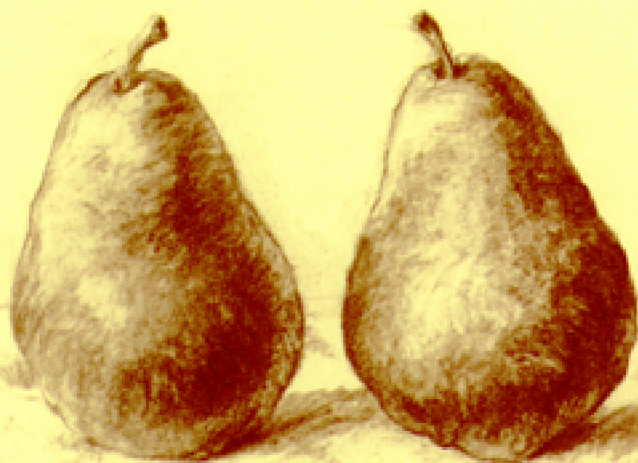
The Wallace Stevens Journal



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Racial Domain and the Imagination of Wallace Stevens

LISA DuROSE

> *What is [the poet's] function? Certainly it is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. Nor is it, I think, to comfort them while they follow their readers to and fro. I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives.*
>
> —Wallace Stevens

> *[W]hat happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society[?] For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work,* becoming.
>
> —Toni Morrison

LIKE HIS CONTEMPORARIES e. e. cummings, Hart Crane, T. S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens was a witness to the turbulent politics and raging prejudices of the twentieth century. Although he insisted that poets should carry no social, political, or moral obligation (*NA* 27), he is an artist embedded in the racial climate of his times, an atmosphere that infiltrates some of his most memorable poems, from "Prelude to Objects" to "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" to "The Greenest Continent." These poetic depictions have led some critics to conclude that Stevens, like his fellow modern poets, shares "the vocabulary of racial images" (Nielsen 58), a language typically identifying nonwhites as exotic, primitive, and sexualized.[1] The evidence is quite convincing: of the more than twenty Stevens poems that contain nonwhite characters, record black dialect, or recount African American experience, most construct and employ African American identity in a fixed and categorical manner.[2]

But simply to say that Stevens' poetry of racial difference is a product of white racism is too sweeping, for it leaves nearly everything else unanswered: In what ways does Stevens' construction of black identity work to criticize, celebrate, or merely maintain the status quo? How does the inclu-

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sion of black characters in the poems benefit Stevens himself? What are the consequences of believing in an imaginative process that could remain untouched by politics? Certainly Stevens' encoding of race does more than invite further exploration. It requires it. For his poetry of racial difference grows out of a particular, complex dynamic that is generated by the conflict between Stevens' belief that the imagination can transcend cultural assumptions and the reality of early twentieth century racism that made it nearly impossible for even the most ambitious white mind to comprehend black American life. "A possible poet," writes Stevens, "must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of . . . reality" (*NA* 27). What during the mid-twentieth century could be one of the more pressing forces of reality with which to contend than the struggle for racial equality, a struggle that Stevens had in fact to witness and somehow process? How Stevens negotiated this specific pressure of reality—the ways in which he unconsciously resisted it, boldly confronted it, or silently evaded it—shapes nearly every image he crafts of African Americans. Because of this psychological and poetic struggle, Stevens' poems of racial identity reveal what can happen when gifted, complex, and self-insistently apolitical artists work in "a highly and historically racialized society" (Morrison 4). Stevens' poetic undertaking demonstrates how even the most prized and individual imagination "sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision" (Morrison xi).

In a disturbing, almost maddening way, Stevens' representation of the African Other, though steeped in historically racist language and imagery, is often aesthetically powerful and his characters so gorgeously rendered and compelling that it becomes too difficult to dismiss the poetry as simply a product of racial prejudice. As such, Stevens' construction of African American identity poses a problem for contemporary readers sensitive to the perpetration of literary racism, for to admire a Stevens poem such as "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" for its unorthodox treatment of bourgeois white women is also, in some ways, to tolerate its stereotypical construction of African American women. It is difficult and perhaps even dangerous to separate the aesthetic beauty of a poem from its highly racist ideology. "Excising the political from the life of the mind is a sacrifice that has proven costly," writes Morrison. "I think of this erasure as a kind of trembling hypochondria always curing itself with unnecessary surgery. A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only 'universal' but also 'race-free' risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist" (12). Indeed, Stevens' fabrication of the black presence provides an unmitigated space for exploration; it invites a meditation on the writer himself—on the fears, desires, and curiosities that reside in his imaginative process.

Stevens' attitude toward nonwhites—a mixture of fascination and sympathy, vulgarity and aversion—is useful in understanding his depiction of black characters. Interestingly enough, no modern white poet, with perhaps the exception of Williams, was as vocal in his declarations of align-

ment with African Americans as Wallace Stevens.[3] But his expressed alliance was often a troubling blend of support and stereotype. During his career Stevens made a number of statements indicative of the problematic sentiments he held for nonwhites. His letter to Ronald Lane Latimer on Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, in which he declares his support for the Ethiopians but does so by employing the derogatory term "coons," is perhaps the best example of this mannerism. "While it is true that I have spoken sympathetically of Mussolini, all of my sympathies are the other way: with the coons and the boa-constrictors" (*L* 295). While in Johnson City, Tennessee, Stevens describes in a letter to his wife the movements of troop trains carrying black soldiers. Although at one point he notes that these soldiers are viewed as "absurd animals" by the southern whites in the station, Stevens writes, "I want to cry and yell and jump ten feet in the air; and so far as I have been able to observe, it makes no difference whether the men are black or white" (*L* 209). Perhaps more as a shock device than a political statement, Stevens occasionally signed his poems "Sambo" and declared his poetry to be "like decorations in a nigger cemetery." Stevens' remarks in his letters do reveal a struggle to come to terms with the racial inequalities of his generation. That the poet, however, expresses his views within a racist paradigm (describing Ethiopians as "coons" and using racial epitaphs like "Sambo" and "nigger") suggests the difficulties even the apolitical Stevens had in overcoming the racial politics of his time; and it expresses a troubling symbiosis between sympathetic intentions and racist ideologies.

What happens, asks Toni Morrison, when writers like Stevens (those in positions of privilege because of their race, gender, or class) "trust in [their] ability to imagine others and [their] willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for [them] [?] . . . [W]hat prompts and makes possible this process of entering what one is estranged from—and in what disables the foray, for purposes of fiction, into corners of the consciousness held off and away from the reach of the writer's imagination[?]" (3–4). What is it, in other words, to identify with the Other, to take on the characteristics, to inhabit the positions of those who are not privileged in the culture? For Stevens, especially, declaring an alliance with African Americans—fictive though it might have been—is both dangerous and liberating, both a way to symbolize black culture without legitimizing its presence and a way to transgress bourgeois white America without acknowledging his own position within it. Although Stevens might have maintained that his poetry, according to Helen Vendler, is " 'like decorations in a nigger cemetery' " (*Extended Wings* 65), when it came time to publish those decorations, he resumed his position of privilege as a white American male. As bell hooks states:

> To make one's self vulnerable to the seduction of difference, to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one

relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality. When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other. (23)

Although Stevens admires the boldness and beauty of Victoria Clementina in "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" and the insight of the negress in "The Virgin Carrying a Lantern," by embedding the descriptions of these characters in stereotypes, he allows himself a space for distance, an avenue away from these figures of alliance.

Although a few Stevens scholars have noted the poet's declarations of identification with African Americans, many—especially contemporary critics—have avoided the subject of race altogether.[4] Of those who have discussed Stevens' proclaimed racial allegiance, none have considered in their examinations what Stevens gained from such positioning. In his 1951 book review of *Auroras of Autumn*, Randall Jarrell reflects on how Stevens' American philosophy is surrounded by racial and ethnic difference. "In *Harmonium*," writes Jarrell, "he still loves America best when he can think of it as a wilderness, naturalness, pure potentiality (he treats with especial sympathy Negroes, Mexican Indians, and anybody else he can consider wild)" (128). Ardyth Bradley in his 1961 explication of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" suggests quite astutely:

> The title is perfectly relevant, saying that imaginative creations, including poems, including this one, are like decorations in a cemetery, are dogged assertions of the meaningfulness of life. . . . Stevens locates this affirmation of meaning in the midst of a poverty-stricken world of death, in a *nigger* cemetery, because the affirmation comes not from a systematic metaphysics but from a primitive instinct for finding meaning in life, an instinct corresponding to what Santayana calls our "animal faith." For Stevens, as for William Carlos Williams and Faulkner, the American Negro is a symbol of vitality. It is a particular, simple, primitive strength—the *niggerness*—of Negroes living in an austere world without the buttressing of wealth and European culture, that Stevens is using to demonstrate vitality. (114)

Peter Brazeau, in his 1983 biography of Stevens, recounts the origin of the poem's title. Stevens had been visiting Key West with his friend Judge Arthur Powell when, during a walk, they came upon a fence.

> "I explained," [the Judge recalled,] "that I thought [the fence] enclosed a graveyard, as some of the rubbish looked 'like deco-

> rations in a nigger cemetery.' He was interested when I explained the custom of negroes to decorate graves with broken pieces of glass, old pots, broken pieces of furniture, dolls heads, and what not. The poem ["Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"] itself is an olio, and the title is fitting." (100–01)

Both Powell's explanation of the poem's title and Bradley's highly charged and racially assumptive description represent much of what is going on in Stevens' poetry of racial difference, a combination of fascination with and stereotyping of the Other.

In her 1986 biography on the poet, Joan Richardson describes how the young Stevens, who arrived alone and jobless in New York City in 1900, was struck by the playful tempos and irregular rhythms of a new style of music played by African Americans. Listening to ragtime music, Richardson argues, Stevens felt a kinship with the performers:

> Like the black musicians roaming "free" up from the South, he had moved away from his familiar soil. Just as they reproduced in beats mimicking the quickening pace of city life the deeper movements of ring shouts they had sung in their churches back home—movements of songs that proclaimed their faith—he, too, changed what he was experiencing of the newborn century into poems that re-created his yearning for his native place and the faith that was lost. (*Early Years* 113)

As a rootless wanderer left to negotiate the quick and often brutal world of New York, Stevens, suggests Richardson, had much in common with those Southern blacks who migrated North; for both are adventurers who take the new experience of city life, mix it with their old traditions, and create.

Although Jarrell, Bradley, and Richardson provide revealing and detailed anecdotes of Stevens' alignment with and sympathy for the African Other, not one considers what Stevens received from such an alliance in his poetry. No critic asks what Stevens gains, artistically, by embracing "the primitive strength" of his African American characters or by experimenting in his poetry with the rhythm of ragtime music. Their tone suggests an admiration for the poet, for what he gives African Americans, namely a sense of legitimacy and a call for recognition of their gifts (all stereotypically framed, of course). Even though it seems to shape nearly every encounter Stevens has with the Other in his poetry, the pertinent question is ignored: What does the inclusion of African Americans do to and for the work? What does it offer the poet who uses them? "Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette," writes Morrison, "American Africanism makes it possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless. It provides a way of contemplating

chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and a mechanism for testing the problems and blessings of freedom" (7). African American characters and images in Stevens' poetry serve as mirrors for white characters ("The Virgin Carrying a Lantern" and "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab") and catalysts of events and ideas impossible to embrace in white skin ("Nudity at the Capital," "Prelude to Objects," and "The Greenest Continent"). If, as Stevens notes in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," "The poetic process is psychologically an escapist process" (*NA* 30) but one that ultimately must adhere to some reality, then applying blackface—declaring in his poetry that he is just like African Americans—afforded him a great measure of freedom from the racial status quo, an opportunity to escape the social conventions placed upon an upper-class white American male in the early twentieth century: financial independence, middle-class morals, and the Protestant work ethic. Thus black figures in "Nudity in the Colonies," "Nudity at the Capital," "Prelude to Objects," and "The News and the Weather" are often used in categorical and racist fashion—as symbols of primitive and savage imagination—to criticize or even celebrate white American wealth, religion, and morality by providing a standard by which to judge the larger white culture. Because his identifications and experiences with African Americans were more often confined to the imaginative realm—they occupied his poems, but not his life—Stevens could project himself into the myth of black life (he could imagine, for example, the state of an Ethiopian soldier fighting Mussolini's army or the position of a black female maidservant) without actually living in it.[5] His imaginative sympathies (with those who do not share similar advantages) never had to become everyday realities.

No doubt many of Stevens' poems recognize the African American presence as vital and powerful. In the counterpointed poems "Nudity at the Capital" and "Nudity in the Colonies" it is the speaker in the first poem, the one who adopts the persona of a black man, who seems the most insightful and knowledgeable:

> But nakedness, woolen massa, concerns an innermost atom.
> If that remains concealed, what does the bottom matter?
> (*CP* 145)

The speaker in blackface astutely theorizes that the truth is much deeper than most think, that nakedness—the kernel of existence—encompasses a much smaller arena than some would think. As Joan Richardson points out, the white man, "massa," then responds to the observation. In "Nudity in the Colonies" he admits the truth:

> Black man, bright nouveautés leave one, at best,
> pseudonymous.
> Thus one is most disclosed when one is most anonymous.
> (*CP* 145)

Although the "black" speaker is praised for his insight, an explanation for this attribute is quickly tendered. The anonymous status of the speaker, the one who applies the blackface and the black idiom, is what grants him the perspective the white man cannot hold: that of the critical outsider. The black speaker's anonymity makes him knowable and easily equipped to recognize one of the basic tenets of existence: nakedness. As Michel Benamou notes, "Stevens insists on nudity as essence revealed by existence. . . . The search for centrality and for nakedness is a single movement, the ascensional movement of a human hero" (114). That Stevens chooses to adopt an invented black persona to express this essence of existence is quite revealing, for the poet seems to be suggesting that a black man would be better able to comprehend this simple element of life—nakedness—than a white man would. This depiction appears to reiterate a sort of noble savage ideology in which the intelligence of the black man is grounded in his more primary and nourishing relationship with the natural world. The speaker in "Nudity in the Colonies" turns to a black man with a very specific dilemma, one that both the white speaker and the poet assume a black man would be well equipped to handle. Moreover, because this description is framed by the process of blackface, the authenticity of the poet's praise and respect of this black figure becomes suspect. How are we to read the construction of black dialect? Is it Stevens' attempt to capture the black idiom? Is it used slightly in jest to poke fun at the white man who misses what is so obviously clear to the black man? Even these two counterpointed poems—which superficially seem to admire the black presence—are, when examined under a historically racial lens, troubling.

In "Prelude to Objects" Stevens embraces what he terms the "nigger mystics" as ruthless and destructive figures of the imagination. He brings in the vocabulary of racial difference to pit the uncivilized imagination against the schooled, the mystical against the scientific. The first stanza in part I seems to be a discussion about finding one's self; the word "self" is repeated four times within the first eleven lines:

> If he will be heaven after death,
> If, while he lives, he hears himself
> Sounded in music, if the sun,
> Stormer, is the color of a self
> As certainly as night is the color
> Of a self, if, without sentiment,
> He is what he hears and sees and if,
> Without pathos, he feels what he hears
> And sees, being nothing otherwise,
> Having nothing otherwise, he has not
> To go to the Louvre to behold himself. (*CP* 194)

The tone of possibility that surrounds this first stanza, with all the repetition of "if," suggests some kind of searching. The speaker implies that this search should begin in the forms of landscape and art; for the character—the "he" in the poem—may take on a variety of different forms: heaven, music, the sun. He is, in fact, "what he hears and sees" as long as he "feels what he hears / And sees. . . ." His metamorphosis begins with what he can imagine, what he can feel. In the stanza's last line we are told only where the "he" figure will not behold himself: at the Louvre. To gain a possibility of what he can be, the character needs to look elsewhere. The last part of the second stanza indicates where he may gain such a reflection of himself:

> One is always seeing and feeling oneself,
> That's not by chance. It comes to this:
> That the guerilla I should be booked
> And bound. Its nigger mystics should change
> Foolscap for wigs. Academies
> As of a tragic science should rise. (*CP* 195)

The way of finding oneself, the speaker suggests, is by recognizing the "guerilla I" within, that part of us that is hidden and metaphorically imprisoned ("booked / And bound") by internal and external forces. That the "nigger mystics" of the "guerilla I" serve as catalysts, as mirrors of the "One" who is seeking, is indicated clearly by the first two lines of the second stanza: "Granted each picture is a glass, / That the walls are mirrors multiplied. . . ." "One" needs to find himself in his foils, in those who, through their difference, enable and validate his presence. Oppositions frame the poem—one/"guerilla I," mystics/scientists, and foolscaps/scholars' wigs—and all are set in motion by the vocabulary of racial difference. In part II of the poem, Stevens clearly specifies where the poet should fall in this midst of polarizations:

> Poet, patting more nonsense foamed
> From the sea, conceive for the courts
> Of these academies, the diviner health
> Disclosed in common forms. Set up
> The rugged black, the image. Design
> The touch. Fix quiet. Take the place
> Of parents, lewdest of ancestors.
> We are conceived in your conceits. (*CP* 195)

The poet sides with the "nigger mystics," "The rugged black," and abandons loyalty to the courts of the academy, opting instead to find his poetry in common forms. He decides to return to the art of his parents, "lewdest of ancestors," and rediscover his primitive, imaginative powers. But the poet's alignment and identification with these black figures cannot come

without a racially connotative vocabulary that represents blacks as more common and "rugged" than whites and that portrays them as standing outside the court of cultural knowledge: the academy. Such a distinction also raises the issue of audience in the poem. The poet is asked to gather these common forms, these "rugged blacks," for those in the academy. He is to prepare his conception and creation of images for a particular audience, those who are unfamiliar with the "common forms" of art, unaware of the "nigger mystics" in their midst. In addition, it is somewhat disturbing that the pieces of advice given to the poet—about setting up the "rugged black" and taking the place of "parents, the lewdest of ancestors"—are inscribed in the realm of the primitive. Essentially, the poem's racial vocabulary (a vocabulary that cannot escape certain cultural connotations even though Stevens is describing an imaginative transformation) suggests that although black characters are valued, what they are valued for—their lack of sophistication, their investment in the mythical instead of the scientific, and their closer proximity to the earth—are all attributes stereotypically associated with nonwhites. Although the poet embraces these qualities and chooses to adopt them in his philosophy of art, it is hard to overlook that such stereotyping works against any attempts Stevens has at truly knowing African American culture.

Ironically enough, Stevens' alliance with those who held the least power in his society—blacks—allows him a certain measure of freedom, a way to transgress white society safely. Putting on blackface as he does in "Nudity at the Capital" and "Prelude to Objects" accomplishes two important tasks for Stevens: it is a vehicle by which he can explore the Other in the safest possible manner (on his own terms) and it is a mechanism to critique the white world from which he comes. What could be one of the more forbidden social forces to critique than the bourgeois morality and economics of a society in which, as Frank Lentricchia tells us, "the inescapable question pressed upon [Stevens] first by family and then by his New York experience is this: How can I turn some part of myself (my 'talent') into a commodity that people will want and 'therefore pay for'?" (146).

In fact, the early Stevens felt much anxiety and perhaps even anger over the economic burden he was forced to carry. When he moved to New York in 1900 at the age of twenty-one Stevens, Lentricchia argues, was forced "to bear witness to the thinness of his middle-class insulation" (142). Although Stevens was raised in the bosom of bourgeois life, his father insisted that the young man carry out the full responsibility of American manhood: economic self-reliance. Encouraged by his father to seek a career in journalism and, in the language of supply and demand, to "[t]ake an inventory of [his] capacities" (*L* 19), Stevens did find a position with the *New York Tribune*. But he thought the writing assignments a drudgery and his position on the staff tenuous. All this economic anxiety came to a head when Stevens attended the funeral of a fellow journalist who also wrote fiction he admired: Stephen Crane. Stevens found Crane's funeral,

peopled mostly with lower-class mourners, an "absolutely common-place, bare, silly service" (*L* 41). He felt Crane, surrounded by the throngs of the commonplace, was not given his proper due. The budding writer's talent was never appreciated and honored in a culture that valued popular forms of media (such as journalism) over more artistic endeavors (such as fiction). After this event, Stevens, according to Joan Richardson, had finally become a "native" of the city's brutal reality (*Early Years* 128), which declared no vacancy for a life devoted solely to arts and letters. Nine months later, not wanting to share in the same fate as Crane, Stevens wrote his father requesting a guaranteed income so he could quit his job at the *Tribune* and devote all his time to writing. Garret Stevens refused his son's request and Stevens, in the words of Lentricchia, suddenly found himself "expelled from Eden" (144). Unlike the rags-to-riches pattern of most American tales, however, Stevens' story took another form. His American dream "involve[d] the recapturing of a lost social and economic status that he had never earned but which he had nevertheless enjoyed" (Lentricchia 144). Suddenly Stevens came to know the tenuous comfort of middle-class existence and the pervading threat of economic descent. That he would find much to criticize about the system that placed him in such an unhappy circumstance certainly seems likely.

For a white American male poet beginning his career during the turn of the twentieth century, besieged by demands from both his father and his culture to prove his masculinity through an economically productive talent, Stevens might have felt compelled to critique American capitalism in the safest manner possible: in the guise of a blackface. "In minstrelsy," writes Morrison, "a layer of blackness applied to a white face released it from law. Just as entertainers, through or by association with blackface, could render permissible topics that otherwise would have been taboo, so American writers were able to employ an imagined Africanist persona to articulate and imaginatively act out the forbidden in American culture" (66). Yet, as in minstrelsy, Stevens' metaphorical use of blackface in his poetry is not employed to reveal the social injustice of racism or even to show a sensitivity toward African American struggles. Rather, it provides a means for Stevens to indulge his felt sense of difference—as a poet in a culture obsessed with commodity and production—without actually experiencing the powerlessness of such a position.

As Milton Bates notes, Stevens frequently adopted various personas in his poetry. Citing a journal entry in which Stevens claims that " 'every man is like an actor's trunk, full of strange creatures, new & old' " (Bates 55; see *SP* 166), Bates identifies at least three of the onstage roles Stevens performed: burgher, dandy, and fop. But a distinction needs to be drawn here between Stevens posing as any one of these three characters and Stevens posing in blackface. For, as Bates astutely points out, Stevens was, in fact, a burgher and was often accused of being a dandy; these personas were dramatizations of himself. Obviously, Stevens was not a black man,

and thus this pose proves more problematic. His poetic maneuvers—drawing analogies between his circumstances and the trials of more marginalized members of his society—reveal the fear as well as the desire propelling Stevens' imaginative process "to become." Posing as the culturally disenfranchised releases the poser from certain expectations and duties. That is to say, if the culture devalues certain individuals (based on gender, race, class) then it matters little how well they perform, think, or for that matter, create. With inheritance—acquiring social or financial prestige—comes responsibility, an upholding of standards and norms. Trying on these various identities enables the poet to satisfy the fascination of becoming the outsider (discounted and thus "untouched" by cultural impositions); but, what is more, the strategy also quells the poser's fear of ever truly remaining that outsider. Like the newly found solidarity Stevens might have felt with the poor immigrants of New York in 1900, his strategy of blackface is always once removed.[6] As long as he remains white and employed—two circumstances that are unlikely (impossible in the first case) to change—Stevens can still hope to reclaim that bourgeois Eden of his early existence.

Perhaps Stevens' strongest critique of the culture that placed him in such a financially tenuous position comes in the poem "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab." Employing his metaphorical strategy of blackface, Stevens uses a black female figure in this poem to critique sexually inhibited Victorian characters like the High-Toned Old Christian Woman and Mrs. Alfred Uruguay. In a stereotypical fashion he endows the black female with a primitive and wild sexuality, one that he contrasts with the white women's. But interestingly enough, the representation of the black figure is ambivalent; for in the same moment that he uses her as a symbol of sexual power and freedom in order to indict white women, he also elevates her as an individual force, content and happy with herself.

> Victoria Clementina, negress,
> Took seven white dogs
> To ride in a cab.
>
> Bells of the dogs chinked.
> Harness of the horses shuffled
> Like brazen shells.
>
> Oh-hé-hé! Fragrant puppets
> By the green lake-pallors,
> She too is flesh,
>
> And a breech-cloth might wear,
> Netted of topaz and ruby
> And savage blooms;

Thridding the squawkiest jungle
In a golden sedan,
White dogs at bay.

What breech-cloth might you wear,
Except linen, embroidered
By elderly women? (*OP* 41)

In contrast to the collective "Fragrant puppets"—sisters of the High-Toned Old Christian Woman—who are destined to wear ordinary linen embroidered by elderly women, the named individual, Victoria Clementina, may be fitted in cloth netted of topaz and ruby, savage blooms. From the first, the speaker seems to embrace Victoria Clementina, this figure of vitality and creativity, who may ride in golden sedans with white dogs at bay. He reminds us that this "negress," often dismissed by those white Victorian-minded ladies, is just as human as they. "Oh-hé-hé!" he taunts the old women, "She too is flesh." Although the poet's obvious admiration for the black female figure can be read in some ways as a celebration or an embrace of black culture, both the role Victoria Clementina occupies in the poem and Stevens' word choice and conception of character reiterate a certain racist rhetoric, far removed from the language of adoration. The images and words Stevens associates with this powerful black woman—"savage blooms" and "the squawkiest jungle"—are historically racist and demeaning. The poet praises and equates her with those characteristics—primitive, savage, sexually uninhibited—that have been traditionally placed upon non-Western people as a means to maintain their oppression. Seen in such a lewd manner, African Americans have appeared as the Other, entirely different and ultimately less human than those in the white Western world.

Although Stevens admires the wild imagination and savage beauty of Victoria Clementina, he does not allow her to exist outside stereotypical and racist perceptions of African Americans. Even though she is the only named figure in the poem, the poet uses Victoria Clementina almost exclusively as a point of reference; her presence merely enables him to critique those stuffy Victorian women; her sexuality foils their prudishness; her vibrant imagination, their stifled thoughts. She becomes the Other from which we can define the white women in the poem. By using Victoria Clementina as a mirror, Stevens adopts a recurrent strategy in American literature in regard to portraying black characters: employing them to define the goals and illuminate the qualities of white characters. They become more valuable to the work as foils, rather than highly individualized characters. "[F]or American writers generally," observes Morrison, "this Africanist other became the means of thinking about body, mind, chaos, kindness, and love; provided the occasion for exercises in the absence of restraint, the presence of restraint, the contemplation of freedom and of aggression; permitted opportunities for

the exploration of ethics and morality" (47–48). In "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab" Victoria Clementina's presence becomes a way to reflect on the sexuality, morality, arrogance, self-righteousness, and mundanity of high-toned Christian women.

"The Virgin Carrying a Lantern," an earlier Stevens poem, uses a black woman to comment on the love affair of a white woman.

> There are no bears among the roses,
> Only a negress who supposes
> Things false and wrong
>
> About the lantern of the beauty
> Who walks there, as a farewell duty,
> Walks long and long.
>
> The pity that her pious egress
> Should fill the vigil of a negress
> With heat so strong! (*CP* 71)

Like Victoria Clementina, this "negress" is imaginative, insightful; it is she, the speaker tells us, "who supposes / Things false and wrong," who recognizes that something is amiss with the lantern and the one who is carrying it: the white woman. Although it is never clearly indicated, one could speculate that the beauty's (the white woman's) problem relates to matters of love and sexuality; her egress, though pious, is surrounded with sexual connotations, enabled once again by the presence of a black woman.

Although readers are invited in some ways to share the perspective of the black woman—viewing the beauty from behind a bush—and though it is the black character's realization and speculation that frames the whole purpose of the poem, the speaker will not allow the "negress" full identity outside of racist thought. From the outset we are told by the speaker that she is "Only" a "negress" and that a bear might incite more notice. But the speaker, like the "negress," is an intriguing figure because he or she is the only source we have with which to base our assessment of both the black and white women. Helen Vendler reads the poem's speaker as having a "simpering Victorian voice" who "reprov[es] the negress' suppositions as 'false and wrong,' [and] express[es] indignation at the negress' strong 'heat' " (*Words Chosen* 18). Although the speaker shows sympathy with the "negress" in the last stanza, he or she draws upon stereotypical descriptions of black women and espouses racist ideas. Vendler clarifies some of the speaker's notions:

> if the negress supposes bears, it is because she is acquainted with bears, while the virgin knows only roses; the negress is in the dark, the virgin bears a lantern; the negress, with her strong

> "heat," is sexual, the virgin chaste; the negress an impious spy, the virgin a pious vestal. The trouble with the virgin's universe, which would be pleasing if it contained only roses, dutiful virgins, lanterns, and pious farewells, is that it contains the negress, her vigil, her heat, and her suppositions. (*Words Chosen* 18–19)

But, as Vendler points out, this is a voice and philosophy that Stevens, by employing a satirical tone, is criticizing. Even in this critique, however, Stevens is working under a racial dichotomy; he is pitting white against black. He is also using the "negress" as an enabler of both white characters—the Victorian speaker as well as the white beauty. In a rudimentary sense African primitivism meets white Victorian morality in this poem and Stevens, as he usually does, appears to side with the African imagination. For it is the "negress" who centers this poem, who watches, who waits, who understands.

As he does with Victoria Clementina, Stevens constructs the "negress" as a figure of the imagination, someone with insight and clairvoyance. Yet the status of each of these women as a creative force does not divorce their representations in the poems from certain realistic connotations. Stevens cannot describe an African American—even if she is used as a figure of the imagination—in a vocabulary of racist images and leave these characters untouched by his culture's racism. In both poems what is most striking about Stevens' portrayal of these two women is the process of appropriation he employs. If "imagining," as Morrison contends, is more than just looking at the other (more than just depicting images), but actually "*becoming*" that other (4), then Stevens—especially in these two poems—performs a powerful transubstantiation whereby the "imagined" (these two black women) become the "validated" (the critics of white morality). As he does with his strategy of blackface in "Nudity at the Capital," Stevens unconsciously employs his whiteness, and all the privileges it confers, as a means to "empower" these black figures. In an almost patronizing fashion, the poet, through his whiteness, grants these characters a space to criticize the dominant white culture.

Stevens does attempt, however, to reconcile this dichotomous thinking—this pitting of African imagination and sexuality against white Victorian morality and prudishness—in the poem "The Greenest Continent" from his 1936 collection *Owl's Clover*. Possibly inspired by Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, suggests Milton Bates, the poem describes a European invasion of Africa in which European angels impose their theology and sense of aesthetic on African bushmen by placing a statue within the jungles of Africa. Once again Stevens frames the two sides in a stereotypical fashion (civilized Europe meets African primitivism). But, as Milton Bates notes, "The angels win the battle but lose the war, since the statue, here symbol for all northern ideas of order, proves meaningless in the jungle" (187). In part IV of the poem it becomes obvious that European religion, with its

golden icons and ivory statues, has no place in Africa. "No god rules over Africa, no throne, / Single, of burly ivory, inched of gold," the speaker tells us. "Death, only, sits upon the serpent throne: / Death, the herdsman of elephants" (*OP* 86). This line suggests how completely different are the circumstances and environments that surround these two peoples. While Europeans are constructing statues to pay homage to their gods of order and ideas, African bushmen are quite literally battling against the only force that seems to govern their lives: death. That these angels from Europe should gloriously inflict their religion and ideas upon native Africans, an act that recalls Western missionaries' goal of Christianizing the "savage," strikes the speaker as utterly absurd. In part V he questions the European invaders:

> Hé quoi! Angels go pricking elephants?
> Wings spread and whirling over jaguar-men?
> Angels tiptoe upon the snowy cones
> Of palmy peaks sighting machine-guns? These,
> Seraphim of Europe? (*OP* 87)

The speaker's tone suggests that such an imposition of philosophy is not only useless, but completely ridiculous as well. Forcing one's ideas upon other people, going about "pricking elephants" and tiptoeing upon snow-covered peaks all in the name of Western religion seem comically meaningless. The poem likewise indicates that the gods of the African bushmen are just as legitimate as the god of Europeans and that no one needs to be saved by the forces of Western thought and religion. Although it seems as if the differences between the two peoples are vast, the final section of the poem suggests that they are not irreconcilable. Stevens envisions the sort of divinity they might share: Ananke, "the fateful, impassive, changeless presence who ordains the shape of all lesser gods and artifacts" (Bates 187). Ananke, which symbolizes poetry and is indifferent to racial and regional differences, offers hope, suggesting that a merging between black and white is possible. For Ananke is "the common god" (*OP* 89) and he looks upon the statue in the jungle and observes the people that surround it:

> He sees the angel in the nigger's mind
> And hears the nigger's prayer in motets, belched
> From pipes that swarm clerestory walls. The voice
> In the jungle is a voice in Fontainebleau. (*OP* 90)

This is probably Stevens' most utopian representation of racial relations where black and white are bonded by their similarities and peace and order surround them.

Even with this attempt at a harmonious conclusion, Stevens cannot refrain from using racial epithets or from characterizing blacks in stereo-

typical notions. "Stevens could hold such notions," writes Aldon Lynn Nielsen, "and still consider himself rational because he was ignorant of Africa's contributions to culture, because he chose to ignore the means by which the Africans had been rendered homeless, and because he thought within structures of belief which supported such conceptions and shrouded them in scientificity" (65). As much as Stevens wants these two forces to merge, it does not seem possible because he operates under a structure of thinking that will not allow it. With Ananke looking on, the statue can remain in the jungle, but it will never be completely a part of the jungle; the ivory seems destined to chip, the gold to tarnish. The European statue seems ill equipped to adapt to the climate of the jungle, the jungle unlikely to temper its heat.

In Stevens' 1950 poem "The Sick Man" the possibility of some symbiosis of black and white—what is never completely achieved in "The Greenest Continent"—finally arrives. The poem centers on a listener who "Waits for the unison of the music" between "the drifting bands / And the dissolving chorals" of two distinct groups of musicians: the "bands of thousands of black men" in the South "Playing mouth-organs in the night" and the voices of men in the North, "singing without words, remote and deep" (*OP* 118). The listener, the sick man who lies in a bed "alone," has a vision and in the last two stanzas imagines:

> The words of winter in which these two will come together,
> In the ceiling of the distant room, in which he lies,
> The listener, listening to the shadows, seeing them,
>
> Choosing out of himself, out of everything within him,
> Speech for the quiet, good hail of himself, good hail, good
> hail,
> The peaceful, blissful words, well-tuned, well-sung,
> well-spoken. (*OP* 118)

By possessing a "mind of winter"—the psychological state so espoused in Stevens' poem "The Snow Man"—the speaker is able to envision a unity between black and white, North and South, sound and language. In this epiphanic moment, the listener moves out of himself and gains what for him is the most vital and sustaining music: "The peaceful, blissful words. . . ." The listener here almost seems like a poet who finds, in the opposition between black and white, a language, an art form. Whether or not he is a visionary, or a poet, or an artist, Stevens tells us only one detail about this listener: he is a sick man, lying in a bed alone. What are we to make, then, of his vision of racial and regional harmony? Can we trust this dazzling revelation or is it merely the result of some feverish delirium? Are "sick men" the only ones who can imagine a state of racial unity? The idyllic atmosphere of equality perceived by this listener, because of who he is and what he suffers from, now seems rather tenuous. He appears

somehow divorced from the outside world because of his sickness and isolation, solipsistically enjoying the idea of racial harmony but never really entering the song himself.

Perhaps more than anything else, Stevens wished to disturb the quiet thoughts of his readers, to stir them out of the comfortable chairs of their parlors, to wake them from the slumber of Sunday morning service and the complacency of "late / Coffee and oranges" (*CP* 66). Sometimes in bold and bawdy tone, sometimes in cool and detached cadence, Stevens wrote to rouse and even criticize his most devoted followers: white upper- and middle-class Americans. Armed with the power of the imagination, that force that would allow him to "become the light in the minds of others" (*NA* 29), Stevens took this readership to task: he forced them to question the comfort they took in religion in "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," the fascination they had with bourgeois values in "Exposition of the Contents of a Cab," and the passive submission with which they performed the simple and daily routines of life in "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock."

But such an aim, noble and demanding as it was, did not come without a price, without its richly disturbing consequences. If Stevens, it can readily be argued, accurately assumed that his readership was composed almost exclusively of whites, what then are we to make of his imaginative construction of black identity? What effect did his assumption of a white readership have on Stevens' depiction of those who were not likely to own, in the 1920s or 1930s, a copy of *Harmonium*? When did Stevens' awareness of race and when did his conscious and unconscious allegiance to twentieth-century prejudices disrupt, enrich, or impoverish his imaginative process? As evident by the number of poems that concern black characters and presences, Stevens leaves us with an uncomfortable sense of racial ambivalence. In some ways, he finds it difficult and frequently impossible to imagine whiteness without calling upon images of blackness. Black characters in many of his poems, such as Victoria Clementina and the black "negress," not only encounter whiteness but are also often used by the poet to comment on these white figures. Thus Stevens' invention of black identity performs a reflexive function; it provides, in Toni Morrison's terms, "an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious" (17). Attempting to draw an empathetic alliance with those who were disinherited in his culture—African American men and women—might have provided a vehicle for the poet to work out his fears and desires, especially those anxieties fueled by the pressures of achieving financial success and security.

In his own mind, however, Stevens might have perceived his self-declared alignment with blacks during such turbulent times as an artistic aspiration to reflect something beyond himself, something universal about human struggles and ambitions. Because he was a writer who shared Emerson's vision of the poet as an inventor, as someone who "unlocks our

chains and admits us to a new scene" (236), Stevens might have viewed his endeavor to capture African American experience as an attainable ideal, one propelled by his ability to invent, to imagine. If, according to Stevens, the poet fulfills his obligation to his readers only when he "make[s] his imagination theirs" (*NA* 29), then he may have viewed his representation of nonwhites as completely genuine, as a product of that "supreme fiction" made real by the poet's and reader's faith in imaginative powers. Yet in undertaking this task, the poet strives to render more than he knows, and, at last, can present us only with small sketches of black America that appear more invented than authentic, more imagined than real.

Whatever it was that Stevens envisioned as his poetic obligation—whether he hoped, as he said, to be "the light in the minds of others," or "to help people to live their lives" *(NA* 29)—his poetic privilege, his endeavor to move imaginatively among the stratified zones of black and white experience in the early twentieth century, was equally as powerful. In his crafting of African American characters, in his act of imagining the Other, Stevens did, in fact, *become*. But this transaction, in the end, proved costly. For Stevens' various poetic acts of "becoming"—his declarations of alignment, his use of blackface, his strategies of enabling whiteness, and his methods of transubstantiation—inevitably diminish and patronize African Americans. Through his seductive depiction of African American experience and struggle as something comprehensible to white sympathies, Stevens makes the identity of his nonwhite characters "knowable" and thereby controllable. Regardless of his intentions, however, Stevens widens the disparity between black and white (Other and Self), unwittingly leaving us to contend with the attraction and consolation of false alliances.

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Notes

[1] Although African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer employ similar strategies, they usually serve another purpose: to ironize, to appropriate the image on their own terms. Cullen's "A Song of Praise," for example, describes a black woman's beauty in a racial vocabulary: "Her walk is like the replica / Of some barbaric dance / Wherein the soul of Africa / Is winged with arrogance." Yet her loveliness is not obscured by this reference, only enhanced. For if we view the woman only through this racial description, the poet tells us, we will be deprived of her complete radiance. In the last stanza he addresses his white readership:

> You-proud-and-to-be-pitied one,
> Gaze on her and despair;
> Then seal your lips until the sun
> Discovers one as fair. (4)

See Hughes's "Negro" and "Young Negro Girl" for other examples.

[2] The poems that characterize African Americans as primitive and often associate them with the forces of death and decay include "O Florida, Venereal Soil" (which describes a "negro undertaker / Killing the time between corpses / Fishing for crayfish . . ." [*CP* 47]), "The Jack-Rabbit," "Two at Norfolk" (which begins with the imperative, "Mow the grass in the cemetery, darkies" [*CP* 111]), "Mud Master," and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." In poems such as "Contrary Theses (II)" (with its oddly placed line, "The negroes were playing football in the park" [*CP* 270]) and "Primordia" (where in the eighth section, "The black mother of eleven children / Hangs her quilt under the pine-trees" [*OP* 27]), Stevens seems to be using nonwhites as local color. See Aldon Lynn Nielsen (62) for a further discussion of this pattern in Stevens' poetry.

[3] For an in-depth discussion of William Carlos Williams' representation of racial difference, see Aldon Lynn Nielsen, 72–84.

[4] Helen Vendler, in her astute and insightful reading of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" in *On Extended Wings*, points out that most of the poem's stanzas (except for I and IV) depend upon rhetorical figures for their form. "Often the figure is antithesis, for instance, as in the dominating contrasts of summer and winter, rich and poor, the mechanical and the human, the social and the private" (72). Yet the subject of racial experience and identity seems politely avoided. Nowhere in this list of antitheses is there any mention of the contrast that frames the entire poem: black and white. And the title's significance is primarily discussed in terms of its relationship to Stevens' simile that his poems "are like decorations in a nigger cemetery." Such also seems to be the case in David Jarraway's explication of the poem, which, he simply states, is "strangely titled" (61), but he offers no further explanation of the strangeness.

[5] A close examination of Stevens' correspondence and various biographies suggests that he had very little contact with African Americans. Although he lived during the time of the Harlem Renaissance, I could find no mention of his views on poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, or Jean Toomer. Perhaps the most damaging and revealing evidence comes from Joan Richardson's biography *The Later Years* where she recounts a 1952 meeting of the National Book Award committee, on which Stevens served as one of the judges.

> While waiting for Peter Viereck, the last of the judges, delayed by a snowstorm, to arrive, the other five (Winfield Townley Scott, Selden Rodman, Conrad Aiken, Wallace Stevens, and William Cole) passed the time looking at photographs of previous meetings of National Book Award judges. Gwendolyn Brooks appeared in one of these. On seeing the photo, Stevens remarked, "Who's the coon?" (The meeting it should be noted, took place after lunch, which for the poet had probably begun with two healthy martinis and continued with a fine bottle of wine.) Noticing the reaction of the group to his question, he added, "I know you don't like to hear people call a lady a coon, but who is it?" (388)

While Richardson goes on to imply that the incident is partly a result of intoxication and partly Stevens' comedic attempt to be shocking, this passage reveals more than an uncomfortable bit of racism; it demonstrates the poet's ignorance of African American writers. It is 1952 and Stevens, who is more than established in the American life of letters, seems ill informed of the contribution of black artists.

[6] Frank Lentricchia describes Stevens' newly felt sympathy with the poor during his early years in New York:

> Suddenly he felt a shocking solidarity with the poor who had hitherto only repulsed him in their filth and poverty (the sight of Italian immigrants had once made it impossible for him to finish a snack of clams on the half shell); he was coming to know a new sort of closeness with those who had hitherto made him

feel faintly disgusted when they sat too near him on commuter trains. At the age of twenty-five Stevens came to know economic difference and the peculiar privilege of middle-class life in America. (144–45)

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Questioning the Composition of Romance in "The Idea of Order at Key West"

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It should be said of poetry that it is essentially romantic as if one were recognizing the truth about poetry for the first time. Although the romantic is referred to, most often, in a pejorative sense, this sense attaches, or should attach, not to the romantic in general but to some phase of the romantic that has become stale. Just as there is always a romantic that is potent, so there is always a romantic that is impotent.

—Wallace Stevens

"THE IDEA OF ORDER at Key West" addresses romantic potency by investigating its central source of inspiration, the muse. This famous poem is one of the most critically elusive and contentious in all of Wallace Stevens' work. Harold Bloom attempts "to reveal how faithfully [this poem] follows the model of the Wordsworthian crisis-poem, in its American Romantic modification" (93). Although a romantic poem in its topos—a mysterious female figure singing on the seashore—the romantic paradigm is questioned from the outset:

> She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
> The water never formed to mind or voice,
> Like a body wholly body, fluttering
> Its empty sleeves. . . . (*CP* 128)

Neither the figure's body nor voice contains the sea or its representative song. The romantic paradigm of a female body singing for the poet—his muse or instrument—is unquestionably "empty" here, dispossessed. Eleanor Cook argues against Wordsworthian sublimation:

> The woman does not half-perceive and half-create anything; she is the single artificer of her song. She is what the listeners behold—not a woman made into addressee, listener, younger self, and spirit of place, as Wordsworth made Dorothy. Stevens' woman sings her own song, . . . his sea does not have a knowable spirit. It is an inverse ghost—not a spirit shorn of body but a body shorn of a knowable spirit. (131)

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Bloom's "model of the Wordsworthian crisis poem" is not the case for Stevens, except insofar as romantic paradigms are in crisis. John Hollander, in "The Sound of the Music of Music and Sound," observes a similar romantic shift:

> There is no manifesto about musical figures more powerful or more direct than the beginning of "The Idea of Order at Key West," where the voice of the singing spirit and the "constant cry" of the sea are emphatically denied a relation that their forerunners have had throughout the history of our poetry. (134)

Although I agree that spirit and sea are logically denied interrelation, this denial is not simple because the power of the poem's music works against it:

> The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
> The song and water were not medleyed sound
> Even if what she sang was what she heard,
> Since what she sang was uttered word by word. (*CP* 128)

The sound of the music has a stronger effect on the reader than the poem's logical denial of mimesis. As she echoes "what she heard" "word by word," the poem's cadence and rhyme mimic the logic of mimesis that Stevens is denying. She listens and speaks within the scene and therefore would seem to provide a narrative copy of the seascape, but she is refused the role of symbolic provider. The muse as romantic paradigm is in crisis while the poem continues to reconstruct a new music that is more powerful than the anti-paradigmatic argument. Stevens forwards a music that does not carry the usual symbolic attributes. The active imagery signifies sound and sight but awaits morphology. This muse is a figure but not a recognizable trope, or a trope emptied of usual figuration; she is a signifier as yet unsignified, or a signified hollowed of signifiers.

A. Walton Litz, before Hollander, stated that "Stevens rejects the older romantic notions of the poet expressing the voice of nature" (193). However, there lingers in Litz's analysis the notion that nature is the reference for inspiration: "in Stevens' poem the singer is a maker, building a verbal artifice out of the sound of the sea" (195). This view maintains the poem within a twofold mimetic order, which limits the poem's generative compositional powers to being *about* nature. My point is that while "verbal artifice" is being built, it is not "out of the sound of the sea," or "a response to nature" (194), as Litz also states. Such certainty about a dialogue with nature simplifies the poem's central unanswered question, "Whose spirit is this?" (*CP* 129).

In order to approach that question, I will return to the undermined dialectic of "sea" and "she" that Stevens complicates in the second stanza:

> The sea was not a mask. No more was she.
> The song and water were not medleyed sound

> Even if what she sang was what she heard,
> Since what she sang was uttered word by word.

The first line's caesura divides the identities of she and the sea, neither of which is a mask. We might ask, masks of whom: each other, the observer, poet? Regardless, Stevens brings them together in the next line, an example of defied romantic logic. Although he argues that "song and water were not medleyed sound," the two entities are called up simultaneously in the poem and are therefore set in comparative relation so that the negatives fail to deny metaphorical identity.

In the first stanza, she and sea relate in terms of value, mutual exclusion, simile, personification, mimesis, speech, knowledge, and synecdoche. Despite all those relationships Stevens will not draw them up in metaphor. In fact, she and the sea become anti-metaphorical, "The song and water were not medleyed sound" and not a mask. However, the innovations of grammar and syntax in this line overpower the negative logical argument. The noun "medley" becomes the verb "medleyed" activating "song and water" as well as an adjective describing the singular "medleyed sound," thus unifying "song and water." The word's unusual syntactical usage is itself a medley of sorts, being one word used in three different grammatical ways. This grammatical saturation increases syntactical links, further drawing together she and sea. Even the abundance of spatial relations between she and the sea in the confines of the poem's printed space conglomerates the muses to the extent that the negative "not" hardly denies the medley.

Such a reading seems intricate, but Stevens has yet to complicate the actual argument in the second stanza. The first two lines logically reaffirm each other. The third line, "Even if what she sang was what she heard," introduces a dependent conditional clause. Despite the poet's assertion that the two entities do not wear on each other (as masks, medleys), the third line suggests the possibility of mimetic reportage by the female subject. Although the condition is left indeterminate, the proposal of musical inspiration teases the reader along with the poem's evolving predicament. The rest of the conditional sentence follows: "Since what she sang was uttered word by word." The speculation about her music is divided into a spoken utterance that breaks down her song. This line's ambling cadence emphasizes the mechanical assembly of the song, whose site is the poem. Perhaps the line's attention to language is the first indication (not couched in the logic of a negation overwhelmed by images, as were the previous lines) that her song is the poet's poem.[1]

To recapitulate, some of Stevens' most effective techniques are at work in these four lines. Indeterminate identity is constituted by several phenomenal elements, all of these existing in many figurative relations. The logic of negation is overpowered by the suggestive capabilities of figures, such as image and sound drawn together by metonymy and metaphor.

Often such figuration is not made but merely suggested so that the reader makes poetry out of suggestion. Words are used innovatively, both in terms of revamped syntax and grammar, as well as of their placement within the poem's rhythm and meter. Interpretive teasing occurs through various means, such as the possibilities of mimetic definition, metaphor, and the apparent logic of a conditional argument. Stevens' rampant use of the conditional is important because it implies cause and effect. Within that framework, he usually includes contradiction so as to demonstrate the fallibility of logic, once again. Lastly, reflexive attention to the writing of the poem distracts attention away from transparent mimesis. The reader's role as listener of a true story or event is disrupted. The reader becomes involved in configuring the poem's compositional world rather than being told about it.

The question of who originates the lyric is developed in the third stanza:

> Whose spirit is this? we *said*, because we *knew*
> It was the spirit that we *sought* and *knew*
> That we should *ask* this often as she *sang*.
> (*CP* 129; italics added)

Speaking, knowing, seeking, asking, and singing are all forms of interpretation, a hermeneutical plurality that is rather like a revolving hinge in Stevens' poetry. There is virtually no difference in these forms of knowledge, especially when logic does not (literally) hold water in this poem. They belong together indeterminately, but determinedly together. The point is that there is no locatable origin for the spirit. The lack of reference for the spirit and the ocean is the mystery the poet wants to participate in. Although a defined knowledge is well out of reach, there exist between the utterance and knowledge the quest and the song. The quest(ion) operates in dialectical rapport with the mysterious song. Epic striving works in economical exchange with lyricism. Together they are part of the conditional economy of "the gift," which Jacques Derrida has suggested is the space of time in any exchange.[2] I mention Derrida's gift metaphor here because Stevens is transforming the notion of a divine gift or inspirational song into a quest(ion) about human order. Stevens' use of the conditional tense works in this model of causal existence, applicable to life, and the poem "The Idea of Order at Key West" asks, if we have the song (gift), what sort of exchange that is—especially when we realize that it is our own, not belonging to a transcendent other.

The identity of the singer is questioned together with the content of her song:

> It may be that in all her phrases stirred
> The grinding water and the gasping wind;
> But it was she and not the sea we heard. (*CP* 129)

Eleanor Cook wonders whether " 'It may be' that, somehow, 'in' her words (but how, 'in'?) there stirred the 'gasping wind' " (132).[3] Cook's bracketed question problematizes the possessive quality of language in the same way Stevens undermines mimetic possession. Stevens is careful to keep her words indeterminate: "But it was she and not the sea we heard." Her "phrases" may compose the wind in an abstract linguistic form, but wind and sea remain uncontainable, just as she is not a mask for the poet. Toward the end of the poem, the questers rather than the questee become questioned. We do not know that the poet and Ramon Fernandez are implied until the end; therefore "we" is indeterminate. The possibility of the reader's involvement strengthens the philosophic urgency of the spiritual quest(ion).[4]

The fourth stanza is to me the most remarkable in terms of "pure poetry." Its lyricism appears and sounds transformative. Yet this most potent poetry is doubly limited. It is part of a conditional argument and counter-argued by the following stanza. Here we have the romantic exorcized:

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

Because this section of the poem has so much in store, I will layer a few readings of it in order to show its many logical defacements. I will begin with a fairly quick reading that provides an overall shape, which will then be retraced in more detail. In many of the poems from *Ideas of Order,* and in "Imagination as Value," Stevens cites the romantic as a denigrating limitation upon imaginative production. The above excerpt of "The Idea of Order at Key West" begins with romantic considerations of the ("wine dark"?) sea. The conditional argument is "colored" by the metonymic waves, then reconditioned by a consideration of a sky voice, which is then grounded by the "cloud" metonymy. The quest for originary voice is complicated by basic perceptions. Through perception the poem is composed by showing the "act of the mind" taking precedence over an argument searching for reason and truth: originary still points, such as the sea voice, are shown to be insensible, having nothing to do with building this com-

position. The semblable argument is obfuscated: "If it was only the outer voice of sky / And cloud, of the sunken coral water-walled, / However clear. . . ." The power of the "coral" metonymy as image and sound overtakes, and makes the reader forget, its supposed part of a logical quest for spiritual ownership. Set within a series of images that accumulatively awaken the senses, the coral image acquires an immanence effective within the poem's composition. As part of the ongoing quest(ion), it is a preposterous impediment, a recasting of the lyric point of departure. Stevens shows its dislocation within the argument by continuing with the transition, "However clear," which pretends to function in a logical sequence, one that has been subverted already. It is strange that both the poem's lyrical imagery and its argument share the same sentence syntax, as they work rhetorically against each other: the plodding rhythm and repetition of the "summer sound" lines construct a dull singularity that provides an answer to the argument that is as unsatisfactory as Stevens makes the argument out to be. On top of that irresolution, Stevens heaps "Theatrical distances, bronze shadows" so that the accumulating sensory data overpowers logical formulations.

Let us retrace this part of the poem with more attention to the sound of the music. Stevens conjoins sound with image as one side of a dialectic that plays off the poem's logical debates. Logic depends upon syntax and grammar, which are sometimes altered to lend power to sound and image.[5] Conveniently, this section of the poem can be divided into an argument according to the rhythm and meter of the lines. In answering the previous stanza's question, "Whose spirit is this?" the first four lines conditionally propose nature, that most romantic source. These lines all outgrow pentameter in uneven meters. Their sound sense dominates the meter, cannot be contained by it. The most remarkable case of this is the fourth line, "And cloud, of the sunken cor*al wa*ter-*wall*ed." Here, the caesura precedes an anapest, which leads to the onslaught of the underwater image, which is sonically submerged by the alliterative "*awl*" sound. After "sunken," the stress on "walled" picks up the second unstressed syllable of "coral," thereby further submerging the (imagined) physical coral within the water by drowning the hard sharp "cor" stress within the three "awl" sounds. (By fitting images of submersion in a romantic landscape, Stevens may be playing with the romantic characteristic of mental submersion.) The claustrophobic sounds force the restrictive meter to require an extra syllable (perhaps a pressure for breath in the face of containment). Stevens demonstrates a most effective poetic technique that continually arises when poems reach their densest potencies: the sound sense of the poem copies, emphasizes, and mimics physical properties of the image.

This achievement is aided by altering the syntax to cooperate with the innovative play of grammar. As in the poem's earlier use of "medleyed," here again the syntax is made more dynamic by drawing the verb from a noun: "water-walled" performs verbal and adjectival action on "coral,"

further strengthening the sunken sense by the overloaded use of grammar. What does it mean to have nouns acting instead as verbs and adjectives simultaneously? Perhaps as adjectives they always affect something else, thereby being interrelative rather than autonomous. As verbs, nouns, once again, can never be autonomous because they are active rather than still; they always participate in a chain of action. This grammatology is part of Stevens' poetics of change.

The next five lines offer a measured repose from Stevens. Here we think we read the contemplative sensible poet whom we can trust, the writer of the later poetry. These lines obey iambic pentameter. "However clear" pretends to function within the poem's logical flow of sentences, which already have been subverted by overpowering images. "However clear" also carries another meaning pertaining to the "air," so that the poet's already precarious argument also engages in a debate about sensory perception: "However clear, it would have been deep air. . . ." The measured rhythm and tone, however, gently lead to the only sure appraisal witnessed in the scene, "sound alone," which still perplexes its recipients. Mervyn Nicholson makes this comment:

> To say that it is sound "alone" is to remove from it all abstract meanings, while at the same time allowing the ground of all meanings to emerge. Hearing not only precedes meaning: it makes meaning possible, and hence contains meaning within itself in potential form. In "Key West" the sound of a song changes the sensory experience of the listener. Sound transforms into intensified *color.* . . . (67)

Changing sound into color, like paint into image, is one of the many leaps Stevens makes between types of figures. Following the caesura that introduces the transition, "But it was more than that," reason again gives way to sensory perception, and the meter extends past ten syllables (for three lines) to work in conjunction with the onslaught of images:

> The meaningless plungings of water and the wind,
> Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped
> On high horizons, mountainous atmospheres
> Of sky and sea.

The chaotic barrage of "The meaningless plungings of water and the wind" in a long uneven meter uses techniques similar to those in the "water-walled" line, this time making the verb a noun: "plungings" asserts verbal action as event, thereby prioritizing the sensuality and the unsensibility of sound and image.

From that vital imagery's irrational power, Stevens moves in the next line to a mixture of abstraction and artifice. Although never operating within the parameters of strict mimetic realism, the semblance of a physi-

cally real seascape could be interpreted up to this juncture. With "Theatrical distances," the poem becomes a dramatization of the abstract quest of the onlookers to understand the spirit of the scene. Those "distances" exist between "her voice, and ours," and between "meaningless plungings" and "water and the wind," as the continuous sentence links these attributes. However, that abstract vagueness—that is, the mind's interpretive plurality at work—remains firmly rooted in the physical scene (both the landscape and the language of the poem as site). "Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons" connects the abstract "distances" to seeing the color of the horizons, as in a sunset. While maintaining that physical reference, "bronze" points to metallic guilding that is materially crafted, much like the composition of the poem. The plurality of "horizons" amplifies the physical horizon to include the abstract and linguistic orders in operation. Pushing the abstract linguistic potency, "mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea" stretches the boundaries of mimesis by using mountains to describe sea and sky. The "mountainous atmospheres" also works as a metaphor continuing the trope of "distances" within the abstract mind of the perceiver, as well as being a metaphor of the sheer magnitude of the seascape.

Within lines such as these Stevens writes abstract linguistic poetry. Charles Altieri describes Stevens within the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism, maintaining the model of the mind using abstract allusions, as in Plato's forms. However, Marie Borroff points out that Stevens uses abstraction in the strict etymological sense, as the material condition of language.[6] The formulation "It Must be Abstract" in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" thoroughly proposes the idea that language always carries the weight of a split sign, and that if that split is recognized as a condition of language, it always remains a fictional property. Writing with this awareness ever presently inscribed in his poetry, Stevens' abstract poetry always expresses its requisite materiality, as do the works of the Abstract Expressionist painters. I use the term "abstract linguistic" to differentiate the poetic from the painterly medium and to register the manner in which the language of the poem becomes a dominant discursive reference. The surface of language is reflexively signified, or made obvious, by altered syntax that emphasizes imagery ("water-walled," "plungings"). Meanwhile, the words still act as references for externals, but any pretense of accurate mimetic reference is problematized by the arrangement of linguistic images operating in collision on the poem's surface.[7] Stevens manages Abstract Expressionism without losing sight of mimetic orders, however, as witnessed by the way "mountainous atmospheres" still describes a scene. In this style, Stevens is more like Willem deKooning—alluding to signifieds but prioritizing the signifier's compositional commentary—than he is like Jackson Pollock. Dekooning's *Woman and Bicycle*, for instance, contains a semblable form of its title, but the canvas is dominated by the abstract contours of colored paint.

The stanza I have been discussing probably seems fluidly non-containable, following analyses of its many motions, but it actually remains part of a simplifiable argument. The first four lines propose nature as a limited reference for the spirit. The next five reiterate the poet's ambivalence while asserting sound as one sure thing. The last four build a complex abstract composition without philosophically satisfying the quest(ion). However, the compilation of the whole stanza shows nature to be an artificially constructed, non-locatable origin for the spirit.

In his "pejorative" romanticism, Stevens makes poetry a demonstrative craft that shows its "bronze" artifice at work. The indeterminacy of spiritual voice disallows the location of an originary source or referential power. "More even than her voice, and ours," more than the sea, sky, summer wind; all of that traditional romantic nature music still exists, but as a "body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves. . . ." The personified body of nature is an empty misgiving in the poem's order of things, a signified that lacks vital signifiers in contemporary language. Conversely, the new poetic order has become, for Stevens, "meaningless plungings," a sensual feast without a host, new signifiers in composition without a well-worn signified. The poem is now less interested in attributing reason to nature; instead it concentrates on how the poet perceives and how the poem is written. "Theatrical distances, bronze shadows [are] heaped" together according to the poem's composition, with no other discernible laws. By taking idealized orders (the muse) out of poetry's mystique, Stevens materializes old abstract forms (nature) into a new syntax of sounds and images that compose logic in their assembly. They are one and the same: the poem's abstractions are compositional.

This stanza sits at the poem's center as a fulcrum upon which much is determined. Since it is encased in an unfinished conditional argument, it does not make claims, unlike the rest of the poem. Yet the poem's understanding rests upon its composition. Its lack of a claim, its dissolution into sensory composition is, I believe, the lesson of the poem. To return to one of Stevens' liveliest readers, Bloom notes its interpretive difficulty as he analyzes the opposition of "Comparison" and "Cause and Effect." I have been discussing this dialectic in terms of how figural composition undermines logic. Unwilling to allow the stanza to remain conditionally suspended between "Comparison" and "Cause and Effect," Bloom claims a "Crossing [to] Solipsism," which involves a "restitution of Power" (100–01). Willing a formal resolution, Bloom reads the stanza within his schematic poetics, concluding thus: "A voice rises up here, beyond the sea, beyond the singer, beyond Stevens, for it is more than those voices. What rises up is a voice neither natural nor human, yet Stevens cannot tell us, or know himself, what such a voice might be" (101). Although Bloom says that the first stanza "denies mimesis" (99), here he divinely anthropomorphizes the voice. Although Stevens interrogates voices, "it was more than that" does not lead to a Bloomian transcendental equivalent as much as it

directs the reader through the composition that follows, "among / The meaningless plungings of water and the wind, / Theatrical distances, bronze shadows heaped / On high horizons. . . ." This part of the poem is not a segue preceding the singer's triumphant singular voice; it assembles an abstract composition similar to the finale's "Fixing [of] emblazoned zones" (*CP* 130). Bloom's reading nears then detours from the crux of the poem (the suspension between "Comparison" and "Cause and Effect") by falling prey to the hunt for an answerable source within the logical framework of "Cause and Effect":

> Our clue must come through the second crossing of the poem, which moves toward greater expressiveness as opposed to mimesis, moves back partly to a world of sight and moves also to an internalization of the spirit. Why? Because, though the voice that is great within us cannot be our own, we are under the transgressive necessity of being able to locate it nowhere else. (101)

Bloom tries to ground the question in "Solipsism" by matter of default, or "transgressive necessity." Checking that necessity, we find that "transgress" means to "infringe, violate, go beyond the bounds of" (*OED*). This unruly romantic imposition is what the poem works to be rid of from the beginning. I suggest the poem takes the question of origin or spirit and says we can continue to look elsewhere, but that all we have is sensual figuration, the spells of language. The poem's linguistic performances may teasingly move the reader who is trained in the tradition of religious awe as exercised by romantic poets, but Stevens' images are no longer contained in the tropic baggage of old signified transcendences. The poem's flat abstract compositions do not provide vertical symbolic reference (i. e., God → navel) for the spiritual question. The poem reissues the mystery that likely initiated divine structures in the first place. Stevens shrugs, "God is in me or else is not at all" (*OP* 198).

The "second crossing" Bloom refers to is the impasse that is signified, as in "Of Modern Poetry," by a line break. Its structure says *this is an obvious transition in the poem's development*.

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world. . . . (*CP* 129)

These demonstrative lines locate, for Bloom, "an internalization of the spirit" (101). Within romantic poetry (Bloom aligns Shelley here) the muse has been just that, although the poem will show us that "the single artificer" is a rhetorical decoy.

> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (*CP* 129–30)

The section's confident voice turns out to be ironic within the poem's evolving structure and rhetoric, as her seemingly powerful presence is denied, apart from her part in the poem. "Then we" adds a couple of erratic syllables that remind us that the poet and his friend are viewing this phenomenon, rather than the figure being the muse incarnate. As they objectify her quite violently, for she is striding vulnerably alone, the next line asserts that the song is the limit of her existence. The poem develops an absolute unification between her, song, and creation, but emphatically not between these and the natural world: "there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made."[8]

Bloom recognizes that the poem disassociates itself from the singer, although his reading garnishes romantic wishes here within Stevens' rhetoric:

> This stanza is the poem's attempted sublimation of its deepest intentions or desires for utterance, and like all such metaphors it "fails." This is not poetical failure so much as it is argumentative or topical failure, for the sublimating metaphor tries to emphasize the resemblance between inner voice and outer ocean, at the expense of the dissimilarity. (102)

Bloom is right about the "argumentative or topical failure" that charts automatic mimesis as the poem's equation. But that failure is the poem's topical argument against romantic paradigms that mimetically bond poetry with nature. Similarly, I would describe the authorial intention implied by Bloom in "attempted sublimation" as a rhetorical strategy by Stevens. The poem directly de-sublimates the singer here. Her disappearance from the poem enables the full presence of the masculine poetry addressed to Ramon Fernandez. By transferring the house of order from an externally concocted other to the poem's present party ("Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know") Stevens vivifies spirit within those present rather than those absent sublimations.

Within this stanza, then, Stevens' rhetorical argument simplifies the indeterminacy of the preceding stanza so as to strut the muse out "alone" as Platonic pure idealization, thus isolating her as an essential object of the viewers (poet and reader Ramon). Yet the only definite attribute of this poem's quest so far is the song, whose only legacy is the written lyric. They actually create the poem that is indivisible from her song. The viewers insist that the only world is the one that was sung. It is no accident that once her song is "made" the present turns into past tense and she disappears from the rest of the poem. Remember that "Farewell to Florida" confirms the dissociation occurring here.

The poem's musical configuration changes at the following structural break, after which the poet speaks to Ramon of order and mystery in a markedly different masculine rhetoric:

> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
> Why, when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (*CP* 130)

They, two men together, are without her, and their controlling language shaping their vista seems a paradox in the lyric convention because, as the lights "portioned out the sea," the seascape is divvied up without mythic or mus(e)ic reference.[9] If a new myth need be read in this scene, it is of the "rage for order," in Key West or any other perceived place. The myth is of *tilting, mastering, portioning, fixing, arranging, deepening, enchanting.* The italicized verbs emphasize symbolic action: dead nouns are revitalized so that events, compositions are in movement. Aggressive language appears to overcompensate for mysterious bewilderment. Yet the strong language works in a new *dramatic* way that is both straightforward and ironic: straightforward because the air is cleared of symbols representing an already ordered reality or discourse; ironic because the poem had been searching for spiritual origin, which all of a sudden becomes immaterial when the idea of an external reference for spirit—transcendence—is discarded. This type of poetics creates and resembles acts of perception and thought; readers need not find symbolic referents; composition is literally enacted on the page.

Perhaps this stanza is the first instance in Stevens of a dialogic poetry wherein the poet is cast as Ariel fully presenting the scene to the reader-comrade. It is curious and significant that Stevens' voice is strongest and somehow most modest when assuming full responsibility for poems presented to a formulated reader.[10] Perhaps the dramatic monologue becomes less jesting, less ironic, less oracular when dialogic. By asking "Ramon" (an arbitrary name, therefore anybody) "Why" order takes shape, Stevens invokes the reader's participation in the philosophical quandary composed of the poem's assembly.

Readers may feel "she" was easily done away with, a convenient female prop for objectification. "The shapes a bright container can contain!" says Theodore Roethke in "I Knew a Woman." Yes. That is the poem's point. The muse is historically made to *answer* for many orders, ranging from abstract idealization to mimetic reference. Here, she is made to *question* in her potent but fleeting production. By disallowing her existence apart from her song in the poem, the trope that she is becomes immaterial

(and purely material, a figuration). In the last two stanzas the poet and his friend have come no closer in their quest. The poem actually intensifies at the end (it is not a dejection ode), and that is because the feminine figure is no longer objectified as a ghostly foil responsible for the mysteries beheld by the maker.

Through this muse, Stevens charts a fictional life of the immortal beloved. By pointing to the mystery, awe, and violence of her figuration Stevens demystifies the myth as the object of male desire. Instead of procuring a moral polemic in such destruction (is it offensive or constructive?) the poem concludes by asserting the "rage for order" in language that reaffirms mystery at the source of creation:

> Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,[11]
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (*CP* 130)

Mystery of order evokes musical quests without phantoms but all phantasmagoria.[12]

"The Idea of Order at Key West" exorcisizes romanticism by bringing the inspirational muse to the surface of the poem and showing her as part and parcel of the masculine "rage for order." In showing us the muse and taking it away (it is not a she, but a figure) Stevens manages to leave the music. The poem still performs a seduction of the senses through mus(e)ical sounds and images, while arguing that her figuration is an unnecessarily artificial externalization of mythic desire. Stevens' pejorative muse loses her transcendent idealization, her tropic identity (most firmly within the aggressive masculine rhetoric at the end), while the poem still performs a music as seductive as the moving romantic lyrics of the past. This seduction may confound the reader because it belies romantic tradition: Stevens removes the transcendental sign (muse, who does not even begin with a name here, only a gender that often becomes neutral) while maintaining the emotional complex surrounding her/it. The reader is left without an object of desire and only with the spell of language. The poem, then, performs, demonstrates, and argues for the supreme power of music over logic.

Beyond that, it shows the romantic to be an organizing principle of thought, a way of understanding the world by linking desires with phenomena in what is known as a body of knowledge, a map. The muse is a compass with which to map nature. The earth (mother, if one wants to pursue psychoanalytic myth) is the object of knowledge: a system that is based on the object and subject split created in the interests of mastery. "Whose spirit is this?" questions the epistemology of this polarization by redirecting attention away from an iconographic imaginary other and to-

ward a reformulated composition of a present place with unfixed spirit. Stevens shows in this poem's performance that the object is subjective knowledge itself created by poets as musicians.

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Notes

[1] William Doreski suggests "The process of re-inventing narrative as a musical gesture occurs in 'The Idea of Order at Key West,' in which a musical instrument, the human voice, sings independently of the natural order and invents a 'mimic motion' that does not replicate the ordinary human voice yet is intelligible, a voice of pure music" (61). Doreski's "fictive music" helps explain Stevens' way of thinking: "It remains an idea of order because it is necessarily abstract. It does not refuse imagery—it is an image—but is abstract because irrational, not anti-rational but beyond or aside from rationality" (62).

[2] In Derrida, the notion of the gift is questioned as being part of an always imminent exchange, which is therefore conditional. Derrida suggests that what the gift presents is time—the gap of exchange itself—within which possibility may be the real gift. Gifts are therefore windows wherein surprising exchanges are rather like lyrical epiphanies solely determined on secular grounds. This vision of earthly marriages continues to develop through Stevens' work.

[3] Cook elaborates on the poem's romantic context: " 'Whose spirit is this?' the listeners ask. Not the old spiritus-wind Romantic afflatus. It is enough to make any wind gasp[,] . . . as when giving up the ghost—a very apt thought. Stevens is testing his ghosts and spirits of many a year" (132).

[4] David Walker emphasizes the role of the reader in trying to answer the questions posed by the poem (see 23–27).

[5] Marie Borroff notes Stevens' habitual technique of contrasting Latinate sounding words with his rather alliterative American idiom. Although I am not pursuing this technique here, it is another form of logical defacement exercised by Stevens' music.

[6] See also Alan Filreis, who details Stevens' inheritance of French modern art and his development of an Abstract Expressionist poetry. Filreis' article is especially rewarding in its explanation of abstract art and cubism as aesthetics that make viewers keener to reality through sharp attention to sensory perception.

[7] Marjorie Perloff's "flat surface" term is applied to modern arts such as the collages of Picasso and Braque and the textual overlays of Pound and Williams, all of which critique the notion of *depth* in art by making surface textures limit reference. Books by Glen MacLeod and Jacqueline Brogan link Stevens to modern arts, with an emphasis on painting.

[8] Thomas F. Bertonneau argues that the sacrifice of the singer of "The Idea of Order at Key West" is "what figure costs." He contextualizes this "immolation" in literary history, suggesting by way of a quotation from Stevens' "Two or Three Ideas": "It might be that '[t]o see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences'; and this appears to be what has happened to the Floridian singer when she stops singing, thereby marking the end of a divine epoch. But what now?" (65). That epoch includes Eliot and Pound, as Bertonneau points out. What is unclear to me about Bertonneau's interpretation is exactly when he thinks "she stops singing." He appears to agree with Bloom that her song lasts throughout the poem. After quoting "for she was the maker," Bertonneau continues: "She fulfills the role of signifier, so to speak, and the whole world, from the immediacy of the

beach to the 'mountainous atmospheres / Of sky and sea,' fulfills the role of signified" (62). However, the poem reads, "she was the maker. Then we, / As we beheld her striding there alone, / Knew . . ." (*CP* 129–30). This indicates to me a change in agency in which the observers take responsibility for the music; the poetic voice admits that the muse was simply his instrument of composition. The muse was the poet's signified ghost of a signifier. The answer to the question "But what now?" is that, as Bertonneau himself points out, Stevens' poetry "has ceased to be a matter of chance" (*L* 293) and thus assumes responsibility as a secular ethical practice.

[9] Bloom holds onto the muse here after her exit: "Stevens' singer stops, but her lingering idea of order triumphs over both the pale and unknowing Fernandez and the Stevens who knows too well the fear of a calm darkening among water lights" (103). For Bloom, "her lingering idea of order triumphs" probably because the muse reigns atop a romantic transcendent order. However, the poem composes the singing figure as a trope that no longer participates in Stevens' idea of order at Key West.

[10] Some other examples are "Debris of Life and Mind," "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," and "Angel Surrounded by Paysans."

[11] James Longenbach updates the lineage on pale Ramon:

> Stevens always insisted that "Ramon Fernandez" was "not intended to be anyone at all," and, in a sense, like the "Mr. Burnshaw" of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," he is a caricature. Yet most of Stevens's readers will know that Fernandez was a critic familiar to Stevens from the pages of the *Nouvelle revue française,* the *Partisan Review,* and the *Criterion* (where he was translated by T. S. Eliot). . . . [In "I Came Near Being a Fascist"] Fernandez confessed that he had "a professional fondness for theorizing, which tends to make one highly susceptible to original 'solutions.' " It was just that susceptibility that bothered Stevens and made him challenge Fernandez to answer a question to which he knew there was no certain answer. (161)

In the context of Longenbach's commentary, notice that Stevens calls Fernandez "pale Ramon," thereby transferring the figure of the ghostly muse more firmly upon his directed reader.

[12] Michael Davidson explains how phantasmagorias were originally ninteenth-century London magic lantern shows. With modernist figures such as Freud and Pound, ghostly images became absorbed into thought. Fitting with the demise of externalized deities and the rise of subjective consciousness, in "The Idea of Order at Key West" Stevens makes the muse phantom a subjective or writerly responsibility to be taken up in poetry.

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Stevens' Rivers and Rocks: Motions to the Center

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AS J. HILLIS MILLER has written, Wallace Stevens, in his later years, attempted no less than to confront the very core of being that he conceived as coursing through each particle of existence, a center that is, at once, everything and nothing ("Poetry of Being" 103). Rivers and rocks are the primary metaphors Stevens uses to portray this center, metaphors that reach their full development only in the final poems of his life. Stevens' journey toward a poetry of the center can be charted through many of these later poems. His competing desires for a minimalist expression, for a permanent fiction of being, and for retention of the fictions of his earlier poetry are expressed through the evolution of rock and river metaphors and through his commentaries on earlier poems. In the final poems, particularly "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" and "The Rock," Stevens attempts to view the center without evasion and capture it plainly in metaphor. Such poetry, the poetry of the center, is expressed as rising from the center independently of the poet's will, permanently creating new meanings as the center shifts and changes beneath the fiction.[1]

"The Motive for Metaphor," a poem from Stevens' middle years, introduces the effort he will undertake in his later poetry. Helen Vendler argues that this is a poem of self-criticism and that Stevens is, to a large degree, chiding himself for the evasions of his early poetry, for shrinking from the weight of primary noon (the self-knowledge of complete exposure) (24). I propose that Stevens is also speaking of a more comprehensive evasion; he believes he has evaded confronting the true center of being, the "blank [that] underlies the trials of device" (*CP* 477). In an act of profuse naming that is repeated in many of the later poems, Stevens tries to capture—as if by surrounding—the essence of what he has evaded:

> The weight of primary noon,
> The A B C of being,
>
> The ruddy temper, the hammer
> Of red and blue, the hard sound—
> Steel against intimation—the sharp flash,
> The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X. (*CP* 288)

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The naming in this poem rises in a crescendo until the very end, the X. No fewer than four adjectives are used to capture the nature of X, but X is not an expressive symbol. In fact, X defies understanding. The only way Stevens could have more completely collapsed his definition would have been to place a blank space before his concluding period. X is a marker for something that can include all that precedes it in the list, even seemingly contradictory qualities such as vitality and fatality. The effort to find a sufficient metaphor for this center will occupy much of Stevens' later poetry.

In "From the Packet of Anacharsis," Stevens portrays the center as a white kernel of truth that finds outward expression through color and definition:

> In the punctual centre of all circles white
> Stands truly. The circles nearest to it share
>
> Its color, but less as they recede, impinged
> By difference and then by definition
> As a tone defines itself and separates
>
> And the circles quicken and crystal colors come
> And flare. . . . (*CP* 366)

The movement toward definition, however, is necessarily a movement away from the truth of the center. As colors become apparent, their resemblance to the central white becomes more remote. The most pure and accurate poetry is therefore that which probes closest to the center, in the region where resemblances are least obvious and definition is least pronounced. Stevens' criticism of his earlier poetry is that it spent too much time in the outer reaches of definition, where circles quicken, colors flare (even if they are only "half colors of quarter-things" [*CP* 288]), and change seems to create meaning. In "The Motive for Metaphor," he stresses the poverty of these movements, the banality of merely circulating, and the evasion of being content with a less than complete expression of the center. But "The Motive for Metaphor" places Stevens in a curious position as a poet: if the motive for metaphor is a "shrinking from," Stevens must either abandon metaphor or come to find another motive for it. Stevens' motive in the later poems is to approach the center directly. This movement is attempted, for the most part, in poems of mountains and rivers.

"This Solitude of Cataracts" is an early attempt to portray the center, a poem that provides insight into Stevens' conflicting desires to approach the center directly yet retain the fictions of his earlier poetry. In the first five lines, Stevens uses the metaphor of the river to represent the flow of being. After it is named, the river expands until it is "Fixed like a lake" while "flowing / Through many places, as if it stood still in one" (*CP* 424). The image of a fixed flowing, a permanence in constant change, is characteristic of Stevens' vision of the center. Stevens stresses the movement of

the river by repeating its *fl*ow through "felt," "flecked," "flowing," "fluttered," "ruffling," and "reflections" even after the river has become "Fixed." The ruffling and the reflections (imagination and poetry) arise through the agency of the river, which gains outward expression after it has been seen and named.

Although Stevens names the center directly in "This Solitude of Cataracts," he does not sustain his expansive vision. "This Solitude of Cataracts" turns on the sixth line: "There seemed to be an apostrophe that was not spoken." An apostrophe is a turning away, and at this point, Stevens turns away from the center:

> There was so much that was real that was not real at all.
> He wanted to feel the same way over and over.
>
> He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,
> To keep on flowing. He wanted to walk beside it,
>
> Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.
> He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest
>
> In a permanent realization, without any wild ducks
> Or mountains that were not mountains, just to know how it
>   would be,
>
> Just to know how it would feel, released from destruction,
> To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis,
>
> Without the oscillations of planetary pass-pass,
> Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time.
> (*CP* 425)

In this passage, Stevens expresses his desire to remain in a poetic realm in which a figure can walk by the water and order the world according to his imagination and will (an idea expressed most clearly in "The Idea of Order at Key West"). He replaces the raucous ducks (symbols of brash reality) with the more comfortable and elegant moon, upon which he exerts his will, causing it to become "nailed fast." By the end of the poem, he has retreated from the self-exposure of "primary noon," wishing to reside within an entirely fictive persona (the man of bronze) in a land "Where you yourself were never quite yourself / And did not want nor have to be" (*CP* 288).[2]

Stevens is well aware of the evasion, however, and throughout the poem his language serves to undermine the desires that are themselves clouding his original vision of the center. Not only are the elements of the poem's second half impossible to achieve (to nail the moon fast, to stop his heart, to become a man of bronze and yet continue breathing), the repetition of "wanted" points to the distance between desire and reality. In addition,

the cataracts in the title are Stevens' acknowledgment of his own clouded vision, his reluctance to approach the center and the self with the "eye made clear of uncertainty" (*CP* 471), a blindness that will be "cleaned" in "The Rock." The tone of this poem is almost nostalgic, the product of a poet who has committed himself to approaching the "fatal, dominant X," but who regrets the loss of his former fictions.[3]

In the spirit that led Stevens to name being in "This Solitude of Cataracts," he orchestrates a bombastic effort in "Credences of Summer" to look straight at the center:

> Postpone the anatomy of summer, as
> The physical pine, the metaphysical pine.
> Let's see the very thing and nothing else.
> Let's see it with the hottest fire of sight.
> Burn everything not part of it to ash.
>
> Trace the gold sun about the whitened sky
> Without evasion by a single metaphor.
> Look at it in its essential barrenness
> And say this, this is the centre that I seek.
> Fix it in an eternal foliage
>
> And fill the foliage with arrested peace,
> Joy of such permanence, right ignorance
> Of change still possible. Exile desire
> For what is not. This is the barrenness
> Of the fertile thing that can attain no more. (*CP* 373)

Belief is the subject of "Credences of Summer," belief in a permanent center that, when correctly seen, can produce a permanent fulfillment of potential. Stevens' eye is both destructive and generative. The poet's active call for movement toward the center is accompanied by a call to destroy that which hinders vision and movement: "everything not part of it." When the center is named by "a single metaphor," obliterating all peripheral metaphor (and all evasive poetry), Stevens believes that the "essential barrenness" of the center can be fixed by an "eternal foliage" (looking forward to the "memorial mosses" [*CP* 445] of "Metaphor as Degeneration" and the leaves of "The Rock").[4]

After calling upon himself to approach the center, Stevens attempts to do exactly that. The metaphor he chooses is that of a mountain, a "natural tower of all the world" (*CP* 373). Like all Stevens' expressions of being, this rock partakes of elements other than itself: "It is a mountain half way green and then, / The other immeasurable half, such rock / As placid air becomes. . . . / A mountain luminous half way in bloom / And then half way in the extremest light / Of sapphires flashing from the central sky, / As if twelve princes sat before a king" (*CP* 375). Soon, however, Stevens

will dwell on the insufficiency of this vision, with the implication that he failed to heed his own call to destruction and minimalism. This is how Stevens parodies the profusion of metaphor in "Credences of Summer" in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

> This is the mirror of the high serious:
> Blue verdured into a damask's lofty symbol,
>
> Gold easings and ouncings and fluctuations of thread
> And beetling of belts and lights of general stones,
> Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush
>
> Or the wasted figurations of the wastes
> Of night, time and the imagination,
> Saved and beholden, in a robe of rays.
>
> These fitful sayings are, also, of tragedy:
> The serious reflection is composed
> Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace.
> (*CP* 477–78)

The green rock of summer is replaced here by the woven and artificial damask. The "extremest light / Of sapphires flashing from the central sky" is replaced by a "beetling of belts and lights of general stones, / Like blessed beams from out a blessed bush." This is a scathing passage, full of the language of ridicule ("wasted figurations," "easings and ouncings"). Stevens is critical of the half-measures, partial attempts, and hasty retreat into the ornamental poetry of the past in "Credences of Summer." The call for minimalism is again sounded: "The serious reflection is composed / Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace."

In "Metaphor as Degeneration," Stevens attempts to capture the center plainly in a single metaphor, without any of the ornate figurations of "Credences of Summer." As in "This Solitude of Cataracts," he explicitly names the center "river," but the correspondence between metaphor and subject is inexact. The river in this poem is like no river on earth. It is certainly not the Pennsylvanian river, though it partakes of Swatara. This river "flows round the earth and through the skies, / Twisting among the universal spaces. . . . / It is being" (*CP* 444). The river is the source of poetry (the subject of the poet's brooding), and, more generally, it "Includes death and the imagination" (*CP* 444). Stevens ends the sixth tercet with a question that collapses the metaphor entirely: "or is it air?"

At this point, however, the poem makes a fairly remarkable recovery, accomplished through a process of expansion and contraction. Swatara (the personal river) expands again to become the river of life, which in turn becomes "the landless, waterless ocean." At the sixth tercet, the river had expanded beyond the boundaries of its metaphor, but in the final tercet, the river appears again as a river, not an empty abstraction:

Here the black violets grow down to its banks
And the memorial mosses hang their green
Upon it, as it flows ahead. (*CP* 445)

This river has banks and vegetation, the sort of river one might encounter in reality. Restored are its boundaries, its flow, and its direction. At the end of the poem, metaphor is certainly not degeneration. By naming being, Stevens can open it up for inspection, so to speak. If Stevens had not named the center "river," there would be no banks and no vegetation to announce its unnamed presence in the final tercet. To employ the model in "From the Packet of Anacharsis," Stevens has, by naming the center, allowed those immediately adjacent circles to become more distinct through resemblance. The center is now fixed by that to which it has given rise. The banks and the mosses provide evidence of the river's presence, but they do not allow the same expansive vision of the center found earlier in the poem; consequently, this poem must be considered only a partially successful attempt to portray the center.

In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," canto XVII, Stevens comments on the failure of these early rock and river poems:

The color is almost the color of comedy,
Not quite. It comes to the point and at the point,
It fails. The strength at the centre is serious.

Perhaps instead of failing it rejects
As a serious strength rejects pin-idleness.
A blank underlies the trials of device,

The dominant blank, the unapproachable. (*CP* 477)

Here, Stevens' feelings toward the blank at the center are much less angry and fearful than those in "The Motive for Metaphor." Violence ("Steel against intimation") is replaced by a more neutral "serious strength." His frustration in "The Motive for Metaphor" at failing to find a mode of expression that would live up to his own standards (recalling the anger of the bantam at the "universal cock" in "Bantams in Pine-Woods") is modified as a resignation to inexactness. As he reaches the point of the point, the very tip of understanding, the effort fails. The "Not quite" and "It fails" are both placed on a line below the beginning of each sentence, expressing the drop of the voice, the downcast eyes, the unraveling of energy as concentration and effort fall short of the mark. Stevens ends calmly, in the voice of a wearied bantam: "The strength at the centre is serious."

Though Stevens does criticize these early attempts, they still provide insight into his vision. The center is characterized by a vastness that cannot easily be caught in metaphor. It includes both life and death, and is not limited by boundaries of matter or space. It is permanent but in con-

stant motion. It is a final state, a becoming that is also the end of becoming, a potential yet also a fulfilled potential. It is the particulars of existence but also the combined whole of the particulars: "a place, / As of a character everywhere" (*CP* 429).

"Two Versions of the Same Poem," though an indirect approach to the center, serves to clarify this two-in-one quality of being. In this poem, identity is likened to a wave, a temporary area of distinction from the general mass of common existence. Each wave is the tip of the particular, but also a point through which the whole flows. With each "more and more" crest of becoming, there is a corresponding "less and less" trough of subsiding. The source of these waves, "in the centre of / The sea," is a "half-asleep" cadaver, a "water-carcass" with a "puissant heart," which causes "A beating and a beating . . . / . . . a strength that tumbles everywhere, / Like more and more becoming less and less" (*CP* 354). "Two Versions of the Same Poem" describes being without trying to fix it or name it directly. The movement and undulations of existence, the rise of consciousness and the subsiding of identity, are characterized with a vitality that is lacking from the poems considered above ("Credences of Summer," "Metaphor as Degeneration," and "This Solitude of Cataracts"). It is only in Stevens' final poems that he is able to synthesize a direct naming of the center with a sustained vision of the vast flow and undulation of existence. Stevens' final treatments of rivers and rocks occur in "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" and "The Rock."

Stevens begins "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" by looking straight at the center and naming it in the very first line of the poem:

> There is a great river this side of Stygia,
> Before one comes to the first black cataracts
> And trees that lack the intelligence of trees. (*CP* 533)

But before the tercet is concluded, another river, the Styx, has appeared. The predecessor to the Styx in Stevens' poetry is the river Swatara in "The Countryman." Swatara is the river of death. It descends (falls) "out of the cap of midnight, / Toward the cape" where it enters "the swarthy sea" (*CP* 428). The tone of this poem is dark with mystery, as the adjectival form of the river comes to dominate the entire poem ("swarthy sea," "swarthy motion," "swarthy water," "swarthy presence," "swarthy name"). "Cape" and "cap" (both forms of "cloak") speak to the concealment and impenetrability of the river, as do its dark waters and the midnight landscape of heavy hills "hanging above." One can imagine the same darkness in Stygia where trees "lack the intelligence of trees"; the phrase suggests a land so utterly devoid of order and meaning that if trees had intelligence, they would be lacking it there.

This desolation of meaning appears in the first section of "The Rock," and, as in that poem, Stevens recovers from such a barren vision. After

portraying the barrenness of the center with the destructive eye proposed (but not employed) in "Credences of Summer," Stevens is able to provide a comprehensive expression of the center. The Styx recedes as "this side of Stygia" becomes "far this side of Stygia," and the river of rivers reasserts its presence: "The mere flowing of the water is a gayety, / Flashing and flashing in the sun." Unlike Stygia, the final river of rivers has meaning, purpose, and a joy that is its own. The gayety and flashing of the river are not formed in the sight or mind of an observer, for "On its banks, / No shadow walks." Instead, at its heart lies a "curriculum, a vigor" (recalling the vigor of the "water-carcass" in "Two Versions of the Same Poem"). As in "Metaphor as Degeneration," the river can be best observed by "the appearances / That tell of it," but unlike the river of the earlier poem, the river of rivers continues its expansion to the end of the poem. It incorporates the Styx ("The river is fateful, / Like the last one"); it incorporates the banks and locality ("The steeple at Farmington" and "Haddam"); and it transcends the boundaries of matter ("It is the third commonness with light and air"), of space ("Space-filled [as containing everything and nothing], reflecting the seasons"), and finally, of time ("The river that flows nowhere, like a sea" [*CP* 533]). In this final line, time marked by the river's flow can be no longer since the river flows nowhere. Frank Doggett aptly describes the river as "flux," a constant passing away of life and time and substance (71). However, it is also a constant coming to be (a "vigor," a vitality), an undulation partaking of all that is.

In "Metaphor as Degeneration" Stevens is not able to sustain the fictions of the center, settling instead for the static "banks" and "memorial mosses." Not until "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" does he feel his expressions of the center's form (the glistening of the locality, the sheen of the river, and its reflections) are of sufficient resemblance to follow the center's undulations.

A striking feature of "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" is the absence of a human figure beside the river. Stevens' figure walking or singing by the water originates in "The Idea of Order at Key West." In that poem, the figure brings order to the real world through her song (poetry) as she walks by the sea. This image, however, gradually recedes in the later river poems. In "This Solitude of Cataracts," the figure is expressed as a desire ("He wanted to walk beside it [the river]" [*CP* 425]). In "The Countryman," the figure is silent ("He does not speak beside you [the river]" [*CP* 429]). In "Metaphor as Degeneration," the figure is abstract and sits "Brooding sounds of river noises" (*CP* 444), without song or speech. In "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," a presence is implied (he who would cast the shadow), but the fiction (the shadow) is absent, since one does not cast a shadow when the sun is directly overhead. The fictive persona is destroyed as Stevens approaches the self-exposure of "primary noon" (the light destructive to partial truths), just as Stevens dismisses the bronze man in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven." Moreover, the

center (once seen and named) acquires its own imaginative capacity ("reflecting the seasons, the folk-lore / Of each of the senses"). The river, as it expands, incorporates the singer and sings itself.

Helen Vendler calls this poem a hymn, a song of praise for Stevens' "precious life-current" after he has been "to death's door and . . . been granted a reprieve"; after returning from Stygia, he records "his renewed perception of the boundlessness and amplitude of life" (73–76). This is an apt description of the connection Stevens finds between his own life force and the life force that animates nature, expressed as the sparkling, undulant river. In fact, Stevens' river of rivers is quite similar to Emerson's conception of the "over-soul" or "spirit," which Emerson often described as a river or stream. In "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (and other river poems), Stevens draws upon Emerson's river, most clearly from the poem "Two Rivers":

> Thy summer voice, Musketaquit,
> Repeats the music of the rain;
> But sweeter rivers pulsing flit
> Through thee, as thou through Concord Plain.
>
> Thou in thy narrow banks art pent:
> The stream I love unbounded goes
> Through flood and sea and firmament;
> Through light, through life, it forward flows.
>
> I see the inundation sweet,
> I hear the spending of the stream
> Through years, through men, through Nature fleet,
> Through love and thought, through power and dream.
>
> Musketaquit, a goblin strong,
> Of shard and flint makes jewels gay;
> They lose their grief who hear his song,
> And where he winds is the day of day.
>
> So forth and brighter fares my stream,—
> Who drink it shall not thirst again;
> No darkness stains its equal gleam,
> And ages drop in it like rain. (*Poems* 248)

The personal river, Musketaquit (the Concord River), brother of Stevens' Swatara, is quickly eclipsed by the boundless river of the spirit, the same "unnamed flowing" that comes to replace both Swatara and Styx in "Metaphor as Degeneration" and "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." Emerson's river of the spirit flows through and animates the particular, local river; it could therefore quite accurately be named the River of Rivers in Massachusetts. At the end of the poem, Emerson's river expands through time,

an infinite flowing that dwarfs the passage of ages. Similarly, Stevens' river "flows nowhere, like a sea" not because it has ceased to move, but because its movement is infinite, with no clear beginning, end, or destination, flowing nowhere and everywhere.

Though Stevens certainly draws from an Emersonian vision of being, he does not share Emerson's spiritual certainty in the permanence of the central; Stevens' darkness is much more prominent and foreboding. Stygia is black with the menace of obliteration, with the possibility of non-awareness in the absence of an afterlife. At the end, however, Stevens' river stands alone, and he names it again and again, joyfully affirming his belief in the permanence (and ultimate good) of being. At the end of "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," Stevens has realized his desire to find the center, to experience, or at least believe in, an Emersonian unity of being and self.[5]

Stevens looked forward to this final phase of his poetry in "A Pastoral Nun." The poem begins as follows:

> Finally, in the last year of her age,
> Having attained a present blessedness,
> She said poetry and apotheosis are one. (*CP* 378)

The nun is, of course, Stevens, for whom poetry and apotheosis do become one in the late poetry. To paraphrase the next three tercets: if Stevens lives according to the law that poetry and apotheosis are one, he lives in an immense activity, in which everything becomes, essentially, everything else—a general being. "[M]orning" (beginnings), "summer" (middles), the "hero" (human sublime), the "enraptured woman" (sexuality, desire), the "sequestered night" (the subconscious?), the "man that suffered, lying there at ease, / Without his envious pain in body, in mind" (death, the end), and the "favorable transformations of the wind" (poetry, the imagination) are, together, "As of a general being or human universe" (*CP* 378). This "immense activity" is the movement of the center, that which is named "river of rivers" and, in his other hymn of apotheosis, "rock."

"The Rock" is Stevens' "commonplace" treatment of the center as mountain, the poem in which he most successfully sustains his vision of the center. "The Rock" is divided into three sections. The first of these, entitled "Seventy Years Later," concerns the permanence of identity. After seventy years of life, Stevens is unable to say that life, in reality, was anything at all. "It is an illusion that we were ever alive," he says in a matter-of-fact voice. Memory, love, and the poetry of the past are now devoid of meaning. The shadows of ourselves (our memory of who we were) "no longer remain"; love is no more than an embrace between two clods, sex a "queer assertion of humanity"; "The sounds of the guitar" and the "words spoken" (poetry) "Were not and are not." That these things ever had meaning is "Absurd" and "not to be believed" (*CP* 525). Harold Bloom reads

these as lines of great anguish (341). The anguish, however, lies not in the utterances themselves but in the fact that they are said in such a calm and detached voice. They have more of a bemused tone, as if Stevens were trying to understand how the sources of such former feeling could now mean so little. The tone is muted because Stevens knows his death is quite near, that he will soon descend from active consciousness to the mass of undifferentiated potential being, the central blank. The elements of his identity (birth, memories, relationships, poetry) are swept away into nothingness as Stevens imagines the non-awareness of after-death and the consequent destruction of meaning. From this perspective, life truly is not and never was.

After directly contemplating the barrenness of general being, undifferentiated by identity, the poem and poet are subject to a startling change:

> The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like
>
> An invention, . . .
>
> A theorem proposed between the two—
> Two figures in a nature of the sun,
> In the sun's design of its own happiness,
>
> As if nothingness contained a métier,
> A vital assumption, an impermanence
> In its permanent cold, an illusion so desired
>
> That the green leaves came and covered the high rock,
> That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned,
> Exclaiming bright sight, as it was satisfied,
>
> In a birth of sight. The blooming and the musk
> Were being alive, an incessant being alive,
> A particular of being, that gross universe. (*CP* 525–26)

As Stevens describes the absence of meaning, the absence of life itself, a presence begins to emerge. The entire passage turns upon the line "As if nothingness contained a métier" (a trade, a calling, a "curriculum" as he says in "The River of Rivers in Connecticut"). The nothingness, the blank that has no existence without an individual consciousness, suddenly gives rise to awareness and life, a "vital assumption." This "impermanence," this point of temporary distinctness in an otherwise "permanent cold," is an illusion, yet it *is*.

The birth of the leaves and the blooming of the lilacs are Stevens' own movement toward consciousness and creation. Stevens is the rock; the rock is he. The workings of the mind, the blooming of awareness, are like an opening of the eyes. This is a strange image in which leaves give rise to blooming lilacs that in turn engender sight. But in this image, we can ob-

serve the unity of Stevens and the rock; the rock's vegetation and the poet's sight (and insight) are really the same phenomenon. This sight and blooming are being, an incessant assertion of consciousness "like a blindness cleaned," an assertion that Stevens intones throughout these last two tercets: "bloomed," "blindness," "bright," "birth," "blooming," "being," "being," "being." In addition to the repeated phoneme, there is a grammatical progression in this chant from the past tense of "bloomed" to the noun of becoming, "birth," to the participle of continued presence, "being." Moreover, the "A B C of being" from "The Motive for Metaphor" is here reversed. "[C]ame," "covered," "came," "cleaned" leads to "bloomed," "blindness," "bright," "birth," "being" to the *b-a/b-a* of "being alive, an incessant being alive" to the final, singular capital "A" of "A particular of being." The concluding "A" points to the establishment of identity, the concentration of consciousness to a point. This point is the tip of the particular but also a point through which the whole flows, the "gross universe."[6]

In this passage, one can feel Stevens' joy of connection with the great mass of being, a joy previously expressed as the gaily glittering river. In "Seventy Years Later," creation is not portrayed as a product of the poet's will; it is a vitality upon which the poet draws rather than controls (as opposed to his desire in "This Solitude of Cataracts" to nail the moon fast), a necessity that requires him to continue imagining. As Emerson writes, "We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. . . . Only itself can inspire whom it will, and behold! their speech shall be lyrical, and sweet, and universal as the rising of the wind" ("Over-Soul" 253).

While the first section of "The Rock" concerns Stevens' desire for connection, the second, "The Poem as Icon," concerns his desire for permanence. Early in "The Poem as Icon," Stevens makes a distinction between the rock (center) and the poles of the rock (the ground and the leaves). These areas roughly correspond to the wave (rock), sea (ground), and crest (leaves) construction of "Two Versions of the Same Poem." In Stevens' model of being, the ground is a vast commonness, without distinction, the blank from which the rock rises. The rock is man's continual movements toward and away from identity ("The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho, / The step to the bleaker depths of his descents . . ." [*CP* 528]). As such, it partakes both of the vast commonness of the blank and of the distinct, particular man. The leaves are the tip of identity and consciousness, "the poem, the icon and the man" (*CP* 527). But what can Stevens mean by a "cure" of the rock "by a cure of the ground / Or a cure of ourselves" (*CP* 526)?

Stevens' use of the word "cure" has been a major point of discussion in readings of this poem. J. Hillis Miller reads "cure" as (at least) a scouring, healing, solidifying, covering, and representing of the rock, meanings

which he claims are "incompatible" and "irreconcilable" ("Rock" 9–11). These meanings are certainly present in the poem, but when viewed within Stevens' effort to express the center, they no longer appear irreconcilable. Stevens sees with a destructive eye, scouring the center (rock) to remove "everything not part of it" (*CP* 373). After this necessary scouring, however, the rock is cured through a process of healing, as new vegetation grows upon it. The new foliage acts as the adjacent circles of "From the Packet of Anacharsis," the mosses of "Metaphor as Degeneration," and the glittering of "The River of Rivers in Connecticut." The vegetation is what can be seen of the rock ("the appearances / That tell of it" [*CP* 533]), indicating its form in close-fitting foliage. These leaves express the form of the rock and further represent it in "eternal foliage" (*CP* 373), thus curing it in the sense of making it lasting or permanent. One must make the distinction, however, between leaves that are used merely to conceal the rock, even decoratively ("It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves" [*CP* 526]), and the leaves that rise from the rock, providing a true glimpse of the rock as the center shifts beneath the image ("Its copy of the sun, these cover the rock" [*CP* 527]). Through the agency of the leaves, the poem cures the rock by recording a true image of it, by serving as an icon for it.[7]

Another sense of "cure" is as an escape from the downward flow of decreation, a permanence of identity or a continuance of identity after the poet's death. If the rock is both a rising and a falling, "Cadaverous undulations" (*CP* 355) toward and away from identity, then to be cured of this motion would be to remain at the peak, permanently among the leaves and lilacs. The fiction of the leaves is a cure of ourselves because the poem (leaves) maintains a form of the poet's identity after death. As the leaves endure, so does the identity—and to some extent the consciousness—of the poet in that his ideas continue to create "New senses in the engenderings of sense" (*CP* 527). Thus, Stevens uses the word "cure" also as "to be freed from," cured of decreation and the descent of the rock.

"The Poem as Icon," section II of "The Rock," is Stevens' second order description (within the poem itself) of his contribution to this human effort to express the truth of the center, shared, as he says in "A Primitive Like an Orb," by the lover, believer, painter, and poet. Each poem, each "tenacious particle" that bears "Some lineament or character . . . Of the planet" (*CP* 532–33), is "a cure beyond forgetfulness" (*CP* 526), immune to the evanescence of life and language portrayed in "Seventy Years Later." Stevens uses the metaphor of the leaves to represent this effort. "The Poem as Icon" restates the progression in "Seventy Years Later," but one level removed. Vegetative growth occurs again, but now the leaves have acquired the rock's generative capacity; the leaves that had sprouted from the rock now bud and bloom and bear fruit themselves. Awareness is heightened and meaning becomes profuse, meanings born of the leaves' own fertility. The leaves express the changing truth of things as they are, the exact moment "between is and was" (*CP* 474). The representation

changes as the center changes, since the leaves never cease to move through the cycles of growth, budding, and blooming. As Stevens states in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven":

> In the area between is and was are leaves,
> Leaves burnished in autumnal burnished trees
>
> And leaves in whirlings in the gutters, whirlings
> Around and away, resembling the presence of thought,
> Resembling the presences of thoughts, as if,
>
> In the end, in the whole psychology, the self,
> The town, the weather, in a casual litter,
> Together, said words of the world are the life of the world.
> (*CP* 474)

The leaf metaphor is used not only to capture the shifting and changing nature of this poetry, but also to imply its potential to grow large. Each poem, when viewed as a particle of being through which the whole flows, can expand to include all others. In addition, Stevens' words grow large to include himself, as they do in the second half of "The Poem as Icon." Stevens merges the images of human and leaf: "They bud the whitest eye," "the mind in root," "They bloom as a man loves, as he lives in love" (*CP* 527). As Stevens had become one with the rock, he is now one with the leaves, a second-order icon for the center. The leaves are "the poem, the icon and the man."

What Stevens has attempted in "The Rock" is to create an "endlessly elaborating poem" (*CP* 486). The poem is both the thing and the icon of the thing, the description of the process and the process itself. It is the particular and the whole, "the essential compact of the parts, / The roundness that pulls tight the final ring" (*CP* 442). This circularity is expressed as a wreath of leaves ("The pearled chaplet of spring, / The magnum wreath of summer, time's autumn snood" [*CP* 526]) rotating through the seasons, a representation of sufficient resemblance to the center's form that the leaves themselves (the fiction itself) can create meaning in the same way that the leaves originally arose from the center (rock), correctly seen. Thus, the poem of the center is that poem (or group of poems, particles) that is functionally most similar to the center itself, permanently engendering meaning, endlessly elaborating.

Such circularity (on a linguistic level) leads Miller to propose that "The Rock" consists of a succession of *mise en abymes*, fictions that act as a series of embedded and self-referential images, spiraling into indeterminacy.[8] Stevens' images are certainly circular, but they do not necessarily suggest retreat or regression. Stevens portrays the fictions covering the rock as generative, as budding and blooming, making new meanings of the rock. Miller argues that an image such as "that which is near, point A / In a

perspective that begins again / At B" (*CP* 528) suggests an "endlessly receding geometrical figure," since "No solid starting place exists, but only an arbitrary beginning which constantly begins again at points B, C, D, and so on, and there is no reaching the horizon" ("Rock" 26). The key images Stevens employs to represent his own fiction (the wreaths of leaves), however, suggest not an endless regression but an endless rotation, a circular figure, renewing rather than receding. If the perspective begins again at B, C, D, and so on, then one must eventually return to A, just as spring, which leads to summer, autumn, and winter, will return again to spring. Such is the bootstrapping effort Stevens undertakes to create a permanent, generative fiction of being.

"The Rock" ends with a joyous song of belief in permanence, a cure of the rock entitled "Forms of the Rock in a Night-Hymn":

> The rock is the gray particular of man's life,
> The stone from which he rises, up—and—ho,
> The step to the bleaker depths of his descents . . .
>
> The rock is the stern particular of the air,
> The mirror of the planets, one by one,
> But through man's eye, their silent rhapsodist,
>
> Turquoise the rock, at odious evening bright
> With redness that sticks fast to evil dreams;
> The difficult rightness of half-risen day.
>
> The rock is the habitation of the whole,
> Its strength and measure, that which is near, point A
> In a perspective that begins again
>
> At B: the origin of the mango's rind.
> It is the rock where tranquil must adduce
> Its tranquil self, the main of things, the mind,
>
> The starting point of the human and the end,
> That in which space itself is contained, the gate
> To the enclosure, day, the things illumined
>
> By day, night and that which night illumines,
> Night and its midnight-minting fragrances,
> Night's hymn of the rock, as in a vivid sleep. (*CP* 528)

In the nature of hymn, this is an affirmation of and a rejoicing in presence. Without the self-ridicule that accompanied the profusion of metaphor in "Credences of Summer," Stevens attempts to realize the poetic process described in section II. He provides a long series of metaphors for the center (leaves), which shift around the "Form(s) of the Rock," providing it

expression and meaning. In "The River of Rivers in Connecticut," Stevens calls the river by name, "again and again, / The river that flows nowhere, like a sea." As in that poem, he no longer uses the word "center," because the center, once seen, becomes "the habitation of the whole," an understanding, as he says in "Credences of Summer," "that fulfils his age, / By a feeling capable of nothing more" (*CP* 374).

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Notes

[1] In previous criticism, images of the rock and river have been identified as two of Stevens' primary expressions of being. Early accounts of rocks and mountains stressed the rock as physical grounding, solid reality upon which the imagination could take root and find itself realized (Mills 77). The rock (particularly in the poem "The Rock") was conceived as a barren, formless fund of potential. When acted upon by the poet's imagination, the rock could be transformed into either a full expression of the self (Pearce 411) or an image of the whole of existence (Doggett 170). In addition, J. Hillis Miller has identified the river as one of Stevens' principal metaphors for being. Being, "visible nowhere in itself, and yet visible everywhere in all things," is seen "as a river, hidden beneath all the appearances that tell of it, and yet flowing everywhere" ("Poetry of Being" 100, 101).

The monumental in rock and river metaphors has been well documented. What has been less well understood in these images is the nature of the fluid, the shifting, and the changing. Stevens' later poems of rivers and rocks contain images that shift and circulate (the sparkling of a river's sheen, the blooming of vegetation, the whirling of leaves), and the poems themselves make dramatic, and seemingly abrupt, shifts of meaning and reference. One view holds that shifting circularity within the poem "The Rock" is regressive, retreating infinitely from meaning and truth (Miller "Rock"). The purpose of Stevens' shifting images, however, can better be understood within the context of an effort to express the central whole of being, a whole that "is not to be seen beneath the appearances / That tell of it" (*CP* 533). When viewed within this larger effort, and when traced through a number of early attempts, failures, and self-commentaries, Stevens' shifting, changing images do not appear indeterminate. Stevens uses the fluid and changing to sustain his vision of the center. Such change is necessary to express the form of the central whole, as Stevens envisions the whole to be, itself, in constant motion.

In addition, most criticism of these poems focuses primarily on the metaphysical in Stevens' representations of being. Near the end of Stevens' life, however, poems of rivers and rocks express his desire to find a personal connection with the vast flow of being and, in some way, to escape the desolation of meaning accompanying death. The parallel goals of believing in and permanently representing a universal animating force (an "over-soul") are the impetus of much of Stevens' later poetry, especially those in which he directly names this force "river" or "rock."

[2] The loneliness and isolation of the bronze man (desiring to observe and meditate upon but not to participate in the life cycles of common reality) recall the sadness of the parakeet of parakeets in "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws." The parakeet (Stevens) exerts his will and intellect while munching a "dry shell" (*CP* 82). He perches upon a pallid rock, isolated from the verdant jungle below him.

[3] In "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (a poem of bare reality) Stevens comments on the evasions of "This Solitude of Cataracts." In addition to stating emphatically that his earlier fictions are false ("We are not men of bronze and we are not dead" [*CP* 472]), Stevens reassesses his desire for permanence. In "This Solitude of Cataracts," he seeks the permanence of an extended past, a permanent isolation from the vast flow of existence and the possible truths of self-exposure. In canto X of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," Stevens describes a permanence of faith in reality, which he sets in opposition to the desire for evasive fictions ("a faithfulness as against the lunar light" [*CP* 472]). His faith is in "a permanence composed of impermanence" (*CP* 472), a motionless entity in motion, like a fixed lake flowing or a "river that flows nowhere, like a sea" (*CP* 533).

[4] The "essential barrenness" of the center, however, is not characterized by absence of life, but by profusion of life without differentiation or resemblance. It is both barren and fertile in the same way the central white (blank, without distinction of color) is actually the combined activity of all colors of the spectrum.

[5] As he states in "The Ultimate Poem Is Abstract," he desires:

> an intellect in which we are fleet: present
> Everywhere in space at once, cloud-pole
>
> Of communication. It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
>
> Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
> Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
> And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy. (*CP* 430)

[6] In the late poems, Stevens accomplishes similar recoveries from barrenness in "The Plain Sense of Things," "The Green Plant," and "Two Illustrations That the World Is What You Make of It."

[7] The poem as an icon of being is previously explored in "A Primitive Like an Orb." "The essential poem at the centre of things," like the other representations of being, expands through the boundary of the metaphor: "It is / As if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem" (*CP* 440–41). In canto VIII of "A Primitive Like an Orb," Stevens introduces another metaphor for the center: the giant of nothingness. The giant has form but neither distinction nor definition. The expressions of his changing form, the appearances that tell of his shape, are "tenacious particle[s]" of the human perceptions of truth, the poem(s) of the whole. These come into being "by the power of his [the giant's] form" (*CP* 443) much as the form of the rock dictates the shape of the foliage covering it.

[8] For Stevens, the rock is never merely an abyss; the center is only a seeming blank because it lacks resemblance and internal distinction. Poetry makes meanings of the rock as a prism can make distinctions within the seeming blank unity of white light (see "From the Packet of Anacharsis").

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On Hearing Modern American Music in Stevens' Poetry

DAVID M. LINEBARGER

ALTHOUGH NUMEROUS CRITICS have broached the subject of music in Wallace Stevens' poetry, only a few of Stevens' poems have been linked to specific musical sources, and then only suggestively. Barbara Holmes, for example, finds that "Thunder by the Musician" contains "a short narrative remarkably reminiscent of the 'Internal Dance and Lullaby' " from Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (24), and Sidney Feshbach develops the possibility that Erik Satie's *Socrate* lay behind some of the phrases in Stevens' "The Comedian as the Letter C." Much more frequent than allusions to specific musical sources are the analogies between the two arts that various critics have developed. Northrop Frye compares Stevens' usual mode of developing his poems with the musical form of theme and variations, adding that Stevens' method of development in his late style is similar to Beethoven's method of development in his late quartets; Lawrence Kramer argues that "Stevens is the poet closest to Ives" in "the need to reconcile a transcendental vision, a sense of the absolute, with a texture and a form that are distinctively American" (171); and Robert Buttel hears "something Debussy-like, soft and scintillant" at times in the early poetry of Stevens (106).

Though Stevens' passion and interest in traditional classical music are well known, the extent to which Stevens, as Wilson Taylor informs us, "always seemed to enjoy the works of more modern composers" (101) deserves further examination. In particular, the music of Edgard Varèse and Henry Cowell, two of Stevens' contemporaries, adds to our appreciation of two of Stevens' most musical poems, "Autumn Refrain" and "The Man with the Blue Guitar." Exploring the analogies between these two poems and works by these avant-garde composers illuminates Stevens' subtle musicianship and provides further evidence of how thoroughly his poetry engages the artistic figures and social conditions of his American life and times.

Repeating the Word: Edgard Varèse and "Autumn Refrain"

Stevens is a poet steeped in a poetic world of repeated elements, of almost obsessively repeated images, words, and themes that cohere in an

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often cryptic cosmos of repetitions and variations on these repetitions. Often a reason why those critics cool or even hostile to Stevens' art lament (somewhat naively) its lack of meaningful social content or commentary, the amount of repetition in Stevens is taken to represent a paucity of ideas, and often an impoverished relationship to the real world of daily struggles. But for the many readers who are moved deeply by Stevens, his repetitions often become a source of poetic or emotive power, a communication of emotion most analogous to that which takes place in music, the art in which techniques of repetition have been most highly developed.

Wondering why repetition does not become boring but rather deeply engaging and moving in Stevens' verse, Angus Fletcher suggestively links Stevens' mode of repetition to music: "It would appear that Stevens discovered—perhaps even set out to discover— . . . a technique and a justification of formal repetition of elements" (x). Stevens may have discovered a technique for at least one form his manifold repetitions took, that of repeating the single word, in the music of Edgard Varèse, who was for many of Stevens' contemporaries the most promising and exciting American avant-garde composer throughout the 1920s.

If one were to cite a single poem to illustrate how much Stevens repeated the single word and its variations, that poem would be "Autumn Refrain" (1931). A poem placing itself belatedly, and most minimally, against both Keats's nightingale and his ode "To Autumn," "Autumn Refrain" marks, as A. Walton Litz claims, Stevens' recovery of "his full poetic power" after his virtual silence following the publication of *Harmonium* in 1923 (171). Though it is impossible to know to what degree Stevens had Varèse's music in mind when he wrote "Autumn Refrain," Varèse's music, especially his composition *Hyperprism* (1923), helps illuminate the varied and subtle musical effects of Stevens' inventive fourteen-line homage to the sonnet tradition.

Just as Stevens was considered the leading poet of the Arensberg circle from around 1915 until 1922 (when the Arensberg group began to dissipate), so too was Edgard Varèse considered its leading composer. Whereas Stevens almost stopped writing poetry for a brief period after 1923, Edgard Varèse went on to compose a breathtaking series of orchestral scores throughout the 1920s: *Offrandes, Hyperprism*, *Octandre, Intégrales, Amériques*, and *Arcana,* all performed by the leading conductors of the day. Though the reaction to these controversial works was mixed, Paul Rosenfeld voiced what many members of the avant-garde felt, that in Edgard Varèse America had finally discovered its first musical prophet: "But the greatest fullness of power and of prophecy yet come to music in America, lodges in the orchestral composition of Edgard Varèse. . . . He is the poet of the tall New Yorks; his music showing a relation with the 'nature' of the monster-towns paralleling that of the elder music to the 'country,' and revealing the new nature to man" (*American Music* 160; 167–68).

Though Stevens never mentions Edgard Varèse, he could hardly have avoided being aware of his pioneering musical presence on the avant-garde scene in New York in the 1920s, either through the writings of various music critics or through his contacts with the Arensberg circle earlier in the decade. According to the man most responsible for introducing Stevens to avant-garde circles, the music critic Pitts Sanborn, the most prominent avant-garde figures in American music in 1927 were Carl Ruggles, Henry Cowell, and Edgard Varèse, composers to whom Sanborn refers as "the extreme lefters in the current musical radicalism of America." Sanborn, like Rosenfeld, reserves the highest place in avant-garde American music in the 1920s for Varèse: "The crown and sceptre of the left, however, the power that speaks to kindred power, and a big share of the glory, are vested in Edgar Varèse" ("A Glance Toward the Left" 25). Today, Varèse's relatively small musical output is often ranked as one of modern music's greatest and most influential achievements. This is largely the case, however, only among sophisticated music scholars and/or composers; for the most part, the general concert-going public has had little contact with his forms of advanced musical expression, forms that challenge the basic premises of melodic, harmonic, and tonal frameworks much more radically than the musical innovations of Stravinsky or Schoenberg. As Joan Peyser puts it, "the revolution Edgard Varèse began in music was ahead of anything dreamed of by his contemporaries" (141).

Varèse's music and its possible influence on Stevens' "Autumn Refrain" are best illustrated by the two critical reactions to Varèse that Stevens would have been most likely to know. The first is an impressionistic description of Varèse's music from Paul Rosenfeld's book on American music in 1929;[1] the second is much more technical, indeed the first important musical analysis and explanation of Varèse's musical innovations to appear in print, Henry Cowell's article on Varèse in *Modern Music* in 1928. Published in New York, *Modern Music* was the most influential music journal of its day, and Stevens' close friend Pitts Sanborn often reviewed the year's contemporary musical events in its pages. If Stevens had wanted to read a discussion of Varèse's music, Pitts Sanborn, among others, would most likely have recommended Cowell's article.

Rosenfeld describes the experience of hearing Varèse's music in this way: "You walk, ride, fly through a world of steel and glass and concrete, by rasping, blasting, threatening machinery become strangely humanized and fraternal; yourself freshly receptive and good-humoured" (*American Music* 160–61). How can such a music of "the tall New Yorks" possibly help us read Stevens' "Autumn Refrain"?

> The skreak and skritter of evening gone
> And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun,
> The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and moon,
> The yellow moon of words about the nightingale

> In measureless measures, not a bird for me
> But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
> I have never—shall never hear. And yet beneath
> The stillness of everything gone, and being still,
> Being and sitting still, something resides,
> Some skreaking and skrittering residuum,
> And grates these evasions of the nightingale
> Though I have never—shall never hear that bird.
> And the stillness is in the key, all of it is,
> The stillness is all in the key of that desolate sound.
>
> (*CP* 160)

The key to hearing a possible connection to Varèse's music here is in exploring two types of repetition in "Autumn Refrain": the surprising amount of it at the level of the single word, combined with the seemingly planned lack of repeating metrical structures at the level of the poetic line, both especially on display in the poem's first seven lines. In the first seven lines alone we hear the following repetitions of the single word: *gone, gone, gone; sorrows, sorrows; sun, sun; moon, moon, moon; measureless measures; bird, bird; name, name, nameless; never, never*. The musical effects of these repeated words in "Autumn Refrain" are analogous to, and most illuminated by, Varèse's inventive new approach to the issue of repetition in music.

In his 1928 analysis of Varèse's music, Henry Cowell writes: "one finds that dynamic nuances on the same note, or repeated tones, often take the place of melody. He very frequently does away with melody entirely by having only repeated tones for certain passages" (10–11). Whereas traditional classical music emphasizes melodic and harmonic invention over rhythmic invention, Edgard Varèse attempts, through techniques of repetition, to deemphasize traditional melodic elements so that a listener might more fully concentrate on and be able to appreciate the rhythmic subtleties of his music. As Cowell notes after discussing Varèse's rhythmic invention, "Varèse evidently realized that these rhythmical subtleties would be lost on the listener, were his attention to be diverted by melodic interest or harmonic change" (14).

Both Stevens' use of the repeated word and his own rhythmic invention in "Autumn Refrain" can be read as analogous to Varèse's use of repeated notes to help foreground a wide-ranging rhythmic invention in Varèse's most well known composition of the 1920s, *Hyperprism* (1923)—so much so, in fact, that one wonders if Stevens is working directly with Varèse's musical ideas in this widely discussed score. The subtle rhythmic effects achieved largely through repetition of the single word in the first three lines of Stevens' poem, for example, are surprisingly similar to a specific passage of Varèse's music that Cowell describes in "The Music of Edgar Varese":

> In *Hyperprism,* page ten, we find a good example of the discontinuance of the melody (partly by repeated tones and partly, as in the flute and trumpets, by continued repetition of a figure) for the purpose of calling attention to the cross-rhythm between the parts. There is . . . in the centre of the last measure a quarter-note triplet of particular interest, since it begins and ends on a weak beat, running through the strong beat; the second note being accented, almost but not quite coincides with the third beat of the measure in an extremely unusual manner. (13–14)

Something quite close to the subtle rhythmic effect described above is suggestively present in the third line of "Autumn Refrain," an effect emphasized through repetition of the word "gone":

> The skreak and skritter of evening *gone*
> And grackles *gone* and sorrows of the sun,
> The sorrows of sun, too, *gone* . . . the moon and moon. . . .

Before we can examine the subtle rhythmic displacement in the monosyllables "sun, too, gone" in the middle of line three, it is important to describe the effect of the repeated single word above. If we pause at the ellipsis, as we seem invited to do, the single word, repeated three times, that most stands out from this texture, both in meaning and in sound, is "gone." Intoned once in each of the first three lines, the word "gone" receives not only a primary stress but also carries the strongest emphasis as far as meaning and placement are concerned. It falls on the last beat of line one, creates a strong sense of caesura in line two, and then is displaced onto an unusual sort of extended caesura strikingly similar to the one Cowell describes above in *Hyperprism.* The effect in line three of Stevens' poem is suggestively close to the rhythmic effect of the quarter-note triplet that Cowell so admires in Varèse's score. If we assume for a moment that Stevens was actually trying to achieve a poetic effect similar to that which Varèse achieved in his music, then we must wonder whether Stevens could possibly have done so more skillfully and movingly than he does with his repetition of the word "gone" and with his own "quarter-note triplet" of "sun, too, gone" which, like Varèse's rhythmic figure, "coincides with the third beat of the measure in an extremely unusual manner."

Though Stevens' phrase "measureless measures" in line five clearly alludes to the "measureless measures" (measures whose greatness cannot be measured) of past poets such as Milton, Keats, and Whitman, this phrase might also refer to musical measures, as Barbara Holmes has suggested in her reading of what she calls an "annoyingly musical poem" (51). I suggest further that we might read Stevens' "measureless measures" as "measureless musical measures" of the type that we have just been discussing in the poem's first three lines as well as in the music of Edgard Varèse. As Cowell aptly demonstrates, Varèse's measures are so varied that they can-

not possibly be heard as measured. In his 1928 article in *Modern Music*, Cowell provides us with a chart illustrating that "In *Hyperprism* on the first page alone there are thirty-two different rhythmical manners of filling a measure" (16). Because of their seemingly endless variety of rhythmic invention, these musical measures "produce," as the American composer Elliot Carter puts it, "a much more irregular scansion than that found in Stravinsky, whose irregular scansion is almost always measured by some constant, repeated unit, such as a continuous stream of eighth notes" (2). We might say something similar concerning the scansion of Stevens' lines and of his variety of rhythmic invention in "Autumn Refrain." Stevens does not only write of the "measureless measures" of other poets. If we take the poetic line as an analogous unit of measure to the musical measure, then Stevens, like Varèse, also produces his own "measureless measures."

In scanning the opening movement of the poem, in fact, we find a degree of rhythmic invention nearly as striking as that found on the first page of Varèse's *Hyperprism*:

> The skreak and skritter of evening gone
> And grackles gone and sorrows of the sun,
> The sorrows of sun, too, gone . . . the moon and moon,
> The yellow moon of words about the nightingale
> In measureless measures, not a bird for me
> But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
> I have never—shall never hear. . . . (*CP* 160)

We have already examined the varied and subtle metric variations of the first three lines. The next four lines also scan quite differently. Line four, for example, is in fairly straightforward iambic hexameter while line six, most notable for its repetitions of "name," is markedly anapestic before closing with a final iamb. Moreover, Stevens' repetitions of the single word help call attention to this rhythmic variety by deemphasizing logical or narrative development, similar to the way in which the repeated tones of Varèse's music deemphasize melodic development and interest. The result for both poet and composer is a foregrounding of rhythmic interest. This effect is further heightened in Stevens by his specific employment of repeated words, almost all of which fall on, and thus help to create or even to emphasize, a marked sense of rhythmic pulse, however irregular this pulse may be.

The rhythmic effect in a general sense is analogous to that heard in Varèse, and descriptions of the effect of Varèse's music best suggest how we might hear the repeated word in Stevens, the *gone, gone, gone*, followed by the *moon, moon, moon*, followed by the *name, name, nameless*, and so on. Rosenfeld describes the effect of Varèse's music on the ear: "Sounds come in waves, a single sound advancing; then, as it fades, another rising to

take its place: the sequence corresponding curiously to that in which the unconscious ear synthesizes the vibrations of objective nature. We hear somewhat as Varèse writes" (*American Music* 170–71). The effect of the repeated word in "Autumn Refrain" is, as Rosenfeld puts it on hearing Varèse's music, closer to the way the "unconscious ear synthesizes the vibrations of objective nature" than to any of the more predictable and recurring patterns of a more traditionally crafted art, such as iambic pentameter in verse or 4/4 time in music (to offer only the most obvious examples). The best analogies to this effect do come from the way in which we hear "objective nature," so to speak, the irregular pulsations and waves we might hear when listening to a freeway from afar, or the quite different but equally irregular pulsations we might hear in the varied repetitions and unpredictable metrics of nature's nocturnal awakenings.

Though "Autumn Refrain" is clearly written from within a pastoral tradition of poetic birds, I think it is also possible to read it as a city poem, though of a late night city (perhaps Hartford) that has considerably quieted from the jangly noise we hear in the music of Edgard Varèse, "the poet of the tall New Yorks." For Rosenfeld, the city comes to aural life after hearing Varèse's music: "Following a first hearing of these pieces, the streets are full of jangly echoes. The taxi squeaking to a halt at the crossroad recalls a theme. Timbres and motives are sounded by police-whistles, bark and moan of motor-horns and fire-sirens, mooing of great sea-cows steering though harbour and river, chatter of drills in the garishly, lit fifty-foot excavations" (*American Music* 160). We can best hear the noise of the city in Stevens' "Autumn Refrain" by listening carefully to the poem's opening line, "The skreak and skritter of evening gone." Eleanor Cook correctly calls this "one of the noisiest lines he ever wrote" (126). Though we cannot identify what Stevens' "skreak[s] and skritter[s]" might be, they do have the ring and raspiness of motor horns or a taxi's squeaking from earlier in the day. And though they are now "gone," like "grackles" and the "sorrows of the sun," an echoing residuum of their sound remains in the air, in the poem's desolate complex of "still" sounds now gone, a most mournful chord containing American grackles, Whitman's "yellow moon of words," the European nightingale of an irrecoverable poetic past, and, at least suggestively, the music of Edgard Varèse.

Henry Cowell and "The Man with the Blue Guitar"

On April 15, 1936, no less an authority on American music than Aaron Copland reviewed Rosenfeld's recently published *Discoveries of a Music Critic* in the *New Republic*. A lifelong reader of the *New Republic* and an admirer of Rosenfeld's writings, Stevens most likely saw and read Copland's review with great interest. In a passage from his tribute to Rosenfeld entitled "The Shaper" (1948), Stevens intimates that Rosenfeld's criticism in some way helped him as a poet, helped to "give shape" to the

"young poet": "his character as a poet made it easy and natural for him to give character to the young poet, the most inchoate of human beings and yet potentially the most choate. . . . [H]e was shaping, helping to give shape, to those to whom that meant becoming choate" (*OP* 246–47). In discussing Rosenfeld's book, Copland laments that "musical criticism is at an especially low ebb in this country" and that "there is almost no one to whom we can point with pride as a critic of instinct and knowledge and catholicity of taste" (291). Copland goes on to praise Rosenfeld as an exception to the prevailing rule, as "an *amateur* in the French and best sense of the word. He listens to music primarily because he loves it, and he writes about it primarily because he wishes to communicate what he has experienced while listening" (291). Rosenfeld's best work, according to Copland, comes in his chapter on the American avant-garde composer/performer Henry Cowell: "The pages devoted to Henry Cowell are brilliantly done. It will be a long time before anyone need add anything in that direction" (291).

Speaking of Cowell and his activities on behalf of modern music, Rosenfeld writes: "American Culture is substantially indebted to his mental fluidity. His persistent and very practical championship of radical and unpopular work, too, has provided steady encouragement to those with something individual in them to give" (*Discoveries* 280). Though Henry Cowell's central role as a selfless champion of experimental music is well established today, he was often most celebrated by his contemporaries, both at home and abroad, for his avant-garde approach to playing the piano: his plucking of the piano's strings and the violent tone-clusters he banged out on the piano's keys with forearms and elbows. What makes Rosenfeld's discussion of Cowell most memorable is, in fact, his extended and highly impressionistic account of what it is like to see and hear Henry Cowell perform, an account that bears a curious resemblance to Wallace Stevens' transitional long poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937). Even if Stevens did not have the violent musical performances of Henry Cowell specifically in mind, Cowell's music provides an important musical analogy for the dramatic musical effects Stevens strives to achieve.[2]

Henry Cowell is never mentioned explicitly by Stevens in his letters or poetry, yet his reluctance to reveal possible sources for his poems is legendary. As he puts it in a paraphrase explaining the meaning of "I play" in section XXIV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," "there is a kind of secrecy between the poet and his poem which, once violated, affects the integrity of the poet" (*L* 361). Even prior to the appearance of Rosenfeld's *Discoveries of a Music Critic*, Stevens was probably well informed about Cowell's controversial piano recitals, especially through his intimate friendship with Pitts Sanborn, the most vigorous and visible champion of Cowell's music throughout the 1920s.

Sanborn introduced Stevens to the avant-garde circles in 1914 that were so crucial to his poetic development, and he is most likely the single per-

son responsible for convincing Stevens to start publishing poetry in avant-garde magazines in 1914 (Bates 70–71). One of the few surviving letters we have from Stevens to Sanborn reveals the profound friendship these two men shared and Stevens' enjoyment in reading Sanborn's writings on music: "It depresses me to think that I don't see more of you. . . . I should love to see you again, particularly if we could spend an evening together. Your pamphlet on Beethoven's Symphonies is on my table at home and occasionally I take it up just to hear you talk; it is naturally full of your intonations" (*L* 341–42).

Sanborn's music criticism in the 1920s demonstrates his thorough knowledge of avant-garde activities, and his high esteem for Cowell's music is unusual. Reporting on the 1923–24 concert season for *Modern Music,* Sanborn singles out Cowell among all American composers: "As for the Americans, I have no hesitation in saying that to me the most arresting contribution was made by Mr. Henry Cowell of tone-cluster fame. Fun has been poked at Mr. Cowell because he sometimes operates the keyboard with his palms, his fists, his forearms. Why, in all conscience, should he not? The main thing about his music is that in it he reveals a talent as well as a theory" ("Honors of the Season" 7). Reviewing a Cowell recital given at St. Mark's Hall on May 11, 1922, Sanborn lavishly praises Cowell's most famous piano composition: "Three 'Irish Myths' [The Voice of Lir, The Hero Sun, and The Tides of Manuanaun] proved a most notable feature of the program through their dazzling tonal color and the sharpness of the musical profile. . . . Altogether the definiteness of Mr. Cowell's musical utterance in a sphere where the possibility of definiteness has been denied by pundits stood out yesterday with decisive clearness, as did also his uncanny power of summoning color from the piano" ("Music," rpt. in Manion 119–20). Finally, Sanborn describes how Cowell plays a "blue guitar" of his own in a review of avant-garde musical activities for *Modern Music* in 1927. Cowell "abandons the keys of the piano and plucks at its wiry viscera in his search for effects that neither the smitten ivories nor the strings of harp or lyre or psaltery or lute have sufficed to yield" ("A Glance Toward the Left" 27). It is perhaps worth noting that in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" Stevens explicitly mentions two of the ancestors to the modern guitar Sanborn identifies ("the sullen psaltery" in XVI, "the lion in the lute" in XIX) and suggests a third (the "wind-gloss" in XVIII recalls the romantic lyre) in the crucial transitional movement that takes place in sections XVI–XIX. Whether Stevens had in mind Sanborn's suggestive phrase is impossible to say, but we can safely assume that Stevens had at least a passing, and perhaps a detailed, knowledge of Cowell's musical activities through Sanborn.

While composing "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens commented on the violence and pressure of contemporary life in his lecture on "The Irrational Element in Poetry," offering a bleak picture of "things as they are" in December of 1936:

> The pressure of the contemporaneous from the time of the beginning of the World War to the present time has been constant and extreme. No one can have lived apart in a happy oblivion. . . . People said that if the war continued it would end civilization, just as they say now that another such war will end civilization. It is one thing to talk about the end of civilization and another to feel that the thing is not merely possible but measurably probable. If you are not a communist, has not civilization ended in Russia? If you are not a Nazi, has it not ended in Germany? (*OP* 229)

Stevens' response to such contemporaneous pressure was to develop, as he memorably put it a few years later, a "violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (*NA* 36). In such an endeavor, Stevens could hardly have chanced upon a more telling musical model than Henry Cowell.

Rosenfeld describes just how violently a Cowell recital begins:

> Waddling with terrific velocity toward the grand piano at the center of the stage, he promptly sat down and applied his entire forearm to the ivories of the dignified instrument. A roar arose from the piano, followed by one from the audience, which in its turn was followed by still further roars from the piano as the composer again and again struck and released masses of keys now with an arm and now with a fist. (*Discoveries* 273)

Section III of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," where the blue guitarist "bang[s] it from a savage blue, / Jangling the metal of the strings . . . ," can be read as analogous to the violent musical performances of Henry Cowell:

> Ah, but to play man number one,
> To drive the dagger in his heart,
>
> To lay his brain upon the board
> And pick the acrid colors out,
>
> To nail his thought across the door,
> Its wings spread wide to rain and snow,
>
> To strike his living hi and ho,
> To tick it, tock it, turn it true,
>
> To bang it from a savage blue,
> Jangling the metal of the strings . . . (*CP* 166)

This banging "from a savage blue" (out of a violent imagination) results in "Jangling the metal of the strings," just as Cowell's banging on the piano

would jangle its strings. The violent energy located in the infinitive phrases ("To drive," "To nail," "To strike," "To bang") might be read, somewhat crudely, as Stevens' rendition of an increasingly violent music-making.

Rosenfeld opens his chapter on Cowell with various descriptions of the openly hostile audiences who witnessed Cowell's avant-garde piano performances. Stevens opens his poem by dramatizing an exchange between the blue guitarist and his audience. Here is Rosenfeld's description of Henry Cowell as he prepares to play "The Banshee," a piece performed directly upon the strings of the piano:

> [T]he composer rose from his stool, and stepping resolutely behind the piano, thrust a hand inside its open queue and started to pluck the wires. The moment was tense. Few members of the audience could help feeling that if they were the piano, they would certainly get up and sock the fellow; and everybody glued his eyes upon the venerable instrument, expecting at any moment to see it rise on its hind legs and deliver a swift one to his jaw with one of its fore paws. (*Discoveries* 274)

Cowell is bent over, about to pluck the piano's strings. As he does so, he is playing the piano as one would play a guitar. Even the staid grand piano can barely contain its anger in Rosenfeld's description, as if it shares and lends credence to the audience's potentially violent reaction.

Section I of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" opens with an uncannily similar setting, although the tension between the audience and musician is less hostile:

> The man bent over his guitar,
> A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.
>
> They said, "You have a blue guitar,
> You do not play things as they are."
>
> The man replied, "Things as they are
> Are changed upon the blue guitar."
>
> And they said then, "But play, you must,
> A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
>
> A tune upon the blue guitar
> Of things exactly as they are." (*CP* 165)

The opening description of the "man *bent* over his guitar" can be read as both a passively static description of the blue guitarist's posture (as those who sense a possible allusion to Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* might read it) and as an active verb indicating a performance about to happen. The performer/poet in this poem begins by bending over his guitar to play, focused on the task at hand. But what is most striking about this performance

is that the audience interjects, challenging the poet/performer not to play on a "blue guitar" but rather to "play things as they are."

By dramatizing such an audience response to the blue guitarist's music, Stevens expresses his sense of an American audience which often insisted on some version of social realism ("things as they are") as a response to the increasing pressures of contemporary life in the 1930s. Stevens' opening lines also dramatize one of the problems he will search out an answer to in "The Man with the Blue Guitar": how to be a social poet but on his own terms (rather than on those of his Marxist critics), how to play, in other words, social realities while also expressing something of transcendent value ("A tune beyond us") in the sounds of words.

The unusual music heard in Cowell's "The Banshee" is produced directly on the strings inside the piano by sweeping a finger up and down the length of one or more strings. Rosenfeld describes the strange sound effects emanating from the piano: "From its sounding strings there arose a series of weird glissandi which any theatrical producer mounting a play about a haunted house and wishing to suggest the spook by musical means could not possibly have improved upon" (275). Stevens describes musical effects like those heard in Cowell's "The Banshee" in section IV of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," offering his own version of a "crazy" music played upon one string. The sounds of buzzing flies, if listened to carefully, do sound like "a series of weird glissandi":

> A million people on one string?
> And all their manner in the thing,
>
> And all their manner, right and wrong,
> And all their manner, weak and strong?
>
> The feelings crazily, craftily call,
> Like a buzzing of flies in autumn air,
>
> And that's life, then: things as they are,
> This buzzing of the blue guitar. (*CP* 166–67)

By attempting divergent forms of musical expression in sections I through IV, Stevens' blue guitarist suggests the difficulty of discovering a form of musical expression equal to expressing the violent state of "things as they are" in 1936–37, a difficulty to which the poem bears witness. In what I take to be a partial description of his poetic project in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," Stevens almost seems to be urging himself and his poetry onward to the burdensome task at hand:

> Poetry
>
> Exceeding music must take the place
> Of empty heaven and its hymns,

> Ourselves in poetry must take their place,
> Even in the chattering of your guitar. (*CP* 167)

With this daring and, at least to my mind, overbearingly confident (and thus anxiety-producing) self-challenge that poetry must surpass music, and by so doing become our new religion, replacing "empty heaven and its hymns," Stevens seems to be presenting himself as Poet Elect. In this regard, Harold Bloom quite rightly places sections V and VI as a "*Tessera,* or synecdochal reversal," and an initial stage of what he calls "Crossing of Election" (120). The poem has shifted, we might say, from the "jangling" and "buzzing" strings of a blue guitar engaged in playing, like Cowell at the piano, a violent and jangly music of "things as they are" to a more articulate, a more speech-oriented term—the "chattering" guitar. As the "you" in "your guitar" slips in section V toward more fully depicting not something akin to Cowell's music but something closer to Stevens' musical speech, the term "chattering," with its associations of frivolity, adds a note of balancing self-deprecation to Stevens' otherwise grandiose claims for what poetry "must" do.

In the sections that immediately follow V and VI, Stevens attempts to find the words and music necessary to confront the increasingly violent state of "things as they are." Though Stevens fails at such a daunting task, he fails magnificently, as he expresses movingly in section after section the pathos of not being equal to the task of expressing "things as they are." In section VII, in fact, the blue guitarist can play no music: "The strings are cold on the blue guitar" (*CP* 168). In section VIII, we see "the feeling heavy in cold chords / Struggling toward impassioned choirs" (*CP* 169). These "cold chords" from VIII are finally given expression as Stevens attempts two types of chords in XI. But both his chord and discord are weakly ineffectual: the chord "falsifies" things as they are; the "discord merely magnifies" (*CP* 171) them. Is Stevens suggesting, at least in the early stages of "The Man with the Blue Guitar," that to play "things as they are" neither chords nor discords will do, that perhaps only the violently banged out tone-cluster can adequately begin to express the violent pressures of contemporaneous life?

In the jacket statement from *The Man with the Blue Guitar and Other Poems* Stevens writes: "Although the blue guitar is a symbol of the imagination, it is used most often simply as a reference to the individuality of the poet, meaning by the poet any man of imagination" (*OP* 233). If I am correct in suggesting that Henry Cowell is, in addition to Stevens, perhaps one of "The Men with the Blue Guitars," one of the "men of imagination" who occupy the space of Stevens' breakthrough long poem, then we might wonder to what extent Cowell's violent music-making helped Stevens discover the violence of the imagination he later cited as necessary to the writing of poetry. Recent developments in Stevens criticism have demonstrated just how much of Stevens' poetry finds its source in contemporary figures and

events few critics would have imagined possible in, say, the 1970s. James Longenbach and Alan Filreis, for example, have recently shown how frequently specific contemporary political events find expression in Stevens' poems. Glen MacLeod has given us a sense of how Stevens' interactions with the contemporary art world appear in various guises in his poetry. Perhaps just as the movements of contemporary politics and modern art circulate through Stevens' verse, so too might some of this century's more memorable expressions of modern music.

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Notes

[1] Rosenfeld's critical writings have often been cited for their possible influence on Stevens' poetry. For examples, see Sidney Feshbach, Louis Martz, and Martha Strom.

[2] For other readings that interpret "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in relation to music, see Barbara Comins and Alden R. Turner.

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Wallace Stevens and the Maternal Art of Poetry

MARY SIDNEY WATSON

MUCH OF THE SCHOLARLY work on Wallace Stevens has rightly centered on the interrelated roles of reality and the imagination, for this interrelationship embodies the basis of his understanding of the nature of poetry and the poet's function in society. But this relationship is complex. As J. S. Leonard and C. E. Wharton observe, "For Stevens the structure of reality confounds our usual categories of objective, subjective, and intersubjective" (12). Additional insights into that relationship can be gained by turning to psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's model for the genesis of cultural activity within the preoedipal mother-child relationship, a "potential space" that allows the blending of inner and outer realities. A dialogue between Stevens' and Winnicott's examinations of the interphase between the subjective and the objective may afford new insights into Stevens' work, especially into the nature of the power Stevens suggests the poet exercises in creating a protected sphere that holds back the force of the outer world while paradoxically enabling a more direct experience of that world. Conversely, although Winnicott locates the origin of cultural activity and creativity within this "intermediate area," he never examines the role the creative person fills in society—an area where Stevens has much to offer. A dialogue between the two theorists (which Stevens certainly was) promises to open up a broader understanding, not only of Stevens' work, but also of the nature of literary art.

While Winnicott sees the experiencing of outer reality as a fixed phenomenal experience, Stevens varies his use of the term "reality," as he draws on what David Hesla has called a "chaotic shootout" of warring ideas (261). But this difference is more superficial than it appears, as Winnicott's formulation posits an experiencing of the world that infuses that sensory input with the subjective and locates the origin of creativity within this zone where the boundaries of subject and object seem to merge. Similarly, Stevens defines the poet as anyone who is open to recognizing (and appreciating) the experience of the world outside the self as a reflection of the viewer's subjectivity:

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> It is easy to suppose that few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there—few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. (*NA* 65–66)

Winnicott's theory provides a bridge for understanding the relationship between the role of the poet and the affective merger of self and natural environment in Stevens' poetry.

Winnicott's explanation of the origin and development of creativity is exciting because, unlike earlier psychoanalytical depictions, it "shows how childhood experience and the childhood subjective world come to be integrated into the adult's creative life and culture as a whole without seeing creativity as simply a return to childhood wishes, fantasies, and fears" (Chodorow 153). Like Stevens, Winnicott is interested in "the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (*Playing* 3), and he also sees this as a "universal" mode of creativity: "It belongs to being alive" (67). His portrayal of the interrelation between inner and outer reality is very close to Stevens' depiction of the interweaving of reality and the imagination in "The Idea of Order at Key West," "The World as Meditation," and many other poems. In his version of object relations theory, Winnicott locates the foundation of this creativity in the earliest stages of the child's life, as the infant gradually differentiates itself from its mother. In *Playing and Reality* Winnicott proposes three psychological realms: an inner realm of subjective experience, an outer domain of objective experience, and an "intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute" (2).

This transitional or potential space where "the baby's separating-out of the world of objects from the self is achieved only through the absence of a space between" is the central paradox of his theory of object relations, a paradox that he argues must be "tolerated" by the developing personality (108). In this transitional sphere, the borders between what is "me" and "not-me" are dissolved, and the inner (subjective) world and the outer (objective) realities appear to merge, a psychological maneuver that allows the infant to lessen the stress of separating itself from its mother by maintaining an area where the separation never seems to occur, where the mother still seems part of the self (109). The evolution of this intermediate area is played out through the infant's changing relationship with its "good enough" mother, who must provide two services to the developing personality: 1) reflect back accurately the developing self and 2) protect the potential space from being overwhelmed by the outer reality. She accomplishes this by adjusting her responses, initially mirroring the infant's ges-

tures by providing the appropriate object, then gradually withdrawing her immediate aid and allowing the infant to experience competence within a sphere of safety (*Playing* 11–14). This zone, where the inner psychic world is sensed to infuse and merge with the world of outer reality, becomes the locus for play and eventually the site of cultural activity.

In Winnicott's model the child learns to tolerate the mother's absence through its attachment to a transitional object—a teddy bear, a blanket, a thumb, or some other object that the child perceives as having existence outside of itself and yet also as being a part of itself. This attachment forms within the potential space developed through the relationship with the mother. The transitional object that the infant craves must be respected by the family. As Winnicott observes, concerns about sanitation are set aside as the parents instinctively understand that any change to the child's blanket (or any other transitional object) may be threatening to the child. The parents' tacit acceptance of the child's sense of unity with the transitional object provides a zone of emotional safety in which the child can establish its first steps toward independence. Later, Winnicott argues, the object that must be respected is the child's cultural pursuit, in which again the self's subjective experience is felt to merge with some aspect of the nonsubjective world (*Playing* 4–5).

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens also emphasizes the necessity of the recognition of the "universal interdependence" of the imagination and reality; they are "equal and inseparable" (*NA* 24). He insists:

> The subject-matter of poetry is not that "collection of solid, static objects extended in space" but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes; and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are. (*NA* 25)

"The imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real" (*NA* 6). Poetry, then, is "an interdependence of the imagination and reality as equals" (*NA* 27). Like Winnicott, Stevens stresses that creativity exists only within this intermediate zone. As Jeanne Ruppert argues, "For Stevens there is no 'transcendental poetic spirit'; there is only the constantly recurring phenomenon of a world measured out in terms of a human response to brute being" (85). Creativity, for Stevens and Winnicott, is a universal response to a world outside the self that can only be sensed and understood through the subjective.

Stevens begins to move away from (perhaps "embellish" would be better) Winnicott's formulation in his exploration of the functioning of this transitional area. As Ruppert notes, Stevens goes beyond the acknowledgment of the existence of such a sphere of interaction between the imagination and reality "to account for the feeling response that the conscious human being makes to nature. Does it arise from what one finds in nature,

or from what one brings to nature, or from the fact that one both 'finds' and 'brings' . . . ?" (75). What then is the effect on reality of the imaginative act? Stevens is intrigued by the paradox of the "reality" of the experience of the imaginative act, which seems to exist only on a subjective level, but which reaches out to change the world outside the self. For example, the singer in "The Idea of Order at Key West" transforms the perspective of her listeners; Penelope in "The World as Meditation" finds the strength to resist her suitors yet another day; and in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" the product of the imagination becomes the new sense of reality for his listeners: "The blue guitar / Becomes the place of things as they are, / A composing of senses of the guitar" (*CP* 168). In reference to these last lines Stevens explains in an August 1940 letter to Hi Simons "Things imagined . . . become things as they are" (*L* 360).

Winnicott and Stevens present similarly complex, even paradoxical, portrayals of the relationship between creativity and tradition. In addition to the necessity for a safe context for the developing self, Winnicott emphasizes the connection of creativity to a tradition of cultural activity:

> Perhaps I have said enough to show both what I know and what I do not know about the meaning of the word culture. It interests me, however, as a side issue, that in any cultural field *it is not possible to be original except on a basis of tradition*. . . . The interplay between originality and the acceptance of tradition as the basis for inventiveness seems to me to be just one more example, and a very exciting one, of the interplay between separateness and union. (*Playing* 99)

Stevens suggests an even more ambivalent relationship between the creative person and tradition in that, within a tradition, words tend to accumulate connotative meanings that pull the sense of the word further and further from the thing itself: "A tendency toward the connotative, whether in language or elsewhere, cannot continue against the pressure of reality" (*NA* 16). Also, Stevens' poetry presents the dangers of the imagination, especially the imagination functioning under the burden of inherited concepts that limit its perceptions, as a shift toward imagery that has become detached from "the thing itself" and instead grows out of earlier images within the tradition. For instance, in "The Man on the Dump" Stevens portrays a cycle of imaginative development in which the tradition appears as an accumulation of worn-out analogies that adhere less and less to the real:

> how many men have copied dew
> For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
> With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
> Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
> One grows to hate these things except on the dump. (*CP* 202)

This is the far end of the cycle, the end furthest removed from the objective world. The transition to a new era of imaginative power is portrayed as a "purifying change" where "One rejects / The trash" (*CP* 202). Stevens sees the tradition as necessarily cyclical, accruing imagery and connotations as it feeds off itself, its vital connection to reality becoming increasingly tenuous until the new reality forces a break.

In Stevens' system of thought the imagination rises at "the end of an era" when it is "always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality" (*NA* 22). This rejection of tradition by a questing imagination is, I believe, at the heart of the difference between Stevens' and Winnicott's depictions of the creative act. Winnicott's portrayal is of a more passive self, "at rest" in the merger with outer reality. Stevens' creative self is powerfully active; the imaginative act is a forceful push against the pressure of the outer reality, forever trying to reach the unattainable, to set aside the "trash" of old images, the worn-out tradition, as well as the filter of the self's own perceptions. The drive is always toward "things as they are." But the difference here may not be as great as it first appears. Winnicott, of course, is influenced by the focus of his inquiry—the infant—and so his language incorporates the self's relative lack of power and cohesive will at that stage. Stevens' portrayal is not only of the adult mind, but of the strongest and most energetic of creative minds (at least in Stevens' view)—the poet's. As such, his poetry provides an important extension of Winnicott's theory, one that can be understood by turning to Winnicott's second major contribution to a psychoanalytic understanding of creativity, his exploration of the necessity of access between the outer reality and a "true" self, which can be blocked when the force of the outer reality becomes too great.

For Winnicott the most important source of definition for the infant is the primary caretaker, whom he assumes to be the mother. When the mother's responses are not reflective of the infant's gestures and the infant is forced to comply too soon to environmental demands (the "pressure of reality," in Stevens' terminology), Winnicott posits the development of a "False Self" that exists to "hide the True Self": "Compliance is then the main feature, with imitation as a specialty" (*Maturational* 146–47). The development of a False Self and the True Self lies on a continuum, and some compliance by the True Self is adaptive and normal, the stuff of everyday social convention, the masks of polite society. However, when the True Self is unable to override and control the False Self, the result is the loss of creativity and spontaneity, for "[o]nly the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real" (*Maturational* 148). The result for the child is a split self and a varying degree of loss of access to the True Self and thus the creative capacity (58).

While Winnicott's depiction of the self is multilayered, and access to the outside reality consists in the ability to override internalized cultural conventions, Stevens' person of the imagination is more dramatically ac-

tive and forceful in his pursuit of the outer reality. But the outward quest is also directed inward, as Crispin discovers as he crosses the ocean in "The Comedian as the Letter C":

> The salt hung on his spirit like a frost,
> The dead brine melted in him like a dew
> Of winter, until nothing of himself
> Remained, except some starker, barer self
> In a starker, barer world. . . . (*CP* 29)

For Stevens, the ability to approach the bareness of reality through the fog of subjective perceptions is a measure of the strength of the imagination. As Eleanor Cook observes, the "decisive" cause of Crispin's failure to achieve his dream of a poetry of the real is that he "simply lacks the inner strength, the immense strength needed to begin to realize his vision" (196). Rather than the "resting place" envisioned by Winnicott, Stevens sees the interphase between inner and outer realities, according to Cook, as "a pattern of continuing human struggle, the struggle of the imagination with the reality that is outside it" (205). And so we have "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" as an expression of that strength:

> Nevertheless, it may be said that poetic truth is an agreement with reality, brought about by the imagination of a man disposed to be strongly influenced by his imagination, which he believes, for a time, to be true, expressed in terms of his emotions or, since it is less of a restriction to say so, in terms of his own personality. (*NA* 54)

The poetic act achieves some rapprochement with "things as they are" outside of the self, but only within the transitional sphere where "things as they are" includes the inner reality of the poet.

For Stevens, creativity is a universal human inheritance, but the extraordinarily creative person possesses unusual strength of the imagination. In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" Stevens asserts, "A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow" (*NA* 27). In terms of Winnicott's model, this appears to be an individual who has incorporated the mother's role, who has the psychological strength to protect his or her own transitional sphere from impingement by the outer reality.

In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" Stevens obviously associates the strength of the creative imagination with masculinity, but his poetry suggests that the "virile youth" is more metaphorical than a statement about gender and creativity. Two of Stevens' most powerful poems, "The Idea of Order at Key West" and "The World as Meditation," put women in the role of poet/maker. It is to these two poems I wish to turn in order to

illuminate Stevens' perception of the function of the creative imagination and the role of the creative person in society, a question Winnicott does not pursue.

Relatively early in his career, in prose and in his poetry, most notably, perhaps, in "The Idea of Order at Key West," Stevens explored the role the poet fills in the lives of others. He is adamant in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" that the poet has no "sociological or political . . . obligation" (*NA* 27). He also insists that the poet has no "moral obligation," that his role is

> not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves. . . . I think that his function is to make his imagination theirs and that he fulfills himself only as he sees his imagination become the light in the minds of others. His role, in short, is to help people to live their lives. (*NA* 29)

In "The Idea of Order at Key West" Stevens achieves a sense of the poet's role by distancing us as readers from the singer so that we cannot know what she gains from her song. In effect, we are listening to the speaker listen to the singer, and it is only his response to which we are privy. This emphasis on sounds reflects, as Gyorgyi Voros points out, an "immersion in one's environment" (109), an environment that now includes not only the sound of the ocean, but also the woman's song created in response to that sound. After hearing the song, the speaker turns toward the town, and as he does, her song allows him to perceive order in the world he sees, so that the lights seem to have

> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (*CP* 130)

Her song enables the listeners to find order in the speaker's world; it provides a structure for the speaker's perception, which Ruppert points out is "a 'making,' albeit on a humbler level" (87). To turn again to Stevens' own explanation of the poet's role in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,"

> what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (*NA* 31)

What the poet does, in effect, is to invite others into her transitional sphere, and by doing so, into her particular merger of bare reality read through her own perceptions. That sharing enables others to transform their own perceptions, by providing them with a structure for ordering their world.

As Winnicott suggests, the locus of culture lies in this transitional sphere, not only in its genesis, but also in the connections it allows between individuals.

While "The Idea of Order at Key West" demonstrates the role the poet fills in society through the creation of a sense of order through which others may perceive their world, "The World as Meditation" turns the focus inward and asks: What does the creation provide to the creator? What is the nature of the creative experience? In this eloquent love poem Penelope's internalized image of Ulysses, her re-creation of him each morning, allows her to keep her suitors at bay. The movement of the poem is from a newly constructed external reality, the arrival of spring and of a new day, to a freshly invented internal reality, from the original external projection of Ulysses as an "interminable adventurer" to the internalization of an image of Ulysses as faithful husband, who is "coming constantly so near." It is the world and it is not the world that Penelope perceives, but her imaginative construction of her reality renews her strength and allows her to face another day of her husband's absence.

Penelope imagines Ulysses, and her imagining of him allows her to order herself, to create a shelter for her memory of their love that sustains it during his absence. The shelter she creates exists within the greater rebirth of the natural cycle, but that rebirth is part of an "inhuman meditation":

> The trees had been mended, as an essential exercise
> In an inhuman meditation, larger than her own.
> No winds like dogs watched over her at night. (*CP* 521)

The repetition in stanza four of "essential exercise" from the epigraph by composer Georges Enesco connects the human and the nonhuman creative acts and clarifies the kind of permanency that is suggested in the last sentence of the epigraph: "*Je vis un rêve permanent, qui ne s'arrête ni nuit ni jour*" (*CP* 520). [I live a permanent dream, which ceases neither night nor day.] The "permanent dream," the creative life such as that constructed by Penelope, is not, in Stevens' mind, transcendent to nature, but is a *response* to the cyclical pressures of the natural world. Even so, I agree with Loren Rusk's analysis of the sufficiency of humanity in this poem. As Rusk suggests, "The planet encourages Penelope's constant composing precisely by its lack of concern; we are all that we have." But Penelope's desire for nothing but Ulysses suggests "that humanity 'will suffice' " (18). There is no protective greater presence, "No winds like dogs" watching over her. Ulysses (and, perhaps, the very human protection offered in the encircling image of his arms as necklace and belt) is all she desires. Stevens says it is enough.

In stanza six Penelope acknowledges what she has known all along: it is the sun, not Ulysses. Penelope's experience is not simply a rejection of

reality for an embrace of a fictional construct. Penelope knows, without a doubt, that her experience is purely subjective:

> But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun
> On her pillow? The thought kept beating in her like her heart.
> The two kept beating together. It was only day. (*CP* 521)

The original version of this poem in the *Hudson Review* appeared with a space between the two sentences in the final line of stanza six:

> The two kept beating together.   It was only day.
> (334)

The pause created by the spacing in the original version implies a sense of anticipation and disappointment; its absence in the *Collected Poems* suggests this was not the reading Stevens intended. As Rusk suggests, Penelope never really believes Ulysses is coming, but she "allows herself . . . a fantasy of reunion" (15). The experience has meaning and succeeds in sustaining her because she internalizes the image she has created of the returning Ulysses: "The thought kept beating in her like her heart. / The two kept beating together." This internalization of the image, the imaginative construct, is the "deep-founded sheltering" that protects her memory of their relationship and fuels her resolve.

Stanza seven begins with the paradox: "It was Ulysses and it was not." The rising sun was only the rising sun, but it was also the image she constructed of it, the presence of Ulysses. As Rusk points out, the "experience . . . is real" (19). Just as the parents in Winnicott's anecdote of the transitional sphere must accept the emotional reality of the child's attachment to the blanket or stuffed toy, which is felt to be both part of the self and "not-me" (*Playing* 4), Stevens insists that readers of this poem must accept the subjective reality of Penelope's experience. The "barbarous strength" is clearly within her—it is the imagination, but an imagination that has fed on an outer reality and that now will "never fail."

Daniel Schwarz suggests that in Stevens' later poetry he "lives very much in the world of life in action and confronts all its ambiguities" (196). Here, perhaps, is one of those "ambiguities," for the suggestion seems to be that Penelope's imagination "would never fail" because it has fed on the benignity of the outer reality, that it succeeds because of "a planet's encouragement." However, the need for Penelope's meditation arises because her reality is *not* benign: Ulysses *is* absent and probably is dead, and the suitors are a very real and present menace. Subjective reality for Penelope is both "a planet's encouragement" *and* a "savage presence." For the creative person then, the imaginative function creates a new internal order by reordering the perception of a complex outer reality, one that is both benign and threatening in its aspects. The imagination enables the

self to construct a sphere of safety, to take over the maternal role and provide its own protection against the "pressure of reality."

The final picture Stevens gives us is of Penelope composing herself for her suitors both outwardly, by combing her hair, and inwardly, by repeating Ulysses' name, an act that strengthens her internalized image of him to keep him "coming constantly so near." As Bettie Marshall observes, Penelope "has ceased to be the abandoned wife besieged by suitors and has become ever the welcoming wife" (82). This is Stevens' final paradox—that Penelope's experience, which has no objective existence, by ordering her inner experience and strengthening her resolve, will hold off the pressure of reality; in short, the "barbarous strength" of her imagination will suffice.

What I want to point out in both of these poems is that the person of creative capacity, the poet-figure, creates a sense of order, a protective framework that holds back the force of the outer reality. In terms of Winnicott's model, this is an internalization of the role of the mother, who must provide a zone of safety in which the infant develops its capacity for creativity and culture. Whether transforming the perspectives of others, as with the singer at Key West, or protecting her own psychic world, as in Penelope's case, the poet is the person who is able to keep the outer reality at bay and to make use of it, to use the "barbarous strength" of the imagination against the "savage presence" of bare reality and, through the power of this recognition and acceptance of the individual subjective experience, to enhance her audience's ability to perceive the world outside the self.

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Poems

And Juda Becomes New Haven

And Juda becomes New Haven or else must
He become Juda and walk the shady street
to make the sea past Hamanasset become

the Red Sea that splits for the passage of Jews
in exodus? Who is the Pharaoh in this town
of golden domes and no pyramid builder

with a native claim to the English tongue?
Must an iceman come with quiver and arrows
leaving his intricate snow nest in the Alps

to set aright the histories of this town
where scapegoats pasture on the green scarcely
finding a blade of grass that is not venomous

because the Elks did it and now must live
past all his remorse, past all memories
to forgive another persona of his self

hood in hand standing at the drugstore corner
begging on the shady street that leads neither
to Hamanasset nor to the sea of Judas?

Mary de Rachewiltz
Tirolo di Merano, Italy

To the Breach

I

If words are, as you say, mere signifiers
divorced from what they vainly signify,
what can your own words do but prove to us
the self-defeating nature of your logic,
for words will conjure worlds, though thought be vexed
to catch their mundane magic at the trick.

II

These words are signified
As well as signifiers—
Tell this to Cretans who
Declare all Cretans liars.

III

All language has been centered on the phallus,
Cry critics, stretching mother tongues to tell us.

Erase the text, and explicate the margin,
Urge swollen texts, in pages black with jargon.

Unwrite the written. Level what's erect.
To make the best connections, disconnect.

Paul Lake
Russellville, Ark.

Order at Santa Cruz: October 1989

There is something more than apocalypse
when we feel the ground begin to dance.
The encounter of our own and earth's tympanum
lets us perceive the dominion of resonance:
the floor rolls deep as a kettledrum,
the china and chandelier play like bells,
the harp-strung windows quiver in their frames,
and all around the bass-hollowed walls
reverberate. Something old in these refrains

that strikes us new, a chord beyond our structure.
We see our collective odds-making
in pale orange, violet, and blue arcs
where power lines snap, in skyscrapers'
reversed pendulums, in tuning-fork
telephone poles, in shoreless, breaking
waves of concrete and earth, in cities lit
by candles and fire, in bridges cut like cake,
in the sudden knowledge of unearned credit

and the magnitudes of assumptions we share.
Terra firma beneath our feet, and if not
God, reason and order in heaven, and elsewhere,
the paltry, usual, human stuff: confidence,
suffering, arrogance, ecstasy, despair,
according to chemistry's and time's coincidence.
A second to find sea legs on land's yaw,
to smell the hominid fear we had forgot-
ten, to shake the accretions from awe,

to feel the hot flow of adrenaline.
It's later we sort through the hypotheses—
more fluid than ethereal physics or greasy
economics can guess—fractures spinning kaolin
plates, the unimaginable heat of the core,
the eons of fickle sand and roiled stone
that move us in moments, ages, centuries,
while we follow, not knowing the score.

Carolyn Dille
San Jose, Calif.

The Happy Deities

You look up at a mansion splendid with splendid views, and sin
imagining yourself in a silk peignoir, complacent
among the passion vines, covetous of complacency
after nightfall's rockets, scattering shots,
boom and fizzle of magnesium glow over the parking lot,
a child singing *Ouuu, it's beau-tee-ful*, at each starry bloom,
silhouettes of families on curbs and lawns, murmurous swell
as spermy comets dash madly seeking consummation, then
perish below the crescent moon they cannot reach, or soil.

Ostracized for ignorance, her art a terrible participation,
Riefenstahl danced, danced beyond banners and guns,
beyond contracts signed in secret chambers,
danced on broken cities, listless bones in a ditch,
danced in the shadow of the white-peaked mountain.
For that the dead never forgive her.
But is it all you hope for, to be born back into longing,
passing from state to state in perpetual fits of discontent,
wanting what might be elsewhere, consumed by what you are not,
and what is not, and what is?

From the west comes the Boundless in white raiment.
From the south the Beautifier with her transforming eye.
Untransformed, you go frantically hither and thither
despairing, as if some accident in infancy
gouged out a valley of depression in your skull
marking you for hunger as are larvae of elm beetles
that despoil the trees, littering the table with their excrement,
trees whose only defense is to cast off their own splendor.

Phyllis Stowell
Berkeley, Calif.

Key West

Somewhere,
between the lost city of Atlantis and Kingdom
Come, there is more than enough
light, liquid and pleasure to make any-
body happy. On the wharf, you can pay

five dollars to be photographed
with a green python coiled
around your neck. And the handler
will scrawl on the shiny Polaroid: I survived
Paradise.

David Athey
Palm Beach, Fla.

Counting Mrs. Edgar's Cats

On the days when there are seven cats,
She counts the littlest one three times,
You said, as if it were part of a litter.

But we who have rational minds know
There are three,
And only three. Our view is limited

That way, as it says in this book
Of magic I have here, somewhere,
In my cluttered room.

What, then, surprised me when I saw
You in the red sky just before dawn?
In a rational world, we would never meet.

So. What held me back? Anyone would've
Played that bluff. What discipline allows
You to count three and still see the seven?

David Wyman
Leominster, Mass.

Marital Blues

Men scatter throughout clouds.
—Wallace Stevens

When husbands drift away like blue balloons
Then slowly merge into the larger blue
That widens California afternoons,
Those left behind to contemplate the view
Will trace their languid tracks across the sky
Then vainly try to will them back. Without
Some closure, vengeance cannot satisfy;
At least a clear betrayal cuts off doubt.

As they escape through fictions of lost boys,
Their gravity begins to disappear
And there is nothing anyone can do.

Imagine them as leaking, storm-tossed toys
Ascending in a thinning atmosphere
And recognize that they are turning blue.

A. M. Juster
Belmont, Mass.

Reviews

Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose.
Ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson. New York: Library of America, 1997.

I am of three minds
Regarding the LOA Stevens,
Like a bookstore
In which there are three people
Browsing the new arrivals.

I

Browser I is the general reader, contemplating his first Stevens purchase. He smiles as he leafs through the *Collected Poetry and Prose*, for it comprises most of the material previously distributed among three volumes—the *Collected Poems*, *Opus Posthumous*, and *The Necessary Angel*. It reproduces the six collections of poetry published by Alfred A. Knopf during Stevens' lifetime plus "The Rock" section of the *Collected Poems*. These add up to more than the *Collected Poems*, inasmuch as Stevens omitted from the 1954 collection several poems (including an abbreviated "Owl's Clover") and a prose statement on the poetry of war. The new volume also includes late poems inadvertently left out of the *Collected Poems* or written after it went to press, and it devotes over a hundred pages to "Uncollected Poems," ranging from juvenilia through poems that were still in manuscript at Stevens' death. Of Stevens' prose the volume contains all three plays, the complete *Necessary Angel*, a category of "Uncollected Prose," and a sampling of the notebooks, journal, and letters. With the Chronology, Note on the Texts, notes on individual selections, and two indexes (one for the poetry, another for the prose) the book comes in at a relatively trim 1,032 pages. Durably bound and printed on acid-free paper, it is a bargain at $35, with substantial discounts available from some booksellers.

II

Browser II already owns the handsome clothbound editions of Stevens' works. When she orders texts for her college course in modern poetry, however, she must decide whether to make do with the Random-Vintage paperback of the *Collected Poems* (at $16) or have her students purchase the paperbacks of *Opus Posthumous* ($17) and *The Necessary Angel* ($9) as well. For her the *Collected Poetry and Prose* makes good economic sense if she devotes several weeks to Stevens. The Library of America could make the decision easier by issuing the Stevens volume in a paperback edition of the kind available for Poe and Whitman. College Editions of this length currently sell for about $14, but none is currently planned for Stevens. As a teaching text, the Library of America Stevens has the disadvantages endemic to the series. The typeface is small—10-point for most of the text, with smaller type for block

quotations and still smaller for the notes. The print on the reverse of the page is visible through the bible paper, so one is always reading palimpsest. Gone are the visual and tactile gratifications of the Knopf clothbound volumes. This is strictly a Low Church production, right down to the slender hymnal ribbon that serves as a bookmark.

Teachers and students will appreciate the expansive eleven-page chronology in the back of the volume, which serves as a miniature biography. They should be forewarned, however, that the Stevens of the chronology is not drawn to scale. Perhaps in an effort to avoid controversy, the editors have emphasized details at the expense of larger issues. Reading the chronology for the 1930s, for example, one learns that Stevens engaged in a fistfight with Ernest Hemingway in Key West but not that he took part in the political altercations of the decade. From the account of Stevens' terminal illness, one learns that he read Longfellow to nurses at the hospital but not that he showed an interest in matters of faith or religion. (For the record, Hemingway won. The nurses arguably lost.)

Were they not so bland, the journal entries and letters drawn from *Souvenirs and Prophecies* and the *Letters of Wallace Stevens* might have compensated for the omissions of the chronology. Two previously unpublished letters from Stevens to the poet Alice Corbin Henderson stand out from the rest, for they contain candid assessments of William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and T. S. Eliot. Writing to Henderson in 1922, shortly after the publication of *The Waste Land*, Stevens says of Eliot's poem, "As poetry it is surely negligible. What it may be in other respects is a large subject on which one could talk for a month. If it is the supreme cry of despair it is Eliot's and not his generation's. Personally, I think it's a bore." How right he was—his comment anticipates Eliot's own description of the poem as "the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life"—and how wrong.

I have one final and probably idiosyncratic reservation about the Library of America volume as a classroom text. The editors include selections from all of Stevens' notebooks except the one that I have found to be pedagogically the most useful, namely, *From Pieces of Paper*. Available in its entirety in George S. Lensing's *Wallace Stevens: A Poet's Growth*, the notebook contains numerous titles for which Stevens never wrote the poems. When my students are in danger of taking Stevens too seriously and missing his wit, I write a few of these on the board: "The Halo That Would Not Light," "Pretty Hot Weather for Dead Horses," "Brochure On Eden," "Bad Money at the Six O'Clock Mass," and "Still Life With Aspirin." Besides comic relief, these afford insight into Stevens' method of composition. The finished poem is often a variation on, or annotation of, the theme announced in the title.

III

Like Browser II, Browser III already owns the previously published volumes of Stevens and is inclined to adopt the new edition in the classroom. Can he also use it for serious scholarship? Though encouraged by the Library of America's professed dedication to "publishing authoritative editions of

America's greatest writing," he may wonder what "authoritative" means in this connection.

Here it may be helpful to recall the sentiment that inspired the Library of America project. Thirty years ago Edmund Wilson published *The Fruits of the MLA*, a cranky little pamphlet in which he lamented the apparatus-heavy editions of Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain then being produced by university presses under the auspices of the Modern Language Association and the Center for Editions of American Authors. As an alternative to these bloated tomes, Wilson proposed that an American publisher, perhaps with a subsidy from the federal government, initiate a series modeled on the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade editions of classic French authors. The Pléiade editions are not only compact and inexpensive but also meticulously edited.

Wilson got his wish with respect to the physical appearance of the American Pléiade. Editorially, however, something was lost in translation. As a rough index of that loss, one might compare the amount of textual commentary in the two series. The Pléiade edition of Mallarmé devotes 266 pages to "Notes et Variantes" (16% of the total volume), making it virtually a variorum edition. In contrast, the "Note on the Texts" and "Notes" in the Library of America Stevens together add up to forty-seven pages, or 5% of the total. Assuming that these are representative volumes (comparison of the Pléiade Baudelaire and Library of America Robert Frost yields similar results), one can't help but conclude that the Library of America wants its texts to be authoritative, but not *too* authoritative.

Of course, more isn't necessarily better. The real question remains: How well have the editors done their job within the constraints of the series? By going back to the first editions of the individual volumes published by Knopf and sometimes comparing these texts with other printed versions, Kermode and Richardson have produced a version of the major poetry that is more reliable than the *Collected Poems*. I counted over a dozen corrections in this part of the edition alone, of errors ranging from missing terminal punctuation to a misplaced line ("We hang like warty squashes . . .") in section VIII of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle." A few errors in the *Collected Poems* managed to slip through, such as the missing roman numeral for the first stanza of "Poesie Abrutie," the dash that should be a hyphen in line 5 of "The Pediment of Appearance," the missing periods indicating an ellipsis at the end of line 13 in section I of "The Auroras of Autumn," and the spelling "Center" in the title of "The Hermitage at the Centre." These and several proofreading oversights in the table of contents and indexes (for example, *Sujets* should be *Sujects* in the title of Stevens' commonplace book) are more apt to distract the scholar than the general reader or the teacher.

Elsewhere in the volume, the editors' decisions are calculated but questionable. "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," for example, is rife with errors as reprinted in both *Transport to Summer* (1947) and the *Collected Poems*. Though the editors cite the first printing of *Transport* as their source, they have wisely consulted the 1942 and 1943 limited editions of *Notes* published by the Cummington Press and have silently corrected errors in the Knopf texts. For one crucial passage, however, they have unaccountably opted for the Knopf

wording. Thus the Library of America version of section VIII of "It Must Give Pleasure" reads,

> What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,
> Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,
> Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory. . . .

The contrast between the angel's serenity and the violence of celestial space provides delectable grist for the mills of exegesis. Unfortunately, the abyss is *violet*, not *violent*, in the holograph manuscript and corrected typescript of the poem at the Houghton Library, as well as both Cummington editions. Seven lines later, the abyss is described as "lapis-haunted." The color is thematically significant, for it associates the angel's realm with the "violet space" occupied by major man in section VIII of "It Must Be Abstract."

The editors' treatment of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" signals a shortcoming of the volume. Their notes often provide too little information about the texts consulted and the grounds for their choices. Or the information is incorrect. "First Warmth," for example, has attracted textual scrutiny (most recently from John Dolan in the fall 1997 issue of this journal) because Stevens later incorporated the poem, with several changes, in "As You Leave the Room." Though Kermode and Richardson cite the 1957 edition of *Opus Posthumous* as the source of their text of the poem, they actually adopt the wording of the 1989 corrected edition of *Opus* for the poem's third line, which reads, "A countryman of all the bones in [not *of*] the world." Their notes are hit-or-miss in identifying alternative published versions of the poems. They reproduce the lines that were deleted from the periodical printings of "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad" and "Autumn Refrain," but mention neither the longer version of "Academic Discourse at Havana" (entitled "Discourse in a Cantina at Havana") nor the slightly different version of "Tradition" that is reprinted as "Recitation after Dinner" in both editions of *Opus Posthumous*.

The Pléiade edition of Mallarmé might also have served as a model for the handling of Stevens' juvenilia. Preceding the French poet's published volumes is a category entitled "Poëmes d'enfance et de Jeunesse." In contrast, Stevens' early efforts are tossed into a catchall category of "Uncollected Poems" along with his mature work. The longer version of "Owl's Clover" is also relegated to this category, even though it was published as a separate book in 1936. Though Stevens had misgivings about the poem, it has attracted considerable critical attention and should take its rightful place between *Ideas of Order* and *The Man with the Blue Guitar* in the front of the Library of America volume.

Like the poems in the "Uncollected" section, the selections in the "Uncollected Prose" have been published elsewhere, most of them in *Opus Posthumous*. An exception is a piece called "There was a mother chicken." Most readers would trade this embarrassing attempt at a children's story for one of the seven *Harvard Advocate* short stories not included in the volume or even, for that matter, the high school oration entitled "Greatest Need of the Age," likewise omitted.

Stevens scholars will not be well served until there is a proper variorum edition of the poet's complete works. Published on CD-ROM or even on the Web, such an edition might be less odious to Wilsonites. In the meantime, should you ante up the price of the Library of America edition? It depends on which of the three bookstore browsers you most resemble. If you are simply looking for a highly portable Stevens or plan to devote a significant portion of a semester to teaching him, then the Library of America volume is a good choice. If you are looking for previously unpublished material or definitive texts of familiar material, you may decide to save your money.

Ultimately, the value of the new edition may reside less in these utilitarian considerations than in its testimony to Stevens' importance among American writers. In choosing which authors to canonize, the Library of America has doubtless been influenced by nonliterary considerations having to do with copyright and the publishing marketplace. The fact remains that only one other twentieth-century poet, Robert Frost, has been so honored, and Stevens' reputation will be enhanced by the publication of the *Collected Poetry and Prose*. It is, besides, a touching gesture of filial piety. The volume was published with support from the poet James Merrill (1926–1995), and will be kept in print by a gift in his memory.

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