

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



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Volume 20 Number 2

Fall 1996

# The Wallace Stevens Journal

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Cover: *Wallace Stevens*, 1981  
Acrylic on aluminum  
by Mimi Gross

## The Wallace Stevens Journal

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## The Influence of Wallace Stevens on Contemporary Artists

GLEN MACLEOD

*It is a visibility of thought,  
In which hundreds of eyes, in one mind, see at once.  
—“An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”*

**N**O AMERICAN POET has inspired a broader range of artists than Wallace Stevens. The following examples illustrate that influence. Artworks have been selected to represent the full spectrum of responses to Stevens' poetry, from pure abstraction to straightforward figuration, from delicate line drawing to painterly expressionism, from small watercolors to very large mixed-media constructions, from serene still lifes to apocalyptic visions. I hope this representative grouping will make undeniably clear the extent and variety of Stevens' appeal to visual artists.

One reason Stevens has had such wide-ranging influence is that he is such a complex and many-sided poet. Each artist responds to that aspect of Stevens that speaks most directly to him or her. There is the Stevens of "The Snow Man" whose cold rationalism surfaces in Jasper Johns's *Winter*; the Stevens of the Florida poems whose gaudy, sensual effects correspond to those in works by William Baziotes and Grace Hartigan; the high romantic Stevens of *The Auroras of Autumn* whose sublime vision inspires Jesse Murry, Gregory Botts, and Jennifer Bartlett; the Stevens whose delicate nuances are like the color harmonies of Milton Avery or Fairfield Porter; the comic Stevens whose spirit presides in works by William Burney, Mimi Gross, and Claes Oldenburg; and the Stevens of endless hesitations and revisions like those in works by Jack Tworkov or Richard Diebenkorn. The list could be greatly expanded.

Another reason Stevens speaks so directly to artists is that his poetry was often written in direct response to contemporary developments in the visual arts. His mature career (1913–1955) exactly spanned the period from the Armory Show (1913) to the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, and Stevens followed the course of modern art during those years with close attention.<sup>1</sup> His *Collected Poems*, in the words of Hayden Carruth, "present to us the whole movement of this century in art."<sup>2</sup> His poetry, therefore, addresses problems that concern most mod-

ern artists; and it speaks the dialect of the art world. Taken together, the following artists and artworks provide a kind of guided tour of Stevens' poetic world.

### *Milton Avery*

Milton Avery (1885–1965) grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. His family moved to the area in 1898, and he lived there until 1925, when he left for New York City. As a lover of poetry, he was well aware that Hartford was also home to one of America's greatest living poets, Wallace Stevens. Avery's wife and fellow-artist, Sally Michel Avery, recalled that poetry played an important role in their life together. The family often read poetry out loud. Milton especially liked doing this, and he would read favorite poems again and again.<sup>3</sup>

One of the poems he liked best was Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Probably he was drawn to the poem's witty allusions to Picasso, since he, like Stevens, often used guitar images in his own paintings as self-conscious references to the undisputed leader of modern art. With a similar mixture of respect and humor, Avery also named his dog Picasso. Often he read "The Man with the Blue Guitar" aloud to his family.<sup>4</sup> Robert Hobbs has suggested that Avery's *Self-Portrait* (1947) may be related to Stevens' poem since it shows the artist dressed entirely in blue.<sup>5</sup> This painting also calls to mind that poem's central theme of the complex relations between imagination and reality: in the background are other paintings, all of them portraits of his wife and daughter posing. This is the self-portrait of an artist for whom life and art are inextricably intermingled.

Another of Avery's favorite poems, which he also liked to read aloud, was "The Idea of Order at Key West." This poem took on special significance for him when, on doctor's orders, he spent the winter of 1959–1960 in Key West, living in a rented house with his family. As Martica Sawin has pointed out, Avery's *Lone Bather* (1960) seems closely related to "The Idea of Order at Key West."<sup>6</sup>



**Milton Avery, *Lone Bather*, 1960**  
Oil on canvas, 50 x 72"  
Milton Avery Trust, New York

Like Stevens' poem, this painting depicts a single female figure on a beach, facing away from us toward the vibrantly colored sea and sky. She is the poet- or artist-figure who creates the world in which we live:

For she was the maker of the song she sang.  
The ever-hooded, tragic-gestured sea  
Was merely a place by which she walked to sing.  
.....  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. (CP 129)

According to his wife, what Avery loved most about Stevens' poetry was its *sound*.<sup>7</sup> The close affinity between Stevens and Avery may perhaps best be summarized by drawing an analogy between Avery's sensuous use of color and Stevens' sensuous use of language. It is a sensuousness at once elegant and strange, startling and seductive. Martica Sawin relates it to their common experience in Hartford: "Avery and Stevens were both frugal New Englanders by conditioning, who seem to be forever compensating for some early sensory deprivation by reveling in exotic and subtle hues."<sup>8</sup>

*Jack Tworikov*

Jack Tworikov (1900–1982) reached maturity as part of the Abstract Expressionist movement whose leading figures were Jackson Pollock and Willem DeKooning. (Other artists in this article associated with Abstract Expressionism are William Baziotes, Robert Motherwell, Richard Diebenkorn, and Grace Hartigan.) Abstract Expressionism emphasized spontaneity, freedom, direct expression of emotion, and an exuberant, painterly delight in the medium itself. Tworikov's painting *Adagio* (1953) is typical of the "gestural" abstraction for which this movement is known.

Like Wallace Stevens, the Abstract Expressionists developed their art under the combined influences of surrealism and abstraction during the 1930s and early 1940s, and their mature paintings provide a suggestive parallel to Stevens' abstract late poems such as "The Auroras of Autumn" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." They became famous in the early 1950s, at the same time that Stevens was becoming known as perhaps the greatest living American poet, whose work owed its "major" status primarily to a coherent, overarching aesthetic theory. Naturally the Abstract Expressionists turned to Stevens' writing for help in explaining the new painting they had recently developed.



Jack Tworkov, *Adagio*, 1953  
Oil on canvas, 80 x 26"  
Collection of the Metropolitan  
Museum of Art  
Anonymous gift, 1955 (55.82)

Jack Tworkov was reading and talking about Wallace Stevens in the early 1950s. This was entirely in character, since Tworkov originally wanted to be a poet. He had been an English major at Columbia College before dropping out to devote himself to painting. Dorothea Rockburne, who was a student at Black Mountain College in the early 1950s, recalls his discussing Stevens there in July 1952.<sup>9</sup> We may surmise what aspects of Stevens Tworkov responded to by examining the markings he made in his own copy of *The Necessary Angel* in the mid-1970s.<sup>10</sup> All the markings are in the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," which focuses on the concept of nobility—a central issue for both Stevens and the Abstract Expressionists. The importance of this idea for Tworkov is clear from his journal: "I want to make paintings more noble, more real, more truthful than myself. The pictures should transcend *me*."<sup>11</sup> Tworkov's yearning for transcendence led him to share Stevens' highly romantic view of art as a replacement for religion. As Tworkov noted in his journal,

"My predicament is that I'm essentially a religious man—a religious man without a religion—and so abstract art is perhaps the nirvana towards which I reach."<sup>12</sup> But he was equally drawn, like Stevens, to the idea of art as a response to the "pressure of reality." In a journal entry dated January 21, 1947, he had typed: "Style is the effect of pressure."<sup>13</sup> And he underlined the passage about this idea (quoted above) in his copy of *The Necessary Angel*.

*Adagio* is based on the human figure, but as in Willem DeKooning's famous series *Women*, the chief interest of this work is its exuberant brushwork.<sup>14</sup> The painter's—and the viewer's—attention is not so much on the nominal subject as on the act of painting itself: long arm-strokes trailing thickly through oil paint, partial impressions sketched spontaneously, untidy passages enlivened by rapid hesitations and second thoughts, so that the final painting is the record of a process rather than a convention-

ally finished work. The critic Harold Rosenberg labeled this process “Action Painting,” and it is closely analogous to the late poetry of Stevens.<sup>15</sup> In *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950), for instance, Stevens’ central subject is life itself in its most characteristic mode, in the process of change. This theme is embodied in the figure of the “necessary angel” whose self-description might easily apply to the figure in Tworkov’s painting:

Am I not,  
Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,  
  
A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man  
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in  
  
Apparels of such lightest look that a turn  
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (CP 497)

### *Fairfield Porter*

Fairfield Porter (1907–1975) was vitally interested in poetry. He wrote poetry himself, and he married the poet Anne Channing. His personal library was rich in books of poetry and about poetry.<sup>16</sup> To list his poet-friends is virtually to catalogue the New York School of poetry, and he painted portraits of many of these figures—Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch among them.

Although Porter never met Stevens, he devoted serious and searching attention to Stevens’ poetry throughout his artistic career, from the mid-1930s till the time of his death in 1975. In one characteristic episode, his wife remembers Porter going to bed one evening in the 1960s, clutching Stevens’ poems and announcing, “I’m going to understand them if it kills me!”<sup>17</sup> In his library were Stevens’ *Parts of a World* (1942), *Collected Poems* (1954), *Opus Posthumous* (1957), and *Letters* (1966).<sup>18</sup> He quoted Stevens frequently in letters, in his critical writing, and in conversation. In 1936 he based a linoleum cut on Stevens’ poem “The Men That Are Falling,” and he chose Stevens as a model when he began writing art criticism in the 1950s.<sup>19</sup> Although he certainly admired many other poets, he seems to have seen Stevens in particular as a kindred spirit.

The painting *Lizzie at the Table* (1958) bears witness to this aesthetic kinship. The canvas shows the artist’s two-year-old daughter, seated in a high chair, looking out across the breakfast table. The meal is over, but the table has not yet been cleared, and among the items remaining is a book. Its lime-green dust jacket identifies it as Stevens’ *Opus Posthumous*. Probably, as Anne Porter has remarked, the artist had been reading *Opus Posthumous* at breakfast, and he simply painted the book where he had left it.<sup>20</sup>



Fairfield Porter, *Lizzie at the Table*, 1958

Oil on canvas, 36½ x 45½"

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Arthur M. Bullowa, 1993

But the impromptu appearance of Stevens' book in Porter's painting is more than accidental. Rather, it illustrates Porter's dictum that "the profoundest order is revealed in what is most casual."<sup>21</sup>

This episode exemplifies one of Porter's central artistic aims, and it was one that he felt he shared with Stevens. In a critical essay of 1970 Porter quoted Stevens as follows: "Wallace Stevens said the aim of poetry was 'without imposing, without reasoning at all, to find the eccentric at the base of design.' This is both the artist's vision and his sense of order."<sup>22</sup> In fact, Stevens never wrote exactly this phrase. Porter has "put together" this statement using excerpts from two separate poems, as he explained in a letter to his friend Arthur Giardelli:

The American poet Wallace Stevens expressed something that I like, that I agree with, and I will make a collage of some of his remarks to produce this: without imposing, without reasoning at all (one discovers) the eccentric to be the base of design.<sup>23</sup>

One part of Porter's "collage"-quotation is taken from the poem "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery":

It was when the trees were leafless first in November  
And their blackness became apparent, that one first  
Knew *the eccentric to be the base of design*. (CP 151; italics added)

Here the poet gazes unflinchingly at barest reality ("the eccentric") and finds it a solid foundation for poetry ("the base of design").

Porter combined this phrase with another taken from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," perhaps Stevens' greatest long poem:

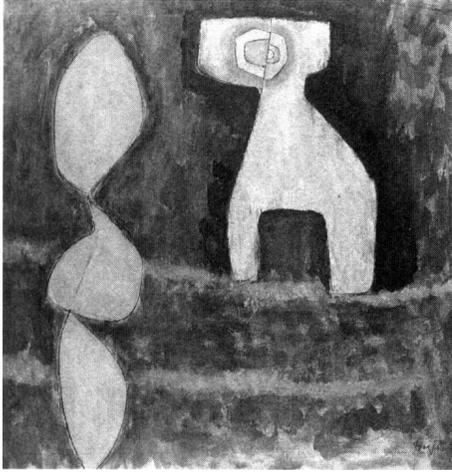
to impose is not  
To discover. To discover an order as of  
A season, to discover summer and know it,  
  
To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
*Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,*  
Out of nothing to have come on major weather,  
  
It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. . . . (CP 403-04; italics added)

Both Porter and Stevens sought, in their art, to get in touch with "reality." This is not easily done. In order to see reality at all, the artist must strip himself bare of all rational or imaginative preconceptions, so that he will not "impose" them on what he sees. Both Porter and Stevens avidly sought such clarity not as an end in itself, but because it could serve as a firm foundation to support a loftier, more spiritual vision. Their shared aesthetic goal was to capture the miraculous occurrences in everyday life, the serendipitous moments when the ordinary suddenly takes on extraordinary significance.<sup>24</sup>

Hilton Kramer once characterized Porter's painting as "French art with a Yankee accent," a combination of sensuousness and austere spirituality.<sup>25</sup> The description applies equally well to Stevens' poetry.

### ***William Baziotes***

William Baziotes (1912-1963) was a great admirer of Stevens' poetry. Robert Motherwell recalled that "William Baziotes was deeply interested in Stevens, partly because both were born in Reading, Pa."<sup>26</sup> This geographical coincidence probably meant a great deal to Baziotes because he had a "sentimental, almost mystical notion about 'psychic connections,' " according to art historian Mona Hadler.<sup>27</sup> During his years in Reading, his interest in Stevens was nurtured by his friendship with the poet Byron Vazakas. "I introduced Bill to contemporary literature," Vazakas recalled, "including my two favorites, MacLeish and Stevens. . . . I know he liked



**William Baziotes**, *Figure on a Tightrope*, 1947  
Oil on canvas, 36 x 42"  
Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Louis R. Wasserman,  
1977 (1977.471)

it, especially Stevens' earlier work."<sup>28</sup> Baziotes' wife, too, recalls his interest in Stevens' poetry; she still has a copy of *The Man with the Blue Guitar* that Baziotes gave her in 1952.<sup>29</sup>

A comparison of Baziotes' painting *Figure on a Tightrope* (1947) with Stevens' poem "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream" helps to characterize the affinity between these two artists. *Figure on a Tightrope* is a typical Baziotes canvas in that it includes a few biomorphic-abstract forms suspended in a flickering, mysterious atmosphere of delicately modulated color. Like many of his most characteristic works, this one has the look of an under-

water scene. The beauty of the color contrasts with the strangeness of the forms, creating a deliberately ambivalent effect. Baziotes sought, in his own words, "an image coming in from the unconscious making irrational elements work together. In my type of painting, I often feel we have horror and something very beautiful. A certain strangeness, too."<sup>30</sup> A similar combination of elements can be found in Stevens' "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream," in which the experience of swimming in a stream becomes a kind of surreal metamorphosis:

We bathed in yellow green and yellow blue  
And in these comic colors dangled down,

Like their particular characters, addicts  
To blotches, angular anonymids  
Gulping for shape among the reeds. (CP 371)

The civilized contours of the speaker's world dissolve in this liquid element in a way that is both humorous ("comic") and vaguely unsettling ("Gulping for shape"). Soon the poem modulates from these bright colors and antic word-play into a more sombre key:

It was passing a boundary, floating without a head  
And naked, or almost so, into the grotesque  
Of being naked, or almost so, in a world

Of nakedness. . . . (CP 371)

There is something uncomfortable in this “grotesque” description, something too vulnerably “naked,” and this is the very point of the poem, which concludes:

How good it was at home again at night  
To prepare for bed, in the frame of the house, and move  
Round the rooms, which do not ever seem to change . . . (CP 372)

This poem uses underwater imagery to symbolize a journey into the unconscious, just as Baziotes does in paintings such as *Figure on a Tightrope*. The journey is exhilarating but also frightening; we are refreshed, but also relieved, when it is over. The lure of the irrational has, as Baziotes said of certain of Goya’s pictures, “a mixing of beauty and horror that I find very exciting.” Baziotes’ painting and Stevens’ poetry share this fundamental ambivalence about the irrational element in art, and this accounts for the similar quality of imagination in their work. We may think of them together as representing an “identity of sensibility” such as Stevens thought to exist between certain poets and painters (NA 164).<sup>31</sup>

### **Robert Motherwell**

Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) was one of the most intellectual and articulate of the Abstract Expressionists who came to maturity in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He was also perhaps the most literary of this group, alluding with ease in writing and conversation to the significant writers and literary documents of modernism. He titled paintings *Mallarmé’s Swan*, *Kafka’s Room*, and *Beckett’s Space*; did an entire series called “The Hollow Men” after T. S. Eliot’s poem; and illustrated editions of James Joyce, Octavio Paz, and other writers.

Motherwell felt a particular kinship with Stevens because he, too, came from a privileged background and had a Harvard education that sometimes made him feel isolated among avant-garde artists:

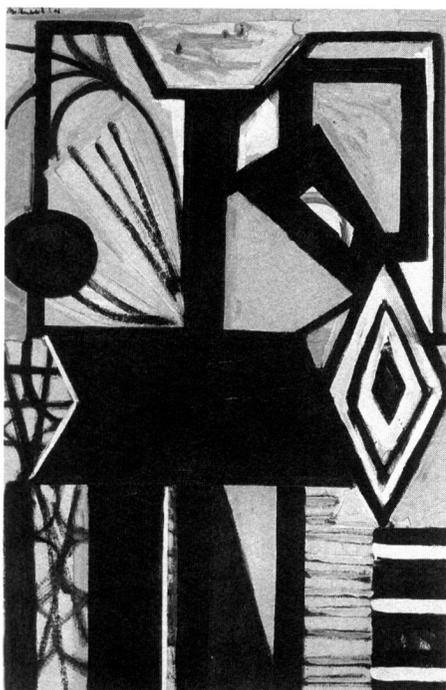
I think the fact that he was a business-man, a connoisseur of wines and teas and food, a patrician, probably greatly prejudiced the bohemian milieu of Greenwich Village in those days in a way that is difficult to exaggerate. I am not a business-man, but have suffered enough myself from the other a priori clichés to know how hurtful and unfair it is.<sup>32</sup>

He also used to defend Stevens’ work “against those who thought he was too much of an aesthete and were all for William Carlos Williams.”<sup>33</sup> It was not usual for Motherwell to quote American poets in his essays, but he did quote Stevens. In the essay “Painter’s Objects” (1944), for example, he used a stanza from “The Poems of Our Climate” to criticize the present state of abstract painting.<sup>34</sup> And when he edited (with Ad Reinhardt) *Mod-*

ern Artists in America in 1951, he quoted a passage from *The Necessary Angel* on “the pressure of reality” in order to explain the recent ascendancy of abstract art.<sup>35</sup>

The temperamental affinity between Motherwell and Stevens was noted by others as well. Frank O’Hara thought of Stevens as “the American poet probably most similar in sensibility to Motherwell,” defining what he meant as follows:

Stevens’s “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is almost a paradigm of Motherwell’s conception of the “series,” in which variations on a visual motif invite the artist and the viewer to see things with as much ingenuity and insight [as are] available to each without violating the essential identity of the initial image.<sup>36</sup>



**Robert Motherwell**, *Blue Air*, 1946  
Oil and sand on paperboard, 41½ x 283/8"  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden  
Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.  
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966  
© 1996 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by  
VAGA, New York, N.Y.  
Photo credit: Lee Stalsworth

In choosing as an analogy for Motherwell’s work Stevens’ poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” O’Hara probably had in mind not only Motherwell’s series paintings—the best-known of which are the *Elegies for the Spanish Republic*—but also his career-long predilection for the color black.<sup>37</sup>

Motherwell has done several artworks related to Stevens, all of them inspired by “The Man with the Blue Guitar.” In 1983 he recalled: “Years ago, maybe thirty years ago, I called one of my paintings (or collages) ‘the Blue Guitar.’”<sup>38</sup> The year was 1946, and in fact he created two such works, one a painting, the other a collage; both were titled *Blue Air*. In recalling this episode, he seems to have confused the two. “At one time I wanted to make a painting called ‘The Blue Guitar’, but the shape turned out to be a wood instrument—a clarinet or a fife, I do not remember. I have not seen the picture in years.”<sup>39</sup>

Investigation shows that these memories refer to the collage *Blue Air*, now in a private collection. Another letter from Motherwell provides further clues to the genesis of this collage: "There is a kind of imaginary instrument in it, but more like a woodwind, and is dominantly blue. (The guitar shape is so deeply a Cubist icon that I probably avoided it, especially in making a collage which is a Cubist invention, and hence a reference by indirection.)"<sup>40</sup> By changing the instrument, Motherwell disguised his references both to Picasso and to Stevens. The painting *Blue Air* disguises its inspiration even further by venturing into nearly pure abstraction. The composition is evidently based on the human figure, but it has been entirely transformed. One is reminded of these lines from Stevens' poem:

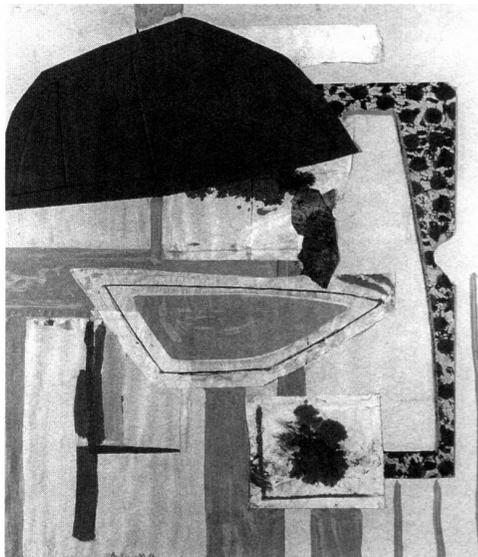
Nothing must stand

Between you and the shapes you take  
When the crust of shape has been destroyed. (CP 183)

Much later in his career, Motherwell returned to "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and completed two collages based on it. *The Blue Guitar* (1990) and *The Blue Guitar (To Wallace Stevens)* (1990)—both in the collection of the Dedalus Foundation—show the painter returning in old age to the inspiration of his youth, paying tribute to a great poet who was also a kindred spirit.

### **Richard Diebenkorn**

Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993) was introduced to Stevens' poetry in 1946 by the painter David Park. "David Park read the poems stanza by stanza to his drawing classes whose assignment it was to make rapid line drawings using the images as subject."<sup>41</sup> Among the poems Park read aloud were "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Disillusionment of Ten



**Robert Motherwell**, *Blue Air*, 1946  
Oil-collage, 40 x 30"  
Collection David M. Solinger, New York  
© 1996 Dedalus Foundation, Inc./Licensed by  
VAGA, New York, N.Y.  
Photo credit: © Geoffrey Clements, Inc., New York

O'Clock," "Metaphors of a Magnifico," and "Earthy Anecdote"—all from Stevens' first book, *Harmonium*.<sup>42</sup> Diebenkorn responded immediately to Stevens' poetry because of its "very graphic and color-charged imagery."<sup>43</sup>

The idea of using Stevens' poetry as a stimulus to drawing attracted Diebenkorn deeply. "The students, I being one of them, loved it and I later used the device in some of my classes—always successfully."<sup>44</sup> The point of such an exercise was to give the student "insight into one's own artistic potentialities and capacities."<sup>45</sup> Here is his more detailed description of his procedure:

The student was given rather little time, 2 to 3 minutes, and was forced to gather, concentrate his impressions—encouraged to locate an image and state it (by necessity) immediately. A discipline was imposed which was very different from the usual elementary art school drawing assignment wherein the student has endless time to qualify, prepare his reactions and responses, become bored or tired, etc. Here he tapped in himself, when he did, a fresh, direct and concise avenue to graphic expression which often would surprise him. The results (the drawings) were surprising also and this along with great immediacy and vividness of image *and* drawing were the measure of "success" of the enterprise as far as I, and I think David, were concerned.<sup>46</sup>

In Diebenkorn's experience, it was Stevens' poetry that worked best in the classroom. "I used works of poets other than Stevens, of course, but none had the magic, for this purpose, that he did."<sup>47</sup> "Of all the modern poets there are none who give me subjects that are as vivid as Stevens."<sup>48</sup>

Diebenkorn thought of Stevens as a poet who could give visual artists access to their own creative potential. He derived this notion from his own immediate, personal response to Stevens' poetry. The strength of that response suggests that he recognized in Stevens a fundamentally similar artistic temperament. Thus John Elderfield, writing in the catalogue of Diebenkorn's drawings at the Museum of Modern Art in 1989, cited Stevens as the poet whose sensibility is closest in spirit to Diebenkorn's.

The *Ocean Park* series illustrates this affinity particularly well. Diebenkorn is known as a painter of hesitations and revisions, who allows the stages of composition to remain visible alongside and underneath the final design. This aspect of his work aligns him with the Abstract Expressionists, especially Willem De Kooning whose painting had an important, early influence on Diebenkorn's career. Elderfield relates this aspect of Diebenkorn's work to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird":

it is as if thirteen ways, and more, of looking at the world are accumulated in a single work. As we retrace the layers of their accumulation, we retrace the multiplicity of their interpretation. . . .<sup>49</sup>

We can relate Diebenkorn's painting to "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in another sense as well. Like De Kooning and other of the Abstract Expressionists, Diebenkorn often worked in *series*. A possible subtitle for the *Ocean Park* series, which includes well over three hundred works, might be "Hundreds of Ways of Looking at a Landscape."

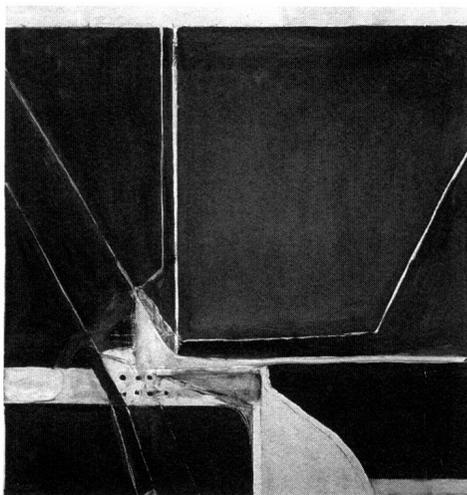
Ultimately, the affinity between Diebenkorn and Stevens comes down to their fundamentally similar way of looking at the world. Stevens is known—paradoxically—both for his vivid, concrete imagery and for his abstractness and ob-

scurity. In the same way, Diebenkorn began as an abstract painter, shifted to figuration in 1956, and turned to abstraction again in 1967. As his painting career shuttled comfortably between abstraction and representation, so a work like *Ocean Park #26* hovers between landscape and abstract design, between rational, geometric forms and irrational, organic process. The drawing is at once playful and elegant, linear and painterly, sensuous and restrained. According to Elderfield, it is Diebenkorn's interest in such opposites—or, more precisely, in the *relationships* between them—that unifies his entire work:

the unity of his achievement proceeds from a relationship between abstraction and representation, and between imagination and reality, that reveals different emphasis in different periods, but that persists through them just the same.<sup>50</sup>

This unifying element is also what links Diebenkorn most closely to Stevens. Stevens' description of his personal "imagination-reality complex" could describe Diebenkorn's outlook as well as his own:

Sometimes I believe most in the imagination for a long time and then, without reasoning about it, turn to reality and believe in that and that alone. But both of these things project themselves endlessly and I want them to do just that. (L 710)



**Richard Diebenkorn**, *Ocean Park #26*  
Oil on canvas, 89 x 81"  
Acquavella Gallery, New York  
Photo credit: Scott Bowron Photography, N.Y.

Both Stevens and Diebenkorn conceived of artistic activity as an endless series of confrontations between imagination and an ever-changing reality. In this sense, we might think of the *Ocean Park* series as Diebenkorn's pictorial version of what Stevens called his own "endlessly elaborating poem" (CP 486).

### *Grace Hartigan*

Grace Hartigan (b. 1922) first came to prominence as one of the so-called "second generation" New York School artists that included (among others) Helen Frankenthaler, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Larry Rivers, George Segal, and Claes Oldenburg. There was close interaction between painters and poets in this group, as Hartigan recalls: "My relation with the 'New York School' poets—Schuyler, Ashbery, and Koch as well as O'Hara, was a source of stimulation, strength, comfort—all wonders—in the 50's." She first read Stevens' poetry at the urging of Frank O'Hara, who made a habit of promoting Stevens among his painter-friends: "I was 'introduced' to Wallace Stevens in the early 50's by my beloved friend Frank O'Hara."<sup>51</sup>

Hartigan read Stevens' poems with an eye to expressing her own aesthetic aims. This is clear from the statement she wrote in 1956 for the Museum of Modern Art's historic exhibition *Twelve Americans*. This brief manifesto, which "summarizes her artistic goals as well as any that has been written" (according to Robert S. Mattison), concludes with a quotation from Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West":

*I have found my "subject," it concerns that which is vulgar and vital in American modern life, and the possibilities of its transcendence into the beautiful. I do not wish to describe my subject matter, or reflect upon it—I want to distill it until I have its essence. Then the rawness must be resolved into form and unity; without the "rage for order" how can there be art?*<sup>52</sup>

Here Stevens' impassioned outcry "Oh! Blessed rage for order" (CP 130)—that so neatly conflates the spiritual, emotional, and rational components of the poetic impulse—serves as shorthand for Hartigan's own artistic objectives.

Hartigan's interest in Stevens is most fully embodied in the painting *The the* (1962), whose title comes from the last line of his poem "The Man on the Dump": "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the" (CP 203).<sup>53</sup> The 1960s were an important transitional period for Hartigan. By the late 1950s, the mood in New York had changed: "the camaraderie fell apart."<sup>54</sup> In 1960 she married and moved to Baltimore. During the 1960s, no longer at the center of avant-garde activity, she "struggled to find what my subject was and what there was in Abstract Expressionism for me. . . . *The the* came as I was struggling for imagery and losing it."<sup>55</sup> She explains the genesis of this painting:



**Grace Hartigan**, *The the #1*, 1962  
 Oil on canvas, 80½ x 115½"  
 New York State Office of General Services  
 Empire State Plaza Art Collection, Albany, N.Y.  
 Photo credit: William Knorr

I found myself through the 50's reading "The Man on the Dump" over and over. . . . I feel close to making order—beauty—out of garbage or chaos. . . . So in the early 60's, having moved to provincial junky (JUNKY) seedy Baltimore, I decided to do a painting about all this which I called *The the*.<sup>56</sup>

She began the painting with imagery that then became more and more abstract, just as Stevens' poem begins with concrete images but concludes with an abstract statement:

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.  
 The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche  
 Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho . . . The dump is full  
 Of images.

.....  
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (CP 201-03)

Hartigan compares Stevens' playful use of language in this poem to Abstract Expressionism: " 'Ho-ho' is sort of like 'The the'—a kind of throw-away repetition. It's like Abstract Expressionism. 'Let's loosen it up here. Let's throw the language around a little bit.' "<sup>57</sup> *The the* exemplifies the colorful, painterly brushwork of Abstract Expressionism, though its high

spirits are contained within the grid-like structure that orders the surface of the canvas. It is typically Abstract Expressionist, too, in its large size (80½ x 115½")—a forceful reminder of the ambitious spirit that unifies Hartigan's entire career. This also she associates with "The Man on the Dump": "It speaks of triumph, isn't Truth triumph?"<sup>58</sup>

### *Jane Wilson*

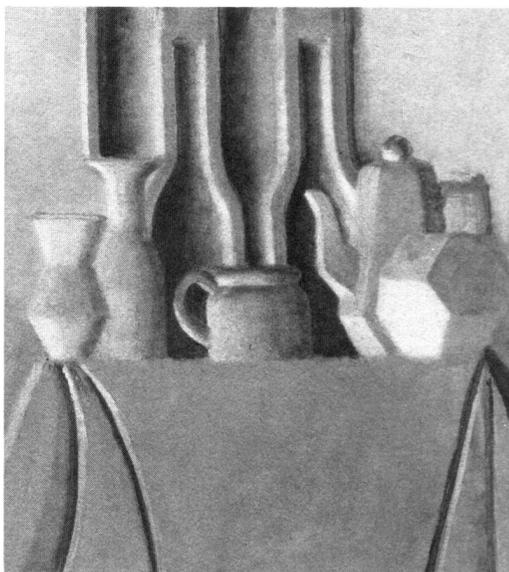
Jane Wilson (b. 1924) actually *knew* Wallace Stevens personally. In 1953 her husband, John Gruen, who was composing a song cycle based on Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," wrote to the famous poet inviting him to listen to the songs and stay for dinner. "For some reason, God only knows what it could have been, he accepted the invitation and came to where we lived," recalls Gruen. "We were really in deep shock at the fact that he agreed to come."<sup>59</sup> Stevens did indeed come, listening to Gruen's songs, looking at Wilson's paintings, and sharing dinner with these two young artists. The famously reclusive poet apparently enjoyed this rare outing; he carried on a lively correspondence with Gruen and Wilson from then until his death in August 1955. Wilson suggests that Stevens' pleasure in their company may have had something to do with their shared interest in the relations between the arts: "I suspect that it may have been an interesting, relatively remote relationship with young people who were starting out and who were connected to various parts of the current [scene], since music, art, dance and poetry were all interrelated at that point."<sup>60</sup>

Wilson has always considered this personal connection with Stevens "a kind of private possession" that lends special significance to her reading of his poetry.<sup>61</sup> But her interest in Stevens' poetry began long before she met the poet. Both she and Gruen were introduced to Stevens' poetry by their friend and teacher at the University of Iowa, Austin Warren. In those early days they used to read the poems aloud to each other. Their library contains well-marked copies of Stevens' *Harmonium* (1923) (a gift from Austin Warren), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Parts of a World* (1942), and *The Auroras of Autumn* (1950).

Wilson discovered that reading Stevens' poetry could put her in the right state of mind for painting. "I found whenever I picked up a book of his and began reading here and there . . . that I always found a poem that allowed me to enter into a certain climate of mind, . . . exactly the kind of climate or territory that I needed to be in in order to paint. So it was the most direct way of completely focusing." One poem that was particularly useful for this purpose was "Anecdote of the Jar," "the first poem of his that became internalized way back at college. It's still immediately conducive to the frame of mind I need when I paint."<sup>62</sup>

"I've always felt a private affinity with [Stevens'] work," says Wilson.<sup>63</sup> Thinking, like Stevens, in terms of analogies between the arts, she draws a parallel between Stevens' use of poetic rhythm and the artist's way of looking: "There's a poem about a bouquet ["Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight"] in which he enumerates the colors. The rhythm of the poem and the way the mentioning of the color is used is very like the rhythm of looking intensely. . . ." And she associates her own preference for natural light with the "vivid sense in reading his poetry of being out of doors. When I read his poetry, I feel he is speaking from and creating an outdoors situation. . . . Perhaps I'm thinking about the presence of outdoor light, which might be either out of doors or indoors." She shares Stevens' interest in "the physicality of objects" and is fascinated by the idea—recurrent in Stevens' poetry—"that the object is also the poem or painting, and that they are ultimately inseparable."<sup>64</sup>

"The fact is, [Stevens] is somewhere connected to both my landscape and still-life work," writes Wilson.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps we can see this in *Summer Tea Time* (1978–81), whose familiar still-life objects are lent a certain strangeness by being painted to look as if they have been modeled in bas relief from clay or plaster. The summer light warms the scene, but it also highlights certain abstract qualities of the composition: the purely geometric object at the right, the dark columnar space scooped out above the carafe on the left, the ghostly shapes of absent wine bottles at the center.



**Jane Wilson**, *Summer Tea Time*, 1978–81  
Oil on canvas, 30 x 25"  
Courtesy of Fischbach Gallery, New York

These rich effects of light and shadow, which depict spatially the interplay between abstraction and representation, between imagination and reality, are enhanced by the subdued palette—a Stevensian restraint translated into pictorial terms. To describe the experience of studying such a painting, we might quote one of Wilson's favorite poems, "Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight":

[T]his effect is a consequence of the way  
We feel and, therefore, is not real, except  
In our sense of it. . . .

.....  
Our sense of these things changes and they change,  
Not as in metaphor, but in our sense  
Of them. So sense exceeds all metaphor.

It exceeds the heavy changes of the light.  
It is like a flow of meanings with no speech  
And of as many meanings as of men. (CP 430–31)

### *William Burney*

The painter William Burney (b. 1927) is also a Stevens scholar. Now an Emeritus Professor of English at Central Connecticut State University, he published, at the beginning of his teaching career, *Wallace Stevens* (Twayne United States Authors Series, 1968), a book that is still a standard reference work for college students. Burney has painted off and on all his life. At age 24 he was accepted at the graduate program of the Yale School of Art and Architecture, but he eventually went on to get a Ph.D. in English instead.

In 1973, Burney took up painting seriously again. Many of his works have titles drawn from Stevens, for instance, *This Green Sprout Why* (from "Questions Are Remarks"), *A Flippant Communication Under the Moon* (from "The Auroras of Autumn"), and *Ting-Tang Tossing* (from "The Bed of Old John Zeller"). But his paintings are not based on the poems as directly as these titles may imply. "I've said Wallace Stevens taught me how to paint," Burney writes. "But no specific poem did that. I've never done a painting with a Stevens poem in mind."<sup>66</sup> He describes the origin of his titles this way: "It did not occur to me to use phrases from Stevens poems to entitle my paintings until I went to a recital of Ned Rorem's settings of Stevens poems and realized he was doing with his vocal line what I was doing with my visual line."<sup>67</sup> This episode clearly illustrates the artist's Stevensian habit of drawing inspiration from interart analogies: he was able to recognize the parallel between his own painting and Stevens' poetry only by analogy with a third art form, music.

The title *It Is Nothing, No Great Thing* comes from the poem of 1950 entitled "Imago," which begins:

Who can pick up the weight of Britain,  
Who can move the German load  
Or say to the French here is France again?  
Imago. Imago. Imago.

It is nothing, no great thing. . . . (CP 439)

"Imago" is a post-war American poem describing the power of imagination as a "gorgeous fortitude" that can lift the weight of history, bringing peace and

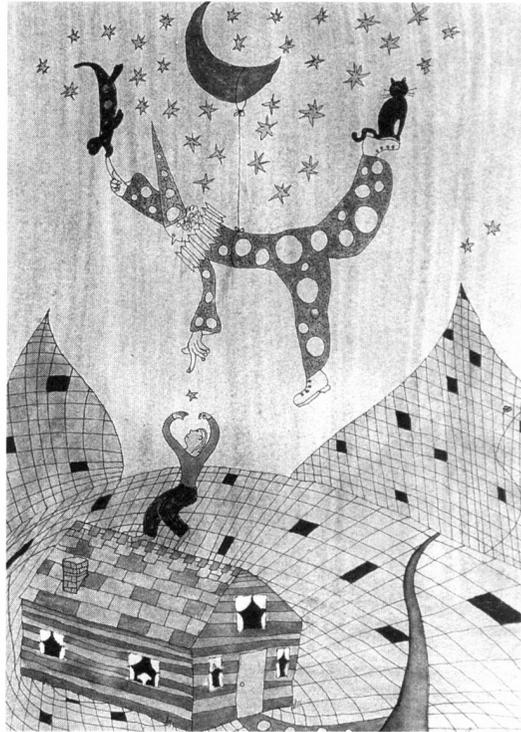
Making this heavy rock a place,  
Which is not of our lives composed . . .  
*Lightly and lightly, O my land,*  
*Move lightly through the air again.* (CP 439)

Burney translates this feeling of imaginative power into a more personal realm. Of the painting *It Is Nothing, No Great Thing* he writes:

The clown is such an airy being, you can see through him. He is not hanging from the moon; he is lightly moored to the moon. And yet he contains the stars, as in a cup.

In looking for a title for the painting, my eye lit on the phrase in Stevens' poem, "Imago," "It is nothing, no great thing." What takes place [in both the poem and painting] is a metamorphosis like that of a pupa becoming an imago, an adult winged form.

The airy clown's actions, his supporting a real dog and a real cat, and his dropping a real star into a real boy's real hands, cause the hills to billow, to become the cockles of the boy's heart, the whole world to be blood red. Looking at the painting, one feels that its world has become one the boy can command, and as in the poem, to do so is nothing, no great thing, because the world outside the painting is already deeply in accord with the change of heart



**William Burney**, *It Is Nothing, No Great Thing*, 1980  
Acrylic and gouache on paper, 11¾ x 8¼"  
Collection of the artist, New Britain, Conn.

which I, the painter, have accomplished in the passion of my meditation.<sup>68</sup>

The fairy-tale quality of this painting, with its fanciful draftsmanship, clearly shows the influence of Paul Klee, who is Burney's—as well as Stevens'—favorite painter. In the spirit of Klee, *It Is Nothing, No Great Thing* depicts a circus-performer who is to some extent a stand-in for the artist himself: he is willingly engaged in a risky and dangerous performance that demands all of his skill and concentration but that is also, from a practical point of view, slightly absurd. Stevens would certainly sympathize with this view of artistic creation as a balancing act, comic but serious at the same time.

### **Claes Oldenburg**

Claes Oldenburg's (b. 1929) project *Cross-Section of a Toothbrush with Paste in a Cup on a Sink: Portrait of Coosje's Thinking* (1983), created with his wife Coosje van Bruggen, began as a proposal for a commission by the University of Hartford. As Oldenburg recalls, "Hartford made me think of the poet Wallace Stevens who had lived and worked in the city." He was interested especially in Stevens' double life as poet and insurance executive, "which had made [him] question the relation of art to life, imagination to reality, one of the central concerns of our approach." He describes the conception of this work:

We associated three particular poems by Stevens with the toothbrush in a cup: "Anecdote of the Jar," which evokes the image of a large-scale container, like a cup, set in a landscape; "Of Hartford in a Purple Light," which concerns the passage of the sun and the effects of light on the landscape; and "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch," which interweaves the human body with geometry, particularly the triangle.<sup>69</sup>



**Claes Oldenburg/Coosje van Bruggen**  
*Cross-Section of a Toothbrush with Paste in a Cup on a Sink: Portrait of Coosje's Thinking*, 1983  
Steel and cast iron painted with polyurethane enamel, 19'8 x 9'2¼ x 611/16"  
Haus Esters, Krefeld, Germany  
Photograph courtesy of Oldenburg/van Bruggen

Oldenburg's notebook pages illustrate various stages in the development of this idea, including references to Stevens: the phrase "I placed a jar" next to the cup shape; the note "inscription to WS" on the base of a monument-sized desk pen; the triangular cross-section incorporating the "a, b, c" references from "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch."

The chief interest of this work is in the contrast between the utterly specific and mundane subject—a toothbrush in a cup on a sink—and the abstract reduction of forms to a simple right-angled triangle. The very concept of analyzing into "cross-section" so lowly and familiar a subject, the combination of purely abstract ideas with particular concrete places or things, is essentially Stevensian. The title of Stevens' well-known poem "The Idea of Order at Key West," to give only one example, epitomizes this way of thinking. A photograph shows Oldenburg's completed work *in situ*. The sculpture stands in an outdoor environment, asserting its individuality against its surroundings and establishing itself at the center of a new idea of order.

*Sneaker Lace* (1989) was another sculpture that Oldenburg and his wife Coosje van Bruggen considered for the University of Hartford. He had already fabricated a model of the sculpture when they received the commission for that project:

We wanted to refer to the poet Wallace Stevens, who had lived and worked in the city. The transformed ordinary object of the *Lace* seemed to us to suit the poet's sensibility. The title of Stevens' collected works, "The Palm at the End of the Mind," also hinted at an affinity, since the *Lace* first acquired its sculptural scale through a comparison to a palm tree.<sup>70</sup>

The analogy between the sneaker lace and the palm tree—a virtual totem for Stevens—would certainly have amused the poet who delighted in such surreal juxtapositions and unexpected resemblances. We need only think of such titles as "The Emperor of



**Claes Oldenburg**, *Sneaker Lace in Landscape with Palm Trees*, 1991

Four-color lithograph, 57 x 42½", Edition: 55  
Photograph Courtesy of Gemini G.E.L. at  
Joni Moisant Weyl, New York

Ice-Cream" or "Oak Leaves Are Hands" to agree that Oldenburg's sculpture is in tune with Stevens' sensibility. The palm analogy is made visually explicit in the lithograph *Sneaker Lace in Landscape with Palm Trees* (1991).

### Jasper Johns

In a group of works from the late 1980s entitled *The Seasons*, Jasper Johns (b. 1930) pays homage to Stevens. This important series is Johns's most autobiographical work, full of personal symbols and echoes of his earlier work, and each panel contains as part of the composition a rendering of his own shadow. The series also acknowledges important influences on his artistic development. There are many references to Picasso, for example, particularly to his paintings *Minotaur Moving His House* (1936) and *The Shadow* (1953).

Like Claes Oldenburg, Johns was one of the founders of Pop art in the 1960s. His deadpan paintings of such impersonal images as targets and flags were part of a reaction in the art world against the high seriousness



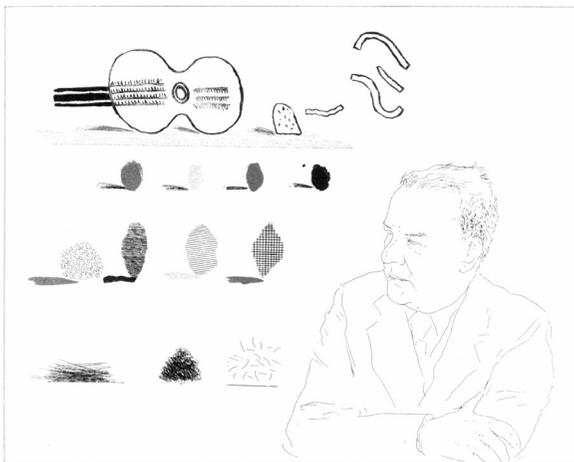
Jasper Johns, *The Seasons (Winter)*, 1989  
Eight-color intaglio, 26 x 19", Edition: 73  
© 1996 Jasper Johns/Licensed by VAGA,  
New York, N.Y.  
Photograph courtesy of Universal  
Limited Art Editions, Inc., West Islip, N.Y.

and deep psychic engagement of Abstract Expressionism, which had dominated the 1950s. His mentor was Marcel Duchamp who, with his aloof intellectuality and ironic humor, has remained for Johns a revered figure. The panel *Fall* contains a profile of Duchamp, a tribute to a guide and kindred spirit.

*The Seasons* owes its conception to the poetry of Wallace Stevens. In 1985 Johns was asked by the Arion Press to illustrate a special edition of Stevens' poems.<sup>71</sup> Having just completed a painting entitled *Summer*, he decided to make an etching based on this painting for the frontispiece of the book. In rereading Stevens' poetry, Johns was struck by "The Snow Man" and conceived the idea of doing an entire seasonal sequence.<sup>72</sup> The *Winter* panel includes an image of a snowman that refers to Stevens.

### David Hockney

David Hockney (b. 1937) first read Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in the summer of 1977 when he was staying with Henry Geldzahler on Fire Island.<sup>73</sup> He responded deeply to the poem's central focus on Picasso and to its playful variations on the theme of the imagination confronting reality. Immediately he completed a set of drawings inspired by the poem. That fall he decided to develop



**David Hockney, "The Poet" from *The Blue Guitar*, 1976/77**  
Etching and aquatint, 18 x 20½", Edition: 200  
© David Hockney.  
Photo credit: Steve Oliver

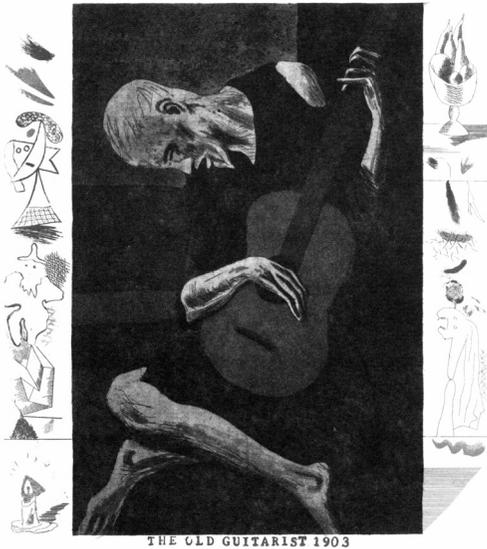
these drawings into a set of colored etchings using a method devised by Aldo Crommelynck for Picasso:

The method of colour etching itself was chosen not simply as the most appropriate for translating the linear coloured drawings on to a plate for printing; there was also a poignancy about using a technique which had been invented for Picasso but which the master had not had a chance to use before his death.<sup>74</sup>

In 1977 the twenty etchings were published as a portfolio and as a book by the Petersburg Press. The full title of the book emphasizes the complex interrelations between poetry and painting this series exemplifies: *The Blue Guitar: Etchings by David Hockney who was inspired by Wallace Stevens who was inspired by Pablo Picasso*. On the jacket of the book, Hockney explains the relation of his prints to Stevens' poem:

The etchings themselves were not conceived as literal illustrations of the poem but as an interpretation of its themes in visual terms. Like the poem, they are about transformations within art as well as the relation between reality and the imagination, so these are pictures within pictures and different styles of representation juxtaposed and reflected and dissolved within the same frame.<sup>75</sup>

PABLO PICASSO Spanish 1881



THE OLD GUITARIST 1903

David Hockney, "The Old Guitarist" from  
*The Blue Guitar*, 1976/77

Etching and aquatint, 20½ x 18", Edition: 200

© David Hockney

Photograph courtesy of Christie's, New York

etchings *Model and Surrealist Sculpture* (1933) and *Sculptor at Rest and Model with Mask* (1933).<sup>77</sup>

In the same year, 1977, Hockney did two paintings on the same theme: *Self-Portrait with Blue Guitar* and *Model with Unfinished Self-Portrait*.<sup>78</sup> The theme has resurfaced at least once since then, in the snapshot-collage *Still Life Blue Guitar 4 April 1982*.<sup>79</sup>

### Siah Armajani

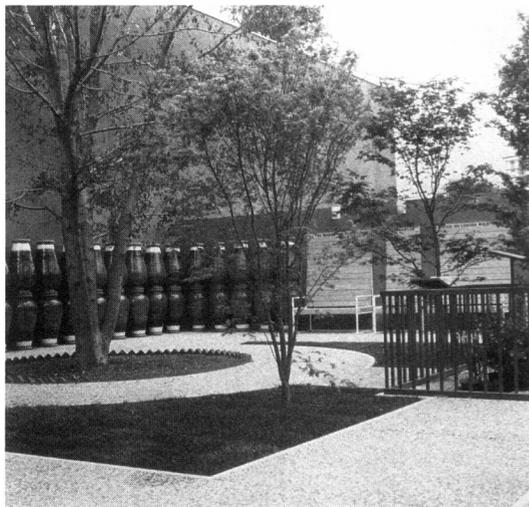
Siah Armajani's (b. 1939) *The Poetry Garden* at the Lannan Foundation headquarters in Los Angeles was inspired by Stevens' "Anecdote of the Jar." Since the Lannan Foundation is dedicated to supporting both contemporary art and contemporary poetry, *The Poetry Garden* was designed both as a retreat for gallery visitors and neighbors, and as a site for literary events. Modeled on the ancient Persian "paradise garden," it is "a space for solitary contemplation, social congress, and enjoyment of literature."<sup>80</sup> Stevens' poem is the focal theme of this space. It suggested the blue ceramic jars that enliven one corner of the garden, "because that corner needs a bright spot of color."<sup>81</sup> The complete text of the poem itself is inscribed in ceramic tile along the top of the tall benches lining the garden walls. "The text is lit from above by standard outdoor fixtures that emit a yellow, candlelight glow during evening readings."<sup>82</sup> The poet Mark Doty de-

Hockney is not illustrating Stevens' poem but translating his poetic method into the realm of the visual arts. The imagery in Hockney's etchings comes from Picasso, not from the poem. In the frontispiece, not only the central image of Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* but also all the red and green drawings in the border surrounding it allude to Picasso. In keeping with the spirit of Stevens' poem, Hockney refers particularly to the surrealist Picasso of the mid-1930s.<sup>76</sup> Hockney's etching *A Picture of Ourselves*, for instance, borrows imagery from Picasso's painting *Two Nudes on the Beach* (1937), and from his

scribes the effect of such readings: “In this garden, the work of the poet who is reading becomes ‘the jar’—everything in the garden seems to revolve around the language that is placed at its center, where a simple metal podium is always ready to receive the text of the reader.”<sup>83</sup>

Armajani selected “Anecdote of the Jar” because it “speaks to the dichotomy between an object of art and its environment. Our job is to reconcile these two polarities.”<sup>84</sup> His emphasis on the conceptual and environmental views

of art, together with his notion that art should be a reconciliation of opposites, reveals the heritage of Marcel Duchamp, whose spirit also hovers behind “Anecdote of the Jar.”<sup>85</sup>



**Siah Armajani**, *The Poetry Garden*, 1992  
Specially commissioned courtyard at the Lannan  
Foundation, Los Angeles  
Photo credit: Susan Einstein

### **Mimi Gross**

The artist Mimi Gross (b. 1940) is particularly drawn to the work of Stevens—both his poetry and his essays—an interest that may have been kindled by the poet Ted Weiss who was her teacher at Bard College. At some periods in her career, Gross has found herself reading poetry almost exclusively. When her daughter was young during the 1970s, for instance, she often read lyric poetry because it was possible to read it in a relatively short time and then to “carry it around in your head”<sup>86</sup> long afterward.

Gross’s figurative work is lively, colorful, and often witty—qualities we also associate with Red Grooms, her former husband, with whom she collaborated on such outsize constructions as the legendary environmental sculpture *Ruckus Manhattan*. When that project was first shown at 88 Pine Street in Manhattan in 1975–76, instead of a catalogue the two artists issued a newspaper, *The Daily Ruckus*, whose front page was modeled on the *New York Times*. It was Gross’s idea to replace the *Times*’s motto “All the News That’s Fit to Print” with a quotation by Stevens: “It is possible that to seem—it is to be, / As the sun is something seeming and it is” (CP 339). These are the opening lines of “Description without Place,” a poem that is an appropriate epigraph to Gross’s art since, as she points out, it is



Mimi Gross, *Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Stevens*, 1981  
Gouache and pastel on paper, 58 x 73"  
Collection of the artist, New York

about the nature of illusion. She thinks of Stevens as the great poet of illusion, because he expresses the "made-up culture" of America and because "In our time you have to make up your own standards. Stevens affirms this." The exuberant theatricality of *Ruckus Manhattan* reflects the high-spirited, comic aspect of Stevens that is perhaps most concentrated in "The Comedian as the Letter C."

Gross has done a number of portraits of favorite writers, among them Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Isherwood, and Virginia Woolf. In creating these pieces she works from photographs, and her primary concern is to express her interest in the writer and his (or her) work, rather than to capture an exact likeness. She has done several portraits of Wallace Stevens, including one painting on cut-out aluminum that is in the collection of the Lannan Foundation in Los Angeles. Another, *Mr. and Mrs. Wallace Stevens* (1981), is the largest of the portraits. The image of Stevens is based on the photograph from the dust jacket of his *Collected Poems*, but Gross's treatment of it is delightfully inventive. Anyone familiar with Stevens' life will notice that the friendly redhead sitting on the arm of the poet's chair does not resemble his wife, Elsie. Gross explains that the figure of the wife is purely imaginary since, at the time she made this work, she knew virtually nothing about Stevens' personal life. "He's so *private* you feel you know him very well. . . . I was flabbergasted to learn he was married."

A friend posed for "Mrs. Stevens" who functions, in the finished work, as the poet's inspiring Muse or interior paramour. It is after midnight, according to the clock at the upper left, and Stevens is sitting up late in the darkened living room. The complaisant young woman beside him shares the vital, earthy red color of his comfortable armchair. Contrasting with her warmth and the directness of her stare, the blue-tinged moonlight (always in Stevens associated with the imagination) lends the scene a cool and mysterious air that corresponds to the poet's own detached, meditative gaze away from the viewer. The cartoon-like drawing approximates the ironic tone of so much of Stevens' verse.

### Jennifer Bartlett

Jennifer Bartlett (b. 1941) is known for her artistic daring. “Her ambition, once fired, has no limit,” remarks the art critic John Russell.<sup>87</sup> In contrasting Stevens with her former teacher and friend Jack Tworokov, Bartlett remarks, “Stevens had a more flamboyant imagination and character.”<sup>88</sup> She might have had herself in mind.

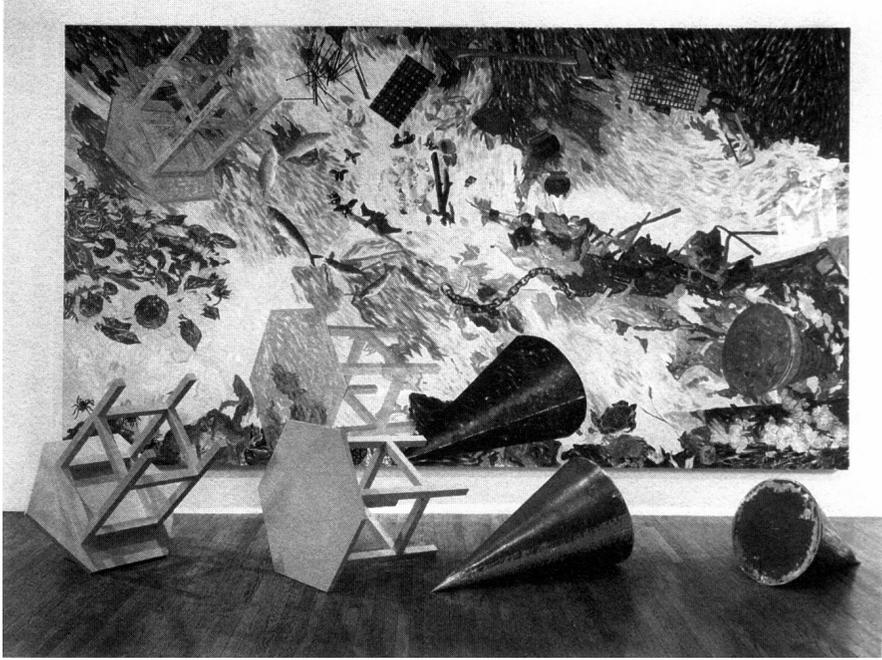
Tworokov’s wife remembered Bartlett’s early interest in Stevens’ poetry: “[She] spent a summer in our house in Provincetown [in the early 1970s]. . . . [I]t was she who got me seriously involved in Stevens—especially in the *Blue Guitar*, a favorite of hers.”<sup>89</sup> She recalled the young artist walking about the house reciting stanzas from this poem—a picturesque memory, though Bartlett herself thinks it “a glamorization of the actual event.”<sup>90</sup> With the creation of her *Fire* series in 1989–90, however, Bartlett openly claimed Stevens as a kindred spirit.

Every work in the *Fire* series (which numbers at least eighteen paintings) has a title or subtitle borrowed from Wallace Stevens: *The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm*, *Anything Is Beautiful if You Say It Is*, *The Comedian as the Letter C*, *Botanist on Alp*, *Fish and Bread: Description without Place*, *Tarantulas: Anecdote of the Jar*, *Water Lilies: Crude Foyer*, and so on. These allusions are never simple in their meaning; though Bartlett’s canvases are crowded with imagery, the images are not drawn from Stevens’ poems. In this sense, Bartlett is extending the modern tradition of oblique relations between title and painting that Stevens himself learned from Marcel Duchamp.

What inspired the *Fire* paintings is suggested by one of the largest in the series, *Spiral: An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* (9' x 16'). John Russell notes that this title “may not seem related to the image of red-hot upheaval that goes with it, but to those who know that during her first marriage Miss Bartlett spent a lot of time in that university city, it may start the imagination rolling.”<sup>91</sup> Bartlett herself comments on this painting, “I began reading a lot of poetry and I found myself going back to Wallace Stevens and this poem, which I think is one of his greatest poems. I perhaps would not have responded to that had I not lived in New Haven at an extremely important time in my life. It was my first experience outside of California [where she grew up] and it was my introduction to the East Coast at a very exciting period at Yale in art.”<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps the title image of the “spiral” in this painting, and the central image of fire in this series, are related to the convergence of these two images in the final couplet of “A Duck for Dinner,” the fourth poem in Stevens’ sequence “Owl’s Clover”:

When shall lush chorals *spiral* through our *fire*  
And daunt that old assassin, heart’s desire?  
(OP 96; italics added)



**Jennifer Bartlett**, *Spiral: An Ordinary Evening in New Haven*, 1989

Oil on canvas, break formed and welded hot rolled steel, and painted wood.

Canvas: 108 x 192"; cones: 20 x 30¼ x 21" and 22 x 42½ x 23"; tables: 30½ x 32 x 35" and 39½" x 41 x 35"

Private collection, Greenwich, Conn.

Photo credit: Andrew Moore

This series seems to be an act of exorcism and renewal. The conflagration that rages through these canvases is both destructive and purifying, infernal and purgatorial. Bartlett is aiming at the sublimity characteristic of the late poetry of Stevens, such as "The Auroras of Autumn," whose climactic moment of existential terror occurs in a vision of fire: "He opens the door of his house / On flames" (*CP* 416–17; italics added).

*Spiral: An Ordinary Evening in New Haven* is typical of the *Fire* series as a whole. Placed in front of many of these paintings are three-dimensional objects—in this case two wooden tables and two metal cones—whose painted replicas appear on the two-dimensional canvas behind them. The interplay between the objects and their artistic representation is further complicated because the objects themselves have obviously been fabricated as part of the artwork. This invites a very Stevensian meditation on the relation between appearance and reality, and on kinds and degrees of artifice.

### *Jesse Murry*

Wallace Stevens was a central influence on the African-American artist Jesse Murry (1948–1993). During one especially productive period of his career, in the mid- to late 1980s, he thought of Stevens as “an angelic intelligence who has been for me spirit, mentor, and guide. . . . It is through his poetry that I find inspiration.”<sup>93</sup> He knew much of Stevens’ poetry by heart and believed that Stevens’ poetic theory directly addressed the chief concerns of contemporary painters: “I think his poetics is the most complex and relevant statement of modern art.”<sup>94</sup>

At the time Murry painted *Green Is the Night and Out of Madness Woven* (1987), he consciously thought of himself in the romantic tradition in which “painting and poetry are . . . the only weapons I have to combat the insanity of the world and the only means I have of acquiring a spiritual grip on the chaotic nature of experience.” Representational painting seemed to him impossible: “[It] has simply added more and more images to the dump.” Yet he also realized that abstract painting had reached an impasse; it was at the end of an exhausted formalist tradition. The way out of this dilemma, for him, was to be found in Stevens’ central concept of a supreme fiction: “I proceed by stating that painting is a poetic act, that painting is a supreme fiction.” He envisioned a new kind of abstraction that could include “extra-visual content,” a “new inwardness,” a “poetic dimension.”

Murry’s aesthetic aims were summed up in a statement issued in connection with his one-man exhibition (that included *Green Is the Night and Out of Madness Woven*) at the Sharpe Gallery in New York City in December 1988:

Although the work is inspired by the romantic landscape tradition, particularly Turner, Constable and Friedrich, Murry knows that in a late technological age where vacuity and emptiness rule and the art object is devalued as a meaningless sign, it is too late to paint from nature. His most essential source is the poet Wallace Stevens whom he considers to be the truly great Post-Modernist mind. Like Stevens, the artist believes that in an age of disbelief, only through a willing suspension of disbelief, by an act of mind or the imagination can we save ourselves. This is the New Romanticism that seeks not transcendence but a reaffirmation of existence through the mind, and the mind’s image of itself conceived within the context of landscape. Murry believes, as Stevens believed, in art as a supreme fiction: it must be abstract, it must change, it must give pleasure.

Murry was most interested in such late, long poems as “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” and “The Auroras of Autumn,” in which Stevens achieves a kind of romantic sublimity. This heroic version of Stevens owes much to the teaching of Harold Bloom, with whom Murry took a course at Yale in the mid-1980s. Indeed, the term paper Murry wrote for that course reads like a personal manifesto. Titled “Painting Is a Supreme Fiction: Why I Read Wallace Stevens,” it echoes, in its critical vocabulary and point of view, both Stevens (“fiction,” “materia poetica”) and Bloom (“belatedness,” “trope,” “crisis”).



Jesse Murry, *Green Is the Night and Out of Madness Woven*, 1987  
Oil and wax on paper, 22 x 40"  
Collection of George Centanni, New York

A number of Murry’s titles from this period refer to Stevens poems, for example, *A Sea Shade* (from “Tea”), *The Weather and the Giant of the Weather* (from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” I.vi), *The Sky Behold* (by analogy with “the sea Behold” in “A Duck for Dinner”), *In the Golden Regions* (which Murry associated with “The Auroras of Autumn,” vi), and *To the Rising Moon* (which he associated with “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” v).<sup>95</sup> The title *Green Is the Night and Out of Madness Woven* comes from “The Candle a Saint”:

Green is the night and out of madness woven,  
The self-same madness of the astronomers

And of him that sees, beyond the astronomers,  
The topaz rabbit and the emerald cat,  
  
That sees above them, that sees rise up above them,  
The noble figure, the essential shadow,  
  
Moving and being, the image at its source,  
The abstract, the archaic queen. Green is the night. (CP 223)

Murry's canvas depicts an abstract landscape turbulent with the "madness" Stevens locates in "the image at its source, / The abstract." Like Stevens, Murry has much more in mind than the mere weather: "I turn to the idea of God and the knowledge of weather and the experience of light as the *materia poetica* of painting. And I know that the light as weather, as God, takes on a spiritual force and poetic power as the tangible and concrete manifestation of the imagination makes the particulars of my subjectivity or inwardness tenable, actual, real."

Later in his too-short career, Murry moved beyond this highly romantic mode into a more tentative, self-consciously postmodern stance. At the same time, his enthusiasm for Stevens was qualified by his need to come to terms with Stevens' racism. He was acutely aware of the racial stereotypes at work in such poems as "The News and the Weather," "Virgin Carrying a Lantern," and "A Discovery of Thought." And he knew well the anecdote about Stevens being shown a photograph of judges of the National Book Award, one of whom was Gwendolyn Brooks. Looking at the picture Stevens said, " 'Who's the coon?' "<sup>96</sup> While Murry continued to draw sustenance from Stevens' poetry, he could not overlook the personal limitations of Stevens the man.<sup>97</sup>

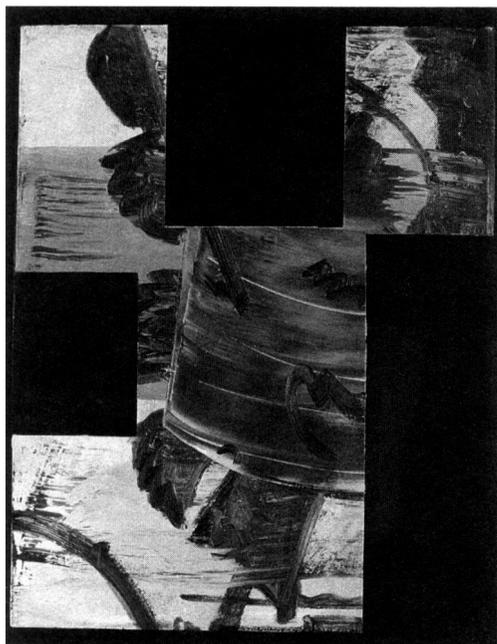
### *Gregory Botts*

Gregory Botts (b. 1952) is a painter whose aspirations are unabashedly romantic. He is committed to pursuing the American Sublime through painting. His great precursors in this endeavor are the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman, who sought spiritual exaltation in pure abstraction. "What he contemplates in Pollock is the Romantic ecstatic," comments poet-critic David Shapiro; "With Newman, he privileges the sublime."<sup>98</sup> In trying to progress beyond what he sees as the ultimate failure of Abstract Expressionism, Botts has adopted Stevens as a guide. In Harold Bloom's words, "his interpretive agon as an artist centers on Newman and Pollock, for whose paintings Stevens serves as an enabling substitution."<sup>99</sup> Botts himself puts it this way:

The Abstract Expressionists were cutting out content that Wallace Stevens was able to include. Abstract Expressionism doesn't finally last. I'm putting the content back in.<sup>100</sup>

"I probably came to Wallace Stevens through Harold Bloom," says Botts. He discovered Bloom's criticism about 1985–1986, at a time when he had become "disgruntled about the level of content in art criticism." Bloom's high seriousness, intensity, and contagious enthusiasm seemed to provide exactly what he missed elsewhere in discussions of art. Eventually he began sitting in on Bloom's classes at New York University. "The feelings I had in my painting were so similar to how he would discuss Stevens' poem 'The Rock,' for instance. That has been enormously validating for my work." A number of paintings—*The Dominant Blank* (1987), for example—have grown directly out of his reading of Bloom's work. "I've basically taken Harold's writing as being poetic in itself." Bloom is interested in Botts's painting, too, praising his work and associating it directly with Stevens' poetry:

The longer I stare at a major Botts painting, the more inescapably I seem to be projected into the visual analogue of the most intense of Wallace Stevens' later poems. . . . If anyone in our time paints an *Auroras of Autumn*, it will be Botts.<sup>101</sup>



**Gregory Botts**, *Figure in Landscape #5*, 1990–92  
Acrylic ground, oil on canvas, 39 x 31½"  
Courtesy of the artist, New York  
Photo credit: Dan Hill

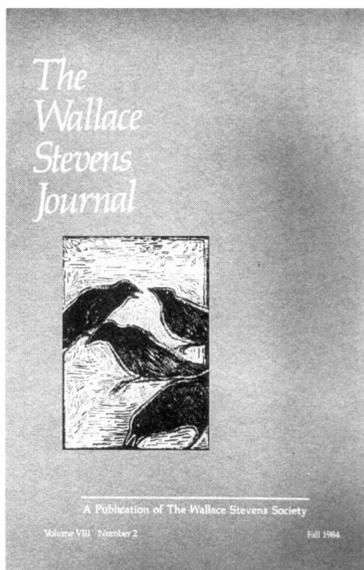
*Figure in Landscape #5* (1990–92) is from Botts's series *The Fiction of the Leaves* (1987–92). The series began with two paintings titled after Stevens, *Domination of Black* (1987) and *The Dominant Blank* (1987–88). The visual inspiration for these works was a sunset on a lagoon visible from Botts's studio in Santa Barbara.<sup>102</sup> In both paintings, alternating bands of orange and blue are overpainted with leafy branches of eucalyptus trees, black as if silhouetted against the sunset. Cut into this scene are purely abstract rectangles, deep purple in color. *Figure in Landscape #5* is a variation on this theme, though considerably smaller than most works in the series. Botts is striving, in David Shapiro's formulation, for "a

new abstraction saturated with the figure."<sup>103</sup> Looked at another way, Botts is seeking to revitalize the abstract tradition by enlisting the resources of landscape painting. He thinks of his mixture of abstraction and representation as analogous to "the way Wallace Stevens' poetry has 'place' to it, but turns it into abstraction by way of thought, as in 'The Rock' or 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven.' "

## Illustrations of Wallace Stevens' Poetry

### Kathryn Jacobi

The artist Kathryn Jacobi (b. 1947) became interested in Stevens' poetry when she was asked to design the cover for the first issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* (Spring 1977). "I was working as a free-lance illustrator and designer, and I was asked to bring a portfolio so that I could show Robert Deutsch [the editor] the material. . . . I became more and more interested in Stevens . . . and I've found that it's been a very sustaining love."<sup>104</sup> Jacobi is now Art Editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*. Her cover art for the Fall 1984 issue, shown here, illustrates "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird."



**Kathryn Jacobi**, Cover design for *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 1984  
 Courtesy of The Wallace Stevens Society, Potsdam, N.Y.

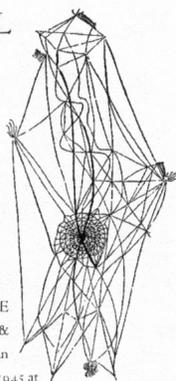
Jacobi's interest in Stevens has influenced her other artwork as well. She has done a group of drawings related to "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" and a series of paintings—called *Lending a Deaf Ear*—that grew out of "a lot of concentrated reading in Wallace Stevens' poetry." These paintings incorporate direct allusions to Stevens, though "there isn't necessarily a one-to-one relationship between poem and image." Sometimes lines of Stevens' poetry appear as formal elements in the composition; and sometimes Stevens provides a title, such as "Never Forgetting Him That Kept Coming Constantly So Near," which comes from "The World as Meditation."

### Paul Wightman Williams

In 1944 the artist Paul Wightman Williams (d. 1956) joined the fledgling Cummington Press, a private press devoted to fine printing of special-edition books. Harry Duncan, who founded the Press at the Cummington School of the Arts in Cummington, Massachusetts, recalls: "Paul Wightman

Williams was my partner at this press from 1944 until his death in a car wreck at Rowe, Massachusetts, in 1956. Many of the books we printed together were illustrated by him. . . .<sup>105</sup> In addition to providing illustrations, Williams was in charge of handling the paper for these books.<sup>106</sup> Among the books the two collaborated on were Robert Lowell's *Land of Unknowing* (1944), William Carlos Williams' *The Wedge* (1944) and *The Clouds* (1948), Tennessee Williams' *I Rise in Flames Cried the Phoenix* (1951), and Alan Tate's *The Hovering Fly* (1949), which J. M. Edelstein considers "the masterpiece of the Press."<sup>107</sup> After Wightman Williams' death, the Press published a memorial volume entitled *Requiescat in Pace* (1956) with an elegy by Barbara Gibbs, a portrait by Bernard Perlin, and a foreword by Alan Tate.<sup>108</sup>

ESTHÉTIQUE  
DU MAL



A poem by WALLACE STEVENS with pen & ink drawings by Wightman Williams; printed in July 1945 at The Cummington Press, Cummington, Massachusetts.

**Wightman Williams**, Title page, *Esthétique du Mal*, 1945 (illustration for special edition of Stevens' poem) Cummington Press  
Photograph courtesy of the Huntington Library

Wallace Stevens greatly admired the work of the Cummington Press, which had printed his *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* in 1942 (without illustration except for a spare, appropriately abstract geometric design on the title page). He supported the Press's activities by waiving any royalties and even offering to subsidize the printing of *Esthétique du Mal* "if that would make the difference between what you would like to do and what it might otherwise be necessary to do."<sup>109</sup> "The Cummington Press is very much my dish," he wrote to Duncan, and he was delighted when he received his copies of *Esthétique du Mal*: "The books are marvelous. I cannot tell you how pleased I am by them. . . . I am going to keep all of them for a while, until I am quite sure that they go to people who are good enough

for them" (L 523, 515). The book was chosen by the American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of the Fifty Best Books of 1946.<sup>110</sup>

Williams drew the illustrations for *Esthétique du Mal* before the Press had obtained permission to publish Stevens' poem. According to Duncan, "The illustrations were part of a package intended to snare the poem, to attract Stevens' approval. They were sent in a portfolio to induce him to let us publish it."<sup>111</sup> Stevens responded positively to the proposal: "Mr.

Williams' drawings are extraordinary. Just how apposite they are I shall have to leave to his virtue" (L 487–88). He also recorded his reaction to Williams' drawings in a letter to Alan Tate:

I don't know Mr. Williams but I have seen the drawings, which remind me of an advertisement over the entrance of one of the movie places here which is showing *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The advertisement is "Wilde and Weird". (L 498)

There are fourteen illustrations, including the one on the title page.<sup>112</sup> They seem to show a figure weaving at a loom who becomes increasingly entangled in the web until eventually he or she is inextricably interwoven with it (as on the title page). Though the weaving motif does not appear in *Esthétique du Mal*, it is common in Stevens' poetry. One section of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* concludes: "A fictive covering / Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind" (CP 396; italics added). Also Stevens' poem "The Dwarf" describes life as a "web" we weave: "Now it is September and the web is woven. / The web is woven and you have to wear it" (CP 208).<sup>113</sup> Williams' drawings illustrate both these aspects of the imagination: it may protect and adorn, but it can also be restrictive.

### *Kurt Seligmann*

The Swiss-born artist Kurt Seligmann (1900–1962) was a member of the surrealist circle in Paris. He came to America at the outbreak of the Second World War, like many European artists and intellectuals, and eventually became an American citizen. Seligmann was involved in most of the surrealist activities in New York during the early 1940s, publishing articles and illustrations regularly in the surrealist magazines *View* and *VVV*, and participating in the famous *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in 1945.

John Bernard Myers recorded in his diary a visit with Seligmann and his wife in October 1945:

It is a joy to visit him in his studio at 40 West Fortieth Street high above Bryant Park. . . . In one corner Kurt has a large press for making etchings, a technique at which he is highly proficient. In another space he does his oil painting. One wall is completely covered with shelves, upon which are grouped hundreds of books—old and strange editions dealing largely with alchemy, astrology, and other forms of prescientific inquiry. Seligmann has spent years collecting these volumes, many of which are extremely rare. . . . No one more than Seligmann, among the Surrealists, has been so in touch with "the marvelous."<sup>114</sup>

The artist's interest in the occult aligns him with several critics who have interpreted Stevens' poetry in terms of alchemical symbolism.<sup>115</sup> Seligmann's authoritative book *The Mirror of Magic* (New York: Pantheon,

1948) was published in 1948, the same year that Myers approached Stevens about publishing something in his *Prospero Pamphlets* series, circulated by the Gotham Book Mart. As Myers describes that episode,

I had been in correspondence with Wallace Stevens about his writing a puppet play, only to be told that he had many years before written two [plays]—but would send us a pamphlet-length poem instead. What I received was the magnificent (perhaps a masterpiece) *A Primitive Like an Orb*. Kurt Seligmann, upon reading it, instantly agreed to provide three [*sic*] drawings.<sup>116</sup>

The two illustrations Seligmann produced are typical of his drawings during these years, depicting surrealist creatures in uncanny poses, and they suit the poem in both their strangeness and their heroic quality. Stevens himself was quite pleased with these illustrations, as he wrote to the printer:

I think the drawings do very well and, because they transpose the poem into something quite different, they give the imagination an enlightening experience: a kick.



Moreover, I think that the arrangement of the poem, that is to say, the placing of the illustrations where they are placed, the general spacing of the make up, extremely good and I wouldn't say it if I didn't think so.<sup>117</sup>

Stevens' willingness to collaborate with artists like Seligmann is one of the clearest indications that his interest in the relations between poetry and painting was more than theoretical. "To a large extent, the problems of poets are the problems of painters," wrote Stevens (*OP* 187), and his habit of thinking in these terms helps to explain why his poetry speaks so directly to

Kurt Seligmann, Drawing (#2), *A Primitive Like an Orb*, 1948 (pamphlet-edition of Stevens' poem)  
Banyan Press  
Photograph courtesy of the Huntington Library

the concerns of modern painters. Indeed, when Stevens spoke of “poetry,” he often meant painting as well. “There is a universal poetry that is reflected in everything,” he speculated (following Baudelaire), “a fundamental aesthetic of which poetry and painting are related but dissimilar manifestations” (NA 160). His faith in this universal language is the basis of his central search for the spiritual fulfillment of a “supreme fiction.” In this ongoing poetic project, he thought of painters as his natural allies. This collaborative spirit endures, forty years after his death, in the many young artists who continue to find inspiration in Wallace Stevens’ poetry.

University of Connecticut, Waterbury

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the relation between modern art and Stevens’ poetic development, see my *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993). This essay is reprinted, in revised form, from the catalogue to the exhibition *Painting in Poetry/Poetry in Painting: Wallace Stevens and Modern Art* (March 17 to April 27, 1995) at the Sidney Mishkin Gallery, Baruch College, New York. The reproductions accompanying this article were made possible by a grant from the Research Foundation of the University of Connecticut.

<sup>2</sup> Hayden Carruth, “Without the Inventions of Sorrow,” *Poetry* 85.5 (February 1955): 288–93; rpt. in Charles Doyle, ed., *Wallace Stevens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 405–09.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Sally Michel Avery, November 20, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> “The Reminiscences of Sally Michel Avery: Interviews with Louis Shaeffer,” Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 123. Cited in Robert Hobbs, *Milton Avery* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 154.

<sup>5</sup> Hobbs, 153.

<sup>6</sup> Martica Sawin, catalogue essay for the exhibition *Milton Avery*, Maitland Art Center, Maitland, Florida, February 21–April 5, 1987, n.p.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Sally Michel Avery, November 20, 1987.

<sup>8</sup> Sawin, n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Dorothea Rockburne, response to questionnaire from Glen MacLeod dated November 15, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Tworokov’s copy of *The Necessary Angel* was shown to me by his widow, the late Rachel (Wally) Tworokov.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Tworokov, journal entry, March 6, 1960. Quoted in *Jack Tworokov: Paintings, 1928–1982* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1987), 134.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Tworokov, journal entry, ca. 1975, in *Jack Tworokov: Paintings, 1928–1982*, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Tworokov, journal entry, January 21, 1947, in *Jack Tworokov: Paintings, 1928–1982*, 127.

<sup>14</sup> Tworokov’s title *Guardian No. 1* may relate to Jackson Pollock’s *Guardians of the Secret* (1943), which has two “guardian” figures at either end of the oblong canvas.

<sup>15</sup> Tworokov never felt entirely comfortable with the excesses—either personal or artistic—of the Abstract Expressionists, and in his later work he returned to the discipline of strict, geometric structure. His former student Jennifer Bartlett suggests that this aspect of Tworokov’s character also aligns him closely with Stevens. “Jack basically

liked the structure and quietness of Stevens," she recalls. "He liked a kind of art that is essentially quiet and modest. I associate 'Anecdote of the Jar' with Jack—the notion that a very common object can structure what you see. . . . It's a kind of appreciation of the commonplace. I would guess Jack liked how normal Wallace Stevens was—having his job, with poetry as an avocation." (Interviews with Jennifer Bartlett, April 25, 1989 [telephone] and May 12, 1989.)

<sup>16</sup> Porter's personal library was donated, after his death, to Southampton College of Long Island University. I am grateful to the staff of the Southampton College Library for providing me with an inventory of these books.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Anne Porter, November 30, 1983, quoted in my "Fairfield Porter and Wallace Stevens: Kindred Spirits of American Art," *Archives of American Art Journal* 24.1 (1984): 2–12.

<sup>18</sup> These books, with the exception of the *Collected Poems*, are listed in the inventory of Porter's personal library. Anne Porter thinks it certain that he also owned the *Collected Poems*.

<sup>19</sup> The linoleum cut appeared on the cover of the socialist publication *Poems for a Dime*, 5 (November 25, 1936). See Joan Ludman, *Fairfield Porter: A Catalogue Raisonné of His Prints* (Westbury, N.Y.: Highland House, 1981), 57. For an account of Porter's view of Stevens as a model art critic, see my "Fairfield Porter and Wallace Stevens."

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Anne Porter, July 28, 1983, quoted in "Fairfield Porter and Wallace Stevens."

<sup>21</sup> Statement on his *Cooper Square* in *Art Now: New York* 1 (6) (June 1969), n.p.

<sup>22</sup> Rackstraw Downes, *Fairfield Porter: Art in Its Own Terms, Selected Criticism 1935–1975* (New York: Taplinger, 1979), 268.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Fairfield Porter to Arthur Giardelli, February 2, 1970. This letter was brought to my attention by Armistead Leigh and is quoted in "Fairfield Porter and Wallace Stevens."

<sup>24</sup> For Stevens' interest in the "normal sublime," see Eleanor Cook, *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 189–213.

<sup>25</sup> Hilton Kramer, "An Art of Conservation," *New York Times* (February 9, 1969): II, 33.1.

<sup>26</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, September 21, 1983, published in Stephanie Terenzio, ed., *The Collected Writings of Robert Motherwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 270 n. In fact, Baziotes was born in Pittsburgh in 1912. His family moved to Reading the following year. See Barbara Cavaliere, "An Introduction to the Method of William Baziotes," *Arts Magazine* 51.8 (April 1977): 125, 131 n 9.

<sup>27</sup> Telephone conversation with Mona Hadler, October 8, 1983.

<sup>28</sup> Letter to the author from Byron Vazakas, October 21, 1983. Vazakas met and corresponded with Stevens in the 1940s (see *L* 524–25).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Ethel Baziotes, November 20, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Barbara Cavaliere, "William Baziotes: The Subtlety of Life for the Artist," in Michael Preble, ed., *William Baziotes: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Newport Beach, Calif.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1978), 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ironically, Stevens himself would have denied any affinity with Baziotes. His one comment on Baziotes' painting is entirely negative. When Stevens saw some black-and-white reproductions of Baziotes' work in 1948, he claimed to want to "tear my hair at his ineffectiveness," and he called the paintings "filthy things" (*L* 574, 579). He was probably responding to the negative publicity surrounding the prize awarded to

Baziotes' *Cyclops* at the Art Institute of Chicago that year. Baziotes became, for a while, a symbol in the press of everything conservative critics detested about modern painting.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, September 21, 1983. Rpt. in Terenzio, ed., *Collected Writings*, 269–70.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, January 19, 1988.

<sup>34</sup> Rpt. in Terenzio, ed., *Collected Writings*, 24–25. This article originally appeared in *Partisan Review*, January 1944.

<sup>35</sup> Robert Motherwell and Ad Reinhardt, eds., *Modern Artists in America* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951), 40. The Stevens passage is from NA 22.

<sup>36</sup> O'Hara, "The Grand Manner of Motherwell," in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas, Calif.: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 178.

<sup>37</sup> See Stephanie Terenzio, *Robert Motherwell and Black*, catalogue for exhibition (Storrs, Conn.: William Benton Museum of Art, © 1980).

<sup>38</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, September 21, 1983. In another letter he thought the title might have been "The Blue Flute": "I think the collage (from the 1940's) that I was thinking of is called 'The Blue Flute'. I imagine it was a double reference, to Stevens and to 'The Magic Flute' " (November 16, 1983).

<sup>39</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, January 19, 1988.

<sup>40</sup> Letter to the author from Robert Motherwell, November 16, 1983.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Diebenkorn, letter to the author, December 15, 1987.

<sup>42</sup> Diebenkorn, letter to the author, October 31, 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Diebenkorn, letter to the author, December 15, 1987.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Diebenkorn, letter to the author, October 31, 1988.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Diebenkorn, letter to the author, December 15, 1987.

<sup>49</sup> John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Richard Diebenkorn* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988), 13.

<sup>50</sup> Elderfield, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Letter to the author from Grace Hartigan, November 28, 1987. Frank O'Hara gave Hartigan a book of Stevens' poems. Jane Freilicher recalls that she read *The Necessary Angel* when O'Hara lent her his copy of that book. (Letter to the author from Freilicher, January 24, 1988.)

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Robert Saltonstall Mattison, *Grace Hartigan: A Painter's World* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1990), 9.

<sup>53</sup> I am grateful to the late Holly Stevens for calling my attention to this painting.

<sup>54</sup> Grace Hartigan, videotaped talk on *The the*, Albany Institute of History and Art, March 25, 1993. Thanks to Terence Diggory for calling this videotape to my attention, and to Dennis R. Anderson, Curator of the Empire State Plaza Art Collection, for lending me a copy of it.

<sup>55</sup> Albany videotape.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to the author from Grace Hartigan, November 28, 1987.

<sup>57</sup> Albany videotape.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to the author from Grace Hartigan, November 28, 1987.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), 206.

<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Brazeau, 206.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Jane Wilson, December 28, 1987.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Jane Wilson, December 28, 1987.

- <sup>63</sup> Letter to the author from Jane Wilson, June 4, 1989.
- <sup>64</sup> Interview with Jane Wilson, December 28, 1987.
- <sup>65</sup> Letter to the author from Jane Wilson, June 4, 1989.
- <sup>66</sup> Letter to the author from William Burney, March 14, 1989.
- <sup>67</sup> William Burney, "On *It Is Nothing, No Great Thing* and 'Imago,'" unpublished essay. I am grateful to the artist for allowing me to read and quote from this essay.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>69</sup> Claes Oldenburg, "Cross-Section of a Toothbrush," in Germano Celant, *A Bottle of Notes and Some Voyages: Claes Oldenburg, Coosje van Bruggen* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 148.
- <sup>70</sup> *Claes Oldenburg: Sculptures & Lithographs at Gemini, 1988-91* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Gemini G.E.L., 1991), 9-10.
- <sup>71</sup> *Wallace Stevens: Poems*, sel. and intro. Helen Vendler, frontispiece etching Jasper Johns (San Francisco: Arion Press, 1985).
- <sup>72</sup> Barbara Rose, "Jasper Johns, 'The Seasons,'" *Vogue* 177 (January 1987): 198-99.
- <sup>73</sup> Facts in the this paragraph come from Marco Livingstone, *David Hockney* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 192.
- <sup>74</sup> Livingstone, 192.
- <sup>75</sup> *The Blue Guitar* (New York: Petersburg Press, 1977), jacket copy.
- <sup>76</sup> For the importance of surrealism to "The Man with the Blue Guitar," see MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, Ch. 3.
- <sup>77</sup> Gert Schiff, "A Moving Focus: Hockney's Dialogue with Picasso," in *David Hockney: A Retrospective* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1988), 45.
- <sup>78</sup> Both paintings are reproduced in *David Hockney: A Retrospective*, 184-85, 188-89.
- <sup>79</sup> See *David Hockney*, catalogue for exhibition (March 15 to April 24, 1983), Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main, 66.
- <sup>80</sup> Lisa Lyons, "The Poetry Garden by Siah Armajani," *Design Quarterly* 160 (1994): 27.
- <sup>81</sup> Quoted in Lyons, 24.
- <sup>82</sup> Lyons, 28.
- <sup>83</sup> Mark Doty, "Reading in *The Poetry Garden*," *Design Quarterly* 160 (1994): 6.
- <sup>84</sup> Quoted in Lyons, 28.
- <sup>85</sup> For the relation between Duchamp's readymades and "Anecdote of the Jar," see MacLeod, *Wallace Stevens and Modern Art*, Ch. 1.
- <sup>86</sup> Interview with Mimi Gross, March 9, 1989. All facts and quotations are from this interview.
- <sup>87</sup> John Russell, "Heady and Hectic Works from Jennifer Bartlett," *New York Times* (January 12, 1990): C, 27.1.
- <sup>88</sup> Interview with Jennifer Bartlett, April 25, 1989.
- <sup>89</sup> Letter to the author from Mrs. Jack (Wally) Tworokov, January 31, 1989. The picturesque memory is from an interview with Wally Tworokov, November 5, 1988.
- <sup>90</sup> Interview with Jennifer Bartlett, April 25, 1989.
- <sup>91</sup> John Russell, *op. cit.*
- <sup>92</sup> Quoted in D. Hayne Bayless, "A Painter Joins a Poet's Search for New Haven's 'Ordinary Evening,'" *New Haven Register* (January 28, 1990): D1, 3.
- <sup>93</sup> Jesse Murry, "Painting Is a Supreme Fiction: Why I Read Wallace Stevens," unpublished essay, 2. Unless otherwise identified, all quotations are from this essay.
- <sup>94</sup> Telephone conversation with Jesse Murry, December 18, 1987.
- <sup>95</sup> Interview with Jesse Murry, February 26, 1988.
- <sup>96</sup> This incident is reported by William Cole in Peter Brazeau, *Parts of a World: Wallace Stevens Remembered* (New York: Random House, 1983), 195-96.

<sup>97</sup> Information on Murry's later career was supplied by George Centanni, the executor of Murry's estate.

<sup>98</sup> David Shapiro, "Domination of Blanks: Painting and Poetry's Truth," catalogue essay in *Gregory Botts* (New York: Anne Plumb Gallery, 1989), n.p.

<sup>99</sup> Harold Bloom, "The American Sublime: Gregory Botts, Painting as Icon," catalogue essay in *Gregory Botts: Paintings* (New York: Anne Plumb Gallery, 1990), 9. This essay was reprinted in *Arts Magazine* 64.10 (Summer 1990): 36–43.

<sup>100</sup> Telephone interview with Gregory Botts, June 20, 1991. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this interview.

<sup>101</sup> Bloom, 7, 9.

<sup>102</sup> Bloom, 9.

<sup>103</sup> Shapiro, op. cit.

<sup>104</sup> Telephone interview with Kathryn Jacobi, April 30, 1989.

<sup>105</sup> Letter to the author from Harry Duncan, January 8, 1990.

<sup>106</sup> Telephone interview with Jerome Melvin Edelstein, November 21, 1994. Edelstein is finishing a book on Harry Duncan and the Cummington Press that will include an essay on the history and influence of the press, and a bibliography of Cummington Press books.

<sup>107</sup> Interview with Edelstein, November 21, 1994.

<sup>108</sup> After Williams' death, in the fall of 1956, Duncan accepted an offer from the University of Iowa to relocate the Cummington Press there.

<sup>109</sup> Letter from Wallace Stevens to Harry Duncan, March 2, 1945, published in J. M. Edelstein, *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 63.

<sup>110</sup> Letter from Harry Duncan to Wallace Stevens, published in Edelstein, *Wallace Stevens*, 66; cf. L 523.

<sup>111</sup> Telephone interview with Harry Duncan, November 25, 1994 (cf. L 487).

<sup>112</sup> Paul Wightman Williams' original drawings for *Esthétique du Mal* are in the Mary L. Richmond collection of Cummington Press material in the University of Nebraska Library, Omaha.

In 1945 Williams also did a work entitled *Homage to Wallace Stevens*, which I have been unable to trace. See letters from Harry Duncan to Wallace Stevens, June 8, 1945; and from Wightman Williams to Stevens, March 30, 1946—both in the Huntington Library.

<sup>113</sup> Jacqueline Vaught Brogan suggests that Wightman Williams' illustrations comment directly on the *subject* of Stevens' poem, namely, the notion of an aesthetic of *pain*. Countering critics who read *Esthétique du Mal* as an attempt to escape from or transcend the pain of life, Brogan interprets the poem as Stevens' recognition of "the inefficacy of aesthetic consolation in time of war." She sees Williams' figure entangled in the web as a visual equivalent of this point. ("Planets on the Table: Stevens, Bishop, Rich, and Jordan," paper delivered at the American Literature Association conference, June 3, 1994.) This essay was subsequently published in *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 19.2 (Fall 1995): 255–78.

<sup>114</sup> John Bernard Myers, *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* (New York: Random House, 1983), 46–47.

<sup>115</sup> See Michel Benamou, "Poetry and Alchemy," in *Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 109–39; and Leonora Woodman, *Stanza My Stone: Wallace Stevens and the Hermetic Tradition* (West Lafayette, In.: Purdue University Press, 1983). Woodman (83–85) specifically reads "A Primitive Like an Orb" in terms of alchemical symbols.

<sup>116</sup> Myers, 85. Myers appears to have misremembered the actual sequence of events. *A Primitive Like an Orb* was published in March, 1948. It was not until December 1948 that Myers approached Stevens about writing a puppet play, again in collaboration with Seligmann. Stevens considered this “a very sparkling idea” but ultimately was not inspired to work on it. (Letters from Myers to Stevens, December 19, 1948; and from Stevens to Myers, December 22, 1948, in the Huntington Library.)

The three plays (not for puppets) that Stevens wrote in 1916–17 are *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise*, *Carlos among the Candles*, and *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick*, all of which are reprinted in *OP* 149–177.

<sup>117</sup> Unpublished letter from Wallace Stevens to Claude Fredericks, May 24, 1948, Huntington Library. Fredericks was head of the Banyan Press in Pawlet, Vermont, which printed these pamphlets.

# One Word of the Sea: Metaphysics in Wallace Stevens

JOSÉ A. BENARDETE

TOWARD THE END OF "The Idea of Order at Key West" Wallace Stevens mentions "The maker's rage to order words of the sea" (*CP* 130), one of which I may have been fortunate enough to discover in the course of my narrative wanderings in what he came to call the "Whole of Harmonium." Larger even than the familiar oeuvre, that whole features above all what Stevens called "my true poems" in the short address "On Receiving the National Book Award for Poetry (1955)" when he said, "It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize" (*OP* 289). It is one of those true poems, then, bits and pieces of which are indeed scattered throughout the oeuvre, that will be found, almost in narrative fashion, to disclose at the very least an oceanic phoneme that may even be a morpheme as well. More ambitiously still, I can characterize my inquiry as being addressed to "The essential poem at the centre of things" (*CP* 440) of which even the whole of *Harmonium* may be only a reflection. Mentioned in "A Primitive Like an Orb," this essential poem may even prove to encode metaphysical reality itself.

But let me start at the beginning, with a puzzle concerning "The Idea of Order at Key West" that answers at once to philosophic and literary preoccupations. Taken simply at face value, the poem involves the familiar contrast between mind and body, only elevated now to the cosmic level of mind versus matter, for if "It was the spirit that we sought" we could hardly be expected to come on it in connection with "The water never formed to mind or voice, / Like a body wholly body" that offers nothing more than "The meaningless plungings of water and the wind" (*CP* 128–29). So it is the spirit that we seek as estranged from body, recalling Plato and Descartes? Can that really be the Stevens whom we love? The Stevens of "The Comedian as the Letter C" who begins indeed with "man" as "The sovereign ghost" who hovers over physical reality but who is ridiculed soon enough as the mere "wig / Of things," anticipating the great reversal of the poem in section IV? If Stevens begins in a scholastic vein with the words, "Nota: man is the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost," he pursues his medieval disputation further by plumping for the opposite

position, "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence. / That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find" (CP 27, 36).

Surely this is the authentic Stevens, one is roused to protest, in comparison with whom the Stevens of "The Idea of Order at Key West" in 1934, who is engaged in seeking the spirit or sovereign ghost, can only be deemed extraordinarily retrograde, quite as if he had forgotten the radical dialectic of "The Comedian as the Letter C" owing to the long hiatus that separates his second book of poems from his first. Yet the matter is not so simple, for already in 1924, a mere two years after "The Comedian" of 1922, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" contrasts "*mon âme*" (the sovereign ghost) in the first section with "the obese machine / Of ocean" in the last, and where in an idealizing act *mon âme* it is that "evolved the sea-blooms from the clouds" by enjoying the optical illusion of "sea-clouds . . . in the swimming green" (CP 99, 102, 99). So if the obese machine of ocean is the mechanistic *res extensa* of Descartes, what is *mon enfant*, *mon bijou*, *mon âme* but (near enough) his *res cogitans* though now recycled once more with feeling and figuring as Stevens' beloved imagination?

Far from being merely retrograde, the twelfth line in French in each of the five sections I take to be arguably the most personal utterance in the Stevens canon, a hooded, even narcissistic utterance that this consummate WASP would never have dared to express in the plain English of "My imagination is my child, my jewel, my soul." Much later, in 1949, he would turn to Latin, compressing it into the single word *puella* in the fourteenth line of "Puella Parvula." If "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," with its inveterate dualism, gives us the personal Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C" two years earlier gives us an intellectual Stevens as a serious philosopher, though here again he adopts a disguise by reducing this persona to a "marvelous sophomore" (CP 36) toward the end of section III. The long hiatus in Stevens one may even try now to explain by acknowledging an impasse reached by him in 1924 as between his personal (poetic?) and philosophical selves. The source of much suffering for Stevens, that impasse affords us today a rich narrative of intertextuality, preparing the way in fact for one of the "true poems" he never wrote.

Ten years have gone by after "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" and we are listening to a *puella* (near enough) singing by the ocean in "The Idea of Order at Key West." The mind/matter dualism of the first three stanzas threatens for a moment in the fourth stanza to collapse into idealism, as "She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang . . . for she was the maker" (CP 129). So mind or spirit assumes primacy here, and body appears to be merely derivative. Turn now, however, to the last stanza where a radical switch occurs, as we learn of "The maker's rage to order words of the sea," quite as if the spirit or sovereign ghost or *puella* aims merely to enlarge on what is really primary after all, namely body itself.

If the suggestion is almost hair-raisingly reminiscent of the reversal in "The Comedian," it signifies as well what certainly smacks of being a reversal of the first line of the poem. Precisely by merely ordering words of the sea, it is very much to be doubted that the maker will sing "beyond the genius" (or generative powers in the etymological sense of *genius*) "of the sea," particularly since the words of the sea are expressly said to be "words . . . of ourselves and of our origins" (CP 128–30).

It is this stress on origins that encourages me to press the etymology of *genius*, recalling moreover that line in *The Iliad* at XIV.201, in effect involving Ocean as the "genesis" of all things, even the gods, that prompts Plato at *Theaetetus* 152e to brand Homer as both a Heraclitean materialist and a Protagorian relativist. If this Homeric, let alone Platonic, reference is not the sort to play much of a role in literary studies of Stevens, I may be allowed, as a professional philosopher with my own concern for origins, to pursue an agenda featuring a Homeric Stevens quite prepared to address Plato across the centuries. Much more disturbing than anything merely retrograde in "The Idea of Order at Key West" proves to be an outright contradiction on the very verge of which the poem hovers. How can the "meaningless plungings" of a mind-independent reality square with the inevitable meaning with which "words of the sea," like all words, must be supposed to be invested? By no means unresponsive to such "logical discrimination," even so exacting a critic as Helen Vendler may choose with Crispin in "The Comedian" to be "washed away by magnitude" (CP 28) rather than pursue the poem's self-destructive logic. Vendler writes,

The apparent structure of the poem is one of logical discrimination, but actually the complicated "even if . . . since . . . it may be . . . if . . . or . . ." and so on simply serve to implicate the various alternatives ever more deeply with each other so that the sea, the girl, the water, the song, the wind, the air, the sky and cloud, the voices of the spectators, all become indistinguishable from each other, as Stevens wants them to be. (36)

Maybe so. But even at the cost of effecting a breach in that poetic monism the philosopher with his penchant for logical discriminations will find himself itching to exercise his *métier* here, being deterred not at all by Vendler when she continues, "To separate out his inferences and insist on the demarcations of his logic would be to run counter to the intent of the poem" (37).

Highly unstable at best, the philosophic import of "The Idea of Order at Key West" can be rescued from final incoherence but only via an extended detour into contemporary metaphysics as practiced by analytical philosophy. Any fear of the rebarbative in this connection, prompted reasonably enough by the suspicion that heavy-duty metaphysics could only

defeat the poetry of the poem, can soon be allayed by recalling that analytical philosophy has been characterized above all by the slogan “the linguistic turn” as popularized by Richard Rorty. Precisely by being mediated by the kind of fastidious attention to points of language that one expects from literary studies, the application of analytical metaphysics to poetry proves to be negotiated by a *tertium quid* that takes the curse off any direct confrontation between them. No more felicitous case study along this line can be imagined than that afforded by “The Idea of Order at Key West”—the title itself involving a droll juxtaposition of the universal and the particular—where poetry comes as close to metaphysics as it possibly can, without lapsing into the didactic.

The rescue operation can be summed up in a single word, a bit of technical philosophic jargon, namely *intentionality*, derived late in the last century by Franz Brentano.<sup>1</sup> Incoherence is narrowly averted by the recognition that what is desired—to order words of the sea (and of ourselves)—may be no more than an intentional object, quite on a par with what was desired by Ponce de Léon, namely to drink from the Fountain of Youth. The basic point here is simple enough. If (1) “Ponce de Léon desired to drink from the Fountain of Youth” can be true, even though (2) “There was a Fountain of Youth (from which Ponce de Léon desired to drink)” is false, by parity of reasoning we can at least entertain the suggestion that (3) “The poet desires to order words of the sea” is true, even though (4) “There are words of the sea (that the poet desires to order)” is false. Notice how Vendler’s “logical discrimination” comes precisely into play regarding a science having to do with what follows or fails to follow from what. Thus the “demarcations” of logic insist that (4) fails to follow from (3), just as (2) fails to follow from (1). There is no pressing need then to posit the real existence of those putative words of the sea.

A joint resource shared by continental and analytical philosophy shortly before they broke away from each other, Brentano might almost be said to antedate the linguistic turn that originates rather with Gottlob Frege (the two are actually contemporaries) whose own independent encounter with intentionality, in connection with his famous example of the Evening/Morning Star, lacks Brentano’s metaphysical emphasis.<sup>2</sup> How Brentano’s intentionality lends itself to the linguistic turn, specifically as regards logic, W. V. Quine explains crisply enough with his distinction between opaque and transparent contexts. In an intuitive if somewhat impressionistic vein, transparent contexts could be said to be sentences featuring “not ideas about the thing but the thing itself.” Opaque contexts are sentences whose logical behavior is determined less by the referents of their sub-sentential expressions than by the ideas we have in thinking about those referents.<sup>3</sup> Agreeing with Brentano that the salient feature of mentality, in contradistinction with the merely physical, is to be found in its peculiar

object-directedness that allows for a merely intentional object that lacks real existence, Quine can even acquiesce in Brentano's further insistence that any purely physical account of mind is thereby disqualified from the outset. But where Brentano draws the conclusion that mind enjoys an autonomy of its own, Quine as a radical physicalist is content to banish mind from metaphysical reality, thereby endorsing Eliminative Materialism. Although the elimination of mind *tout court* can seem utterly mystifying, what it comes to in practice is a little less so. Here one envisages a future science of human behavior that, breaking with our so-called folk psychology, ceases to be satisfied with mentalistic explanations of it in terms of beliefs and desires, explanations to which Quine principally objects because of the opaque contexts, with their defiance of standard logic, that they inevitably involve. With science being committed then to transparent contexts, at least in its more theoretical reaches, opaque ones Quine can welcome readily enough when it comes to all extra-scientific discourse.

One extra-scientific mode of discourse that accommodates opaque contexts is supplied by poetry itself. Accordingly, the poet can sing opaquely beyond the generative powers of the Heracleitean flux even in his very rage to order its words (that is, find meaning and intelligibility in it) precisely if in fact there is no such originary meaning and intelligibility there to be found. Hence indeed his rage of frustration, which comes from the recognition that his object of desire may be merely an intentional one. No need then for pale Ramon (his paleness indicates how "spiritual" he is) to "tell" us "Why, when the singing ended . . . / The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there, / As the night descended . . . portioned out the sea" into "emblazoned zones" (*CP* 130) that may be taken to be merely intentional objects reminiscent of the "sea-clouds . . . in the swimming green" that were produced by Stevens' *bijou* of an imagination. No wonder then at Stevens' impasse of 1924 after his imagination was exposed as mere illusion. If ten years later in "The Idea of Order at Key West" the poet explains how mind imposes order on the flux, this move of course is fairly superficial, on the level of a schematizing psychology of perception, and not at all to be compared with our profound metaphysical rage to order words of the sea that we cannot but fear to be merely intentional objects.

In the vein of an expressly Quinean poetics,<sup>4</sup> which was designed to enrich even the best readings of poetry available today by pressing into service Quine's two classic papers, the 1948 "On What There Is" and the 1951 "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," we need not hesitate to identify a trope of intentionality that infects Stevens' "rage to order words of the sea." The recognition of this enables us to fend off any weak gloss on his "rage," though it is only when we are at our strongest that we have the will to resist the ready gratification supplied by our acquiescence in words of the sea that are posited in weak readings of the poem. The hankering for those

words being real enough, the weak readings might even be taken to be more successful than the strong one when it comes to Stevens' effort to "speak words that in the ear, / In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat, / Exactly, that which it wants to hear" (CP 240). If Stevens styles himself in that poem, "Of Modern Poetry," as "A metaphysician in the dark," one may well take his other remark *au pied de la lettre* as being an outright confession that he is a rhetorician above all. No such confession is actually needed, for the ostensible pull to our origins is felt keenly enough as an undertow even by me precisely at the moment that I insist on my strong, apotropaic reading of "The Idea of Order at Key West."

How the age-old quarrel between philosophy and poetry has contaminated the present discussion ought to have become evident before now, and it would be the height of naiveté to expect me to rise above it in the mode of neutrality. Yet the quarrel can prove even poetically rewarding if it motivates us to break out of our own impasse, which Vendler presciently anticipated when she pronounced a taboo on anyone daring to "separate out [Stevens'] inferences and insist on the demarcations of his logic." Granted that words of the sea are *exactly* that which the delicatest ear of the mind wants to hear, how can we satisfy that want in the face of "meaningless plungings" that were seen to be hardly compatible with any meaning that words of the sea, like all words, might be supposed to carry?

To the rescue now comes Irvin Ehrenpreis' invaluable study of nonsense words in Stevens, alerting us to the fact that a word need not have meaning proper, that is, cognitive meaning. This opportunity to ransack Ehrenpreis' rich glossary of nonsense words in Stevens is irresistible. Two texts I take to be decisive. First, and most important, there is this from the third poem in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" of 1942 where "the grossest iridescence of ocean / Howls hoo and rises and howls hoo and falls" (CP 383). Second, and playing an auxiliary role, one recalls the lines in "Sea Surface Full of Clouds" where "the windy booms / Hoo-hoed it in the darkened ocean-blooms" (CP 100). What that hoo-hooing in the earlier poem consists in is explained in the later one in terms of the ocean's first howling hoo, then rising, then howling hoo again, and falling; ergo, it hoo-hoos. So one word or quasi-word of the sea is arguably to be found in *hoo* serving at least as an oceanic phoneme. If *hoo* should now be felt to be hardly more than one of the "whirroos / And scintillant sizzlings such as children like," one must refrain from cutting Stevens off too abruptly, for, he continues in "A Primitive Like an Orb," they are "Vested in the serious folds of majesty," and even adds that his whirroos are "A source of trumpeting seraphs in the eye" (CP 442).

That *hoo* may even be a proper morpheme one is encouraged to believe when one considers that it probably supplies the philological root of "Hoon" who figures in the 1921 "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon." Six months

before his death Stevens confided in a letter, "I think the word ["Hoon"] is probably an automatic cipher for 'the loneliest air', that is to say, the expanse of sky and space" (L 871), a conjecture that one need not, of course, take as definitive. *Hoo* figures also (in the plural) in the 1922 poem "Bantams in Pine-Woods" as its last word ("An inchling bristles in these pines / . . . And fears not portly Azcan nor his hoos" [CP 76]), prompting Ehrenpreis to gloss its use as follows, "So the poet becomes a cock, and his poems are 'hoos,' " astutely adding that "nonsense syllables seem often to have signified for Stevens the artless power of a natural sound to bring the individual and his world together" (220–21). On the deepest, meta-physical level, that bringing together of subject and object is notably featured in the third section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" where "The poem refreshes life" at the outset by satisfying a "Belief in an immaculate beginning," which only later we are nudged into identifying with ocean and its hoo. Beyond that, a poem also "sends us . . . To an immaculate end" with "its late plural," which in its turn we are invited to identify with the "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" of the "Arabian in my room" who "throws his stars around the floor" (CP 382–83). Thus "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" in its threefold repetitiousness must somehow enshrine the philological plural of *hoo* in the pluralistic language of the imagination that is thereby grounded in the *ur*-word of a Heraclitean materialism with its "meaningless plungings of water" (CP 129).

If Vendler is an indispensable guide to the poem (along with Ehrenpreis, Harold Bloom, and Eleanor Cook), her description of it as "twelve lines of iridescence" (right) followed by "eight lines of grossness" that involve "a repudiation of the vatic language of the first half" (wrong) one must needs deplore if only because the "damned" Arabian (no proper Christian, he) with his abracadabra is vatic enough, etymologically, in his implicit clairvoyance of the future. Still, precisely as a philosopher I would be fatuous indeed if I failed to attune my extended gloss of the poem to Vendler's superb ear, for it is not as if she is deaf to "the allegorical 'meaning' of the Arabian and the Dove and the Ocean," all of which she takes, alas, to be canceled by the fact that "the elegant responsive triad of an immaculate beginning, a winged passage"—I identify this second item with the Dove as life serving as a *tertium quid* between brute physicality and mind—"and an immaculate end is grossly attached in retrospect to the triad of its causal stimuli in the vocables of nonsense: hoobla-how, hoobla-hoo, and hoo" (187–88), though I must insist on reversing the order here. "Hoo" answers to the immaculate beginning while "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" indicates an immaculate end with its late plural.

Nor is it the case that my own reading of the poem cannot be used by Vendler in support of her position. Have I not in effect found Ocean in the last tercet to be engaged in hoo-hooing where it need hardly be added that

to hoo-hoo something is presumably to mock it, suggesting even that if *hoo* is indeed the originary phoneme the corresponding morpheme may well be *hoo-hoo*. It is a note of “gross” mockery, then, that Vendler correctly hears in that whirroo, missing entirely “the serious folds of majesty” with which I find it to be “Vested.” No seraphs are trumpeting here in the delicatest ear of her mind if only because she cannot reconcile her belief in an immaculate beginning with its “ever-early candor” (CP 382), which she acquired suitably enough at the outset of the poem—conjured with thrice in anticipation of the Arabian’s threefold spell, “candor” has a “magical and incantatory” (187) force—with the evident mockery that contaminates it at the end.

More than merely jarred, Vendler feels positively betrayed by Stevens, and my difference with her might thus be supposed to be an irreducible case of *de gustibus*. Well, not quite. Mine is the reading of a metaphysician, designed above all to show how I at any rate can enjoy in the second part of the poem precisely that “strong exhilaration / Of what we feel *from what we think*” that is promised us in the first part, in the form of “An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.” Presumably, then, “what we feel” here arises from “what we think” regarding the “strange relation,” mentioned at the end, with which “Life’s nonsense pierces us” (CP 382–83, emphasis added).

What exactly is that relation? And how does it bear on the fact that Vendler is outraged by (what she takes to be) the nay-saying of the last nine lines precisely insofar as they run afoul of the yea-saying of the earlier twelve? The ocean’s howling hoo does reek of the cosmic nihilism that can be heard in the sound and the fury of Macbeth’s idiot (both are engaged in “signifying nothing”). Yet the very absence of meaning proper or cognitive meaning in the ocean’s hoo empowers it all the more to enjoy expressive meaning, precisely by expressing the (cognitive) meaninglessness of reality itself. But there is yea-saying as well. Expressed in the gentlest way by the yea-saying of the hoobla-hoo of the cooing, that is, [h]ooing, Dove, the nonsense of life harbors the originary, nihilistic phoneme twice over, which should suffice quite by itself to explain its poignancy. Add to that the threefold presence of the vocable in the much more problematic conjurings of the damned Arabian, and the “strange relation” comes to sight at last, recalling Crispin in section III of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” as “the relentless contact he desired,” that is to say, “the blissful liaison, / Between himself and his environment, / Which was, and is, chief motive, first delight, / For him, and not for him alone” (CP 34).

The nihilistic hoo of Ocean thus succeeds in supplying the elixir of a blissful liaison by piercing (in its passage through life itself) the poetic imagination of the Arabian, thereby affording a rush of pure power to the metaphysician sympathetic with Eliminative Materialism who may even confess to being positively “blissed out” by this winged passage into a

physicalistic monism in which words of the sea are found to be “of ourselves” as well. If “The adventurer / In humanity,” writes Stevens, who doubtless recognized himself to be one, “has not conceived of a race / Completely physical in a physical world” (*CP* 325), he needs to be reminded of another such adventurer in Quine with his “canonical scheme . . . that knows no propositional attitudes but only the physical constitution and behavior of organisms” (221). No need then for me to dissent sharply from Bloom when he insists that the second part of the poem “cannot be reconciled with the Coleridgean idealization of poetry” in the first part that “it was meant (supposedly) to adumbrate or illustrate” (*Poems of Our Climate* 182). I can acknowledge with Eleanor Cook that lines 13 to 20 do “function in Stevens’ debate with Coleridge . . . as a reversal of lines 1 to 12” (235), in that (she does not say this) its “idealism” is superseded but not (I urge) annulled by a physicalism that need not be felt (with Vendler) to contaminate it.

A great admirer of lines 13 to 21, “a fabulistic chant” that he takes to be “the very first of the fifteen or so fables that are the true glory of *Notes*” (*Poems of Our Climate* 180), Bloom can yet apparently agree with Vendler when she “‘elegantly observes’” that after “‘twelve lines of iridescence . . . we are given eight lines of grossness’” but only if they are “taken in sequence” with lines 1–12. So, even while differing with her as to the merit of “the poem of the Arabian” (182), which he isolates on its own, Bloom can agree with Vendler that the two-part poem of lines 1–21 is less than satisfactory as an integrated performance, a consensus ruling to which Cook probably subscribes as well. Ostensibly out of line with Bloom’s more personal gloss on lines 13–21 in terms of a current sexual inadequacy indicated by the wood-dove’s having “used to chant his hoobla-hoo” in the poet’s past, the metaphysical reading might even respond to it albeit subliminally as providing a further sublimated source of “excitation.”

It is Cook’s discussion, however, much more than Bloom’s or Vendler’s, that anticipates my own, even to the extent of her proposing to “work out the reversal” of the poem in terms of “suggestions of white magic” (notable in the threefold mention of “candor”) being answered by “suggestions of black” in the threefold use of “hoo” in the Arabian’s conjuration (235). Hers then is a white magic reading of the poem, which is only to be expected in one writing under the auspices of Northrop Frye, where mine is a black magic one, and the inevitable question is then, whose magic is the stronger? Thus Cook argues that while “the first part shows us the power of the human imagination, just as *Kubla Khan* does, the second part shows us the helplessness of the same imagination” (235). Helplessness is indeed the state to which I am reduced when Cook brilliantly sums up 13–21 as “*Kubla Khan* but you [that is, Stevens] cannot” (235), with all the high jinks of Stevens’ nonsense. Yet she can also issue me a reprieve by

conceding that "power in the second part is exercised by the Arabian certainly," though alas "it is a power that excludes the reader in the sense that we cannot agree on even an approximate common stance for reading lines 13 to 20" (235), acknowledging thereby a familiar enough crux in Stevens studies. So be it. Let Stevens scholarship divide into white magic versus black magic readings of the poem, and everyone will at least be showing his or her true colors. The black magic reading can even profit further from Cook when she confides, "Stevens' nonsense-lines read to me like an archetypal riddle-and-charm poem, the precise opposite of the . . . [quoting Frye] 'original spell to keep chaos away', the Word of God or Logos" (237). This theological or anti-theological gloss may even encourage us to enroll Stevens for one brief moment in the devil's party (recalling William Blake on Milton) when he dares to characterize his beloved imagination (the Arabian) as "damned."

In a more classical vein, Cook writes, "The chanting of hooblas and how and hoos, a circle woven thrice as in the charm-poems of Theocritus and Virgil, resounds like some mage's spell to undo the white and shining enchantment of the first part" (236). Undo? Even though Cook instructs us that *candidus* in signifying a dazzling white "has been used in Latin of the moon, the stars, day; of swans and snow; of Dido's beauty; of gods and persons transformed to gods" (234) where the moon and the stars head the list? If I am now reminded of Stevens' letter of January 12, 1943, to Hi Simons mentioning the fact that "The Arabian is the moon" (L 433) it is only to urge that the "candor" of the first part need not be taken to be altogether submerged in the second, with even stars being flung about the floor. As for some undoing taking place, that is scarcely surprising when one considers that the pleasure dome of Coleridge's *Kubla can* (and here Stevens is to be seen as trumping Cook's inspired nonsense) was presumably already shattered in 1922 by the hoos of Chieftain *Iffucan*, formidably arrayed "in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles" (CP 75). Mention of Virgil and the Arabian (infidels both) in almost the same breath will appear less unmotivated when one looks ahead to the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" where the poet "Patches the moon together in his room / To his Virgilian cadences, up down, / Up down" (CP 407). If Cook now comes as close to the metaphysical reading as any purely literary one can, thanks to glossing the second part "as if the Arabian made the memory of the wood-dove chant to his own tune and allied himself with the ancient continuing hooping of the ocean" (236), one can only marvel at her continued insistence on the imagination's helplessness in lines 13–20.

By no means incoherent,<sup>5</sup> however, Cook's reading rewards the metaphysician with something more valuable than mere smug reassurance when she startles him out of his almost narcissistic bliss by observing of Stevens that "he ends with a piercing or wounding, even by nonsense-lan-

guage, even by the 'hoo' we hear the ocean saying, even in *the full knowledge that we say these things ourselves*" (239; emphasis added). So, for all his drive to the ultimate in sheer reductiveness, our physicalistic metaphysician has been seduced by the hoariest poetic trope of all, what Ruskin called the Pathetic Fallacy? On coming to learn of his complicity in that disreputable trope, he can hardly continue to congratulate himself on his tough-mindedness. Recall that in "The Idea of Order at Key West" a hankering for words of the sea emerged naively enough in terms of the drive to meaning and intelligibility, a drive that the Quinean (Quine is famous for his critique of meaning<sup>6</sup>) is bent on resisting. How ironical then that the Pathetic Fallacy should explain our philosopher's immense satisfaction in hearing the meaningless words of the sea, *hoo* and *hoo-hoo*, compose a tale told by an idiot.

A contradiction in terms, "meaningless words"? Not quite, seeing that we can recall the distinction drawn by the Logical Positivists between cognitive and expressive (or emotive) meaning where metaphysics and poetry alike are confined by them to the latter. Because the origin of language and (cognitive) meaning can arguably be traced back to mere expressive meaning, postulating ordinary words of the sea (and of ourselves) that at once lack all cognitive meaning, even while being invested with the expressive variety, can now almost smack of a sober scientific hypothesis. An Eliminative Materialist might even suppose that he can hold on to an unproblematic expressive variety of meaning precisely by eliminating the dubious cognitive sort, failing to realize that intentionality attaches almost as much to the former as to the latter. Witness someone who in exclaiming "Ah!" expresses a pro-attitude to the planet Venus under the description "the Evening Star" (recalling Stevens' "young emerald" that "charms philosophers" [CP 25–26] in "Homunculus et La Belle Étoile"), even as he is prepared by mouthing "Ugh!" to express a con-attitude toward the same planet under the description "the Morning Star," which he associates with Lucifer. If the one real object here answers to two different intentional objects in Brentano's jargon, those merely intentional objects figure in Frege's memorable jargon of 1892 as different "modes of presentation" (158) of the planet Venus, which serve as the different senses of the expressions "the Evening Star" and "the Morning Star." Thus we can even suggest that "Ugh!" and "Ah!" (and "hoo") contexts are referentially opaque (by a natural extension of Quine's distinction between opaque and transparent contexts) in that substitution in those contexts of co-referring singular terms, for example, "the Morning Star" and "the Evening Star," proves to involve even cognitive dissonance.

No wonder now that, in acquiescing in the expressive meaning of the *ur*-words, in part perhaps out of a failure to appreciate that if *howl* is primarily an intransitive verb it is here in "howls hoo" pressed into service

as a transitive one, our tough-minded and nay-saying metaphysician might well be surprised to learn from Cook that he has unknowingly succumbed to the Pathetic Fallacy. For it is not to be doubted that the mockery he hears in the ocean (that mockery being an intentional object) is nothing but the projection of his own mockery of the drive to meaning and intelligibility. Hence the narcissism of his bliss. Hence also a humiliating reversal when he acknowledges that the metaphysical ground or origin of reality that he found to be indicated by the hoo of ocean may even serve as its Fregean referent.<sup>7</sup> Far then from being *transparently* expressive of reality, the nihilistic *hoo* determines a referentially opaque context where the object (in this case reality itself or the ground of reality) is occluded by the (emotive) sense of *hoo*, which is doubtless some mordant variant of “nay” that was subjected to the trope of reification in “the nothing that is” (CP 10) of “The Snow Man” of 1921. If traditional poetics will identify the Pathetic Fallacy as the operative trope here, a more specifically Quinean one will opt for a closely related bit of figuration labeled conveniently enough as the trope of opacity. Well, our abashed metaphysician can at least confess that he is being properly punished for failing to heed Plato when he deplored the poets as dangerously subversive, though he was not to know that as a post-Platonic poet Stevens had rhetorical devices at his disposal, calculated to undermine the philosopher himself, of which Plato never dreamed, devices addressed above all to the delicatest ear of the metaphysician himself in *his* dark in terms of “that which it wants to hear.”

Not that the philosopher is quite without means of neutralizing Stevens, the master rhetorician. Armed with the twofold distinction between tender-minded and tough-minded on the one hand and between yea-saying and nay-saying on the other, the former patented by William James, the latter by Carlyle, both of which were readily available to Stevens in his immediate doxagraphic background, we can canvass his oeuvre noticing how he makes a practice of jerking his reader about now in a positive, now in a negative direction. Tracking that practice, we can affix a plus sign in the margin in order to register a case of the one and a minus sign by way of indicating a case of the other. Sometimes the duplicity can be fiendishly subtle. Ostentatiously tough-minded in featuring the nay-saying of the ocean howling hoo (or is it rather a quotational case of howling, “Hoo?”), lines 13–21 will be heard by the metaphysician at any rate as being on balance largely affirmative, a case of “After the final no there comes a yes” (CP 247) that launches Stevens’ beautiful and peculiarly self-revealing poem of the *douce* campagna, which he self-protectively trashes by rendering it almost impossible to access under the absurd title “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard,” taken by Roy Harvey Pearce to be Carlyle (354 n 3).

Enshrined twice over in the sheer expressiveness of the wood-dove representing life and thrice over in the abracadabra of the Arabian representing mind as the imagination, the nihilistic hoo of ocean thereby secures "the blissful liaison, / Between [oneself] and his environment" (*CP* 34) that Crispin could only despair of achieving, though if Ehrenpreis' gloss on "Bantams in Pine-Woods" can be credited when he writes that "the poet becomes a cock, and his poems are 'hoos' " (220–21), Stevens already had a taste of it in 1922. So in lines 13–21 the "pure power" of tender-minded yea-saying wins out in the end precisely by being grounded in a radical nay, looking ahead to our tough-minded metaphysician who may now ruefully confess that he has been seduced by a master rhetorician. That Stevens was quite capable of self-consciously exercising his duplicity is suggested by his assessment of William Carlos Williams, which is very much a case of one professional exposing the tricks of the trade of another. By no means content merely to observe that "In order to understand Williams at all, it is necessary to say at once that he has a sentimental side," Stevens adds, "What Williams gives, on the whole, is not sentiment but the reaction from sentiment, or, rather, a little sentiment, very little, together with acute reaction." And he can even urge us to "run through these pages" noticing "how often the essential poetry is the result of the conjunction of . . . the sentimental and the anti-poetic, the constant interaction of two opposites" (*OP* 213–14), which Stevens in his very own way might even be supposed to be emulating with *his* interaction of two opposites.

A veritable paradigm of what may some day come to be recognized as a fully professionalized, even scientific mode of literary criticism that tough-mindedly identifies "essential poetry" in terms of the devices of pure rhetoric, Stevens' gloss on Williams opens up the prospect of an anti-poetics that must be recognized from the outset as placing the whole poetic enterprise at risk. That such an anti-poetics may already be available today in the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida, Cook strongly suggests in the course of her rich and complex discussion (to which I make no claim to do anything like full justice), even expressing the fear that "when we are knowledgeable enough and defensive enough about the ways language works . . . what power do they then retain?" (239). How that fear might bear on my double reading of lines 13–21, one metaphysical, the other apotropaically rhetorical, not to say deconstructive, may not be quite as easy to assess as those steeped in continental philosophy, where Heidegger and Derrida can simply assume that we are living in an era characterized by the end or ending of metaphysics, will be apt to suppose. Quite different is the sentiment in analytical philosophy (here the names to conjure with are Frege and Quine) where it is widely, though by no means universally, believed that metaphysics has been renewed today as very much a going, even flourishing, concern after being precisely revitalized by the failure of

Logical Positivism to drive a stake through its heart.<sup>8</sup> Viewed *dans cette galère* the rhetorical reading will be allowed to score a palpable *ad hominem* hit against our caught-off-guard metaphysician, even while leaving the metaphysical reading pretty much intact as an authoritative gloss on lines 13–21 taken to be successfully *expressive* of a position very close to, if not quite the same as, Eliminative Materialism. For if mind appears to be very much at hand in the Arabian and hence appears to be by no means eliminated from reality, it is only by way of his (cognitively) meaningless abracadabra. How reductive Stevens could be about this passage is evident when he writes not merely that “The Arabian is the moon” but that “the undecipherable vagueness of the moonlight is the unscrawled fores: the unformed handwriting” (L 433).

Although Frege and Quine are widely felt to be much more remote from, and even alien to, poetry than Heidegger and Derrida, the very recalcitrance of the former will probably be found to indicate that they have in the end more to offer the study of poetry than the latter. Because Stevens has been seen to view himself now as a metaphysician, now as a rhetorician, and finally as an adventurer in humanity, this last, doubtless most revealing characterization allows him to hang loose as between metaphysics and rhetoric. Like Wittgenstein’s duck-rabbit, the metaphysical and rhetorical readings of “The Poem Refreshes Life,” as I may venture to label it, can both be enjoyed in turn, the latter being admittedly parasitic on the former. As for the unwritten poem of the sea, principally stitched together out of “The Idea of Order at Key West” and “The Poem Refreshes Life,” there is surely no great novelty in that when one considers how, out of “a triad of poems written in 1921,” two of which, “The Snow Man” and “Tea at the Palaz of Hoon” I have even had occasion to glance at, Bloom has no hesitation in observing, “I will read the three poems as though they formed one larger, dialectical lyric when run together” (*Poems of Our Climate* 50), thereby in effect proposing to enrich the canon with a fourth, “uncollected” one beyond the available three.

On an exegetical level the principal reward of my discussion will probably be felt to lie in my rescuing the second, grittier part of “The Poem Refreshes Life” from the depreciation of it that largely results from the excessive pleasure that the first, too-attractive part has widely afforded. Reluctantly, then, I must be a second bearer of bad news (Bloom precedes me) regarding lines 1–12, which would have us suppose that poetry refreshes life by satisfying (our desire for) belief in an immaculate beginning but only “For a moment.” So there are two sources of worry here. The first issues from an alethic mode of criticism, native to philosophers, which asks whether that belief in an immaculate beginning, granted that we do want to have it let it be only for a moment, is a true belief or a false one. Probably a false one, Stevens can be seen to suggest, particularly if it is taken naively

in a fairly idealistic vein. Are we quite sure now that we really do want our refreshment from poetry to consist in any such short-term false belief? Was Plato, moreover, right when he said that the poets tell lies,<sup>9</sup> and does Stevens even admit here to agreeing with him? Worse still, does Stevens go Plato one better by saying that the poet's lies simply give the audience "that which it wants to hear"? Finally, along this line, does our very pleasure in lines 1–12 (I, too, admit to it) amount to a confession, wrung from us by Stevens, that we do wish to be lied to? So he has even been given a go-ahead from us?

It is the second source of worry, however, that is still more disquieting. The operative words here are "For a moment." So the poem refreshes life but only (here is real candor) for a moment, and then back to the workaday world? Well, that is probably true, so my quarrel with it cannot be on alethic grounds. Rather, I can only protest: whence our pleasure in simply being told albeit in golden words that poetry (including especially the very poem at hand) consists in the instant gratification of an escapism that is soon defeated by the workaday? We may even grant that the rhetorical *tour de force* here is comparable in strength to the surreptitious transformation of nay into yea in lines 13–21, which actually undertake to deliver the goods (lines 1–12 are no more than promissory) as regards "The poem of pure reality" later, in 1949, to be mentioned in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" where in section IX "We seek / Nothing beyond reality. Within it, / Everything, the spirit's alchemicana / Included" (CP 471). If the spirit's alchemicana are provided by the damned Arabian whose black magic must involve alchemy and astrology alike, reality is more obviously still delivered by the howling ocean. How is that, then, for the pure power of a supreme fiction, though merely to identify it as such is already to proceed from metaphysics to rhetoric. That the extended, largely unwritten poem of the Arabian should prove to be the poem of pure reality bids fair to being Stevens' supreme fiction, something one might even live by and (almost) believe in. In a 1953 letter to Renato Poggioli Stevens could write, "I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality" (L 790), a desire of Stevens that a tough-minded metaphysician today might dare to find fulfilled in the poem of the Virgilean Arabian.

Much too robust to wither in the face of philosophic captiousness, the first section (lines 1–12) has been rebuked by me only in order to redress the balance between the two parts of "The Poem Refreshes Life." Accordingly, the enhancement of the second part can now enable it to serve as the core of Stevens' true but unwritten poem "at the centre of things" whose *donnée* was already to be heard in the 1922 hoos of a bantam cock insisting both that "I am the personal" and that "I am my world" (CP 75). Less solipsistically, and jumping from 1922 to the 1949 "Puella Parvula," reality will be found to be "The elephant on the roof," also "The bloody lion . . .

ready to spring / From the clouds . . . / Making a great gnashing, over the water wallows / Of a vacant sea declaiming with wide throat" (CP 456) incessant hoos on which—ironically enough—the physicalistic metaphysician will be especially prone to confer a yea-saying intentionality by hearing them as nay-saying words of the sea that prove in the end affirmative by being simultaneously both "of ourselves" and "of our origins." Beyond merely rescuing the second part of "The Poem Refreshes Life," I have more ambitiously undertaken to vindicate the unity of the entire canto by viewing the second part as in effect a successful "transumption" of the first part, bearing in mind that Harold Bloom has characterized his master trope of transumption as "the revisionist trope proper" that features "retropings of earlier tropes," in the case at hand, notably Coleridge.<sup>10</sup> If I have a little anachronistically emphasized a metaphysical reading of the poem in the light of analytical philosophy today, simply by way of a sober hypothesis in literary history harking back to Stevens' days at Harvard, one is entitled to ask whether the poet in conjuring with his hoos may not have heard in them mockingly anti-metaphysical echoes of Williams James when he wrote,

Metaphysics has usually followed a very primitive kind of quest. You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part in magic *words* have always played. If you have his name, or the formula of incantation that binds him, you can control the spirit, genie, afrite, or whatever the power may be. Solomon knew the names of all the spirits, and having their names, he held them subject to his will. So the universe has always appeared to the natural mind as a kind of enigma, of which the key must be sought in the shape of some illuminating or power-bringing word or name. That word names the universe's *principle*, and to possess it is after a fashion to possess the universe itself. "God," "Matter," "Reason," "the Absolute," "Energy," are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest. (52–53)

If I now insist that the metaphysical reading of the poem can accommodate even James's anti-metaphysical mockery as well as Cook's deconstructive worries, it is to be feared that my testimony may fail to be honored as that of a disinterested party in the dispute.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See the entries on "Intentionality" and "Brentano" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> See Frege: *Philosophy of Language*, ch. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Thus the sentence (a) "The Evening Star has exploded" is a transparent context while the sentence (b) "Jones believes (desires, fears, hopes, etc.) that the Evening Star has exploded" is an opaque context. Replace the singular term "the Evening Star" in (a) by the co-referring expression "the Morning Star," yielding the new sentence (c) "The Morning Star has exploded." Because the Babylonians were surprised to learn after centuries of ignorance that the Evening Star was (identical with) the Morning Star, being indeed (as we know) the planet Venus, (c) will be true or false depending on whether (a) is true or false. Quine now insists that scientific, objective contexts must be transparent, allowing for the substitution of co-referential singular terms *salva veritate*. Consider by contrast (b). Perform the same substitution, yielding (d) "Jones believes that the Morning Star has exploded." In this case (b) may be true even though (d) is false. So the Principle of Extensionality that insists on the substitutivity of co-referential singular terms *salva veritate* fails in opaque contexts where the object is occluded by the idea we have of it. Logic figures in all these cases in that the argument "(a) and (e), therefore (c)" is a valid argument where (e) is "The Evening Star is identical with the Morning Star." Not so with the argument "(b) and (e), therefore (d)."

How metaphysics comes specifically into play now emerges through the following steps. Standard logic today enshrines Leibniz's Law, according to which the following is a valid argument-form: (1) a is F, (2) a = b, therefore (3) b is F, one instance of which appears to be the argument, "The Evening Star is believed by Jones to have exploded, the Evening Star = the Morning Star, therefore the Morning Star is believed by Jones to have exploded." So opaque contexts pose a challenge to logic itself. In particular, propositional attitude contexts pose such a challenge. Take the proposition, "The Evening Star has exploded." Believing, desiring, fearing, hoping, etc. that the Evening Star has exploded, Bertrand Russell called propositional attitudes. Propositional attitude contexts involve intentionality. Moreover, Quine follows Brentano in holding that mind as such is characterized above all by the intentionality (and opacity) of propositional attitudes. How then to square the demands of logic with the nature of mind? The most provocative response here is that of the Eliminative Materialist for whom mind simply drops out of reality. Witness Quine, who writes that "if we are limning the true and ultimate structure of reality, the canonical scheme for us is the austere scheme that knows no . . . propositional attitudes but only the physical constitution and behavior of organisms" (221).

<sup>4</sup> See my "Metaphysics and Poetry: The Quinean Approach" and *Metaphysics: The Logical Approach*, ch. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Thus Cook's "precise opposite of . . . the word of God" which I choose to read as supporting the metaphysical gloss, she advances rather in a deconstructive vein that threatens the poetry.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Quine's 1951 paper "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in his *From A Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

<sup>7</sup> Frege's classic distinction between the sense and reference of a singular term takes the referent of "the Evening Star" to be the same as the referent of "the Morning Star," namely the planet Venus, while taking the sense of the former to be something like "Heavenly body first seen in the evening" and the sense of the latter to be "Heavenly body last seen at dawn."

<sup>8</sup> The turning point is recognized to be Quine's 1948 paper "On What There Is," in *From A Logical Point of View*.

<sup>9</sup> No Platonist, Bloom as our most Romantic critic can yet write that "a trope . . . results only from a reader's *will to be lied to*" (394; his emphasis), and it is thus that Bloom opens up unexpected common ground between literary criticism today and Plato.

<sup>10</sup> "Retropings" occurs in *The Breaking of the Vessels*, 74, while "the revisionist trope proper" occurs in *A Map of Misreading*, 101.

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## Wallace Stevens and the Cummington Press: Additions and Reflections

CAROLYN MASEL

**R**ON KLARÉN BEGINS his article on the Wallace Stevens–Cummington Press correspondence by reflecting on the difficulty of interpreting Stevens’ “other” career with the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and by proffering the body of letters between Stevens and the Cummington Press as a locus in which we might observe the man performing both as a poet and as a businessman.<sup>1</sup> Although the correspondence provides quite a full picture of Stevens in the process of managing one aspect of his literary career, it seems doubtful whether this relatively uncomplicated administrative process can be said to challenge his capacities as an attorney and executive—nor does Klarén make such a claim. On the other hand, an almost inevitable consequence of Klarén’s approach is an accentuation of the businesslike aspect of the correspondence, an emphasis that puts it at variance with my own sense of it, as gleaned from the original archive at the John Rylands University Library of Manchester.<sup>2</sup>

Essential to our differing interpretations of the letters are our different interpretations of Katharine Frazier, who in 1922 had established the Cummington School for gifted children to which the Press was attached, and who was its editor. While Klarén observes that she comments on *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* both before and after its publication “in her capacity as a lover of literature” (65), and while he claims that she “is able to move gracefully between the roles of shrewd businesswoman and literata” (67), he seems to me nevertheless to diminish her somewhat, for the very nature of his project requires that he treat her primarily as a negotiator. In one sense, he is merely fulfilling Frazier’s own wish to be a facilitator of the purest possible realization of Stevens’ ideal book. Notwithstanding, there needs perhaps to be more of a distinction made between agent and instrument than Klarén’s account suggests; certainly my sense of Frazier is of someone a good deal less shrewd and a good deal more visionary than the person he depicts. It is the high-minded aspect of the whole venture that Klarén seems to me so consistently to underplay.

Why, one is prompted to ask, would a critic discount the many indications of mutual good will with which the correspondence abounds? For the case could not seem clearer. Time after time, considerations of profit are subordinated to a selfless higher service to poetry—an attitude that

Klarén would seem to find difficult to credit. Yet it is the case that while both Frazier and Harry Duncan, who succeeded her as editor, hoped that the Press might eventually be able to repay the School fund that had set it up, no one envisaged that it would ever make a genuine profit. For one thing, the specialized work of printing on hand-dampened paper required a constant humidity, and this, together with the press's being housed in an unheated building, meant that printing was essentially a seasonal matter. Publication was slow. A normal print run was 300 copies, for consistency's sake. Thus Frazier's initial statement of the aim of the Cummington Press's being to "reinforce the author's intentions" is not merely a sales pitch; she means what she says, and in the event she consulted Stevens about every aesthetic decision in the making of the book of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

Indeed, Frazier, Duncan, and Paul Wightman Williams, the Press's illustrator, all manifest the kind of personal commitment that is possible only in a very small enterprise. Special personal copies of *Notes* were printed for Stevens, one of which was on hand-made paper (see Frazier's letter to Stevens of September 15, 1942); Williams individually colored the prints of his drawings in each of the forty signed copies of *Esthétique du Mal*—an enormous task, since there was a drawing on each page (see Duncan's letter to Stevens of August 24, 1945); Duncan undertook the labor-intensive task of typesetting and printing six copies of a list of Stevens' relatives, charging him so little that Stevens protested (see his letter of November 8, 1943).

In fact, there is a host of indications that Stevens was aware of the Press's tiny scale and attendant financial difficulties. In his earliest dealings with Frazier he waived any royalty fee for *Notes*, as he would do for *Esthétique du Mal*. Rather, in both cases, he offered to contribute money if it proved necessary to the success of the book. As he said in his third letter to the Press,

It is not a question of money; it is a question of each of us doing the best job we know how, and only that. (January 21, 1942)

Klarén suggests that Stevens' insistence on paying for samples of the Press's work sent to him by Frazier may be due to his not wanting to be indebted and, hence, obliged to contribute work to the Press (62). However, a more generous view seems possible: he may simply have been scrupulous about not placing any financial burden whatsoever on a small concern that could ill afford it.<sup>3</sup> When, at Stevens' request, Duncan sent copies of *Three Academic Pieces* to Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., Stevens insisted:

You are not a commercial publisher and I want to pay for these things for that reason, so that you will not be out of pocket on my account. (Letter to Duncan of December 12, 1947)

There seems to me to be no reason to think that Stevens' repeated need to reassure Alfred A. Knopf that his dealings with the Cummington Press posed no threat to the sales of Knopf's trade editions of his books was not motivated as much by honesty as anxiety.

Pressing further, it seems worth asking why Katharine Frazier's contribution to *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* should have been so greatly elided in the various accounts of its composition. Perhaps such critics as Klarén and James Longenbach (1991) take their cue from Stevens in this respect. It is obvious that he did not form a close friendship with her as he did with Duncan, and one can only speculate as to the reasons for this. My own sense is that it might be partly attributable to her personal style (as far as an epistolary style can be called personal), which is sometimes effusive and sometimes also very direct. It may also be a matter of gender; Stevens characteristically addresses his orders for books to "Gentlemen," even when he is aware that Frazier has been stranded without a secretary or a typesetter. It seems worth noting also that he never spelled her name correctly, despite her signature's being clearly legible and despite his practice of emending all spelling mistakes in his letters. In the light of this last, it is perhaps significant that her name (while spelled correctly in the *Letters*) is consistently misspelled in Klarén's article as well.

James Longenbach underplays Frazier's role in a different way in the course of tackling the vexed question of the status of the envoi of the *Notes*. He argues that Stevens considered it crucial, and for this reason suggested to Frazier that "a line or two" from it be printed on the back cover of the book (249). The implication is that it was he who selected the "line or two" in question, an interpretation that supports Longenbach's central thesis about *Notes* being essentially a wartime poem. Klarén, too, claims that Stevens "proposes" the lines, "Soldier, there is a war . . . ," although he later refers to Stevens' "concur[ring] with Frazier's selection of words for the back cover" (65). The situation is actually quite ambiguous. The ambiguity hinges on the lack of a comma in Stevens' letter of June 1, 1942 (*L* 408), so that one cannot tell whether Stevens means any two lines from the poem that begins "Soldier, there is a war . . ." or the first two lines in particular:

Let me say that I have been thinking that it might be nice to have on the back outside cover of the book a border consisting of a line or two of the poem beginning "Soldier, there is a war" etc: enough to state the idea.

It seems to me that Frazier herself registers this ambiguity in her reply and seeks to resolve it by explicitly proposing the first and last sentences of the poem (see her letter of June 4, 1942). In the end, it is impossible to know whether it was Stevens or Frazier who decided upon the first two lines—though it seems clear that Frazier chose the last two—and the credit must therefore be shared between them.

Thus far I have omitted the most obvious reason that Stevens and Frazier did not proceed to develop a deeper friendship, which is simply that their time was limited: Frazier suffered the first of a series of heart attacks shortly after the project of *Notes* was begun, and was forced to retire. Yet in this case my sense is that the facts do not of themselves provide enough of an explanation, and so I return to the question of the temperaments involved. One possible interpretation is suggested by a later letter, of March 2, 1943, which is not part of the Cummington Press archive. When Stevens heard that the brother of his close friend Henry Church had died, he wrote:

You lost your brother at about the same time that I lost my sister, the last member of my family, so that we are in a position to exchange sympathy. . . . While things of this kind are blows, my own feeling . . . is to try to feel about it as if it was something that had happened long ago. . . .

I am sorry to hear that your heart is disturbing you again. I know of a good doctor and a good lawyer, which is the usual combination for people who are worried about their hearts. But to limit myself to the lawyer. . . . (L 440)

And so he does, for the rest of the letter, a good half-page. Katharine Frazier mentions her own serious illness only in order to explain why *Notes* is behind schedule and to express her “very deep regret” that she had therefore not been able to typeset the book herself (June 20, 1942). Her remarks about the importance of *Notes*’ appearing during the War are interspersed with profoundly moving remarks about the way that the poems “keep re-filling [her] own life”:

Planning and advising about it during my critical illness this summer was one of the things that made life endurable under such restraint. . . .

That the sun ‘must be in the difficulty of what it is to be’ bears me up. Your poetry partakes of that supreme fiction in that I can come back indefinitely for more light; it does not reveal itself all at once, nor, for me, ever exhaustively. And that is the best thing I can say about anything. (September 24, 1942)

That these remarks should be included in a letter that concerns itself primarily with her former students at the Front and, conscientiously, with sending review copies, makes them all the more poignant. Yet all she elicits from Stevens is a single sentence saying that he “very greatly appreciate[s] her remarks,” and a good deal of advice as to where the review copies should be sent (September 28, 1942). As far as the collection indicates, he does not respond to Duncan’s letter to inform him that Frazier is to retire to a nursing home in Albany, involving a journey that Duncan considers gravely dangerous (October 4, 1943), nor to Duncan’s provision of the address a month later, with its hint that “of course, she’d be glad to hear from you any time” (October 28, 1943). I say “as far as the collection indicates” because, as Klarén notes, the correspondence is not complete. He professes to be “startled” by the mention of “Frazier Hall,” when “there has been no mention of Kath[a]rine Frazier’s death” (69). In this case, the gap is easy to fill, being one of the lacunae in the collection that declares itself: the relevant letter announcing Frazier’s death is Duncan’s letter of July 12, 1944, now held in the Huntington Library.<sup>4</sup>

Klarén’s depiction of Duncan’s and Stevens’ friendship strikes me, by contrast, as accurate and judicious. There is a peculiar mixture of humor and veneration in the younger man’s attitude toward the poet that Klarén, it seems to me, gets just right. Perhaps one would want to add the kind of evidence that is available only from the original archive—from seeing and handling the letters, turning them over, holding them up to the light; working from photocopies involves a certain loss. There is, in addition, one error of fact, which would appear to be the result of a simple misreading. In their final exchange, Klarén has the pair “gloating over” some seventeenth-century paper (70). It is, however, indisputably modern:

The Papier d’Auvergne is something we had despaired of seeing: a sheet made by hand today that actually incorporates the qualities that are admirable in seventeenth-century papers. (Duncan’s letter to Stevens, January 4, 1951)

Stevens’ letter on this paper is carefully typed above and below the “charming water-mark” (a flower on a stem with two leaves), and Duncan anticipates it will “take damping like a dream and printing ink like a charm.” Its abiding beauty shines forth all the more brightly in its context in the archive, where the urge to conserve paper is most apparent. Duncan’s carbons are on strips of paper torn from larger sheets. There are often old letters on the backs. Some of the carbons are on colored paper, presumably left over from printing jobs. Wartime paper shortages must have been to such lovers of paper as Stevens and Duncan something akin to hunger. Stevens’ personalized office letterhead is printed on cream-colored

Old Hampshire vellum, and the Cummington Press stationery is Fabriano paper.

The verso of Duncan's carbons provide some interesting material. On the back of his letter to Stevens of June 30, 1945, for example, is the draft of a letter to one Sergeant Swallow apologizing for the delay in returning a manuscript. Duncan's explanation supplies further evidence of the Press's isolation and small-time status—and the unlikelihood of its being run according to "hard business" principles:

the manuscript was sent by express, we aren't near a railroad, and trucking deliveries are slow and uncertain because of the scarcity of truckers. We have no transportation but shank's mare.

And the verso of Duncan's gracious letter to Stevens of December 28, 1947, quoted below, contains an earlier draft, showing the care he took to get the thing just right:

You ask me to let you know whether your check to the amount of \$10.00 drawn in our favor in payment for two copies of *Three Academic Pieces*, both tied into paper covers, is right. And it isn't. Whereas these two copies are numbered in the edition, they are presentation copies to the author and so worthless, priceless, as you will. Also, one cannot purchase what already belongs to him. Therefore, with our thanks, we are returning said check to you. . . .

Even more tellingly, perhaps, Duncan's letter of March 29, 1946, contains poetry, in *terza rima*, emended in Duncan's hand, on the back. There is no evidence that he ever communicated his personal interest in poetry to Stevens; however, on the verso of his letter of September 13, 1947, is the draft of a letter to Marianne Moore in reply to her criticisms of Duncan's *Three Monodies*.

It seems fitting that Duncan's poetry should manifest a preoccupation with form—or perhaps not form so much as technique. (*Terza rima*, it hardly needs to be said, is not easy.) Whatever ambitions as a poet he may have harbored, it was in the technically demanding field of printing that he achieved acclaim. Not that his accomplishments as a printer were *merely* technical, but the correspondence reveals him to be extremely knowledgeable about his craft, and passionate about some aspects of it. Yet despite the awards he won, and despite the enduring testimony of the superb limited editions he designed and printed, he has tended to be rather underestimated as a maker of books, a fact that I can attribute only to his utter lack of pretentiousness.

His letter of June 24–25, 1945, in which he talks about his conception of *Esthétique du Mal*, is unusually voluble. Indeed, it is a veritable disquisition on the rectangular tendency of pictures, which he judges to be arbitrary, and to derive probably from the exigencies of printing during the Renaissance. In the case of illuminated manuscripts, the page boundaries hold the text and illumination together as a unity—something not available to the printer, who must balance text and woodcuts. Duncan then proceeds to refer to a book by Edward Thomas that Stevens has lent him, which is printed on “very beautiful paper with evident love and care”—but, he dares to ask, need it have been printed at all?—“a question that does not arise in the case of Blake, [say,] who exploited his medium for what it uniquely could do.” He then goes on to consider whether

a competent scribe (which the engraver must have been) could not have made as large an edition in the same amount of time, and not so destroyed the surface of that paper. For printing is done by pressure and in its nature bites into the paper (the modern fashion for kiss-printing takes all the guts out of the process). Poetry, with its uneven right-hand margin, would seem especially well suited to treatment by illumination. The problem is to free rigid forms of type, without nostalgic imitation or loss of dignity, so that the rectilinear boundaries become the edges of the paper itself. . . .

Wightman Williams’ drawings do not subscribe to the conventions of rectilinearity. He has tried to set up “a rather happy rhythm from page to page till the end” by placing the drawings close to the text. Moreover, the drawings themselves “approximate . . . the sharpness, weight, and texture of the type-face, and they will bite into the surface”:

If the poems and drawings do marry, why shouldn’t they couple? And if they don’t, there’s little good in printing an estrangement. But it’s an old fashioned marriage, with one party quite dominant: the drawings hover around, comment on, almost haunt the poetry, which certainly has it so far as length, breadth, and weight go. The poetry is, as it should be, the authority.

Although he does not like self-consciously printed books, which he calls “immature,” Duncan thinks that

To disregard the rectangular prejudice and the balance-principle need not be odd, however, so long as the book finds its necessities within itself. Perhaps finally we’re being more old-fashioned than you—I’d like to think that the final effect will be right enough to show its necessity like an Arabic book or Chi-

nese print with its roles of picture and characters reversed in importance.

Stevens, in characteristic fashion, politely ignores all of this, merely mentioning in passing an essay by Dr. Valentiner about the reason for Dutch paintings being rectangular. According to him, it had “nothing whatsoever to do with tradition” (July 2, 1945). Duncan seems completely chastened:

I think there must have been a lot of poppycock in those later reasons of mine. . . . That letter was at best speculative and I’d be sorry if it seemed dogmatic, or final, or even “right.” I merely struck out this way and that trying to rationalize what I was doing, a grandiose procedure, at best. (July 6, 1945)

“But surely an understandable—and even a necessary one,” one wants to remonstrate. The American Institute of Graphic Arts certainly approved the thinking behind it, including the unsigned edition of *Esthétique du Mal* in their award of *Fifty Books of 1946*. Stevens was, eventually, lavish in his praise: “I feel a great deal of pride in the choice of the book as a top-drawer printing job” (April 1, 1946). In an earlier letter to Duncan, Stevens wrote:

No one can say this sort of thing more sincerely than I, because The Cummington Press is very much my dish: it is because I like your work so much that the two books printed by you have come about. As a matter of fact, I thought that the first edition of the NOTES was a superior thing as a book. Perhaps it was too conformist. The ESTHETIQUE contains much more of the individual printer and individual artist and, for that reason, it hangs on. (February 19, 1946; L 523)

The correspondence between Stevens and the Cummington Press yields in abundance certain kinds of information of interest to literary historians. It provides, for example, such scanty information as we have about Stevens’ habits of composition, being especially valuable in relation to the *Notes*, and it is therefore no surprise that the relevant material should appear in the *Letters*. In addition, this correspondence provides information about the reception of Stevens’ poems, in the form of details of review copies sent and citations of sales figures. Presumably, it is this kind of information that Klarén has picked up on, for it is the only sort of thing that could properly be called a “business matter,” apart from considerations of copyright. Yet one can hardly judge Stevens as a businessman from this kind of interchange: it is the interchange to which, one is tempted to say, all publishing poets are subject. Certainly Stevens is experienced in literary negotiations of this kind—but what poet (especially one of his

stature) is not? Poets are not novelists; they do not, generally, have literary agents.

While the correspondence provides some kinds of information, it is palpably lacking in others—perhaps, indeed, in the very kinds one might expect to find there. Surprisingly, for example, the archive contains very little explicit material about World War II, and might therefore be disappointing to a critic such as James Longenbach. Except for Katharine Frazier's comments—though these, I have suggested, do constitute an important exception—and except for the physical evidence of a chronic paper shortage, the War never becomes, in these letters, at least, more than incidental, a background noise causing nothing worse than inconvenience. Combing the archive for evidence, one is constrained to note such minutiae as the new motto that appears on The Hartford Accident and Insurance Company stationery in July 1942: "BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS—KEEP 'EM FLYING," which, by July 1944 has become "BUY WAR BONDS AND STAMPS—REGULARLY." This lack of talk about the War may itself be significant; it is difficult to tell. Certainly, Duncan's complaint about his bookbinder's delayed completion of *Esthétique du Mal* has a peculiar resonance: "We feel victimized, but suppose that he does too, since he's lost a man" (October 13, 1945). From the vantage point of Manchester at the end of the twentieth century this sounds like a rather gross misappropriation of wartime diction—after all, he and Williams are merely the victims of the labor shortage: the binder's loss of a man is likely to be due to his being conscripted rather than killed. Besides, the War is over: the adoption of such a tone is surely melodramatic. Yet from the same vantage point, working on *Notes* during the Gulf War has taught me that one reads Stevens' notoriously problematic "coda" to *Notes* ("How gladly with proper words the soldier dies . . .") differently in wartime than in peace. It is impossible to say, in the end, whether such a pervasive omission as the War resounds hollowly, or whether it is so much present in everyone's minds that it can be assumed to be so, rendering further mention unnecessary. Such are the emotional sureties lost to time; even the completest archive can never recapture them.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See "Wallace Stevens and the Cummington Press: A Correspondence, 1941–1951."

<sup>2</sup> See also my introduction to the microfilm of the collection. A small proportion of the material in this article derives from that introduction.

<sup>3</sup> It is, moreover, extremely difficult to judge what Stevens considered an obligation. See, for example, his initial letter to Leonard C. van Geysel in Ceylon (*L* 323), which is a lot to ask as a favor of an unknown person.

<sup>4</sup>WAS 565. Special thanks to Sara S. Hodson, Curator of Literary Manuscripts at the Huntington Library, who made photocopies of seven "missing" letters available to me. The following letters from Harry Duncan to Wallace Stevens are properly part of the Stevens–Cummington Press Correspondence: WAS 566 (July 25, 1944), WAS 581 (February 15, 1946), WAS 586 (April 15, 1946), WAS 589 (December 14, 1946), WAS 598 (September 8, 1947), WAS 614 (March 31, 1950). Note also that Stevens' letter of September 16, 1947, is addressed to Duncan at "The Cummington Press, Frazier House, Cummington, Mass." The same address appears on the Press letterhead in Duncan's letter of May 8, 1948. I have found no reference to "Frazier Hall."

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# Exceeding Responsibilities: Politics, History, and the Hero in Wallace Stevens' War Poetry

STEVEN MISKINIS

**I**S WALLACE STEVENS, as a poet, "in history" or "not in history"? This is the nagging question that Jacqueline Vaught Brogan raises in her essay "Stevens in History and Not in History: The Poet and the Second World War." The question is a perennial one for Stevens criticism, and it boils down to the need to explain the puzzling lack of any direct references to the tumultuous historical realities of his times. The question is really less a strictly historical question (who, after all, could seriously claim to be outside history?) than an ethical one that seeks to pinpoint the political commitments of the poet in relation to the political environment of his time. For Stevens not to be in history, to discover his poetry to be devoid of political commentary, from the perspective of the question, nevertheless has political, and thus ethical, implications: detachment becomes insensitive arrogance (because there can be no such thing as real detachment from the spectrum of political happenings) that in turn becomes irresponsibility. Brogan raises the question, as the opening of her essay makes clear, from the perspective of "an unbroken tradition regarding Stevens' poetry as socially irrelevant, socially unconcerned, and even (most damningly) socially irresponsible" (168). Brogan rescues Stevens by finding a variety of indirect references, increasing after World War II, to his contemporary world, references that, as they are explicated, reveal a depth of social criticism and, thus, social responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

This approach to Stevens, and the questions that it puts to his work, is due for some reconsideration. Implicit in this approach is the reduction of history to the spectrum of political events, while ethics in turn becomes a set of positions available in relation to largely political questions. That modern "politics" itself is a specifically historical way of being of the polis, one bound up with possibilities of progress and liberation, is something becoming increasingly clear with the apparent exhaustion of liberational politics. The most salient effort to think beyond politics in a "transpolitical sphere" can be found in the writings of Jean Baudrillard. If Baudrillard has been charged with the conservatism of quietism, provoking the question "why bother to act at all?"<sup>2</sup> that is because the imperative to act, an ethical

imperative derived from political circumstances, does not govern the space in which his discourse seeks to maintain itself. In that space, the imperative that politics brings with it is open to question even as that space cannot escape the eventuality of a diagnosis on political terms: "So politics will never finish disappearing—nor will it allow anything else to emerge in its place. A kind of hysteresis of the political reigns" (Baudrillard 11).

Although there is an air of extremity about Baudrillard, his thought does not lack precedent or guide. The critique of the subject of Western humanism has always also been a critique of an ethics of accountability, and as the ideal of a self-present subject has come under interrogation, so has the possibility of accountability for the subject's intentions and actions. Ethics, in their possibility, come into question, for example, with Derrida's thinking of *differance*: "For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility" (*Margins* 6). In a later discussion of play or *jeu*, Derrida is explicit about play's relation to ethics and politics:

*this particular* undecidable opens the field of decision or of decidability. It calls for decision in the order of ethical-political responsibility. It is even its necessary condition. A decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable. (*Limited* 116)

Derrida, of course, does not abrogate or criticize the political as such, but he does delineate its limits. Simultaneously, he does not scrap ethics, but rather indicates the need to rethink ethics particularly in relation to an undecidability that first opens the field within which a subject can assume responsibility for a political stance. We should finally note that Derrida's own work develops a path pursued by Heidegger much earlier. For Heidegger, the historical destiny of a people living in their world is shaped by the necessity of decision that itself is based upon the "undecided and measureless," and which in turn gives rise to the standard or measure by which a historical people live:

As a world opens itself, it submits to the decision of an historical humanity the question of victory and defeat, blessing and curse, mastery and slavery. The dawning world brings out what is as yet undecided and measureless, and thus discloses the hidden necessity of measure and decisiveness. (63)

Derrida, Heidegger, and Baudrillard all insist upon thinking otherwise than politically, and, I contend, Stevens shares this same concern in his

own way. In effect, I am suggesting that Stevens' reticence with regard to the historical matters of his time needs to be understood as more than aesthetic disaffection;<sup>3</sup> it is part of an attempt to situate himself at the margins of the political such that politics themselves become questionable in their very possibility. Stevens writes, "Today, in America, all roles yield to that of the politician," and then continues by locating the poet specifically in contradistinction to the politician:

The role of the poet may be fixed by contrasting it to that of the politician. The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. (L 526)<sup>4</sup>

The poet does not simply oppose the politician as an opposite in the way disinterested aesthetics might oppose the politically interested. The poet exceeds the politician and the public life he epitomizes, and this excessive space, one outside local mythologies and the pressure of reality, is one that puts in question (but does not negate or prevent) the political concerns readers bring to Stevens' poetry.

To read Stevens from the perspective of the unabsorbable excess of poetry means that we cannot settle for the view that sees in the absence of political commentary the sign of a naivete that reveals the concerns of Stevens' work as the superstructural effects of socio-economic forces to which Stevens himself was hopelessly blind.<sup>5</sup> Neither can we proceed in the opposite direction and see in Stevens a transcendence (via abstraction) of the historical forces of his time.<sup>6</sup> We shall see that the heroic subject of history, the hero Stevens celebrates when the pressures of the reality of war demand the celebration of heroes, is one that always recognizes that it is historically situated. Obligated to respond to its historical conditioning, the subject affirms a difference that exceeds containment within any of the standards that the participants of a given cultural moment are asked to bear. Joseph Kronick has offered a Stevensian view of history that eludes arche and telos in order to maintain a freedom that "exists only in the indeterminability of [Derridean] writing" (286). While this is certainly the case, Kronick tells only half the story. That freedom may be resiliently within an undeterminable space, but that space is never there freely for determination. We will see then that Stevens' hero transcends history but never abandons it. Instead, transcendence finds itself shaped by what it exceeds in a movement that doubles it while at the same time allows for an affirmation of difference.

The subject of history, then, affirms itself by actively repeating the lineages that historically construct it in a difference with themselves—a situation that, as we shall come to see, places the subject in strife with its own possibility. The subject freely assumes what it is historically fated to

by actively distinguishing itself in repetition. It thus disposes the conditions of its own existence by consciously reiterating them in a manner that mirrors the process of history itself understood along Nietzschean lines as the eternal return of the same in difference. I begin by pointing up the Nietzschean echoes in Stevens' sense of nobility because self-affirming difference for Stevens, as for Nietzsche, is noble difference.

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens famously characterizes the imagination as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36). The external violence, what Stevens calls "the pressure of reality" (NA 36), is resisted by the imagination in its capacity to sustain a noble distinction in the face of the leveling influences of modern democratic society. Stevens defends high culture from what he sees as the growing power of a mass culture that cannot bear distinction:

We pick up the radio and find that comedians regard the public use of words of more than two syllables as funny. We read of the opening of the National Gallery at Washington and we are convinced, in the end, that the pictures are counterfeit, that museums are impositions and that Mr. Mellon was a monster. (NA 17)

One need not read Nietzsche to develop the conservative distaste for the effects of democracy that Stevens displays here, nor does the desire to secure an aristocratic prestige for high culture make Stevens idiosyncratic for his time. But Stevens' affirmation of nobility bears important Nietzschean colorings. For Nietzsche, the noble affirms itself in its difference from others: "it acts and grows spontaneously, it seeks its opposite only so as to affirm itself more gratefully and triumphantly." By contrast, the slave bears an underlying *ressentiment* against all that differs: "slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself' " (473, 472). The slaves speak as workers in Stevens' "Idiom of the Hero," where the fantasy of a well-blended, classless society betrays a fear of the chaos the noble affirms:

I heard two workers say, "This chaos  
Will soon be ended."

This chaos will not be ended,  
The red and the blue house blended,

Not ended, never and never ended,  
The weak man mended,

The man that is poor at night  
Attended

Like the man that is rich and right.  
The great men will not be blended . . .

I am the poorest of all.  
I know that I cannot be mended,

Out of the clouds, pomp of the air,  
By which at least I am befriended. (*CP* 200–01)

Like Nietzsche, who scorned social movements and nationalist enthusiasms because he saw in them the workings of the slave's resentment at life itself, Stevens shields the political import of his poem by affirming distinction from within an apolitical space where poverty denotes nature itself. Yet this gesture is precisely what is noble, in Nietzschean terms, because the speaker accepts himself as he is, in his difference from others. That distinction is noble precisely in its refusal of a class definition that would place the speaker in a dialectical dependence upon that from which he distinguishes himself, and thus undermine the affirmation of identity.<sup>7</sup> In another poem we find: "There was not an idea / This side of Moscow. There were anti-ideas / And counter-ideas. There was nothing one had" (*CP* 229).

The noble quality, for Stevens, secures itself in self-affirmation only by escaping the chaos of the ever changing and shifting political realities of the time: "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" (*NA* 17). This is the chaos of the modern moment in its historical unfolding. The stakes in differing involve maintaining at a critical distance the historical character of the modern so that the self can confront it in a stance that accepts historical necessity without succumbing blindly to the currents that shape the modern moment:

To sum it up, the pressure of reality is, I think, the determining factor in the artistic character of an era and, as well, the determining factor in the artistic character of an individual. The resistance to this pressure or its evasion in the case of individuals of extraordinary imagination cancels the pressure so far as those individuals are concerned. (*NA* 22–23)

There is no dialectical relation with history here. The first sentence can be valid only by claiming on its speaker's part a clear consciousness of the nature of contemporary historicity, a consciousness that presumes a transcendence of history—that is, a consciousness of history itself instead of one that is simply and symptomatically historical. The resistance to the historically determinative pressure of reality is not a dialectical opposition

since it can take the form of simply eluding. Rather, such resistance mobilizes, on the individual's behalf, a counter-force that effects a qualitative difference, opening up the space of a truly singular affirmation. This space, in its exteriority to the pressure of reality, grants the possibility of statements precisely of the nature of the first sentence that comments on the movement of history from the perspective of a detached observer.

Against the haphazard but insistent flourishings of local mythologies, rhetorics, and movements, we find in Stevens a movement toward an absolute space from which the subject can affirm itself without at the same time subjecting itself to a local, transitory identity. Stevens is no metaphysical or mystically romantic poet, but he does resort to metaphysical absolutes in order to seek respite from history. We saw this in "Idiom of the Hero" where the speaker abandons social questions in order to affirm the unmendable poverty of unchanging nature. Even if this state is chaotic and self-differing, as Stevens' evocations of being generally are, it affirms the self-presence of a consciousness that, in its transparent relations with nature, is freed of mystifications. One sees this also in "Martial Cadenza" where the evening star comes to embody the movement of time as pure repetition that, unsoiled by historical contingency, persists in an identity-less identity:

What had this star to do with the world it lit,  
With the blank skies over England, over France  
And above the German camps? It looked apart.  
Yet it is this that shall maintain—Itself  
Is time, apart from any past, apart  
From any future, the ever-living and being,  
The ever-breathing and moving, the constant fire. . . .

The star keeps the distance of the noble, a pure presence that allows the speaker to commune with it so that self-identity and pure presence link across the insubstantiality of history:

The present close, the present realized,  
Not the symbol but that for which the symbol stands,  
The vivid thing in the air that never changes,  
Though the air change. Only this evening I saw it again,  
At the beginning of winter, and I walked and talked  
Again, and lived and was again, and breathed again  
And moved again and flashed again, time flashed  
again. (CP 238)

Death is equally absolute; and while self-presence is not secured in death, death nevertheless opens a negative rift in everything and thus provides an absolute context against which historical significance dwins-

dles. "The Death of a Soldier" allows no Christian recouping of its event and, more importantly, allows no response of any kind to a phenomenon that becomes analogous to the passage of the seasons in its ahistorical occurrence:

He does not become a three-days personage,  
Imposing his separation,  
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn,  
When the wind stops. . . . (CP 97)

Death strips away all the social, political, and ethical contexts implied by the soldier; insofar as the speaker refuses not only the task of mourning, but its very possibility, he aligns himself with this most circumspective space that feels no pressure of reality. Death as what lies beyond belief, as what surpasses every contextualization, emblemizes a noble distance of absolute difference, as we see in the much later poem "Flyer's Fall." Here the fall becomes an ascent beyond "the dirty fates" of history itself:

This man escaped the dirty fates,  
Knowing that he died nobly, as he died.

Darkness, nothingness of human after-death,  
Receive and keep him in the deepnesses of space—

Profundum, physical thunder, dimension in which  
We believe without belief, beyond belief. (CP 336)

Death here opens a space outside all the cosmologies or eschatologies that serve to organize and ensure the underlying meanings of historical time. Yet the effort of thinking that space requires belief beyond all belief, and for the simple reason that the transcendence of one's historical being only occurs through history itself. That is, by way of emphasizing the importance of repetition in all of this, the suspension of belief and, in turn, of an era of belief, occurs by way of faith in an alternative. To seize that alternative is to be liberated from "the dirty fates," but such liberation occurs only by resorting to what one would be liberated from. Believing beyond belief, we escape the beliefs to which we have been historically fated by freely assuming our fate as believers in what comes down to an act of repetition in difference.

The argument of the poem depends upon a repetition of the word "belief" that serves to empty it of its semantically stable representational content. Belief tasks us with rethinking its significance in its non-representational repetition. As we saw with "Martial Cadenza," in affirming the

self over and against history, the fantasy of dispensing with the symbol can arise, but the symbol cannot be discarded because it is what provides access to such a linguistically pure space. Nevertheless, it can be rhetorically disposed by the subject struggling to twist free of representational thinking. The movement beyond representational thinking at the same time is a movement against what we will see to be the base or common view of history that confuses the identity of the present moment with an ideal order teleologically organizing history. If non-representational thinking transcends this historical delusion, it does not transcend history itself, but rather comes to will history's own repetitive process of identityless self-differing.

As becomes clear from a poem such as "The Bouquet," Stevens moves against a representational view of linguistic expression toward a dynamic view in the interests of imaginative self-affirmation. Metaphor is described as "a growth / Of the reality of the eye," and that reality is tied to a dynamic source: "a drop of lightning in an inner world" (CP 448). Jarraway shows that two ways of seeing are opposed in the poem: a Nietzschean pluralism confronts the view of Stevens' "meta-men" who are, in Jarraway's words, "figures for the definitive determiners of truth" (266-67). We should go further and say that at stake are two opposed experiences of language and therefore of reality. Jarraway recognizes that the meta-men maintain a representational view of language: "The meta-men behold the idea as part / Of the image, behold it with exactness" (CP 449). Against that is the dynamic force of a language mobilized by the lightning of sense, which shows reality itself as dynamic. The poem itself, therefore, is organized not simply as a demystification of the representational view of language, but as a striving against it.

The bouquet which "stands in a jar, as metaphor," is "Of medium nature" (CP 448). Although never explicitly stated, there is good reason to believe the bouquet is actually a still life painting that, as the poem progresses, assumes an increasing reality. The final stanza of the fourth section asserts its reality: "They [the flowers] are not splashings in a penumbra. They stand. / They are" (CP 452). In any event, the shift from metaphor to presence makes clear that presence itself is indistinguishable from its representations, and its representations are as much actively energetic and shaping as they are passively mimetic. Metaphor makes this energy visible in a "medium nature" that cannot be reduced to a single sense: "One approaches, simply, the reality / Of the other eye" (CP 448). Metaphors shape reality, but as the final section makes clear, reality in turn shapes metaphor, exerting a force easily the equal of any individual sense:

A car drives up. A soldier, an officer,  
Steps out. He rings and knocks. The door is not locked.  
He enters the room and calls. No one is there.

He bumps the table. The bouquet falls on its side.  
He walks through the house, looks round him and then  
leaves.  
The bouquet has slopped over the edge and lies on the  
floor. (CP 452–53)

The poem is thus framed on one side by inner lightning and on the other by the impact of the soldier. Language as a medium becomes the scene of a violent interplay of forces, each asserting its own will to power. The efforts of the meta-men to establish a strictly mimetic view of language are characterized as a will to power that denies itself under the guise of disinterested objectivity: “They understand, and take on potency, / By growing clear, transparent magistrates,” who become “Cold with an under impotency that they know” (CP 449). The bouquet, on the other hand, expresses both a will to multiplicity, “It is centi-colored and mille-flored,” and dynamism, “as if feathers of the duck / Fell openly from the air to reappear / In other shapes” (CP 450). And it asserts its own potency: “And the eccentric twistings of the rapt bouquet / Exacted attention with attentive force” (CP 450).

The bouquet becomes a site of vibrant affirmation:

A vibrancy of petals, fallen, that still cling  
By trivial filaments to the thing intact:  
The recognizable, medium, central whole— (CP 450)

As such, it becomes the symbol of an endlessly self-differing play: “It is a symbol, a sovereign of symbols / In its interpretations voluble” (CP 451). However, one cannot explain away the fantasy of a center or of a representative symbol in which the affirmation of a non-representational, energetically differing view of language culminates. As this view of language assumes potency in the poem with the disappearance of the contrasting meta-men, it begins to take on the characteristics of what it has overcome. As a symbol, as a recognizable center, difference becomes identity and enters into representation. And as “The infinite of the actual perceived” (CP 451), the potency of sense assumes the impotent innocence of actuality or truth insofar as we hear a descriptive claim about the nature of actuality. There is a fantasy of self-present identity organizing this poem, but such a center is necessary if the triumphant dynamism is to be able to assert itself in its victory. In doing so, the poem itself becomes the striving in difference of the mimetic and dynamic view of language. Only in such a conflictual configuration, only in difference, at least in the Nietzschean sense, does force, hence affirmation, exist at all.

In “Stevens’ Boundaries,” Michael Beehler argues that “Stevens’ writing works continually from inside the horizon of this [logocentric] rhetoric—

for it is only from within this horizon that writing can be written or thought be thought—demonstrating the constraints that bind it while necessarily repeating those constraints” (106). But more occurs than a structural delimitation of the prerequisites of meaning. If Stevens’ poetry approaches writing in the Derridean sense, it is by provoking the “divergence, the *difference* between Dionysus and Apollo, between ardor and structure” (*Writing* 28). The difference the poem occasions, the ardor that disrupts the consciousness of representation, cannot be represented, but it can be occasioned by a movement of self-affirmation. The occasion is inseparable from a historical context that the difference both acts upon and distinguishes itself from. Stevens’ structural delimitation is also the distinguishing of the noble from the base, the distancing of the bouquet as “the fore of lofty scenes” from “the things of medium nature, as meta-men / Behold them” (*CP* 450, 449). The poem about poetry is inextricably political but noble enough to refuse any dialectical acknowledgment of identity. A medium of transparency, of commonality, is rejected. When the soldier arrives at the end, we should not see the revenge of the meta-men. The preoccupied soldier acts with disregard for his effect on the vase. He enters as an unconsciousness, something that cannot be reckoned with, as a representation of the ultimately meaningless eventuality that characterizes the events of history. Recalling “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” we see a recurring structure: self-affirmation differentiates itself from the historicity of its time only by consciously affirming its historical nature. Thus the poem thinks its own displacement, in the physical displacement of the bouquet that “is a part of a dithering: / Cloud’s gold, of a whole appearance that stands and is” (*CP* 452). The stance is not ontological or eternal except insofar as the bouquet’s being is a dithering, an event grounded in and relegated by history: “The bouquet has slooped over the edge and lies on the floor” (*CP* 453).

The structure recurs as well in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” in the figure of the soldier pacing “Between two neatly measured stations” who is bid to think “Of less neatly measured common-places” (*CP* 275). The fifth canto, in which these lines occur, begins, “The common man is the common hero,” and then turns to offer two definitions of common fortune. The first, “Induced by what you will,” is characterized by the superstitions of what could be called local mythologies, which bear in common a delusive sense of agency:

the entrails  
Of a cat, twelve dollars for the devil,  
A kneeling woman, a moon’s farewell. . . . (*CP* 275)

The second definition is “induced by nothing,”

Unwished for, chance, the merest riding  
Of the wind, rain in a dry September,  
The improvisations of the cuckoos  
In a clock-shop. . . . (CP 275)

Thus we encounter a doubling, in the form of two commonplaces, that occurs throughout the poem. The question the poem raises is how one deals with the history one is allotted. "Force is my lot" (CP 273), the poem begins, and we can hear the voice of the stalwart soldier who accepts the violence of war as unavoidable, as part of the constellation of political events that he passively bears as fate. Or we can hear the Nietzschean affirmation of a different force, one that is inevitable because it inheres in the orderless order of things. The soldier is asked to distinguish the commonplaces, to sort the base from the noble, the reactive from the active. This space between is that which lies between the pressure of reality and the inevitability of history, which, by the end of the poem, is positively realized as the natural order of things:

So  
Summer, jangling the savagest diamonds and  
Dressed in its azure-doubled crimsons,  
May truly bear its heroic fortunes  
For the large, the solitary figure. (CP 281)

As A. Walton Litz notes, "By displacing and generalizing the subject, turning the soldier into a 'major man' and war into the destructive force which poetry both shares and controls, Stevens absorbed the experience of war into his poetic" (265). That aptly describes the active appropriation of the reactive forces of one's time. In the brief prose statement that follows this poem in *Parts of a World*, Stevens says, "The poetry of a work of the imagination constantly illustrates the fundamental and endless struggle with fact," a struggle that intensifies during wartime when "In the presence of the violent reality of war, consciousness takes the place of the imagination" (OP 242, 241). The details of victory and defeat are simply facts that the poetry must take up in a differing repetition in order to heroize them: "the poetry of war as a consciousness . . . is a consciousness of fact, but of heroic fact, of fact on such a scale that the mere consciousness of it affects the scale of one's thinking and constitutes a participating in the heroic" (OP 241-42). Stevens subtly depoliticizes heroism, which becomes a matter of scale and not of dedication. In fact, according to the logic of the statement, there is nothing necessarily heroic about the soldier who gives his life for an ideological cause because such a cause is, in historical terms, a local mythology. Participation in the heroic requires thinking through the underlying historical nature of one's commitments on a historical scale

that exceeds the priorities offered by any politically framed outlook. There is nothing more common and mediocre than blind acceptance of a rhetoric that finds its greatest intensification during wartime. This is the logic of all of Stevens' war poetry—and of his poetry in general, which never celebrates or sympathizes with the trials of the "common person" except in the process of affirming a noble difference, a difference of scale that recognizes for what they are the various political gambits that mobilize the "common" rhetorically as a way to silence as elitist or undemocratic anything not translatable to the common medium of simple and easily digestible slogans—themselves easily represented and disseminated by the media.<sup>8</sup>

In line with the dynamic view of a non-representational language (which is non-political but not politically naive), canto XII asserts, "It is not an image. It is a feeling. / There is no image of the hero" (CP 278). In the next canto, the hero's being becomes understood as a willing that exists only in its exercise: "He is the heroic / Actor and act but not divided" (CP 279). The hero comes to emblemize a common, national will without becoming representative, and thus without becoming a spokesperson for the ideal of democracy. Conceiving the inconceivable, we find a self-transcending movement through a political rhetoric that is akin to believing beyond belief:

It is a part of his conception,  
That he be not conceived, being real.  
Say that the hero is his nation,  
In him made one, and in that saying  
Destroy all references. This actor  
Is anonymous and cannot help it. (CP 279)

Although this could be construed as a nationalist and even fascist vision, such a reading resorts to a mimetic comprehension and stabilization of referents that serve to figure a dynamic movement that becomes totalizing only because becoming is the common lot of all beings. In effect, such a reading (toward which the reader is provoked by the poem's politically loaded language even as the reading is disqualified) would be guilty of losing sight of history's dynamism through the false idealization of a particular, local, political standard into a teleology that organizes history's movement.

The conceptionless conception of the hero is a repetition of an earlier version of the hero, yet utterly different. In canto VII, the speaker muses on the classic and bourgeois hero. The classic version of the hero assumed a form peculiar to each epoch: "The classic changed. There have been many" (CP 276). The bourgeois, by contrast, are multitudinous in the present: "And there are many bourgeois heroes. / There are more heroes

than marbles of them" (CP 276). This is the base version of a Nietzschean pluralism of sense; here, representation fails the task of conceiving because the common people are too numerous to be adequately figured. In both cases, "There is no image of the hero." In the noble version, this is because it is the common lot of things actively to distinguish themselves, to affirm themselves precisely by exceeding any common representation:

Instead of allegory,  
We have and are the man, capable  
Of his brave quickenings, the human  
Accelerations that seem inhuman. (CP 279)

The bourgeois hero, on the other hand, is without distinction in his commonality and thus eminently available for representation. However, representation falters before the great, indistinguishable mass he and his fellows passively constitute. The noble hero lives a dynamic existence that manifests itself only as a distinctive sense or feeling: "There is a feeling as definition. / How could there be an image, an outline, / A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?" (CP 278). Meanwhile, for its base double, feeling becomes an idea that has as its object the commonplace: "Yet there is that idea behind the marbles, / The idea of things for public gardens" (CP 276). The unrepresentability of the masses becomes dynamically evoked as feeling, but the feelings are reactive, antipathetic, and self-exhausting: "a feeling / In a feeling mass, a blank emotion, / An anti-pathos" (CP 276). This negative force finds expression finally in a "barbarism" that is presumably that of total war:

Obscure Satanas, make a model  
Of this element, this force. Transfer it  
Into a barbarism as its image. (CP 277)

The heroic distances itself from the mediocre at the same time as it thrives within the common medium of being: "The hero / Acts in reality, adds nothing / To what he does" (CP 279). One way to grasp this is to recognize how Stevens has orchestrated his evocation of the noble hero such that it distinguishes itself from the bourgeois variety by doubling it, by using it as the base that provides the resources for a repetition that enables an affirmation of difference. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we learn "The major abstraction is the communal" (CP 388), and it is in order to arrive at an accord with the communal that the major man exerts his will, which is finally that of the order of things. This order is the dynamic recurrence of difference, an eternal return that the hero affirms simultaneously in affirming the self's sovereignty: "The man-hero is not the exceptional monster, / But he that of repetition is most master" (CP 406).

Stevens affirms a self-presence that manifests itself as a mastery over repetition. The self opposes itself to the conditions it is fated to by affirming repetition as a capacity for noble distinction. The self for Stevens remains, however, resourceless; nothing is added to reality. Rather, the self affirms the iterative movement of all beings in their presence, both their metaphoric doubling that avails them to rhetoric, and historic doubling that lends them to the repetitions that constitute traditions. Thus, in the afternote to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," the poet can tell the soldier that the poetic war "is a war that never ends. / Yet it depends on yours. The two are one" (CP 407). He describes them as parallel lines, "But your war ends" (CP 407). One line tracks identity in its beginnings and endings while the other tracks metaphorization, the identityless self-differing of all identity. The second line depends on the first line for the specificity of its refigurations, while its significance escapes any particular figure; war is only a momentary, historically determined way of positively presenting the spacing of difference that plays out historically. Yet such a presentation of history's movement is not simply encumbered with such contingencies as war; the two are one because such wars are the very matter of history's movement. Accepting the dependence of Stevens' war upon the World War amounts to accepting destiny—that is, accepting the political realities of the time to which one is historically fated.<sup>9</sup>

In "Repetitions of a Young Captain," assertion of difference becomes at the same time self-affirmation through mastery of repetition. The poem begins with an allegory of change that utilizes the theater trope of which Stevens is so fond. The theater is destroyed by a storm that bares it to "an external world" which is now "the spectacle of a new reality" (CP 306). The second canto continues with the audience nevertheless remaining in the ruins of the theater watching the performance "As if nothing had happened" (CP 306). Consciousness of cataclysmic change dawns only gradually as the performance becomes a repetition of itself: "His thick shape / Issued thin seconds glibly gapering," leading to a consciousness of performance as mere performance: "It was a blue scene washing white in the rain" (CP 306). The tradition expires by gradually becoming recognizable precisely as a tradition. It becomes visible to itself as performance, as scene, in short, as empty rhetoric.

These cantos stand as a prelude to the remainder of the poem, which returns us to the issues of "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War." The speaker confronts the tenor of his time by, as the title suggests, engaging in the iterative movement of repetition. But, unlike in the previous poem, where the pacing soldier was called on to develop the taste to distinguish among commonplaces, here the speaker speaks out on behalf of distinction, thereby distinguishing himself in the process of affirming difference. Further, he distinguishes his rhetoric from the hyperbolic rheto-

ric of the times by meditating on the nature of language itself. His language is repetitious because repetition structures a reality by nature dynamic:

If these were only words that I am speaking  
Indifferent sounds and not the heraldic-ho  
Of the clear sovereign that is reality,  
  
Of the clearest reality that is sovereign,  
How should I repeat them, keep repeating them . . . ?  
(CP 307)

The heraldic announcement of reality does not occur by means of representation. Rather, the content of the language lies, outside representational content, in its reiterative movement, which reflects an unrepresentable reality always differing from itself, just as “The departing soldier is as he is, / Yet in that form will not return,” and “The giant of sense remains / A giant without a body” (CP 308). Thus it is precisely in its rhetorical disengagement from any “literal” functioning that language possesses sense.

Of course, there is no literal sense in the commonality of a nonrepresentational reality; representational language is historically championed by those blind to their own historical being and belongs to all that, in the fifth canto, the speaker will “defend myself against” (CP 308). Referenceless rhetoric becomes (paradoxically) the corporally sustaining element of a self that refuses to succumb to history: “On a few words of what is real in the world / I nourish myself” (CP 308). These words enable the spiritualizing movement that distances itself from the literality of the historically insistent pressure of reality and arrives in the abstractly ideal region of existence itself:

A few words, a memorandum voluble  
Of the giant sense, the enormous harnesses  
And writhing wheels of this world’s business,  
  
The drivers in the wind-blows cracking whips,  
The pulling into the sky and the setting there  
Of the expanses that are mountainous rock and sea;  
  
And beyond the days, beyond the slow-foot litters  
Of the nights, the actual, universal strength,  
Without a word of rhetoric—there it is. (CP 308–09)

The final deictic phrase suggests the collapse of all the binaries used in this presentation, and the universal space the poet speaks from affirms its historical particularity: “Millions of instances of which I am one” (CP 309). The ideal and the real, the metaphoric and literal, the universal and the

particular, and, most importantly, the dynamic movement of history itself and the local rhetorics that represent it remain indistinguishable because one can never be thought without the other.

The poem concludes by urging an unreserved affirmation of fate:

Secrete us in reality. Discover  
A civil nakedness in which to be,  
  
In which to bear with the exactest force  
The precisions of fate, nothing fobbed off, nor changed  
In a beau language without a drop of blood. (*CP* 310)

As with "The Bouquet," the affirmation of the poem finally asserts only the striving difference between two elements of "the exactest force." The final line implies the mastering of history with the supplantation of the bloodshed of a representational ethos by a nonrepresentational ethos that is to be historically realized. But the lines also ironically acknowledge the bloodless nature of rhetoric in its historical impotency. It is a question of power, and we are left to wander between alternatives. Does the rhetorical structuring of language fatally contain history as the theater of trope that allegorizes the movement of history within the poem? Or does history erupt outside the bounds of language like the tempest that leaves the theater a historical ruin of empty rhetorical gestures in the first stanza? The conclusion affirms the former, but what is this climactic affirmation if not a poetically orchestrated effect that, like all such rhetorical effects, finds itself menaced by the movement of history? We might think of it as another bouquet susceptible of being knocked aside by the drift of history or as a dramatic evocation doomed eventually to be discovered as empty dramaturgy in a renewed context.

These questions cannot be answered; yet the point is not to see in Stevens' writing an oft-vaunted endless indeterminacy. Rather, the oscillation between language and history is precisely what enables them both to become visible in their unsynthesizable, nondialectical interrelation. In what Heidegger might call their striving, language is seen only in its rhetorical efficaciousness from the perspective of history that precipitates or foregrounds the linguistic nature of assertions by constantly turning up assertions as outdated and irrelevant to the current historical scene. At the same time, history announces itself only through language as the need to return to or reiterate a proposition in order to update it. The historical difference marked by the return is graspable, in turn, only by being presented within a rhetorically organized structure that bestows an identity upon identityless becoming by containing it within a beginning and end. In poems such as "Bouquet" and "Repetitions," Stevens masters repetition by affirming it as the movement of history itself. Yet such mastery comes

down to nothing more than actively accepting that to which one is fated. And that means, in the final instance, accepting that one is not at the end, outside history, that the evocation of the poem is bound to be displaced by the very movement that finds expression through the poem. Thinking this thought requires all the resources of the imagination that conjures up nothing new but rather redispenses the violence of reality upon a qualitatively different scale that for Stevens is both the heroic and the creative. The heroic commands self-sacrifice and commitment because it requires anticipating one's own death along with the death of one's ideals. Such a commitment to the future finds its resources and grounding in the past that provides or destines the traditions and lineages that are dynamically and differently repeated in the present moment.

I resorted in the end to a fairly Heideggerian formulation of Stevens' hero. This hero transcends politics in order to become capable, to make possible a decision about the political itself in its modern form. Such a decision has no measure or standard to guide it, which is why, in part, Stevens' poetry seems so abstractly irrelevant. His poetry does not stand for anything and is thus, presumably, outside history. Or perhaps it does, obliquely and reassuringly, have a position with regard to its contemporary issues. But when the question of what Stevens stands for determines our evaluation of the poetry, we bring a political standard to what deserves the uncertainty of an imaginative standard. Worse, when we decide to appreciate the imaginative, metaphysical aspects of his poetry, we lose sight of the fact that for Stevens the imagination is never outside or distant from the political—rather, it is distinctive from the political—it opens the very possibility of such distinction. Appreciating that distinction, thinking what it provokes us to think, is to see just how seriously committed to reality is the light playfulness of his poetry. Further, it is to appreciate the risk of a thinking that exceeds determinative standards or measures. That risk is fully comprehended only when, without resorting to a “demystification” of underlying or “unconscious” political commitments in the poetry, we let the question of what the poetry is responding to, and of how and whether it is responsible at all, remain a guiding issue in our reading.

Virginia Tech

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Two other works that also deploy Stevens' poetry resonantly within the real world are James Longenbach's *Wallace Stevens: The Plain Sense of Things*, and Alan Filreis' *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*.

<sup>2</sup> “The logic of Baudrillard's position is certainly impeccable: if value judgment has been superseded, if the end of history really is upon us, then why bother to act at all? Beyond aesthetics lies, perhaps, not liberation but stagnation” (Sim 134).

<sup>3</sup> However, understanding Stevens' poetry as an aesthetic of dissatisfaction would be appropriate, insofar as we see such dissatisfaction along the lines of Fred Hoerner's recent

discussion of Stevens' "chastening aesthetics." Our essays share a similar poststructural perspective on Stevens' work, although Nietzsche and Heidegger have more determinatively influenced my approach while his is both Lacanian and Marxist. This is not insignificant, for while Hoerner deals with Stevens in terms of the effect of his aesthetics on the reader (with regard to anticipated satisfactions), mine approaches aesthetics from the perspective of the artist. That is, I am interested in the creative impulse as a way of artistic self-affirmation. Self-identity may remain a (political) fantasy in Stevens' poetry, but self-affirmation does not. Insofar as one tries to keep in sight the exuberance of the violence of the imagination in Stevens' poetry, describing his work as "chastening" does not seem quite right.

<sup>4</sup> Brogan cites this letter in her essay as well, although she uses it to much different effect (185). Longenbach cites a similar passage Stevens wrote for the *Yale Literary Magazine*, and calls it "vintage cold war rhetoric" (285). However, for Longenbach, Stevens' career is a series of renegotiations between the political and the poetic, and the turn to cold war rhetoric marks a shift away from the political engagement of Stevens' war poetry. To be sure, this engagement does not reduce to simple support for a political cause; as Longenbach's reading of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" makes clear, Stevens' tendency toward the abstract is a movement from within a specific historical situation toward a fiction open "to all people in all places and times, international or global rather than national or regional," and this fiction necessarily must recognize the underlying contingency of the new values it proffers (256). But for Longenbach, engagement nevertheless means a more or less pragmatic dialogue between poetry and politics such that for poetry to be characterized precisely by its ability to look beyond a political outlook means a surrender to apolitical aestheticism. Hence, when Stevens speaks, in the *Yale Literary Magazine*, of "the poet's problem" as needing "to maintain his freedom, the only condition in which he can hope to produce significant poetry," and then vests this "significant poetry" with hopes of "increasing intellectual scope and power" of a sort that can supply "fundamental satisfactions" to people, Longenbach sees Stevens following the postwar tendency toward depoliticized art (284–86). But, as I am hoping to suggest, freedom from political commitment does not have to mean aesthetic disinterest in one's historical moment. Indeed, I take the increased scope and power of poetry for Stevens to lie in its capacity to work toward alternative modes of commitment in relation to one's historical situation. Filreis also understands himself to be challenging the view of Stevens as simply an apolitical poet: "Since for Stevens the Soviet position was to insist that life and reality were the *same* as politics, he felt he must argue oppositely" (227). Yet, while Filreis (like Longenbach) locates "Stevens's very resistance to referentiality" as part of a general postwar disaffection with political ideologies in general (155), this essay finds Stevens' relations to politics articulated in a consistent way across a much broader range of writings than those dated by the postwar moment.

<sup>5</sup> See Lentricchia.

<sup>6</sup> See Altieri.

<sup>7</sup> "This is why Nietzsche presents the dialectic as the speculation of the pleb, as the way of thinking of the slave: the abstract thought of contradiction then prevails over the concrete feeling of positive difference, reaction over action, revenge and *ressentiment* take the place of aggression" (Deleuze 10). David Jarraway also sees Stevens exhibiting a Nietzschean preference for the play of differential forces over antithetical contradictions in his reading of "Connoisseur of Chaos" (117–18). Reading this Nietzschean influence in "Idiom of the Hero" allows us to see that the affirmation of difference occurs in behalf of a noble selfhood. Further, taking the slave's perspective, this affirmation is inextricable from its political context and can be brought to account within the ethics of that political context. In this sense, there is no hidden political text that is mystified in the text's workings in this poem or in others to which we shall turn. The political is not the subtext or an unconscious to be uncovered behind

Stevens' abstractions. Those abstractions are intended as an explicit disdain of the political and the analytical lenses it brings to bear on the social sphere.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense, Stevens' position bears resemblance to what Alan Filreis calls "the Ransom-Tate group," which refused to write a poetry that would "work in the service of a national program" (72, 73). Yet, while, according to Filreis, Stevens distanced himself from the Formalists by seeking a more engaged relation with the reality of his time, this should not be understood as a movement toward greater political commitments. Or rather, the commitments may well be there, but it is significant that they are not affirmed as such, that they require the critic to tease them out. The commitment to the heroic precludes any common medium with the political and, in this sense, is politically irresponsible since it literally refuses to respond to any given political standard. This irresponsibility is not excusable; but not to think the heroic as it is given to be thought in Stevens' poetry is, in another sense, also irresponsible. The heroic does not evade the political; it exceeds it only to return upon it and open a new possibility of thinking it. The soldier in "Examination" is confronted, after all, with the essentially ethical imperative to choose, while he is refused a political standard to guide the choice.

<sup>9</sup> But an acceptance of destiny does not necessarily amount to a political passivity, its base double. Rather, what is at stake here is acknowledging that the way one seeks to think the movement of history itself cannot help but be tainted by one's location in history. To think of history is akin to attempt to believe beyond belief; one cannot stand outside one's historical moment. Far from pretending to such a transcendental gesture, Stevens' poetry constantly makes clear that his historical moment is what provides the very resources for the attempt to think beyond it.

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## ‘Alone in an Immense Valley’: A Note on Stevens’ ‘Valley Candle’

TOM WHALEN

**M**OST CRITICS OF STEVENS’ early poem “Valley Candle” see it as an allegory of the mind: “the candle ablaze with conscious life” (Doggett 132), the candle as “the illuminating power of the creative artist” (Kessler 83). For Robert Rehder the poem concerns our “perception of an object” as the means for “the object [to create] the world from which it comes, . . . the fixed point . . . necessary to change chaos to order and to communicate purpose” (215–16). And for Joseph N. Riddel, “ ‘Valley Candle’ is perhaps the . . . purest expression of [Stevens’] near solipsistic imagination. . . . Read as a minor allegory, the poem becomes an apology for the imagination’s slanted light, but it will not sustain a heavy burden” (63). Yet few readers (Rehder is the exception) are willing to lend the candle the ordering power of the central object in Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar.” Stevens’ valley candle does not take dominion everywhere. The darkness converges upon the candle until the wind extinguishes it, leaving behind the image alone, until the darkness converges upon the image and the wind again blows. This “ultimate dark” (Doggett 179) of the poem, is, according to Kessler, “ ‘essential’ because without it the light is purely of the mind, a frail illusion” (84).

These seem accurate enough readings (Rehder again excepted), receptive to Stevens’ reality/artifice dialectic (the artificial flame of “his actual candle” [CP 523]), true to the poem’s narrative, and, at least in the case of Doggett, willing to acknowledge its powerful negativity. My reading does not necessarily intend to contradict the standard opinion, but it does intend to expand on it and take us further into the complexities and possibilities that this minimalist poem offers. I, too, whenever I have read “Valley Candle,” have followed its basic narrative and dialectic. The candle alone in the valley. The beams of the night converging upon it. The wind blowing. / The image of the candle. The beams of the night converging on the image. The wind blowing again. A. B. C. / A1. B1. C1. Simple enough it seems. Yet my easy interpretation of the poem’s structure and themes has always left me unsatisfied; something continues to shimmer within the poem’s “ultimate dark” long after the candle light and its trace have been extinguished.

VALLEY CANDLE

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.  
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,  
Until the wind blew.  
Then beams of the huge night  
Converged upon its image,  
Until the wind blew. (CP 51)

It might be best to begin with the simple, or even simple-minded, literal; that is, to look at the images themselves alone, and to disregard any implicit or symptomatic connotations. But here one immediately encounters difficulties. For the opening word (“My”) posits a speaker whose presence in the valley can only be presumed. Nowhere else is reference to the narrator made. In such a short poem this might seem an insignificant point if it were not for the poem’s emphasis on finality. In such a spare, minimal world and one that moves toward oblivion, the place or presence of the speaker becomes at least problematic. We can say that he is present in the valley when the light goes out and that his consciousness is the container of the candle’s trace; or we can say that he is, from a (not eschatological) distance of time and space, remembering the event. If the former, then the poem takes on a narrative/emotional dimension that the reader *makes*; if the latter, the reader wonders at the speaker’s objectivity, his seeming affectlessness, unlike the narrator of “Domination of Black” who can say of night’s power, “I felt afraid” (CP 9).

In its extreme economy and abstractness (candle/valley/beams/-night/wind/image), “Valley Candle” does little to resist an allegorical approach; yet at the same time the allegory refuses to stay fixed, the equations shift: candle = candle; candle = mind; candle = imagination; candle = being . . . I can accept, but not as a final judgment, that the “night converg[es] its black beams upon a candle of being until the flux extinguishes that single life” (Doggett 179)—but where, then, is our speaker if his symbolic candle is his life? Nothing in the poem allows us to posit the narrator, as in a Dickinson poem, on the other side or in the grave. Nor does it seem entirely fitting, albeit accurate in its way, to call the poem an allegory for the weakness of “imagination’s slanted light” (Riddel 63). Something more than the imagination’s secondary or dependent status is at stake; something of a greater finality seems to have occurred in the valley. But even this finality, which I believe the reader is impelled to accept, must be implied. Stevens never says that the candle is extinguished. He tells us that the wind blew after the beams of the night converged upon the candle, and the wind blew again after the beams of the night converged on the image of the candle. The poem’s brevity forces us to implication on even the narrative level.

Other than *my* candle, the poem offers us only two qualifiers: we know that the valley is *immense* and the night is *huge*. Twice-over we are told the night is huge. "Valley Candle," like much of Stevens' poetry, has about it the sense that it is imparting to us "an inevitable knowledge" (CP 503) about our position and size in the universe, our relationship to "this blank cold, this sadness without cause" (CP 502). The candle is small, the valley immense, the night huge; light and warmth minimal, then imagined, then non-existent. The issue, as one walks through this valley of darkness, is not that of fearing evil (remember that for Stevens, God and the imagination are one, at best, and the gods' demise affects in us only nostalgia), but perhaps that of confronting diminution.

Certainly the external architecture of "Valley Candle" mimics diminishment, with its six lines tapering down, twice, to its tight five-syllable nub. Seen as a two-part structure the poem shrinks candle-like before our eyes, with the syllabic count running 12, 10, 5 / 6, 7 (but this penultimate line is shorter than the preceding one), 5. A certain stability resides in the repetition of lines 3 and 6, but since this is the line that extinguishes the candle and the image of the candle and the poem, stability is not the condition that obtains.

Metrically the lines underscore the weakness of the candle and its image before the force of the night and wind, with lines 1, 2, and 5, according to my scansion, having soft endings, and lines 3, 4, and 6 hard endings. In line 1 the candle burns (and rhythmically falls) "alone in an immense valley"; in line 2 the beams of the night converge "upon it," that is, the candle, and in line 5 they converge upon "its image." The endings of lines 3, 4, and 6 accent the power of the night wind: "the wind blew," "the huge night," "the wind blew."

What does expand are the poem's three sentences (12, 15, 18: syllabic count), as the night swallows the diminishing candle and its (diminished) image. Diminution and enlargement—this is the poem's dynamic the reader and the possessor of the candle must confront: the diminution of life (mind, imagination, being) versus the enlargement of a consuming darkness (night, non-existence, the final blank).

We have seen a variation of this consuming darkness even earlier in Stevens' "Domination of Black," which concludes:

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

Here the force of finality gives planets the impermanence of leaves and makes night come suicidally tinged with "the color of the heavy hemlocks." But unlike in "Valley Candle," the power of negation in "Domination of Black" is tempered by the speaker's presence throughout the poem. If the speaker of "Valley Candle" also "felt afraid" of annihilation, he did not or could not say, his affectlessness deriving perhaps from the contemplation of a more ultimate finality. Further, we can see that the cry of the peacocks serves as a tempering factor; as Helen Vendler puts it, at the end of "Domination of Black" "animal utterance and meaninglessness come to a standoff" (*Words Chosen Out of Desire* 67).

Throughout his work, Stevens often brought, in a miraculous convergence, the world into the mind. If an abyss exists between the signifier and the signified, an abyss charged with meaning's difference and deference, for Stevens it was there to be bridged if possible, not played in. Vendler notes that "Stevens' wish to be devoted to the physical world was of course real," but not his devotion to it (*On Extended Wings* 320 n 16). As such, his poetry is not always a poetry of the transcendent, but what might be called that of an abstract realist. He shows us how the mind makes the world, how the other becomes personal, how it is possible "To discover an order," "to find, / Not to impose" (*CP* 403–04). But the supreme fiction that we can discover reality to be sometimes has its limits. In "Valley Candle" the world does not become the book, the book the world, as it will in "The Reader" and "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm"; neither the candle nor its image makes the beams of the night converge upon it, nor the wind blow. The action is sequential, the image follows the reality as trace, and the trace vanishes.

We should not equate "Valley Candle" with "Anecdote of the Jar" as Rehder does ("The object creates the world from which it comes. . . . [I]t is the fixed point, the centre, necessary to change chaos to order and to communicate purpose—the jar in 'Anecdote of the Jar,' the candle in 'Valley Candle' " [216]). The narrator of "Anecdote of the Jar" decidedly "place[s] a jar in Tennessee" (*CP* 76), whereas no such action, causative or not, is taken by the speaker of "Valley Candle." The jar is on a hill in daylight; the candle in a valley at night. The jar *makes* the "slovenly wilderness" come up to it, *makes* it "no longer wild," whereas the "beams of the huge night" and the wind act upon the candle. If this candle is the romantic one of being, then it is an ineffectual one, quite unlike the candle of "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" where Stevens hosannas "How high that highest candle lights the dark" after his "We say God and the imagination are one . . ." (*CP* 524). Nor is it comparable to the candle in "A Quiet Normal Life" where "his actual candle blazed with artifice" (*CP* 523), since the candle of "Valley Candle" does not blaze and what actuality it has is smothered by its symbolism.

What Stevens does not achieve or attempt in "Valley Candle" is the equilibrium and steady gaze that allowed him to write about the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (CP 10). Yet the "inevitable knowledge" of "Valley Candle" is necessary to obtain such a gaze. In "Burghers of Petty Death" Stevens tells us "there is a total death, / A devastation, a death of great height / And depth, covering all surfaces, / Filling the mind" (CP 362). The candle is not the operative object in "Valley Candle." Like us, it is alone in an immense valley. Rather, it is the huge night and its accompanying wind toward which our thought must tend, "Before winter freezes and grows black" (CP 362). The "total death" brought on by this wind, by this huge night, is "Of great height and depth / Without any feeling, an imperium of quiet, / In which a wasted figure, with an instrument, / Propounds blank final music" (CP 362), which is the same music of "Valley Candle."

I am not trying to suggest that an element of finality or even nihilism is missing in our reading of Stevens. Metastasis was his natural standpoint; "the giant of nothingness," as he said in "A Primitive Like an Orb," is "ever changing, living in change" (CP 443). What I am suggesting is that the confronting of oblivion ("the giant of nothingness," the final blank) is essential to Stevens' open-endedness and prerequisite to appreciating and understanding the plain sense of the things of our world.

Of course one could say, as Stevens did in "The Plain Sense of Things," that "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (CP 503) and see in "Valley Candle" a possibility for infinite regression, for infinity. If no trace of the candle's image remains at the end of "Valley Candle" there is at least the poem "Valley Candle" that Stevens has composed. The candle alone in the valley. The beams of the night converging upon it. The wind blowing. / The image of the candle. The beams of the night converging on the image. The wind blowing again. / And out of this annihilation rises the poem "Valley Candle." But this seems more a trick of circular reflexivity than a way out of the "ultimate darkness." After the beams of the night converge on the image and the wind blows, I do not see arising from this annihilation an image of the image of the candle.

Stevens desired that "the central poem [become] the world, / And the world the central poem" (CP 441), but in "Valley Candle" the abyss "Between farewell and the absence of farewell" (CP 152) cannot be traversed by the imagination's generative force. The light in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" that arises "out of the central mind" allows the paramour to "make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there . . . is enough" (CP 524). But at the end of "Valley Candle," there is no light, no sun, no actual or imagined candle flame that can cast, much less traverse, a shade.

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## Poems

### Moons of a Metaphor

On any given day there is great earnest,  
each endeavor compressing its moment  
to rest fully, to accomplish just one moon,  
  
an Io of a planet of plans accumulating  
orbits for hours and months. Seen from  
a distance, though, like a father watching  
  
his daughter raising her family, the moments  
and effort escape notice, as the making  
of a grove of sequoias, or of an arroyo, or  
  
of a rounded mountain. The details of the day  
contain an unrevealed history, the course  
of the meandering possessing every dream,  
  
every act and sensation, without release, in  
reflected light, an inscrutable design, a  
hopelessly symbolic act, unmotivated flight.

S. Christian Hempstead  
*S/R San Francisco, at sea*

### A Holograph Draft

Dear Sir:

I have received your letter of  
the 26th. The offer it contains,  
that in exchange for ~~mermaids~~ a warranty deed  
to 1464 we drop our claim  
for 16,000 ~~blackbirds~~ dollars, will not do.  
Our client has decided to obtain  
~~a pair of scarlet boots~~ a writ of execution to be served  
at his discretion. I remain, most truly,  
~~the Rajah of Molucca~~ ~~blithely yours~~  
your obedient servant, Wallace Stevens

Richard Epstein  
Denver, Colorado

### don't press me for details

the title was there  
waiting for clues  
dressed in afternoon light  
certain failure  
would elude the dream this time  
for this time is never that time  
but what about the time you dreamed you were  
a pear  
being unwrapped by  
a green-blue-iris sea-colored creature who introduced herself  
as the woman Wallace Stevens invented oceans for  
then a motorcycle drove by and waking up  
you saw the face of William Carlos Williams  
on the cover of the book on  
the table and you knew for one certain second  
Stevens had to be right  
about everything  
because poetry was not something small enough to fit  
the conditions a wheelbarrow might suggest for it  
it was about everything  
else  
and otherwise  
that is and was the hard indistinct truth  
which is tiring enough  
to make one accept the forty hours  
a week needed to keep  
the dandies and the doldrums from troubling  
your sleep

Michael Caufield  
Seattle, Washington

### Holly

When his daughter skipped from college  
Stevens made a holy bother  
but she proved the brightest scholar  
on the poems of her father  
and put them into final order.

Frank Lennon  
Cos Cob, Connecticut

## Study of Four Daffodils

*after Stevens*

### I

Opusculum caducum.  
The daffodils do not honk.  
They are not skirts or trumpets;  
They are simply themselves.

### II

They are yellow flowers  
Composed of six ovate petals  
Framing a central crown.  
Their filaments, too, are yellow.

### III

Their texture is neither smooth  
Nor coarse, but cool to the touch.  
They smell greenly. Their stalks  
Grow hollow toward the top.

### IV

Cut, in a clear pitcher sized  
For cream, green magnifies  
In clouded water: elliptical  
Stems, four parchment-toned leaves.

### V

The yellow varies, spreads  
From a chartreuse core—  
Goldest in the scalloped center,  
Paler at the petal edge.

### VI

Daffodils in a casement window;  
Beyond the window, snow.  
The snow, the flowers, being simply  
Themselves, cannot say

*I'll leave you.* But dearest,  
I ask you: parted or not  
By this darkening glass,  
For whom will they stay?

Kathy Fagan  
Delaware, Ohio

## Ovum

Stevens cast them as regal couriers,  
the worms itemizing their cargo  
at heaven's gate. But here, holding court  
in the rancid crawlspace beneath my house,  
the maggots belong to a lower caste—  
sublunary, unlettered, little more than  
animate dirt. Eye by eye and lip by lip,  
they reduce a rotting cat, the genius  
of today, as a thick cloud of flies  
hangs over the disfigured face.

I study the scene from a stranger's distance  
as earth's angels nickel-and-dime the cat  
into nothingness, but the maggots,  
*sub specie aeternitatis*, are truly no more foreign to me  
than my own breath and blood, the egg  
our common origin into this temporal world.

Then why, crouching over their work,  
do I blackball them from my kin?  
Wasn't I once as grotesque and voracious—  
a tiny, guiltless happenstance nauseating  
my mother morning after morning?  
Then why waver in the face  
of such steadfast and unqualified love?  
Why not take heart in the portrait of what,  
like Badroulbador, will be my eventual end?

Todd Copeland  
Waco, Texas

## In Transit

If it is a cliché  
To point out  
That airports are like  
The porticoes of heaven,  
The great silver birds  
Arriving like Captain Stormfield's  
Wicker-seated trolleys,  
Still, Bishop Butler,

Though (like Twain) he never saw an airport  
Or conceived  
That nature might encompass men who fly,  
Points to another sense  
In which this simile is true.  
These polyglot faces at Seatac, Heathrow,  
Baffin Bay,  
These shapeless bags of tired clothes in transit,  
Stand stripped of their identities,  
Of almost all defining elements  
Of dress and lust and politics.  
Reduced to mere furniture of waiting rooms,  
Here—as at the end of life—  
We are without the contexts that define us.  
In death, Butler asked,  
What personhood  
Is left to be immortal?  
If, as Stevens wrote,  
The natives of the rain  
Are rainy men,  
And if we are fully scribed,  
Each one of us,  
By our local culture  
And its colorful surroundings,  
Then this place of passage  
Is truly like the foyer of paradise,  
Where all one has become—  
Each faded, monochrome sprite—  
Dwindles to these simple,  
Moral facts:  
Does one push in line?  
Extend the commonest of courtesies?  
Attempt to understand the foreign tongue?

Thomas Trzyna  
Seattle, Washington

**Wallace Stevens Contemplates  
Sunday Service in Haddam**

The day was nooning toward its bells,  
And all were late, and yet he lingered there

Enjoying summer and gold-nugget bees  
Divorced from gravity. He felt, at last,

That he was master of his mind, one of  
The few who've made a satisfying picture

Of the world and of the world's world,  
The inclusive all, the one containing

All the perfect particles, the one  
He was among the ones of, watching as

His hand scooped air as if it were  
Ice cream, a clean fresh strawberry,

An air so clean it glittered to his eyes  
And melted on his tongue, an air

Of summer on a Sunday. He wouldn't go,  
And finally the others left him there.

E. M. Schorb  
Mooresville, North Carolina

**Texture**

Only at this late hour  
do we realize just how great  
our failure has been

to duly regard  
the things we touch:  
the braille of walls;

the nap of flannel pajamas;  
the glass of tap water,  
heavy and lukewarm.

Even at this hour,  
we are not content.  
By the light of the moon

on the chrome faucet  
(forgetting where our hands  
have been; discounting

the terrible dreams  
that are sure to follow),  
we pull bread from its bag

but do not eat it—  
we run our fingers  
over its fine ridges.

Randall Mann  
Gainesville, Florida

### Reading Wallace Stevens by Lamplight

*I am sitting here reading a poet. There are many people in the room, but they are all inconspicuous; they are inside the books. Sometimes they move among the pages, like sleepers who are turning over between two dreams.*

—Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

So it's not his moon whose haunted face  
reminds me of regrets I never had  
and would have wanted if I'd known  
the sky would darken this way, like a hand  
closing, if I'd seen the porcupine stutter  
between the low bushes or spikes of moon  
dappling the leaves, stars budding between them—

nor his sun, either, that enormous swallower  
who belches the world back every noon  
and forces us to see it, to live it again.  
It's just this pinpoint lens, this drizzle of light  
spilling over my page, his poem, as if reading  
is a way of seeing and sight is a silence  
between the words, connecting them

to this night drowning and real.

Stan Sanvel Rubin  
Brockport, New York



### Tonight Wallace Stevens

Tonight Wallace Stevens seemed deep to me as Crater Lake  
and bluer, if possible: who on this planet without a God  
defeats death so easily, cuts it down to size,  
devours it like an omnivore of oblivion?

Are not the propagations of death bars to pleasure? If you  
could wake up tomorrow uncrushed by grief, wouldn't you  
feel less foolish? Tonight Wallace Stevens seemed  
deep to me as Crater Lake and bluer

than I could stand—for I am drained of blueness,  
a boy's face buried in gray fur as winds from the northwest  
scour the pneumatic Chryslers of 1959 with sand and snow  
and my parents kiss in the street as they did in life—

yet I concur with Stevens that such embodiments of death  
impoverish the imagination, that the only paradise  
suitable for breathing forfeits its pales and deeps of blue  
when ghosts take it upon themselves to burst into passion.

Scott Coffel  
Iowa City, Iowa

### Ennui

There is less light and the leaves look like, bright  
In the remaining light, no more than leaves

The summers spread, while, hid, the river bends,  
As the river wends, darkening, toward the sea.

Nor do the leaves, falling in the failing light,  
Fall right enough tonight to bethou me.

Robert Noreault  
Massena, New York

## Bayou Poem

Cypress and Spanish moss, they  
shroud a grandeur hidden there, hidden  
here in bawdy Cajun country where  
slutty swans glide away delirious, rejoicing  
in the sour-mash concerto haunting  
Bayou Lafource and the remains  
of the Delta.

Crimson oars churn brackish waters silent.  
An owl peers wide into alluvial darkness, an obese  
land of aunts and uncles, Opelousas fiddle tunes,  
marshlands trampled by boots of French invaders,  
Union armies, Texas outlaws whose lyrics  
played well before they were hanged.

Adulation for an incarnate culture stuffed  
away amid elaborate trappings, variations from Dixie's  
usual red-clay rural theme, frightful inland coasts  
festering when the sun goes down: a wet leaf  
clings to Milady's navel, old Mardi Gras masks  
float by, their color gone, mournful music,  
yes, mournful music, shipped down Highway 61 South  
from Memphis, thick with dust, the natives must  
assemble the notes and words, paste the songs  
upon cold lips of bottomland tenants  
gone crawfishin' in the gray mist  
hovering over Everlasting.

Errol Miller  
Monroe, Louisiana

## Reviews

### Samuel French Morse: Collected Poems.

Edited with an introduction by Guy Rotella. Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 1995.

The final two poems of Samuel French Morse's *Changes* (1964) illustrate especially clearly two of his central preoccupations—the equivocal relation between meaning and essence and the transitory power of language and perception to define that relation. In “The Poem” it is “*Not what the world must mean, but what it is.*” You might—in a lovely metaphor—hold “all summer in your hand / Like dripping pebbles picked up from the sea’s / Drowned bottom.” But “No one can safely hold / Much in so little, in so little much / For long, or whole.” Still, “you touch / The fragments of the world, for what they mean,” thus reaching a momentary accord between the mind and the world (terms that apply just as well to Stevens or Frost despite the marked differences between Morse and these poets and between these two poets themselves). The line “Much in so little, in so little much” neatly accentuates the transient equilibrium that exists before “whatever runs between / Your fingers may be lost.”

The second poem of the pair, “A Poem in Praise of Hancock Point,” places greater emphasis on language, on speech, on those rare “country-colored words . . . / The kind of talk that makes our meaning clear.” “We listen for but almost never hear / In anything we say what fills the ear / As purely as the ringing of a bell.” We “almost never hear / An accent we can recognize, as near / Plainspeech as common sense.” The country-colored words, the vernacular, “The kind of talk that makes our meaning clear, / Colloquial as August, when we’re here [at Hancock Point]— / A rhyme for rustics, like a villanelle,” are all close to earth and therefore in keeping with the nature of things. But while the rustic note is sounded (in a comment on this poem, Morse said the villanelle’s source was in rustic part songs), the formal and traditional also assert themselves. Indeed, the poem itself is in the form of a villanelle, its two recurrent rhymes centered on “bell” (“well,” “spell,” “villanelle,” etc.) and “ear” (“hear,” “clear,” etc.). Thus, for Morse, plainspeech, which he links with common sense, must be wedded with form to achieve the “kind of talk that makes our meaning clear / And provident, like time, beyond the mere / Expense of breath or change we cannot quell.” Something festival-like—the earthy world of Brueghel, say, fused with poetic elegance—suggests itself, making one acute to what true clarity of meaning would be, as the poem captures and celebrates the essence of this actual place, Hancock, Maine, at a particular time, August.

Stevens in “A Note on Samuel French Morse,” his introduction to Morse’s first book of poems, *Time of Year* (1943), stresses the particularity of the New England setting: “His subject is the particulars of experience. He is a realist; he tries to get at New England experience, at New England past and present. . . . He writes about his own people and his own objects as closely as possible according to his own perception. This rectitude characterizes everything that he does.” (New England is surely the core, although Morse does respond to other places and subjects.)

According to Stevens, Morse's individual perception does not stretch toward the transcendental; he is a realist gratified by the particulars of the world opened to him by his commonsensical perception: "We like the commonplace / of sea and spruce too much / to be impressed by some / mirage we cannot touch," Morse says in the title poem of *A Handful of Beach Glass and Other Poems* (1982). Part of his realism, however, includes in the same poem this skeptical proviso, which reveals just how subtle is the process of eyeing the world: "though substance also is / illusion of a kind, / and what we call the world / has yet to be defined."

An aspect of the rectitude to which Stevens refers is that Morse is very much his own poet. In reading his poems, one thinks, for example, of Frost now and then, as in this passage from "Myriads": "The birds come in flocks, though not to stay; / and what they have to tell you, when they call, / you know already: it is almost fall, / too late for any song." But Morse is by no means in Frost's pocket or in any other poet's. He had models from Thoreau to his twentieth-century contemporaries but followed them obliquely, in his own transforming ways. Stevens, in fact, as he turned the pages of the poet's first volume, found "them a little obstinate" as they adhered to Morse's special slant on things. Aware as he was of all the poetic innovations that occurred in this century and however much he admired many of the poets who originated them, Morse was remarkably impervious to new styles. Most notably, open forms were not for him. He seems to have desired a deliberate and sustaining connection with the poetic tradition and to have found aesthetic authority and pleasure in rhyme. For him, rhyme is the most obvious manifestation of the structures lending support for his provisional definitions. Only occasionally does the form stiffen and thereby become obtrusive.

Guy Rotella, the able editor of this volume, has in his trenchant and valuable introduction confronted the issue of Morse's formalism head-on; he says rightly that Morse "belongs to a significant twentieth-century tradition in which conventional forms are deployed for skeptical functions" and are not considered a regressive move any more than the use of open forms guarantees an original step forward. The very doubleness of the quest for order conflicted by philosophical doubt is accentuated by the formal pattern. Or, as Rotella puts it, "Morse skews his endings, undoing closure without disclaiming the urge to reach conclusions." In this way the many poem sequences that Morse has left us examine their subjects in the light of shifting perspectives. These sequences, says Rotella, reflect how "Morse's formalism was tempered by his acute awareness of the subjectivity inherent in existence: in observation and response, in knowledge and estimation, in experience and in the effort to shape experience without damping it down to singularity or system."

These are the poems, then, of a precise philosophical observer. A reader's satisfactions, and there are many, tend not to derive from poetic flamboyance or great displays of passion but rather from clarity of description and thoughtful response. The sequence "Poems for Jane" expresses love in the context of vividly recalled shared epiphanies, defining moments in the lives of the poet and his wife as their "love itself has been our answer for / All that the world contrives by sudden chance" ("For New Year's, 1951"). Only in the concluding lines of the last poem in the sequence ("A Memory of Trees") does the imagery of epiphany flare up more dramatically: "The past we keep, the dream . . . until we turn, / Acknowledging

our love, to see the room / Like a late Northern orchard, all afire / With the slow sweetness of its sudden bloom." The life of this sequence of poems and many other poems by Morse is found in their un-self-promotional attentiveness to seeing the world and his experience as accurately as possible. Rotella, a student and then a colleague and friend, says that "Morse was in some ways a formidable man, rigorous, decorous, and blunt, but he was also generous, sympathetic, and encouraging." One senses such a man behind these poems. Stevens says that Morse's way "is not a literary novelty; it is an unaffected statement of his perception of the thing," and then adds, "Poems written with this in mind will often not possess . . . either emotion or the music of emotion. Instead they will possess . . . the 'moral beauty' that Mr. Venturi spoke of recently as being present in the painting of Cézanne." To utter the phrase "moral beauty" these days is to sound quaint indeed. But some such phrase is needed to get at the restraint and integrity that inform Morse's poems and give them, not emotional flatness, but the quiet power that makes so many of them as worth reading now as when Morse wrote them.

Robert Buttel  
Philadelphia, Pa.

### **The Never-Resting Mind: Wallace Stevens' Romantic Irony.**

By Anthony Whiting. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Since the mid-sixties, when Frank Doggett labeled Stevens' verse a poetry of thought, readers have been attempting to situate it within contending philosophical traditions. Doggett, who saw no single tradition in Stevens and emphasized the miscellaneous quality of his ideas, concentrated on such thinkers as Bergson, Santayana, Schopenhauer, and Vaihinger. Later studies have suggested links with, most prominently, the phenomenology of Heidegger and Husserl, Cassirer's theory of symbolic forms, Nietzschean perspectivism, William James's pragmatism, and, to a lesser extent, Berkeley, Croce, Hegel, Kant, Leibniz, Niebuhr, Spinoza, Pierce, Whitehead, the Hermetic tradition, and Eastern thought. Anthony Whiting's *The Never-Resting Mind* is, to my knowledge, the first detailed account of Stevens' affiliations with romantic irony, a theory first articulated at the end of the eighteenth century by Friedrich Schlegel, and we may wonder why Stevens scholarship ignored it for so long. Perhaps it is because the concept itself has been largely ignored and misunderstood.

Although the term suggests something more general, the concept of romantic irony, as Whiting makes clear, has a precise meaning (the term came much later and was not commonly used by the people who wrote about it). Romantic irony, as Whiting defines it (and I borrow his language), rejects an ordered universe, posits instead a universe that is abundant and chaotic, and affirms the power of the mind to construct a world out of chaos. Recognizing that the mind's ordering is ultimately false, the romantic ironist assumes a skeptical attitude toward all formulations of experience, and this skepticism allows the ironist to transcend any particular ordering of experience. At the same time, however, the ironist also accepts and is committed to the mind's fictions, and this dual stance—the ironist's simultaneous commitment to and detachment from the structures of the mind—is the central concept of Whiting's study and the chief means by which he relates the

concept to Stevens' verse. Such a stance results, for example, in a fragmenting of experience and leads to an endless cycle of the destruction of older concepts and the creation of new ones, to a world that is continually changing through a process of reduction and creation. Even before the appearance of Stevens' verse (and it does not appear in earnest until page 61 with a discussion of "The Snow Man"), one may anticipate how such a concept could be used in reading the poems.

How convincing a case does Whiting make for romantic irony as a conceptual presence in Stevens? It is a balanced and level-headed argument that does not claim too much (the parallels are obvious and convincing in themselves) but that struggles a bit with one of the difficulties inherent in such a study. That is, what sort of claim is being made? What exactly *is* the relationship between Stevens' poetry and romantic irony? Does it simply furnish a perspective from which to view the poetry or do the poems (at least some of them) owe their ideas and structures to this little-known concept? Initially, the book seems to adopt the first option. "In looking at Stevens through the lens(es) of romantic irony," Whiting writes, "I also explore [a] central aspect of his art." Later, however, Whiting speculates on where Stevens may have first encountered the concept, and the implication now is not that it gives us a way of reading the poems but that it contributed to the poems' composition. The fact that the book finally evades the issue by using a terminology ("echoes," "affiliations") that does not commit it to either position is not, however, a mark against it; it is perhaps as satisfactory a solution to the classic dilemma of source study as any other. (Intertextual theory would be able to finesse its way through this tight spot by positing a romantic irony intertext that is a product of our *reading* of Stevens, not worrying overmuch about sources and influences.)

One further quibble with Whiting's case for romantic irony: readers may find his description of Schlegel's version of the concept rather thin, not richly illustrated with Schlegel's own texts, in contrast to his treatment of Hegel and Kierkegaard. A limited number of quotations are returned to repeatedly, and it may be that since Schlegel defined the concept primarily in aphorisms (spread over three volumes) he did not provide Whiting with appropriate texts for citation. Whatever the case, it seems odd initially that Whiting relies more heavily on texts from two philosophers, Hegel and Kierkegaard, who attacked the theory, than he does on Schlegel. There is, however, method in this maneuver. Whiting attempts to give equal time to Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and Hegel and suggests that there are in fact two versions of romantic irony, one positive and one negative, both found in Stevens.

It is finally the manner in which the concept of romantic irony illuminates Stevens' poems, shows them to us in a new light, that matters, and Whiting's careful readings of selected poems is the real strength of the book. It is not likely to change our reading of the poetry in any significant way, but it may shift the emphasis slightly and uncover facets not seen clearly before. Whiting begins with an assumption that is at the heart of numerous earlier studies (stated in different ways), that Stevens' whole career can be seen as a tension (in James Longenbach's words) " 'between conflicting desires for engagement and transcendence' " or (in George Lensing's words) between conflicting claims of " 'the inner life of imagination and the outer world of the real.' " What is original about Whiting's study is his exploration of this tension and many of the implications that follow from it in light of the concept of romantic irony. A chapter on Stevens and Schlegel, for

example, allows Whiting to discuss Stevens' concept of creativity in light of Schlegel's view of the ironist as engaged in an endless process of creation and destruction. (The *Ozymandias* canto of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" illustrates the activity of simultaneous creation and destruction; "The Snow Man" illustrates the process of "reduction" that leads to a new patterning of experience.) A chapter on Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Stevens allows Whiting to show the number of variations Stevens' poems play between the two poles of detachment and engagement. A chapter on the form that romantic irony dictates—what Schlegel called "artfully ordered confusion"—reveals the three major ways Stevens structures his poems to give the effect of simultaneous unity and chaos ("multiple perspectives," "opposition," and "asymmetrical repetition"). A chapter on the late poems asks whether the irony of *The Auroras of Autumn* and *The Rock* differs from that of the earlier work (it does). A brief afterword suggests, through a reading of Donald Barthelme's story "Kierkegaard Unfair to Schlegel" (obviously a text Whiting was unable to resist), that romantic irony is also a part of postmodernism.

Throughout the book, whether articulating a philosophical issue or interpreting a poem, Whiting's prose is refreshingly clear and accessible, and his readings are generally compelling. Even what seems to me a misreading (Whiting's thesis requires "Crude Foyer," a poem central to the argument of Chapter 3, to say the opposite of what it appears to say) is illuminating, forcing a rereading and a reassessment of the poem. Offering a new focus for rereading poems central to the canon, *The Never-Resting Mind* is a worthy addition to the host of studies that have attempted to construct an intellectual context for Stevens' poetry of thought.

B. J. Leggett  
University of Tennessee

### **Wallace Stevens and the Pennsylvania Keystone: The Influence of Origins on His Life and Poetry.**

By Thomas Francis Lombardi. Selinsgrove, Pa. and London: Susquehanna University Press (Associated University Presses), 1996.

Wallace Stevens and the Pennsylvania Keystone represents many years of devotion to a thesis and to southeastern Pennsylvania. Thomas Lombardi, convinced that "local material illuminates Stevens's more obscure passages," explains his goal: "Using [Stevens'] poetry as a source, I explicate the material based upon a knowledge of his formative and young adult years and a poetic understanding of the depth to which those experiences are reflected in themes and imagery." Lombardi makes important and accurate concessions in his preface: "From time to time, themes and imagery, occasionally with less than adequate preparation, are thrust at the reader who may be ill prepared to digest them. The references to origins often appear in an irregular, almost mechanical, manner." Such candor is indicative of the strengths and the weaknesses of this book.

Lombardi's thesis is convincing and perhaps even commonsensical. He is most helpful when he is providing information about Reading, Pennsylvania, Berks County, and southeastern Pennsylvania, and two chapters (2 and 5) are devoted exclusively to doing this. His emphasis on the influence of Pennsylvania Dutch words, expressions, and culture is salutary and solidly based both on the facts of

Stevens' life and on Stevens' many statements about this ethnic group with which he strongly identified. Lombardi provides numerous quotations drawn from letters included in the eight boxes of largely unpublished genealogical material at the Huntington Library, material that he shows to be more revealing of Stevens than its scant use by the scholarly community would indicate. He presents essential historical and cartographical information (though one cannot always rely on its accuracy), and he gives revealing interpretations of several poems that lend themselves most readily to his thesis, especially those in *Transport to Summer*, such as "Burghers of Petty Death," "A Completely New Set of Objects," and "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors."

In his chapter on *Transport to Summer*, the longest and most effective one of the book, Lombardi shows how Stevens' obsession with genealogy influenced his poetry, especially a group Lombardi calls the "graveyard poems." We are introduced to a new Ludwig Richter in "Chaos in Motion": "It so happens that a Ludwig Richter lies buried a few gravesites from Stevens's ancestors in the Amityville cemetery, which inspired 'Burghers of Petty Death' and 'The Good Man Has No Shape.' . . . Stevens, searching as he did for his great-grandparents, must have sighted that stone at the time of his Amityville visits." This accidental fact, this local, almost personal Richter can now take his place as an alternative to the one scholarship has up to now provided. Lombardi's treatment of "Burghers of Petty Death" is the best thing in the book, and his photograph of the tombstones of John and Catherine Zeller effectively illuminates points he makes. Lombardi provides many other photographs that he himself took and that serve as immediate insights into Stevens' world of southeastern Pennsylvania and thus into poems.

However, there are some problems, minor as well as serious, in the work. One becomes sensitive to certain repetitions: various forms of the word *origin* (over 300 times, most frequently as *originary*), phrases with *mundo* and *Pennsylvania*. Lombardi quotes out of context and misquotes. For example, the following passage from "Sunday Morning," "we devise / Our earthly mothers waiting," is given as "we devise / Our earthly mother waiting." That this is more than an oversight is indicated by Lombardi's typically unqualified assertion that "'Our earthly mother' undisguisedly refers to his own mother." Lombardi's documentation of quotations is not always as helpful as it could be; he often gives the manuscript location for journal entries that are published in *Souvenirs and Prophecies*. At other times, he fails to give any source at all for information that is quite useful: "it is no secret that Stevens in a handwritten script book did enormous research on sources of Pennsylvania German in terms of environment, religion, morals, and even burial customs, the latter inspiring his interest in graveyards during the 1940s." It would be helpful to know where this "script book" is located, even if one could guess that it is probably at the Huntington Library.

There are also more technical and factual errors than one would expect: Stevens' date of graduation from Reading Boys' High School given as 1896 instead of 1897; the implication that Stevens' brother Garrett graduated from Yale rather than Dickinson College (after failing out of Yale); the statement, with no source, that Elsie "did win a beauty contest, heralded as the prettiest girl in Cumberland County" (actually this was said by the granddaughter of Stevens' brother Garrett to apply to Garrett's wife [see Brazeau, *Parts of a World* 261]); the date of 1906 for

Stevens' "A Book of Verses" for Elsie, rather than 1908; the statement that "Philadelphia oftentimes functioned as a kind of rendezvous for him and his fiancée," when only one such meeting happened (on February 20, 1909); the implication that "In 1918, Stevens, while simultaneously experiencing his own personal loss, reviewed the devastation of the recently terminated World War I" and thus wrote "Lettres d'un Soldat," when in fact one letter in Holly Stevens' *Letters of Wallace Stevens* shows that he had completed these poems by September 1, 1917, and another letter shows that he first heard of his sister's death (the "personal loss") in May of 1919 (*L* 202, 212).

The bulk of Lombardi's analysis of Stevens' poems is dedicated to seeing in them, often in poems whose titles refer to many geographical entities outside of Pennsylvania, the informing presence of the "green . . . fluent mundo," a phrase he uses often to mean the actual world of Stevens' Pennsylvania past. In his reading of Stevens' poems, Lombardi often comes to surprising conclusions: "the 'two words that kill' in 'Le Monocle' are likely the last two words—'Good bye!'—spoken to Wallace by his mother" on his last visit to Reading before her death; "In 'Metaphors of a Magnifico,' the 'Twenty men' who cross a 'bridge / Into a village' are traversing a span in rural Pennsylvania. They are farmers, not soldiers"; it is not likely, Lombardi asserts, that "Bantams in Pine-Woods" takes place in Georgia but "more likely occurs in the Appalachians of Pennsylvania."

Lombardi is particularly hard on Elsie in his readings of several poems. He sees her as the woman in "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch": "Though Wallace again idealizes Elsie, he simultaneously discredits her morally by the innuendo of illegitimacy and intellectually by her lack of 'language,' a reference too relational to be undeliberate." Elsie, "adopted and without pedigree," is also the "she" of "The Beginning," and though one could possibly argue for this reading, one would be reluctant to accept the image of Stevens, looking at Elsie's dress on the floor and experiencing "the shocking implication that Elsie, old and nude, summerless, now wears autumn, and Wallace, in the autumn of his life, forced to gaze upon the ugliness of Elsie's autumnal nakedness, is left with a lost ideality." Reading "Out of Wedlock," a section of "Five Grotesque Pieces," Lombardi suggests that Elsie could be the "old woman that knocks at the door," "an old bitch, an old drunk" who "has been yelling in the dark."

Lombardi's book, though it could be seen in the tradition of recent works with a biographical or real-world emphasis (Brazeau, Bates, Lensing, Filreis, Longenbach), is one of a kind; one will not be able to rely on it for information the way one can (and Lombardi himself does, copiously) on Brazeau or the works edited by Holly Stevens. However, it can open up discussion on Stevens. It demonstrates a willingness to take risks and to say things directly that most critics might think for a moment and then reject as oversimplifications. It offers enriching suggestions: a Reading-Hartford axis (Christian-pagan, so that coming home to Reading becomes a trope for coming home to religion) to compete with the common Hartford-Key West axis; a belief that most of Stevens' assertions are not qualified; a feeling that Stevens' provincial and ethnocentric longings are legitimate, even commendable; and a confidence in the reality of Stevens' deathbed conversion to Catholicism.

Don Blount  
University of South Carolina, Aiken

## News and Comments

The death of J. M. Edelstein on June 12, 1996, is the passing of yet another sturdy pioneer in the continuing exploration of WS' poetical accomplishments. There is no more indispensable book about WS than his *Wallace Stevens: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh, 1973). It must have given him special satisfaction to be able to see the publication of a companion volume two decades later, John N. Serio's *Wallace Stevens: An Annotated Secondary Bibliography* (Pittsburgh, 1994); both volumes remain in print. Mel Edelstein was also the originator of this department in the *WSJ* back in 1981; his keen interest in collecting WS prompted the bibliophilic coloring that has always been a part of it. He was a member of both the Grolier Club of New York and the Zamorano Club of Los Angeles, his private interests paralleling his career of collecting and writing about books for such institutions as the Getty Center, the John Carter Brown Library, the Library of Congress, New York University, and the National Gallery in Washington.

In 1974 Mel Edelstein was asked by Holly Stevens to appraise her father's manuscripts, correspondence files, copies of his own publications, and private library. The appraiser's compensation for this substantial job came in the form of duplicates of WS' works; these comprised an important part of his splendid private collection of WS. As an appraiser he was expert and fair; as a mathematician he could be careless. In adding up the figures in his WS appraisal he overshot by (if I recall correctly) \$50,000. When Holly Stevens and I confirmed the correct total, her disappointment was obvious, as was my joy, for doubtless the Huntington Library could not have afforded to buy the WS archive (even on the installment plan agreed to) had his addition been sound. His enthusiasm for books, broad knowledge of subjects, skill at bibliography, keen sense of what is collectable, and, yes, his arithmetic—all of these put WS people permanently in debt to Mel Edelstein.

\* \* \*

Einar Perman reports from Stockholm about a January 28, 1996, full-page spread on WS in the "Litteratur" section of *Svenska Dagbladet*, the second most widely circulated daily newspaper in Sweden. Professor Ulf Linde, a member of the Swedish Academy (which selects Nobel Prize winners in literature), published three of his own translations of WS poems, including "The Idea of Order at Key West," and some comments on WS. Perman says that Linde told him in conversation that WS "was one of the big misses of the Academy (before he was in it), and now it is of course too late."

\* \* \*

A well-researched article on the obscurity of WS' current reputation in Hartford appeared in *Northeast*, the Sunday magazine of the *Hartford Courant*, on March 24, 1996. Steve Kemper's "Looking for Wallace Stevens" contains a number of debatable conclusions, such as WS' being "one of Hartford's, and the world's, grumpiest geniuses," but his interviews provide a fascinating update of acquaintances' attitudes toward WS first recorded in Peter Brazeau's *Parts of a World*

(1983). Unfortunately, some of the testimony, although new, is mostly hearsay. In the early 1960s Elsie Stevens sold the family house at 118 Westerly Terrace to the Episcopal Church, which still uses it as the residence for the provost of Christ Church Cathedral. The present occupant is quoted as saying that her "asking price was more than the church could afford. Then she came back with a much lower price. The theory was that she took delight in selling it to a church because Wallace was an atheist, and this was one last way to get back at him as part of their dysfunctional relationship." The actuality of their "dysfunctional relationship" is something that no one alive today can confirm, and Elsie's motivation in lowering the price seems equally inscrutable. Could she not have sold the house to a Protestant church in an irritated reaction to undocumented assertions that WS underwent a deathbed conversion to Catholicism?

\* \* \*

Louise Glück will be the WS poet at the 34th annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Program, which will take place on two evenings, first in the Wallace Stevens Theater at ITT Hartford's corporate headquarters on April 7, 1997, and then at the University of Connecticut, Storrs campus, on April 8. On both occasions, at 8 p.m., Glück will read from her own poetry and present awards to student winners in the annual poetry contest. The expanded program has been made possible by the generosity of the ITT Hartford Insurance Co. (the successor to WS' long-time corporate employer), sponsor of the Storrs series since its beginning in 1964.

Glen MacLeod tells us that moving part of the WS Poetry Program to Hartford was first proposed by the Hartford Friends of Wallace Stevens, a new group dedicated to promoting WS' reputation there. The Friends have applied for non-profit, tax-exempt status; on October 5 they hosted their first WS birthday celebration at the Hartford Public Library. Speakers were Robert D. Richardson, Jr., author of *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (1995); John Crockett, editor of the *Harvard Advocate* in 1942 and thus the publisher of WS' "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War"; and Connecticut poet Dick Allen. Musicians from the Hartt School of Music performed settings of WS poems.

\* \* \*

A thoughtful rather than hackneyed allusion to WS occurs in the title of an article by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man," in *The New Yorker*, October 23, 1995. Gates also quotes a stanza of WS' poem in his survey of the responses of black writers, academics, and intellectuals to the not-guilty verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial and to the aftermath of the verdict. WS' exploration of apprehensions of reality is pertinent to Gates's sensitive as well as disturbing early analysis of what, a year later, seem endless reactions-to-reactions to this haunting case.

\* \* \*

Scholars using the WS archive at the Huntington during the past year include David M. Linebarger (UC-Davis), WS and modern music; Robert D. Moynihan (SUNY-Oneonta), further studies of WS' private library; Howard Pearce (Florida Atlantic), WS' poetry (for a book); Edward E. Simmons, Jr. (unaffiliated), WS'

poetry; Kyoung H. Yang (Korea University), dissertation on WS and reality (his later poetry in terms of the surrounding world).

\* \* \*

Last year's survey of the prices asked for WS' *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942) and *Esthétique du Mal* (1945), the first editions, concluded that an English dealer (R. A. Gekoski) was the international leader toward higher ground. From his Cat. 21 (July 1996), however, one could infer that he had sold neither copy (but his prices remained firm). Meanwhile an American dealer entered the fray: James J. Jaffe (Cat. 38, February 1996) offered the former—Edelstein A6a, "covers little soiled, otherwise a fine copy"—for \$1500, and the latter—Edelstein A10, one of 300, "fine"—for \$1750. *Waiting for Godot*—Cat. 35, February 1996—offered an out-of-series unnumbered copy of *Esthétique*, one of the deluxe issue of specially bound, hand-colored copies, for \$2750. It would appear safe to say that at least two American dealers are not giving up exalted valuations of WS books without a fight. For the modest collector an attractive alternative to these high-spots might be WS' own selection of representative poems, beginning with "Earthy Anecdote" and ending with "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," the Faber *Selected Poems* of 1953, "a very nice copy in triflingly nicked and rubbed d.j.," offered by an English dealer (Clearwater, Cat. 61, June 1996) for £100.

Daniel Woodward  
Huntington Library

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## Vassar Viewed Veraciously 16 Pencil Sketches by Wallace Stevens

Introduction and notes by Daniel Woodward

Wallace Stevens visited Vassar College on weekends during the summer of 1931 while his wife Elsie and their seven-year-old daughter Holly were enrolled in a program designed to promote the education of children within the home. He occupied himself by walking about the campus drawing pencil sketches of what he saw. While these amateur exercises are no more than addenda to the works of a major poet, they are the only extant drawings by a writer whose mature sensibility was substantially influenced by modern art.

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**Wallace Stevens and  
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**The Influence of Origins on His Life and Poetry**  
THOMAS FRANCIS LOMBARDI

This is the definitive work on origins as they appear in Stevens's poetry. Thomas Francis Lombardi, a poet himself, traces Stevens's originary influences—place, family, tradition, the feminine, ethnic heritage, and religious roots—against the cosmopolitan influence of Cambridge and New York and demonstrates the extent to which Stevens's formative and early adult years shaped his entire life and influenced the grand sweep of his poetry.

Stevens's life epitomized a personal and irresistible rite of passage toward origins, a universal odyssey that sensitive people undertake over the course of their lives—the ethnocentric pull toward the native experience. That attraction to his native soil would inform much of the content of his poetry. To this end, he wished to be one with his ancestors for the reason of experiencing a sense of identity with the provincial past, not in spite of, but because of it. Without an adequate understanding of this relationship, no in-depth comprehension of Stevens's poetry seems possible.  
(Susquehanna University Press, ISBN 0-945636-79-2, \$43.50)

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8:30–9:45 a.m., Warren, Sheraton Washington

Presiding: George S. Lensing, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

1. "Diction and Thought: Stevens' Influence on Donald Justice and Others," Joseph Duemer, Clarkson Univ.
2. "Where the Serpent Lives: The Medusan Faces of Adrienne Rich and Wallace Stevens," Barbara L. Estrin, Stonehill Coll.
3. "American Identities: Stevens's 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven' and Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,'" Stephen Paul Miller, St. John's Univ., Notre Dame Coll.

Respondent: Barbara M. Fisher, City Coll., City Univ. of New York

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