

*The  
Wallace  
Stevens  
Journal*



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A Publication of The Wallace Stevens Society, Inc.

Volume 22

Number 2

Fall 1998

# The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume 22 Number 2

Fall 1998

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Manuscripts, subscriptions, and advertising should be addressed to the editor. Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate; word-processed manuscripts will not be returned. Authors of accepted manuscripts should be prepared to furnish a disk copy.

*The Wallace Stevens Journal* is indexed or abstracted in *Abstracts of English Studies*, *American Humanities Index*, *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*, *Current Contents*, *IBR (International Bibliography of Book Reviews)*, *IBZ (International Bibliography of Periodical Literature)*, *Literary Criticism Register*, *MHRA Annual Bibliography*, *MLA International Bibliography*, and *Year's Work in English Studies*.

This journal is a member of the Council of Editors of Learned Journals.



# Stevens' "The Rock" and J. Hillis Miller's Practice of Misreading

B. J. LEGGETT

*Does the necessity of misreading mean the same thing in each case? . . . Even if the law of misreading applies here also, there are obviously strong and weak critical misreadings, more or less vital ones.*

—Miller, "Deconstructing the Deconstructers"

*There are weak mis-readings and strong mis-readings, just as there are weak poems and strong poems, but there are no right readings, because reading a text is necessarily the reading of a whole system of texts, and meaning is always wandering around between texts.*

—Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*

## I

WALLACE STEVENS' LATE POEM "The Rock" played a small but significant role in the institutionalization of deconstructive criticism, although its place in the brief history of American deconstruction is complicated by a fundamental confusion or incoherence that may be located in J. Hillis Miller's influential 1976 reading, the text that assigned its role. Miller used the poem as the foundation for one of the earliest attempts to introduce to the uninitiated what was then known primarily as the Yale School, a group of what Miller called uncanny critics consisting of himself, Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, and Jacques Derrida. The two-part essay, published in the *Georgia Review* as "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," is now recognized as one of the seminal statements of Miller's version of deconstruction, as Robert Markley among others has noted (181). Recounting the beginnings of American deconstruction in *After the New Criticism*, Frank Lentricchia observes that among Derrida's followers "Miller assumed the burden of chief spokesman and polemicist." And while de Man was producing a series of "Derridean revisions of Nietzsche" and "Hartman was establishing himself as the philological athlete of American poststructuralism," Miller took on one of the spokesmen for traditional criticism, M. H. Abrams, at the

MLA convention and in *Critical Inquiry* and “prepared a long two-part essay on Wallace Stevens for the *Georgia Review* (in the course of which he carried Stevens into the poststructuralist camp)” (162).

The *Georgia Review* essay became one of the principal statements in the early dissemination of deconstructive criticism for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its brilliantly wrong-headed reading of “The Rock,” among the last of Stevens’ long, difficult theoretical poems. It was also the clearest and strongest statement to that point on the program of literary deconstruction. It is perhaps the central text in Vincent Leitch’s and William E. Cain’s early attempts to estimate Miller’s criticism, and Abrams refers to it repeatedly in his MLA confrontation with Miller. Cain’s 1979 essay finds that it is one of two texts in which Miller “elaborates his deconstructive stance in greatest detail” (379). (The other is his review of Joseph Riddel’s *The Inverted Bell*, to which we will return.) Leitch’s essay a few months later characterizes Miller’s description of the “means and ends” of deconstruction in the second part of the article as “the most lucid account yet written” (604). Lentricchia, with a focus on the polemical nature of the article, observes that in it Miller “introduced a key term for the controversy, *mise en abyme*, reviewed the state of American and Continental criticism, and inducted his Yale colleagues into the uncanny critics’ hall of fame” (162).

Recognizing its central place among the early texts of deconstructive criticism, I want to reread “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure” together with some of these texts and, of necessity, Stevens’ poem. Now that we are in the wake of deconstructive literary criticism (as distinguished from Derridian deconstruction), its moment of putative dominance in the academy having passed,<sup>1</sup> elements of Miller’s strategy and style that have been obscured may perhaps be more easily read, in the way that any critical practice or ideology opens itself to remoteness. Although deconstructive readings of Miller’s kind are no longer central to critical practice, their influence remains, just as formalist assumptions and strategies survived the demise of formalism. My contention is that both Stevens’ poem, which has been shaped to some degree by Miller’s preemptive reading,<sup>2</sup> and Miller’s theory of misreading, which seeks its sanction in the poem, will be illuminated by a reexamination of the relation between the poem and the essay and between these texts and other early texts of deconstructive criticism, a reexamination of the meaning, as Harold Bloom says, that “is always wandering around between texts” (*Kabbalah and Criticism* 107–08).

How can a theory of reading be illuminated by attention to its practical application? What is the relation between practical criticism and theory? These questions (which appear to have framed themselves in Miller’s seductive style) lead us to the first of the texts I want to read beside Miller’s essay on “The Rock.” This is “Theory and Practice: Response to Vincent Leitch,” Miller’s reply to the 1980 essay cited earlier. Miller’s (mild) objection to Leitch’s account of his criticism is that the general formulations of

deconstruction that Leitch has abstracted from “the context of the practical interpretation which fathered them” has tended to give them “a higher level of universality than they have in the original” (609). Miller argues that seeing a concept clearly “cannot occur as abstract theory but only by way of reflection about concrete acts of interpreting particular works” (614). Leitch “should perhaps have said something about the particular readings that are associated with the general statements he cites.” Also “he might have raised the question of the relation between the two” (611), that is, between the particular reading and the general theory.

What Miller here contends Leitch has left undone is what I wish to pursue. I want to examine the relation between Miller’s form of deconstructive criticism and his concrete act of interpreting “The Rock.” I accept, at least provisionally, his premise that the “test of the efficacy, if not of the ‘validity,’ of a given theory is the persuasiveness of the readings it enables” (610). There is, however, one distinction between theory and practice in the essay that, if correct, will tend to make the kind of examination I propose—the analysis of a particular and unique act of reading—more difficult. Miller argues that “a theory is easier to refute or to dismiss than is a reading” and this is because “a reading can only be successfully opposed by another reading,” which involves “returning to the text in question and working back through it” (610).

Miller’s limiting of the authority of any critique of his own reading—it would be simply another reading and necessarily a misreading—is only one of a number of defenses that have rendered deconstructive criticism particularly resistant to attack. To question Miller’s methodology or the cogency of a particular reading, as I want to do here, is to risk what could be called (after one of the first to experience it) the Abrams Effect, the recognition that *any* argument against a deconstructive reading—the basis or logic of the argument being largely irrelevant—may be dismantled by the rhetoric of deconstruction, which has been formulated, not incidentally, to do just that: to neutralize the logic of any form of extended statement.<sup>3</sup> It is deconstruction’s good fortune, and perhaps the secret of whatever longevity it has enjoyed, that its resourceful rhetoric, its method of reading literary and philosophical texts, works equally well against the attacks of its opponents.

I want to argue that Miller misreads “The Rock,” and he would no doubt agree, since all readings are in his view necessarily misreadings. I must therefore scrutinize the standards and concepts implied in his actual practice, and what I will attempt to show is that among these is the notion of misreading in the traditional sense of an unnecessary and correctable misreading. In questioning Miller’s interpretation of Stevens’ “The Rock,” I want to be able to make the same distinctions among different kinds of misreading that Miller himself finds it necessary to make, and it is evident that critics such as Miller and Bloom who assume that all reading is misreading find themselves in situations in which their official conceptions of

misreading prove insufficient or incoherent. Miller borrows, apparently from Bloom, a distinction between strong and weak misreadings as a way out of his quandary, but this brings with it some confusion, for Miller's strong misreading is clearly not the same as Bloom's, lacking (at least in theory) its Freudian willfulness.<sup>4</sup>

Although the notion of a weak misreading does not always mean the same thing for Bloom, one of its functions is to enable him to say that someone is clearly mistaken and can be shown to be so, as in this comment on an allusion to Shelley in a passage from Stevens' poem "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue": "Critics have misread this, weakly, as an attack upon Shelley, which the context alone would reveal to be unlikely, and which Stevens, in a letter, clearly disowns, in a strong tribute to the harmonious skeptic among his Romantic precursors" (*Wallace Stevens* 121). That is, these critics' misreadings are neither necessary nor strong (willful), and their mistaken ideas could be corrected by a better understanding of the context in which the Shelley allusion occurs and by a reading of Stevens' letter, which Bloom proceeds to cite. For Bloom, then, *all* reading is misreading and *some* reading is misreading in yet another sense, and he finds it necessary to draw distinctions. This is a dilemma that Miller also faces, and the text that reveals it most forcefully is "Deconstructing the Deconstructers," his 1975 *Diacritics* review of Joseph Riddel's *The Inverted Bell*.

Miller uses the review, which preceded the Stevens essay by a year, as an occasion for clarifying the tenets of deconstruction as he sees them, which necessarily involves showing how Riddel's version of deconstruction is mistaken. He recognizes immediately that his central concept of misreading makes this task more difficult. His discomfort can be read in his phrasing of his contentions as questions and his final resort to Bloom's strong and weak misreadings:

First there is the question of Riddel's reading of Heidegger and Derrida. Has he got them right? What would it mean to "get them right?" If all interpretation is misinterpretation, this would be as true of Riddel's reading of Heidegger as of Wordsworth's reading of Milton. Does the necessity of misreading mean the same thing in each case? Then there is the question of Riddel's reading of Williams. Has he got Williams right? Even if the law of misreading applies here also, there are obviously strong and weak critical misreadings, more or less vital ones. (24)

Miller wishes to say that Riddel's reading does not get Heidegger, Derrida, and Williams "right," while admitting that no reading could possibly get them right. His means of escaping his dilemma are to suggest that misreading does not mean the same thing in each case and to find equivocal

terms—"vital" and "coherent" are examples—with which to question the competency of Riddel's reading.

"Is Riddel's own critical language coherent? Does he say the same thing from one end of his book to the other?" Miller asks (25), forgetting for a moment his own view that no text is coherent, that no book is able to say the same thing from one end to the other. Miller's implication is that Riddel's critical language is not coherent and that his deconstructive reading misinterprets Heidegger, Derrida, and Williams. The question is whether these are necessary misreadings, inherent in the nature of all reading, or misreadings that may be traced to the competency of the reader. For Miller's own review to escape incoherence (chiding a fellow critic for what is inescapable in their joint enterprise) they must fall into the second category.

This conclusion—that some misreadings may be attributed to the incompetency of the reader—is reinforced by Miller's intimation (again by way of a question) that Riddel is simply confused: "Is he confused in a way which might have been clarified, or is there some necessity in the deconstructive enterprise which means that it is always open in its turn to deconstruction [*sic*]?" (29). The answer is the former: "His book would have been clarified if he had remained more faithful to his intermittent insight into the difference between Heidegger and Derrida," and "he would have been aided by a more elaborate rhetorical theory and by a more discriminating attention to the play of figures in his authors" (29). These are obviously correctable mistakes, as is Riddel's major failure: "Perhaps the most difficulty is caused in Riddel's book, however, by his failure to recognize consistently the necessary heterogeneity of any text" (30). It is Riddel's failure, then, that has produced his misreadings and not the contradictions in the texts he reads. "The clearer deconstructions are those which are most sensitive to the complexities of figure, to that range of different figures which current rhetoric is recovering as a tool of literary analysis" (30). Riddel's misreadings are the result of his not understanding this: "Riddel for the most part does not face explicitly the heterogeneity of Williams or of the other authors he discusses. The result is that he contradicts himself, rather than recognizing fully the contradictions in the texts he discusses" (31).

These are the distinctions that "Deconstructing the Deconstructers" struggles to express without unmasking its own contradictions, yet I am willing to accept Miller's distinctions between forms of misreading, contradictions included, as a means of approaching his reading of "The Rock." I mean to show that there are at least two kinds of misreading present in his essay, but that his "weak" misreadings—those that may be attributed to the lack of competency of the reading rather than contradictions in the text—are primarily responsible for the essay's essential incoherence. As he says of Riddel, even if the general law of misreading applies here, there are strong and weak critical misreadings, the latter consisting of confu-

sions that might be “clarified,” that reside in the critic’s commentary as the result of a failure of recognition or understanding, although, in this instance, not independent of the general theory that sanctions them.

## II

A feature of Miller’s method of reading, as is well known, is to direct attention to one or more crucial passages in a text (as opposed to the text as a whole), sometimes passages of only a few lines, which signal an impasse or contradiction or a moment of undecidability. “Stevens’ Rock and Criticism as Cure” begins with one such passage from “The Rock”:

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.  
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground  
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (CP 526)

“A ‘cure of the ground’? What can this mean?” Miller asks (I, 5), and begins his play with the many senses of the word “cure,” tracing its etymology and applying its contradictory meanings to the passage at hand, as he would manipulate “host” and “parasite” in his MLA paper “The Critic as Host” a few months later. He concludes, “The multiple meanings of the word ‘cure,’ like the meanings of all the key words and figures in ‘The Rock,’ are incompatible, irreconcilable. They may not be organized into a logical or dialectical structure but remain stubbornly heterogeneous” (I, 10). The phrase “a cure of the ground,” then, announces a moment of the poem’s unreadability, and subsequent passages that contain the word “cure” are also contaminated by it: “The meaning of the passages in ‘The Rock’ turning on the word ‘cure’ oscillates painfully within the reader’s mind. However hard he tries to fix the word in a single sense it remains indeterminable, uncannily resisting his attempts to end its movement” (I, 11). Miller is a careful reader and much of what he says about Stevens’ poem is persuasive, but his interpretation of what is for him its key passage is so seriously flawed that it undermines the entire reading and the more general observations about deconstructive criticism that depend on it. (The phrase “a cure of the ground,” as Miller understands its use in the poem, becomes a key figure in the second part of the essay, which departs from the poem to discuss the principles of deconstructive criticism.) I will concentrate my reading on that essential portion of the essay that deals with Stevens’ “cure of the ground” since, as Bloom observes, “the notion of ‘cure’ is central to [Miller’s] reading” (*Wallace Stevens* 346).

“The Rock” is at least in part a poem about its speaker’s sense of nothingness or meaninglessness and his attempt to be cured of it. The figure of the bare rock is associated with nothingness, and the cure of which the poem speaks is pictured either as covering the rock with vegetation, concealing the nothingness (although that is “not enough”), or making “mean-

ings of the rock" so that "its barrenness . . . exists no more" (CP 527). The first of the poem's three sections,<sup>5</sup> "Seventy Years Later," introduces the concept of nothingness as an act of forgetting the past. To the seventy-year-old speaker incidents from the past have taken on a sense of absurdity, as if they never existed, were merely figments of someone's (or something's) imagination. "It is an illusion that we were ever alive," he begins, "Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves / By our own motions in a freedom of air." But it is not simply that they *no longer* seem real; their unreality is such as to suggest that they *never* existed. "The lives these lived in the mind are at an end," he says, initiating a conventional interpretation of the remoteness of the past, but then corrects himself, "They never were." It is the unconventional sense of the past as never existing that inserts the concept of nothingness into the poem: "The sounds of the guitar / Were not and are not. Absurd. The words spoken / Were not and are not. It is not to be believed" (CP 525).

Miller's paraphrase of this first section is relatively straightforward and unproblematic. The necessity of misreading is an issue for him only at certain points in the text. At other points he does not appear to question his ability to " 'say the same thing' as the poetic texts say" ("Deconstructing the Deconstructors" 25). "The first six stanzas of 'Seventy Years Later,' " he writes, "record a radical act of forgetting" that "annihilates everything that seemed most vital in the poet's past, most solidly grounded" (I, 8). He also paraphrases straightforwardly Stevens' conceit of nothingness as containing a "métier," a vocation or "assumption" by which the illusion of the past has been produced, but he does not recognize the relation between the notion of the speaker's past as the invention of a "fantastic consciousness" and the poem's "cure of the ground." The first section, that is, concludes with a conceit or figure (what Stevens calls a fiction) that appears with increasing frequency in his later poems. Although Miller argues that Stevens' readers will be able to interpret terms such as "rock," "ground," and "forgetfulness" from other Stevens poems (I, 5), in his own interpretation he limits this principle of intratextual reading to particular words rather than larger themes or concepts.

"The Auroras of Autumn," the title poem of the section preceding *The Rock*, toys with the notion that we and our world are the thoughts of a cosmic imagination "which in the midst of summer stops / To imagine winter" (CP 417). This "never-failing genius" fulfills his "meditations, great and small" through our lives, "As if he lived all lives" (CP 420). A number of the poems of *The Rock*, including the title poem, deal with similar conceptions. "The Plain Sense of Things" is based on a fiction similar to that of "The Auroras of Autumn." The end of summer is seen as "an end of the imagination," the failure of a "fantastic effort." Winter is "the absence of the imagination" that "had / Itself to be imagined" (CP 502–03). In "Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly" an afternoon is "Too much like thinking to be less than thought" (CP 518). The sun is credited

with the ability "To think away the grass, the trees, the clouds," and the poem speculates on the existence of a "pensive nature . . . free / From man's ghost, larger and yet a little like. . . ." (CP 517–18). "The World as Meditation" describes Penelope's meditation as she awaits Ulysses and discovers "an inhuman meditation, larger than her own" (CP 521). "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" conceives of a "central mind," a "knowledge" or imagination that the speaker equates with God so that the world may be thought of as "imagined" (CP 524).<sup>6</sup>

In "The Rock" the speaker and the incidents of his past are seen as the inventions of an external consciousness seeking its own happiness, dissatisfied with the barrenness or nothingness of its state:

The meeting at noon at the edge of the field seems like

An invention, an embrace between one desperate clod  
And another in a fantastic consciousness,  
In a queer assertion of humanity:

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. . . . (CP 525–26)

To think of oneself as an "invention," a "theorem," or an "assumption" is of course to be reduced to the content of a mind or imagination, to become an idea, and the reduction is heightened by the suggestion that the idea the speaker constitutes is itself an illusion, something created to cover an essential emptiness. The "vital assumption" contained in nothingness is "an illusion so desired / That the green leaves came and covered the high rock, / That the lilacs came and bloomed, like a blindness cleaned. . . ." (CP 526).

The conceit of "Seventy Years Later," which will be central to the following section (and to Miller's impasse, although he apparently does not recognize it), is that the natural world, including the speaker, is an illusion created from the nothingness that underlies it, and that its purpose is to cover over nothingness. To shift the metaphor and borrow the key term from the following section, if nothingness is a kind of blindness, then the invented natural world is sight, "curing" blindness. As the poem puts it, the *métier* or assumption contained in nothingness "was satisfied, / In a birth of sight" (CP 526). If the natural world is thought of as a fiction, an invention or illusion, then its inventor must be thought of as a kind of artist or poet, and this implied parallel between the natural world and the poem is also central to Miller's key passage in part two, which compares the cure offered by the poem with nature's cure, the leaves. The leaves

and lilacs are synecdochic figures for the whole of the natural world, for life itself, the entire "gross universe." The audacious premise of "The Rock" is that the "particular[s] of being" represent an attempted "cure" offered by some activity contained in the nothingness on which they rest: "The blooming and the musk / Were being alive, an incessant being alive, / A particular of being, that gross universe" (CP 526).

Miller offers this passage as one example of the poem's unreadability, and his discussion of it is an example of a "clear" or strong misreading as opposed to a weak one, since it points to a difficulty in the text rather than creating one in the commentary. He notes that the sequence of phrases in apposition, as here, creates problems in interpretation since "[t]he relation among the elements in such a series is undecidable, abyssed." In the passage above, "the phrase 'that gross universe' is placed in apposition with the subsidiary word 'being' in the phrase before, rather than with the apparently parallel word 'particular' " and the "sequence plays with various incongruent senses and grammatical functions of the word 'being' " (I, 13). It is true that the final phrase "that gross universe" is not precisely parallel, but the progression of the sequence of phrases appears to be functional, especially when read in its larger context. The passage in which it appears begins with particular leaves and lilacs and ends with the entire visible universe as an attempted remedy for nothingness's blindness, "gross" here both in the sense of "glaringly noticeable" and "growing or spreading with excessive luxuriance." "Seventy Years Later" thus ends with the "gross" universe as one instance of the attempt to overcome the sense of nothingness, in effect the nonhuman world's own attempt; the second section, "The Poem as Icon," deals with an example of a parallel human attempt, the poem.

The poem is an icon because its attempt to cover the barrenness of the rock or otherwise cure us of its nothingness resembles nature's cure, so the poem is an image or a figure for the natural process described in the first section. There are thus two cures spoken of in the second section, a "cure of the ground," the "natural" cure described in the first section, and a "cure of ourselves," of which the poem is the prime instance. "The Poem as Icon" is concerned with the particular value of the poem as a cure of nothingness, its superiority to the simple covering of the rock with leaves. It is, in effect, a justification of poetry as a source of meaning. The poem does more than hide the rock; it "makes meanings of the rock, / Of such mixed motion and such imagery / That its barrenness becomes a thousand things / And so exists no more" (CP 527).

We are now in a position to reread Miller's crucial passage and his weak misreading of it. The passage opens the second section and obviously refers back to the conclusion of the first, nature's covering of the rock with leaves and lilacs. The second section says that this is not enough in itself (as was demonstrated by the speaker's forgetfulness, his loss of the meaning of his past). The cure he seeks is "beyond forgetfulness":

It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves.  
We must be cured of it by a cure of the ground  
Or a cure of ourselves, that is equal to a cure

Of the ground, a cure beyond forgetfulness. (CP 526)

Miller's misreading of this key passage differs from his strong misreading of the sequence of phrases in apposition cited above since that reading supposedly extends an impasse in the text. This misreading simply mistakes Stevens' use of a preposition.

The title of Richard Hull's 1935 novel *The Murder of My Aunt* plays on the reader's tendency to interpret "of" in such a way as to make the aunt the victim of the murder. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the story is told from the point of view of the nephew who plots against her. But the novel proper ends prior to the murder, and the last section, called "Postscript," picks up the story from the point of view of the aunt, who turns out to be the murderer (of the nephew), as the title had informed us all along if we had been alert to its implications. The last paragraph of the novel is this, in the aunt's words:

I have now only to add a title to these notes, and the one I have chosen perhaps needs a word of explanation. Well, "of" can be possessive, can't it? Can mean "of or belonging to." (241)

The primary sense of the preposition in Stevens' "cure of the ground" and "cure of ourselves" is one that Miller, like the hypothetical reader of *The Murder of My Aunt*, does not consider. It is, I am arguing, the cure "of or belonging to" the ground and the cure "of or belonging to" ourselves. This interpretation is suggested by the context alone, but it is reinforced by Stevens' use of the construction "cure of" in his "Adagia"—"Poetry is a cure of the mind" (OP 201). Miller cites this as one of Stevens' few uses of "cure," but he does not see its implication for his reading of "The Rock."

As Stevens makes clear in poems such as "Man and Bottle" and "Of Modern Poetry," "of the mind" in the phrase above also uses "of" as a possessive to mean "belonging to." In "Man and Bottle" poetry is "of the mind" because it is "A manner of thinking, a mode / Of destroying, as the mind destroys. . . ." (CP 239). In "Of Modern Poetry" the poem is a mental act. It begins, "The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice" and ends, "The poem of the act of the mind" (CP 239–40). Since the poem is defined as an "act of the mind," the "Adagia" entry surely does not say that the poem cures the mind, but that it is the cure "of or belonging to" the mind. Similarly, the "cure of ourselves" is the cure we offer just as the "cure of the ground" is the cure offered by the ground.

Miller's failure to consider this possibility—he does not argue that the preposition is ambiguous—makes nonsense of much of his reading as he strains to find ways that the ground can be cured. Here is a representative

selection of his reading of a “cure of the ground” that goes on for several pages:

The cure of the ground would be a caring for the ground, a securing of it, making it solid, as one cures a fiberglass hull by drying it carefully. At the same time the cure of the ground must be an effacing of it, making it vanish as a medicine cures a man of a disease by taking it away, making him sound again, or as an infatuated man is cured of a dangerous illusion. “Cure” comes from Latin *cura*, care, as in “curate” or “a cure of souls.” The word “scour,” which I used above, has the same root. A cure of the ground would scour it clean, revealing the bedrock beneath. Such a curing would be at the same time—according to an obsolete meaning of the word, with a different root, Middle English *cuuwe*, cover, conceal, protect—a caring for the ground by hiding it. (I, 10)

But of course if the preposition in “cure of the ground” is possessive, then Miller’s pages of etymologies—his scouring, effacing, concealing, protecting, and securing—as well as his conclusion that “cure of the ground” here is unreadable for the reasons that he offers are fatally undermined.

What is the poem’s context for “cure”? Are the passages that contain the word in fact unreadable? I want to paraphrase this portion of the poem in as direct and elementary a manner as possible. The key passage in which the word occurs begins by referring back to the fiction of the first section, the fantastic consciousness that produces “an illusion so desired / That the green leaves came and covered the high rock. . . .” The opening passage of “The Poem as Icon” says that “It is not enough to cover the rock with leaves,” that is, simply to hide it. We must be “cured of it,” of the rock, of the barrenness it represents, but by what? By a cure of the ground, first of all, but what might that be? The ground or the earth is the source of the leaves that cover the rock, but that covering in itself does not constitute a cure. Yet, the poem says, the leaves may be the beginning of a cure of the ground:

And yet the leaves, if they broke into bud,  
If they broke into bloom, if they bore fruit,

And if we ate the incipient colorings  
Of their fresh culls might be a cure of the ground.  
(CP 526)

In “Seventy Years Later” the leaves are associated with “being alive” or “particular[s] of being.” Now, the speaker says that, if these particulars of being are more than a cover for the rock but help to nourish our lives, they might constitute a cure of the ground. Or, to phrase it differently, if the

particular experiences of living in the world are fruitful and if we “feast” on life, if we devour it so that it becomes a part of us, this act could be seen as a cure of nothingness or meaninglessness offered by the earth as opposed to a cure that *we* contrive, the other possible cure the poem considers. “To eat the fruit would be to possess the whole and so to cure the ground,” Miller writes. “It would be to understand it, in the etymological sense of reaching the base and standing there, in a ‘final found,’ with a multiple pun on ‘found’ as discovery, invention, and foundation” (I, 20). This approaches nonsense and it does not state a relationship between eating the fruit and curing the ground. It is difficult to think of any sense in which the eating of fruit constitutes a curing of the ground that produced it, and it is scarcely surprising that Miller’s weak misreading produces an impasse, a condition of what he names “unreadability.”

But what of the context of a “cure of ourselves”? Here the preposition is more ambiguous, but the primary sense is still the cure “of or belonging to” ourselves rather than “curing ourselves.” We are to be cured *of* something by either “a cure of the ground” or “a cure of ourselves” that must be at least “equal to a cure / Of the ground.” If we read the passage from Miller’s perspective then its sense is “we must be cured of something by being cured,” which appears redundant. What the passage says is rather that the cure that comes from ourselves must be equal to the cure that comes from the ground, or, to put it in Stevens’ more habitual terms, the human imagination must be equal to reality<sup>7</sup>—although reality here is figured, paradoxically, as the creation of a nonhuman imagination.

The cure that comes from ourselves, from the human imagination, is the “fiction of the leaves” that is the “icon of the poem.” The poem’s fictional leaves are the human equivalent of the natural world’s vegetation (which the poem depicts as a nonhuman fiction); both cover the bare rock of nothingness. The fictional leaves of the poem, however, have the advantage that “They bud and bloom and bear their fruit *without change*” (my emphasis). They are therefore in at least one sense “beyond forgetfulness.” They are also “more than leaves that cover the barren rock” (CP 527) since the poem “makes meanings of the rock”—human meaning—in a manner that the natural cure cannot achieve. Miller says, oddly, “The cure of the ground proposed in the poem is the poem itself” (I, 10), but the poem’s distinction between the ground’s cure and our cure—the poem—is emphatic. Near the end of “The Poem as Icon” is a sentence that should have alerted Miller to his erroneous reading of the preposition: “This is the cure / Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves” (CP 527). The addition of leaves to the equation—the leaves are clearly one source of the cure, not something to be cured—and the parallel construction of the three phrases make more obvious than earlier passages that “of” here is possessive and consequently that a great deal of what Miller says about the poem is based on a misreading that belongs to his commentary and not to the text. This is not to say that my reading of “The Rock” is the “correct” read-

ing—that I know what the poem means and Miller does not—or even that there could be a definitive reading of the poem. I am rather questioning the persuasiveness of Miller’s reading in the only manner he thinks possible: “a reading can only be successfully opposed by another reading” (“Theory and Practice” 610). My further argument, as a footnote in the history of deconstructive criticism, is that one of the seminal essays of the movement is based on what is very nearly a howler.

What is most significant about Miller’s apparently simple misunderstanding of a preposition is that it infects almost every aspect of the essay, including of course its title. Because he takes Stevens’ “cure of the ground” to mean “curing the ground,” the “Criticism as Cure” of his title incorporates that erroneous reading when criticism becomes later in the essay a “cure of the ground.” “The poem itself rises as an icon which is the equivalent of the leaves, blossom, and fruit, and so cures the ground,” Miller writes (I, 20), and in the second part of the essay (which uses the terms of his misreading to characterize deconstruction) he argues that “criticism is a continuation of that activity of the poem”:

If the poem is a cure of the ground which never succeeds, criticism is a yielding to the temptation to try once more for the “cure beyond forgetfulness,” and then once more, and once beyond that, in an ever-renewed, ever-unsuccessful attempt to “get it right,” to name things by their right names. . . . The critical text prolongs, extends, reveals, covers, in short, cures, the literary text in the same way that the literary text attempts to cure the ground. (II, 331)

But of course the assertion that the literary text attempts to cure the ground (whatever that might mean) is not, as I have tried to show, sanctioned by Stevens’ use of these terms, and Miller’s use of “cure” and “ground” throughout part II of the essay is undermined by his misunderstanding of what they imply in the poem.

Unfortunately for the argument of the second half of the essay, they are the two key terms. “If poetry is the impossible possible cure of the ground,” he writes, establishing his central figure, “criticism is the impossible possible cure of literature” (II, 331). Criticism becomes a cure of the ground in various senses: “The ‘deconstruction’ which the text performs on itself and which the critic repeats is not of the superstructure of the work but of the ground on which it stands” (II, 333). What he calls the Socratic or scientific criticism that stands opposed to deconstruction would try to cure the ground in a different way; it “would be not only a penetration of the ground but also its correction, its straightening out” (II, 335). Deconstruction, on the other hand, “annihilates the ground on which the building stands by showing that the text has already annihilated that ground, knowingly or unknowingly” (II, 341). “Ground” becomes increasingly impor-

tant as the essay progresses. The text's "apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air" (II, 341). The criticism of de Man, Bloom, Hartman, and Derrida "is an interrogation of the ground of literature, not just of its intrinsic structure" (II, 343). The concluding sentence of the essay spells out clearly, in the task Miller sets for criticism, just why criticism is for him a cure of the ground and why his misreading of "The Rock" has seized on that phrase: "The task of criticism in the immediate future should be the further exploration, as much by practical essays of interpretation as by theoretical speculation, of this coming and going in quest and in questioning of the ground" (II, 348).

The ground that serves as the foundation for Miller's own exploration, I have argued, turns out to be thin air, but is this argument in itself merely a confirmation of deconstruction's premise that all reading is misreading? That might indeed be the case if the term "misreading" always referred to the same activity and if each particular instance of misreading could be shown to be *necessary*. Miller's motive in reading "The Rock" is of course to demonstrate that the misreading *is* a necessary one, an acknowledgment of the heterogeneity of the poem, and in particular of its key phrase "cure of the ground." Whether or not his misreading of "The Rock" is an instance of the necessity of misreading thus depends in part on the persuasiveness of my own reading of Stevens' "cure of the ground" and the argument, based on it, that the context of the poem and the larger context of Stevens' writings are sufficient to correct his misreading.

Even the most persuasive reading of "The Rock" cannot in itself invalidate the claim that all reading is, in some sense, misreading (misreading perhaps as simply the absence of a definitive interpretation),<sup>8</sup> but it can raise questions about Miller's own practice of misreading and its relation to the theory that sanctions it. Miller writes, "The only way persuasively to challenge deconstructionist readings . . . would not be to construct an alternative theory but to show the inadequacy of the particular readings associated inextricably with whatever is 'theoretical' in such work" ("Theory and Practice" 611). I have attempted to show the inadequacy of Miller's reading of "The Rock," but is its inadequacy tied to his theory? It is, it seems to me, in one obvious sense. Miller's theory that all texts are unreadable, that all texts contain the kind of incoherence exemplified by "The Rock"'s "cure of the ground," leads to a practice that oddly and perversely rewards the reading that fails to make connections, is blind to the relation between a particular passage and a larger context, confuses the function of grammatical units, or distorts a text in its paraphrase to produce incoherence. Had Miller not mistaken the use of a preposition in "The Rock," for example, or had he not failed to see the implications of the "Adagia" entry "Poetry is a cure of the mind" or the implications of other themes and motifs in the *Collected Poems*, Stevens' phrase "cure of the ground" would have been of much less value to his essay. Indeed, the essay might never have been written.

"When we are confronted with any manifestation which some one has permitted us to see," Nietzsche writes in *The Dawn of Day*, "we may ask: what is it meant to conceal? What is it meant to draw our attention from?" (358). Another of the features of Miller's practice of misreading is his willingness to permit us to see that he has done violence to the text under examination. In an essay on *Heart of Darkness*, for example, he speaks at the end of his "own complicity" in obscuring the meaning of the novel. He has "attempted to perform an act of generic classification, with all the covert violence and unreason of that act"; he is "guilty . . . of covering over while claiming to illuminate" (220). He calls attention to his misreading, however, only on the basis that it is a universal condition—the necessity of all texts, including his own, to be misunderstood. The activity of deconstruction, he notes in the essay on "The Rock," can be done "only in such a way as to be misunderstood in its turn, like the work itself, so that it has to be done over, and then again" (II, 331). The effect of such an emphasis on general misreading is to draw our attention from the details of a particular misreading, as in the case of his reading of "The Rock," to conceal the fact that each particular misreading is, like this one, personal and eccentric, its form not the inevitable result of some general condition of reading. Miller holds that "the particular way in which a given work is unreadable may be exactly specified" ("Theory and Practice" 610), and it is this principle as it applies to "The Rock" that can be shown to be mistaken, since it assumes that the critic is pointing to an incoherence in the text and not creating one by an inadequate reading. Moreover, to contend that the way in which a given text is unreadable may be "exactly specified" comes dangerously near the principle of a "definitive" misreading. Robert Markley, who argues that Miller's reading of "The Rock" is a manifestation of a "style" and not a "system of ideas," speaks of the language of the essay as "deliberately hypnotic" and of its rhetoric as "incantatory" (182). The ability of Miller's rhetoric of misreading to distract us from the text under examination, to direct our attention away from the basis of the interpretation being offered, may be one explanation for the fact that in the two decades since "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure" appeared no one has pointed out just how badly it distorts Stevens' poem in the service of the theory it sought to institute.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jeffrey Nealon's *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (1993), where he argues that deconstruction "is dead in literature departments today." Although he grants that there is still a great deal of discourse being produced on deconstruction, few critics, he notes, would today identify themselves as deconstructionists and the term "no longer dominates Modern Language Association conference panels." Nealon cites, among other evidence of deconstruction's demise,

Barbara Johnson's 1992 address at the School of Criticism and Theory, "The Wake of Deconstruction" (22).

<sup>2</sup> It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of Miller's reading in Stevens criticism. It is consistently cited in commentaries on "The Rock," almost always approvingly. Bloom quotes from it extensively and refers to it as "the fullest commentary yet ventured" on the poem (*Wallace Stevens* 346). Anthony Whiting calls it "perhaps the single most influential deconstructive reading of Stevens" (76), and Mary Arensberg is not alone in alluding to it as a "seminal essay" in her discussion of Stevens and Nietzsche (35).

<sup>3</sup> The Abrams Effect was perhaps first recognized during a series of skirmishes that began with Miller's attack on the logocentric premises of M. H. Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*. It continued with responses by Wayne Booth and Abrams and culminated in the appearance of the three critics at a 1976 MLA session called "The Limits of Pluralism," at which Miller responded to the arguments of Booth and Abrams with "The Critic as Host." The paper, especially in its two printed versions in *Critical Inquiry* and in the book *Deconstruction and Criticism*, established deconstruction's seeming invulnerability to attack, the success of Miller's rhetoric in deflecting the most rigorous critique. In Donald Pease's terms, it "makes Abrams a victim of the limitations of a less resourceful critical discourse" (72).

<sup>4</sup> Miller's motive for misreading is more textual or linguistic in orientation than is Bloom's oedipal motive. In "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure," he phrases the necessity of misreading in these terms: "The critic cannot by any means get outside the text, escape from the blind alleys of language he finds in the work. He can only rephrase them in other, allotropic terms" (II, 331). More than that, "any literary text, with more or less explicitness or clarity, already reads or misreads itself" (II, 333). In this conception the critic is merely pointing to the text's own misreading. "Sooner or later there is the encounter with an 'aporia' or impasse," which means that "[d]econstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself" (II, 338, 341). Miller's two conceptions of misreading here appear to be at odds with one another, but both depend on assumptions about the nature of language rather than on assumptions about the relation of the poet or critic to the precursor, as in Bloom.

<sup>5</sup> The third section, which both Miller and I have largely avoided, perhaps because it seems anticlimactic, is titled "Forms of the Rock as a Night-Hymn," and it is essentially an abstract definition of the rock as that which underlies all existence—"the habitation of the whole," the "starting point of the human and the end." Janet McCann notes, "The third part does in a generalized and abstract way what is done on a more personal level in part 1" (126). Miller cites its concluding lines as "the farthest or deepest point of the *mise en abyme*" (I, 30).

<sup>6</sup> The earliest extended use of this fiction of the cosmic imagination is apparently in "Credences of Summer" where "The personae of summer play the characters / Of an inhuman author, who meditates / With the gold bugs, in blue meadows, late at night" (*CP* 377).

<sup>7</sup> In 1953 Stevens paraphrased a passage from "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in terms that suggest why the "cure of ourselves" must be equal to the "cure of the ground": "I want, as a man of the imagination, to write poetry with all the power of a monster equal in strength to that of the monster about whom I write. I want man's imagination to be completely adequate in the face of reality" (*L* 790).

<sup>8</sup> In "Theory and Practice" Miller states that "unreadability" is a better term than "misreading" in referring to the heterogeneity or incoherence of texts (610), and in "The Critic as Host" he says of the text under discussion, "The poem, like all texts, is 'unreadable,' if by 'readable' one means open to a single, definitive, univocal interpre-

tation" (447). In effect, then, provocative terms such as "misreading" and "unreadable" turn out to refer to a more innocuous conception, the absence of a definitive interpretation, one that would forever put an end to interpretation for any given text.

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# An Encounter with the Firecat: Wallace Stevens' "Earthy Anecdote"

JOHN MILES

## I

IN *THE WALLACE STEVENS JOURNAL* 21.1 (Spring 1997), Massimo Bacigalupo points out that the "firecat" in "Earthy Anecdote," the opening poem of *Collected Poems* (1954), "is a creature unknown to dictionaries, English, American, or regional" (94). This presents what Bacigalupo describes as a "lexical quandary" for translators and leads him to suggest that "a translator would do well to render 'firecat' with a word that is both actual and symbolically rich, for example (in Italian) 'lince rossa,' a common name for *Felis rufus*" (Bacigalupo 97). The "lexical quandary" is well substantiated.<sup>1</sup> The quandary, however, is surely more than lexical. It is not simply that we have no word for a firecat. It is rather that there is no such beast as a firecat, though we all believe that there is. Behind the lexical question there is an epistemological question, and perhaps behind that there is an ontological one, for we cannot say (and Stevens does not say) what the nonexistent firecat would look like. A study of these existential ironies may serve as a basis for a fresh understanding of the poem and of its key position in Stevens' oeuvre.

In this short article I propose to consider some of the issues arising out of Bacigalupo's article. I believe that "Earthy Anecdote," as Joan Richardson suggests, is "one of [Stevens'] most important poems" (Richardson 482), but that imposes the task of explaining its importance, which is underlined by Stevens' placing of it as the opening poem in *Harmonium* (1923), *Selected Poems* (1953), and *Collected Poems*. As Bacigalupo indicates, Stevens originally sent it to Carl Zigrosser, editor of *The Modern School*, on February 9, 1918 (L 204). Zigrosser accepted it for No. 5 of the magazine (July 1918) and on February 20 Stevens sent him a second letter, emphasizing that the poem contains "no symbolism" but indicating that it has "a good deal of theory about it," which he did not offer to explain because "explanations spoil things" (L 204). A drawing was commissioned from Walter Pach, who produced what Glen MacLeod describes as "a fairly abstract illustration" (87). This is the one reproduced in Bacigalupo's article. Stevens, I suspect, might have hoped that Walter Pach would be tempted to pro-

duce a drawing of a firecat. Walter Pach, however, confined himself to producing an evocation of a prairie sunset, which seems to me to interpret the poem quite imaginatively. On receiving the magazine Stevens wrote on July 10, 1918, thanking Zigrosser and conceding that the drawing was "quite nice as it is," but there was evidently something he wanted to place on record: the illustration, he said, was quite the opposite of his idea; he "intended something quite concrete: actual animals, not original chaos" (L 209).

These comments in Stevens' letters provide the starting point for any interpretation of the poem. The account offered here is merely one possible approach to reading "Earthy Anecdote" and through it Stevens' "great poem of the earth," which, he told his hearers at Columbia University in September 1948, "remains to be written" (NA 142). In the section that immediately follows, I shall briefly describe Stevens' anecdote and its orchestration. In the third section I shall try out a reading of the poem as a philosophical frontier tale, an epistemological parable that can be interpreted through some fairly straightforward juxtapositions with elements of the philosophy of C. S. Peirce, William James, and George Santayana. This reading will be seen to have an evolutionary background and to connect with a Lucretian vision of the place of humans in the natural world that Stevens may have owed at least in part to Santayana, who had described Lucretius as "the unrivalled poet" of naturalism (TPP 5). The Lucretian connection will be explored in section IV, where I shall endeavor to show how "Earthy Anecdote" relates to Stevens' work as a whole. Section V summarizes my conclusions.<sup>2</sup> It may be convenient at this point to quote the poem in full.

Every time the bucks went clattering  
Over Oklahoma  
A firecat bristled in the way.

Wherever they went,  
They went clattering,  
Until they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the right,  
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the left,  
Because of the firecat.

The bucks clattered.  
The firecat went leaping,  
To the right, to the left,

And  
Bristled in the way.

Later, the firecat closed his bright eyes  
And slept. (CP 3)

## II

On the threshold of *Collected Poems* this doorkeeper bristles, warning us that if we enter, we must expect to be confronted by poems that resist our intelligence. In his letters to Carl Zigrosser, I take Stevens to be indicating that “Earthy Anecdote” calls for an interpretative response from the reader that might be compromised if he put his own explanation on record. In a subsequent letter to Hi Simons (L 346), Stevens recognized an exegetical role for criticism and the validity of differing interpretations.

The force of the anecdote as deployed by Stevens is that it extends the field of interpretation beyond the individual episode to other anecdotes and to the overarching masterwork. Beyond that, it subverts any idea of precise boundaries between the oeuvre and its subject, as in Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of Nietzsche’s concept of anecdotes: “The anecdote is to life what the aphorism is to thought: something to interpret” (Deleuze 110). “Earthy Anecdote” is the most anecdotal of Stevens’ anecdotes in its apparently paradoxical identification of “anecdote” with “no symbolism” and also in the way in which its swerving and blocking metaphors seem to place it beyond the reach of definitive interpretation. As B. J. Leggett explains:

“Earthy Anecdote,” more than any of the other aesthetic experiments in shaping the void, thus rather self-consciously fulfills Deleuze’s criterion for the anecdote as a form of perspectivist writing. It remains “something to interpret” and thereby embraces its own ideology. (209)

The capacity to resist the interpretations it evokes is its essential quality, and for Milton J. Bates, is virtually its theme. He describes the poem as

an emblem of one’s own engagement with this kind of poem: like the bucks, one’s clattering, discursive mind swerves left or right whenever it approaches the firecat, thus duplicating the pattern of bafflement and evasion in the anecdote. The poem continues to produce its intended effect—an effect that is also its subject—as long as the firecat remains a source of perplexity. (152)

For a fuller treatment of these issues, the reader is referred to the wide-ranging and illuminating discussions of Stevens’ anecdotes by Adalaide Kirby Morris, A. Walton Litz, Milton J. Bates, Frank Lentricchia, B. J. Leggett, and others, and their extensive bibliographies.<sup>3</sup> For the moment I shall

confine myself to drawing attention to one particular feature of Stevens' use of anecdote that is relevant to "Earthy Anecdote."

We find it in the central twist of the narrative, the joke Stevens plays on unsuspecting new arrivals with the irony of the nonexistent firecat. This is typical of frontier tales and also of the man whose Hartford colleague, Arthur Polley, once observed: "In his astute way, he'd say something to you, and you'd wake up about the next noon that you'd been kidded" (Brazeau 65). This type of tale has particular value as a device for instructing a young apprentice, and in that sense it opens up all the rhetorical possibilities of poet as mentor and reader as ephebe, a Lucretian relationship on which Stevens plays so many variations throughout his work.

The twenty lines of "Earthy Anecdote" are full of the simple repetition and parallelisms that might appear in a primitive folk tale. The dominant word, *firecat*, appears in every one of the five verse paragraphs, and it unites the two most frequently repeated vowel sounds of the line endings: the short "a" of "firecat/clattering" and the "i" of "firecat/time/line/right/bright/eyes." The opening short "e" of "Every/went" matches the repetitions of "left" and is also the final sound of the poem: "slept." Eleanor Cook has pointed out the psychological consonance of "slept" through "sleeping" with "leaping" (29).

The central figure in the poem, at once commanding and elusive, is the firecat, whose bristling continually causes the bucks to change direction. The bucks' mode of progression is "clattering," which evokes hooves on hard ground and possibly also an occasional clash of horns, indicating that the bucks are armed against possible threats and conflicts. (The first verb in *Collected Poems* just happens to begin with the letter "c.") "Clattering," as Eleanor Cook reminds us (29), is also an idiomatic expression for "chatter," which would make speech and action synonymous in the first line, with some at least of the epic overtones that might convey. The anonymous narrator has access to the motives of the bucks, reminding us that other poems in *Harmonium* will have "actual animals" as narrators or will enjoy privileged awareness of animal consciousness. The irony that the unseen narrator conceals from the reader is that there is no such beast as a firecat.

In the primitive thought processes in the poem, logical connections are not elaborated. The bucks perform their actions "because of the firecat," a phrase whose repetition lets it function as an ironic refrain. The connection between the actions and the firecat is immediate and of a complete simplicity: not "because they saw the firecat" or "believed there was a firecat" or "because it was there" or "because it might get them": simply "because of." The language might be that of the bucks themselves. "Because of" has the simplicity of a mode of response to experience that was already working before causes, reasons, necessity, and hypothetical propositions were invented. The bucks' beliefs take the form of action. It is not as simple as it seems, however, because the bucks' unquestioning accep-

tance of the description “firecat” is at odds with their unsettled circling to the right and to the left. The miniature plot turns on danger and unease. The clattering is the belief, but its repetition shows that there is also doubt that remains unresolved.

### III

The idea of relating the poem to a philosophical intertext draws encouragement from Milton Bates’s description:

Mindful of Stevens’ care in the ordonnance of his books, the reader is tempted to regard this poem, the first he encounters on opening *Harmonium*, as a sort of theoretical preface. It is an oblique preface, just as the theory is oblique. (152–53)

Philosophy is arguably one of the best candidates to be the theory in question, and within philosophy epistemology finds a natural place at the beginning of many systematic treatises. But the poem does not suggest a Cartesian or Kantian attempt to establish foundations of knowledge, and it does not evoke the vocabulary and style of traditional empiricism.<sup>4</sup> Knowledge, it seems, is a practical joke played by the natural world on the unwary for their immediate preservation and perhaps secondarily for their ultimate enlightenment. “Because of the firecat” is a direction for action masquerading as a reason. Belief, which is inseparably related to action, is acritical, precedes evidence, and is useful insofar as it conduces to survival and progress. The theme of survival in the face of a possibly fictive predator also comes out strongly in “The Jack-Rabbit,” which was originally linked with “Earthy Anecdote” (Lensing 113). Human thought processes are simply a more developed form of animal consciousness. It is a poem with which the Presocratics might feel at home, but its anti-intellectualist primitivism makes it natural to look in the direction of pragmatism and related tendencies. My next step, therefore, is to see how the issues I have identified as emerging from “Earthy Anecdote” relate to the portrayal of the relationships between truth, belief, and action in the work of C. S. Peirce, William James, and George Santayana.

A hundred years ago, during Stevens’ freshman year at Harvard, the following announcement appeared:

MR CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE of Milford, Pennsylvania will give a course of Eight Class Lectures on REASONING AND THE LOGIC OF THINGS, at the rooms of the Cambridge Conferences, Studio House, 168 Brattle Street, on Monday and Thursday Evenings in February and March, 1898, at eight o’clock. . . . The course herein outlined will be of unusual interest and value to students and teachers of Philosophy. It is hoped that many will avail themselves of the privileges of attending. . . . (Peirce, *Collected VIII*: 287–88)

The first of these lectures connects a Lucretian vision, a pragmatic view of belief and action, and a theme of survival. Peirce professed to feel some difficulty in meeting the conflicting expectations of his sponsors and responded with wit and paradox. Contrasting his own philosophical position with that of Lucretius, he said:

The Greeks expected philosophy to affect life . . . in the person and soul of the philosopher himself, rendering him different from ordinary men in his views of right conduct. So little did they separate philosophy from esthetic and moral culture that the *docti furor arduus Lucreti*<sup>5</sup> could clothe an elaborate *cosmogony* in noble verse, for the express purpose of influencing men's lives. . . . (*Collected I*: 340)

Peirce supported a plea for uncompromising philosophical rigor with a spirited attack on intellectualism, instancing the preservation of the species as one of the "vitally important topics" that he contended were too serious to be left to philosophers. In Peirce's philosophy, inquiry was the tentative common pursuit of objective reality through the removal of real doubts when these actually arise. He opposed the Cartesian method of universal doubt, maintaining that merely artificial doubts do not provide foundations for knowledge. His doctrine of fallibilism left room for correction of errors and for a closer approach to objectively valid beliefs in the light of experience. The behavior of the bucks in Stevens' poem, for example, shows that the straightforward supposition "firecat" has failed to put their minds at rest; it is accompanied by genuine doubt, which could be replaced, through a process of inquiry, with a settled opinion that would serve until they had further reason to modify it. The process would be subject to error, but in principle it would also be capable of leading toward better explanations of the way in which things work. This was the background within which, as he continued his lecture, Peirce explained his view of the close relationship between belief and action:

We *believe* the proposition we are ready to act upon. *Full belief* is willingness to act upon the proposition in vital crises, *opinion* is willingness to act upon it in relatively insignificant affairs. (*Collected I*: 347)

Belief, he maintained, was often acritical even when it had an appearance of rationality:

Men many times fancy that they act from reason when, in point of fact, the reasons they attribute to themselves are nothing but excuses which unconscious instinct invents to satisfy the teasing "whys" of the *ego*. (*Collected I*: 346)

In pressing home these views, he displayed the respect for animal consciousness (once again engaging philosophers today) which is also to be found in the writings of William James, Santayana, and Stevens:

Those whom we are so fond of referring to as the “lower animals” reason very little. Now I beg you to observe that those beings very rarely commit a *mistake*, while we—! . . . The instincts of those animals whose instincts are remarkable present the character of being chiefly, if not altogether, directed to the preservation of the stock. . . . (*Collected I*: 345, 348)

These arguments formed part of Peirce’s response to nineteenth-century naturalism and evolutionary theory. The place of knowledge in his philosophy as something essential to survival in a potentially hostile environment is summarized as follows by the philosopher Christopher Hookway: “Peirce obviously assumes that our capacity for common-sense beliefs, and these cognitive instincts themselves, can receive evolutionary explanations” (231–32). The 1898 lectures may well have been attended by some of Stevens’ Harvard friends and tutors. How much Stevens would have known directly of Peirce’s pragmatism is uncertain. Joan Richardson indicates that Garrett Stevens was deeply influenced by the series of articles Peirce wrote for *Popular Science Monthly*, one of which was the best-known and most anthologized of Peirce’s papers, “How To Make Our Ideas Clear” and that this influence is reflected in at least one of his letters to his son (45–46). Writing to Theodore Weiss in 1944, Stevens implied that his knowledge of Peirce was limited but acknowledged a longstanding interest in his philosophy (*L* 476).

William James believed that anecdotes and examples were essential to the pragmatic method of philosophizing, and he used many of them in his writings. He defined belief as “the mental state or function of cognizing reality” (*Principles* 913). He held that a mind presented with an object (such as a candle or a firecat) cannot help believing that it is real, until something leads it to do otherwise:

The sense that anything we think of is unreal can only come, then, when that thing is contradicted by some other thing of which we think. *Any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality.* (*Principles* 918)

Pursuing the distinction between real and unreal, he went on to point out: “The total world of which the philosophers must take account is thus composed of the realities *plus* the fancies and illusions” (*Principles* 920). James’s account of truth, belief, and action, like that of Peirce’s, relates to human beings and other animals battling for survival, as the philosopher Graham Bird indicates:

Human beings are biological organisms living and acting in a specific environment. For such creatures to survive, or flourish, it is essential that they adapt their behaviour successfully to that environment. In so far as behaviour is rational, guided by reasons and choices, it must make some reference to belief, but presumably some methods of accepting or rejecting beliefs will tend to be successful while others will not. The successful strategies will, at some developed stage of consciousness, be marked by consciously formulated beliefs to which we eventually give the title 'true.' Even before that stage is reached, however, such strategies may still exist and still guide action. Action, or behaviour, here seems to be the most basic phenomenon, while belief, truth, and meaning, are in some way dependent upon that basic item. (49–50)

James constantly emphasized this dependence, as in *The Will to Believe*:

deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief: but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all. (*Essential Writings* 309)

In *The Will to Believe* James maintained that it could in certain circumstances be rational to accept a belief for which there was incomplete evidence. James's discussion of "the will to believe" was later linked by Stevens with his own concept of the "supreme fiction" (L 443), of which the firecat may be seen as an early emblem.

Joel Porte, in his introduction to the 1989 critical edition of *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, characterizes Stevens as "Santayana's truest disciple, his most constant ephebe" (IPR xxix), and this alone would be a good reason for including Santayana in any examination of a supposed prolegomenon to Stevens' metaphysic. Santayana's serene defiance of philosophical fashions ultimately produced a fully worked out philosophical system that combines an idiosyncratic account of knowledge as belief with a fluctuating scepticism about "the mania for seeing evolution everywhere, and, what is worse, evolution in single file" (Lachs 103). Progress depends on the proper application of reason and reflection, and the lessons of history are capable of being misunderstood or forgotten. From Santayana's point of view, the bucks' worst danger would be the busy clattering that values everything because it leads to something else.

The opposing terms of Stevens' letter to Carl Zigrosser, "actual animals" and "original chaos," make an early appearance in Santayana's *Reason in Common Sense* (1905), the first volume of *The Life of Reason*. The first chapter opens by considering "Whether chaos or order lay at the begin-

ning of things" (LR 35). Santayana discusses rationality in terms of animal consciousness:

Every actual animal is somewhat dull and somewhat mad. He will at times miss his signals and stare vacantly when he might well act, while at other times he will run off into convulsions and raise a dust in his own brain to no purpose. (LR 50)

It is natural for the bucks to begin with a consensus derived from their immediate reaction, which needs little more to represent it than the single exclamation "Firecat!" As long as they ignore the ineffectiveness of their clattering, however, they are condemned to repeat it. Timothy Sprigge, in *Santayana*, summarizes Santayana's view of the impulsive nature of knowledge as follows:

The natural and original approach of the mind to the world is one of unperturbed dogmatism. People do not believe things because they have evidence. When something attracts the attention some fanciful account of its nature and origin leaps to meet it. (30)

In the course of Santayana's discussion in *Reason in Common Sense* there is a vivid passage in which he describes "terrible and delightful presences chasing one another across the void," discerning "what they love and fear" before "the landscape brightens and fades with the day":

A world loaded with dramatic values may thus arise in imagination; terrible and delightful presences may chase one another across the void; life will be a kind of music made by all the senses together. Many animals probably have this form of experience; they are not wholly submerged in a vegetative stupor; they can discern what they love or fear. Yet all this is a disordered apparition that reels itself off amid sporadic movements, efforts, and agonies. Now gorgeous, now exciting, now indifferent, the landscape brightens and fades with the day. . . . Such experience has variety, scenery, and a certain vital rhythm; its story might be told in dithyrambic verse. (LR 58–59)

This passage, which occurs in the course of Santayana's initial discussion of epistemology among references to "actual animals" and original chaos, seems to me to have a good deal in common with the plot of "Earthy Anecdote" and also with its atmosphere.

Santayana subsequently refined and clarified these views in *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (1923), coining the term "animal faith" to express his view of the close relationships among knowledge, belief, and action. Noel O'Sullivan, in *Santayana*, explains "animal faith" as follows:

What we commonly think of as certain knowledge of existence is really belief, and rests, not on knowledge, but on 'some irrational persuasion' Santayana calls animal faith. Although animal faith has no rational foundation, it must immediately be added that it may find a pragmatic justification, in so far as its initially blind and impulsive character is transformed by experience into a basis for harmonious adjustment to the material world in which we live. This pragmatic certainty is neither subjective nor objective, since it does not involve any literal claim about the nature of the world which confronts us. (62–63)

This matches the exactness of Stevens' phrase "Because of the firecat," with its avoidance of literal claims about the firecat. Though *Scepticism and Animal Faith* was published in 1923, it contains many passages that possibly share some elements of their origin with "Earthy Anecdote" and certainly seem to depict the same world:

Knowledge accordingly is belief: belief in a world of events, and especially of those parts of it which are near the self, tempting or threatening it. . . . The whole life of imagination and knowledge comes from within, from the restlessness, eagerness, curiosity, and terror of the animal bent on hunting, feeding, and breeding. . . . The living substance within him being bent, in the first instance, on pursuing or avoiding some agency in its environment, it projects whatever (in consequence of its reactions) reaches its consciousness into the locus whence it feels the stimulus to come, and it thus frames its description or knowledge of objects. In this way the ego really and sagaciously posits the non-ego: not absolutely, as Fichte imagined, nor by a gratuitous fiat, but on occasion and for the best of reasons, when the non-ego in its might shakes the ego out of its primitive somnolence. (*SAF* 179, 185)

In linking his account of knowledge with his discussions of questions of order and human progress, Santayana's *Reason in Common Sense* created a powerful potential basis for the opening of a "great poem of the earth."

Whereas Peirce had criticized artificial doubt, William James explored the circumstances in which it might be rational to accept beliefs for which there is a lack of evidence. Santayana's radical characterization of knowledge as "animal faith" held out the possibility of making sense of experience, but it emphasized the impulsive origins of our beliefs and looked to Lucretius rather than later philosophers for an account of the self in its relationship to the natural world (O'Sullivan 55–56). It is not particularly surprising that there should be some common elements in the style of the philosophers who were strong presences in Stevens' vicinity at a formative time. I have endeavored to show to what extent these elements may also be discerned in "Earthy Anecdote." Section IV of this article will take

up the Lucretian theme and will seek to relate my reading of "Earthy Anecdote" to the structure of Stevens' work as a whole.

#### IV

In section III of this article "Earthy Anecdote" has been considered as a philosophical anecdote. I now propose to look at its relationship to Stevens' "great poem of the earth." Without attempting to embark on a full-scale analysis of the Grand Poem, I shall begin to support my reading of "Earthy Anecdote" by considering the possibility that it is intended to function as a title poem as well as a prologue. Its possible links with Stevens' title poems in general will then be examined. This will lead me toward some tentative conclusions about the genre of the Grand Poem and the way in which Stevens exploits traditional devices and genres for his own purposes.

The title "Earthy Anecdote" would be an understatement even if applied to an individual poem, and a huge understatement if it signaled a major endeavor. There is word-play or word-war here (to borrow Eleanor Cook's terms) between the ironic literal meaning of "a story too coarse for polite company" and the underlying paraphrase: the story of the world presented by Wallace Stevens, teller of tales. From that frontier version there is no great distance to a pre-Socratic and Lucretian rendering, encouraged by Joan Richardson's signaling of the importance for Stevens of the pre-Socratic philosophers (24), as well as by Harold Bloom's characterization of Stevens as a Lucretian poet (27). If we read "Earthy Anecdote" as an ironic word-play for "De Rerum Natura," we have a possible title poem for *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, telling us something about his work as a whole, just as unobvious title poems such as "The Idea of Order at Key West" bring out important aspects of the individual volumes in which they appear.

*De Rerum Natura* is a paraphrase that seems to be quite consistent with the general sequence of Stevens' book titles and title poems. In 1917, shortly before "Earthy Anecdote," came a sequence of poems to which he gave the general title "Primordia" (OP 25). To "primordia's" more familiar dictionary meanings of "sources" and "beginnings," which themselves already suggest "preliminary minutiae" for an account of the world, we should add "rerum primordia," the primary particles of Lucretius' Epicurean philosophy. It is known that Stevens originally wanted to publish *Harmonium* under the title "The Grand Poem: Preliminary Minutiae." The eventual choice, *Harmonium*, evokes philosophical associations that are quite consistent with an epic scheme. Its appearance as a late choice may partly explain the absence of an unmistakable title poem from Stevens' first collection, though "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Peter Quince at the Clavier" are halfway to being candidates. Also to be found in *Harmonium* is another title with suggestions of a formal treatise: "Of the Surface of Things."

The first twelve poems of *Ideas of Order* were originally published under the general title "Canonica" (Edelstein 213). There were three divisions in Epicurean philosophy: canonic, physics, and ethics. "Canonica" dealt with "procedures for use in the system" and physics with "the entire study of nature," and they were customarily combined. This lends further weight to a Lucretian reading. The title poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," a summative philosophical poem, continues the scheme. *Parts of a World* is a title that could be a reworking of "Primordia," and its half-submerged title poem might be "Landscape with Boat," with its emphasis on "Parts, and more things, parts" (CP 242).

After *Harmonium* Stevens' titles fall into two pairs: *Ideas of Order* and *Parts of a World* followed by *Transport to Summer* and *The Auroras of Autumn*. This might be considered to give us wholes preceding parts, representing the two main types of philosophical view about the primary substance of which the world is composed (the One or the Many). *Transport to Summer* and *The Auroras of Autumn* are dynamic names, full of movement, and hence may be read as including the unnamed seasons in the flux of experience. The auroras borealis bring in particles again, since they are thought to be produced when the earth is bombarded by charged particles from the sun. These two pairs of titles cover primary substance and the four seasons, matching the schematism that might be expected in a didactic epic. In Stevens, however, it is not rigid or mechanistic but apparently spontaneous.

*The Rock* contains "The Plain Sense of Things," a further Lucretian paraphrase for "the nature of things," another summative poem, as James Longenbach recognizes (303). The title poem itself, "The Rock," is a notoriously difficult poem to interpret, but perhaps it too is in part a question about the nature of things, which Stevens manages to turn into a question about ourselves and the foundations on which our lives have been built. Read from this perspective, it seems to be asking whether any substratum persists in our identity that amounts to more than the sum total of our experiences and the qualities attributable to us. These are the questions with which the pre-Socratic philosophers began their treatises.

Readers will be familiar with the main features of the didactic epic as a genre. They are summarized by the philosopher John Barnes as follows:

The written works of the early thinkers frequently bore the title *On Nature* (*Peri Phuseos*); and although the titles were bestowed not by the authors but by later scholars, they were largely appropriate. For the general enterprise of the early philosophers was to tell the whole truth 'about nature': to describe, to organize, and to explain the universe and all its contents. The enterprise involved, at one end of the scale, detailed accounts of numerous natural phenomena. . . . At the other end of the scale, the Presocratic enterprise involved much larger and more obvi-

ously 'philosophical' questions: did the universe have a beginning? And if so, how did it begin? What are its basic constituents? Why does it move and develop as it does? What, in the most general terms, is the nature and the unity of the universe? And what can we hope to learn about it? (13–14)

The plots and themes, as distinct from the labeling, of Stevens' oeuvre, set it apart by virtue of their breadth, their diversity, and their universality, and they correspond quite well with the summary given by John Barnes. To apply Stevens' emphasis on "actual animals, not original chaos" to his work as a whole seems quite feasible: its distinctly epic ring may surely be taken to imply a rejection of Miltonic creation myths in favor of an approach to the real through direct observations of the animal kingdom and the natural world. The alternative to creation myths is the evolutionary theory glimpsed in "Earthy Anecdote" and underlined with heavier irony in "The Jack-Rabbit." As we turn through the poems we encounter animals, birds, the wilderness, the weather, the sea, the sky, and the attempts of yokels, comedians, and pedagogues to understand and explain them. These pedagogues include not only the philosophers featured in this article, but Stevens' entire cast of thinkers of all styles and periods. Unlike Lucretius, however, Stevens is not the spokesman of one philosopher but an impresario who calls up philosophers of all styles and periods to speak his lines. So strong are his imaginary relationships with these figures that they seem to carry over into his otherwise puzzling remark in "Adagia": "Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them" (*OP* 192). In structure his *De Rerum Natura* is anecdotal; in approach it is eclectic.

In exploiting the didactic epic to convey his "sense of the world," Stevens found a way of accommodating the breadth of his interests and observations and the range of his thought.<sup>6</sup> But breadth of range and seriousness of ambition alone would not have sufficed for what Mallarmé, in his letter to Verlaine of 16 November 1885, had called "The Orphic explanation of the earth which is the sole task of the poet and the supreme literary game" (Millan 252). The elaborate machinery of his antique predecessors offered him immense opportunities for parody, as Barbara Fisher explains:

Parody offers a playful way to talk about things that are felt to be meaningful but are no longer taken seriously. It constitutes one sort of permissible discourse with institutions of the past. . . . [Bakhtin] contends that since antiquity, every "high" genre (epic, lyric, tragedy) has generated a countervailing mode, a comical parodic counterpart. (24)

It is in some such way as this that I believe Stevens' poetry can be seen as pretending to set a *De Rerum Natura* before us. Ostensibly telling us what the world is made of, it is really saying how it feels to live in it. It is

even more complex and satisfying than this, for as Barbara Fisher points out, Stevens' use of the parodic mode is a double one, "both sacral and sacrilegious" (Fisher 24): as well as the parodic Crispin there is the poet of "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," for whom "noctes vigilare serenas" ("to spend the tranquil nights in wakefulness" [Lucretius l. 142]) is the mode of his constant quest for "the plain sense of things" (*CP* 502).

## V

Such juxtapositions and analogies as I have suggested in this article are bound to be speculative, and they do not displace others, such as those presented by Leggett in his indispensable Nietzschean reading. The case for "Earthy Anecdote" as an epistemological poem can draw stated or implied support from other critics. It is a possible, and perhaps a probable, identification of the "theory" Stevens associated with the poem. That leaves open all the choices of different versions of epistemology, depending on the different philosophical styles with which different readers feel at home. My imaginative leap (for it can be no more) toward the philosophies of Peirce, James, and Santayana can, however, adduce some points in its favor. The acritical nature of knowledge as belief, the fallibilism, and the curious connection between pragmatism's anecdotal picture of a world of contingency and its impulse to create an imaginative epic vision of the real—all seem to me to link these philosophers with this poem. In "Earthy Anecdote," as in his other anecdotes, Stevens seems to be telling us that reality itself is at once anecdotal and the subject of a larger vision. As the mature James tells us in *A Pluralistic Universe*,

Here, then, inside of the minimal pulses of experience, is realized that very inner complexity which the transcendentalists say only the absolute can genuinely possess. . . . [N]othing real is absolutely simple. . . . [E]very smallest bit of experience is a *multum in parvo* plurally related. . . . Our 'multiverse' still makes a 'universe'; for every part, tho it may not be in actual or immediate connexion, is nevertheless in some possible or mediated connexion, with every other part however remote, through the fact that each part hangs together with its very next neighbors in inextricable interfusion. (*Essential Writings* 363, 367, 368)

Who, then, is the firecat? He is the embodiment of the animal faith that keeps us on the move, the unquestioned animal who dictates the moves of actual animals. He is the best the modern world has to offer in place of Christopher Smart's cat Jeffry, whose acrobatics testify to the glory of God and who "counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes" (Lonsdale 436). Stevens' astuteness in denying us his own explanation of the poem and leaving us to wake up "about the next

noon" with all sorts of reflections prepares us, distantly, for his paradoxes about belief in fictions and the quest for the supreme fiction.

A translator seeking to follow my reading cannot use the name of an actual animal in a nonfictional mode, because the firecat's nonexistence is central to the poem. What would be best would be a plausible coinage, devised in the hope that it might prove as deceptive as the original. Bacigalupo's suggested Italian translation is "lince rossa" (bobcat), which is delightful, but bobcats actually exist, and my preference therefore would be for a counterfeit Italian name indicating a so-far-undiscovered fiery species of lynx or cougar. If an illustrator could be persuaded to produce a drawing of a firecat, so much the better.

Does every swift circular tour round this poem simply return us to the bafflement with which we began? I am not quite sure that it does. Beyond the threshold of *Collected Poems*, the perplexities of the anecdote may begin to resolve themselves into the questionings of the Grand Poem. In this way, to borrow Peirce's wryly pragmatic phrase, "Earthy Anecdote" eventually shows us how to make our ideas clear.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See the report by the editor of *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, especially *WSJour* 21.1 (Spring 1997): 97 n 2, indicating that the eminent lexicographers he consulted could not trace a source for the word *firecat*. My own searches of English and American general and dialect dictionaries produced a similar result. To an inquiry raised on my behalf, Sir David Attenborough, always the most helpful and approachable of naturalists, responded: "I am afraid I cannot help. I have never heard of a 'fire-cat'" (Letter from Sir David Attenborough, FRS, to Joyce C. Miles, July 20, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to the editor and referees of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* and to Ann Massa of the University of Leeds for a number of comments that have greatly assisted the preparation of this article.

<sup>3</sup>I am more than usually indebted to the many critics and commentators who have written perceptively on "Earthy Anecdote" and its background, from Marianne Moore and George Betar onward.

<sup>4</sup>Leggett (207–12) in his Nietzschean reading links the poem with Nietzsche's "three anecdotes" in *Philosophy During the Tragic Age of the Greeks* and suggests that the Nietzschean fire-dog is concerned with belief in events. My debt to these suggestions will be obvious.

<sup>5</sup>Statius, *The Silvae* II: VII.76: "the towering frenzy of learned Lucretius." I am grateful to R. J. Clare of the School of Classics in the University of Leeds, who gave me the source of Peirce's Latin quotation.

<sup>6</sup>Willard Spiegelman discusses didacticism as a resource for American poets after 1945. Some of what he says, however, seems equally applicable to the poetry of Stevens.

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# The Riddle of the Firecat

MERVYN NICHOLSON

THE WORD "FIRECAT" APPEARS in Stevens' poem "Earthy Anecdote," the first poem of *Harmonium* and of the *Collected Poems*, a poem that, simply because of its placement, acquires a certain importance. Thanks to this placement, "firecat" is almost the first word that a reader meets on opening the book, even though its meaning is unclear. There is a suggestive reference in Stevens' journal account of his trip to British Columbia in 1903 that may offer some biographical basis for his "firecat." Stevens records his companion's catching a glimpse of what he calls a "lion," disappearing over the ridge of a mountain, just after dawn—presumably a mountain lion (*SP* 124). Perhaps this elusive "firecat" in the fiery light of morning is what lies behind the poem, a vivid and brilliant memory. But the term itself remains problematic.

In a discussion of the problems of how to translate the word "firecat," the distinguished scholar and translator Massimo Bacigalupo raises important and subtle issues about Stevens' poetry (see "Wallace Stevens and the Firecat"). Translating Stevens into Italian—a peculiarly happy language for Stevens, one feels—is the kind of task that forces into the open certain questions about his poetry that have been all too easy to ignore. In particular, it raises questions about some fundamental *habits* of thought that profoundly characterize Stevens, yet that prevailing critical assumptions tend to make hard to appreciate or even see.

Most obviously, it raises the question of Stevens' obscurity, the common complaint one hears, not just from frustrated students but from English professors and other literate types, that they do not understand what Stevens means. This is not a matter of interpretation, so to speak, but of simple surface meaning, in the sense of primary construal of his words. A poetry of obscurity, although it may have its virtues, as one realizes from the French symbolistes or from surrealism, also has its futilities and irritations.

At any rate, the firecat certainly proved frustrating for Bacigalupo, as his efforts to decipher the term, his checking into numerous dictionaries, and his consulting of many Stevens experts, testifies. As he himself put it, "a 'firecat' is a creature unknown to dictionaries, English, American, or regional. For a translator it poses an immediate problem" (94). One looks

in vain for a “meaning” of the word in any of the usual sources. Hence, to the common insistence that there is no such thing as a firecat, Bacigalupo responded, if that was the case, then why did Hart Crane use the term in *The Bridge*, his major poem?

If there are no firecats, and if “firecat” is a neologism of Stevens’ own, then how could anyone else use the term? There is an answer that is obvious enough, and Bacigalupo was quite aware of it, as his discussion of the poem indicates. Hart Crane must have been reading Stevens and must have taken the term from him. What other explanation could there be? But perhaps the real point about Hart Crane’s use of the term is not that he got it from Stevens, but the very fact that he felt compelled, as a poet himself, to use the word. What this suggests is that the word itself has a certain poetry, merely as a term *per se*. There is something about the word that draws attention to itself, partly because it is a neologism, but more important because it constitutes a striking image in a single word. This magnetic, even magical quality of the term explains why Stevens created and used it in the first place. Creating it was to create a poem in itself. “Firecat” is a miniature poem, a poem in a word.

But in fact the one-word poem is typical of Stevens. His creative neologism actually coheres with a poetic habit that is one of the profoundest characteristics of this subtle poet. Stevens was in the habit of making up the titles of poems before actually writing the poems, as if the title itself conveyed a poetic energy that attracted him and from which he could then go on to write a poem. It seems that the poem is a way of explaining the magic of the title or of fulfilling the poetic promise condensed in the title. The title thus becomes a condensed form of the poem as a whole, a kernel or seed, and the poem grows out or unfolds from the title. This accounts for the way that so many of his titles are in effect one-line poems—one thinks of “Oak Leaves Are Hands” or “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws” or the humorous “Floral Decorations for Bananas.”

But as one ponders this principle, one realizes that even so simple and unpoetic a title as “The Rock” is a condensed poem, since the motif of the rock has enormous resonance as an image in itself, not only in Stevens but in poetry as a whole (as, for example, in Wordsworth’s obsession with rocks and stones), indeed in culture as a whole, as Jesus’ use of the pun on *petrus* in the Gospels indicates. This gift for poetic condensation is one of the things that has made Stevens a major poet.

Quite often these titles are not merely micropoems; they also suggest paintings, the titles of unpainted pictures. “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws” is an obvious instance. This particular example sounds like a work by Matisse, with its vivid, dramatic colors and its focal bird image (compare Matisse’s famous cutout, *The Siren and the Parakeet*). In such cases, the title suggests that the poem is a focus of contemplation, of what amounts to a meditation, where one simply beholds the image in its intensity and ponders its potential complexity and emotional resonance. As in “Anec-

dote of Canna," one "Observes the canna with a clinging eye, / Observes and then continues to observe" (CP 55). One observes—and continues to observe—where continuing to observe suggests a process of contemplation, of seeing more, and seeing more precisely. This turns the original sight into multiples or variations on that original sight, perceptions of detail as well as recollections of a variety of associations conjured up by these details.

Vividness and imaginative intensity—continuing to observe—is a preoccupation of Stevens, vividness and intensity being an effect that his poetry constantly strives for. In this respect, Stevens' technique suggests a specific type of verbal exuberance that is as old as the English language. "Firecat" suggests nothing so much as the peculiar expressions that go back to Old English, usually termed "kennings," where a riddling expression collapses within itself several different terms. The standard *OED* example for kenning is "whale-road" for sea. In the original Old English, a well-known illustration is *rodoreo candel*—"sky-candle"—for sun, for "That strange flower, the sun, . . . That savage of fire, / That seed," as Stevens says (CP 85). In other words, Stevens' firecat belongs to one of the most ancient techniques of poetic writing. It is a technique that Emily Dickinson practiced extensively in her poetry (e. g., "yellow noise" [J 829] for sunrise), and Dickinson as much as Whitman is a presence to be reckoned with in Stevens' poetry.

In fact, the technique seems inherent in the poetic impulse itself. The technique of riddle is characteristic of thinking in images rather than in abstract ideas: it indicates another *kind* of thought. The hegemony of abstraction and abstract reasoning has led to a devaluing of thinking in images, as if it were childish or unworthy of adult consideration, even though it is basic to poetry. No doubt the demeaning attitude of abstract reasoning toward poetic, metaphorical thought is one reason why Stevens chose to leave out the answers to his riddles.

The impulse to condense rather than proliferate is plain enough from Stevens' predilection for aphorisms and for short haiku-like poems. Indeed, the very formation of his longer poems, with their regular three-line or two-line divisions (stanzas?), expresses the same predilection and indicates the way that the longer poems are "unfoldments" of the short poetic formations that Stevens continually generated throughout his career. This brings us to what is really the opposite tendency, to expand and unfold, taking a small beginning and allowing it, in effect, to grow and proliferate in different directions. This tendency to expand—to grow—is at its most explicit in "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," which actually has a series of numbered variants. But it is also the basis of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" and is certainly implicit in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," as the title—always important in Stevens—itself makes evident: a series of growths or variants emerging out of an opening perception and heading in a particular direction ("notes toward"). The form appears to be

based on what in music is called “variations”: the mutation and expansion of a brief initiating musical phrase.

Hence, one can distinguish between two kinds of rhythm in Stevens. There is a condensing rhythm, so to speak, and there is its complement, an unfolding/proliferating rhythm. Such “rhythms” are really poetic impulses or pulsations, like a heartbeat or breathing in the body, the expression of imaginative thought; they are not conceptual discussions like the intellectual integument of texts of philosophy, though Stevens loves to play with this philosophical/abstract paradigm (e. g., “Academic Discourse at Havana” or “The Constant Disquisition of the Wind”).

As I suggested at the outset, “Earthy Anecdote” is a poem of unusual importance simply because of its placement. Stevens chose to put it first in his *Collected Poems*. “Earthy Anecdote” is a kind of paradigm for all the poems that follow; it is not merely an introduction. It is the first in a series and is, to put it in terms of a familiar configuration in Stevens’ poetry, the originating form of a complex of variations unfolding out of that form. It is an exemplar of what is to follow. In this way, the *Collected Poems* itself is a sequence of “notes toward,” unfoldments out of an initiating, propelling perception.

“Earthy Anecdote” draws attention to itself for its dramatic imagery, for its neologism “firecat,” and for its placement in the whole array of Stevens’ writing. The question that Bacigalupo was forced to ask, simply because of the task of translation, is: what is the firecat? and, furthermore, why did Stevens feel compelled to make up a special word for it? Why didn’t he use a word that was familiar to everyone or that could be identified in a dictionary?

Asking this question seems to be almost in bad taste, given the prevailing climate of assumptions; it has at any rate certainly not been raised so directly, and perhaps it requires someone from outside English to do so. In the prevailing climate of assumptions, one is not supposed to find an “answer”; presumably, one is to be content with a field of obscure, suggestive language, and not go any further. The notion of an answer would imply closure and an end of interpretation, a definitiveness that would kill the poem (or at any rate the activity of commenting on the poem). After all, by the law of *différance*, there is no such meaning: signifiers defer/refer to one another but are themselves empty and do not “end” in anything. Given the prevailing influence of this ironic formulation, it is difficult to come to grips with what are fundamental features of Stevens’ writing, namely its affirmative energy, its positive, exuberant delight, a certain buoyancy for which the familiar French term *jouissance*, with all its overtones (including its sexual overtones), is most apt.

This is, after all, the poet that Northrop Frye described as “not one of our expendable rhetoricians, but one of our small handful of essential poets” (“The Realistic Oriole” 255).<sup>1</sup> What we find in Stevens, then, as

Gyorgyi Voros puts it in her recent book *Notations of the Wild: Ecology in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, is:

an affirmative, frequently joyful vision as an alternative to the twentieth century's increasing objectification of Nature and alienation from it. His abiding quest was for the rediscovery of a dynamic fulfilling relationship with the vast nonhuman portion of the universe without resorting either to traditional religiosity or to the philosophy of humanism that prevailed during his lifetime. (3)

In the ironic view, to find "no meaning" is itself a meaning, but it is a meaning of obscurity rather than of definiteness, a "pediment of appearance" (CP 361), in Stevens' own phrase, where color, shape, line, sensory experience in general—the very qualities that Stevens' poetry is remarkable for—are hardly possible. It is a different kind of meaning that we must look for, meaning—not as some general or abstract "theme," some all-enclosing concept—but as the experience of sensation, intensified perception, and the array of feelings and insights that flow from such perception. It is meaning as existential/imaginative experience, not meaning as abstract idea.

The compelling feature of Stevens' firecat is that it is a brilliant, definite, and forceful image in itself; it is anything but obscure. Indeed, it is that which dispels obscurity, given its association with fire and its capacity to make the "bucks" swerve in neat circular lines to the right and to the left; the firecat is almost a definition of the definitive, that which creates and is order, as opposed to the darkness and shapelessness of the obscure. Coming at the beginning of the *Collected Poems*, the firecat is the equivalent of "Let there be light": the beginning of the beginning, the compelling energy out of which all creation emerges. It corresponds oddly to the *last* poem, "Of Mere Being," in Holly Stevens' edition of her father's poems, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, which features a bird that is the equivalent of the firecat, a fire bird, whose "fire-fangled feathers" "dangle down" (398), suggesting that the bird is (also) a metaphor of the sun and what the sun means, the sun being the recurring, master motif in Stevens' poetry.

In spite of the current view of poetry as an indeterminacy, readers and critics have found it impossible not to wonder what the firecat is. Bacigalupo is not the only one or the first to ask this question, though he is certainly the most direct. Thus, Richard Blessing suggests that the firecat is "a prairie fire" (11). Michel Benamou opines that "the mysterious 'firecats' of Oklahoma . . . probably were oil wells" (94).<sup>2</sup>

There is an answer to the question of what the firecat is, in my opinion, but it is not a simple matter of this equals that, like identifying an obscure reference in a footnote. It is rather a generic answer; that is, "Earthy Anecdote" belongs to a generic type in Stevens' poetry, a specific genre, the

genre of the riddle. In this particular case, as in many of Stevens' riddle poems, the answer is the sun. To that extent, the firecat "is" the sun; that is, the whole poem revolves around and refers to the sun. "Earthy Anecdote" is a cosmic poem, as is appropriate for the opening of a great collection of poems. Thus, the "bucks" mentioned in the poem are planets; they are not merely a particular species of (male) animal. This identification explains what would otherwise be a very peculiar configuration in the poem, in which the bucks circle around the firecat:

they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the right,  
Because of the firecat.

Or until they swerved  
In a swift, circular line  
To the left,  
Because of the firecat. (CP 3)

Animals do not swerve "In a swift, circular line," whether to the right or to the left, but planets certainly do swerve in swift, circular lines to the right and left of the sun. The sun—that "golden alguazil" (CP 82) in the phrase of "The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws"—balances and orders the cosmos, combining force and form, energy and harmony, with the kind of perfect grace that a large cat is so famous for displaying. It seems likely, therefore, that the text that lies behind "Earthy Anecdote," or one of them, is Blake's "The Tyger": "Tyger, tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night," where the "forests of the night," as in Stevens, have a cosmic reference.

Bacigalupo objects to the suggestion that the firecat is the sun, because, he says, it is "too sweeping" (96). Thus, he draws attention to the setting of "Earthy Anecdote": Oklahoma. This is a strong point. Why Oklahoma? But the answer to this question is metaphoric, like everything in Stevens, or in this particular case, synecdochic. The state of Oklahoma was "Indian territory" while Stevens was young—one forgets that Stevens was born in the 1870s—Oklahoma was one of the last parts of the forty-eight continental United States to be occupied and settled by whites. Stevens was nearly thirty when Oklahoma joined the union in 1907 (compare its neighbors Kansas in 1861 and Texas in 1845). In fact, the "closing of the frontier" happened in Oklahoma, not Idaho or Oregon or Washington. As every student of American history knows, Oklahoma had been earlier set aside for the native populations, including the Cherokees, who had been "removed" from their ancestral territories far to the east.

In Stevens, Oklahoma is a symbol of the wild, the untamed, the virile and energetic. No doubt it has had similar associations for American culture generally, as is perhaps indicated by one of the most popular of all

musicals, *Oklahoma!*, perhaps the most peculiarly *American* of all musicals. "Oklahoma" can be found at least twice in Stevens' other poems, first in "Life Is Motion":

In Oklahoma,  
Bonnie and Josie,  
Dressed in calico,  
Danced around a stump.  
They cried,  
"Ohoyaho,  
Ohoo" . . .  
Celebrating the marriage  
Of flesh and air. (CP 83)

"Life Is Motion" is, like "Earthy Anecdote," a *Harmonium* poem. It is not one that critics seem to be much interested in, even though it is profoundly characteristic of Stevens, including its conspicuous nonsense words ("Ohoyaho, / Ohoo"), made-up words that are, in that respect, related to the "firecat," another made-up word that Stevens could not resist. What one notices about Bonnie and Josie is that they are celebrating life, and Oklahoma is a metaphor for earth at its most fecund and vital, the place where "the marriage / Of flesh and air" is celebrated. The "Oklahoma" of "Earthy Anecdote" is earth itself, and not a particular state, earth in its aspect of abundant life so typical of the "summer" vision in Stevens' poetry.

A second use of "Oklahoma" in Stevens appears in a poem that seems utterly different from "Life Is Motion," with its nursery-rhyme-like rhythms. It appears in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," section XVI:

The oldest-newest day is the newest alone.  
The oldest-newest night does not creak by,  
With lanterns, like a celestial ancientness.

Silently it heaves its youthful sleep from the sea—  
The Oklahoman—the Italian blue  
Beyond the horizon with its masculine,

Their eyes closed, in a young palaver of lips.  
(CP 476–77)

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" would seem about as far away as one could get from the vulgar Bonnie and Josie dancing about their stump in "Life Is Motion." But several features here suggest that we are in fact in the same territory as "Earthy Anecdote" and "Life Is Motion." When one turns to this passage from "Earthy Anecdote," one is struck by the motif of the closing of eyes: "Their eyes closed. . . ." It will be remembered that this is exactly what the mysterious firecat does: "Later the firecat closed

his bright eyes, / And slept." He is a being entirely comfortable in his kingdom, unafraid, entirely at ease in his vital energy, safe, confident in and of his world, an emblem of never-endingness, of never-ending energy, not "a celestial ancientness."

This sense of perfect authority and strength, the sovereignty and ease of a divine being, is present in the silent heaving of "The Oklahoman" here. It would appear that this "Oklahoman" is the sun—the day—that "Silently . . . heaves its youthful sleep from the sea," rising up in a constant newness, like the stars that come from Ireland in another of Stevens' poems (compare "Master Soleil, / Bringing the lights of Norway and all that" in "Of Hartford in a Purple Light" [CP 226]). The sleeping of the sun is, of course, nightfall (as in another riddle poem of Stevens, "Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons"). This vital solar energy is the basis of the line in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," "The oldest-newest day is the newest alone." It is specifically associated with masculine energy, as the sun and the sky in so many mythologies are: "Beyond the horizon with its masculine" (CP 476). The firecat, it perhaps does not need to be pointed out, is also male. The sun is the prototype for the figure of the noble rider that fascinated Stevens throughout his life, a male figure associated with the animal power of nature. The "young palaver of lips" in this particular passage of "An Ordinary Evening" recalls the "marriage / Of flesh and air" that Bonnie and Josie are "celebrating" in "Life Is Motion." More significantly, it recalls the important marriage symbolism of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," marriage being an inevitable way of visualizing, among other things, the union of sun and earth.

One further citation of Oklahoma in Stevens should be noted, because it makes clear that Oklahoma was a synecdoche for power, wildness, creative energy, vastness in his mind. This occurs in a letter he wrote on 29 September 1916 to his wife on a business trip, from a place far beyond even Chicago:

[Omaha] is five hundred miles west of Chicago. Oklahoma City is, goodness knows, still farther away: a land of mustangs, Indians etc. I am glad to have a Sunday there. [ . . . ] Out here, everybody has the reputation of being as rich as the pope, but looks as if he had less than nothing. They live on "pigs feet, pigs tails, pigs ears and pigs snouts," according to a restaurant sign. (L 198)

"Bonnie and Josie" would clearly be right at home in such a place. In the Oklahoma of Stevens' letter we do not find "bucks" (as in "Earthy Anecdote"), but we do find "mustangs," a word of similar sound and explosive vitality.

A few months later, writing from Houston (26 February 1917), again to his wife, he observes that "Oklahoma City reminded one of Easter"

(L 199)—a remarkable association. Oklahoma is associated not merely with vulgar pioneer energy but with the energy of the life-source itself, as Easter implies. Nevertheless, one must never underestimate the value of crude vitality in Stevens (remember “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”). This crude vitality reappears (slightly more dignified) in the nursery-rhyme-like poems and phrases that are scattered throughout Stevens’ work. Nor should one underestimate or forget the fact that about his favorite poet was Robert Louis Stevenson—*A Child’s Garden of Verses*, specifically. Stevens was so fond of Stevenson that he was one of the few poets that he urged Elsie to read.<sup>3</sup>

If indeed the “firecat” in “Earthy Anecdote” is the sun, it would be consistent with a major strand in Stevens’ poetic thought, which recurrently focuses on the sun, indeed personifies the sun. The key example is the opening—it is no accident that it is placed at the *opening*—of “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction”:

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

You must become an ignorant man again  
And see the sun again with an ignorant eye. . . .  
(CP 380)

Stevens goes on: “How clean the sun when seen in its idea”—the sense of cleanness and having been washed being very pertinent in the present context (as is the associated figure of the young man, the *ephebe*). This is an overwhelming perception: “something that never could be named” (CP 381). The emphasis on “ignorant,” a word that is repeated, should be noted. It is the naive, immediate, uninhibited dedication to sensation, which Bonnie, Josie, and in his own way, the firecat, all express, that is required—not the intellectualizing usually associated with the word “idea.” Hence “The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be” (CP 381).

There are a significant number of references to cats in Stevens; he seems to have had a predilection for felines. Stevens associates cats with light, despite their nocturnal proclivities, for example the “lion of the spirit” in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”: “Say of each lion of the spirit / It is a cat of a sleek transparency / That shines with a nocturnal shine alone. / The great cat must stand potent in the sun” (CP 472–73). The association of the cat with “potency” and the “sun” indicates the outcropping of the “firecat” complex of poetic thought in Stevens’ mind. But Stevens wrote many sun poems, often personifying the sun, or even treating the sun in the form of a riddle, as for example “Gray Stones and Gray Pigeons” and “The Bird with the Coppery, Keen Claws.” Furthermore, Stevens also creates micro-riddles of the “firecat” type in connection with the sun; for ex-

ample, "a bright red woman will be rising / And, standing in violent golds, will brush her hair" (CP 338).<sup>4</sup> Similarly, "The blue sun in his red cockade / Walked the United States today" (CP 264). The image of the sun striding across the cosmos is a favorite figure for this poet and one that he probably first met in Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*, where, in the poem "Summer Sun," the sun is "The gardener of the World":

Great is the sun, and wide he goes  
Through empty heaven without repose;  
And in the blue and glowing days  
More thick than rain he showers his rays. (804)

These rays showered from "empty heaven without repose" may be the origin of the "looks that caught him out of empty air" (CP 483) in "An Ordinary Evening": "new resemblance[s] of the sun, / Down-pouring, up-springing and inevitable" (CP 465). The energy of the sun becomes a metaphor for consciousness creating and re-creating the world around one, just as light alters the world it appears in: "The way the earliest single light in the evening sky, in spring, / Creates a fresh universe out of nothingness by adding itself" (CP 517). "The sun is half the world, half everything, / The bodiless half" (CP 481). "Bodiless" suggests not the abstract, but that which makes bodies appear, or that which makes bodies possible: the power that sustains existence, *Sein*.

The technique of riddle appeared early in his career, as one would expect, given its instinctive appeal. For example, "From a Junk" was published in 1908, and Stevens did not reprint the poem, but the riddling technique is already developed, if not overdeveloped:

A great fish plunges in the dark,  
Its fins of ruttled silver; sides,  
Belobored with a foamy light;  
And back, brilliant with scaly salt.  
It glistens in the flapping wind,  
Burns there and glistens, wide and wide,  
Under the five-horned stars of night,  
In wind and wave . . . (OP 8)

This poem is not about a fish at all, of course; it is about the moon, or the moon reflected in the water. The "moon" is the answer to the riddle posed by the poem, as the completion of the final line makes all too plain: "In wind and wave . . . It is the moon." Stevens was addicted to ellipsis, needless to say, and it is significant to find him already using it in this early poem. What "From a Junk" shows is Stevens' tendency from the outset to make his poems periphrastic images: ways of visualizing reality in metaphoric terms, and this tendency grew as his writing developed. One may surmise that many of the more obscure and difficult passages in his poetry

are periphrastic descriptions, riddles where the answer is left off. That is, they are “description[s] without place” (CP 339), ways of depicting or expressing instances of perception, precise shifts of awareness and feeling that have no names because they are unique to the moment and the person (as in, for example, “Of Hartford in a Purple Light”—and ultimately even “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven”). Hence many of the obscure locutions in Stevens are riddles left as riddles, without giving an answer, which is in effect what nature itself is, an immense collocation of sensations, infinitely complex, without an intellectual rationalization.

Leaving the answer off was central to his evolving poetic methodology. That was why “From a Junk” was unsatisfactory and ultimately abandoned by the poet: the last four words—the “answer”—should *not* be supplied by the poet. To say that the firecat “is” the sun is, in turn, to say that the sun is a vast mystery, “The inconceivable idea of the sun”; it is the expression of infinite powers of life and death that we can experience, but cannot *know*, cannot break down and neatly deposit in conceptual containers, cannot “conceive” (“inconceivable idea” as “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” puts it).

More important, what one notices about “From a Junk” are its extraordinary visual intensity and brilliance. Clearly, the technique of riddle—of periphrastic description—can act as a powerful vehicle for imaginative expression, for vividness rather than obscurity. This in turn explains why Stevens was drawn to the technique in the first place: it is, paradoxically, an unusually effective means of conveying *sensation*, of projecting the intense sensory experience that simply cannot be transposed into ordinary descriptive language. The reason for this effectiveness is that the technique of periphrastic description, of riddle, engages the mind and imagination. It is a stimulus to consciousness. Hence, as Stevens himself puts it in “Variations on a Summer Day,” the fact that this is a “variations” poem is no accident:

Words add to the senses. The words for the dazzle  
Of mica, the dithering of grass,  
The Arachne integument of dead trees,  
Are the eye grown larger, more intense.

(CP 234)

The growth of sensation is a function of language—of art or imagination—as much as of the senses *per se*: “one looks at the sea / As one improvises, on the piano” (CP 233). This process of expansion of sensation is essentially the purpose of art: “the true work of art . . . is not the work of the individual artist. It is time and it is place, as these perfect themselves” (NA 139–40), as he puts it in “Imagination as Value.”

If “Earthy Anecdote” is a riddle focused on the image of the sun, the specific *tone* of “Earthy Anecdote” becomes clear: it is a tone that fuses

exuberance and intensity on the one hand with a kind of playfulness on the other—the fusion of grandeur and quirky humor, which is so rare in other poets but so characteristic of Stevens. The title, in this view, becomes a pun, for the poem is an “anecdote” about the planet earth. There is a cosmic dimension to this poem that does not negate the delight and *jouissance* that Stevens is so fond of. The poem is a cosmic *jeu d’esprit*, but this is exactly what one finds in Stevens’ poetry—in, more precisely, the affirmative and energized side of his writing, which is not easy to absorb or appreciate in an intellectual climate that prizes irony and aporetic formulations and that regards spiritual perceptions as delusions. Still, *Lebensweisheitspielerei* could be regarded only as fundamental to Stevens. It is too easy to treat Stevens as a philosopher, preoccupied with abstractions and ironies, speaking in the tragic voice of the diminished perspective found in his “winter vision,” as it might be called. (This is not to deny the winter vision, which is unquestionably an element in Stevens’ *oeuvre*.) Thus critics often avoid the poems in Stevens where the techniques of “Earthy Anecdote” are in evidence.

The most important variant of this riddling technique is essentially what is termed, very inadequately, “personification.” One finds personification especially in his treatment of cosmic elements of experience: sun, moon, earth, sea, wind, and the insignia of the cycles of day and season—the big things in life, to put it crudely. For example, in “Our Stars Come from Ireland,” which I cited earlier, “The ocean breathed out morning in one breath” (CP 455). The change of season is often the focus of attention in Stevens; in fact it is hardly going too far to say that that is what Stevens’ poetry is “about”; thus, in “The Novel”:

The crows are flying above the foyer of summer.  
The winds batter it. The water curls. The leaves  
Return to their original illusion.

The sun stands like a Spaniard as he departs,  
Stepping from the foyer of summer into that  
Of the past, the rodomontadean emptiness.

(CP 457)

“*The sun stands like a Spaniard as he departs*”: the image of the sun as a Spaniard is striking enough (and consistent with Stevens’ fascination with Spain). Technically a simile, this is not a “figure” in the sense of a conceptual-rhetorical prevarication. It indicates the natural impulse of personification that grows out of Stevens’ poetic thought, especially in the context of primary, elemental images such as the sun. The way that the season is visualized as a foyer—“the foyer of summer”—is also typical of Stevens, where states of mind and phases of the seasonal year are so often visualized as rooms.

Much of the territory I have explored here is “condensed” in the opening segment of “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery”:

In the far South the sun of autumn is passing  
Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore.  
He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him,  
The worlds that were and will be, death and day.  
Nothing is final, he chants. No man shall see the end.  
His beard is of fire and his staff is a leaping flame.  
(CP 150)

The motif of flame and light; the personification (“His beard is of fire”); the association with poetic power (“Like Walt Whitman”); the cosmic references (“The worlds that were and will be”); the creative power (“singing and chanting the things that are part of him”); the motif of seasonal change; and the thought so fundamental in Stevens (“Nothing is final”)—all are outcroppings of the complex of image and idea in which the sun in Stevens is embedded. It is no accident that he put this segment *first* in the entire sequence of fifty “Decorations.”

The impulse to personify the sun is closely paralleled by the corresponding impulse to personify the earth, often—not surprisingly—as a female being, e. g., in “The Beginning”:

So summer comes in the end to these few stains  
And the rust and rot of the door through which she went.  
  
The house is empty. But here is where she sat  
To comb her dewy hair, a touchless light. . . .  
.....  
This is the chair from which she gathered up  
Her dress, the carefulest, commodious weave  
  
Inwoven by a weaver to twelve bells . . .  
The dress is lying, cast-off, on the floor.  
(CP 427–28)

Notice the impulse to visualize the season as a house or dwelling-place (as in “The Curtains in the House of the Metaphysician,” where the “curtains” appear to be clouds, and the “house” the world). When one speaks of “personification” in these cases, the locution is misleading. It is not personification in the empty decorative sense that poets have long since rejected (most loudly in Wordsworth’s preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*); rather, it is the tendency to visualize experience in human terms, which is almost a definition of what the imagination is in Stevens.

This visualizing activity is a mode of intellection, but it is different from the abstract reasoning so highly cultivated and prized in the academy. To the extent that one develops feelings about something one begins to treat

it, unconsciously or consciously, as if it were a human being, and it is this unconscious impulse that the poet articulates, but in a conscious, deliberate form. In other words, personification of this type is something built into the imagination, something inherent in our emotional and sensory existence as human beings and not an expendable "trope" or merely verbal juggling that can be deconstructed on the grounds that, as Paul de Man puts it, "Metaphor is error because it believes or feigns to believe in its own referential meaning" (104). It is not a matter of belief but of experience, of the senses as they absorb experience and "make variations." The riddle, in short, is a *perception*; it is a mode of perceiving reality, a way of articulating the overpowering impact of the sensory world. As Stevens himself put it in the "Adagia," "Poetry has to be something more than a conception of the mind. It has to be a revelation of nature" (OP 191).

It should be clear that to say that the "firecat" "is" the sun does not mean that the method of reading the poem is to substitute or reduce one to the other, in effect plugging "sun" into the places where "firecat" appears ("find and replace," in computer jargon), like a number in a math equation. The technique of riddle is the reverse of the reductive. The image of the sun is enfolded in the image of the firecat, a way of expressing the awesome magnificence of the sun that governs every aspect of existence on earth. But this identification *is* a part of the poem, and if we avoid the identification of the firecat with the sun, the result is not that we cease to ask the question of what the firecat is. The question does not go away; it merely changes or disguises its form. It becomes, for example: Why is the firecat described as controlling the "bucks"? What does that "mean," in the sense of "refer to" or even "symbolize"?

The inevitable answer to this question is that the firecat must be some sort of allegory, say of the artist, that is, a special being who somehow controls or is superior to others, above the "herd," so to speak, above the "villatic Fowl" to use Milton's phrase (a poet Stevens certainly knew) ("Samson Agonistes," l. 1695). This is the solution suggested by Bacigalupo and by others. The problem with this allegorical explanation is that Stevens does not view the poet or the artist as a romantic "genius" who is somehow "above" others.

Consider the way the poet/artist is visualized in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (another poem in a title, another picture in a title): the artist/poet is visualized as a worker, a "shearsman of sorts" (CP 165), and as *one who plays for others*, where "plays" has both its musical and its ludic associations, somewhat like the figure of the clown, which also had considerable fascination for Stevens. Stevens emphatically rejected the romantic image of the poet as some kind of vatic seer, someone with special authority over others. It follows that the *reader* automatically acquires a certain importance in Stevens, as is implied by the frequent references to reading in his poems and his use of reading as a metaphor (at its most profound in

"The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm"). The poet is not an expendable snob, who is somehow "better" than others.

As Stevens phrases it in "Reply to Papini," "The poet is / The angry day-son clanging at its make. . . ." (CP 448). The poet is like the firecat, not because the poet is better than others, but because the poet is associated with the power of creation and perception, with the ever-present hinted suggestion in Stevens that perception and creation cannot be separated from each other.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frye's other essay on Stevens, "Wallace Stevens and the Variation Form," also repays re-reading for this topic. Frye's comment on Stevens' "essentialness" has been in effect rephrased by Ralph Pite: "His poetry is extraordinary in part for the simple reason that it was written right from the heart of the commercial world. No other poet has been there or done that. Moreover, it is now the world to which academia is meant to conform. . . . Stevens's precisely managed privacy holds out against the State, of course, and against the Communists, but it also offers timely resistance to the more tempting idea of 'joining the company'" (204).

<sup>2</sup> More typically, critics are unable to say "what" the firecat is and are satisfied to propose, like George Betar, that the firecat is a symbol of order in contrast with chaotic energies. This is essentially the view proposed by Bacigalupo in his essay on "Earthy Anecdote." It is interesting that even a major Stevens critic such as Helen Vendler, when it comes to *teaching* Stevens, resorts to a series of suggestions of "what" is referred to in each of the parts of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (see "Wallace Stevens: Teaching the Anthology Pieces").

<sup>3</sup> On Stevens' fascination with Stevenson (the similarity of name no doubt had something to do with this fascination), see Jacqueline V. Brogan and my "Reading Stevens' Riddles."

<sup>4</sup> Stevens' poetry is full of these micro-riddles. To give another example, in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," we read of a "blue woman" (CP 399). Stevens explains this identification in a letter: "The blue woman was probably the weather of a Sunday morning early last April when I wrote this" (L 444). Compare "The Woman in Sunshine," where the woman in sunshine *is* the sunshine. In "Study of Images I" this "blue woman" modulates into a cosmic plant: "the big, blue bush / Of day" (CP 463), recalling "The Red Fern," where the sun/day is a huge plant growing.

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## Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery: A Surrealist Lineage

SUSAN McCABE

*The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme  
Of the unknown.*

—Stevens, "To an Old Philosopher in Rome"

**T**O BE AT THE EDGE OF SUCH extremes is the ever-shifting position in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery. This piece will articulate a lineage, the genealogical impact on Ashbery of reading the older poets, particularly as Bishop modifies and redirects his alliance with Stevens in terms of the threesome's shared interests in surrealism and painting. Ashbery published his first book, *Some Trees* (1956), the year after Stevens died; Bishop by this time had already published her debut volume, *North & South*, in 1946. Ashbery called Stevens his "favorite poet" and included Bishop among his main influences, praising her "seamless language" (Kostelanetz 20). Although the connections among these poets has been explored by a number of critics, a lineage has not been specifically configured in terms of each poet's intimate commentary upon and use of visual art as a means of displacing the iconic powers attributed to language.<sup>1</sup>

I examine here how these poets simultaneously gesture toward and undercut the surrealist version of the visionary through an interchange between poetry and painting in their work. Such a deconstructive move will establish a significant link among Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery. In his essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," Stevens regards the two mediums as inextricable, "how often a detail, . . . in respect to painting, applies also to poetry. . . . [O]ne could become a painter after one had become a poet" (NA 160). All three poets were intensely interested in painting, and Bishop and Ashbery (at one point or another) each wanted to be painters rather than writers. Bishop, in fact, wished she could have been a painter more than a poet.<sup>2</sup> That Stevens' poetry partakes of painting has been made evident through Glen MacLeod's assessments of the eclectic "uses" Stevens made of art,<sup>3</sup> and as Richard Kostelanetz notes of Ashbery: "Initially more interested in visual art than in writing, young John studied painting once a week at the museum school in Rochester"

(19). *Reported Sightings* (1989), Ashbery's art criticism from between 1957–1987, testifies to the poet's avid engagement with painting.

The shared lineage of these poets as well as their differences can be seen as those roughly, if somewhat arbitrarily, between Picasso as mediated by Stevens (both question yet retain the figure of the artist), Giorgio de Chirico through Bishop (both disrupt yet suggest potential narrative coherence through mysterious settings), and Jackson Pollock through Ashbery (both do away with representational figuration and narrative sense). By adumbrating this network of connections, I am not striving to aggravate the already existing complexity inherent in any project taking up a question that involves tracing a lineage among three poets. My coordination of these poets with particular painters is not a matter of rigid or perfunctory correspondences, but rather a means for provoking meditation upon one aspect of a vast terrain. Although many other paintings and painters could be called upon to illumine the lineage under discussion, I invoke the "surrealist" (surrealist in that they fulfill some of the defining characteristics of the surreal as perceived by these poets) paintings that I do because they are clarifyingly metonymic of the crisis of representation confronted by Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery. Such a lineage of "crisis" should be read bearing in mind James Longenbach's recent important reminder of the *continuities* between modernism and postmodernism (21). In other words, Bishop and Ashbery resort to Stevens more than they reject him. These poets (each in his or her own way) foreground language as an evocative rather than as a referential system of signification and in doing so partake of a similar foregrounding within painterly painting, one that blurs (without fully erasing) boundaries between subject and object, between internal and external, between the imagination and reality.

As far-reaching as surrealism's influence has been, the term, as Roger Shattuck cautiously but capaciously puts it, "refers to literary-artistic activity that centered in Paris in the Twenties and profoundly affected two generations of poets and painters in Europe. Beyond this point, any concurrence of opinion on the nature and significance of surrealism goes to pieces" (Nadeau 12). Julien Levy writes in his anthology of surrealist documents in 1936: "*Surrealism is not a rational, dogmatic, and consequently static theory of art*—hence, for the surrealist point of view, there can be no accurate definition or explanation" (3); Levy, however, delineates this "point of view" as reflecting a post-Freudian attention to the subconscious "in opposition to the positivist dissections of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," and among surrealist goals, he lists "To intensify experience" (3). In Ashbery's "Growing Up Surreal" (one among many of his discussions of his indebtedness to surrealism), he declares: "We all 'grew up Surrealist' without even being aware of it" (41). As inclusive and slippery as the term "surrealism" continues to be, its emphasis upon intense and extreme states of mind, upon the unconscious and its links with irrationality and dream states, nevertheless constitute almost obsessional un-

derpinnings in the work of Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery. André Breton defines surreality as “‘pure psychic automatism . . . in the absence of all control by reason’ ” (qtd. Nadeau 89).

In an often-quoted passage from his *Second Manifesto*, Breton imagines “there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions” (123). He categorically claims that there is no “other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point” (124). Such faith and determination “to fix” is antithetical to the poetics of Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery, who share an aesthetics of flux and temporality, the mysterious never becoming entirely visionary. Imagination may be enshrined, apotheosized by Stevens, an exaltation both Bishop and Ashbery inherit and inhabit with him, but these latter poets, especially Ashbery, question the adequacy of art, its power to impart order and coherence. In fact, this trio of poets can be said to be surreal in their very defiance of any motivating hope of transcending contradictions: it is as if they intentionally stop just short of the unifying “point” desired by Breton and his followers (with Ashbery stopping the farthest from it). Their versions of surreality emerge through an investment in a poetic process that troubles and dismantles conventional notions of aesthetic representation.

In his review of the 1968 show “Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage” at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York, Ashbery critiques the 1920s movement itself: “As [it] pursued its stormy course, exclusions, anathemas and even suicide followed in the wake of Breton’s rulings and pronouncements.” Ashbery is remarking in particular on the suicide of the homosexual writer René Crevel: homosexuality did not, apparently, qualify as part of the so-called total sexual freedom Breton had advertised (“The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism” 6). However, he then declares the contemporary poet’s (including his own) indebtedness to surrealism and that “it is indeed a renewing force”:

I once interviewed the poet Henri Michaux, who said that, though he did not think of himself as a Surrealist, Surrealism had been the chief influence on him as a writer because it gave him the permission . . . to do as he pleased. In this sense we are indebted to Surrealism; the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it. (7)

With such a broad definition in place (or sliding in its place), I think we can perceive the liberating, even self-pleasing tradition of surrealism Ashbery inherits through Stevens and Bishop, both at the apex of their exposure to this then-radical enterprise in the 1930s. Surrealism provided an important impetus for each of these poets in their attempt to trouble conventional representationalism.

"The Man with the Blue Guitar" emerges in the following year after Stevens had seen the first major retrospective of Picasso's works in 1934 and the "Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism" show at MOMA in 1936. The poet's essay, "The Irrational Element in Poetry," delivered at Harvard the night before the MOMA show opened, remarks with some irritation: "Then too we are at the moment so beset by the din made by the surrealists and the surrationalists . . . [that we may think] of them as the sole exemplars of the irrational today. Certainly, they exemplify one aspect of it" (*OP* 224). Although Stevens deflected the din of the surrealist school and claimed that the poem grew out of the general influence of "the literature of painting" (*OP* 187), Picasso, hailed as one of surrealism's heroes by Breton, appears as pivotal in this poem and particularly his familiar painting, *The Old Guitarist* (1903).<sup>4</sup> The guitar image and its replication in Picasso as well as in other surrealists (Georges Braque and Juan Gris, to name just two) locates it as a kind of "found object," a readymade, itself belonging to the literature of painting. The guitar becomes replayed, so to speak, in various configurations as a synesthetic touchstone in cubism and collage. Picasso's *Guitar* (1913), for instance, quite explicitly figures toward a *figure*, that of the artist as somehow melded with intersecting fabrics and textures along with the everyday piece of newsprint, a motif that gains prominence in Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar."

The improvisational design of Stevens' "The Man with the Blue Guitar," as Joseph Riddel puts it, "entertains the extreme form of disintegration in Stevens' experience; in no other poem will the unity of the work be so tenuous. . . . [It] imposes an aesthetic cosmos upon physical chaos" (138). Such tenuousness links this work with Ashbery, who embraces rather than resists a disintegrative process. Section XIII of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" references the monochromatic dominance of Picasso's Blue Period (including *The Old Guitarist*), its use of variant tones of the same color with a concomitant distortion of perspective. Blue dissolves into the "Expansions, diffusions," that "blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins." Stevens constructs the poet (one provisionally protected as he floats in the Picassoian "Blue buds or pitchy blooms" [*CP* 172]) as "almost to man" (*CP* 165) but beyond him, patched together through language with the tentative feel of a perishable, yet carefully constructed collage:

I cannot bring a world quite round,  
Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye  
And bearded bronze, but not a man. . . . (*CP* 165)

Even with his acknowledgment of limits, the poet regales "a hero's head"; as "A shearsman of sorts" (*CP* 165) (a phrase that implies collagist cutting), the figure persists much in the way that the figure persists in *The Old Guitarist*, however lopsided, melancholy, and in reverie. "The pale

intrusions into blue" of Section XIII shade into "corrupting pallors." Blue turns into fabric of the fantastical, the surreal "Expansions, diffusions" Ashbery will later explore:

Blue buds or pitchy blooms. Be content—  
Expansions, diffusions—content to be

The unspotted imbecile reverie,  
The heraldic center of the world

Of blue, blue sleek with a hundred chins,  
The amorist Adjective aflame . . . (CP 172)

Paint becomes grammatical distortion. Language becomes a case of amorous multiplication, not "content to be" a single thing.

Although Stevens orders his polysemous poem into thirty-three independent but interrelated sections, each consisting of eight to sixteen lines of rhymed or unrhymed couplets, the wildness and violence of his images threaten to burst these neat confines. One recalls Stevens' famous formulation of the imagination (in the violent year of 1942) as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36). "Protection" is a key word in a desire to keep the boundaries of inside and outside in place, even as they are questioned, even as they are violently garrisoned. Breton's disconcerting and bald assertion that the simplest surrealist act would be to go out into the street, revolver in hand, and fire at random into the crowd ("Second Manifesto" 125) converts into an aesthetic violence. A dismantling and reordering, a shuffling (like an exquisite corpse) of the sections of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" could produce illuminating reinscriptions, as there exists no hierarchical or sequential character to the poem. Throughout we receive violent shards of poetic activity, resonant of the surrealist enterprise. Section X, for example, in its embrace of the illogical and subversive, calls to "raise" and raze, to demolish and reconstruct:

Raise reddest columns. Toll a bell  
And clap the hollows full of tin.

Throw papers in the streets, the wills  
Of the dead, majestic in their seals. (CP 170)

This represents also an attempt to construct a figure for the poet, "almost to man" but beyond him, patched together through language.

Pivotal for Ashbery's inheritance of Stevens is section XV, where Stevens evasively refers to "this picture of Picasso's":

Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard  
Of destructions," a picture of ourselves,

Now, an image of our society?  
Do I sit, deformed, a naked egg,

Catching at Good-bye, harvest moon,  
Without seeing the harvest or the moon?

Things as they are have been destroyed.  
Have I? Am I a man that is dead

At a table on which the food is cold?  
Is my thought a memory, not alive?

Is the spot on the floor, there, wine or blood  
And whichever it may be, is it mine? (CP 173)

These lines economically and fluently present an ontological crisis via Picasso's "horde / Of destructions' ": poetry, painting, "ourselves" coalesce and destabilize the most basic assumptions of reality and self, asking in effect: Am I alive? Am I here? Am I myself? Are these my thoughts? Should I not know if that which I perceive staining the floor is my blood or spilled wine? The potential image of self as "deformed, a naked egg" (akin to a de Chirico head as effigy) unsettles the notion of the poem as capable of reflecting or imparting coherence or proportion. The self, fragmented and estranged from the familiar, is stripped, revealed without ideal figural beauty. With the valedictory "Catching at Good-bye," the circular chasing after what is always already lost, one misses the visionary moment of "the harvest or the moon," a motion that will take prominence in both Bishop and Ashbery, in their engagement with the insistently evanescent.

Stevens' subject in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" is to explore the interrelationships between the imagination and reality (Riddel 138), and such a clear-cut, yet vast, field of inquiry is inherited by both Bishop and Ashbery. The poem wants to negotiate a place for poetry and for the poet, to designate their role in dealing with reality and the imagination. By referencing painting, and, on some level, Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*, the poem foregrounds aesthetic crossings: the visual with the auditory, the linguistic with the musical; the modern artist's refutation of verisimilitude emerges with marked immediacy through the citation of nonrepresentational painting. Section XXII nevertheless asserts the primacy of poetry and the inability to get beyond or outside the poem:

Poetry is the subject of the poem,  
From this the poem issues and

To this returns. Between the two,  
Between issue and return, there is

An absence in reality,  
Things as they are. Or so we say.

But are these separate? Is it  
An absence for the poem, which acquires

Its true appearances there, sun's green,  
Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks? (CP 176–77)

From “An absence in reality” emerges these so-called “true appearances,” synesthetically, surrealistically, and animately rendered. The positings of individual couplets gives way to the de-positing in the next; no assertion rests unvexed without being qualified by another question (this method of self-subversion occurs quite frequently in Bishop in her more foregrounded following of the process of consciousness). The attention to “absence” in both Bishop and Ashbery emerges as part of this legacy of the surreal: that circular site “Between issue and return” where language both divests and invests appearances with their character, which serves only to adumbrate the ever-elusive visionary moment.

Stevens quotes Picasso's phrase “ ‘horde / Of destructions’ ” (CP 173) in part to point up the limitations of mimesis and of linguistic transparency. In this way, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” looks forward (with poetry and painting almost indistinguishable) to the work of both Bishop and Ashbery in their more emphatic disposal of clear-cut divisions between the unconscious and the world in which it participates. In Bonnie Costello's reading, painting, for Stevens, becomes primarily an aesthetic locus for sensuous embodiment: “a cure for rhetoric” (“Wallace Stevens and Painting” 66). Yet Stevens mutes pictorial presence, revels in reverberations, veering away from the known toward the unknown, and as he says of the imagination: “[it] always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar” (NA 165).

Georges Bataille writes of Picasso that “dislocation of form leads to that of thought” so that “the immediate intellectual movement . . . aborts” (24). Stevens, even as he plays with dislocation, preserves the illusion of intellectual movement. Bishop, however, even in her dislocations within image, tends to preserve *the experience of narrativity*. Ashbery further subverts narrativity as he, like Bishop, foregrounds the unrealized visionary. When Bishop writes to Anne Stevenson, refracting and echoing Breton's notion of “fixing” that point that would resolve dream and reality, she is quite tentative, self-modifying: “Dreams, works of art (some) glimpses of the always-more-successful surrealism of everyday life, unexpected moments of empathy (is it?), catch a peripheral vision of whatever it is one can never really see full-face but that seems enormously important” (*Elizabeth Bishop and Her Art* 288). We know it is there—something enormously important—but we will never entirely experience or perceive it. Art, like dreams, can only be numinous, in fragments, in torn-off edges.

Bishop's lucid details paradoxically undermine the representational, deflect the visionary. They seamlessly frame the familiar through the

strange. Like Bishop's work, de Chirico's defamiliarizes ordinary objects and terrains of everyday existence. Ashbery writes that although de Chirico "was not strictly speaking a Surrealist, he is in a sense the one great Surrealist painter" and continues, pertinently for Bishop, "With Dali and Magritte one is aware of a technique that coexists with their subjects; in de Chirico manner and matter form an inseparable whole. His dreamlike landscapes and still lives and the paint that composes them form an irreducible, magic substance" ("The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism" 8). As another art critic describes de Chirico's effect, "In his mysterious pictures of huge, silent, deserted squares, dappled with cast shadows, incongruous objects confront some impending, undefined catastrophe and a numinous tension invests these scenes with the significance of auguries" (Levy 32). The sense of "some impending, undefined catastrophe" certainly underpins Bishop's work, especially during her years in Paris in the 1930s. The haunting quality of *presque-vu* or of something about to occur emerges vividly in de Chirico's *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* (1914) with its solitary girl with hoop, its stark, receding arcade, its indeterminate van, and its shadow figure (to name just several evocative elements). Most objects in de Chirico's paintings can be identified; it is their relationship to one another within mostly deserted environs that reduces an object's referential precision and that encourages indeterminate allegorical or metaphoric interpretation. As does Bishop, de Chirico resorts to elements that appear to be familiar, but somehow the familiar is also startlingly shadowed and unfamiliar, the *heimlich* necessarily *unheimlich*.

"Cirque d'Hiver" (one of Bishop's Paris poems) refers overtly to de Chirico, but it is the poem's manner and atmosphere that conjure up the mysterious texture of his paintings. Distinct from Stevens' man with the blue guitar who, at times, becomes the blueness itself, instrument and player rhapsodically united—"Tom-tom, c'est moi. The blue guitar / And I are one" (CP 171)—the artist figure in "Cirque d'Hiver" appears through an emblem of crisis and division:

Across the floor flits the mechanical toy,  
fit for a king of several centuries back.  
A little circus horse with real white hair.  
His eyes are glossy black.  
He bears a little dancer on his back. (Bishop, CP 31)

This diction, simple and child-like, readies us for some revelation, enigmatically retained. She invokes de Chirico through one of his famous horses:

His mane and tail are straight from Chirico.  
He has a formal, melancholy soul.  
He feels her pink toes dangle toward his back

along the little pole  
that pierces both her body and her soul

and goes through his, and reappears below,  
under his belly, as a big tin key. (Bishop, *CP* 31)

One thinks of Comte de Lautréamont's eroticized metaphor for the beautiful as "the chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (263). The poem ends with a turning away that is also a turning toward, a deflective gesture that Ashbery inherits:

The dancer, by this time, has turned her back.  
He is the more intelligent by far.  
Facing each other rather desperately—  
his eye is like a star—  
we stare and say, "Well, we have come this far."  
(Bishop, *CP* 31)

"This far" remains purposefully pendulous. What is this desperation? The fear of never writing again?<sup>5</sup> The dependence on both the abstract intelligence of the horse and the frivolous, Ariel-like body of the rider? One might think of the tension in de Chirico's *The Mystery and Melancholy of a Street* between the potential for play with its depiction of a girl with her hoop and the overarching desolation and ominousness created through shadows and perspective. Marjorie Perloff writes of Ashbery in a way that is reminiscent of Bishop's strategy of maintaining a tight tension: "Language always on the point of revealing its secret—this pattern of opening and closing, of revelation and re-veiling, of simultaneous disclosure and concealment is the structural principle of Ashbery" (262).

Bishop published the sestina, "A Miracle for Breakfast," in December 1936 (in her notebook of this month she has notes from Stevens' "Owl's Clover," and she writes to Moore "I dislike the way he occasionally seems to make blank verse *moo*—" [qtd. Millier 109]). Like "Cirque d'Hiver," the sestina points toward the "surrealism of everyday life," the peripheral almost glimpsed marvelous through concrete details (a digestible miracle). The poem is set in the liminal morning hour (a time Bishop favors in many of the poems of *North & South*):

At six o'clock we were waiting for coffee,  
waiting for coffee and the charitable crumb  
that was going to be served from a certain balcony,  
—like kings of old, or like a miracle.  
It was still dark. One foot of the sun  
steadied itself on a long ripple in the river.  
(Bishop, *CP* 18)

We have the de Chirico stillness through the “long ripple,” but rather than augury we have experience “like a miracle,” a simulacrum that is also a withholding. The “makings of a miracle”—“one lone cup of coffee” and “one rather hard crumb”—are transformed through the poet’s imagination, but Bishop’s hallucinatory seeing is not transcendent vision as the surrealist doctrines might have it:

I can tell what I saw next; it was not a miracle.  
A beautiful villa stood in the sun  
and from its doors came the smell of hot coffee.  
In front, a baroque white plaster balcony  
added by birds, who nest along the river,  
—I saw it with one eye close to the crumb—. . . .  
(Bishop, *CP* 18)

Such seeing is tentative, a momentary breaking off from destitution. Like Ashbery, she is often stranded in the quotidian. The poem ends in a manner that anticipates Ashbery’s experience of missing the miracle:

We licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee.  
A window across the river caught the sun  
as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony.  
(Bishop, *CP* 19)

The movement from Bishop to Ashbery, from de Chirico to Pollock, can be seen through her poem “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance” where she retains local coherences, but diffusely. The startling juxtapositions and movement in this narrative jar us; vivid images distend continuously into the unfamiliar, as in this section:

In Mexico the dead man lay  
in a blue arcade; the dead volcanoes  
glistened like Easter lilies.  
.....  
In Dingle harbor a golden length of evening  
the rotting hulks held up their dripping plush.  
The Englishwoman poured tea, informing us  
that the Duchess was going to have a baby.  
And in the brothels of Marrakesh  
the little pockmarked prostitutes  
balanced their tea-trays on their heads  
and did their belly-dances; flung themselves  
naked and giggling against our knees,  
asking for cigarettes. (Bishop, *CP* 58)

When the poet comments, “Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’ ” (Bishop, *CP* 58), we understand the paratactic layering of the poem as part

of the unhierarchical sequencing of dream, the “being in the process” that impels much of Ashbery’s work.

The resemblances between Ashbery’s work and Pollock’s can help one chart Ashbery’s course from Stevens through Bishop. Pollock’s abstract expressionism grows out of surrealism’s interests in psychic automatism and the unconscious. The diffuse, improvisational and reckless aspect of Pollock appears as the renunciation of coherence in Ashbery. For instance, in Pollock’s *Blue Poles* (1953), a canvas composed with oil, duco, and aluminum paint in seemingly irregular, spontaneous patches and streaks, the violence from within, claimed by Stevens to protect from the violence from without, has extravagantly exceeded its bounds. Comparing this particular painting to Picasso’s *Guernica*, Frank O’Hara calls it “heroic,” citing it as one of Pollock’s “painfully beautiful celebrations of what will disappear, or has disappeared already, from his world, of what may be destroyed at any moment” (22). Such violence and evanescence, at least from Ashbery’s point of view, are linked with both world war and the daring connected with avant-garde art. In a lecture Ashbery gave at the Yale Art School in May 1968 (think of Stevens’ lecture just prior to the celebrated 1936 MOMA show opening) in which he discussed the demise of the avant-garde as he knew it in the fifties when there was “no sure proof of [its] existence” (“The Invisible Avant-Garde” 390), he refers to Pollock as an exemplar of one (like himself) perched on the precipice of a phantasmic avant-garde, stimulated by self-doubt:

To experiment was to have the feeling that one was poised on some outermost brink. In other words if one wanted to depart, even moderately, from the norm, one was taking one’s life—one’s life as an artist—into one’s hands. A painter like Pollock for instance was gambling everything on the fact that he *was* the greatest painter in America, for if he wasn’t, he was nothing, and the drips would turn out to be random splashes from the brush of a careless housepainter. It must often have occurred to Pollock that there was just a possibility that he wasn’t an artist at all, that he had spent his life “toiling up the wrong road to art” as Flaubert said of Zola. But this very real possibility is paradoxically just what makes the tremendous excitement in his work. It is a gamble against terrific odds. Most reckless things are beautiful in some way, and recklessness is what makes experimental art beautiful, just as religions are beautiful because of the strong possibility that they are founded on nothing. We would all believe in God if we knew He existed, but would this be much fun? (390–91)

I quote this passage at some length because it draws together several strands pertinent to this discussion. Pollock appeals to Ashbery because of a recklessness and a recognition that such art was pursued in the face of

its possible emptiness and insignificance; Ashbery's comparison between the pursuit of such art and religious faith positions his aesthetic questions close to where I began: the alliance of surrealism with a potential for visionary experience. Pollock's abstract expressionism is, of course, not strictly surrealist, but grows out of surrealism's interests in psychic automatism and the unconscious. Yet Ashbery (via Pollock) newly defines the beautiful, not the marvelous (as rendered through de Chirico) but the reckless—a word implicit in the surrealist experiments of the 1920s.

The diffuse, improvisational, and risk-taking aspect of Pollock's work (along with many of the abstract expressionists emerging in the 1950s) corresponds to the renunciation of coherence or narrative and devotion to opacity in Ashbery, a quality that emerges from the work of Stevens and Bishop. Pollock's streaking, pouring, and splattering of paint resembles Ashbery's embracing of process and discontinuity: lines, in poems as in paint, seem to have no fixed trajectory. "Of Dreams and Dreaming" (from the tellingly titled *Hotel Lautréamont* [1992]), for example, casts us in the unprocessed, not fully bounded, yet continually filtered realm of dream:

Tell me more about that long street. Actually we're  
overextended;  
time is running out. While still all things to all people we  
are no longer swimming in the pool left by the sunrise. No, a  
forest has resumed the strict narration. One puts gloves on  
to ward off something. What is it? (90)

Fred Moramarco comments of this volume that "the spirit of Lautréamont hovers behind these late poems, demolishing our comfortable sense of individual reality and substituting for it a bizarre conglomerate reality that is both mysterious and inexplicable" (47). As with Bishop, the intense investment in the visual somehow deflects full scopic comprehension and instead implies, without clear designation, some ever-evasive visionary reality.

Ashbery compares his mind to "an underground stream," saying: "I want the poetry to come out as freshly and unplanned as possible, but . . . I'm bored by the automatic writing of orthodox surrealism. . . . I have arranged things so that, as this stream is coming out, I make a number of rapid editorial changes. My poetry has an exploratory quality" (Kostelanetz 31). Ashbery's paradoxical self-description mirrors what Pollock says when asked about "accident": "What makes you think it's an accident when I know what I'm going to drip before I work? . . . I *can* control the flowing of paint; there is no accident, just as there is no beginning or end" (Frank 111). The poet refers to his interest in "the irregular form—the flawed words and stubborn sounds, as Stevens said, that affect us whenever we try to say something that is important to us" (Kostelanetz 31). Ashbery, more than Stevens (or Bishop for that matter), inhabits the flawed and imperfect arena of language, the locus where meaning turns impenetrable, un-

able to communicate—something monstrously important about to be revealed and suddenly aborted, to paraphrase Bataille's language about Picasso.

Ashbery explains the necessary opacity and mystery of his poems (referring to his delight in seeing silent films without subtitles): "The difficulty of my poetry isn't there for its own sake; it is meant to reflect the difficulty of living, the everchanging, minute adjustments that go on around us and which we respond to from moment to moment—the difficulty of living in passing time, which is both difficult and automatic, since we all somehow manage it" (Kostelanetz 33). Ashbery expertly shows the "minute adjustments" of consciousness, which demand a simultaneous investment in unconscious dream life, divested as it is of the miraculous or the marvelous predicated by the surrealist doctrine. Ashbery, however, it should be remembered, experimented heavily with automatic writing in his second volume, *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962). "A Last World" for instance, as it confronts that monstrous possibility of apocalypse, renders a violence of phrases juxtaposed before the flames, unprotected by a violence from within. The poem opens with blindness in the unknown:

These wonderful things  
Were planted on the surface of a round mind that was  
to become our present time.  
The mark of things belongs to someone  
But if that somebody was wise  
Then the whole of things might be different  
From what it was thought to be in the beginning,  
before an angel bandaged the field glasses. (SP 42)

Later this strangely dissolves into dream:

Do men later go home  
Because we wanted to travel  
Under the kettle of trees  
We thought the sky would melt to see us  
But to tell the truth the air turned to smoke,  
We were forced back onto a foul pillow that  
was another place. (SP 45)

The poem ends, world enflamed with word:

Everything is being blown away;  
A little horse trots up with a letter in its mouth,  
which is read with eagerness  
As we gallop into the flame. (SP 45)

This little horse is not de Chirico's or Bishop's in "Cirque d'Hiver" nor is Ashbery's artist-figure the old guitarist; contemplation is ever-combus-

tible and fragmented. The differences I am pointing toward can be seen as those roughly among Picasso (who retains the figure in "The Man with the Blue Guitar"), de Chirico (whose mysterious settings suggest a potential narrative coherence), and Pollock (an artist better fit to describe Ashbery's interest in a kind of ultimate and intense opacity and unfigurement).

Ashbery inhabits the flawed and imperfect, yet somehow plotted, arena of language where meaning turns impenetrable, unable to communicate as in "As One Put Drunk in the Packet-Boat." Resonant with Bishop's "A Miracle for Breakfast," the "waiting" has been pushed even further into lapses, displacements and uncertainties without "the solace of form" (to borrow Lyotard's phrase [81]):

I tried each thing, only some were immortal and free.  
Elsewhere we are as sitting in a place where sunlight  
Filters down, a little at a time,  
Waiting for someone to come. Harsh words are spoken,  
As the sun yellows the green of the maple tree. . . .  
(SP 163)

Ashbery's poem is more self-consciously about the process of writing. Unlike Bishop's sestina, the internal and external seamlessly overlap:

So this was all, but obscurely  
I felt the stirrings of new breath in the pages  
Which all winter long had smelled like an old catalogue.  
New sentences were starting up. But the summer  
Was well along, not yet past the mid-point  
But full and dark with the promise of that fullness,  
That time when one can no longer wander away  
And even the least attentive fall silent  
To watch the thing that is prepared to happen.  
(SP 163)

Ashbery permits gaps and absences; they permeate the text rather than hunch behind it, as they do in the tight couplets dense with rich, unfamiliar imagery in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" or, for that matter, as they linger on the shadow outskirts of Bishop's sestina. With improvisational self-consciousness ("New sentences were starting up"), Ashbery's "As You Came From the Holy Land" gestures back to both Stevens and Bishop, but more intensely parodies the seriousness of waiting for a miracle to occur (the holy land deflates to "western New York state" [SP 167]) and with surreal randomness, phrases unfurl in sporadic anaphora, augury prevented and deflected:

you reading there so accurately  
sitting not wanting to be disturbed

as you came from that holy land  
 what other signs of earth's dependency were upon you  
 what fixed sign at the crossroads  
 what lethargy in the avenues  
 where all is said in a whisper  
 what tone of voice among the hedges  
 what tone under the apple trees  
 the numbered land stretches way  
 and your house is built in tomorrow  
 but surely not before the examination  
 of what is right and will befall  
 not before the census  
 and the writing down of names. . . . (SP 167)

The vagueness and inscrutability of the sense of these proclamations create the ominousness summoned through de Chirico, but they are framed so that they seem dismissable. "Earth's dependency" certainly refers to that "old dependency of day and night" ("Sunday Morning"), and the reader recalls other poems of Stevens, for example, "The Reader" where the speaker "sat reading as if in a book / Of sombre pages" (CP 146) or "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" where "The reader became the book" (CP 358). Here no such gratifying dissolving takes place; rather, "The summer night is like a perfection of thought" (CP 358). These vague proclamations create an ominousness (de Chirico style), but they are dripped (if you will), lack depth. The poem continues, enjambling its unpunctuated lines, only motioning toward anti-climax, gesturing toward "that thing of monstrous interest":

remember you are free to wander away  
 as from other times other scenes that were taking place  
 the history of someone who came too late  
 the time is ripe now and the adage  
 is hatching as the seasons change and tremble  
 it is finally as though that thing of monstrous interest  
 were happening in the sky  
 but the sun is setting and prevents you from seeing it. . . .  
 (SP 167-68)

Miracle or apocalypse, either way we are blinded; it happens on the wrong balcony.

Ashbery's long poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" pursues the ontological concerns of Stevens and Bishop and discovers "That everything is surface. The surface is what's there / And nothing can exist except what's there" (SP 190). While Stevens' poem as a possible "picture of ourselves" offers some reflexivity (as does Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*), Ashbery's diffuse meditation finds "This otherness, this / 'Not-being-us'

is all there is to look at" (*SP* 202). Ashbery, in fact, in Pollock fashion, does away with the painting as such. "The Painter," a poem from his first book in 1956, dismantles representationalism rather than gesturing toward it as Bishop does; subject and object contravert to reveal a blankness on both sides. The sestina ends in limitless silence, the very form of the poem pointing up the artificiality of aesthetic endeavors to control the unknown, to pin down:

Finally all indications of a subject  
Began to fade, leaving the canvas  
Perfectly white. He put down the brush.  
At once a howl, that was also a prayer,  
Arose from the overcrowded buildings.

They tossed him, the portrait, from the tallest of  
the buildings;  
And the sea devoured the canvas and the brush  
As though his subject had decided to remain a prayer.  
(*SP* 21)

Putting down the brush and putting down the pen become overlapping acts: leaps of faith that can never (and may never want to) achieve fulfillment or completion.

Dreaming and the investment in the surreal in Ashbery, however, lose the more grandiose charm these activities continue to possess in Stevens and Bishop; to quote from Ashbery's "Self-Portrait" again:

What should be the vacuum of a dream  
Becomes continually replete as the source of dreams  
Is being tapped so that this one dream  
May wax, flourish like a cabbage rose,  
Defying sumptuary laws, leaving us  
To awake and try to begin living in what  
Has now become a slum. . . . (*SP* 193)

While inheriting word-play and lyrical buoyancy from Stevens, Ashbery takes on some of Bishop's more personal voice of struggle (rather than meditation), a turning away from one position to quickly occupy another. Ashbery borrows from Bishop, then, the impulses toward ellipsis, qualification, and the breakdown of causal connections—all elements that point up the unconscious or unknown domain at the edges of the well-crafted poem. As with Stevens and Bishop, he maintains strict control over line and rhythm as a tension to semantic opacity. Bishop and Ashbery both suggest the failure of transcendence, even as they gesture toward the potential for "miracle." Ashbery, by way of Bishop, deflates the older poet's faith in a heroic aesthetics. If the surreal seems most noticeable in Bishop's

first volume, *North & South*, so too does a crisis of aesthetics, one that shows up in Ashbery's negotiations between the known and unknown, the real and the imagined. A dimension of waiting, of reticent withholding, informs her address of the visionary we experience in de Chirico's paintings, as if we had somehow seen their scenes before, in their eerie presence so infiltrated by absence. With dream life occupying the region of a slum, Ashbery's more jaded approach to this kind of defamiliarized experience emerges in "Self-Portrait":

Perhaps an angel looks like everything  
We have forgotten, I mean forgotten  
Things that don't seem familiar when  
We meet them again, lost beyond telling  
Which were ours once. (SP 194)

Anxiety heals into amnesia with an echo of Stevens' familiar line from "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "we live in a place / That is not our own" (CP 383). The younger Ashbery, increasingly, occupies the realm of "dream," not as revelation but as momentary forgetful revealings within language divested of ultimate signification.

If Ashbery and Bishop register the failure of the visionary, even as they gesture toward it, the trace of such enactments is embedded in Stevens. "The World as Meditation," for example, allows the failure of the visionary an aesthetics of pleasurable incompleteness. Penelope's artful existence depends on deferral:

She would talk a little to herself as she combed her hair,  
Repeating his name with its patient syllables,  
Never forgetting him that kept coming constantly so near.  
(CP 521)

Indeterminancy ("It was Ulysses and it was not"), along with the chanting of syllables, spurs her trance. Dreams make Ashbery notice "the hole they left" (SP 193); yet he continues to navigate his meditations, living in the unmended, never thinking the known will meet the extreme point of the unknown. For these poets (and I suspect these painters) such thwarted, flickering navigations are a process of drawing upon the unconscious in a manner reminiscent of what Bishop describes in her early notebooks as both perpetually disintegrative and recuperative:

"It came to her suddenly in the morning, just as she was pulling her mind up to the surface for the day—like a bucket full of water out of a well—that part of the mind she'd used for that day—then dumped in again at night, with the addition of whatever soluble things it had met during the day." (qtd. Millier 65)

Whether dream-life is figured as unending voyage, as slum of surprises and disappointments, as murky, transformative well, these three poets turn to the unconscious as a site from which to challenge conventional representationalism: such a process involves them in showing the way signification disintegrates in the very act of constructing it. There is a lineage here that rests on a recuperation of the surreal through painting. Stevens, Bishop, and Ashbery, in their investment in the painterly, trouble linguistic representation, call attention to the limits and mysteries of language, and raise up, if fitfully, the potential for vision.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Influence of Stevens upon Bishop and Ashbery has been considered adroitly in a variety of contexts. Most significant is the recent edition of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* devoted to Stevens and Bishop (1995). William Bysshe Stein's "Stevens and Ashbery: The Wrinkles in the Canvas of Language" argues for their "affinities" in terms of "a painterly illusion of poetry" achieved as "they collapse their word-worlds of things into estranged abstractions of reality and bewildering discords of meter" (56). Lynn Keller's chapters in *Re-Making It New* on Stevens and Ashbery clarify their meeting points and differences in terms of the shift between modernism and postmodernism. Surrealism has also been considered in connection with these poets, but it is most often considered in terms of only one of the poets. Notable essays include Richard Mullen's "Elizabeth Bishop's Surrealist Inheritance," which makes the link between Bishop and surrealism quite firm, and Glen MacLeod's "Surrealism and the Supreme Fiction: 'It Must Give Pleasure.'" "

<sup>2</sup>Bishop painted many watercolors and created a Cornell-influenced box. The recent collection of her artwork, *Exchanging Hats*, edited by William Benton, testifies to her talent, although she is quoted as exclaiming: "They are Not Art—NOT AT ALL!" (xviii).

<sup>3</sup>*Wallace Stevens and Modern Art: From the Armory Show to Abstract Expressionism* fluently reveals the multiple connections between Stevens and painting, including his partaking of surrealism. MacLeod makes a convincing argument for seeing the poet's work, particularly "The Auroras of Autumn" (1950), as possessing close affinities with the painting of Jackson Pollock. He asserts: "Although Pollock may never have read Stevens's poetry, and Stevens may never have seen Pollock's paintings, there are important parallels between their works" (169–70). Such parallels amplify in the case of Ashbery (who did know Pollock's work quite well).

<sup>4</sup>Jacqueline Vaught Brogan calls "The Man with the Blue Guitar" a "supreme synthetic cubist poem" (*Part of the Climate: American Cubist Poetry* 234); this claim works in accord with Picasso's cubist period in the 1910s. I would also like to add, however, the comment made by surrealist Breton: "we claim [Picasso] unhesitatingly as one of us, even though it is impossible and would, in any case, be impertinent to apply to his methods the rigorous system that we propose to institute in other directions. . . . I shall always oppose the absurdly restrictive sense that any label would inevitably impose on the activity of this man from whom we confidently expect great things. The 'cubist' label proved equally fallible a long time ago" (*Surrealism and Painting* 7). Breton's flexibility in the case of Picasso belies the lack of systematic definitions for locating surrealist painting.

<sup>5</sup>Bishop had originally titled this poem "Spleen" (Millier 142).

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## Poems

### A Lady at Another Loom

The stars form planets, where to age may be  
As foreign as our sun would set forth foreign  
In a summer without equinox to come;

Where there is no conception of the spun,  
A planet poised in day; where they,  
Not cursed with night or cast down, weave,

And day is not dissembled in the night,  
A fabric woven wholly out of light.

Robert Noreault  
Massena, N.Y.

### The Snow Man's Father

One must have a will to winter  
to ignore the thaw and the tips  
of the sycamores tinged with green;

and have been long disciplined to ice  
to miss the forsythia's gold tangents,  
the new grasses' wet spikes in the haze

of this March dawn; and to remember  
only misery in the sounds of sparrows,  
in the exuberance of small things,

which is the sounds of the playground  
full of the same exalting  
that is sounding in the young sun

for my son, who coldly stares,  
and, lost himself, regards something  
that returns and something that won't.

Bill Sweeney  
New York, N.Y.

## F as Ineffable

If in order to begin, we first affirm  
What the thing is not, we will be fairly well begun,  
For it is not a thing of *definiendum* clear.  
If effortlessly as a fly in flight  
Might describe a fractal in the air,  
We state the fact offhandedly,  
That it is not a fractal or a fly,  
We will have, what—have faffled it again,  
Have foundered and engulfed the thing,  
Shaped a wreck of frippery, ill-suited  
To a shiftfull effervescence—but then  
For that a *faux* tale may be made to do, to render  
Photic, *en clair* amid the seas, a fore and aft  
To it, by admitting Phoebus, old and flowery.  
So let us fable this as Buffo's colloquy.

Yes, Buffo in mid-fall, as it were, his wife,  
Once fair and sunny, though no fricatrice  
Or errant fisc, matured now to a fretful mope  
And wont to miffs and huffs and fits of pique.  
Buffo, of the fulminating pantaloons—  
Say it! And not only with his sphincter free,  
Full florid, muffin-faced, a friand, known  
In a trice to spheterize a reisling, pheasant,  
Or a fricandeau, the merest whiff of which  
Will furnish him *frisson* to live. And physical?  
Given to the frippets, yes, though well enfeofed  
In middle age—with this Buffo let us have some fun.  
This he, this gross and overgrown sort of fub;  
Parade him, fuddled, in his muffetee of felt,  
Yet know, there twin within him ocean and the sun.

And twinned with Buffo—nay, affixed—Sphragistes,  
A sort of priestly philologue-aesthete,  
Or pharisaical, self-fancied euphonist.  
Though somewhere in your folios it says  
That careful hours with time's deformed hand  
Write strange defeatures in a face, far more a heart.  
For Sphragistes, with his philosophasters,  
Thinks his brother's but a philister to master.  
And not without reason, for sensing that such priests  
Might parse the kitchen plates to fulgent spheres,  
Oft has the oaf ensnared the sphinx. For instance,

Once, in the *sfumato* of a holy night,  
He infiltrated, with a photophore, their rite,  
And in the solemn phalanx, daubed with phosphorous,  
His fub showed up as a phallophorus.

But now in this November, near his gramophone,  
Embowered in his enfilade, Sphragistes sits with book,  
And having focused on its first five phonograms,  
He'll soon bend fond attention to the sixth,  
As d'Arezzo's choral-clear *Cefaut* wafts loftily to God,  
*Fa, ut, fa, ut*—the fricative effect of which  
On Buffo down below brings forth first laughter,  
Then guffaws and *phoot! phoot! phoot!*—*sforzando*—after,  
Which so muffles up the singers' soft inflections,  
*Sfoot! ma foi*, and fuels such fierce infuriation,  
That Sphragistes orders Buffo, formerly *en pantoufles*,  
Found, infanged and banished barefoot to the rough.  
Among the fitch he's chastened, left; let's leave him chafe,  
For of such unforgivable enfantillage,  
Old Buffle, phut, phut, for now, enough, enough!

And of Sphragistes? He proceeds, phut, phut,  
Back to his gramophone; its fulsome hexachord  
Is now at *Cesolfaut* (which admits *sol* to *fa* and *ut*).  
But in that *sol-fa*-ing, does he not detect  
The faintest fuff of foolishness or of regret?  
He turns attention's now descending arc  
To the seventh sign inside his weighty book,  
And G begins engendering within him gloom,  
Which gnaws upon him as he glosses on.  
His thoughts are now begarbled and his head abuzz,  
Until d'Arezzo cannot pierce the inky funk  
Into which the stern and learned man has sunk.  
Then, as his head begins to bow above his book,  
He imagines this unutterable ending:  
Choirs of Buffos sing him *mi*, in tones ascending.

Frank Osen  
Pasadena, Calif.

## To Wallace Stevens on His Deathbed

*We have been a little insane  
about the truth when you were  
in front of Princeton's throng.  
What an inquisitive wind!*

when a skirt flew up during  
lunch with the Hartford boys.  
*The malady of the quotidian . . .*  
when facing it alone. So

how did you end up being  
born again? You are already  
enough like Jesus to me:  
I can't pretend to relate to you.

Come back and burn the libraries  
full of You systematized, You,  
denigrated by analysis.  
Burn Hemingway for

nearly breaking your nose.  
I am in the very Florida  
you cursed farewell, under  
an actual palm: Two girls

are kissing on a lake  
we share with reptiles.  
My chest is bleeding  
from a pencil-point

and the finale of seem,  
from where I'm sitting,  
is more like water,  
or maybe ginger ale.

Did you convert  
and why? You called us  
out, as complacent as  
Sisyphus, as combatants

agreeing to agree . . .  
Who smelled Catholicism  
coming? They didn't tell you  
you were dying. So say

you rolled the dice  
and hit Christ (your  
parakeet, your princox),  
say religion came from

days of desperate,  
drug-induced dreaming,  
say you surrendered  
like a frantic gambler

searching for a sign  
as you beheld the roulette  
of ideas, say you either laughed  
or paused to quip *Let's see,*  
*which fiction? Which fiction?*

William Bowers  
Gainesville, Fla.

### With Words

Those who have their own way  
violate a trust. If one  
is to believe the fleet  
antlered buck's haptic leap's  
height in relation to  
unengraved granite; Walt's  
yawp—as he slumped, vagrant  
(but for love of language),  
often in hat too broad  
for formal wear—his claim  
to all states; or the coffee  
color of cows Van Gogh  
is said to have seen in  
a stable, circumstance  
of emerald fig leaves, then  
something unassailable  
must give, its rank and source  
anonymous as air.

Ed Orr  
Peoria, Ill.

**On Harmonium:  
Homage to Wallace Stevens**

The poem is a flock at harvest.  
Solemn men in red suspenders  
cast their shadows upon the book.  
Pages descend like bronze wings,

pages that gather meaning together,  
meanings that assemble on a page  
like words that describe birds,  
every feather flocked for watchers,

for men whose red suspenders  
cast solemnity like shadows  
upon the faces of old wives  
who gather like light feathers

around a book, opened for reading,  
a book whose moment has not yet come,  
whose illustrations could not please  
any more than they have already pleased.

The words lie as illustrations  
in answer to birds and their meanings,  
more than answers, more than birds,  
more than meanings, flocked together.

Marshall Harvey  
Londonderry, N.H.

**The Japanese Character Mi (To See) and Mi (To Show)**

Are the same in appearance and  
Sound. When I show you the world  
In a fit of wisteria on a volcanic plain,  
Rest assured, I have seen it all before.  
Did not my mother's roses perform well  
On the trellis, widening toward my window?

Daniel Tessitore  
Tokyo, Japan

## An Airy Place

1

The place is airy. Traffic's lined outside.  
Drivers turn, stare at the airy place.

When the light changes, they are slow  
To move, eyes swollen with airiness.

2

Life is motion, said the poet, and stopped.  
Motion's dream is arrival. An airy place.

Gray daylight on the silverware.  
A meal being made, lovingly, out of

3

Sight. Seeing ourselves, nicely suited,  
Through the blades of a ceiling fan.

Daniel Tessitore  
Tokyo, Japan

## Blackbirds

Driving over a hill  
we saw a blackbird  
circling wildly  
panicking  
it might have been screaming  
bursts of red  
beat through its wings

and as our car sped past  
there on the pavement  
was another bird  
flattened  
stiff feathers fluttering

and then they were behind us  
and I saw my own hand  
resting on your thigh

and there you were,  
still driving.

Rasma Haidri  
Middleton, Wis.

## The Plateau at the Top of the Pineapple

*Nothing is lost, loud locusts. No note fails.*  
—Wallace Stevens, “Things of August”

How language sneaks right up to the edge  
Of meaning, as if the empty air at the end  
Of every line was itself an answer, or echo.

He went right on writing, through imaginary  
Citrus storms, through disingenuous nights  
And bright pink days, through envy and

Disinheritance, through Tennessee and Oklahoma,  
Massachusetts at midday, Colorado all morning,  
Across the Great Plains and into the far

Northwest, by train and tractor, by foot and  
Foolish pride, he saw what there was to see,  
Saw, and having seen, continued seeing.

Bound by oceans we are the weather. We  
Reach for something more and find ourselves  
Alone. We gather together all there is

To gather—the world is our stage and the theater  
Is limited only by our inability to imagine more.  
If we bemoan the meagerness, as we must,

We might also remember the plateau at the top  
Of the pineapple, the taste of mango and the smell  
Of mint, a red harvest moon on the horizon.

P. Michael Campbell  
Georgetown, Ky.

## Reviews

### Wallace Stevens: Een blauwdruk voor de zon: The Man with the Blue Guitar; Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.

Translated into Dutch by Rein Bloem. Amsterdam: Athenaeum—Polak & Van Genneep, 1997.

"My own stubbornness and taciturn eras are straight out of Holland and I cannot change them any more than I can take off my skin" (L 422). Thus Wallace Stevens, in October of 1942, engaged in an uncharacteristic piece of soul-searching while pleading with his daughter that she should stay at Vassar and finish her college education. The genealogical determinism did not help to sway an apparently no less stubborn and genealogically determined Holly, but it did unexpectedly return to haunt Stevens' afterlife as a poet. The taciturnity that came straight out of Holland inexplicably went back there to determine the reception of his own poetry. When J. M. Edelstein in the early 1970s drew up his descriptive bibliography of Stevens, he was able to list translations into sixteen languages, with book-length collections ranging from Italian, Spanish, German, and French, to less expected languages such as Japanese, Turkish, Polish, Romanian, Swedish, and Danish. Dutch translators, however, up to that point had remained completely silent: according to Edelstein's list, not a single poem had made it into print. Twenty-five years later, the situation of course has considerably altered. Translations of individual poems have popped up and even pullulated in literary magazines and anthologies. But we have still had to wait for this 1997 volume to find finally a number of Stevens' poems collected into a single book. This is all the more remarkable given that similar volumes had been long available in Dutch in the cases of most other members of the modernist canon.

Fortunately, such belatedness should not be taken to suggest that Stevens' reputation in Holland (or the Netherlands, as we should officially call it) and Flanders (the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) has been languishing. His influence on Dutch poets both of an older and a younger generation has been undeniable, especially since the 1980s. Among the older generation, for instance, clear traces of that influence are to be found in the works of Cees Buddingh, Remco Campert, Hans Faverey, J. Bernlef, and the *monstre sacré* of Flemish-Dutch literature, Hugo Claus, author of multiply allusive poems such as "Thirteen Ways of Looking at P. B. Shelley." Poets of a younger generation, likewise, have made no secret of their admiration. The young postmodernist Erik Spinoy, for example, opened his first book with a series of three poems under the title "De noodzakelijke engel" ("The Necessary Angel"); Willem Jan Otten detailed his fascination for Stevens in a lecture called "Er is een fantastische poging mislukt" ("A Fantastic Effort Has Failed"); and Stefan Hertmans wrote a cycle of six poems, "Stevens op zondag" ("Stevens on Sunday"), which he later collected in his award-winning *Muziek voor de overtocht* (*Music for the Crossing*). Examples of this sort are easily multiplied and they

all attest to the fact that at least for the poetical in-crowd Stevens has become a major international figure.

The most striking testimony to Stevens' growing literary stature, however, came in 1992, when the Dutch literary magazine *De Revisor* devoted a whole issue to "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." The issue contained a full translation of the poem, supplemented with a mixed bag of poems, essays, stories, diaries, drawings, and even musical scores by some 25 collaborators, all of whom had been invited to draw inspiration from the "Notes." Presented as a tribute to the fiftieth birthday of Stevens' most famous long poem, the publication had been carefully prepared. The translation of "Notes" was the work of a group of five translators who had spent three and a half years on the job. With the publication of this translation, moreover, the seeds were planted for the present book, since one of the translators was Rein Bloem.

The name of Rein Bloem (pronounced Rhine Bloom) is a familiar one in Dutch letters. A sometime literary critic and a published poet in his own right, Bloem is above all known as an indefatigable advocate of what is generally deemed "difficult" literature. He has translated Joyce as well as less canonical writers from Greek and Chinese poetry; he is a man of many parts, somebody with a penchant for challenges and even a touch of recklessness about him. He is, in other words, the type of translator who likes to go for broke, and this inclination has now also left its marks on the present collection of Stevens translations—for better and worse.

The positive results of Bloem's daring are obvious. Here all at once we have two of the most important of Stevens' long poems (and two of the toughest to translate), "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," both gloriously complete. Thrown in for further relief, moreover, are thirteen of the shorter lyrics: "Earthy Anecdote," "The Snow Man," "Of the Surface of Things," "Anecdote of the Jar," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "On the Road Home," "A Pastoral Nun," "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," "The Plain Sense of Things," "Vacancy in the Park," "The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain," "The Planet on the Table," and "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." The selection of shorter lyrics may seem somewhat arbitrary and slim, yet it helps to flesh out a portrait of Stevens' many talents. At 126 pages of actual poetry (the book is a bilingual edition with original texts printed on the left), this is a far from negligible collection. What is more, Bloem's long-standing craftsmanship and love of verbal legerdemain ensure us a number of *trouvailles* that help to catch the flavor of some of Stevens' own verbal wizardry.

Yet it is also this knack for the virtuoso that to some extent mars this first collection of Dutch translations. Although Bloem does not bother to offer a translator's rationale, his approach is obviously not that of the punctilious scholar. He repeatedly takes liberties that are uncalled for by any intrinsic textual problems. His titles tell much of the story in this respect. Bloem's collection is sold as *Een blauwdruk voor de zon* (*A Blueprint for the Sun*). The phrase is his translation of the "project for the sun" announced at the onset of "Notes." A witty phrase, one might feel, since it brings into play Stevens' color symbolism for the imagination and allows for playful cross-fertilization with that

other major poem in the volume, "The Man with the Blue Guitar." But its swerve from the original remains unnecessary. The word "project" is one that English and Dutch happen to have in common, and the word "blueprint" does not appear anywhere in Stevens' entire poetry. The shift may not seem momentous, but it is symptomatic if we next look at how Bloem translates the title of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." With him this becomes "Draaiboek voor een meesterwerk," which literally means "Screenplay for a Masterpiece." When the poem was first translated in *De Revisor*, an introductory note explained that no agreement was reached on how to render the title in sufficiently appealing Dutch. Eventually the translating quintet opted for the literal "Notities voor een supreme fictie," which admittedly does not sound as well in Dutch as it does in English. Left free this time to indulge in whatever frolic he wanted, Bloem however went for his own idiosyncratic invention—and insouciantly sacrificed denotative precision.

A comparison between the original collective translation and Bloem's personal reworking of "Notes" turns out to be instructive. If, by way of a sample, we look at the ten cantos of "It Must Be Abstract," we find that alterations are many: some 250 in all. This number is especially striking in light of the unmistakably high qualities of the collective translation, which managed to stay remarkably close to Stevens' original. Several of Bloem's adaptations are no doubt minor and some of them are successful in compacting lines or making them more fluent and musical. But by far the greatest number of changes are lexical and these are often so personal as to move us away from an accurate understanding of Stevens' text. Bloem's compulsive reworking reaches its apogee in canto VII, where no less than 35 changes have been made, some of them verging on the frivolous. Thus, "a stop to watch / A definition growing certain and / A wait within that certainty" becomes (retranslated literally into English) "stopping / To round off a definition and / A deferment within those round words." Both the move from Stevens' passive "watching" to Bloem's active "rounding off" and the self-conscious play on "rounding off" and "round words" are idiosyncratic interventions that were absent from the earlier translation in *De Revisor*.

This inability to leave the text alone diminishes the value of Bloem's virtuosic enterprise, even if the translation of "Notes" continues to be the pride of this volume, probably because it is founded on an earlier and scrupulous collaborative effort. Where Bloem had no such collaborative groundwork to fall back on, the results tend to be more often over the top. It takes a talent for recklessness, to be sure, to settle on "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as the second long poem to include in a selection of Stevens' poems. With its treacherous metrical format, many rhymes, and singsong effects, this is a poem that is particularly hard to bring off in translation. Bloem, as much as he can, tries to remain loyal to rhyme, length of lines, and the overall playfulness of the original, sometimes with astonishing results. But he frequently has to sacrifice rhythm and meaning in the process. Most problematical in the latter respect is the rhyme he needs for the refrain-like "Things as they are / Are changed upon the blue guitar." Bloem comes up with "Dingen, hun natuur getrouw, / Veranderen door mijn gitaar van blauw," which does rhyme but

changes the meaning altogether, since it says that things “in accordance with their nature” are changed upon the blue guitar—a far cry from Stevens’ claim.

Like the *Collected Poems*, Bloem’s selection opens with “Earthy Anecdote,” which in his case also becomes a testimony to a translator’s interventionism. The firecat that “bristled” in the way of the clattering bucks is turned into a firecat that “stood, wig on,” in the way of those same bucks. Much in the same way that we do not need cartoonlike firecats wearing ridiculous wigs, we are in no need of the sort of inattentiveness that manages to translate “The Snow Man” as if it were called “The Snowman” and that has no eye for the problematical syntax in that poem. Nor can we be happy to see a translator so often interested in retaining the formal characteristics of texts ignore these in precisely the one poem where they carry so much of the playful meaning, “Anecdote of the Jar.” Imperfections of this sort, unfortunately, return on every page and they add a dissonant counterpoint to much of the melody.

The imperfect is our paradise in this book, then, and this is finally also true from a philological point of view. For the reprinting of Stevens’ original poems, too, is not altogether spotless. I have counted at least thirteen misprints, the most annoying of which are “The Idea of Order in Key West” (also thus in the table of contents) and “Words are not forms of a single world” in “On the Road Home.” That the angel in “Notes” should gaze at the “violet” instead of the “violet” abyss (he also leaps “forward” instead of “downward”) betrays the fact that the edition used for all these translations is that of the *Collected Poems*. Minor corrections already made by Holly Stevens in *The Palm at the End of the Mind* have not been incorporated, let alone any of the further emendations in the recent Library of America edition. It is always a little disheartening to observe how publishing companies do not bother to call upon the help of specialists in this respect. But publishing companies will be what they are and so they will also write blurbs in which we are told, quite pointblank, that “Wallace Stevens is generally considered the greatest American poet of the twentieth century,” after which we are told that the man was born in 1897 (*sic*) and must hear again the cliché of somebody who “divided his life between the muse of poetry and the mammon of the insurance industry.”

Reviewers will also be what they are—too much in a rush to do their own fact-checking—and so the metathetical birthdate of 1897 (instead of 1879) was duly recopied in several of the reviews the book received in the Dutch and Flemish press. As a final emblem of Stevens’ growing canonical status, Bloem’s collection managed to receive wide attention in the quality newspapers and magazines, including front-page articles and selections as book of the month. The book was generally hailed as a collection long overdue. Comments on the quality of the translations varied from mildly complimentary to rather devastating, but on one account there seemed to be complete unanimity: that Bloem had done a disservice to his own work by introducing it as quixotically as he did. Reactions to his introduction (which is followed by a faulty and lopsided list of recommended readings) ranged from “undiplomatic” and “full of unnecessary acrobatics” to “more of a willful solar eclipse than an elucidation,” “grotesque,” and even “drivel.” It is indeed an overflorid, desultory, and confusing piece full of personal associations and antics, presenting Stevens

as not much more than a superb prankster. In this, as in so many of the other respects mentioned earlier, this first book of translations into Dutch should be improved upon if a second such book should ever be published. Some of the brilliance of Bloem's translations no doubt stands to be lost in the process, but there is still a lot about Stevens' poetry that Dutch-speaking readers can be made to see, feel, and understand more clearly. For Stevens' own sake, then, we can hope only that this first book does not herald yet another of those "taciturn eras straight out of Holland."

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### **Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature.**

By Daniel R. Schwarz. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Though almost everybody agrees that there are important connections between modern visual art and modern literature, most have had a hard time talking about them meaningfully. Daniel R. Schwarz's exploration of the relationship in *Reconfiguring Modernism* seems to promise something new. His approach, outlined in his earlier book, *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics*, is to bear in mind the lessons of deconstruction (without succumbing to its "parochialism") while making cultural readings of texts "without abandoning the aesthetic and the formal" (17). Although his approach seems to me theoretically defensible, he never makes a convincing case that his readings and "configurations" are significantly different from similar connections made by previous critics.

The book ranges over a number of canonical works, comparing texts and their authors to famous paintings and their painters. Chapter one (which reprints the first chapter of Schwarz's *The Transformation of the English Novel, 1890–1930*, tossing in a later section from that book for good measure) argues that modern British novelists "transformed the novel from a realistic social document into a 'cry of its occasion' and affirmed that the act of telling is their paramount concern as artists" (48). Schwarz finds such an attitude in Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse*, and, in general, likens the perspective of novelists to that of modern painters. Chapter two brings together Edouard Manet, Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*, and Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, reading the latter two works as depictions of loneliness and sexual repression. There are then chapters on exoticism in Gauguin and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, classicism in Cézanne and Eliot, the modern depiction of dance, a "cultural configuration" (Picasso, Stevens, and Joyce), and finally a chapter on Stevens and painting.

The chief virtue of the book is not its theses, which tend to be conventional, but its discussions. For example, in the chapter on Gauguin and Conrad, Schwarz uses Gauguin's prose work, *Noa Noa*, to interpret the celebration of the primitive in Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, and then examines how *Heart of Darkness* deals with the same issues. Schwarz seems eager to clear *Heart of Darkness* of the charge that it is racist, arguing that the novel exposes the vi-

ciousness of the European colonizing mentality. Although Schwarz is by no means the first person to put forward this argument, what he says along the way is nonetheless worth reading. At other places in the book, especially the chapters on dance and the Stevens-Picasso-Joyce configuration, the reader might feel that he or she has been talking to Coleridge: although the discussion itself is often very rich, when it is all over, it is not clear whether anything substantial has been said.

As is often the case with books on the relationship among the arts, *Reconfiguring Modernism* can be frustrating to read. Too often in this book “configure” just means to compare broadly. “Eliot’s verse paragraphs often have the visual quality of paintings” (102), Schwarz says at one point; at another, the reader is told “[t]he movement of Gerontion’s mind suggests Cézanne’s shifting forms” (115). These correlations are not explained or particularly developed. Likewise, Schwarz argues that Matisse and Joyce both “revel in the decorative,” depict “‘beautifully ugly’” women, and “call attention to their medium”; while Joyce “displaced his descriptive language from the characters’ thoughts to the world around them,” Matisse “does the same with color” (151). Although most would agree that there is some likeness, it is hard to see how such parallels extend our knowledge. Instead of explaining what new insights modern art gives us about modern literature or the modern world, Schwarz typically explains how modern art shows us the things we already knew.

What is a reader, finally, to make of Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”? At different times, Schwarz compares it to still lifes, Japanese prints, impressionism, pointillism, cubism, surrealism, abstract art, modern dance, visual poetry, the haiku, a Noh play, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, and a few other things. Perhaps Schwarz wants to stress the multireferentiality of the poem, but what he actually shows is that, if one takes a broad enough perspective, everything looks like everything else.

In addition, his “narrative” readings of paintings are often open to question. Take his interpretation of Manet’s familiar painting, *Le Déjeuner sur l’Herbe*, which depicts two clothed men picnicking with a naked woman. Maybe the woman is a prostitute, Schwarz says, but anyway “the painting is gender-inscribed both as a masculine fantasy and as a text to show woman’s control over her body, sexuality, and mood. She will *decide* on the sexual stakes and not tolerate abuse” (60). That the painting could be a male fantasy seems clear enough, but how can we possibly know what the female figure is thinking? (Besides, if she is a prostitute, does not that mean she will actually have to tolerate abuse and allow others to control her body?) Here Schwarz seems to be reading painting as if it were a novel, an approach typical of the mainstream visual art of the nineteenth century—and the bourgeois appreciation of that art—that the moderns vehemently rejected.

As a cultural critic, Schwarz also wants to compare the artists’ biographies, and in this respect he is not particularly strong. We are told, for example, that Stevens and Joyce “suffered painful nonrecognition and disappointment and felt despair about whether their talents would be recognized” (194). Surely this is true of Joyce, but Stevens in truth had about as easy a time of publish-

ing and being recognized as any artist I can think of. His verse plays were not smash hits, but they were produced; *Harmonium* was generally well received; after a hiatus, he began to write again at the encouragement of Ronald Lane Latimer; he won many awards; when he had enough poems for a book, the procedure seems to have been that he wrote his publisher telling him of that fact, and then Knopf would write back asking if the manuscript could be ready in time to be out by Christmas. In fact, Stevens told Charles O'Dowd that he did not care if anybody understood or appreciated his works. Other points of Stevens' life Schwarz incorporates seem either overstated or inaccurate.

The chapter "Stevens' Reading of Modern Painting" is probably the book's weakest one. Appropriately, this part of the book, which includes a discussion of the aesthetics of collage, is itself a collage: aside from two paragraphs of its introduction and another one in the middle, it assembles various paragraphs from Schwarz's earlier book *Narrative and Representation in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, with minor changes. Schwarz's notion of the narrativity of Stevens' poems is only asserted here; the reader will have to return to his previous book for the real argument. Schwarz also argues that there is a "relationship between Stevens the man and Stevens the poet" and that Stevens was influenced by painting. Few would dispute these claims.

"It is worth noting that notwithstanding assertions in Stevens scholarship to the contrary," Schwarz writes in this chapter, "there is no Picasso painting entitled *The Man with the Blue Guitar*" (213). Now, this is nonsense. *Everybody* knows that. Everybody also knows Schwarz's other points—that Stevens said he "had no particular painting of Picasso's in mind" (L 786) for "The Man with the Blue Guitar," that the guitar in *The Old Guitarist* is not blue, that Picasso frequently painted guitars and guitarists, and that the quoted phrase in section XV comes from an interview with Picasso by Christian Zervos (not, by the way, "Zeves" [211] as Schwarz spells it). Schwarz would have been better served paying closer attention to the scholarship he dismisses. It does not seem too much to expect, at the very least, that somebody writing a chapter on Stevens and modern art consult Glen MacLeod's fine book *Stevens and Modern Art*—a book that, by the way, offers some cogent reasons for *not* making many of the connections to cubism that Schwarz makes. One might also expect some mention of Stevens' essay "The Relations between Poetry and Painting."

In a review of a book that makes nearly all of its argument by means of comparison, it seems fitting that I conclude my review with a comparison of my own. In his essay on painting and literature, Stevens notes that appraisals of the relation among the arts often amount to expansive generalizations and details so subtle and minute "that the existence of relations is lost sight of." Like Stevens before him, Schwarz does not always seem to have solved the problem suitably. Also, like Stevens' essay, *Reconfiguring Modernism* is based for the most part on generalization and the sensitivity of its author. I do not doubt Schwarz's sensitivity, but I was hoping to find new ways of understanding the relationship between painting and literature.

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## The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens.

By Patricia Rae. Bucknell, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1998.

Patricia Rae, in her book *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens*, argues that the influence of William James's "Pragmatist" thought was decisive in the works of T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens. Rae would like to show that elements of James's thought enter into statements of all three writers (though they are not much alike otherwise) and that the Jamesian echoes are especially recognizable in samples of their respective prose. As is clear from the beginning and throughout this study, Rae does not intend her critical examination of these writers to be about the usual issues of sources and influences. Instead, she claims that she can show a set of surprising parallels between the writings of a major American thinker of the period at the end of the nineteenth century, a man whose interests exceeded his usual categorization as a "psychologist," and these three figures, each of whom represents a strand of modernism. If she can show, as she argues, the pervasive presence of Jamesian pragmatism in the works of these avatars of the modern, she will have altered some traditional perspectives in the study of modern poetry. Her success or failure will depend on how well her selections from these various writers will serve her larger argument. It will be difficult to please everyone. No James scholar will be content with the narrow focus she applies to his thought. Similarly, specialists in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens will find that her argument sets unusual limits on each writer.

Rae builds her case by analyzing sections of James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) and *Pragmatism* (1907) to trace back "literary modernism's pragmatist use of language," which is, she argues, "an eschewal of metaphysical arguments about the origins of inspiration for thoughts about its effects or a decision to recast the traditional, 'mystical' muse as a practical one" (11). Rae intends to show how much William James is in line with the attitudes and practices of these early modern figures. She then contrasts these findings with the claims of Richard Rorty, who, she writes, has "encouraged critics to view modernist writing as *his* pragmatism's literary counterpart" (218). For Rae, Rorty's pragmatism is an attempt to refit the older model so that it will look fashionable to recent buyers (most of whom consider themselves "postmodern"). Rorty introduces a system of thought that will attract those who have, as it were, gone beyond religious questions, resolved metaphysical issues, and dismissed the imaginative possibilities of reconciliation not only as these may be applied to Hulme, Pound, and Stevens, but also to modernist writers in general. Her argument, though, is not so much against Rorty, relevant as he may be, as against his redefinition of pragmatism, which covers over James's contribution.

Rae's first example is T. E. Hulme, whose fragmented works in aesthetics and poetry are often associated with the rise of early modernism. His publications show several stages in his thought, but, because of his tragic and untimely death at the front in 1915, they leave the reader with a sense of incompleteness. Rae tries to show the influence of James in Hulme's works. If one were to follow her comparisons of James's and Hulme's texts, she makes

an interesting case. One can never be quite sure which direction Hulme might have taken and there will never be an answer.

Rae's reading of Ezra Pound concerns mainly Pound's early development up to and including the period of Vorticism. She cites his correspondence from the period before the war, then several early poems and some early prose. She writes that she wishes to "map correlations [of Vorticism] with the work of William James" (80). To do so would mean going beyond Pound to Wyndham Lewis and Rae does this effectively. Should it be surprising that young Pound was (or might have been, since the parallels established only suggest James's influence) reading William James? He was a rapacious reader. But we still may wish to withhold judgment about a "Jamesian Vorticism."

At one point Rae contrasts those critics who find Pound aligned with a mystical tradition (she cites James Longenbach) with those who describe Pound as a Nietzschean skeptic. Instead of arguing against one side or the other, she calls for a middle position that she describes as "the neutral attitude of a psychologist" (80). One way of clarifying this argument might have been to cite a later poem or two from Pound that might embody "dogmatic mysticism" and "Nietzschean skepticism." This would not entail a comprehensive study of the *Cantos*, only a few poems to demonstrate her point. Furthermore, if there is a middle way, it might be found in a poem. At the end of part I of her book, she connects "the truth of pragmatism and the poems and paintings of Vorticism" with a Heideggerian statement about the function of art. Heideggerians who have listened to pragmatist attacks for fifty years may cringe at this attempt at mediation.

For the second half of her study, Rae moves to the poetry and late prose of Wallace Stevens. Here she tries to demonstrate several arguments that are not easily linked. First, she claims that Stevens is the perpetrator of the "faceless [female] muse" (140), not in the sexist sense that he has recently been accused of by feminist critics, but rather in such a way as to attest to his awareness of the feminine as a source. Her discussion of a number of examples of Stevens' "muses" leads her to her main argument: that Stevens is a Jamesian pragmatist. Leading from earlier discussions of James's development of pragmatism as it was applied to Hulme and Pound, Rae then divides her study into discrete issues concerning Stevens' poetry and Jamesian thought. Her arguments move from examination of several of Stevens' late essays ("The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" [1942] and "The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet" [1944]) to excerpts from early and late poems. She tends, in her citations, to treat Stevens' work as if the dates of composition were pretty much the same (comparing early poems with late poems) and makes a strong claim for the continuity of Stevens' beliefs. Because of this, she will at times make Stevens appear an uncanny precursor of his own development. I should remark here that any critic whose argument goes beyond the individual poem will have to do something of the same.

Given these conditions, Rae can still expect some quibbling from Stevens scholars and critics. She has a tendency to make all of Stevens sound the same, or, at least, more consistent than many might believe. Although the comparison of a major poet and a major American thinker (philosopher) is nearly

always a fruitful experience, any such comparison has fundamental risks. The first is that of confusing philosophy and poetry. Rae is careful to avoid that. The second risk is to treat poetry as if it were contained in its more philosophical moments. Stevens can be made to sound like a philosopher. Taken from the context of its poem, a line or set of lines can be read almost as a complete thought. Almost. But for the poet, the poem remains the form of discourse. With Stevens, who wrote such striking lines, no critic can resist the apt quote. The test is then the degree to which the critic can honor the context and, of course, this may be a matter of taste as much as a matter of hermeneutics. Rae makes impressive use of Stevens' lines ranging from the very earliest poems in *Harmonium* to the very late works in *Opus Posthumous*. In some instances, she prepares the reader for her citations, discussing the context from which her quotations come. At other times, she cites two or three sets of lines from different poems with little or no explanation of the differences. For the purposes of her argument, her use of quotes is usually to the point, given that one accepts Stevens' consistencies. Since her argument is dense and varied, her use of evidence will work for the general reader. Stevens critics, on the other hand, may furrow their respective brows and reach for the *Collected Poems*. They would probably do so in any case.

William James was a powerful thinker, certainly an original American mind. His prose is, as Harold Bloom might say, strong prose, the kind that has attracted readers here and abroad. Although he is ignored by contemporary psychologists, he is still read by historians, philosophers, theologians, and writers. It would be strange, I think, if some of James's ideas did not filter into Stevens' work. Rae offers a number of insightful ways in which Jamesian pragmatism might reveal itself in Stevens' poetry. The proof of such influence, however, can be measured in only so many ways. Unlike some modern writers, Stevens tended to conceal his precursors. He rarely named them, even to his friends. He surely drew upon his predecessors, yet we do not see the names of Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Wordsworth, Keats, Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Valéry—not even in passing. He does little to clarify how much or how little he was indebted to Santayana, much less James. But that proves little.

Rae's attention to passages from the prose of William James, Santayana, Hulme, and Pound is sharp and attentive to varieties of interpretation. She discusses at some length the "qualified assertions" of Wallace Stevens and how such statements might be examined in context. Her discussion of these issues is of interest to readers of Stevens, for she sheds fresh light on some of the poet's phrasings. Her devaluation of Stevens' use of fictions is presented in the context of a number of Stevens critics who, she claims, have misinterpreted one of Stevens' central concepts. In refuting some important Stevens critics, Rae argues that Stevens wrote in a hypothetical mode rather than a fictive one. She claims that even Stevens' most celebrated passages about fictions were functionally hypothetical. When this argument is applied to the poetry, in spite of the apparent contradictions offered in some examples ("Asides on the Oboe"), her reading of certain poems does make the question worth reviewing. Allusions to Nietzsche and Vaihinger on the definition and

use of fictions do not necessarily help her argument, for she is taking her cues from James.

Rae's attention to the parallels, affinities, and echoes of the works of William James in the writings of Hulme, Pound, and Stevens is thorough, subtle, and worth reading. She has had to pursue certain ideas beyond the claims of intertextuality and has made her work more intellectually challenging than a traditional source and influence study.

Thomas Hines  
Kent State University

## News and Comments

The third annual WS Birthday Bash, sponsored by the Hartford Friends of WS and the Connecticut Center for the Book, was held at the Hartford Public Library on Friday, October 2, 1998, from 6:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. The featured speaker was poet J. D. McClatchy. An exhibition of WS-inspired works by painter William Burney was on view. Live music and refreshments were also featured—wine and hors d'oeuvres before the program, champagne and birthday cake after.

\* \* \*

Frank Bidart will be the featured poet at the University of Connecticut's 36th annual WS Poetry Program, sponsored by the Hartford Insurance Company. He will read his own poetry and present awards to winners of the student poetry contest on two consecutive days: Wednesday, April 7, 1999, at 8:00 p.m., at the University of Connecticut, Storrs; and Thursday, April 8, 1999, at 1:00 p.m. at the Hartford's corporate headquarters in Hartford. Both events are open to the public, free of charge.

\* \* \*

The first annual WS Memorial Poetry Reading was held in Elizabeth Park, Hartford, on Saturday, June 20, 1998. Local poets Rennie McQuilken and Diana Garcia were the main readers; two student-poets from the Hartford area also read. Over 100 people attended. The Memorial Reading was co-sponsored by the Hartford Friends of WS and the Friends of Elizabeth Park, who hope to make it a regular part of the annual Rose Festival.



WS Memorial Poetry Reading, Elizabeth Park, June 20, 1998.  
Photo: Courtesy Drew Sanborn

\* \* \*

Those interested in touring Wallace Stevens' house and/or attending a musical performance of some of his poems should keep open the dates of Sunday, March 7, 1999, and Tuesday, March 9, 1999. On the latter date, the Hartford Chorale and the Hartford Symphony will perform the world première of *A Symphony of Songs*. The work is comprised of four Wallace Stevens poems: "Domination of Black," "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," "Another Weeping Woman," and "The Snow Man." The Hartford Chorale commissioned Frederick Tillis, a contemporary African-American composer, to write the piece. As a prelude to the concert, guests will be invited to the Wallace Stevens home in Hartford on March 7, 1999, for a tour and some surprises. For further information, write or call: The Hartford Chorale, 233 Pearl Street, Mailbox #17, Hartford, CT 06103, (860) 547-1982.

\* \* \*

The Eighth Annual Central New York Conference on Language and Literature, held on October 18–20, 1998, at Cortland College of the State University of New York, included a session on Wallace Stevens. Sandra Cookson of Canisius College, who has joined our editorial staff as a proofreader, chaired the session. Speakers were Ella Ophir, "The Mode of Common Dreams: 'Owl's Clover' and Wallace Stevens' Revisionist Aesthetic"; Anca Rosu, "Wallace Stevens and the Uses of Obscurity"; Joel Tyler Nickels, "Epistemology of the 'First Idea': Wallace Stevens and the Phenomenological Tradition"; and Sam Rosenbaum, "Wallace Stevens' French Connection."

\* \* \*

Einar Perman of Sweden reports that the Swedish publisher Wahlström & Widstrand has recently published a bibliophile edition of poems by Wallace Stevens translated by Ulf Linde, with drawings and four monotypes by Curt Asker. Linde is a distinguished writer and art critic and a member of the Swedish Academy, which gives out the Nobel Prize in literature. Curt Asker is a major Swedish artist, now living in France. The title of the book is *Om Att Bara Finnas (Of Mere Being)*. It starts with a ten-page introduction by Ulf Linde, giving an outline of Stevens' life and work. The book contains more than two dozen poems, including "The Snow Man," "Of the Surface of Things," "Peter Quince at the Clavier," "The Idea of Order at Key West," "Things of August," "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself," and "Of Mere Being." The price for this limited edition is 1500 Swedish Crowns.

\* \* \*

A poem published last fall in *WSJour*, "How Wallace Stevens Should Have Died," by Steve Wilson, has been selected to appear in *Best Texas Writing 2*, an annual anthology that collects the best poetry, fiction, and nonfiction published each year by Texas authors or in Texas publications.

\* \* \*

Several distinguished poets paid tribute to WS in late 1997 at the Unterberg Poetry Center of New York City's 92nd Street Y. Participants in the program included John Hollander, Mark Strand, J. D. McClatchy, Harold Bloom, Joan Richardson, and Ann Lauterbach.

\* \* \*

The city of Reading, Pa., celebrated its 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary by producing a commemorative envelope with a photograph of Wallace Stevens on it. The #6 envelope (3 1/2" x 6 5/8") was postmarked on Oct. 2, Stevens' birthday, and it contains a brief biography inside. The photograph appears on the left with a caption, and the color 250 logo is on the lower right. The stamp has been canceled with Reading's commemorative 250 cancel. To order, send a #9 or #10 SASE, plus a check for \$2.50, payable to Dave Silcox, to: Reading 250 Anniversary Stevens Envelope, 404 E. Broad St., Shillington, PA 19607. (This is a limited, numbered edition and there may be none left; to check, call Silcox at 610-777-2167.)

\* \* \*

The Wallace Stevens–Cummington Press Correspondence (1941–1951), held at the John Rylands University Library, Manchester, England, is available for purchase on microfilm. This correspondence was purchased for the Library by Frank Kermode in 1963 from Harry Duncan, first the printer and then the Manager of the Cummington Press, and one of the three correspondents. The collection consists of 106 letters, comprising originals of Stevens' letters and carbon copies of the letters that the Press sent to him. What is arguably Stevens' greatest poem, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, was written in response to a request from Katharine Frazier for a book-length manuscript. The original typescript of the poem, with Stevens' emendations to the text at the proof-reading stage, is included in the collection. The microfilm edition may be purchased from Microform Academic Publishers, Main Street, East Ardsley, Wakefield, West Yorkshire WF3 2AT, England. Write or e-mail for current prices: [micro\\_image@cix.compulink.co.uk](mailto:micro_image@cix.compulink.co.uk).

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Rare copies of WS titles continue to command top prices on the antiquarian market. The William Reese and Company catalog 169 (September, 1997) listed several titles, including the first trade edition of *Ideas of Order*, one of five hundred copies of the first binding, at \$500, and catalog 172 (December, 1997) offered first editions of *Transport to Summer* (\$275) and of *The Auroras of Autumn* (\$250), as well as others. Between the Covers offered a first edition of *The Man with the Blue Guitar Including Ideas of Order* for \$250 in catalogue 59 and the 1945 Cummington Press edition of *Esthétique du Mal* for \$1,250 in catalogue 61.

Sara S. Hodson  
The Huntington Library

# **The Practical Muse**

## **Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens**

**PATRICIA RAE**

This book reconsiders the poetics of three modernist writers, T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, in connection with the pragmatism of William James. Since the 1970s, Richard Rorty has written about "neo-pragmatism," a way of testing "truths" according to consequence rather than correspondence. More recently, he has argued that this philosophical program is best exemplified by modernist writing: "the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience." Rorty's "neo-pragmatism" has become the reigning definition of pragmatism, and his interpretation of literary modernism is widely accepted.

Rae's study, while accepting Rorty's view that there is philosophical solidarity between pragmatism and modernism, rejects his interpretation of both as forms of dogmatic skepticism. If pragmatism and modernism coincide, Rae argues, the case of these three writers suggests that the intersection lies not in a rejection of "truthfulness to experience" but in a cautious respect for it.

The case studies of Hulme, Pound, and Stevens trace a similar arc from the theory of creative inspiration to expressive practice. Rae concludes by using James's characterization of pragmatism as a "mediator" to question the polarities shaping central critical debates on each of the three poets and on modernist literature in general. (Bucknell University Press, \$46.50)

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1. "The Regime of Enjoyment," Douglas Mao, Princeton University
2. "Wallace Stevens and the End of Nature," Bonnie Costello, Boston University
3. "The World after Poetry," James Longenbach, University of Rochester

# Thirteen Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens



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