

The Wallace Stevens Journal



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Of Pears, Oxen, and Mediterranean Landscapes: Three Stevensian Ways of (Un)Painting the Thing Itself

BART EECKHOUT

I

NOTHING IS ITSELF TAKEN ALONE. Things are because of interrelations or interactions," Stevens famously mused in his *Adagia* (OP 189). The idea for this epigram might have originated with Emerson, in particular with the poem "Each and All," where Stevens' literary father pondered how "All are needed by each one; / Nothing is fair or good alone" (258). But the intellectual ramifications of the epigram extend far beyond this single intertextual connection. One of the possible ways of understanding the statement is by reformulating it: no thing is "the thing itself." Things are differential and relational; they can come to exist only through interrelations and interactions with their environments, including, above all, the minds that perceive them. This wider idea, arguably, is the point of departure for what has come to be constructed as Stevens' near-compulsive involvement with "the thing itself." The intellectual antecedents of that involvement are so easily traced that they have been summoned onto the stage time and again in Stevens criticism. As a philosopheme, "the thing itself" is shopworn: it has been around since at least Immanuel Kant's *Ding an sich*—and in fact for some time longer: since Berkeley's "things in themselves" and since the birth of modern science, which based its ideal of objectivity precisely on forsaking all human intentionality and surrendering to the thing itself.

Almost too conspicuously, the so-called thing itself makes a couple of literal appearances in Stevens' work. It is even referred to in its pontifically German format when Crispin, the verbal prankster, sheds his old self in the first stage of his poetic voyage from an Old to a New World and marvels, "Here was the veritable ding an sich, at last" (CP 29). Thirty years later, "The Course of a Particular" still talks of "the thing / Itself" (OP 124), and the most eye-catching appearance of the phrase in Stevens' entire oeuvre of course occurs in the concluding title in *The Collected Poems*, "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself" (CP 534). Countless are the examples, moreover, of variant phrases that naturally link up with

that of the thing itself, as when the speaker of “Credences of Summer” enjoins us (and prompts himself): “Let’s see the very thing and nothing else. / Let’s see it with the hottest fire of sight” (CP 373).

William Bevis has remarked how such appearances—and the obsessive theme they signal—“[have] naturally been traced by Western intellectuals (and Stevens) to sources in Kant” (8). Kenneth Burke was one of the first cases in point. “Is it not a bit ironical,” he asked Allen Tate in a letter of November 1944, “to see a supposedly fairly relatively new poet like Stevens trying to explain his supposedly fairly relatively new esthetic by discovering the Kantian line-up somewhat more than 150 years late? I think you’ll have to let more philosophy into your criticism, if only to avoid its coming in thus unnoticed, and naively” (qtd. in Filreis 97). The warning sounded by Burke was valid insofar as Stevens’ poetry is rightly famous for providing a treacherous admixture of specificity and generality (or particularity and universality), which renders it peculiarly susceptible to philosophical contextualizations and cross-fertilizations. It was even valid insofar as philosophical concepts always already have a tendency to sneak in by the back door during literary discussions, whether invited or not. Yet its validity is at the same time importantly limited. There is obviously a lot more to Stevens’ ideas, beliefs, and attitudes about the thing itself than epistemology. Criticism with a particularly theoretical agenda often runs the risk of forgetting how happy this poet was to exploit the many *poetical* ambiguities made available to him by the philosophical overtones of both term and concept.

From a non-philosophical angle, it may be argued, the thing itself functions as an important—even a necessary—poetic illusion for Stevens. And one of the principal experiences it appears able to accommodate is the painterly desire to see the world as immediately and originally as possible, to see it with eye-lenses cleansed of all the darkening and dulling films of habituated and hackneyed sight. The poetic-cum-painterly quest for the thing itself, in such instances, works aesthetically to *intensify* rather than epistemologically to dismantle and strip down reality. The thing itself on such occasions is no longer that phantom excluded by Kant as inevitably beyond our ken, but corresponds to Kant’s perspectival thing-as-perceived. The issue then turns out to have less to do with tracing the limits of epistemology than with pursuing tangential experiences: various possible states of consciousness, various possible qualities of perception, or various possible modes of projected desire.

In this essay I would like to attend to three emblematic ways in which Stevens sets out to “paint” the thing itself. The verb “paint” is itself characteristically problematic here, since all three instances display the metaphorical character of this activity of “painting” in poetry. Each in its own way involves the setting up of a poet’s *resistance* to the act—or to particular ideologies—of painting. Stevens was nothing if not a poet of resistance. Much as he resisted philosophical appropriations at the same time as he

invited them, he also resisted alignments with painting even as he shared a number of painterly concerns. Two poems of 1938, "Study of Two Pears" and "The Latest Freed Man," and one of 1940, "Landscape with Boat," illustrate this resistant interest in painterly takes on the thing itself. Belonging as they do to the most perspectival of Stevens' volumes, *Parts of a World*, they also develop three different perspectives on the subject. In the first poem we see Stevens putting on the guise of a painter only to destabilize the painterly attempt at representing the thing itself. In the second poem he sounds an echo to painterly visions only *after* his attempt at identifying with the thing itself has elapsed. In the third he sets off from one of his favorite pictorial genres, the landscape, to develop a polemical and somewhat dogmatic anti-dogmatic dispute with one particular type of painter's parallel quest to get at the thing itself. That "type" of painter, I will argue, may be fleshed out most convincingly by drawing on the writings of Piet Mondriaan.

The three poems under discussion all at some point inscribe the irreducibly textual nature of poetic attempts at seizing the thing itself—a textual nature that ultimately separates poet and painter. They diverge considerably, however, in their emotional investments in the topic. These range from an ironic modernist detachment over a vital affirmation of unspoken needs and desires to a more satirical and agonistic drive for artistic self-positioning in which the self is trumpeted so recklessly as to blind itself to parts of reality. It is to a large extent this tonal diversity in Stevens' work—along with the evident riches of imaginative and aesthetic realization—that renders that work more varied and appealing than any critical and theoretical reduction to epistemological and painterly issues could ever be. It is for the never-ending purpose of better understanding the precise nature of that poetically realized diversity that we should take the time to revisit these three poems and retrace their workings in the smallest possible detail.

II

"Study of Two Pears," the first poem in the triad, sounds as if it were actually the title of a painting (a still life, specifically). Already by its very title, in other words, it sets up an analogy between the poet's and the painter's task. "As you know," Stevens explained to José Rodríguez Feo one day, "I pay just as much attention to painters as I do to writers because, except technically, their problems are the same" (L 593). We should notice the wording here, not just the characteristic idea: "problems" is the term Stevens uses, rather than "task" or "project" or "endeavor." It is useful to bear this in mind when we read through his seemingly straightforward "Study of Two Pears":

I
Opusculum paedagogum.
The pears are not viols,

Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

II

They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base.
They are touched red.

III

They are not flat surfaces
Having curved outlines.
They are round
Tapering toward the top.

IV

In the way they are modelled
There are bits of blue.
A hard dry leaf hangs
From the stem.

V

The yellow glistens.
It glistens with various yellows,
Citrons, oranges and greens
Flowering over the skin.

VI

The shadows of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills. (CP 196–97)

Is this a poem that merely “discourse[s] with pleasant dogmatism on the familiar themes of the irreducible world of sense,” as A. Walton Litz proposes (261)? At first sight, it certainly appears to be so. It even tries to outdo painting in registering, or responding to, the irreducibility of our world of sense. The poem opens by declining the imaginatively and associatively twisted painterly representations that would allow pears to look like “viols, / Nudes or bottles”—three of the most classic ingredients of Cubist painting—and goes so far as to denounce any two-dimensional representation whatsoever: “They are not flat surfaces / Having curved outlines.”¹ “The new painting has to be sculpture,” in Helen Vendler’s paradoxical paraphrase (144). What is more, even sculpture—and one might think of Claes Oldenburg in this case, an artist who is known to have drawn inspiration from Stevens (see MacLeod, “Influence” 158–60)—would be inadequate for the requested literalness, since it, too, still consti-

tutes a representational detour that in the end would fail to catch the sensuous qualities of the actual material pears in front of the speaker. In the quest for the pears' identity, no traces of difference seem to be allowed. Stevens is playing with the farthest boundaries of representation, those limit situations where the act of representation itself becomes an act of betrayal and must strive—desperately and/or ironically—to cancel itself. The poetical result, however, is not so much annihilating as intensifying: much of what Stevens achieves is to stimulate us so that we “piece together a pear as if the object were freshly before us, seen for the first time” (Altieri 98). There are other, diametrically opposed ways of achieving similar results: in “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” it happens by the invention of a series of twelve wildly fantastic and astonishing metaphors (NA 86). Here it happens by insisting on concrete and detailed literalness. The starting point of the “Study of Two Pears” is that the objects “resemble nothing else”: a pear is a pear is a pear—and not a metaphor. The poem’s conclusion consists in an emphasis on the fact that the materiality of the pears imposes important limits on what the retina registers. “The mind is smaller than the eye,” Stevens noted in “A Fish-Scale Sunrise” (CP 161). In between starting-point and conclusion, we get a number of specific descriptions, so freshly detailed that Eleanor Cook is no doubt right in singling out this poem as showing how “Stevens’ sensuous particulars do not pall. He keeps them simple, often short, and sometimes achieves a remarkable sense of presence. . . . This is a side of Stevens that we tend to underestimate” (154).

Yet there is more than meets the eye here. Even if one may reasonably feel that the speaker of “Study of Two Pears” is content with a more naively enjoying reader than is usually the case in Stevens’ poems, we are still in the company of a poet who loves to “make the visible a little hard / To see” (CP 311) and who is given to pondering certain theoretical “problems.” The extended reading Charles Altieri has given to the poem is symptomatic in this respect. Although Altieri sets out by talking of a fresh piecing together in front of our eyes, by the end of the poem he winds up commenting in terms that are much more philosophical. “Physical shadows,” he writes, “become metaphorical shadows, which then become metapoetic shadows serving as an emblem for the very overdetermined absence language is in the process of creating” (99). If the pears are not *seen* as the observer wills, they nevertheless seem to possess the uncanny ability to decompose in a critic’s hands. Stevens is a poet who was always inclined to demonstrate at some level that “if it were not for the fact that substance is problematic and absent, there would not be art” (de Man, *Blindness* 244). Altieri’s remark on the poem’s “overdetermined absence” is not simply attributable to his own theorizing and philosophical bias: he would not have been brought to such theoretical speculations had the poem been written by William Carlos Williams.

Indeed, the counterexample of Williams is more than a useful short-hand expedient, as several critics have suggested (see Altieri 98 and Brogan 80). Probably the best question to ask of “Study of Two Pears” is: what keeps this from being a Williams poem? (Conversely: what makes it so Stevensian?) We quickly notice a few unmistakable differences—to begin with the very first line: “Opusculum paedagogum.” The introduction of a small pedagogical manual, in slightly pedantic and self-mocking Latin to boot, is incommensurable with the poetic program of someone like Williams, who was known, on the one hand, for his hypercorrectively American attempts at fighting Latin and Greek with the bare hands, and who would have been horrified, on the other, to see his pictorial poems lose their image-oriented (or imagistic) specificity by being abstracted into pedagogical paradigms. In Stevens’ case, however, the same phrase betrays a characteristic theoretical bias—the wish to pass from the particular to the general—along with an inclination to play a few cavalierly executed epistemological finger exercises. The poem’s formal presentation in six numbered sections, with its faint pretense of organized steps in the logical development of an argument, adds to this theoretical impression. In this context, Williams’ reaction to Stevens’ later “Description without Place” is worth recalling. Williams had interpreted the Spanish “hidalgo” occurring in that poem as a critical allusion to himself and to his own poetic enterprise, and so he responded by writing “A Place (Any Place) to Transcend All Places.”² The poem tries to get a lick in at Stevens on several levels, one of them allusion. Thus, we suddenly come across the phrase “Pears / philosophically hard.” Williams’ pears, the poem suggests, are not exactly like Stevens’, since Williams’ philosophy is restricted to their resistant materiality and nothing else. Despite all the descriptive delicacy and concentration Stevens achieves in “Study of Two Pears,” *his* pears are not entirely kept from serving extraneous philosophical purposes, for they are caught between the pedagogical ambition voiced in the first line and the epistemological verity of the final line. Stevens’ poem, it turns out, is not simply a “Study” in a painterly sense, but also in a more scholarly, intellectual sense.³

There is a second, more subtle way in which the poem diverges from Williams: in the alliterative impulse of its second and third quatrains. “Composed of curves / Bulging toward the base. / . . . Tapering toward the top.” Stevens, it appears, cannot be all eye; he must have his music, too. Though the music does much here to underscore the ostensible delight he takes in depicting the pears, it also has a momentum of its own that works independently of the visualizing experiment and signals how for this poet the stark objectivity of a “Polaroid poetry” can never really suffice.⁴ Neither can an entirely lean, unambiguously exact diction, since we also get, in the fourth quatrain, the dissonant word “modelled.” “In the way they are modelled” suggests some hidden agent—a Pygmalian sculptor or a divine creator perhaps. Even if we are at a loss to explain the

possible appropriateness of this suggestion of agency, we cannot avoid at least the feeling that the pears are strangely doubled: they are not really original, the text suggests, but (always already?) imitations modeled upon something else. They seem irrecoverable from an originary difference. The result of this lexical dissonance is that our attention is diverted from a rigorously or naively transfixing look at the pears to the workings of language and to theories of representation. The same result issues from the “unobtrusive metaphors” (Vendler 146) that are subsequently brought into play. “Flowering” and “blobs” give us slight nudges and once more open up the poem to theoretical ruminations. The first of these words, in particular, has inspired Charles Altieri into musing:

As the pear becomes most fully itself before the eye, it must become something else: the fruit must act as a flower does if the mind is to appreciate fully its appearance as a fruit. Then, as flowering seems to capture the particular act of emergence, we recognize that the term applies to a good deal more than the pear. The flowering is also a process of the mind’s own blossoming within a world formerly perceived only from a distance. The painting brush, the writer’s recasting, and the observer’s attention all here flower, suggesting that when mind too becomes fully itself it must at the same time become other, must take on an identity that no perception *qua* perception can register. Perception at its most intense requires our entering the order of metaphor, requires the intensification of art. This indeed is why we need a painting to learn how to see a pear. (98)

Altieri gets a lot of mileage out of a single word here, but the fact is that Stevens’ tropology proves sufficiently impure to support critical speculations of this sort—an impurity that a Williams poem at its most descriptive would try much harder to avoid. Bonnie Costello has argued that Stevens’ relation to painting overall was “far more figurative and conceptual” than Williams’ literal analogies, which aimed at “an equivalency of effect in words” (66). The difference between both approaches shows even in this almost-literalist poem.

The difference, in fact, becomes even more evident in the final couplet, for Williams would not be likely to end a radically descriptive poem on a general observation, and would certainly avoid the sort of syntactical ambiguity teasingly inserted by Stevens. Altieri has unpacked that classic ambiguity most clearly: “‘As the observer wills’ can refer either to a temporal state (observing cannot take place at the same time as willing) or to a modal state (observing cannot be brought into accord with the dictates of will). In either case, the *as* marks the deep problem” (99). For Stevens, as Lee Edelman has wittily pointed out, “‘is’ is only available to us as ‘as’” (141) and his poems often hinge on the intricate evasions of the ob-

scurest “as.” As a poet ceaselessly out to undercut the priority that our linguistically molded minds tend to attribute to the substantive (the material, the solidified, the static, or, in one of his preferred shapes, the statu-esque), Stevens allows his poem to finish by highlighting the role of grammatical connectives and shifters (which is the role of the immaterial, the fluid, the dynamic, the relational, the provisional, the hypothetical, the transient).

The poem’s final statement does not simply pin the pears down as we would expect it to do, but instead allows the text to fork. Spontaneously, we interpret: the pears are not seen the way we would like to see them, for their materiality imposes severe limits on our perception. But we must also hear a more pedagogical, philosophical, and doctrinaire voice saying: the pears cannot be seen as long as we want anything from them—that is, until we are prepared to subject ourselves to their objectivity and turn into blank slates or mirrors. This second voice undercuts the poet’s own previous insertions of alliteration, dissonant diction, and metaphor. As a result, the text neither reaches the closure of simple aphorism nor eventually manages to leave us with fully present, tangible pears.

Does this also mean that Jacqueline Vaught Brogan is right to see “Study of Two Pears” as “rather obviously pitted against ‘objective’ poetry” (80)? Probably not, for that would mean tilting the balance too easily in a counterintuitive direction: after all, we *have* “naively” enjoyed painting and sculpting along with the poet. It is only when we keep lingering over the text that we find the act of reading somebody in the act of writing on the act of looking at two pears to pose its own sort of enigma—or, as Stevens wanted it, its own sort of “problem.” The problem is that of a disparity between the thing itself in its most literal identity and the necessary doubling of representation, which can bring the thing to life only in a relational manner. A poet like Stevens, working in the medium of language and hence at one further remove from the visual than a painter, tended to be particularly sensitive to this disparity and often sought to inscribe it even at the point of greatest immediacy. “A pear is a pear is a pear—or is it?” the poem seems to be asking, and Stevens’ characteristic answer sounds: “It is and it is not.” The pear has sufficient materiality to impose its own sensuous restrictions and not to comply with our silliest fancies, but if it wants to be *seen* at all, it must adapt to the fact that seeing is a relational category that can never, in the final analysis, be contained by the object of perception. “Things seen are things as seen” (*OP* 188).

III

“The Latest Freed Man,” unlike “Study of Two Pears,” is neither a precision exercise nor an “opusculum paedagogum.” In fact, it does not even appear much involved with the painterly attempt at seizing the thing itself and comes to its subject from an entirely different angle. What it does manage to suggest, however, is the strength of the most basic motivations

behind Stevens' recurrent interest in—or even desire for—the uncontaminated thing itself. Things seen in this poem are still things *as seen*, but the question rather becomes one of how the act of seeing should meet unspoken desires as the sensuous “how” displaces the epistemological “what” of perception. Staging what we may surmise to be his own experience in the third person, Stevens recalls how he got up one morning at six o’clock—his usual hour on working days—and felt empowered by the rising sun:

Tired of the old descriptions of the world,
The latest freed man rose at six and sat
On the edge of his bed. He said,
“I suppose there is
A doctrine to this landscape. Yet, having just
Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist,
Which is enough: the moment’s rain and sea,
The moment’s sun (the strong man vaguely seen),
Overtaking the doctrine of this landscape. Of him
And of his works, I am sure. He bathes in the mist
Like a man without a doctrine. The light he gives—
It is how he gives his light. It is how he shines,
Rising upon the doctors in their beds
And on their beds. . . .” (CP 204–05)

Waking up as the incorrigible modernist that he is, Stevens immediately dismisses the “ ‘doctrine to this landscape,’ ” its “old descriptions.”⁵ He has “ ‘just / Escaped from the truth’ ”—a statement that is much denser than we might infer from the almost perfunctory way in which it is delivered. (It is, grammatically speaking, a dangling participle.) “The Latest Freed Man,” it should be remembered, is the third in a trio of poems not only composed around the same time but also published together (with nine other poems, including “Study of Two Pears”) in the *Southern Review* under the title “Canonica” (see Bates 227). Its two predecessors are “The Man on the Dump” and “On the Road Home,” the first of which famously builds up toward the striking final line, “Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the” (CP 203). This rejection of *the* truth becomes still more apparent in the second poem, with its explicit claims that “ ‘There is no such thing as the truth’ ” and “ ‘There are many truths, / But they are not parts of a truth’ ” (CP 203). In one sense, then, Stevens’ just having escaped from the truth refers to his apparently “new” insight expressed also in the two immediately preceding poems. (The seeds of this insight may of course reach back several decades, more particularly to William James at Harvard, and the effects of it would continue to show, as we will see in a moment, in “Landscape with Boat.”)

Color, mist, rain, sea, and sun must replace “ ‘the doctrine of this landscape.’ ” They are what the senses record and nothing more. The sun holds

pride of place in this group—as it commonly does in this most heliocentric of poets for whom “All things in the sun are sun” (CP 104)—and quickly acquires a certain synecdochal stature. Its image serves complex purposes, though. For no sooner has Stevens mentioned the sun in “The Latest Freed Man” than he calls it a “‘strong man,’ ” which is a highly self-conscious fictionalization and anthropomorphization pulling us away from what is imprinted on the retina. With a glaring prosopopoeia he ascribes human attributes to it, thus parading the one trope that in Paul de Man’s view may even be more essential to lyric poetry than metaphor (“Hypogram” 44–51; see also Hillis Miller “Prosopopoeia”). In addition, the sun-man is turned into an almost Cartesian foundation of certainty: “‘Of him / And of his works, I am sure.’ ” The certainty is characteristically represented by a circular formulation, a shrug of the shoulders: “‘The light he gives—’ ” (and we linger expectantly over the dash, only to be disappointed, since no real enjambment follows, only an anacoluthon) “‘It is how he gives his light.’ ” Sun and light are what they are, phenomena antedating ideas, not to be reached by asking definitional questions of *what* they are, but only by settling for the perceptual experience of *how* they are. “‘The light he gives—’ ” is a sentence that cannot be completed by a definition but only by a change of topic and perspective: “‘It is *how* he gives his light [that matters]. It is *how* he shines [that is of importance to somebody who refuses to address anything except the thing itself]’ ” (italics added). Sunlight to Stevens embodies one of the principal limits of reality: it is as vital to human perception, experience, and consciousness (and to their derivative, the imagination projecting prosopopoeias) as phototaxis is to the life of plants.

Having shifted to an experience of the irreducibility of the sun and its light, Stevens indeed chooses to forego any elaboration of his sun-man prosopopoeia, returning instead to how the sun simply shines on the human and the inanimate alike, the perceiving and the unperceiving—“‘the doctors in their beds’ ” and “‘on their beds.’ ”⁶

And so the freed man said.
It was how the sun came shining into his room:
To be without a description of to be,
For a moment on rising, at the edge of the bed, to be,
To have the ant of the self changed to an ox
With its organic boomings, to be changed
From a doctor into an ox, before standing up,
To know that the change and that the ox-like struggle
Come from the strength that is the strength of the sun,
Whether it comes directly or from the sun.
It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.
It was being without description, being an ox. (CP 205)

With an idiomatically Stevensian syntactical trick, the “ ‘It is’ ” of the previous soliloquy (“ ‘It is how he gives his light. It is how he shines’ ”) is picked up, but in such a way as to become progressively more and more referentially unfocused. The triple anaphora “It was” (which becomes quadruple if we count both hemistichs in the penultimate line, and which will become septuple by the time we are through with the poem) does not really attach itself anymore to any specific antecedent or implied subject. Rather, it comes to express something as all-embracing as the voice of Being. Not coincidentally, “to be” and “being” predominate as verb-forms, appearing no less than six times in a series of infinitival clauses that are all suspended in the air like “a free-floating series of verbal impulses” (Vendler 115). The grammatical subject, that prime guarantee of self and identity, recedes as Stevens, ever so momentarily, tries “To be without a description of to be.” We are very much in the realm of what a few years later he would call the first idea, and Stevens picks his words with the utmost care. As in the later “Description without Place,” he seems to play on etymology: to describe is always also to de-scribe, to pass by the de-tour of scription, and thus to falsify the experience of mere being. The desire for the apperception of the thing itself is a desire for a state of being that occurs without the slightest verbal interference. In Stevens, there is, as Richard Poirier has noted, “an unsatisfiable aspiration, the dream of an impossible possibility: to see something without having to name it, without having to think about it, to see it without having to re-create it, to see it as would a transparent eyeball, with no sense of its dependence on the human will. This, it might be recalled, is Emerson’s dream of ‘genius’: to know a world without knowing it as a text” (210).

To figure this “dream of an impossible possibility,” Stevens needs to fall back, as he repeatedly did, on the rhetorical ploy of an animal’s perception of the world. He inflates himself and gets under the skin of an ox, there to enjoy the unthinking ease of bovine being. The “strength” he thus experiences derives “from the sun,” whether directly or indirectly (no metaphysics and disputations on cause and effect for animals). The feeling is (meant to be) liberating: “It was how he was free.” But free *from* what? From a nagging need for *the truth*, we may presume, and more generally also, from the endless inroads into reality of a mind that can never be satisfied, from a self that feels constrained by its insatiable desire. The primary impulse for searching out such freedom here shows itself to be negative and antithetical: what the latest freed man wants is more a matter of negative freedom *from* than of positive freedom *for* or *with an eye to*. For all we know, he does not want his freedom for any social or ethical purpose but only as a personal psychological antidote to the general misery of living. His freedom, at this point, is not that of the existentialist philosopher: like the “freedom” of animals, it is amoral, not burdened with responsibility.

It is typical of Stevens' texts, nevertheless, that they are themselves rarely naive, innocent, or blank, even at the point of recording a deep wish for naïveté, innocence, or blankness, and even when getting across with considerable incantatory force the pleasurable sensation of imagining oneself—if only “For a moment on rising, at the edge” of social and ethically responsible life—to be an ox. There is no way, for example, in which the text can wrest itself entirely free from its image: the ox. For where does that image come from? Partly from broadly *cultural* stereotypes, as expressed in certain idioms like “strong as an ox” or “dumb as an ox” (see Leggett 245). But the image could also have been inspired by a more strictly *literary* heritage, if it was borrowed from Zarathustra’s advice to the truth-seeker: “‘As the ox ought he to do; and his happiness should smell of the earth, and not of contempt for the earth’” (qtd. in Leggett 245). Not only Nietzsche is an intertextual candidate here, for Stevens’ animal also looks like an Ox of the Sun, and that legendary breed of animal has its own literary history, all the way down from the *Odyssey* to *Ulysses*. The image, in short, remains culturally entangled and open to textual dissemination. The first idea is unable to do without one or other image. “It was being without description, being an ox”: the syntactical parallelism suggests near-synonymity, but the tag dramatically subverts Stevens’ ambition. What must be de-scribed nevertheless gets re-scripted in the image. A similar rhetorical sensitivity informs the poem’s final lines:

It was the importance of the trees outdoors,
The freshness of the oak-leaves, not so much
That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked.
It was everything being more real, himself
At the centre of reality, seeing it.
It was everything bulging and blazing and big in itself,
The blue of the rug, the portrait of Vidal,
Qui fait fi des joliesse banales, the chairs. (CP 205)

This is not a passage in just two different languages, but in at least two different voices as well. One voice that may be heard—and we should not hesitate to call it the dominant one—is that of the lover of the first idea and the thing itself, the man who wants to become all seeing, whose eye wants to pierce material reality at its most intense, who simplifies his dictation and would ultimately dispense with language altogether: “not so much / That they were oak-leaves, as the way they looked” (which is to say, again, not so much the *what* as the *how*). We should also understand and value the moving quality of this voice coming from an almost sixty-year-old, essentially solitary man who wished that his life could be occasionally reduced to standing, looking, marveling, and feeling rejuvenated—like drawing a breath of Alpine air. But there is also a countervoice that knows and registers the ceaseless tension and dilemma between sensibility, on

the one hand, and language, on the other. It is a voice that knows it *must* mention the “oak-leaves” *as* “oak-leaves” not to wind up stammering about the amorphous or to disable the reader from vicariously re-presenting the scene. (This is not the same thing as saying that the word “oak-leaves” is necessary for experiencing the sensible specificity of those oak-leaves, as too enthusiastic and idealistic Wittgensteinians tend to conclude.) Time and again, Stevens anticipates the Heideggerian and Derridean ploy of writing words *under erasure*—of writing them, that is, then crossing them out, but without making them fully illegible, so that the word is at once there and not there. This does not mean that Stevens’ second voice simply speaks the deconstructive language of a compulsively sobered-up linguistic existentialism (though it can always be made to do so). Other, less philosophical notions are at least as much implicated in it, such as the awareness of how the tension between senses and language, between feeling and thought, precisely opens up a space for the poet to play with rhetoric and imagination. For it is hard to turn a deaf ear, in the final three lines, to the boisterously paraded alliteration of “bulging,” “blazing,” “big,” and “blue,” as well as to the witty inner rhyme on “Vidal” and “*banales*” and the conspicuously inserted, fastidious French. It is even tempting to read in the description of Stevens’ room with the “chairs” a faint allusion to Van Gogh.⁷ At the same time as the poet withdraws from the natural outdoor scenery to his own room—a movement that suggests a return to the self that had been momentarily suspended—he hints at Van Gogh’s paintings, the products not of photographic mimesis but of a strong imagination and an idiosyncratic artistic vision. It is no longer the poet-as-ox, then, that appears to be speaking at the end of the poem, but once again the modernist artist tired of the old *schemata* of perception and experience, looking for new ones to replace them. The experience of the first idea or of the thing itself—whether the immediately physical sensation of an ox’s body or the perception of objects registered in a state of oxhood—has already slipped through his fingers. It has served its function of rekindling the poetic imagination. “May there be an ennui of the first idea?” Stevens wondered in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” providing himself the rhetorical answer: “What else, prodigious scholar, should there be?” (*CP* 381).

The first idea, or the thing itself, we may conclude from “The Latest Freed Man,” is no more than the name for an infinitely renewable, necessarily short-lived strategy. This is finally also what the poem’s title tells us. Stevens knows the illusion of being an ox and of perceiving the thing itself to be an illusion in need of continual renewal. For this is only the story of the *latest* freed man. There have been other such stories before, and still more are to follow. Many more indeed followed as Stevens kept trying to close the gap between matter and mind, in the full awareness that the human mind plays a paradoxically double role in this: at once material and immaterial, at once materializing and immaterializing. For

the human mind, even as it tries to seize upon the thing itself, is, in the rambunctious paronomasia of "Repetitions of a Young Captain," a "make-matter, matter-nothing mind" (CP 307).

IV

In 1940, two years after the appearance of "Study of Two Pears" and "The Latest Freed Man," Stevens wrote yet another much different poem, this time foregrounding the artistic quest for the thing itself in more orthodox fashion with the overt purpose of denouncing such a quest. "Landscape with Boat" is more philosophically oriented and more clearly programmatic than either of its two predecessors. It has also been somewhat neglected in the canon of Stevens criticism—a neglect that may have been prompted by its disputatious and dogmatic ring, a certain declarative tone that leaves little room for ambivalence, and the fact that its flat and unredeeming language enacts only too well what it sets out to represent. Yet, in more than one sense, the text does offer an interesting case study, and if caught in an appropriate intertextual web amply resonates with artistic relevance.

The offset line that introduces the poem reads like a *dramatis personae* (but in the singular): "An anti-master-man, floribund ascetic" (CP 241). This man is the subject of the poem, and he has predictably reminded B. J. Leggett of the object of Nietzsche's scorn in the philosopher's diatribes against ascetic truth-seekers and concomitant eulogies of the master-man groping for power (Leggett 221). However, even if that is where Stevens may have actually gotten (part of) his inspiration, the poem profits more from a less compulsory intertext—one that cannot perhaps pretend to any direct allusiveness on Stevens' part, but that nevertheless enhances the artistic significance of the text. We should follow a lead by Bonnie Costello, who believes the "anti-master-man," in general terms, to be a modernist counterfigure to the old masters in painting (78). It is indeed to the language and theory of painting that the poem immediately turns to characterize its protagonist:

He brushed away the thunder, then the clouds,
Then the colossal illusion of heaven. Yet still
The sky was blue. He wanted imperceptible air.
He wanted to see. He wanted the eye to see
And not be touched by blue. He wanted to know,
A naked man who regarded himself in the glass
Of air, who looked for the world beneath the blue,
Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase,
Any azure under-side or after-color. Nabob
Of bones, he rejected, he denied, to arrive
At the neutral centre, the ominous element,
The single-colored, colorless, primitive. (CP 241–42)

There is no compelling reason to believe that the character described in these lines needs to be identified as one specific artist (a painter or, more metonymically, a painter-poet).⁸ Still, the artistic perspective evoked here is evidently that of a form of radically abstract art, and if there is one exemplary figure whose theories may be fruitfully crossed with the text, it is that of the Dutchman Piet Mondriaan (a.k.a. Mondrian). At the time of composing “Landscape with Boat,” Stevens was moving in the direction of an outspoken interest in Mondriaan’s art (especially the later works of the 1920s and after): only two years later, as Glen MacLeod has demonstrated (*Modern Art* xxiv–xxv, 114–21), the reading of an essay by the emigré painter would become one of the inspirational sources for “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” Stevens had himself seen Mondriaan’s work on several occasions during the 1930s, both at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and at the Wadsworth Atheneum in his hometown, Hartford. The Wadsworth, at the time “the most modern museum in the United States” (MacLeod, *Modern Art* 27–28), had been championing artists from *De Stijl* for years, had purchased one Mondriaan painting for its permanent collection in 1936, and was showing three more of Mondriaan’s paintings as part of an exhibition mounted in precisely the year “Landscape with Boat” was written (MacLeod, *Modern Art* 109, 221). What is more, throughout the thirties Stevens is known to have grappled with the claims made on him by surrealist and abstract painting respectively, and thanks to MacLeod we also know how during that same era he kept himself far from siding with abstract art, associating it as he did with its most radical and dogmatic branch of geometric abstraction (see *Modern Art* 92–96 and chapters 3 and 4 overall).

“Landscape with Boat” is inexplicably absent from MacLeod’s study of Stevens’ interaction with the painterly climate of his day, yet it fits in well with the critical narrative presented there. Or so it does if we are willing to dissociate the Mondriaan-like figure taken issue with in the poem from the Mondriaan whom Stevens would come to value much more positively by the time of his work on “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (and also later, when he continued to hail the painter’s “integrity” [L 628]). To most of the ideas attributed to the “floribund ascetic” we can even find verbal and pictorial counterparts in Mondriaan. “He wanted the eye to see / And not be touched by blue,” observes the speaker, while Mondriaan wrote: “We do not have to see beyond the natural, but we have to see, as it were, *through* it: we have to see deeper—see *abstractly*, and above all *universally*” (“Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit” 99).⁹ Mondriaan, too, in his most radical work, “looked for the world beneath the blue, / Without blue, without any turquoise tint or phase, / Any azure under-side or after-color.” He would not allow any “turquoise tint” or “azure . . . after-color,” any variegated shades of color that impress and obsess the eye of romantic, realist, and impressionist painters alike. Instead, he reduced his palette to “The single-colored, colorless, primitive”—that is, to the three

primary (or “primitive”), unshaded (or “single”) colors (red, blue, and yellow), and to the three (so-called “colorless”) non-colors (white, black, and gray).¹⁰

In Mondriaan’s case, moreover, these primary colors and non-colors were not used to any superficially sensuous effect, for the Dutchman was after *“the appearance of the aesthetic idea, in itself”* (“Beeldingsmiddel en compositie” 42; author’s own emphasis). His basic attitude toward the senses (and, inseparably, toward our human physical condition) was negative: he, too, “rejected, he denied, to arrive / At the neutral centre, the ominous element.” The word “ominous” wickedly puns on the root word *omen*, as if the ascetic and abstracting artist exclaimed: “We would see a sign!” The wickedness reappears when the speaker next christens his protagonist “Nabob / Of bones.” A “nabob,” according to the dictionary, is a rich indigenous chieftain, but especially, at this point in the poem, a conspicuously disruptive, stylistically self-conscious lexical item that no ascetic would ever dream of using. So it comes as no surprise to see the enjambment lead to a skeletal bareness: this painter, who is ostensibly so eager to pierce all superficies with his X-raying eyes, is rich only in the hard and dry country of the bones, in the Sahara of skeletons and death. The poem starts to adopt a critical stance here, so that we hark back to the oxymoron of “floribund ascetic” posited at the outset and become aware of the scathing irony in it. Suddenly, we are made aware that the adjective “floribund” contains an echo of “moribund”—or, in James Leonard and Christine Wharton’s somewhat more florid formulation: “The anti-master-man’s floribundness, perverting the rose-potentiality of the class floribunda, renders it a rosaceous equivalent of the moribund” (111).

In the following lines, the poem strikes up an increasingly antagonistic posture as the figure of Mondriaan continues to offer an interesting point of comparison:

It was not as if the truth lay where he thought,
Like a phantom, in an uncreated night.
It was easier to think it lay there. If
It was nowhere else, it was there and because
It was nowhere else, its place had to be supposed,
Itself had to be supposed, a thing supposed
In a place supposed, a thing that he reached
In a place that he reached, by rejecting what he saw
And denying what he heard. He would arrive.
He had only not to live, to walk in the dark,
To be projected by one void into
Another.

It was his nature to suppose,
To receive what others had supposed, without

Accepting. He received what he denied.
But as truth to be accepted, he supposed
A truth beyond all truths. (CP 242)

Does the ascetic persona, rationalizing his procedure, have any real idea of what he is after? The speaker mocks the anti-master-man's tergiversations in lines that bear the outline of step-by-step rational progress but eventually lead only to a cul-de-sac. The repetitive accumulations—"its place had to be supposed, / Itself had to be supposed, a thing supposed / In a place supposed, a thing that he reached / In a place that he reached"—acquire a singsong effect that ridicules the attempt for amounting to no more than self-hypnosis. The choice of words, especially of the quadruple "supposed," is also highly significant. To look for a thing *sup-posed* (or *hypo-thesized*) suggests a quest for a *sub-stance* (or, in the Greek of Aristotle, a *hypo-keimenon*), which is precisely what the theosophically and neoplatonically influenced Mondriaan, situating his own artistic search in a philosophical history of long standing, sought to establish in figuring the "deepest general": "This *deepest general* has been indicated by Aristotle as *substance*, as *that which something is*, as *the thing on its own*, as *that which exists on its own independently of the accidents of size, form—characteristics that merely form the exterior by which the substance reveals itself*" ("Van het natuurlijke tot het abstracte" 88). This irreducible "thing on its own" underlying all variable outward appearances or "accidents," this *hypokeimenon*, is an entirely spiritual "phantom," as the poem calls it, that can be reached only "by rejecting what he saw / And denying what he heard." The ironical reassurance that follows is caustic: "He would arrive. / He had only not to live, to walk in the dark, / To be projected by one void into / Another." Again we may juxtapose textual material from Mondriaan, for whom "not to live" was in some sense imperative as well: "As long as the individual predominates in the consciousness of the age, art remains *tied to (ordinary) life* and is, primarily, the expression of that life" ("De redelijkheid der nieuwe beelding" 51). An alternative art that strives to transcend all embodied individuality, however, can only "be projected by one void into / Another."

Stevens' ascetic quester for the fundamental—a fundamentalist of sorts, who cannot live with contingency and provisionality but "would arrive"—turns a deaf ear to the social world as well. His principled unconcern with lived experience makes him "receive what others had supposed, without / Accepting." He is prepared to embrace only "A [transcendent, absolute, divine] truth beyond all [human, relative] truths."¹¹

He never supposed
That he might be truth, himself, or part of it,
That the things that he rejected might be part
And the irregular turquoise, part, the perceptible blue

Grown denser, part, the eye so touched, so played
Upon by clouds, the ear so magnified
By thunder, parts, and all these things together,
Parts, and more things, parts. He never supposed divine
Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
And that if nothing was the truth, then all
Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.

(CP 242)

This is the rhetorically most accomplished moment in the poem, and Helen Vendler has understandably cited it as a classic instance of Stevens' style (16). "Landscape with Boat," for all its uncharacteristically blunt assertiveness, here shows itself to be a programmatically central text to the volume of which it is part: *Parts of a World*. Piecemeal the poem restores the various phenomenal "parts" that compose our *être-au-monde*—to use Merleau-Ponty's felicitously polysemous phrase. It does so with a barely concealed passion for the things of this world, building up to a jubilant, voluptuous climax that feels like snowballing and rollercoasting forever. Nevertheless, any return to an embodied human state and any reestablishment of a relationship to the world based on passion will always also involve the possibility of conflict, and a small fissure in the climactic outburst dramatizes this possibility. When Stevens reaches the point of invoking "all these things together, / Parts, and more things, parts," the enjambment raises the question of the relationship between sprawling parts and overarching whole. The squirming facts exceed the squamous mind, if we may say so. Throughout *Parts of a World*, Eleanor Cook tells us, "Stevens is wary of themes that commonly give a sense of unity or wholeness, whether war and nation, whether old ideas of light and space, whether home or heaven or the quest for either. . . . He is equally wary of rhetorical patterns that commonly give a sense of unity or wholeness: synecdoche, metaphor, symbol, closure" (153). We have already had occasion to observe Stevens' scant and disruptive use of metaphor, as well as a refusal of closure, in "Study of Two Pears," and his inability to find full satisfaction in old ideas of light in "The Latest Freed Man."

We should, however, also remind ourselves that shoring up the parts of his world did not always prove as easy to Stevens as it might appear from "Landscape with Boat." If the "parts" in that poem work strongly against all totalizing, holistic gestures, if they are even "divided against themselves, repeated so often that they diffuse the very sense of a whole to which a part belongs" (Longenbach 217), several other lines and poems may be produced that surrender much more willingly to a totalizing and integrating nostalgia. This oscillation between diversity and unity has been linked by Longenbach to the poet's political stance during most of his writing life: "Stevens's politics often appear divided on precisely this ful-

crum: wanting to preserve the integrity of every part of the world, he nevertheless fears the anarchic energy those parts set free" (217). In the "parts" climax of "Landscape with Boat," the fear of anarchy is so successfully suppressed that Stevens turns reckless. He enthusiastically adopts a sweeping Whitmanian posture—not really his most congenial stance, though he was given to trying it out now and then—and allows himself to embrace a pantheistic world view ("if nothing / Was divine then all things were"). More than that, he subsequently moves on to formulate a principle that comes dangerously close to courting an absolute relativism: "if nothing was the truth, then all / Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth." From a philosophical point of view (itself to be distinguished from the emotive and persuasive intentions of the text, which are far less question-begging), the speaker's reasoning continues to operate by the yardstick of what it denounces: the absolute. To move from a denunciation of absolute truth into an equally absolute relativism is, of course, to stick to the primacy of the absolute.

The poem, fortunately, does not end on the rash generalization of all things being divine and true, but returns to the seductive sensuous appeal exercised by that divine and true world that philosophical fundamentalists and artistic ascetics forsake in their respective quests for the truth:

Had he been better able to suppose:
He might sit on a sofa on a balcony
Above the Mediterranean, emerald
Becoming emeralds. He might watch the palms
Flap green ears in the heat. He might observe
A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
And say, "The thing I hum appears to be
The rhythm of this celestial pantomime." (CP 243)

To move from "emerald" to "emeralds" means more than to move away from primary colors: it is to step from homogeneity to heterogeneity, from monolithic identity to pluralistic difference, from the unified to the diversified. To "watch the palms / Flap green ears in the heat" is to stage the world's potential for imaginative and poetic investment, figured here by a dense admixture of metaphor and metonymy: the palm leaves do not merely resemble, say, a rabbit's dropped ears, but the metaphor of "Flap[ping] ears" is also metonymically inspired by the sound of the leaves rustled by the wind. The hedonist's eye and ear (and even, because of the "yellow wine," taste and smell) are gratified by the Mediterranean "Landscape with Boat," so much so that the ambiance makes the speaker "hum" out of sheer delight. Such humming is Stevens' downplayed metaphor for writing poetry, since it is inspired by the "celestial pantomime" of the environment, and the one thing pantomimes by definition lack is the spo-

ken word. The world and reality constitute a mute spectacle that needs poets to give it voice and music.¹² With characteristic etymological subtlety, Stevens gives his final word an unexpected resonance by inscribing a fundamentally mimetic trait in all of reality ("panto-mime"). Not only does language seek to mirror the world, he seems to suggest, but the world itself also mirrors language. Things are because of interrelations and interactions. This is no cause for epistemological despair but only for a relaxed celebration of our "celestial" condition.

Stevens' final countering scene of a Mediterranean landscape with boat functions as an attractive sensuous antidote to the world-renouncing austerity evinced by the floribund ascetic. But it has its own limits. If we think of the scene against its biographical background, we cannot help but notice the status of this Mediterranean seascape as a rather bourgeois paradisal fantasy, appropriately disinfected and aestheticized, the imaginary toy of a settled insurance lawyer who, at sixty, knew he would never actually see Europe, but who relished visiting it as an armchair traveler in the mind. This biographical background acquires a special poignancy from the poem's date of composition: 1940. Europe was a battlefield in that year, not a holiday destination. In Stevens' American mind, political isolationism proved sufficiently entrenched to allow him to overwrite historical reality and picture himself humming and sipping wine among the palm trees at the French Côte d'Azur or the Italian Riviera. His own poetic rejection of the ascetic's radical rejection of life and the material world thus had itself to reject a major part of that life and that material world. This is the fate of all advocacies and apologies of hedonism: they have their own severe restrictions, their own self-blinding *partialities*. A reply to the Mondriaans of art (and philosophy) is able to make beguiling use of parts of the world to celebrate life—but only of certain specific parts and no others. The sociopolitical world of conflict and potential violence needs to be hummed away into oblivion. The imperfect, as we all know, is not just a paradise.

There is yet another act of forgetting that enables Stevens to write "Landscape with Boat." Even if a modicum of self-irony may be held to inform his description of the ascetic, he still manages rather easily in this poem to come down on one side of the debate, ignoring for the moment his own strong inclination toward abstraction and his own regular distrust of the sufficiency of sensuous particulars. Glen MacLeod has convincingly demonstrated how much more divided and ambivalent Stevens could be, already in the late thirties, about abstract art, and how soon he would come to latch on to justifications for abstraction, found, among other places, in Mondriaan's writings (*Modern Art* 95). "Landscape with Boat" thus possesses all the momentary strength of its humanistic and phenomenological appeal, but not the strength of its representativeness with respect to Stevens' poetry overall. This is not Stevens at his most polyphonic, dramatizing the difficult polylogue inside his head, but a more monologic

poet, setting up a rhetorical divide between self and opponent for the sake of disputation and programmatic affirmation. “Landscape with Boat” is an affirmation of the sensuous particulars of this world, and may be enjoyed as such by the reader; but it is also, surreptitiously, an exorcism. To make the visible a little harder to see we need to return to more subtly ambiguous texts like “Study of Two Pears” and “The Latest Freed Man”—poems that have always been taken to belong to this writer’s greatest achievements.

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Notes

¹ For a reading in which Stevens responds to Cubism in particular, see Costello 78. The poem’s opening quatrain is singled out by Michael Campbell and John Dolan as one of the more conspicuous instances of Stevens’ use of “praeteritic antithesis” (124–25): the act of denial precisely foregrounds the topic denied, in this case the resemblance between pears and other objects as brought to light by painters.

² See Williams 113–15. For analyses of this poetic tit-for-tat between Stevens and Williams, see Marsh, Gelpi 19–21, and Mariani 517. As to the nearly lifelong relationship between the two poets, we had better distrust the tendency of Williams’ biographer, Paul Mariani, to take an entirely benign view: “Always in public and in their exchanges there was the utmost cordiality and deference between these two giants while each jockeyed for position and watched the other” (499). Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has caught more of the ambivalence with which the two men regarded each other when showing that “Stevens’ and Williams’ friendship was alternately bullying, playful, respectful, and somewhat ‘uneasy’” (76)—the latter word also having been foregrounded by Martha Helen Strom in her essay on the poets’ friendship. For more extended comparative analyses of Stevens and Williams, see especially Heinzelman, Walker, and the various contributors to the special issue on Williams and Stevens published by the *William Carlos Williams Review* (see MacLeod, “Special Issue”).

³ It might be worth recalling here how J. Hillis Miller once contrasted Stevens and Williams with respect to the possibility of grafting further texts onto them. Talking of Stevens, Hillis Miller argued, “he’s especially open to academic criticism. My fascination with and admiration for William Carlos Williams is exactly the reverse: that Williams is so resistant to intellectualizing. He is a very great poet, but difficult for somebody trained in abstractions. I can deal with ideas, and the thing itself, and so on—no problem—but what do you say about ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’ or about a poem that just describes a sycamore tree?” (Interview 233).

⁴ The phrase “Polaroid poetry” was used by John Frederick Nims to characterize Gary Snyder’s *Selected Poems* and explained by Richard Wilbur as referring to that sort of poetry that “follows William Carlos Williams’ weaker poems” (89).

⁵ A useful gloss on how “descriptions” may be viewed as a “doctrine” can be found in “Of Modern Poetry,” composed shortly after “The Latest Freed Man.” There the opening lines suggest a modernist’s typical simplification of history into a pre-modern world that is stable, simple, and legible, and a modern one that is fickle, complex, and illegible: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice. It has not always had / To find: the scene was set; it repeated what / Was in the script” (CP 239).

⁶ The “doctors” referred to recall in one and the same gesture those thinkers/writers who would find a “doctrine” to the landscape—including, possibly, such theological doctors as Thomas Aquinas (Cook 156)—and colleagues like “old Dr. Williams” (L 286), whose poetic project of bringing to light and elucidating objects Stevens at this point is inclined to share (Brogan 81).

⁷ Glen MacLeod suspects that by choosing to “emphasize the elements of everyday domestic life” at the end of “The Latest Freed Man,” Stevens “was consciously indulging [the] Dutch aspect of his sensibility” represented by seventeenth-century indoor paintings (*Modern Art* 87), but the association with another Dutchman, Van Gogh, adds a dimension here that is better attuned to the modernist exercise undertaken in the poem.

⁸ Anna Balakian has interpreted the lines as a response to the Mallarméan struggle with the word and idea of *ciel* (both “sky” and “heaven”) that takes up a central place in symbolist and postsymbolist poetry, without however suggesting that the character in Stevens’ poem is intended as an allusion to the French poet (146–48).

⁹ Here as elsewhere, all translations from the Dutch are my own; English-language versions of Mondriaan’s writings are available from Holtzman and James.

¹⁰ “The natural color of material things has to disappear. As far as this is possible, preferably by a layer of pure color or ‘non-color’ (black, white, and gray)” (Mondriaan, “Neo-Plasticisme” 17).

¹¹ In a letter of 1914 to H. P. Bremmer, Mondriaan explained his own artistic project by saying that “I wish to approximate the truth as closely as possible and for that reason to abstract everything until I arrive at the foundation (always still an exterior foundation) of things. For me it is a truth that by saying nothing determinate one is precisely saying the most determinate, the truth (that of the great comprehensiveness)” (qtd. in Bak 70).

¹² Marie Borroff has usefully reminded us of the music in the final lines, those “repetitive phonic patterns that make us conscious, as we read, of the sounds of words, including the *m*- and *p*-systems to which *Mediterranean*, *emerald[s]*, *palms*, *hum*, *appears*, *rhythm*, and *pantomime* belong” (98).

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A New Kind of Meditation: Wallace Stevens' "The Plain Sense of Things"

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AMONG WALLACE STEVENS' late body of work, "The Plain Sense of Things" stands out as one of the most often cited of his short poems. In particular, readers often invoke the lines, "Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (*CP* 503) to hint at the wonderfully subtle complexities that lie beneath his poetry. Like the eminently suggestive ending of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," these lines counterpoise two terms in a way that invokes a change in our understanding of each term as well as in their seemingly paradoxical relationship. In Stevens' poem the two terms are obviously not beauty and truth, but another pair long familiar to Stevens scholars, the imagination and reality—the imagination and "the plain sense of things." In the reading of this poem that follows, I will consider this pairing by turning to another familiar concept, motion. By expanding and applying the concept of motion, I will demonstrate "The Plain Sense of Things" is not what it may appear to be on the surface—a poem where the mind and the imagination shrink from reality—but rather a meditative poem where a correspondence of motion in the imagination and reality can bring the two into harmony. In other words, this poem offers a new kind of meditation, one appropriate to a world of constant flux.

Such a new kind of meditation requires a new understanding of the process through which we comprehend our world—namely, through language and sense perception, particularly vision. A consideration of motion in language and perception will reveal that these two terms are also interrelated. In fact, as I will show, understanding these different interrelations—of the mind, the world, and the way we understand the world—will ultimately provide us with a new sense of the self. Thus, in returning to "the plain sense of things," we will find that the motion beneath its apparent stillness is a motion that suggests a meditation not of sadness, but of enjoyment and harmony, as Stevens himself suggests in a letter written to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn shortly before the poem was first published in 1952:

This morning I walked around in the park here for almost an hour before coming to the office and felt as blank as one of the ponds which in the weather at this time of year are motionless. But perhaps it was the blankness that made me enjoy it so much. (L 762)

Here we have the familiar figure of Stevens walking and thinking, which is certainly suggestive of an identity in motion. But how are we to account for the apparently “motionless” pond, and how can this be reconciled with this identity in process? As I will show, this motionless state is the result of a limited perspective, one that relies on an intellect not sufficiently informed by the imagination; in fact, as Stevens was aware from his readings in science, particularly physics, this motionless state cannot even be considered possible in a post-Einsteinian world. Lisa M. Steinman, in her book *Made in America: Science, Technology and American Modernist Poets*, considers Stevens’ awareness and understanding of the work of various physicists, including Alfred North Whitehead, one of the popularizers of the new physics whom Stevens often quoted in his essays of the 1940s and who proposed connections based on motion and “process” similar to the ones that I have suggested (Steinman 160). “Touching on the fields of philosophy and art, Whitehead proposed that the new physics demanded that mechanistic models of both mind and matter be replaced with models which stressed process and a creative engagement between mind and matter” (Steinman 8). Stevens himself proposes precisely this connection in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”:

I said of the picture [*Wooden Horses*] that it was a work in which everything was favorable to reality. I hope that the use of that bare word has been enough. But without regard to its range of meaning in thought, it includes all its natural images, and its connotations are without limit. Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states. He says: “The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present.”

Dr. Joad’s comment on this is: “Similarly with external things. Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer. Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal. . . . How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static ob-

jects extended in space? Because of the intellect, which presents us with a false view of it." (24–25)

Although Bergson himself expressed reservations about Einstein's theory of relativity (Quirk 8), Stevens, in juxtaposing these two quotations, reveals his own understanding that there is a connection between the seemingly still, meditative mind and the seemingly motionless object it apprehends—beneath the surface, both are in continuous motion. The quotation from Bergson suggests that if we reflect on our perception of an object, we find that identity is constantly in motion through time, ceaselessly combining elements of memory and perception into a new identity that in turn must perceive in a new way, even if it perceives the same thing—or what appears to be the same thing. For as Stevens points out in his quote from Joad, he was aware of modern, Einsteinian physics that negated the notion "of solid, static objects extended in space." Though the pond in Stevens' letter to Sister Bernetta, the pond that appears again in "The Plain Sense of Things," may seem motionless, Stevens knows that this is a false view.

In understanding how a new perception that overcomes these limits might be formed, we must first consider the basis for our perception and thinking in language itself. This question is brought to bear by another critic, who, like Steinman, considers Stevens' awareness of science. Dana Wilde, in his essay "Wallace Stevens, Modern Physics, and Wholeness," does not only compare Stevens' writing to scientific ideas of which he himself was aware; he also compares Stevens' thoughts on science with those of later physicists such as Erwin Schrödinger and David Bohm who have dealt with the scientific and theoretical consequences of Einstein, Plank, and Heisenberg. In his essay, Wilde shows that Stevens' understanding that the mind, matter, and knowledge are always in flux led him to conclude that this new understanding of the world required a contemplative interpretation that went beyond the apparent physical facts, the apparent limit of science (Wilde 24). While Wilde sees this contemplative interpretation as ultimately invoking a spiritual ideal and possibly an idea of God, Stevens' turn toward the secular seems rather to suggest another kind of contemplative interpretation, one that restores the mind to this world through the power of the imagination. As Wilde implies in bringing Bohm's and Stevens' ideas together, such a restoration of the mind, or thought, with the totality of reality, begins with a consideration first of language and then of perception:

Bohm says in 1980 what Stevens might have said earlier: "thought with totality as its content must be considered as an art form, like poetry, whose function is primarily to give rise to a new perception, rather than to communicate reflective knowledge of how everything is." (Wilde 19)

Thus, in the prose piece "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens, in his juxtaposition of quotations from Joad and Bergson, has presented his thoughts in and through language that is associative, elusive, suggestive; language that embodies motion in words and thus challenges us to use our imaginations to complete the perception of our intellects and see the motion that is beneath the surface of ourselves and our worlds. This is precisely the project that he carries out in "The Plain Sense of Things."

Frank Kermode comments on these aspects of meditation and motion in "The Plain Sense of Things" as he considers the metaphoric nature of all language:

In its own very idiosyncratic way that meditation echoes a central theme of modern philosophy. The plain sense is itself metaphorical; there is no escape from metaphor; univocity in language is no more than a dream. The position is familiar, and the interest of Stevens's poem is that he is not so much affirming it as suggesting the movement of mind that accompanies its consideration. He is especially conscious of the extraordinary effort required even to imagine, to find language for, the plain sense of things and hold the language there for the briefest moment: worth trying, he seems to say, but impossible, this attempt to behold "the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." (179–80)

Thus Kermode suggests the same connections that Stevens himself proposed in his quotation from Bergson: even in contemplation, even in meditation on an object, the mind is in motion, and the language used to describe a still state of meditation, the plain sense of things, must rely on metaphor and must be in motion as well. Because the poem originates in a living mind, is received by a living mind, and operates through the active language of metaphor, the poem is always a living activity of contemplating, receiving, and conceiving, even if the surface of the poem seems to reflect an idea of stillness.

The importance of the motion of language is evident in comparing Kermode's reading of "The Plain Sense of Things" with the passing comment that William W. Bevis gives the poem in his book *Mind of Winter: Wallace Stevens, Meditation, and Literature*. In contrast to Kermode's reading, as well as my own, Bevis claims that the poem is "full of ennui and the blank cold of symbolist malaise" (28). Although Bevis' book offers an excellent overview of meditation as it has come to be understood in the West and shows how the concept of meditation can be used as a literary tool to consider Stevens' poetry as well as other poetry, his reading of Stevens assumes the existence of a kind of meditative language that denies the metaphoric quality of all language: "Meditative perception is typi-

cally expressed through pure image, imaginative perception through metaphor" (11). Kermode, however, in recalling Nietzsche and Emerson before him, reminds us that metaphor and hence imagination are the ultimate basis for all language: "Metaphor begins to remodel the plain sense as soon as we begin to think or to speak about it" (192); or, as Stevens himself states, "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (CP 503). Furthermore, as "The Plain Sense of Things" illustrates, metaphor and the imagination are not only inevitable but in fact *necessary* to achieve the kind of meditation where the self is in harmony with the object it perceives (what Bevis calls a "lyric of meditative perception [suchness]" (297); only through such acts of metaphor and imagination can we go beyond the false view of the intellect and perceive the correspondence of change and vibrations that occurs both in our identity and the objects which we perceive. In other words, without imagination, "a meditative perception" that takes account of change is not possible. Although Bevis suggests that metaphor is the result of a meditative state, in fact, we will see that metaphor *precedes* this state and adjusts our perceptions so that such a meditation is possible.

Just as the pond vibrates below the surface of our everyday perception, so too does the language of "The Plain Sense of Things" move below its obvious surface. The first line, "After the leaves have fallen, we return" (CP 502), reveals this paradox of the meditative mind in motion, for while the surface meaning of this image undoubtedly suggests a feeling of melancholic stillness, the image at the same time points us past this moment of stillness by moving us through both time and space—we do not stop when the leaves fall, "we return." Also, the image of the leaves itself is, of course, a metaphor, literally a "transference," a movement of language. As Kermode has suggested, this motion evokes a kind of active consideration on the part of the reader as well. This active tension of metaphor is reinforced in the "as if" in the next line, since, as Michel Benamou notes, Stevens uses the phrase "as if" "to remind himself that symbols are not to be confused with things as they are" (xv). In refusing to equate the two, Stevens also refuses to allow the language to pause and hence he forces the reader to move from one possibility to another.

Another way to understand how this "as if" functions is to consider William James's understanding of consciousness as a "stream of thought" and the distinction between "substantive parts" and "transitive parts" of this stream: "*Let us call the resting-places the 'substantive parts,' and the places of flight the 'transitive parts,' of stream of thought*" (236). As James indicates, language causes us to focus on the substantive parts when we reflect on our consciousness, and so we come to think that our consciousness consists of discrete, temporarily motionless thoughts, but, in fact, this is actually a failure of perception that is caused by the limits of our vocabulary to capture the transitive elements of experience:

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use. (238)

Thus, the “as if” not only reinforces the implicit motion of the first line, it also causes us to consider the transitive state of thought and of feeling that gets overlooked when we “rest” on the substantive image of the leaves.

Furthermore, the “as if” causes the whole second sentence, and, in fact, all of the lines that follow, to be read as a rhetorical proposition that the reader must actively interpret. By acknowledging “the transitive parts” and opening the door of indeterminacy, Stevens gives us the right to challenge all of the words that follow as if they were merely proposals. Thus we find ourselves to be an active part of an ongoing dialogue between the real and the imaginary, the literal and the metaphorical. Due to our habits of perception, we may find ourselves focusing on the substantive leaves and enjoying Stevens’ language, such as the assonance of the “i” sound at the end of the stanza, “an end of the imagination, / Inanimate in an inert savoir” (CP 502). However, this last line again acts paradoxically. Although it describes an “inert savoir,” its effects on the reader are precisely the opposite, since the peculiar phrasing with the French infinitive causes us to pause in our reading, not to rest in stillness, but to solve a riddle. What would it mean to have an inanimate imagination, especially if we consider inanimate to mean without soul or life? How can we keep our verbs in the infinitive and resist choosing a conjugation that would move us beyond the inert? These are questions that in disrupting the ease of our reading make us conscious of the substantial image of the leaves and the transitive nature of our own thought processes; in other words, while on the surface of language Stevens may be directing us toward the end of imagination, beneath the surface we find ourselves in the midst of language in motion, in a state of indeterminacy as we move toward our own conclusions about his propositions.

This impetus to perceive beneath the surface of language is reinforced in the first lines of the second stanza: “It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold, this sadness without cause” (CP 502). Again, on the surface we are struck with the stillness of the words “blank,” “cold,” and “sadness,” but by revealing that the poet must choose words to describe this feeling, we are asked to consider the metaphorical nature of these words and the active mind that has arranged them. As in his initial “as if,” Stevens makes us aware that in the midst of a meditative mood we are engaged in a consideration of a particular idea of meditation. Stevens again points us to stillness through movement when he writes in the next line: “The great structure has become a minor house.” The last line of the stanza also has a surface level of stillness: “No turban walks across the

lessened floors" (*CP* 502). Although our perception may sense only the resting place of a completed, still thought, when we read with the sounding insights of the "as if" and the poet's effort "to choose" words, we are led beneath the surface to the imagination in motion, which has given us in a moment of "lessened floors," not stillness but the negation of one kind of motion, a negation that calls attention to its active construction through the imaginative metaphor of the turban.

This pattern of language that takes us toward stillness through the motion of metaphor, a pattern of language that calls attention to the active imagination behind the poetry, is evident in every stanza. In the third stanza, we are presented with a greenhouse, which is not actually stable in time since it is fading and "never so badly needed paint," and a chimney, seemingly one of the most motionless of objects, which over the course of fifty years is moving and "slants to one side." The last two lines of the stanza, "A fantastic effort has failed, a repetition / In a repetitiousness of men and flies," is again an image of stillness, failure, and death paradoxically presented through the active motion of metaphor, a metaphor that calls attention to itself if we consider that this *repetitiousness* is not only a repetition of life, but a repetition of language formed in the imagination. The flies also echo the paradoxical stillness of a mind in another meditative poem, where the metaphor of a fly moves a mind toward silence, William Butler Yeats's "Long-Legged Fly": "*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His mind moves upon silence*" (328). The metaphor of the fly might recall as well Emily Dickinson's poem where the fly is similarly both an indication of stillness and that which disrupts this stillness:

I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air—
Between the Heaves of Storm— (223)

In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens himself points out this tension between a meditation of plentiful virility, of limitless connotations, and a meditative stillness of apprehension and death. Referring to "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens writes: "At first, I thought of appropriating the title spoken of by Mrs. Church: The Hovering Fly, but I expelled that cynicism. There are very few things that one loves intensely; the least one can do is to keep the flies off" (*L* 447). Stevens' comment is typically witty—it is truly a turn of phrase in that it turns language by moving it from the consciously literary "The Hovering Fly" (a title later used by Allen Tate for a collection of essays) to the everyday, and it is a similar correspondence of the motion of consciousness through language and the motion of the lived world that Stevens outlines in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet." In quoting Henri Focillon, he again reminds us

that consciousness, like matter, is constantly seeking and expressing a form based on levels deeper than commonplace perception allows:

Human consciousness is in perpetual pursuit of a language and a style. To assume consciousness is at once to assume form. Even at levels far below the zone of definition and clarity, forms, measures and relationships exist. The chief characteristic of the mind is to be constantly describing itself. (NA 46)

However, this process of consciousness constantly describing itself is not solipsistic for precisely the reasons mentioned above—the movements of the mind, our thoughts and feelings, are in relation with the movements of the world so that the imagination can actually make the external world a more vital part of our lives.

If Stevens in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” brings forms of thought, of imagination and meditation, into the Einsteinian world of relativity, where matter and the mind are both forms of energy and motion, in “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet” he describes the mind in a Darwinian world of plenitude and chance, a world whose geography is made more real by the imagination’s ability to comprehend the non-geography, the multitude of other possibilities that also exist in the single possibility that has been realized:

When, therefore, we say that the world is a compact of real things so like the unreal things of the imagination that they are indistinguishable from one another and when, by way of illustration, we cite, say, the blue sky, we can be sure that the thing cited is always something that, whether by thinking or feeling, has become a part of our vital experience of life, even though we are not aware of it. It is easy to suppose that few people realize on that occasion, which comes to all of us, when we look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry, a geography that would be intolerable except for the non-geography that exists there—few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. (NA 65–66)

In “The Plain Sense of Things,” Stevens makes us aware of this indistinguishable correspondence between real things and the unreal things of our imagination so that we can both better recognize the world around us and the way this world reflects our thoughts as part of the vital experience of our lives. Again, Stevens’ letter to Sister Bernetta is illustrative: In the blank pond, Stevens sees an image of his own feelings, not as a kind of cipher, but as the basis for further consideration, for another movement of

perhaps; and in becoming a part of this process, the pond, which beneath the surface was never really permanent or still at all but vibrating like all matter, both reflects and participates in the motion of the mind as a figure of language, as part of a feeling, part of continuing thoughts: “perhaps it was the blankness that made me enjoy it so much.”

This motion of the meditative mind becomes clearer in the fourth stanza, which contains the lines with which I began: “Yet the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (CP 503). These lines are further echoed in the fifth stanza in the clause “all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires.” Again, we are aware that while we are experiencing the end of the imagination on the surface of language, in the structure behind the words, we are encountering a mind that, while seemingly as still as “the great pond,” is in fact in the act of imagining, “expressing silence / Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see” through the construction of the poem. Even in silence, there is an active dialogue, an active exchange of expression, since there is a mind that expresses not silence, but the idea of silence in language, an idea that is realized in the motion of an audience—the rat that senses that there is some expression there to see in the great pond, even if it is only this idea of “silence / Of a sort.” As the poem concludes, “all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires,” we realize that “all this” refers not only to the surface images of the poem—what the rat staring at the surface of the pond sees, a surface “without reflections, leaves, / Mud, water like dirty glass”—but also to the words that we are staring at, the words that have to be imagined in their motion if we are to approach stillness. Although we will always approach, yet never reach this stillness, as I have shown, this is not a tragedy, for the approach itself establishes the correspondence of motion that is the actual basis for the meditative moment.

Another way to understand the way Stevens “frames” this language of motion is to consider the connections between this poem and painting. Although many critics have used painting to elucidate Stevens’ poetry, I would again like to turn to Benamou, one of the first critics to elaborate on this connection, to suggest how Stevens creates frames in this poem that are not only spatial but also temporal. Benamou distinguishes between two kinds of painting in Stevens’ poetry, Impressionism and Cubism, both of which imply a kind of motion or change through time:

Impressionism shows the *passive* principle of change. The eye must be as candid as possible and merely relay the variations of light and colors. But in Cubism, “more than changes of light” are involved. Imagination is the *active* principle which transforms and extends the object by multiplying resemblances. The metaphors of poetry and the metamorphoses of painting tap the same reservoir of analogies. (10)

As Benamou also points out, Stevens seems to have appreciated Impressionism's "poetic quality" (OP 241). In "The Plain Sense of Things," Stevens includes images and the kind of passive movement that Benamou associates with Impressionism: the leaves falling through the inevitable, cyclical movement of nature; "the great structure," which has passively "become a minor house"; the greenhouse, which has faded with the coming and going of sunlight; the chimney, which has leaned slowly over the years, despite its design; and finally, of course, "The great pond and its waste of lilies," which echo a particular Impressionist painting, Monet's *Waterlilies*. Indeed, in Stevens' poem, images act as "substantive thoughts" that are resting places, but at the same time, when seen as a whole, these images call attention to the fluency of the world, the way an Impressionist painting captures a moment through lights and colors that are so emotive because they are transitory. In considering Stevens' own appraisal of Impressionism, Benamou writes:

By this, it seems to me that he meant an element of sensibility, a sensitiveness to the flux and change of nature. Both Monet and Stevens express the poetry of a fluent universe, a vast stage for the wind, rain, sun and moonlight, a poem of skies and waters in which the key word is weather. (5)

While not one color is mentioned in "The Plain Sense of Things"—it is blank in that respect—there are signs of weather and lighting and hence motion in the poem. As Benamou's analysis suggests, even the blank, cold silence of a winter day can be only a metaphor for stillness because it is still a *day* and thus inherently a part of the flux of nature and time.

As Stevens indicates through his association of Joad and Bergson, however, a fluent world is only part of this process of understanding, since the identity who perceives this "fluent mundo" is in a state of flux as well. According to Benamou, Stevens, in trying to harness this fluctuating identity as an artistic method, adopts Cubist techniques of representing images in his later poems:

A brand new theory of perception is at work. Like Husserl's eidetic reduction, it builds on Bergson's energizing of sight by memory, but supercedes [sic] the Impressionist eternization of privileged moments by a series of *Abschattungen* [shading or shadowing], which multiply perspectives and extend time. (106)

This "active principle" of Cubism, which multiplies resemblances and perspectives, is similar to the transitive nature of Stevens' language that we considered previously. The "as if" near the beginning of the poem suggests that what follows is a series of infinite propositions or resemblances from which the poet chooses, juxtaposing these seemingly "passive" images to show that one is an active restatement of the next. Just as we know

that a Cubist painter has stretched our normal habits of perception by looking at an object from different, moving positions in space and time by the fractured images and colors of the painting, we know that Stevens has changed his perspective from the refracted angles of his images and words. Stevens proposes “this blank cold,” which seen from a slightly different angle is “sadness without cause”; to show different rates of change, he arranges the greenhouse whose paint has faded in a few years next to the chimney that has come to slant over the course of fifty years; he contrasts men and flies in the same “repetitiousness” to remind us that the flies are a symbol of death precisely because of their different rate of change. As in Dutch still lifes expressing human vanity, here their brief, buzzing lives are a reminder that human life is not as permanent as it seems, but merely moves along the same, inevitable path at a slower rate. Thus, what appears on the surface to be a moment of stillness, “an inert savoir,” is at another level a revealing of different rates of movement toward stillness; this revealing makes us aware of the various kinds of change that we *must* know, since they are inevitable or “passive,” as well as the different ways that we *can* know these kinds of change by actively considering our perspective in time and space.

Benamou points out a similar paradox in Stevens’ use of frames for his pictorial poems. Rather than stopping movement at some point, his frames reveal the “tension between static and dynamic elements” (35); in other words, the drawing of a fixed line serves as a reference point for the movement that occurs across it. Where a painting of Monet’s whose frame splits a ship in half makes us aware that the frame is a stopping point but one that the painting is moving beyond, Stevens arranges his language like a frame, so that sentences and stanzas emphasize the arbitrariness of his poetic framing points. This is evident from the first line of the poem, “After the leaves have fallen,” since we are aware that we are moving from a “before” that is outside the frame of the poem into the “canvas” of the poem itself. Stevens’ use of punctuation and sentence structures emphasizes this effect. While the first three stanzas each end with the “frame” of a period, the fourth stanza runs directly into the fifth stanza by ending with an enjambed line, “expressing silence / Of a sort”—in fact, as if to emphasize that language explodes beyond the frames we impose upon it, the last seven lines comprise one sentence, by far the longest and most complex sentence of the poem. Also, while both the second and third stanzas contain two sentences that are one line long, so that the frame of the line reinforces the frame of the sentence, this arbitrary structuring is also transgressed in the last two stanzas, neither of which contains a line that is also a complete sentence.

Another obvious way that Stevens shows that language moves beyond the frame of his poem is by including a multitude of references to other poems in “The Plain Sense of Things.” As we have seen in the image of the flies, one way Stevens does this is by echoing other poets. He also refers to

his own poems, however, using similar words and images in different poems to show that the words in his lexicon are not confined to a single meaning; in fact, by using words in different poems to suggest almost exactly opposite meanings, Stevens suggests that each word can be interpreted the way he interpreted the painting *Wooden Horses* as if its “connotations are without limit.” Thus, as the connotations multiply and proliferate, one word or image may be echoed and re-echoed in so many poems that we cannot help but find ourselves in a moving, living language; even words and images in “The Plain Sense of Things” that *seem* to point to stillness or ending are shimmering, vibrant, and alive with different meanings when we consider them in the broader context of Stevens’ work. For example, the leaves that have fallen in “The Plain Sense of Things” appear in canto VII of “The Auroras of Autumn” to propose a complex, living imagination that survives the changing seasons and pauses not to fade away but to “leap” and transform:

Is there an imagination that sits enthroned
As grim as it is benevolent, the just
And the unjust, which in the midst of summer stops

To imagine winter? When the leaves are dead,
Does it take its place in the north and enfold itself,
Goat-leaper, crystallized and luminous, sitting

In highest night? . . .

.....

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

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

In addition, many of the images in “The Plain Sense of Things” echo images from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.” The “turban” recalls the “Arabian in my room” (*CP* 383)—the moving, imaginative light of the moon—in canto III, from *It Must Be Abstract*, a canto that begins with a living view of language: “The poem refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea” (*CP* 382). In canto X of *It Must Change*, we see a different view of a body of water than “the great pond,” one which does not connote a place where the imagination ends but where it proliferates:

The water of
The lake was full of artificial things,

Like a page of music, like an upper air,
Like a momentary color, in which swans
Were seraphs, were saints, were changing essences.
(CP 397)

As a final example, the “repetition” that could be interpreted as a kind of frustration appears in canto IX of *It Must Give Pleasure* with very different connotations:

Whistle, forced bugler,
That bugles for the mate, nearby the nest,
Cock bugler, whistle and bugle and stop just short,

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

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

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good,
The way wine comes at a table in a wood. (CP 405)

Like the other instances, here “repetition” suggests not a resignation to death, but an acclimation of life, a way the imagination can shape our actions and allow us to participate in the cyclical nature of the life of the world.

Although it could be argued that the way Stevens restates previous images and words in “The Plain Sense of Things” is simply a deflation of his former use of language, such an argument would rely on a linear reading of the volume that Stevens prepared as his *Collected Poems*. However, Stevens, whose rhythm of writing followed the seasons, seems to have planned his *Collected Poems* with a similar expectation of his readers, including roughly 300 poems to match the 300 or so poems found in Chinese anthologies of poetry that were designed to be read over the course of a year (Richardson 412). A. Walton Litz comments specifically on the need for this kind of cyclical construction in “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” and he points out that since the poem is a spatial as well as a temporal construct, reading later parts of the poem affects the way we read earlier parts (164). Thus, the connotations present in “The Plain Sense of Things” have to be read as an active interplay of the language in the poems that come both before and after it, since all of the meanings resonate through a repeated, cyclical reading where the poems that end one reading, one cycle, carry the earlier meanings but are themselves part of an “earlier” reading of our next trip through the cycle. Again, what ap-

pears on the surface of things as a deflation of language, a static state of words and hence the mind, becomes, on closer inspection, a deeper sense of movement as we realize that the words actually reflect a movement of meaning and of the mind. In fact, the way words move beyond the “frame” of the line, the sentence, the stanza, the poem, and beyond, echoes James’s description of the way thoughts flow in the “stream of thought”:

The traditional psychologist talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quartpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. . . . Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. (246)

If all of these elements of poetry and painting reinforce a perception of language and thus a sense of imagination that is not in any way static but in flux, what accounts for the one phrase that most seems to resist these limitless connotations and this movement: “A fantastic effort has failed”? Seen in light of the entire movement of the “return / To a plain sense of things” and how “all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires,” we realize that this apparent renunciation of the effort of poetry takes place in a poem; in other words, it is contradicted by its very existence in this context. What this points to is a specification of what kind of effort has failed—this specification is found in the connotation of “fantastic” as something “existing only in the fancy; unreal.” This “fantastic” effort that has failed, then, is not a renunciation of poetry or a resignation of the imagination, but a pointing to “the plain sense of things” to find a new kind of imagination, a new kind of perception, and, ultimately, a new kind of identity that are based on these elements of motion. We are ending an era of imagination by using our imagination to give us a new understanding of reality: “It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era. What happens is that it is always attaching itself to a new reality, and adhering to it. It is not that there is a new imagination but that there is a new reality” (NA 22).

Just as Stevens’ poem challenges us to consider language in a new way, one that is more in tune with the transitive aspects of our thoughts, the poem, through its images, also asks us to consider reality itself, the place where these images originate, in a new way that takes into account the fact that “[e]very body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes.’” In other words, we must consider our sensory perception, especially vision, if we are fully

to understand the relationship between the imagination and reality and its basis in motion. Using the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly "Circles"—an essay to which we will return—David M. La Guardia states that it is the eye itself that "pans unrestrictedly the process world and establishes the initial reaction by which mind and reality fuse" (12); La Guardia adds, "the reestablishment of an original relation to the universe begins in the eye as the 'first circle' and medium of perception" (12–13). In R. L. Gregory's *Eye and Brain: The Psychology of Seeing*—whose title is reminiscent of lines in Stevens' "Crude Foyer": "the mind / Is the eye" (CP 305)—Gregory makes a similar connection between the two primary ways we understand the world, through our visual perception and through language:

What the eyes do is to feed the brain with information coded into neural activity—chains of electrical pulses—which by their code and the patterns of brain activity, represent objects. We may take an analogy from written language: the letters and words on this page have certain meanings, to those who know the language. They affect the reader's brain appropriately, but they are not pictures. (7)

The point that Gregory makes repeatedly in this investigation of the way we see is that understanding our visual sensory information is always an act of interpretation: "Perception is not determined simply by the stimulus patterns; rather it is a dynamic searching for the best interpretation of the available data" (11). In other words, if we know the world through our senses, we know it through our mind as well, and the dichotomy between the two is a false one: "Perceiving and thinking are not independent: 'I see what you mean' is not a puerile pun, but indicates a connection which is very real" (12). Stevens notes this equivalence of perception and thinking when he writes in the "Adagia": "Accuracy of observation is the equivalent of accuracy of thinking" (OP 185).

As we have seen thus far in our consideration of "The Plain Sense of Things," the mind that perceives and the object it perceives are both in motion. A consideration of the poem in terms of visual perception carries this idea of motion one step further to indicate that *the way we perceive is predicated on movement as well*. For example, Gregory points out that in experiments where an image "is optically stabilised vision fades after a few seconds, and so it seems that part of the function of eye movement is to sweep the image over the receptors so that they do not adapt and so cease to signal to the brain the presence of the image in the eye" (44). In other words, we would literally go blind without the motion of our eyes. Gregory not only shows that eye movement is necessary for vision, he also suggests that detecting movement is the oldest, most important function of the eye itself since "detection of movement is essential to survival"

(91). In fact, the extreme edge of the retina, which broadens our peripheral vision, does not detect anything but movement, which causes a reflex so that the eye rotates and the more advanced center of the eye can identify the moving object. Thus, the juxtaposition of images in "The Plain Sense of Things" (what I identified above as the Cubist aspects of the poem) is also a radical return to the animalistic origins of our senses. The way the poem causes us to pan from the moving "leaves," to "the great structure," "across the lessened floors," to the "greenhouse," "the chimney," and finally to "the great pond" and "the rat come out to see" replicates the way our eyes perceive the world around us by remaining in constant motion, and the rat, which we see out of the corner of our eye and hence our mind, causes us to turn our attention to the great pond as a matter of reflex. In other words, just as Stevens' poem leads us to recognize the parallel between the motion of language and the motion of our minds and the world around us, so too does it lead us to recognize the parallel between the motion that is the basis for both our acts of thinking and our acts of perceiving.

"The Plain Sense of Things," through its arrangement and description of images, seems to challenge our notions of perception by in effect replicating the experiment that Gregory calls "induced movement." Induced movement occurs when we are forced to rely solely on vision to detect movement, so that "we tend to accept that it is the largest objects which are stationary, the smaller objects moving" (Gregory 113). Since our perception is based largely on experience, hypotheses, and "playing the odds," "the brain takes the best bet and tends to accept that movement is of smaller rather than larger objects when the issue can be in doubt" (Gregory 114). Because of this assumption of the eye and brain, we can easily misjudge the movement of larger objects when smaller objects are in motion in our field of vision. This understanding of perception gives us yet another way of detecting and interpreting the movement in the poem, since it is the falling leaves, the flies, and "the rat come out to see" that are the most obvious, small moving objects in this poem, yet our focus on their movement can cause us to "overlook" the fact that the larger objects—the great house, the greenhouse, the chimney, the great pond—are in different kinds motion as well, as we have seen.

The return to the plain sense of things thus calls into question perception as well as "the intellect, which presents us with a false view," since our visual perceptual system lies beneath our intellect—it "has been of biological significance for far longer than the calculating intellect" (Gregory 224). This return does not in any way exclude the imagination, however, if we understand the imagination not as the fantastic, as that which is removed from reality, but as that part of our creative thinking that is always necessary to complete our perception, make sense of our perceptions, and expand our knowledge of the world around us. Following Stevens, Wilde writes: "What we see in the mind is as real to us as what

we see by the eye' [OP 188], and what we see by the eye (as science also verifies) is composed by the mind as imagination rather than mind as abstracting, rationalizing intellect" (8). Gregory also shows that the imagination is in fact inseparable from the reality that our senses perceive. For example, our eyes, unlike those of most other animals, are designed to give us a wide range of information that we can then interpret, and "it is this freedom to make new inferences from sensory data which allows us to discover and see so much more than other animals" (Gregory 221).

Stevens alludes to this necessary connection between the imagination and reality when he writes, "In poetry at least the imagination must not detach itself from reality" (OP 187); rather, "Poetry increases the feeling for reality" (OP 188). While James held the "conviction that there is an unbridgeable gap between the flow of bodily sensations on the one hand, and on the other the language by which we represent this flow" (Poirier 41), Stevens, through the fluidity of his language, attempts to bridge this gap by challenging both the way we perceive sensations and the way we consider language. To improve our perception, Stevens' poem shows that first we have to acknowledge to a greater extent the motion of the world around us by recognizing that perception itself relies on motion.

As we have seen in "The Plain Sense of Things," this recognition comes through our imagination, since the imagination can give us a better understanding of motion, expand our perception, and ultimately change our understanding of reality. As Gregory states: "The continual searching for the best interpretation is good evidence for the general importance of augmenting the limitations of the senses by importing other knowledge" (223). This kind of "other knowledge" is precisely what the poem gives us in challenging us to complete reality by going beyond our normal limitations of detecting movement in our language, our identity, our world, and our perception of this world. In recalling Stevens' affinity with the visual aspects of Impressionism and Cubism in his poetry, Benamou writes: "Since all we want is a new *sense* of things, renewing the words will do" (73). Stevens is not *just* renewing the sense of words, however; he is literally offering a new sense of vision and perception through his words and the way these words can act on our imagination. Further, this heightening of perception through the imagination and a realization of motion can in turn change the relation of the imagination to reality, so that when we return to the plain sense of things, this heightened perception can fulfill the goal of meditation and make the mind and its imagination one with reality: "Perhaps there is a degree of perception at which what is real and what is imagined are one: a state of clairvoyant observation, accessible or possibly accessible to the poet or, say, the acutest poet" (OP 192). In other words, "The Plain Sense of Things" does not portray the failure of the poet's imagination in the face of reality; rather it is a guide to a new kind of meditation in which Stevens and his readers can each become "the acutest poet" whose imagination is one with reality.

The necessity of the imagination in understanding our perception means that “the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined” (CP 503). For, at the moment when imagination lets us reach and surpass the limitations of our perception, the old, “fantastic” imagination has dissolved, and a new imagination and a new reality are in the process of being conceived. Of course, this dissolution and reconfiguration occur in language and identity as well: just as flowing language transgresses the frames we have placed on it—asking us to reconstruct our views of language in broader and broader contexts—this new perception transgresses and dissolves our old conceptions of identity and asks us to conceive of a new understanding of identity in a different relation to the world, a relation that is discovered in the kind of meditation that the poem directs us toward.

All of this analysis of movement leads us to the last lines of the poem and the question why “all this / Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires” (CP 503). While the poem causes us to reconsider the role of movement in our understanding of language, perception, and the imagination, this consideration always involves a return to the identity of the poet, who finds that “It is difficult even to choose the adjective / For this blank cold, this sadness without cause” (CP 502). Thus, the dissolution of our old categories, or containers, also leads us to consider the dissolution of the identity that has constructed the poem, particularly if we are willing to accept Richard Poirier’s claim that “for all practical purposes, human beings are constituted by language; they exist in it, and also by means of it” (133).

In tracing the connections between Emerson and Stevens, Poirier points out the paradox of this dissolution as a reassertion of a new kind of self:

Emerson is saying, then, that the soul—he could as readily have called it “desire”—establishes its presence most vividly at the very moment when we are about to extricate ourselves from any of the commitments which the soul has already made or, for that matter, is in the process of making. The Soul reveals itself in those premonitory gestures or transitions by which it abandons one form or an incipient form for the always beckoning promise of another, though this “other” will also prove a limitation. (25)

In other words, Stevens’ efforts to extricate himself from the forms of language that he has inherited and reshaped do not stop at the boundaries of the poem, but point us beyond its frames to the ongoing process of transitions and dissolution where “[t]he Soul reveals itself.” This is because the poem is a commitment even “in the process of making” it: even as it challenges our perceptions, the poem is fixing new limits, and thus can only gesture toward constant acts of transgression, dissolution, and remaking;

the poem bursts beyond its frames even as it suggests new ones beyond it. This continual process is necessary—"an inevitable knowledge" that is required to represent the true nature of the "soul," since "the soul never 'becomes' a thing or a text; it exists in the action of becoming" (Poirier 28). In other words, the "self-erasure by disowning words becomes 'an indication of selfhood'" (Poirier 11) because this self-erasure points to a movement beyond the limits of language and thought that have been inherited.

Poirier's analysis of the formation of identity progressing through moments of dissolution recalls again Emerson's "Circles":

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumferences,—as, for instance, an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite,—to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over the boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempts again to stop and bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions. (Emerson 167)

Since identity is based on language, and since identity progresses through these moments of transgression and expansion, the poet's function is to break our circles, our habits of language and hence our habits of identity—to expand our lives "another orbit on the great deep":

In my daily work I incline to repeat my old steps, and do not believe in remedial force, in the power of change and reform. But some Petrarch or Ariosto, filled with the new wine of his imagination, writes me an ode or a brisk romance, full of daring thought and action. He smites and arouses me with his shrill tones, breaks up my whole chain of habits, and I open my eye on my own possibilities. (Emerson 171)

This breaking of the "whole chain of habits" is precisely what "The Plain Sense of Things" accomplishes. The only habit left in the world that Stevens "inhabits" is the process of motion, of moving beyond old limitations. This process of an expanding identity is what Stevens proposes in his new meditation, one that can help us achieve the harmony that Emerson describes in "Nature" (1849): "The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and

vegetable. . . . Yet it is certain that the power to produce this delight, does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both" (6).

This "harmony of both" is a harmony of habits. As James writes in his chapter on habit:

But the philosophy of habit is thus, in the first instance, a chapter in physics rather than in physiology or psychology. That it is at bottom a physical principle is admitted by all good recent writers on the subject. They call attention to analogues of acquired habits exhibited by dead matter. (110)

For James, these habits of objects are based on a certain plasticity that can be slowly modified just as human beings can slowly modify their identities. This again recalls Stevens' juxtaposition of Bergson and Joad: a changing identity has changing perceptions that parallel the constant changing in the object being apprehended; an understanding of objects is an understanding of ourselves, like Stevens' blue sky or blank pond, which form the world of our thoughts and feelings. Gregory corroborates this idea that a broader understanding of perception can lead to the objects of contemplation forming both embodiments of knowledge already acquired and the expectation of the knowledge that is yet to come:

The seeing of objects involves many sources of information beyond those meeting the eye when we look at an object. It generally involves knowledge of the object derived from previous experience, and this experience is not limited to vision but may include the other senses. . . . Objects are far more than patterns of stimulation: objects have pasts and futures; when we know its past or can guess its future, an object transcends experience and becomes an embodiment of knowledge and expectation without which life of even the simplest kind is impossible. (8)

As we saw in Stevens' comments in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," the lessons that objects have to offer have radically changed from James's time because of a new understanding of the extent to which objects are in motion. After Einstein, objects no longer have substance, but rather, as Joad writes, "Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes." To take delight in the world, to establish a new kind of harmony, we must take into account this new understanding of objects and acquire their habits of nature, the habits of vibration, movement, change. Our meditation of an object apprehended through sight does not lead us, then, to consider it a still, static object, which reflects the stillness of the mind. Just the opposite is true. If we are to expand our perception in the way Stevens suggests, a way that Gregory says is possible, our meditation will reveal the radical

motion of the object, a motion that resembles the motion of our own minds. This new understanding is precisely what Stevens describes in “Three Academic Pieces”:

What our eyes behold may well be the text of life but one’s meditations on the text and the disclosure of these meditations are no less a part of the structure of reality. . . . What the eye beholds may be the text of life. It is, nevertheless, a text that we do not write. The eye does not beget in resemblance. It sees. But the mind begets in resemblance as the painter begets in representation; that is to say, as the painter makes his world within a world; or as the musician begets in music, in the obvious small pieces having to do with gardens in the rain or the fountains of Rome and in the obvious larger pieces having to do with the sea, Brazilian night or those woods in the neighborhood of Vienna in which the hunter was accustomed to blow his horn and in which, also, yesterday, the birds sang preludes to the atom bomb. (NA 76)

In “The Plain Sense of Things” we have these “obvious small pieces having to do with gardens in the rain” arranged in accordance with the “obvious larger pieces,” such as the atom bomb. In the reality of this new world, what appears on the surface as a meditation on stillness is in fact a meditation on motion and the resemblance of motion between human beings and their world. This new kind of meditation relies on a new kind of imagination, one that is not simply “fantastic” but something more real—an imagination that allows us to change our perception and adapt our senses to perceive this motion more fully. This meditation, in turn, will lead to a new sense of perception and a new sense of identity, one more in harmony with our modern understanding of nature. “The Plain Sense of Things,” then, reveals a mind in motion, transgressing old conceptions of imagination and identity to move one step closer toward the energy of pure motion that is in all objects, animate and inanimate.¹

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Notes

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The Reality of Poetry: Wallace Stevens and C. E. M. Joad

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I

TN 1941 WALLACE STEVENS SPOKE to an audience at Princeton University on the subject of poetry. Anyone reading what was eventually published as the “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” will testify to the difficulty of the argument, a difficulty that begins with the title and increases with Stevens’ frequent reliance on the abstract term “reality.” Much depends on what Stevens means by reality, for he uses the term to refer to two distinctly different concepts. Initially, he uses the term to refer to a reality that is flattened by our perception, a fixed reality that we create. But as the essay progresses, Stevens uses the term to describe a more metaphysical sense of reality, one that interrupts our subjective absorption long enough to speak to us of nothing less than our “spiritual height and depth” (NA 34). Stevens uses the first three sections of the essay to offer an implicit critique of the first sense of reality and the last two sections to present the second sense of reality, a metaphysical reality the poet brings to us in the vibrating sound of his words. Stevens centers his sense of this mysterious phenomenon around a few strategically placed references to Dr. Joad. Very little scholarship has been written on Joad and his relationship to Stevens, so one might legitimately ask, who is Joad, what is his philosophy, and how did he influence Stevens?¹

A contemporary of Stevens, Cyril Edwin Mitchinson Joad was born on 12 August 1891 in Southampton, and he died on 9 April 1953 in London. An Anglo-Indian, Joad served from 1930 until his death as the head of the Department of Philosophy and Psychology at Birbeck College (*Twentieth Century Authors* 727, First Supplement 493). In addition to writing regular reviews for *The New Statesman and Nation*, Joad was a prolific author in his discipline. By the time Stevens wrote his 1941 “Noble Rider” essay, Joad had written such books as *Matter, Life and Value* (1929), *Philosophical Aspects of Modern Science* (1932), *Guide to Philosophy* (1936), and *Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics* (1938). Through World War II, Joad was one of the leading agnostics of his day, though after the war he became a Christian.² He was quite popular for his regular participation on *The Brains Trust*, a BBC broadcast. In spite of this popularity, however, every one of

his books received highly negative reviews in *The New Statesman and Nation*, all reviewers responding to the strangeness of his philosophy, one that does not fit neatly into any particular category. R. H. S. Crossman's 1936 review of Joad's *Guide to Philosophy*, for example, declares that Joad actually seems most attracted to the "inconclusiveness" of philosophy (117).³

A probable cause of this charge was Joad's rather indeterminate philosophical position as a pluralistic vitalist interested in the metaphysical realm of value. It is not that vitalism itself was unpopular in Joad's time, but that the philosophy as it was practiced in the early twentieth century typically argued against the metaphysical realm of value, its focus being instead on the human being's experience as a finite creature in a finite and material world (Weinstein x). In addition, Joad's vitalism is pluralistic, rejecting the monistic explanations of the universe offered by determinist, materialist explanations of reality. According to Joad, the universe is not composed only of matter, for there is also the realm of value. The realms of matter and value, moreover, meet in the vital realm of life. In this regard, Joad's pluralistic vitalism is based on what, by his own admission, is a rather unwieldy combination of both the "[eternal] Forms of Plato and the realm of the *élan vital* of Bergson" (MLV 325). Contrary to the popular belief of his day that the eternal forms of Plato are fixed and unchanging, Joad insists that they are vibrating. Also contrary to the popular belief of his day, Joad takes issue with Bergson's idea that there is only change and that it is the intellect that interrupts the flux of life, thus creating for us a false sense of a static reality (MLV 182). Drawing from Plato, Joad argues instead that, rather than the intellect, it is the eternal forms that interrupt the flux, momentarily arresting it while they vibrate their reality into our notice. This reality is thus not false, not something artificially created by us. It is a vibrating, metaphysical reality that we discover.

This metaphysical reality is Joad's culminating focus in *Matter, Life and Value*. Joad begins his fourth chapter, "The Vitalist Hypothesis," by saying that in chapters two and three his goal was to lay "the foundations upon which a metaphysic might be based" (138). Understanding Joad's desire to present a metaphysic is crucial to comprehending both his emendation and endorsement of Plato and his refutation and endorsement of Bergson. In the third chapter, Joad discusses the complexities of the way in which the mind perceives matter, establishing his critique against any theories, such as Bergson's, that are based on the unquestioned belief in an ontologically coherent universe. Thus he begins his fourth chapter: "I have tried to show that the facts of nature and experience cannot be accounted for in terms of a fundamental unity" (MLV 138). Joad then enlarges this idea, especially its corollary that

we are committed to the view that there are at least two fundamentally irreducible principles in the universe, from whose

interaction some of these phenomena result; and that one set of these phenomena, namely those exhibited by what is called mental activity, are to be interpreted as life's awareness of something other than and external to itself. (MLV 138)

This assertion is characteristic of Joad; he repeats it in some version throughout all his books when he discounts those who would argue that metaphysical reality is merely an illusion created by the mind of the individual.

Almost fifty pages later, he arrives at Bergson, presenting two reasons that make it impossible in Bergson's sense to define life. The first is that if life is "realized in experience," this experience "can only be lived through; it cannot be known." As soon as we speak of it, we turn a subject into an object and "falsify its character as experience itself, reducing its complexity to solid, static objects" (MLV 182). On the other hand, Joad admits at this point that he is not in complete disagreement with Bergson. Here he quotes the "famous passage at the beginning of *Creative Evolution*" (MLV 182) in which Bergson comments on the "'most stable of internal states, the visual perception of a motionless object. The object may remain the same, I may look at it from the same side . . . nevertheless the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had'" (MLV 183). Joad agrees with Bergson that this changing describes our perception of external objects, but Joad extends Bergson's argument, asserting that "it is even more true as a description of our internal states, our willings, our emotions, and our desires" (MLV 183). Insisting for this reason that, if all is change, it is not possible to discern in any mental state a difference between that which changes and that "to which changes occur," Joad finds a flaw in Bergson's insistence that all is change. Bergson's assertion that there is only change, Joad insists, argues, unintentionally, the contradictory "corollary that there is nothing which changes, or, in other words, that there is nothing to change, since in postulating such a something we should be admitting the existence of something other than change" (MLV 183).

Joad uses the nature of aesthetic experience as a way of illustrating the reality of this something that is other than change, a something not dependent for its existence on being noticed by us. Here Joad introduces the term "realized" as that which signifies the experiential quality of life. To realize something is to discover it, and this is what we do when we encounter beauty. The discovery is dependent neither on the mind's realizing it nor on the "relation between a knowing mind and [the] object known." The attitude of mind "is one of discovery or of recognition"; when we look at a beautiful object, our "realization that the picture is beautiful involves an attitude of discovery," not of creating (MLV 275). Because we discover rather than create this reality, our experience is enjoyable; if it were something we could manufacture, Joad asks, why would we not manufacture it more often? Aware of the vitality of experiential life, Joad emends Plato's idea of eternal forms, arguing that rather than being static

and unchanging the forms are vibrating and alive, altering their manifestations for each new age. Becoming aware of their presence in art, we realize or live through the experience rather than study the experience after we have had it. Realizing, in this sense of discovering these forms, is what frees us from our habit of fixing what we see, reducing it to a flattened sense of reality that we create.

Joad has much to say about freedom. In his *Guide to the Philosophy of Morals and Politics*, Joad argues at length, citing examples from the Greeks through the moderns, on behalf of the ethics of what constitutes the “good life.” Such a discussion entails addressing, among other concepts, determinism and free will. In his chapter “The Problem of Free Will,” Joad argues that a willed action is performed deliberately “when, after balancing [in “dispassionate” fashion] two alternatives one against the other, [a person] deliberately opts for one of them” (*Morals* 260). Freedom in this regard is a “negative conception.” That is, only a person who acts as a whole, rather than as a deterministically driven entity, can experience this freedom. It is negative, then, in the sense that it is a freedom from “domination by particular influences, those, namely, which the various sciences investigate and emphasize” (*Morals* 261). Such freedom is very different from what Joad describes as the illusory sense of freedom advanced by those who endorse determinism. That is, if we believe that we are what we are only because of heredity and environment—that our existence is always caused by forces beyond our control—how, Joad asks, can we believe that we are free? “Why does instinctive belief persist in contradicting reason?” Joad asks, emphasizing the idea that a determinist insisting he or she is free contradicts reason (*Morals* 259). If determinism is true, we are not free. Here Joad observes Bergson’s critique of scientific abstraction as that which stops the living flow of life, imposing artificial breaks in it, thus looking at each part separately and subsequently forgetting about the whole. He does so in order to critique Bergson’s similar sense of the falsifying intellect and Bergson’s attempt to solve the problem by relying overly much on instinct. Joad argues instead that the intellect can actually choose, “not as a bloodless faculty of intellectual apprehension, but [as] a mode of thinking, or, as I should prefer to say, of experiencing” (*Morals* 269). Joad thus concludes:

Now in a purely determinist world there are no freely acting creatures. There is, then, nothing in such a world whose behaviour could have suggested the notion of freedom to human beings; nothing that could have put the idea of freedom into their heads. Yet, as we have already pointed out, they could not have spontaneously generated the idea for themselves, for in such a world nothing is spontaneously generated. How, then, in a deterministic world, can the illusion of freedom arise? (*Morals* 277)

With this question, Joad goes on in subsequent chapters to return to the idea of negative freedom, a freedom that exists by virtue of the fact that we do not live in an ontologically coherent universe: all is not matter and / or determined, for there is also the metaphysical realm, which includes within it the world of aesthetic experience. A phenomenon that enables us to experience the realm of value, aesthetic experience offers us a kind of abstraction different from scientific abstraction. This different kind of abstraction Joad associates with free will, as opposed to scientific or deterministic abstraction, which he associates with fancy. “Realizing” allows the poet—and his or her readers—to experience the larger whole, what Joad calls the eternal forms of which Plato spoke. “Realizing” is thus an activity that turns the soul’s attention to this metaphysical reality (*Morals* 60).⁴

Joad agrees with Bergson, moreover, that there is no completion to life. It is in a state of becoming. In describing this state of becoming, however, Joad argues that between the teleological and the naturalistic (i.e., deterministic) modes of interpretation, the first is superior, as it can at least explain that protean nature of life, which is not merely matter (MLV 186). This protean nature, says Joad, reflects the multiple or pluralistic “nature of reality” (MLV 188). This reality, which Joad later defines in detail as “whatever entities in the universe are static, perfect, changeless, and are regarded as possessing value,” is thus, paradoxically, what moves, vibrates, and changes as we witness it (MLV 325). It is the metaphysical realm that animates the realm of matter, obstructing or temporarily fixing the ongoing, evolutionary flux of which matter is composed (MLV 199).

Coming from a source outside of us, this obstructing is what keeps life from being merely determinate. What obstructs the flux of life is something external to it; when life comes into contact with this external obstruction, life is diversified and broken up (an insistence that, again, shows Joad’s disagreement with Bergson’s idea that it is the intellect that does the breaking up). This obstructing is also a sign that life is pluralistic in origin. Joad draws on Plato’s idea of Being and Not-Being as he argues that both exist. When Not-Being obstructs the world of matter, actually manifests itself in “adhering” to matter, the Not-Being “acquires a freedom and a spontaneity of its own” (i.e., a vibrating, moving, changing quality) (MLV 205). In this way, poetry speaks to us:

It is in this sense, then, that the value of poetry is relative; it is not something fixed and immutable, there for all readers for all time, but it comes into existence only in so far as there exists some chord in the reader’s soul tuned by experience to the note the poet strikes. (MLV 247)

Joad’s emphasis here comes from what he calls a “famous definition of poetry” that describes poetry “as the mating of sound and sense” (MLV

242). Joad asserts in this regard that the poet does not advance a thesis but functions to create beauty. In fact, Joad precedes this definition by asking what right the poet has to be “classed with the teachers and moralists among those advance riders of the march of evolution” (*MLV* 242). Because these “riders” are aware on some level of the future, they are aware of their age’s tendency to resist that future by clinging instead to flattening, conventional ways of thought. Thus these riders must use a form of violence to disrupt such thinking:

The genius is a manifestation of life at a higher level than that which has been reached in his contemporaries; he is, therefore, a forerunner or prophet of the next level or levels at which life will emerge in the race as a whole, forming, as it were, a bridge between the level which has been and that which is to be evolved. . . . It follows that the genius must from his very nature violently and persistently challenge the accepted categories of thought, canons of art, or rules of conduct current in his age. (*MLV* 220, 227)

These ways of thought ignore the whole (of which the future is already a part). In this respect, Joad insists that the whole is greater than its parts—something which, if approached from the perspective of scientific abstraction, is impossible to see, as scientific abstraction ignores the whole. Joad carries the idea of the whole into his subsequent discussion that in our (pluralistic) universe there are subsistent objects, things that may or may not have physical counterparts. This world of subsistent objects contains within itself the world of physical objects, “as the ocean contains its waves” (*MLV* 127).

As this brief overview of Joad’s major ideas and terms suggests, Joad is not an original thinker. Rather his genius lies in synthesizing ideas that are usually considered as opposites, such as the fixed notion of reality in Plato and the fluid one in Bergson. But it is precisely this synthesis, this presenting two different senses of reality, that influenced Stevens the most in articulating the poetic theory of “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words.”

II

Stevens quotes Joad once in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” and refers explicitly back to him one additional time in the essay. The last two sections of the essay, however, are filled with repetitions of the vocabulary in the quotation from Joad, and, as will be demonstrated, the first three sections are filled with Joad’s vocabulary regarding the way in which we fix reality. What will become clear is that these concepts and Joad’s references to them with words such as “realizing,” “freedom,” and what is “fixed” versus what is “vibrating,” are not used in passing, as is

characteristic of Stevens with a lot of other references, but rather they provide the theoretical ground of his essay.

Still, there is not much of Joad that Stevens mentions explicitly in any of his essays. In his later essay “Imagination as Value” (1948), Stevens quotes Joad again. There are also two quotations from Joad that Stevens copies into his *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujets*. All of these quotations are from various articles that Joad wrote for the weekly periodical *The New Statesman and Nation*, to which Stevens subscribed from its inception. In a letter to José Rodríguez Feo (22 January 1948), Stevens states “[V. S.] Pritchett of whom you speak in your last letter is a more or less regular contributor to the Statesman, of which I have been a reader from #1” (L 575).⁵ Joad is not mentioned in any of Stevens’ letters or any of the *Opus Posthumous* collection. None of Joad’s books is in Stevens’ remaining library (housed at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, and the Amherst Library in Massachusetts), but neither is Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, for example, on which several studies of Stevens have been based. The fact that the books are not in Stevens’ library does not mean that he never owned them; as J. M. Edelstein observes, a group of two to three hundred books was sold after Stevens’ death to a buyer who kept no record of the titles (56). Stevens might also have read the books in a library, as he was a frequent visitor (L 174, 175, 866).

As already mentioned, however, it is easy to establish that Stevens did read Joad in *The New Statesman and Nation*, which began in 1931. The quotation of Joad that Stevens uses in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”—without citing the source—is, in fact, from the 11 January 1941 issue of the periodical. As will be demonstrated, Stevens’ emendation of the article, a tribute to Bergson, who had died the previous week, along with Stevens’ use of Joad throughout the “Noble Rider” essay, shows that Stevens is using Joad’s remarks in a way that draws attention to what in the tribute is an implicit version of a critique of Bergson in *Matter, Life and Value*. This in itself is one sign that Stevens is familiar with more than Joad’s *New Statesman* articles. More significant, Stevens’ use of Joad’s key terms throughout the “Noble Rider” essay, as he, like Joad, contrasts the flattening reality that we create with the vibrating, vital reality that we discover in aesthetic experience, shows either a great familiarity with Joad’s pluralistic vitalist terminology or an uncannily close parallel to Joad’s ideas. Either way, Joad’s unique philosophy greatly aids our understanding of Stevens’ aesthetics as it posits a metaphysical level of the reality of poetry.

In the *New Statesman* article on Bergson, Joad writes a tribute to Bergson, highlighting Bergson’s idea of the *élan vital*. What is not evident to those unfamiliar with Joad’s philosophy, however, is that Joad is actually inserting—quite implicitly—key points from his *Matter, Life and Value* argument, as outlined above. Joad’s critique in his tribute to Bergson reflects Joad’s argument with Bergson that there is only change. Thus in the tribute Joad asserts that, according to Bergson, there are no “things” or solid objects,

"for a thing represents a congealment of the flux. Now the congealment, even if temporary, must be something other than the purely fluid process of change which is supposed to congeal. Yet this something other is precisely what according to Bergson cannot be found" (34). It is in this context that Joad then inserts the rather telling question, "What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed?" implying that there is in Bergson no answer and that according to Bergson it is the intellect that falsifies the information of what we perceive, fixing or flattening the world into static objects. As Joad states:

"Take," [Bergson] says, "the most stable of internal states, the visual perception of a motionless object. The object may remain the same. I may look at it from the same side, at the same angle, in the same light; nevertheless, the vision I now have of it differs from that which I have just had, even if only because the one is an instant later than the other. My memory is there, which conveys something of the past into the present. My mental state, as it advances on the road of time, is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates." Bergson's conclusion is that "we change without ceasing and the state itself is nothing but change." There is thus no self which changes, for in asserting the existence of something which changes, we are asserting the existence of something which, from the mere fact that it is subject to change, is not itself change.

Similarly with external things. Every body, every quality of a body resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. What is it that vibrates, moves, is changed? There is no answer. Philosophy has long dismissed the notion of substance and modern physics has endorsed the dismissal. Just as in the self, so also in the world outside the self, there is nothing that changes; there is only change. How, then, does the world come to appear to us as a collection of solid, static objects extended in space? Because of the intellect, which presents us with a false view of it. (*New Statesman* 34)

Comparing this passage with the passage in *Matter, Life and Value* already presented, one notices that Joad has no qualms about using again what he has already written, or, in this case, quoted. The passage from Bergson is the same. What is different is Joad's response to that passage. Unlike his *Matter, Life and Value* argument, this *New Statesman* tribute does not go on to criticize Bergson, at least not overtly. Instead, Joad appears to summarize Bergson, perhaps hoping to draw the reader's attention to the difference between the solid, static objects and that which moves and vibrates.

The way in which Stevens shortens Joad's tribute reflects a similar focus. To begin with, Stevens makes it seem as if he is quoting first from Bergson and then from Joad. As Stevens writes, "Bergson describes the visual perception of a motionless object as the most stable of internal states. He says: 'The object may remain the same'" (NA 25). Stevens also shortens the first paragraph, omitting Joad's last three sentences summarizing Bergson on the self. Stevens then inserts the phrase, "Dr. Joad's comment on this is" and continues with Joad's paragraph on external things, omitting Joad's last sentence in that paragraph, again, a sentence on the self. Thus he omits the idea summarized from Bergson that there is only change both in the world outside the self and the world in the self. He ends the quotation with Joad's attention to Bergson's idea of the falsifying intellect, highlighting the idea of the intellect making "solid, static objects" out of something vibrating.

Such emendations may seem small, but in addition to demonstrating Stevens' desire in his "Noble Rider" essay to make "the least possible reference to others" (L 388), they reflect at least the possibility that Stevens is familiar enough with Joad to shorten the passage in a way that foregrounds the sense of something moving and vibrating—in spite of what the intellect falsely presents as solid, static objects. Stevens has been interested in these distinctly different forces, moreover, from his essay's beginning focus on what causes us to feel that we are not free to yield ourselves to the aesthetic experience of Plato's charioteer, on that tendency we have to fix or flatten such experience.

It is within this context that, having described Plato's charioteer traversing the heavens, Stevens initially asserts "we do not quite yield. We cannot. We do not feel free" (NA 5). This repeated lament is crucial to Stevens' argument, as he will later assert that what enables the poet to "help people to live their lives" is his "ecstatic freedom of the mind," a freedom that comes not as an "artifice" that adds anything to human nature but as a violence that reminds people of their "spiritual height and depth" (NA 29, 35, 36, 34). The declaration is also significant in that it introduces Stevens' subsequent critique of determinism (the surrender to the Freudian brand of reality) and, in this respect, the American will (which Stevens associates with "fancy") "as a principle of the mind's being . . . easily satisfied in its efforts to realize itself in knowing itself" (NA 11). Without Joad's argument of the illusory idea of free will stemming from determinism—as opposed to the metaphysical freedom in aesthetic experience—it is not possible to understand the full ramifications of Stevens' distinction or of his later development of the kind of abstraction that the poet experiences, sanctioning "the reality on which the lovers of truth insist" (NA 23).

This abstraction involves "realizing" and occurs as a result of the poet's imagination adhering to the reality that Stevens aligns with nobility (NA 33). The opposite of this experience is presented in the beginning of the

essay in which Stevens, in commenting on the passage from Plato as “moving,” asserts that although we may “recognize” the poet’s feelings, we do not “realize” them (NA 5). Thus the distinction between recognizing and realizing helps Stevens to argue two different kinds of reality. The first occurs when we create a flattened account of the experience of being caught up with Plato’s charioteer, intellectualizing the experience and then falling, which makes the image of the charioteer seem “rustic” or static (NA 4). This reality is quite different from the vibrating reality of abstraction, that which allows the poet—and his or her readers—to see the larger whole, which Stevens aligns with nobility. The essay builds to the idea that this nobility is external, in the way that waves are forces different from the water of which they are composed. This external reality is a metaphysical reality that, in spite of our flattening and deterministic ways of looking at it, vibrates, moves, and changes.

Stevens thus builds his essay on several examples that illustrate the difference between these realities. The first kind of reality is the flattening pressure of reality that is the “pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation” (NA 20). As far as Stevens is concerned, this is a Freudian reality, an illusion itself in attempting to present a world marked by a “cruelty of reality” (NA 15). This reality, moreover, is presented through works of the fancy,

an activity of the mind which puts things together of choice,
not the will, as a principle of the mind’s being, striving to realize itself in knowing itself. Fancy, then, is an exercise of selection from among objects already supplied by association, a selection made for purposes which are not then and therein being shaped but have been already fixed. (NA 10–11)

On the other hand, the second kind of reality is that which vibrates, moves, and changes. It is the reality that is the result of the poet’s “ecstatic freedom of the mind,” a reality of the imagination, not of the fancy (NA 35). It is the reality of nobility: “As in the case of an external thing, nobility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes” (NA 34). Indeed, by bringing this metaphysical reality into his poetry, by abstracting it into his imagination, the poet can offer his imagination as a “light in the minds of others” (NA 29), giving others back the power of contemplation that can free their minds from perceiving only objects already fixed through association. The poet withdraws this metaphysical, liberating reality with himself into his abstraction. This is “the reality on which the lovers of truth insist” (NA 23). This realm, or reality of life, moreover, is a realm not made up of static objects but of the “life that is lived in the scene that it composes” (NA 25). Stevens’ multiple senses of reality clearly reflect the pluralistic vitalism of Joad’s metaphysics.

If we fail to acknowledge these two different kinds of reality, we ignore Stevens' desire to present the metaphysical reality that comes to us through the vibrating sound of the noble rider's words. Such is true when we take Stevens' declaration that the imagination "has the strength of reality or none at all" (NA 7) to mean mere reality, a reality without the metaphysical, a reality that indicates the absence of the belief in anything beyond the finite world and/or the subjective experience of the poet. In the context of the essay, Stevens' assertion must be reconciled with his later idea that the poet abstracts himself and the reality "on which the lovers of truth insist" into his imagination and that in doing so, his mind adds "nothing to human nature" (NA 23, 36). Thus, if in the first statement (that the imagination has the strength of reality or none at all) Stevens means a mere monistic, deterministic sense of reality, it would be extremely unnecessary later to assert that the poet abstracts this kind of reality into his imagination, and that doing so does not entail adding anything.

"Reality is things as they are," Stevens mysteriously declares (NA 25) after echoing Joad's vocabulary, stating that the "subject-matter of poetry is not that 'collection of solid, static objects extended in space' but the life that is lived in the scene that it composes, and so reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it" (NA 25). The phrase "things as they are" does not mean things as they are in a monistic and deterministic universe. It echoes the context in Joad that when we realize the eternal forms, we discover the possible, that is, what Stevens calls the "pressure [that] is incalculable and eludes the historian" (NA 21). Claiming this for poetry, Stevens echoes Joad's argument that "[poetry] is essentially a mode of the stream of life. It is not a seeking after non-human truth, a finding of what is somehow there and waiting to be discovered independently of our seeking, but a form of creation which facilitates the emergence of a new level of consciousness" (MLV 260). Stevens echoes this idea in his reference to the ability of the poet to turn our attention to "the world in which we shall come to live" (NA 31). This assertion returns to the initial sense that poetry can do so because it moves us intellectually, in spite of our intellectual diffidence. This power of poetry, in fact, is what Stevens illustrates near the end of his essay by quoting Wordsworth's "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802" in order to show that "if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives" (NA 31). In a context that now explicitly refers to Joad, Stevens declares:

If we go back to the collection of solid, static objects extended in space, which Dr. Joad posited, and if we say that the space is blank space, nowhere, without color, and that the objects, though solid, have no shadows and, though static, exert a mournful power, and, without elaborating this complete poverty, if suddenly we hear a different and familiar description of the place:

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning, silent bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air;*

if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives. (NA 31)

Stevens' focus on hearing a different yet familiar description makes a crucial, logical connection to Joad's use of Plato. Having written almost thirty pages implicitly lamenting the American lack of intellectual freedom to realize the life lived in such artistically rendered scenes, Stevens now focuses on sound: on the power of words to speak to us, to vibrate a vitality through what has seemingly become dead. Such vitality, he asserts, comes in sounds that are both different from our age and familiar to it. This duality attests to the presence of a pluralistic universe, and hearing this duality gives us an understanding of this powerful way in which a poet helps people to experience the metaphysical dimension and thus experience their lives more fully than they might otherwise.

Stevens' focus on sound and meaning thus echoes Joad's. More tellingly, Stevens' idea of the noble rider echoes Joad's idea of the "advance riders," with Stevens arguing, however, that poets do deserve to be called advance riders. Like Joad, moreover, Stevens is aware that poetry can play only a limited didactic role, thus Stevens' assertion that the poet cannot "be too noble a rider" and yet must not lapse into works of mere fancy, such as the statue of Andrew Jackson riding a horse (NA 23, 10). Similarly (and again echoing Joad's vocabulary), Stevens asserts

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. . . . I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed. (NA 32, 34)

With his own kind of violence, the poet pushes back against the violence of this fixing, the violence that turns the history of poetry into a "cemetery of nobilities" (NA 35): "[Nobility] is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). The poet realizes this internal violence as he or she challenges the accepted categories of thought in his or her age. In Stevens' case, the poet challenges his "extremely headstrong" generation's belief that nobility—and the imagination—is "false and deca-

dent." He challenges his generation's rejection of nobility's ability to remind us of our "spiritual height and depth" (NA 33–34). He thus concludes his essay as he began it, challenging people's belief that they are free.

For Stevens, there is not a new imagination but a "new reality" (NA 22). This new reality is external, not dependent on a mind or a group of minds: not dependent, in other words, on new imaginations, new ways of seeing things. For Stevens this new reality includes both the timeless realm of value and the changing world of life, changing because of the moving, vital, and evolutionary force of nobility. Stevens emphasizes this new reality in his final definition of this moving force of nobility: "But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same" (NA 35–36).

III

We are not used to viewing Stevens as one who argues an external, much less a vibrating, metaphysical reality. We are used to viewing Stevens as one who comforts us by agreeing that we can arrange and fix the facts of our existence in a way that denies any metaphysical realm. To demonstrate that Stevens argues against those who deny a spiritual dimension to life, I have traced the similarity between Joad's and Stevens' focus on the metaphysical as a force that disrupts all our attempts to fix reality. To Stevens, those who attempt to fix reality are men and women "ignorant of what it is that they are thinking" (NA 32), and he sees his role as a poet to help them realize the futility of their efforts to deny the vibrating presence of the metaphysical dimension in their lives. In other words, Stevens shows in his poetry that in spite of the fact that we select facts to build and support our complacencies, the keener and/or stubborn sounds of the metaphysical realm invade even our most private inner worlds and argue against us. In this regard, Stevens' aesthetics reveal his critique of American pragmatism.

Specifically, Stevens' aesthetics critique the pragmatism of William James, who taught at Harvard when Stevens was a student there, although the top pragmatists of Stevens' day also included C. S. Peirce, John Dewey, and, in England, F. C. S. Schiller (Joad, *Guide* 448).⁶ As Joad argues, "not so much a definite and compact philosophical theory as a characteristic of a philosophical attitude," William James's pragmatism "identifies truth with utility," with whatever is emotionally satisfying (*Guide* 448–49). The perceiver thus plays an active role in shaping his or her perception: he or she adds, deletes, selects, etc., according to his or her interests and purposes. The "reality" of what he or she perceives is therefore fixed according to whatever the perceiver finds useful in order to maintain emotional satisfaction. In this regard, pragmatism goes hand in hand with solipsism, the belief that "since all of our knowledge is of our own mental states, noth-

ing which is other than our own mental states can be known to exist" (Joad, *Guide* 56). This premise quite centrally aligns pragmatism with the flattening perceptions of reality critiqued by Stevens, who finds such solipsistic thinking to be an act of fancy: that activity that brings things together that have already been fixed. As has been demonstrated, Stevens' "Noble Rider" essay argues instead that it is the metaphysical whole that interrupts the flux of experience, drawing—and freeing—our attention to the moving, vibrating nature of the metaphysical realm.

"O for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts" (Keats I.185). Long before American pragmatism, John Keats rejected its predecessor, the subjective idealism of Locke and, subsequently, of Berkeley and Hume, all of whom argue that we know only our thinking about our thinking. Fixed in such solipsism, we cannot feel such "thoughts" vibrating in our pulses. Stevens in this regard echoes Keats, always somehow lamenting, as in "The Auroras of Autumn," the "unhappy people" locked into the flattening thoughts of perception that create only "mirrors for misery." Thinking of them, the "vital, the never-failing genius" meditates on the metaphysical real, "a whole" (CP 420). This is the mysterious reality of poetry, a metaphysical reality that vibrates, moves, and changes. It is the reality that speaks to us of nothing less than our spiritual height and depth.

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Notes

¹Lisa Steinman is one of the few scholars who mention Joad. In her book *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poetics*, she devotes six pages to investigating Joad's notion of static objects. She bases her reading on Joad's *New Statesman* reviews, however, and does not seem aware of Joad's metaphysics as developed in his books.

²We can see Joad's interest in religion in such books as *Is Christianity True?* (1933), *What Is at Stake, and Why Not Say So?* (1940), and *God and Evil* (1943). Much like C. S. Lewis' and Dorothy Sayers' acceptance of Christianity, Joad's acceptance was based on its indeterminate and complex nature. Like Lewis and Sayers, Joad was drawn to the theory of Christianity and not to the reductive way in which it was being practiced. Joad was drawn to Christianity by its intellectual complexity and mystery.

³11.257 (January 1936): 117. The journal did not begin until 1931; thus Joad's 1929 *Matter, Life and Value* was not reviewed in it. Joad's subsequent texts, however, were reviewed in the journal. (See issues 15.377 [14 May 1938]: 846; and 19.481 [11 May 1940]: 626. The reviews all find major fault in Joad's thinking. Curiously, Crossman's complaint that Joad has a predilection for inconclusiveness is echoed in B. J. Leggett's observation that Stevens' essays lack any sense of finality as theory. The only scholar to offer a book-length study of Stevens' "untapped" *Necessary Angel* essays, Leggett dismisses them for being "flawed" for this reason, finding them helpful only in "marginal ways" (*Poetic Theory* 11).

⁴In his copy of Charles Mauron's *Aesthetics and Psychology*, Stevens echoes this idea from Plato, writing on the first blank page of the book "art sets out to express the human soul" (Huntington Library).

⁵In “Imagination as Value,” Stevens quotes the *New Statesman* article in which Joad rejects logical positivism (31 July 1948). In *Sur Plusieurs Beaux Sujects*, Stevens quotes once from this same *New Statesman* article and once from Joad’s *New Statesman* review of Samuel Alexander’s *Philosophical and Literary Pieces*, in which Joad disagrees with Alexander that the world is “evolving into God” (2 March 1940).

⁶In his 1977 book, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate*, Harold Bloom argues, in fact, that Stevens’ sense of a “First Idea” (“the world without its varnish and dirt”) closely aligns with C. S. Peirce’s “Idea of Firstness,” although Bloom calls Peirce a reductionist rather than a pragmatist. I believe that Stevens’ concept of the First Idea aligns him with metaphysics, the first philosophy.

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Wallace Stevens: Gaining the Light

ROBERT BELL BURR

OUT OF THE LANGUOROUS afternoon of “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” a “folded” moth awakens and rises to seek “the flaming red” (*CP* 22) of a flower. On the white, inviolable landscape of “The Snow Man,” a mysterious, wintry persona stands, observing, listening, as if transfixed, yet never quite palpably there, under “the distant glitter / Of the January sun” (*CP* 10). In the primordial swirl of “Domination of Black,” night, personified by “the color of the heavy hemlocks,” comes, with frightening persistence, “striding,” adding its “color” to the “loud fire” and to the “cry of the peacocks” (*CP* 8–9). In each of these Wallace Stevens poems, the degree to which light plays an active role in engendering desire is a question of critical importance. Does “flaming red” genuinely signal the moth to awaken? Is “distant glitter” substantive enough to refute the lack of place for the snow-persona? Can the “cry of the peacocks” spark an imagined light that is at least comparable to the accelerating imagery produced by the indoor fireplace in “Domination of Black”? In other words, light, as an intended effect, appears to be being gradually sought, or gained upon, in these poems. Desiring the light, then, asks for us its inherent question: What is it if it is ever fully achieved?

The attempt here will be to compare—and hopefully better understand—these three poems in terms of their will, or motivation, toward a “desirable” light, a light that may not acquire full significance until each of the poems is either well underway or nearly ending. The degree to which each poem may, or may not, manifest this desire, or light-gaining urge, of course, varies. For example, in “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores,” “flaming red” is a sudden, and singularly alluring, pronouncement that comes three lines from the end and seems to set up an exploding (bountifully light) effect that comes—out of a compression of thought and calm—with the final line, “And roamed there all the stupid afternoon” (*CP* 23). Referring to this “red,” Samuel French Morse tells us, “The poem presents the meditation of a mind unable to cope with boredom except by aesthetic shock” (67). In “The Snow Man” we are not told if it is day or night until the seventh line (midway). Helen Vendler, who advises the Stevens reader to “mistrust titles” (44), also states, in the same vein, that the essence of a Stevens poem is often found at the very center. At this midpoint of “The

Snow Man," then, the "glitter" of the "January sun," as it becomes ambiguous in relation to "behold," begins ever so slightly to suggest a regal quality for the overall setting, a quality that contradicts the scene's vast emptiness and ultimately enables us to perceive what might be called a "domination of white." "Domination of Black" begins with the diminutive, or innocuous, first line, "At night by the fire. . . ." Later, well past the midpoint of the poem, the fire of the first line is still called only "the fire." Within the next two lines, however, it is rapidly transformed into a "loud fire" and then is not mentioned again. It clearly seems, now, that in each of the poems the primary source of light is, at first, deliberately played down. In "Domination of Black," it is the lurking dependency on this fire, the dire need of more light, however severe the conflict of light and dark may be, that essentially enables us to picture a preponderance of black.

Let us begin with "Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores," a "summer vision" (Frye 165) poem in which a "monstered moth"—a creation of the mind that is synonymous with a "mind" that "roams"—is being retrospectively considered by a speaker who declares in the opening stanza:

I say now, Fernando, that on that day
The mind roamed as a moth roams,
Among the blooms beyond the open sand. . . . (CP 22)

Already, we are given day and the sense of open sky, but this comes by way of hindsight or a slightly nostalgic, retrospective glance. The mind-moth is roaming, not the sun. What might be imagined to be actual sunlight emerges only in the last two words of the poem, "stupid afternoon." Before this moment the poem primarily deals with the signs of drowsing and awakening, the mood of the shore, the unaware moth, and the awaiting hibiscus. In the first stanza, the moth's (or mind's) activity and ultimate goal are being announced before the first event, which is the moth's initial dormancy or containment.

In the second stanza, we are given the beginnings of the moth's progress. The voice suggests the nonsensical mood of "that whatever noise." It would seem now that the mind-moth's awakening desire is situated in a series of scarcely perceptible sounds. "Whatever," as a word choice, may be disturbing to us, but not to an unminding moth.

And that whatever noise the motion of the waves
Made on the sea-weeds and the covered stones
Disturbed not even the most idle ear. (CP 22)

Here, the speaker projects the pleasure of an imagined, semiconscious, or instinctive existence, one in which the mind, comfortable with not making sense, achieves an exquisite, not-minding, transitory relaxation. In this twilight state, Stevens might say that the need for a metaphor of awakening (light) is pleasantly obscured or removed from harsh reality, as when,

in lines 3 and 4 of "The Motive for Metaphor," "The wind moves like a cripple among the leaves / And repeats words without meaning" (*CP* 288). He also might suggest that awakening from this state would be an awakening toward a world in which metaphor, no matter how needed it might be, is inadequate. Why, then, does the moth stir from where it has "drowsed"?

The third and fourth stanzas reconfirm the time ("that day"), describe the "idle" moth, and provide the motive for its awakening:

Then it was that that monstered moth
Which had lain folded against the blue
And the colored purple of the lazy sea,

And which had drowsed along the bony shores,
Shut to the blather that the water made,
Rose up besprent and sought the flaming red. . . .
(*CP* 22)

The grammar of lines 8 through 11 briefly allows the moth to be distinguished from the "mind" and to appear—as the insect that it is—nested at the exact center of the poem. By the use of the verb tense (past-perfect) in the phrase "Which had lain," the moth lies "folded" seemingly slightly further back in time than the time of what we will soon recognize as the main event of "that day," the mind-moth's awakening desire for the light.

Apart from the tripping, forward motion of the poem's tercet structure, the first seven lines particularly convey the mood of sporadic or mindless, certainly "languorous" (Baird 185) motion by word choices such as, "Among the blooms beyond" and "disturbed not even. . . ." The random action within this mood is urged by six variegated uses of "that," each "that" able to conjure a stopping place or springboard for the moth. The shift in sound of "that on that" in line 1, nearly identically repeated in line 6 with "Then it was that that . . .," suggests both the struggle of awakening and the paired sound-visual of opening wings. "That that" contains at least the visual snap of a doubling-undoubling. "That on that" also conveys the sense of the two time-frames that merge and unmerge within the poem. The frame of a mind that roams alone and the frame of that mind's awakened thought are juxtaposed until they combine and become the story of "that monstered moth." The mind in the poem that is startled by what it imagines causes us to reconsider the poem's opening words, "I say now . . .," as being more startled (less argumentative) in expression. The leap of imagination becomes complete when the mind-moth spreads and actualizes itself in order to seek the red center of the flower. It "rose up besprent and sought the flaming red." We are now out of the sound, or absence of sound, mode and into the visual, or light, mode.

It is in the pursuit of this primary red, found in a flower that also contains yellow, yet a "red as red / As the flag above the old café," that we

mark the moth's instinctive preference for a "flaming red." Thus, this desire for the true life-source, one more akin to the sun's (or any direct light's) flame than to the inanimate, reflective taint of a piece of cloth, is being portrayed as both mysteriously true and nonsensical at the same time. How does the moth (or mind) make such a distinction? The motive for the metaphor (moth is mind or imagination) becomes the desire to actualize the dormant will or motivation of the imagined "monstered moth" and to have it seek the sustenance that is suggested by the "flaming red," to have it do, in all aspects of the poem, what a moth is supposed to do.

The moth, then, is one of those light-gaining creatures of the mind, much like the "monsters of elegy" (CP 435), those "beings of the mind" or "children of a desire" (CP 436) that we find in "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" (CP 431). By the intentional use of metaphor, the imagination, like the moth, seeks and utilizes the flamboyant red. The "red as red / As the flag" suggests, in turn, a dichotomy of choice or, better yet, a tantalizing ambiguity. The question becomes which red, or which color for that matter, contains the true light? Also, are there not other choices such as "day," "blooms," "blue," "colored purple," "yellow," and "afternoon" that stem from, or linkup with, this startling and primary metaphor for light, a "flaming red / Dabbled with yellow pollen—red as red / As the flag above the old café—"?

The poem ends with a striking, yet mildly pejorative, self-rebuke for all the nonsense it has so necessarily contained, labeling it as the mind-moth's "stupid afternoon." Before this moment, however, we are given the convincing image of a moth blithely going about its day quite ignorant of the "blather" of the waves, or of their "whatever noise," right up until, and even after, it alights on the "red / Dabbled with yellow pollen" of the flower.

The "listener" of the second poem, "The Snow Man," who blends in and out of a conjectured existence as the "snow man," who "must have a mind of winter" and has to "have been cold a long time" to appreciate—and possibly to find truth or aesthetic solace in—the "distant glitter / Of the January sun," also represents, we might choose to believe, a seeker or finder of the flame, a light-gainer:

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; . . . (CP 9–10)

In this poem, the sun “that is [actually] there,” while not seeming particularly warm or life-giving, does, in fact, motivate the reader (who “must” become the “Snow Man”) to see more and more light and whiteness in the poem with each reading. The poem, then, clearly demonstrates a will or motivation to acquire light. As Richard A. Macksey makes clear, “the poem projects a world of light; distance is transparent; objects glitter” (196). This light, in turn, becomes the sustenance that the poem unmistakably offers. Also, if we use Harold Bloom’s interpretation of “To behold,” a phrase in which we may sense a “touch of expressed amazement” (57) on the part of the beholder, the poem’s “one”-figure, with “a mind of winter,” can be felt to be purposefully contemplating the light. In other words, it is possible that a desire for sustenance, represented by light, is being sparked by the “glitter,” which “is [still] there” in the final line. That is, he “beholds / Nothing that is not there,” even if only within the “formal paradox [on which] the final verse turns” (Fisher 39):

and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. (CP 10)

This final paradox enhances an overall informal paradox: “mind,” “listener,” and an imagined creature, in this case the “Snow Man,” continually merge and separate (as they do in other poems by Stevens, e.g., “Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores”), making it impossible to determine when integration or individuation takes place (in this sense, both the “Snow Man” and the “moth” are tropes). Baird quotes Stevens as writing that he wants “to be nature in the form of a man” (L 190). Significantly, this poem is one sentence, and a seamless one; on a simplistic level, this enables the reader’s easy recycling of the poem and his or her sense of an increasing light, or whiteness. Again, and not so simplistically, the poem gradually acquires more and more light.

Throughout the setting of “The Snow Man,” we are being asked to identify, or find for ourselves as listeners, the mind of winter and the sustained cold. We are given frost, crusts of snow, ice, and a bare place where we might stand and listen. Upon achieving this identification, we are asked “To behold” and “not to think / Of any misery. . . .” If we are “nothing” ourselves, then we are not disturbing the “nothing that is.” Paradoxically, what we behold may offer a glitter or a glimmering. To be philosophical,

there actually may not be such a thing as “misery in the sound of the wind,” any more than there are actual tears in the outpourings of clouds (Ruskin’s “pathetic fallacy”). For want of an epiphany, we may instead be simply (perhaps eerily) in nature’s moment. As Claudia Yukman observes, “It is not nature, but the poem, ‘the description without place,’ that makes nature accessible” (242). Stevens, perhaps, hopes to find for himself a state of being existent in what he calls “the exactest element” (CP 248). There, he may feel and try to communicate “in a way apart, for a moment,” that “joy” or “will” “to be total in belief,” a way of being that is normally beyond us, until it inexplicably happens. When it does happen, he suggests, an accidental wholeness is achieved “Without the labor of thought” (CP 248). This wholeness, in turn, is experienced in a spiritual, not self-conscious way, as if “by surprise.” Also, as Richard Ellmann interpolates for Stevens, there may be something to be said for “treating cold as a part of experience to be valued as highly as warmth” (164). Cold, then, is still existence. As Phil Ochs in his song “Changes” expresses it, “Passions will part to a strange melody / As fires will sometimes burn cold” (40).

The third poem, Stevens’ “Domination of Black,” is an expressionistic and fierce blending of the “colors of” “leaves,” “fire,” “planets,” of “hemlocks” that stride, and of “peacocks” that cry, all “turning in the wind” and in the fire:

At night, by the fire,
The colors of the bushes
And of the fallen leaves,
Repeating themselves,
Turned in the room,
Like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind.
Yes: but the color of the heavy hemlocks
Came striding,
And I remembered the cry of the peacocks. (CP 8)

It is a poem, by Stevens’ own statement, meant to be read “sensuously” (L 251). The “colors,” because they belong to objects outside of “the room,” are presumed to be gradations of “black,” mere shadows that are magnified and turned “At night, by the fire. . . .” The narrator’s will or motivation to conjure his images through the small, yet ultimately significant, light of the fire reminds us of our own instinctive fear of what is basically our home, a vast universe of black. In the room or setting of this poem, as David La Guardia observes, the narrator’s “imagination assumes its own fluxional mode and becomes a darting eye focusing upon the specters in nature’s train” (40). Yet, the narrator’s will surrenders to his fear by admitting it. (“I felt afraid” jumps in in a way that is remarkably similar, while opposite in intent, to T. S. Eliot’s “And in short, I was afraid” [14].)

"In Stevens's universe, nightfall [does not] connote death, decline, all-swallowing darkness" (Fisher 65). The poem, then, envisions an explosion of dark colors, shadows that merge with the colors of the room and thrive on the crests and valleys of the light ("twilight") produced by the fire. William Burney states: "In general, when Stevens uses the image of a room with a window, he is thinking of the mind with some mode [in this case, the fire] of perception, characteristically visual" (28):

The colors of their tails
Were like the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
In the twilight wind.
They swept over the room,
Just as they flew from the boughs of the hemlocks
Down to the ground.
I heard them cry—the peacocks.
Was it a cry against the twilight
Or against the leaves themselves
Turning in the wind,
Turning as the flames
Turned in the fire,
Turning as the tails of the peacocks
Turned in the loud fire,
Loud as the hemlocks
Full of the cry of the peacocks?
Or was it a cry against the hemlocks? (CP 8–9)

A primordial whirlwind, one that contains the original conflict of light and dark (or absence of light), dominates the mind of the narrator who, at one point, looks from his window and sees the planets. What he sees causes him to say, retrospectively, "I felt afraid."

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

Clearly, the fire in this poem feels only inadvertently protective, if that. In fact, Stevens uses the fire as a creative force at work within a pervasive absence of light. Experiencing the poem this way tells us that the fear comes more from the explosive commotion of the fire-invoked images than from the fear of death. While the hemlocks are striding and the remembered

peacocks are crying, motion and sound, too, become colors or shadings. A twilight is named by the wind and caused by the fire.

Stevens says: "I am sorry that a poem ["Domination of Black"] of this sort has to contain any ideas at all, because its sole purpose is to fill the mind with the images & sounds that it contains" (*L* 251). What is intriguing is that we know that tails of peacocks contain dominant dark ovals, or absences of light; that hemlocks suggest night, if not actual death; that all the poem's colors suggest a shadowed system of perception; and that we experience an "I" that seems to signify no one other than the author himself. It may be a mistake to see domination as bad, or to see the twilight as failing. The peacocks, perhaps dark, yet saving characters, are crying either "against the twilight" (obscurity) or "against the leaves [of the hemlocks]" (night). A. Walton Litz reminds us that "the desolate cry of the peacock is remembered because his tail is patterned with the colors of 'the leaves themselves'" (40). The result is an abstract or modernist explosion of a physical black that contains an audible (translatable as light) black in the "cry of the peacocks."

All three poems, in very specific ways, represent the will or motivation toward a desirable, or creative, light. "*Hibiscus on the Sleeping Shores*" is imaginatively filled with blooms, open sand, and seaside roaming. Its mind delights in its own strivings of imagination, before it ultimately seems to say, What inspiring nonsense, this being in an element that is only metaphorically attainable by confusing the first instinct of a moth with the first instinct of a mind. Nonetheless, we experience an afternoon of in-the-garden enchantment as exuberantly conveyed to Fernando by an amazed narrator. The focus of the anecdote is the moth at the exact center of the poem, a metaphor for the mind as it instinctively rises toward a desirable light. In "*The Snow Man*," too, the reader instinctively beholds a physical reality that is scarcely there (the land and leaves are negated) but for the domination of a white ("snow"), almost metaphysical, landscape that is increasingly being evoked by the January sun. "*Domination of Black*" asks us to imagine the light of an indoor fire as if it were a creative force, much like a sun at the center of a galaxy of planets. The walls of the room cease to matter as the absence of light outside becomes the dominion of all light and color. It is by light that we perceive our own absence from light and feel our own urge to gain on it wherever we may find it.

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Stevens and Catullus: A Note

ELEANOR COOK

STEVENS' LINES AND PHRASES sometimes lie in wait for the right occasion, as witness the lovely opening lines of "Credences of Summer":

Now in midsummer come and all fools slaughtered
And spring's infuriations over and a long way
To the first autumnal inhalations, young broods
Are in the grass, the roses are heavy with a weight
Of fragrance and the mind lays by its trouble.

Now the mind lays by its trouble and considers.
The fidgets of remembrance come to this. (*CP* 372)

"Now the mind lays by its trouble. . ." Not long ago, I happened to be looking at Catullus, where I read the following line: "cum mens onus reponit" or "when the mind lays by its burden," as the Loeb translation has it.

o quid solutis est beatius curis,
cum mens onus reponit, ac peregrino
labore fessi venimus larem ad nostrum
desideratoque acquiescimus lecto?

[Ah, what is more blessed than to put cares away, when the mind lays by its burden, and tired with labour of far travel we have come to our own home and rest on the couch we longed for?] (36–37)

The lines are drawn from poem thirty-one (lines 7–10), a poem of rapturous delight in coming home to Italy after a long stay in the Troad: "Sirmio, bright eye of peninsulas and islands. . ." (Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque . . . [31.1–2]).

Stevens would have known the poem. For one thing, he knew Catullus. An early journal entry discusses him and quotes the well-known epigram, "Odi et amo" ("I hate and I love" [85]) (see *L* 104). For another, Tennyson

quoted it on returning home from Italy, and his son, Hallam Tennyson, recalled this in his *Memoir* where the poem is quoted (I, 342). Tennyson adapted the poem, along with Catullus' elegy for his brother, in "Frater Ave atque Vale," written in Sirmio in 1880, in memory of his own brother, Charles Tennyson. He quotes and translates some of Catullus, though not the line that engaged Stevens' attention. Stevens owned a copy of Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir*, and even marked some parts of it (not this passage).

This allusive echo, which I think should be rapidly reclassified as an allusion,¹ makes good sense in Stevens' poem. "Credences of Summer" is in many ways a poem about homecoming. Part 1 continues after the above quotation with familial ghosts alive in memory and imagination, while part 4 is that memorable canto on Stevens' natal state, Pennsylvania. Homecoming or being fully at home is always peculiarly intense in Stevens.

Some recent work on "Credences of Summer" has focused on both its apocalyptic language and its pastoral language. Different senses of coming home in pastoral and in apocalyptic writing are well worth pondering in the light of this allusive echo of Catullus.

University of Toronto

Notes

¹I am working here with a taxonomy of quotation, allusion proper, and echo. Quotation is signaled as such, e.g., by italics; allusion proper (as against "allusion" signifying the whole process) consists of what a likely reader would likely recognize in a given time and place; echo ranges from strong or allusive echo through clear echo to faint. For a fuller discussion of these terms, see my "Questions of Allusion."

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Poems

The Large Blue Sonnet

Let it be large, and let it be blue, too.
And why not? —since *a poem is a meteor*,
It can have girth and it can have hue, too.

If *the poem is a nature created*
By the poet, let it cut in the night sky
such a path as will leave it undated.

Let it fly, since *a poem is a pheasant*,
its ring neck and gaudy plumage daytime
rivals to the nighttime show of planets.

Let it serve espresso, cappuccino,
since *a poem is a café*, in Montmartre,
umbrellas courtesy of Cinzano.

Poems are new subjects, a new reality,
Large and blue, a wink at eternity.

George Held
New York, N.Y.

Depression before Autumn

The green slipper sleeping under the snow,
Enchanted forest crushed by the emperor's heel.

The queen threw in her chips,
Cut all the flowers from the field,

Awake all night singing
Of strange deaths coiled and coiled into sleep,

Dreaming of the wheat of harvest,
Closing the windows of the sun.

Krysia Jopek
New York, N.Y.

Sister Jane Evelyn

She said poetry and apotheosis are one.

Wallace Stevens, "A Pastoral Nun"

No memorable thrashing,
not even the words, wormy
now with disuse, that she shot me with
when I was too clever and erred,

the trickle of nouns, as I read from my primer,
spilling from my mouth,
staining my white uniform blouse
and little blue necktie.

She'd lick the star I hated,
my prize for knowing too much,
and press it between my eyes.
She was more beautiful

than the Blessed Mother,
beauty never called by its name
but withheld, like necessary praise
for the gaudy child about to weep in the corner.

How I loved her.
To punish me,
she would make of herself a cross,
arms at right angles from her body,

the feathery habit swooping wrist to waist
like blackbird pinions I would enter
and have closed upon me.
Disappeared and chrysalid, I'd wait

in the darkness for her voice,
my lips against her husband's cruciform
lounging at her breast.
Talc was all the Order permitted,

but she wore it like allure,
the dense broadcloth subsuming me
as she squeezed and whispered,
"The word and the will of God are one,"

which meant nothing to me,
being not of language, but of thingness.
I knew that if I inched further
I would enter her nunflesh

and, like the tarantula bridegroom,
I must die.
So I stilled myself until she preened
and I was released to my battered desk

in its row of tittering stares
until she called on me to read again.
I would gaze down at the page of vowels
and consonants roiling like chromosomes

in the concupiscent world of Mother and Father
and their gleaming progeny, Dick and Jane.
What would bring me to
was her impatience,

the wedding band rapping the chalkboard
behind which I imagined a trapped boy
who had imprinted on his forehead
the gold star of the phonics champion.

Joseph Bathanti
Statesville, N.C.

A Woman on the Beach

for Wallace Stevens

As if they grew in fields that sang unploughed
into her hands, she plants the rocking waves,
tooled with phantoms over shale, with long
unrooting waverings that climb the night.

She'd cliff and order them or at least their light
if they splashed toward her touch, or curling in
with human toes warmed toward the welcome shore—
but she the shore, she the shore, stands clear,

and doesn't order them, since they won't hear;
and after tides, she follows clouds,
planting out and harvesting in, racking
the waves with the harvests in, to cloud

the ocean's green with seedlings gathered
dark from dizzy, like no bounded dream.
The waves don't hold her where they haven't been.

Annie Finch
Cincinnati, Ohio

Updating the Weather

The sky unfuzzes yet
and still soars to a coxcomb
as the weatherman said it would.
But lo—the malady pre-cursed
unfurls as a banality unmeant.

Weather inside's still outside
where naked youths teeter
on planks tip-top-
ping tumultuous combers
that froth forth a hullabaloo
of joyous suds. Their apogean freezes
pose at the edges of an old sea
restive in its fetal curl
from which they downward skid
at parabolic velocities
to a cry of cowabunga
on extended arms.

Yet encinctured here
in gray asphalt coils
looping moods of the city,
we see sky play the fool
in cubist tangrams as ironical
pyrites marmalade flakes
of micaceous rust in basaltic crush.

But fat words fail us.

Inside, we know red weather
outside bugles a fruity finale—
and recalling the harlequin
woodpecker's maniacal cackle,
Ayuh-hunh ayuh-hunh.
Huh huh-huh hunh-hunh-hunh,
we are afraid. Looping
across Woody's soaring topnotch
an invisible hand toodles
in curlicues of lunate script:
THE END
though indifferent to meridian
we slump row upon row,

like breakers in unbroken blackness
frame time's timeless face,
and enduring flagellant smears
of darting light we refuse
yet to name it a night.

William Hathaway
Southampton, N.Y.

And You, Wallace Stevens

There is no man with a blue guitar—
The man is blue, more blue by far.
Who blows is blue; by the end of the bar
He's blown to blue—and I tune my guitar.

He's blown to blue by the end of the bar—
He's blown as blue as his motor car;
The ladies wait in the blue bazaar,
Your number's next—and I tune my guitar.

Your number's next, the door's ajar,
The ladies wait in the blue bazaar,
The man blows blue to the end of the bar,
He blows true blue—and I tune my guitar.

The note he blows is blue, it's true,
But the man who blows is what's blown blue;
I too blow blue, I blow too blue,
I blow kazoo in the blue bayou.

The ladies wait, the door's ajar,
The man's gone blue in the blue bazaar,
A blue note flows from the horn of his car,
He's stuffed with blue by the end of the bar.

There is no man with a blue guitar—
The man is blue, more blue by far.
The ladies wait, the door's ajar,
My number's next—and I tune my guitar.

Clifford W. Osborne
Tappan, N.Y.

Talking of Molitor

Time and again he'd said the numberless things,
Their shapes, their colors, their places were one—
That blue was green, the mountains waves, the hero
Some simple man reading late at night
In an old house, a ruin before he was born.

We spoke of this, she and I, sitting in the dark
On the cottage porch. The lake contained a moon.
Pines on the island loomed black, a bright black,
And an intimate fire gleamed on the north shore.
We were repeating the end of summer and thinking

As he had thought there, grown old and patient.
We heard his voice in our words, the long pauses,
Slow sentences hanging, drifting aside, the tremble
And sudden animation that made his life ours.
It was as though he had known we would come back,
That what he had made possible would take place.

She said, "Do you think he knows what none can know
Without breath and failure? Because you sound
Like him, is his body telling us the way
That picnic fire streams across still water
Is the fire he muses among weary angels?"

"There are," I said, "times like this when he
Seems more alive, completing me, than I am
Myself, so that I wonder where his truths
Intend our ignorance to go. This hour,
More precious, deep as mixed comfort and desire,

Must contain any eternity we dream,
No matter the loneliness it promises,
Nor want of peace, nor loss of speech, nor touch.
Belief has taught me nothing I believe
Beyond that small fire and the need for nothing more."

She put her glass down on the porch rail.
There was a fire in it and fires in her eyes
And among the motionless leaves. A new silence
Repeated itself lifting from the lake
And the pines became men eager for the moon.

Lee Gerlach
San Diego, Calif.

Cain in Oklahoma

Consider the indifferent Western sky
That condemns the prodigal maverick
Like the cold black eye of the buffalo.

Embrace the enigma you'll never know
Where the convex air grows wise and thick
Swelling in the indifferent Western sky.

You came to ask the rattlesnake why
But learned from its husk the terrible click
Of the cold black eye of the buffalo.

It is the sound of the scissortail's cry
Far from the world of coal and brick
Under the indifferent Western sky.

Once our refrains were fresh and spry;
Now they will never be so wild or slick
As the cold black eye of the buffalo.

If your emptiness craves vistas unknown
Echo the sandstone not the cicada's click,
Reflect the indifferent Western sky
As the cold black eye of the buffalo.

Nathan Andersen
New Haven, Conn.

At the River, Near Glen Allen

Bean rows whirred like wheel spokes
as we drove through fields coming here.
Land and river look about the same.

Sandbars make nests of ripples
proving they aren't quite the same.
Their arch is perfect for bare feet.

Everything is flowing down.
Gravity seems double here—
the levee makes a false horizon.

Lynn Bishop
Charlotte, N.C.

Inconnu

In winter one feels it,
world withdrawing from itself
and humans pulling back as well
in silent release of
certainty's fury,
that noetic imperium long
cultivated, long puffed,
pumpkins of arrogance in
old fields of summer.

An emptiness impervious to
cartographies of pride and
thereby propitious of
a healing wholeness
unviolated,
an innocence needful.

The snow descends.

It is gravity's filigree,
an adornment worn for itself
and not the pretenders, those
knowers forecasting their
own importance.

The snow is everywhere,
all winters where
snowmen look and see nothing,
neither smile nor frown to orchestrations forgotten.

They are hardly moving,
barely dying,
perhaps dreaming
themselves away into
aleatory originations
beyond all logic,
high spaces wherein
premises of substance vanish,
a Lucretian inversion.

Now arrows of knowing falter
and wobble as if impennate,
a detumescence in dumb
shafts of intent, usurpation
and targets refuse themselves,
denying colonization,
mocking bereavement in all bowmen,

their signifying shorn
above the iced crust of
this hiemal time.
And beneath,
broken stems and blossoms
of meaning wilt in disarray,
their juices of seduction
less so
while lower in caverns of
refuge and renewal
custodians of the human
curiously huddle,
aporias suddenly spawning
everywhere in the
nurturing cold and drowse,
an invitation.

Doug Bolling
Jacksonville, Ill.

Lesson in the Diurnal Rotation of the Cobbler

Tree shadows slide across the white wall,
pushed by the driving sun against their will,
trapped in the light of rising morning.

In stillness they loom immense. In stillness
the cobbler sleeps. He dreams forest requiems.
He dreams in the halftones of sepia prints.

At noon the trees regain their flattened souls.
A pause in the play of black on white—
the cobbler soles his shoes in silent light.

Light kidnaps the careless shadows. Trees sway,
forlorn in the rogue twilight wind, reaching
for lost kindred. The moon rises. The cobbler sleeps.

Steven Richman
Plainsboro, N.J.

Buster Keaton Sings Wallace Stevens

*Every poem, says Stevens, is / a poem within a poem
And every accident, as well, / a series of accidents.*

The man with the purple / heart license plate
And fractured face slowly, / slowly speaks a fractured sentence

Of apology for a / failure to apply his brakes
In a timely manner to / stop his rolling tank of

A car, his pale blue / out of control Cadillac El Dorado from
Slamming into my poor / parked Saturn.

*Your yes her no, your no / her yes, writes Stevens
In "Red Loves Kit." The words / make*

*Little difference. The moon / has its moonlight.
In this poem, there are / many poems, many accidents.*

*Rest, crows, upon the edges / of the moon.
Fly upward thick in numbers . . . fill the air / and darken it.*

A mood within a climate / of moods and phases:
Evening all morning, etc., / a summer within

A summer, all moons, / all worlds at once,
Until the chemical rush of spring / coming on, coming

Without intention or invention, / unaware of its
Arrival and arriving, refusing / to acknowledge

Royalty and poverty alike / rolling over our mute pleas
And still gestures, past / all manner of mourners

And revelers: / what has the weather to do
With all of us, we ask / but our words are a hundred

Million light years coming / and gone in a thunderclap.

P. Michael Campbell
Georgetown, Ky.

Lines for Wallace Stevens

The pure poem is a mindstorm of words;
the poet, a meteorologist
of the imagination, votary
of order, slave to metaphor,
a tapeworm feeding on the possible.
So, beyond the bantam's prancing,
the lover's wound, the sun's éclat,
the smart literary tricks or the tricks
nonliterary but still smart, the form
found in or imposed on the formless,
beyond even the celestial tones
of a tenor sax improvising,
or the probes of flying telescopes
bobbing for stars in black light,
there will always be rumblings
in the larynx, arcane syllables
in search of incantation,
prurient dream puns, word salads,
psychosemantics, nonsense.
And at the end there will be no end,
no perfection, no relaxation,
because the lion inside never sleeps.
Nothing is quite the way you left it.

Phillip Corwin
New York, N.Y.

Reviews

Strategies of Difference in Modern Poetry: Case Studies in Poetic Composition.

Edited by Pierre Lagayette. Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998.

With a survey of the linguistic and philosophical inquiries into *difference*, Pierre Lagayette asks how poetry is qualitatively, essentially “different from all other kinds of discourse” (14). He admits that while poststructuralist theory demarcates difference, it has not set forth a language to describe the mark of poetic difference or “poeticity” (19). Poetry, he concludes, deviates from normal speech for the purpose of intensification and by means of “figures” that push language beyond the merely discursive. The figures or varieties of poetic difference described in this volume range from challenges or “disturbances” to the past literary authorities of romanticism and lyricism—as in Yeats, Pound, and Stevens—to transgressive acts of language as challenges to hegemony, whether linguistic or cultural—as in Tato Laviera and Thomas Kinsella. Stevens may ride at the very heart of this modernist enterprise, for his poetry seems to foreground poeticity.

The volume begins and ends with Irish poets, whose confessions about their struggles against English language and culture would immediately suggest a reason for and manner of poetic difference. Charles Altieri, however, in “Lyric Form and Lyric Force: Yeats and the Limits of the Expressivist Tradition,” focuses on Yeats’s attempts to redefine lyricism. After a traditional, close reading of “*Leda and the Swan*,” Altieri then demonstrates, through a poststructuralist analysis, the means by which the poem opposes both Enlightenment rationality and Romantic expressivism. And yet, this reading is still incomplete, for, as he claims, poststructuralism is inadequate to describe authorial methods or intentions and how those might be redeemed by readers. The volume ends with “Thomas Kinsella and the Poetry of Irish Difference,” in which Taffy Martin describes how Kinsella’s early pieces play off his double identity. While this perception of his linguistic and cultural struggle does not approach that of Maxine Hong Kingston or of Chicano poets, Kinsella still situates his difference in a postcolonial context. Martin argues that Kinsella’s most original work is that which tries “not to wreak verbal vengeance but to obviate cultural hegemony by drawing his reader ever more deeply into his own and Ireland’s mythic past” (169–70). The article concludes by comparing Kinsella’s bilingual dilemma to that of Patrick Chamoiseau and Simone Schwarz-Bart; while Chamoiseau emphasizes the tensions in bilingual speech, Schwarz-Bart has a gendered approach to the suffering behind this speech.

In Stevens’ work there seems to be a conscious choice to display poeticity, and to do so in order to rewrite the terms of lyricism and to celebrate communal experience. Of the three essays on Stevens, only one treats him alone, “*Lyrical Variation of Tone in Stevens’s Poetry*.” Alain Suberchicot places his

analysis within the critical debates over Stevens' aestheticism (Gerald Bruns) and his lyricism (Altieri), claiming Stevens expresses "doubt as to the capacity of language to signify exactly what the author intends" (63). By tone Suberchicot means both musical, lyrical quality and manner of expression; the difference lies in its variability, necessary because of Stevens' "linguistic skepticism" (63). A major premise of the essay is that in varying tone to stretch the limits of lyricism, Stevens defends his poetry against the charge of aestheticism, and at the same time engages the collective. The article closely analyzes "The Idea of Order at Key West," arguing that here difference is preserved because the transformation of the sea into the woman's song is a "mock metamorphosis," an intellectual exercise "to compensate for the failing hortative powers of language" (62). Suberchicot also analyzes "Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," where Stevens revises romanticism; in other poems, such as "Some Friends from Pascagoula," "Lions in Sweden," and "Evening without Angels," Stevens deploys the "Tone of Social Comedy" to "celebrate[] the communal dimension of art, language, and thought" (70).

In "Wallace Stevens and Jean Wahl," Anne Luyat-Moore searches the private papers and French publications of Jean Wahl, in exile at Mount Holyoke during World War II, to explore the apparent debate between Stevens and Wahl over the nature of reality and poetic difference. In 1943, Wahl had invited Stevens to Mount Holyoke to the *Entretiens de Pontigny*, where Stevens delivered "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," an essay challenging nineteenth-century romantic notions of the "omnipresent domination of the imagination" (75). Luyat-Moore claims the title of the piece recalls Duchamp's *Jeune homme triste dans un train* (1911), exhibited at the Armory Show of 1913. William Carlos Williams had said that the Armory Show inspired American poets to write a "typically American poetry"—inspiration deflated when Eliot published *The Waste Land* in 1922 and turned that poetry academic. Luyat-Moore builds a case that like Williams, Stevens "spent his poetic lifetime trying to find an answer to the Anglo-American who had given poetry back to an elite" (76). Although Stevens paid homage to Wahl at Mt. Holyoke, he also provoked him by attacking philosophy in opposition to poetry and by linking cubist theory and poetry to create "a new concept of reality in poetry." Further, in attacking Bergson, Stevens questioned Wahl's own philosophical inclination to see "poetry as a unity of symbolic terms in the finished work of the imagination" (83). Luyat-Moore thinks Wahl must have realized Stevens was speaking to him alone (and thus shielded the audience in his translation to them); that his posture was one of self-defense toward the younger sister art of poetry; and, finally, that it revealed tension between the American expatriate poets and those at home. Wahl's answer appeared in 1944, when "On Poetry," was published in *The Chimera*, but Wahl mentions Stevens' name only in the French translation of that piece. Privately, however, Wahl had also written *Four Anti Quartets* in answer to Eliot, as well as "Minute Particulars" and "Toward the Concrete" in answer to Stevens. Despite their disagreements, the two men remained friends and continued to correspond when Wahl returned to France after the war. Stevens and Wahl differed in their philosophical arguments on the nature of the imagination and poetry and in their

conception of time. Luyat-Moore cites Frederic Worms, who suggests that Wahl and Eliot “could have been students together at the Sorbonne when Bergson lectured there in 1910,” and that the two might have derived their concept of time from him. Wahl did not like the idea of “time as an eternal present” (84). Further, for Wahl as Bergson, there is a separation between idea and signification, “while Stevens believed that language was part of reality” (84–85). They would have agreed, however, that Van Gogh was close in spirit to them both.

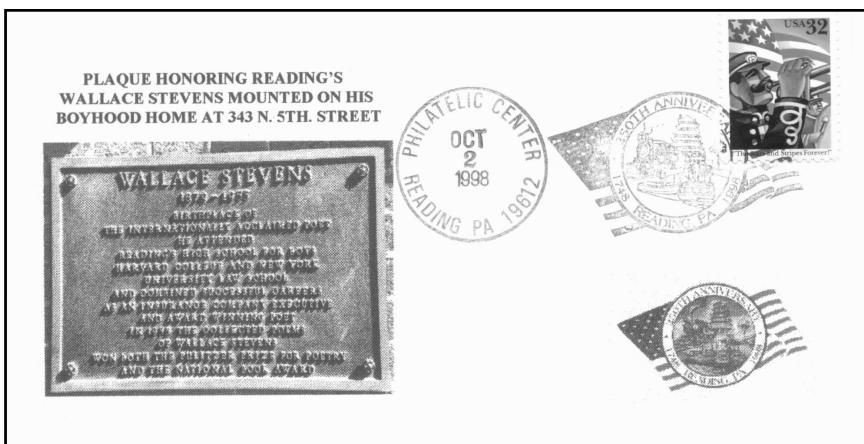
Massimo Bacigalupo treats both Stevens and Pound as glossers of the marks of poeticity in their own work. In “The Author as Explicator in Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound,” he claims both poets were interested in, as Stevens says, “getting the world right.” While Stevens does not, like Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, labor under the influence of the allegorical poets of the Middle Ages, he does seem “to have been naturally inclined to coded writing, and did use to a certain degree private symbolism” (112). The letters and commentaries of the two poets—though admittedly Stevens’ are more complete and more patient than Pound’s—provide access to the more obscure marks of difference. Although Stevens himself thought criticism should be based not on the poet’s intention but on the work itself, Stevens’ critics still look for clues in the letters, no longer rejecting a poet’s explication or reading “as we would have done in the days of the Intentional Fallacy” (113).

Not every essay in the volume is dependent on the theory of difference, and not every essay clearly establishes the emergence of poetic difference. In “Epistemological Empathy: A. R. Ammons and Jorie Graham,” Gudrun M. Grabher places Ammons in the poetic tradition of Emerson (though Ammons separates man and the universe), and in the philosophical tradition of Heidegger (though Ammons denies direct influence). In trying to push through to the presence beyond language, Ammons’ poetry, rather than being anthropocentric, allows the Other (nature) a speaking voice. In “Charles Reznikoff: New World Poetics,” Geneviève Cohen-Cheminet questions both intentionalist and contextualist critical approaches to the poems. She argues, citing Barthes’ *à la littéralité aveuglante*, that in Reznikoff’s poetry “obscurity of meaning co-exists with an obvious blinding readability” (122–23). She rejects intentionality because Reznikoff wished the poet and critic to be effaced; she rejects the contextualist approach because it shrinks the poet to the role of record-taker and because Reznikoff himself was suspicious of social realism. In defending “Testimony,” a 528-page-long collection of fragment poems of “horrendous violence” (137), taken from nineteenth- and twentieth-century law cases and arranged geographically, Cohen-Cheminet finds a key to the poetry in Judaism; the poet becomes the “addressable other” of Primo Levi, to “give voice to voiceless suffering” (138).

Aside from the articles on Stevens, the collection’s most engaging pieces describe formalistic and dynamic difference in the poetry of Roethke and Laviera. Axel Nesme, “(Dys)functionings of Difference: The Intertext at Work in Theodore Roethke’s ‘Four for Sir John Davies,’ ” conducts a formal analysis of the poem’s metrical, phonemic, chiasmic properties that sustain quantitative difference. By dropping the second b-rhyme line from Sir John Davies’

rhyme royale, the poem issues a visible lack or difference. Nesme finds the voice of the Other in the poem's intertexts—Davies, Raleigh, Yeats (phonemically), and especially Dante; the reader must "put his knowledge of the intertext to work within a problematics of desire which the quoted texts support" (98–99). Nesme is not convinced that this dialogue with the dead is entirely successful. "Tato Laviera's Nuyorican Poetry: The Choice of Bilin-gualism," was first delivered as a dialogue between Véronique Rauline and Tato Laviera. Following Chamoiseau and Confiant's *Eloge de la Créolité*, difference means "diversality" (147) and is basically an "issue of choice." Laviera writes Spanish, English, and bilingual poems in "balance" in his books, but that poetic bilingualism glances at "the genuine linguistic battles" (150) fought by colonized peoples. Through this confrontation of languages and of rhythms, Laviera's poetry builds bridges that instead of facilitating dialogue are destabilizing and promote a qualitative, disruptive, and creative difference.

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Clarkson University



Commemorative envelope, postmarked on his birthday, honoring Wallace Stevens on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Reading, Pennsylvania

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