joyous matter when new rhymes come effortlessly, as in the opening lines of the delicate, rarely remembered "Metamorphosis," where "Yellow, yellow, yellow, / Old worm, my pretty quirk" becomes "Gillo, gillo, gillo, / vecchio verme, mio bel grillo" (for once, also English and Italian—not only French—are *almost* the same language!). A fair amount of alliteration is easier to reproduce, provided the necessary adjustments: in the last line of "An Old Man Asleep," for example—"The *river* motion, the *drowsy* motion of the *river* R"—where "river" is translated "rivo," rather than the more common "fiume" (as in "Il fiume dei

fiumi in Connecticut"): "il moto del rivo, il moto sonnolento del rivo R." (In context, no Italian word could make up for the half-whispered, rolling sound of *drowsy*, but *sonnolento* has its own lulling satisfactions, comprising as it does the noun for *sleep* [*sonno*] and the adjective for *slow* [*lento*].) Speaking of alliteration: "The Comedian as the Letter C" confirms its expected untranslatability—which does not mean the gallant attempt was not worthwhile (the poem comes out as an often nonsensical, constantly exhilarating narrative). "How would it be possible to translate a line like *Exchequering from piebald fiscs unkeyed*, and preserve anything except the sense of the words?" Stevens wrote to Poggioli, who then moved right ahead to "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Bacigalupo has been more obstinate, and his solution—"coniando da un eterogeneo fisco scatenato"—manages to retain some of the alliterative play, plus smuggling a "letter C" into the first position!

In fact, Bacigalupo's achievement needs to be measured against Poggioli's. And this not in order to assess a priority, giving either the palm of excellence, since the spirit informing them is necessarily so different (in the art of translation, forty years count like perhaps a century in the art of poetry), but rather to establish their respective significance, the *raison d'être* of a folly like translating a poem. Perhaps it would be enough to point to the different title of "Sunday Morning," pitting Poggioli's slightly courtly "Mattino domenicale" against Bacigalupo's more prosaic, colloquial "Domenica mattina." To read both translations means to experience a sort of chronological dovetailing, Poggioli honoring what in Stevens is still Tennysonian, while Bacigalupo captures what could be felt as already Ashberian. Occasionally, Bacigalupo's gain is assured on all fronts (as in the charming *endecasillabo* "la fronda estiva e il ramo dell'inverno" for "The bough of summer and the winter branch" ["Sunday Morning" II], by Poggioli unnecessarily lengthened and enjambed: "il ramo / Verde d'estate ed arido d'inverno"); on the whole, however, Poggioli is consistently more "beautiful" (albeit with the sort of precious beauty no translator could safely carry much farther than the small selection), Bacigalupo almost invariably more "exact." Take, for instance, the final couplet of "The Snowman": "And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Poggioli's rather smooth, regular "E nulla in se medesimo, contempla / Là quel nulla che è e che non è" has become the harsher, almost ungrammatical "e, nulla in sé, vede / nulla che non sia lì, e il nulla che è": most of the "poetry" is gone, but while Poggioli could only hint at a sort of flickering (presence of) absence, Bacigalupo preserves the crucial distinction between two kinds of "nothingness," a simple, negative absence ("Nothing that is not there") and its "positive" presence ("the nothing that is"). (See, in the commentary, the apt reference to *Hamlet* III.iv.132–33: "HAMLET: Do you see nothing there? QUEEN: Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.") Fast or slowly, translations age, then often die for good; only rarely are they reborn to a happier nature. Poggioli's Stevens belongs to the latter, chosen company. As with his magnificent anthology of Russian poetry, *Il fiore del verso russo* (1948), it is likely that *Mattino domenicale* will become more and more a book by Poggioli, while Bacigalupo's *Harmonium* remains in years to come as *the* Italian Wallace Stevens.

Francesco Rognoni
University of Udine, Italy

L'IMPERATORE DEL SORBETTO

All'arrotolatore di sigari giganti,
quel tutto muscoli, digli di sbattere
in tazze da cucina concupiscenti panne.
Si gingillino le donnette nella veste
che usano indossare e rechino i ragazzi
fiori avvolti in giornali del mese passato.
Sia l'essere il finale dell'aspetto.
Il solo imperatore è l'imperatore del sorbetto.

Prendi dalla cassetiera di abete, senza più
i tre pomelli di vetro, quel lenzuolo
dove una volta lei ricamò delle colombe
e stendilo fino a ricoprirle la faccia.
Se ne spuntano piedi e calli sarà
per mostrare com'è fredda, com'è muta.
E che affissi la lampada il suo getto.
Il solo imperatore è l'imperatore del sorbetto.

Translated by Giovanni Giudici

ALCUNI AMICI DI PASCAGOULA

Parlami ancora dell'aquila, Cotton,
e tu, nero Sly,
dimmi come discese
dal cielo aurorale.

Descrivi con voce profonda
e le immagini più rare
il suo lento cerchio calante
verso il pescoso mare.

Era uno spettacolo sovrano
adatto a un crespo stuolo.
Parlami ancora del punto
dove spiccò il suo volo,

di' come le ali pesanti
spiegate nel bronzo del sole
divaricarono punta da punta
fino alla sabbia, al bagliore

dei pini al liminare della sabbia,
calando in cerchi sovrani
dalla sua tana di fuoco.
Di' il balenio delle ali.

Translated by Massimo Bacigalupo

The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens.

By Anca Rosu. Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 1995.

In *The Metaphysics of Sound in Wallace Stevens*, Anca Rosu bases her argument on the assumption that Stevens' poetic language undermines conventional methods of conveying meaning, and, further, that his persistent attention to assumptions about reality, truth, and knowledge in a deceptively philosophical poetry may baffle the Western philosophical tradition. Rosu's vigorous examination reveals a poet whose innovative use of language causes representation and meaning to break down under close scrutiny, often with sound—and the various devices associated with it, such as repetition, chant, song, refrain, and even nonsense—taking over where meaning leaves off. With a unique perspective at the forefront of her exploration, one she labels a "metaphysics of sound," Rosu asks us to depart "from a decoding to a listening mode" (x) and demonstrates that "Stevens made language into a sort of music that is meaningful not only through its semantics but also through its patterns and its appeals to our sense of being connected to other fellow human beings" (xi).

Not surprisingly, the patterns of sound manipulated by Stevens have a wide range: from conventional and experimental poetic devices, to literary echo and allusion, to parody, to sonic expectations that result from grammar and syntax, and even to incantation, magic, and conjuring. The "music" or "image of sound" Rosu hears in Stevens' poetry becomes a "metaphysics of sound" because, finally, it "has the capacity to transcend its own condition" (xi). Rosu concludes that Stevens has tapped into a new type of poetic discourse in which "Sense is not arrested in formulation but rather transcends itself permanently, residing basically in the language's movement," that movement being "sound-dominated" (xiii). Her claim that "to Plato's metaphysics of sight Stevens responds with a metaphysics of sound" (xiii) may be unnecessarily grandiose, but her underlying thesis and demonstration that Stevens uses language "to conjure rather than to reflect reality" (xi) will intrigue many readers and critics, perhaps especially those who seek ways to expand discussions of poetry and sound beyond conventional modes of noting effects of meter, rhythm, and rhyme.

Rosu maintains that pragmatic philosophy provides the foundation for Stevens' views on language, and that Stevens' "verbal performance (mainly but not exclusively through sound)" is "the symptom of a restlessness concerning the nature of reality and the origins of the self characteristic of his time" (30). Such a discussion continually skirts the boundaries of philosophical argument, and thus Rosu considers and rejects a variety of theoretical positions and affiliations, including deconstruction, phenomenology, Heideggerian ideas about language and poetry, and assumptions about epistemology that have informed critical argument about Stevens. At times, this coverage seems to draw Rosu away from the issue of sound, but it is usefully presented and, in the end, necessary in supporting an assertion that Stevens' language constitutes the very substance of thought in which the subject is created. Rosu shows caution and respect in treating other theoretical views pertinent to her understanding of much more than sound—of Stevens' use of poetry as a way of thinking and of reaching for the knowledge that has been the province of philosophical study.

In positioning her argument, Rosu rests her loyalty with William James, George Santayana, and the philosophical climate surrounding Stevens in his early years as a poet. This philosophical foundation appears in Stevens as a notion of the real that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated by human experience and action. In a critical arena that has now made Stevens a “deconstructionist *avant la lettre*” and a phenomenologist (138–39), Rosu’s position seems carefully considered, reasonable, and convincing: that a foundation in philosophical pragmatism reinforces Stevens’ own tendency to mistrust long-standing notions of truth, reality, and knowledge. Stevens shares with pragmatism the view that an inquiry into the stability of such concepts must be based on language’s relation to context, not “an outstanding reality” (146). Underlying Rosu’s approach is a notion that, paradoxically, Stevens’ uncertainty is an integral part of his technical innovation, that he questions the ability of language to represent reality through intentional and masterful manipulations of sound reaching for a form of expression akin, by analogy, to the effect music has on a listener. For Stevens, “the distinction between real and fictional is eventually dissolved”; language asserts its “foundations in form and pattern and lets reality emerge as a human creation” (xiii). Sonic patterns such as repetition might thus enact “verbal rituals” in which occurs “a coming into being, a founding of the self” (xiii).

Rosu holds that sound has a direct bearing on meaning in an interaction between the expectations of the reader and the messages delivered by Stevens’ speakers. Within this interplay occurs both satisfaction and failure of potential meaning. Insisting that Stevens gives pointed attention to an implied reader, Rosu shows how this attention reveals itself from within the poems’ verbal performances. This convincingly demonstrated claim is one of the more unusual and intriguing aspects of Rosu’s approach. Stevens is often regarded as uncommunicative, impersonal, impossibly abstract, and hermetic, but in Rosu’s thinking Stevens is dialogic, aware of “discursive fluctuations” and “the changes from one discourse to another” which imply the presence of an audience but will also disrupt its expectations (8–9). Rosu’s “method of ‘unreading’ followed by a *rereading* or reconstitution in terms of underlying sound patterns” (34) depends heavily upon the participation of an implied reader, responding to “nothing other than the primary mode of comprehension demanded by the poems themselves” (34).

To show how Stevens challenges the stability of representational language, Rosu reads Stevens’ poetry from the inside out: she examines verbal details microscopically and then draws conclusions, some highly speculative, about sonic effects. Unfortunately, this method of analysis is not what one would call user-friendly. Rosu’s coverage of individual poems has a labored intensity about it that demands patience and willingness to walk down many avenues of pattern and meaning to get at what Stevens conveys in his notoriously deceptive uses of speech. The readings of particular poems tend to be long and convoluted, even when they are ingenious and complex. In these explorations, Rosu repeatedly demonstrates how the fictive dislocates an objective notion of the real. Once Stevens has undermined representation, Rosu then turns to patterns of sound as an emerging force, conveying an entirely new kind of meaning. Yet, just as Rosu’s coverage of individual poems begins to convince, it also threatens to become excessive (see, for instance, the discussions of “Some Friends from Pascagoula” [35–39], “Gallant Château”

and "The Hand as a Being" [55–67]). In some readings, Rosu overworks her methodology by considering and rejecting too many potential avenues of inquiry, where she could have found a more direct and economical pathway toward a central point about patterns of sound.

Rosu inevitably draws argumentative conclusions about what elusive effects of sound might be communicating to the reader (see the coverage of "The Comedian as the Letter C" [126–27], specifically "Crispin, / The lutanist of fleas . . ."). Thus, the identity of Rosu the critic lurks behind her construction of an implied reader. This tendency, however, is balanced against her perceptiveness and care in pointing out ambiguities. Constructing a "listener" for Stevens' difficult poetry is an intriguing exercise in itself, and we might look to Rosu's approach for an example of how this can be accomplished.

Readers may be put off by the fact that so much of Rosu's book is not explicitly about sound. She seems to veer off from central points, though many of these divergences, in fact, are finally drawn into the focal argument. There are lapses in specific readings which cause their direction to be confusing. For instance, Rosu repeatedly hears an "old adage" (presumably, by definition, a short maxim or proverb, a familiar saying) echoed in "The Death of a Soldier" but does not explicitly say what that adage is (86–88). Rather than fully address Stevens' accomplishments in terms of sound, Rosu's coverage of "Sunday Morning" saps it of its poetic energy. The problem here may be rhetorical: while she examines competing discourses in the poem, the phrases of her critical methodology seem to diminish the poem's masterful poetic language ("the analytico-referential discourse reasserts its presence. . . . [A] variety of 'poetic' discourse . . . works against the analytico-referential one" [104–105]). Nevertheless, critics and students, especially those who are interested in sound and poetic language, will want to give serious attention to Rosu's book, which, at its best, gives us an important, new direction in that area of study.

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Beyond Music: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens.

By Theodore Sampson. Athens, Greece: Seagull Publications, B. Giannicos & Co., 1995.

Theodore Sampson begins his interesting study by arguing that Stevens' poetry defies interpretation, that his long poems, particularly, remain too open-ended for rational paraphrase. Most critics of Stevens, faced with his complexities, have none the less attempted to make critical discourse (if not sense) out of them. This has led, in Sampson's view, to critical excesses and undue deformation of the language. Unsurprisingly, he names Harold Bloom as a critic particularly willing to substitute his own obscurities for those of the poet. But certainly one of the attractions for almost anyone writing about Stevens, including Sampson, is the intellectual challenge afforded by such a relentlessly figurative poetry. Not only can this result in criticism that presents a daunting surface, but it requires faith in the rational structure of critical language that seems remote from Stevens' embrace of the

irrational gestures of the imagination. To minimize the impact of this solecism (no critic can completely avoid it) Sampson, instead of dwelling on the referentiality of Stevens' complex tropes, examines the poet's motive for generating such difficult figures, and the ways in which their difficulty generates—or fails to generate—perceptions adequate to the motive of the poem.

That Stevens' basic motive was to "express his own 'sense of the world,'" as he remarks in *The Necessary Angel*, is surely the case. However, beyond that general and unexceptionable statement (isn't this a motive for most romantic and modernist poetry?) lie the complications of Sampson's study. Stevens, he argues, is driven by a highly fragmented view of the world to devise a poetics that rather than superficially heal the disarranged world substitutes for it an even more complexly incommensurate world of tropes. These tropes, voiced by the poet "without any inhibition or self-restraint," generate a "self music" that constitutes the "irrational element" in poetry Stevens valued as heightened perception and a source of "imaginative power" (158–59). This irrationalism serves not to depict "the true essence of things" but to function as "a means of creating such an essence by perceptually transforming them" (146; Sampson's italics). However, this irrationality, Sampson elsewhere argues, citing Valéry's well-known remark, "ultimately results in the 'complete negation of language'" (159). I am not sure what completely negated language would look like, and have never been convinced that it is possible to attain such a rarefied state of non-representation without writing nonsense—which would not be language. Still, it is possible that Stevens desired this negation, since it would shift the function of language from the representation of a fragmented actual world to the creation of an imagined—but perhaps more real—world of the mind. To create a new "essence" of things the poet would certainly have to clean a large imaginative space and re-create, as well, the language that embodies this brave new world.

Stevens did not feel that the poet's function is to explain the actual world to the rest of us, or he would have prized the representational image more than he did. His gradual rejection of the imagism of his early mature style suggests not a movement toward poetic nihilism but an expanded notion of rhetorical possibilities, many of which Sampson adroitly explores. Certainly Stevens was in no way intellectually disabled by his growing sense of the abstract complications of language; rather like Nietzsche, whom Sampson invokes for his grasp of the "subversive nature of metaphors" (150), he was stimulated by it. As he said in a 1935 letter, "Everything is complicated; if that were not so, life and poetry and everything else would be a bore" (L 303).

For Sampson, Stevens' project transcends self-amusement in his vision of "the wonder and mystery of art, as indeed of religion," and becomes an interpreter not of the world but of the life that muses upon it—an interpreter of interpretation. This somewhat mystical view of poetry, evolved from Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater, requires the poet to believe that representation in language extends beyond the merely perceptual. It becomes mystified if the poet comes to believe that his poems actually achieve a "new reality," but for Stevens, I believe, such a state was always momentary, a renewing glimpse of process rather than the untenable stasis of final achievement. Further, as Sampson demonstrates, representation in Stevens characteristically avoids reproducing perceived objects in favor of representing the

mind's more subtle gestures, so his music is psychological (as Coleridge would recognize) rather than mystical. He imitates the within rather than the beyond.

Written with grace and lucidity, thoroughly seeped in the work of preceding critics, Sampson's study offers a convincing rationale for the most irrational aspects of Stevens' work. However, because he confines himself largely to brief poems, fully examining only one of Stevens' longer poems—"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"—he leaves some aspects of his thesis less than fully demonstrated. To my mind, Stevens is himself most fully in his longer poems, precisely because they are "beyond interpretation." Sampson chooses to focus on the shorter poems because the longer ones defy rational meaning, but since this seems to me the heart of his argument about how Stevens' tropes work and their motive and purpose, I cannot help but think a fuller explanation of the flowering of irrational tropes in poems like "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" and "Esthétique du Mal" would have strongly supported his useful contentions about the self-portrayals and self-transformations inhering in Stevens' fictions. But despite this complaint, which really amounts to a plea for a lengthier study, I found Sampson's book a well-argued, highly readable, and important contribution to the study of Stevens' complex rhetoric.

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The Modern Voice in American Poetry.

By William Doreski. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995.

William Doreski's new book promises readings informed by modern and contemporary literary theory, but with no adherence to "any particular set of dogmas" (xvi). The idea is timely and the purpose admirable. Most of us have become tired of reading dogmatic interpretations, intricate theoretical applications, reworking of theories, etc., and yet, we all remain indebted to the conceptual frames that theory has bestowed on us. Beyond rigid applications, poststructuralist theory has proved useful in many ways. It has taught us a few things about language, culture, and history that make our reading of poetry an entirely new experience. And perhaps we could view theory in a totally positive light had it not also burdened us with its jargon.

Terminology can enable critical thinking, but it can also vitiate it. There are quite a number of words that no one can use innocently any longer, because they have been marked by one theory or another. What William Doreski proposes to do is to use the words without regard to their theoretical context, to use them only insofar as they already have (or have acquired) a common usage. The results are sometimes exhilarating, sometimes less successful. One feels happily out of Saussurian woods when one reads: "For Frost a code is always open to question, but he also recognizes its social and psychological utility" (9). But one feels like a casualty of critical language when confronted with a sentence like this: "The imperative of *The Dolphin* is the generation of correlatives, then, and the reconciliation or deconstruction of the binary nature of these images" (127).

The avoidance of too specialized usages, which usually stand in need of definition, does not prevent Doreski from defining his key terms. His definition of voice, for instance, gives us an indication as to what the book is about: "Most simply, a literary voice is one that speaks in any of the modes of poetic diction, tone, and pronominal usage readily available and common in a given era. This voice would be one a reader in that era would readily associate with poetry or verse" (68). In spite of its vagueness, this definition has the merit of underscoring the importance of historical context with a hint that poetry is a changing, evolving verbal form, rather than an essence. But its statement is often at odds with the underlying thesis of the essays, which deal with the major American modernists: Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Williams, Moore, and Lowell. For what strings the essays together is the idea that these poets departed from a lyrical norm and used narrative, dramatic, or confessional techniques instead. We are left to guess whether this norm is the one established by the romantics or other predecessors, or whether it was a British/European norm. Consequently, we are also left to decide whether the modern voice was a thing of the time or a thing of the place.

Most of the essays demonstrate, in deconstructive fashion, that the modernist departure from convention meant the production of new conventions not always consistent with each other, but strong enough to have influenced the poets of the next generation. Doreski enlightens us to Frost's subtle dramatization of the limitations of allegory and symbol and to Frost's awareness of the need for rhetorical strategies in spite of their inefficiency. Williams and Moore appear to have rejected classical rhetoric in favor of a new one based on the effect of different discursive styles: historical document style, in the case of Williams, and personal and private diction, in the case of Moore. Eliot and Pound are shown to have found and explored the power play inherent in dialogue and to have successfully adopted novelistic strategies borrowed from Flaubert, Conrad, Joyce, etc. In his turn, Robert Lowell is singled out for having departed from the lyric norm by using autobiography as an antipoetics, even as he exposes the poetic nature of autobiographical writing. The argument about Lowell continues with reference to younger poets who practice a confessional mode that is more a rhetorical gesture than a rejection of rhetoric.

The chapter on Wallace Stevens stands out as both less dependent on theoretical terminology and closer to the poetry's spirit. For Stevens, Doreski uses the poet's own distinction between reality and the imagination, but not as a tool for the exploration of epistemological issues, as most of Stevens' critics do. Instead, Doreski relies on it in order to unravel the poet's near obsession with the need for a mythology. Mythology in Stevens, Doreski maintains, provides an organic link between imagination and reality, mind and landscape. Stevens rejects mythology understood as classical inheritance from the Greek or the Hebrew even as he struggles to forge a new one related to his favorite places. Scrutinizing poems like "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" or "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," Doreski shows how the places dear to Stevens transform into landscapes of the mind, thereby founding a mythology set apart from the classical and more congenial to the poet's (an American's) temperament. Implied in the analysis of such poems is that Stevens' mythologizing is at the same time a poetics. This suggestion is made clearer and amplified in the pages dedicated to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,"

seen here as an allegory of creation, a “response to or a critique of Genesis” (53). In Stevens’ mythology, poetic creation precedes and supersedes the creation of the world.

What seems curious in this context (a book claiming among other things to show how American poets distinguish themselves from European predecessors) is the absence of attention to historical and cultural context. A poststructuralist awareness of history would discourage us from reading “A Mythology Reflects Its Region,” for instance, as “the larger argument that humanity is a myth-making species” (41) and would direct us to see Stevens’ references as more specifically American. Stevens himself is quite specific: “Here / In Connecticut, we never lived in a time / When mythology was possible” (*OP* 141). The time when mythology was possible is, in the context of American history, pre-Columbian. The refusal of the land (of Connecticut or any other region of America) to accept the transplanted European mythology is as strong as the reluctance of the former Europeans to embrace the Native American myths of the land—hence the impossible task of myth-making has to be replaced by poetry writing.

Doreski’s indifference to history does not originate in any reluctance to embrace it, but rather in his unwillingness (shared by most critics of poetry) to deal with the poems’ literal meaning. The same scorn for the literal creates another minor contradiction in his analysis of “Of Hartford in a Purple Light.” The sun, in the poem, is addressed as “master,” Doreski maintains, because the speaker assumes the manner of a Dickensian servant. Again the idea of a rebellion against things European seems to be defeated. The simple notion that the sun is painting the city in different colors, and is therefore to be addressed as artists usually are, may spare Doreski the puzzling connection to Dickens.

In spite of such contradictions, the readings of Stevens’ poems are satisfying. They draw our attention to Stevens’ efforts to promote American culture, an effort often obscured by his exceedingly sophisticated language. Sophistication, popular critical wisdom has it, is not American. But Doreski makes us see that very sophistication as part of a twentieth-century version of American literary self-assertion.

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The Fiction of the Poet: From Mallarmé to the Post-Symbolist Mode.

By Anna Balakian. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

The Fiction of the Poet is not only a remarkable but in many ways a ground-breaking study. One might have assumed that the territory it covers had previously been traversed by a good many other commentators, but such is not the case. The reason is that, although the line running from Mallarmé (who represents the symbolist mode in its purest manifestation) to the five twentieth-century poets on whom Anna Balakian focuses—Valéry, Rilke, Yeats, Stevens, and Jorge Guillén—is clear, it is not as easy to follow as one might have supposed: it is complicated by aesthetic tendencies removed from and sometimes even antithetical to those deriving from Mallarmé—and this is what allows five such disparate poets (representing five nationalities and four languages) to be grouped under the

“post-symbolist” rubric while at the same time being accorded their differences and their originality. Balakian’s important book is not merely an “influence study”: its ambition, and the difficulty that that ambition entails, consists in her attempt to grasp hold of the Mallarméan “revolution in poetic language” and to delineate five overlapping but distinct aesthetic universes partly derived from it.

Insofar as it does constitute a revolution—and this, of course, is an oversimplification, though one that has a certain heuristic value—Mallarmé’s poetry might be seen as a radical confrontation—perhaps the most radical confrontation European poetry affords—with a religious crisis that has its roots in the Renaissance, if not earlier. Mallarmé’s struggle with the void resulted in what Balakian describes as “a poetics of language to replace the language of poetry” (3), “a semantic transcendentalism to compensate for the waning of metaphysical yearnings” (5); at the same time, she notes, “the secret agenda of the Symbolist ontology [was] to convey a mystery independent of theological topographies, to sever and preserve the sense of mystery and the sense of the sacred beyond their previous commitments and their dogmatic delimitations” (189). Mallarmé’s notorious difficulty is largely the result of a double movement of the mind: on the one hand, a fundamental realism or skepticism in regard to theological or metaphysical presuppositions, and, on the other, an attempt to preserve beauty—or mystery—through and in language. This double movement, expressing itself as a process of condensation, produces the polysemous quality of symbolist poetry, or what in semiotic discourse is sometimes referred to as a “surplus of meaning.” As Balakian incisively argues, however, where poetic communication had previously been seen largely as a subspecies of communication as a whole, Mallarmé, both in his theory and his practice, arrives at a radical delimitation of the former from the latter, such that the very notion of a surplus of meaning with respect to poetry no longer obtains:

If the meaning of meaning is closely grasped in relation to poetry, it is readily evident that the notion of “surplus” is intolerable and inconceivable. For, precisely, in poetic communication the well of meaning is inexhaustible because meaning is not linear, but rather a circular vortex in perpetual motion. . . . [T]he fundamental contribution of Mallarmé and his followers to poetics was to assert and demonstrate that the communication of a message in direct discourse no longer constituted poetry. The so-called surplus was no longer to be considered an excess but rather the essential ingredient for poetic viability. (14–15)

Precisely because for Mallarmé and the symbolists poetic meaning is never univocal, Balakian’s study is not primarily exegetical but, as her title implies, is aimed at grasping the poetic fictions of the writers under consideration—in other words, the aesthetic dimensions of their work. This accounts for the high level of abstraction and condensation she is able to bring to bear on her material.

Balakian has wonderful insights to offer on all of these writers, but in some of the chapters a certain amount of vagueness enters into the analysis because of the difficulty she faced of differentiating, within a circumscribed compass, symbolist from post-symbolist or non-symbolist tendencies. It is not always clear why she chooses to focus on particular issues or poems rather than on others, and readers

who are not well acquainted with the material she covers will sometimes find themselves at sea. Nevertheless, these weaknesses are inevitable and should be regarded as a by-product of the difficulty of Balakian's enterprise.

The chapter on Valéry, in my view, is the most successful in the book, even more so than the one on Mallarmé himself. (The theoretical implications of Mallarmé's poetry have now been charted by a great many commentators, and the value of Balakian's study is a function of her analysis of the fault-lines running from Mallarmé to the post-symbolists.) Valéry viewed himself as a direct disciple of Mallarmé; yet, as Balakian demonstrates, it was precisely by following in Mallarmé's footsteps—with astonishingly little anxiety—that Valéry came upon his own path—indeed, one that in some respects is antithetical to that of his precursor. In some of her other chapters, where she deals with poets whose relationship to Mallarmé is more distant and more highly mediated than Valéry's, Balakian enters in upon a labyrinth from which she is not entirely able to extricate herself (though this in itself can be instructive). In her reading of Valéry, however, Balakian confidently and succinctly traces out the parallels and divergences between the two poets in a way that is richly rewarding to the reader. For example, Valéry had a philosophical cast of mind; yet, as Balakian insightfully notes, "[o]ne of the pitfalls of Symbolism that Mallarmé had avoided, but in which most of his international successors were caught . . . was philosophical poetry" (61). Also, where Mallarmé had aimed at the submergence of the ego in the artifact, Valéry is concerned with the exploration of states of consciousness. Balakian shows how Valéry's Narcissus poems and his *Jeune Parque*, though derived from Mallarmé's *Hérodiade* and *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, are nevertheless antithetical to those creations in this respect.

Balakian's chapter on Wallace Stevens will naturally be of greatest interest to readers of this journal; it should be noted, however, that to be fully understood this chapter depends to some extent on the preceding ones and especially on the theoretical argument that Balakian develops in the opening chapters of the book. (Her insight concerning philosophical poetry, for example, though made in the context of her remarks on Valéry, applies equally well to the even more discursive American; moreover, whereas Valéry's relationship to Mallarmé is direct, Stevens' connection to Mallarmé is both direct and mediated by the example of Valéry.) Other critics have studied the relationship of Stevens to Mallarmé, but the theoretical apparatus that Balakian brings to bear on the material is far more sophisticated than that of her predecessors and, if not entirely adequate, provides us with a number of useful markers that subsequent writers will want to delineate more closely.

That Mallarmé exerted an enormous influence on Stevens, whether directly or through the mediation of his disciples, and even though Stevens was not entirely aware of that influence, is indicated by the way in which one of the most important of the Mallarméan symbols, or symbolic constellations, is played out in Stevens' work: the *azur/ciel* constellation, which figures in Mallarmé's great poem "L'Azur" and throughout his work generally. Because *ciel* can mean both "heaven" and "sky," it can be deployed to function as a highly condensed leitmotif of the religious crisis that loomed so large for the entire symbolist generation. Thus, when Mallarmé writes "Le Ciel est mort" in "L'Azur," this has the effect of asserting both

Oddly, Balakian does not cite what may be the most important passage in which the *ciel* construct occurs in Stevens' poetry—important because it happens to be contained in "Sunday Morning," one of the greatest poems of the century:

And shall the earth
Seem all of paradise that we shall know?
The sky will be much friendlier then than now,
A part of labor and a part of pain,
And next in glory to enduring love,
Not this dividing and indifferent blue.

The religious crisis that emerges in its most radical form in Mallarmé's poetry is encountered in these great lines, but it is also mitigated by the mediation of Wordsworthian immanence and by the millennial hopes that are held out to us at the end of *Paradise Lost*: "for then the Earth / Shall all be Paradise, far happier place / Than this of Eden, and far happier days." "Sunday Morning" is, of course, an early poem, but Stevens will continue to hold onto the romantic heritage as an anchor against the symbolist abyss. To some extent this will be true for all of the poets under Balakian's consideration—even for Mallarmé himself.

The difficulty of tracing the influence of Mallarmé on Stevens, then, and to some extent this will also be true of Yeats, is that in Stevens' greatest poems, such as "Sunday Morning," that influence does not exist in itself but is inextricably bound up with the romantic inheritance; in other words, it occurs only in the context of an achieved synthesis. Insofar as Balakian had to clear a path for herself, it was perhaps necessary for her to draw the lines circumscribing romanticism from symbolism as closely as she did; yet this constitutes one of the inevitable limitations of this fine study. Nevertheless, in *The Fiction of the Poet*, Balakian successfully clarifies and complicates our understanding of the direction that runs from Mallarmé and symbolism to twentieth-century poetry; like Stevens' Necessary Angel, she makes the visible "a little harder to see," deepening our understanding.

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while love, year by year, builds in silence.

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by multiple schemes and arrangements,
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not certain they'll find satisfaction—

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a larger, untrammelled awareness
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