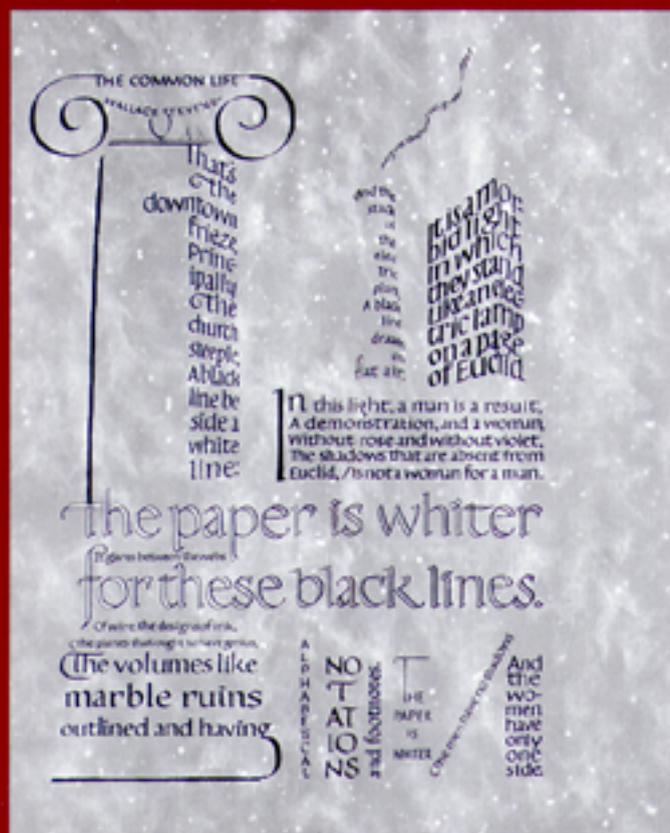


# The Wallace Stevens Journal



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## “As He Starts the Human Tale”: Strategies of Closure in Wallace Stevens

SRIKANTH REDDY

*The poem refreshes life so that we share,  
For a moment, the first idea . . . It satisfies  
Belief in an immaculate beginning*

*And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,  
To an immaculate end.*

—Wallace Stevens

**I**N THIS PASSAGE from “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” Wallace Stevens insists upon a fullness of structure in lyric poetry, on the poem’s self-adequacy and independence. For this poet, the end of a lyric should ideally exist in an “immaculate” relation to its beginning, so that the finished text may take its place in a world where “Everything accomplishes itself: fulfills itself” (*OP* 197). Yet when we are puzzled by Stevens, it is often at the point of closure. Poems such as “Metaphors of a Magnifico,” “The Man on the Dump,” “Les Plus Belles Pages,” or “New England Verses” take their leave of the reader without referring to familiar conventions of poetic ending. This can be due to the cavalier pose Stevens occasionally strikes toward the close of the text, as we see at the end of “The Comedian as the Letter C”:

what can all this matter since  
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?

So may the relation of each man be clipped. (*CP* 46)

This final gesture diverts us from the realm of poetic fiction, from Crispin’s tale, into the area of metafiction; in this ending we are no longer concerned with the vicissitudes of Crispin’s adventures, but rather with the general principle that *any* biography can be terminated, or “clipped” short. The end of the poem is a deliberately unremunerative comment on the preceding story, even less satisfying than the close of its prototype, “From the Journal of Crispin.” Stevens’ endings can take the form of anticlimax, evasive metacommentary, or a deliberately flippant exit from the

text (as at the endings of "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" and "Theory"), as some readers have noted.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest, however, that more often the perplexing Stevensian closure is actually an ingenious, immaculate resolution of an unconventional poetic text.

Different poetic structures encourage different strategies of closure. Shakespeare's sonnets, with their compact template and limited thematic subjects, favor a final pithy reversal (often through the trope of chiasmus) in their closing couplets. The short lines of a poet such as Williams discourage the voluble final utterances of apocalyptic ending. Stevens' situation in relation to modernism placed him in the wake of a wide literary search for new methods of ending experimental texts, ranging from Joyce's rapturous, prolonged final sentence in *Ulysses*—"yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes" (644)—to Eliot's importation of the Sanskrit "shantih" as the last word of "The Waste Land" (69). To glance through the astonishing variety of lyric endings in *Harmonium* is to watch a poet conducting an energetic, extended series of researches into the methods of closure. Stevens sometimes falls short at the poem's final moment, but he is endlessly innovative in his approaches. In this essay I will outline a few of Stevens' contributions to the practice of poetic ending, beginning with his briefer lyrics, moving on to the function of endings within poem-groups, and closing with a discussion of closure in the later, longer poems. As an ending's success depends on its relation to the text it terminates, I will try to provide full readings of the poems whenever possible; if this results in a dilatory process of argument, I hope it will also foreground the functions of Stevensian closure against the poem's overall context. Read with the whole work and the whole body of work in mind, Stevens' poems continually bid farewell to the reader on a hierophantic Omega's note, leaving us "refreshed at every end" (CP 469).

One of Stevens' more innovate methods of closure could be called the "sleep ending." Young lyric poets often use sleep as a gateway to the world of dreams and nightmares. Shelley's "Triumph of Life," for instance, spins a dynamic imaginative pageant out of the stillness of a nap. In such a dream-poem, sleep initiates the lyric mode, opening up areas of desire and consciousness that remain closed to the wakeful. But Stevens often explores the more demotic aspects of sleep: its association with fatigue and depletion, its banal regularity, and its imposition of a deathlike closure on each day's activity. "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock," for example, is a poem of negations that denies dreams to most sleepers; the lyric presents its sole Shelleyan romantic in a degraded form, as a drunken sailor whose fanciful dream is hardly visionary:

People are not going  
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.  
Only, here and there, an old sailor,  
Drunk and asleep in his boots,

Catches tigers  
In red weather. (CP 66)

This is only one instance of the marked ambivalence toward dreams in Stevens' work. An unease with "the swarm of dreams" (CP 179) can lead this poet to pronouncements such as "All dreams are vexing. Let them be expunged" (CP 39). Instead of using sleep as the gateway to a profound and variegated dream-world (a move that would time the onset of sleep early in the text), he often places it at the very end of the poem, closing the text where we might expect a dream to begin.<sup>2</sup>

This strategy of closure first appears in "Earthy Anecdote," the lyric that opens *Harmonium*. The poem is assembled from a bare minimum of words and phrases that are arranged and repeated in various permutations, like the text of a children's book or a beginning exercise in a foreign language primer. The most important nouns are "bucks" and "firecat," the primary verbs are forms of "to clatter," "to bristle," and "to swerve," and repeated phrases like "In a swift, circular line / To the [right/left]" organize the poem. In fact, almost half of "Earthy Anecdote" consists of a single block of text that is duplicated with minimal variation:

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

(CP 3)

Our sense of lyric texture is suppressed by this kind of repetition. "Earthy Anecdote" is assembled like a mosaic rather than brushed like an oil painting. Dynamic activity in the poem's drama of survival and predation quickly becomes reified as Stevens refuses to vary his language,<sup>3</sup> until the final couplet arrives like a vivid figure against such a highly repetitive ground:

The bucks clattered.  
The firecat went leaping,  
To the right, to the left,  
And  
Bristled in the way.

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

Sleeping becomes the most memorable action in a poem of clattering, bristling, leaping, and swerving. This ending is a strong comment upon narrative structure in lyric poetry. The poem has established and reiterated a dramatic agon between bucks and firecat, but it finally skips past any moment of climactic, decisive encounter (by setting apart its final couplet

and using the crude narrative device of “later”) to bring us to a conspicuous fast-forward. After the bristling, leaping, and clattering setup, we are taken directly to the aftermath of the encounter, the onset of sleep, as exhaustion becomes the final subject of the poem. The tired firecat must sleep, so the poem ends.<sup>4</sup> As the first poetic utterance in *Harmonium*, “Earthy Anecdote” announces that a Stevens lyric may close with this kind of gesture, in which the text itself seems to fall asleep.

The firecat is a self-portrait, of course (Cook 29); this representation of Stevens as an agile, bright-eyed agent of poetry (organizing clattering into lines) takes its place among the poet’s other self-portraits, such as the maundering yokel who is undone by genteel language in “The Plot Against the Giant.” This avatar of Stevens is so thoroughly invested in the creative act that poesis can end only when the firecat falls asleep. The firecat-poet can only exist in one of two states at any given time, either: a) “actively organizing the clattering world,” or b) “sleeping in preparation for the next day’s work.” There is no middle ground where the firecat eats or raises children or conducts business deals in this poem’s fictive world. The firecat’s submission to sleep becomes a powerful trope for the end of writing.

Later in his career, Stevens will recognize a more chastening limit to poetic activity, in the wistful “Things of August.” By now the poet has spent a lifetime in pursuit of “A new text of the world . . . / That comes from ourselves, neither from knowing / Nor not knowing, yet free from question” (CP 494–95); but Stevens finally acknowledges that he will not live long enough to write this ideal poem. Poesis is limited not only by the length of a day, but also by the length of a lifetime, and “Things of August” features a classic Stevensian thematization of fatigue at the point of closure:

She has given too much, but not enough.  
She is exhausted and a little old. (CP 496)

“She” is the poet’s muse, life’s once-bounteous summer, now drained. This is Stevens writing the poetry of depletion and disappointment, where even overabundant generosity is deficient: “She has given too much, but not enough.” The final admission of insurmountable fatigue is carefully phrased, as even an *excess* of age is modified by a diminutive adjective; summer is exhausted and “a *little* old,” rather than “too old.” The simplicity of diction in this final couplet is the poem’s most mournful turn, as the voluble poet of “The Comedian as the Letter C” and *Owl’s Clover* leaves us with only a few notes of attenuated and irretrievably reduced language.

The exhaustion of Stevens’ muse at the end of “Things of August” is a more intimate and vulnerable recognition of the firecat’s need for sleep at the close of “Earthy Anecdote”; it associates the end of writing not only with sleep, but with the poet’s death as well. Late in his career, Stevens

repeatedly associates sleep, death, exhaustion, and their adjacent states of consciousness at the point of closure, as at the end of "The Owl in the Sarcophagus":

It is a child that sings itself to sleep,  
The mind, among the creatures that it makes,  
The people, those by which it lives and dies. (CP 436)

To end a poem in either sleep or death is to write a poetry that ultimately confirms the inevitable place of exhaustion and depletion in human experience, as Keats does when he appends the deaths of the Beldame and Beadsman to the ending of "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1246).<sup>5</sup> In these moments of *tristia*, Stevens is one of our great modern poets of weariness, the sleep-ending serving as his major trope for life's tendency toward diminution and exhaustion.

But the diminishment of consciousness provides only one way of closing the poetry of vitality's end. At the age of seventy-one, when endings of all sorts were looming into view for this poet, Stevens published "Puella Parvula." The poem dramatizes the mind's harrowing passage through panic back into calm and an ensuing attentiveness in the face of time's wreckage. While taking the end of summer as its starting point, "Puella Parvula" is actually about the imminent end of all existence; the poem opens in apocalypse, *beginning* with this most extreme case of poetic closure:

Every thread of summer is at last unwoven.  
By one caterpillar is great Africa devoured  
And Gibraltar is dissolved like spit in the wind. (CP 456)

This is a demotic Gotterdammerung, staged in the passive voice and regarded by a snow man's aloof eye; we even detect a hint of approval in the "at last" of summer's demise, as the immediacy of apocalypse is displaced onto the distant topoi of Africa and Gibraltar. Stevens is able to appraise disaster calmly and at arm's length as the poem opens, but this initial, stately progression of brief, end-stopped sentences is quickly overtaken by a looser, less restrained syntax:

But over the wind, over the legends of its roaring,  
The elephant on the roof and its elephantine blaring,  
The bloody lion in the yard at night or ready to spring  
  
From the clouds in the midst of trembling trees  
Making a great gnashing. . . . (CP 456)

Ruin quickly spreads from the reaches of Africa to the more familiar domestic spaces of the poet's Hartford rooftop and backyard. There is a corresponding magnification of apocalypse's animal agents when catas-

trophe nears home, as the caterpillar is exchanged for an elephant that is then joined by a bloody lion. Stevens grows vulnerable in this second stanza, as the aloof appraiser succumbs to a young child's nightmarish vision of circus animals let loose in the neighborhood, and the connoisseur of chaos panics. Yet disaster does not have the final word here, as the text makes a strong movement toward recovery:

Over all these the mighty imagination triumphs  
Like a trumpet and says, in this season of memory,  
When the leaves fall like things mournful of the past,

Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch. O mind  
Gone wild, be what he tells you to be: *Puella*.  
Write *pax* across the window pane. (CP 456)

The clarion call of the "mighty imagination" and the leaves "mournful of the past" are the poem's conspicuously hieratic response to this world's inclination toward a humbling end. Yet this slightly dated, decorous allusion to Shelley quickly gives way to the purely Stevensian, galvanized writing of the penultimate stanza, where the poet regains composure with a savage imperative to himself: "Keep quiet in the heart, O wild bitch." There is an almost physical violence to this mental act, as if Stevens were slapping himself at this point in the apocalypse. We are pulled out of hysteria through the actions of rhetoric, as the switch to the imperative mode, the vocative and anaphoric use of "O," and Stevens' surprising resort to the imagination's Latin (*puella*) all invoke the power of rhetoric to stabilize the world, to stop its revolving except in crystal.

The poem finds a natural closure at this caesura, once the mind is drawn out of its trembling. The last line of "Puella Parvula" could easily have been "Write *pax* across the window pane. And then be still." Had the poem ended at this point, we would read it as one of Stevens' exhaustion endings, a directive to cease the mind's struggle to refresh itself in a decaying world. Milton closed *Samson Agonistes* with such a moment: "calm of mind, all passion spent" (593). But this critical opportunity for closure in "Puella Parvula" is broken by what is for late Stevens an uncharacteristically abrupt enjambment: "And then / Be still." This divided sentence makes a new stanza prosodically *necessary*, as a new beginning is staged in the final tercet:

Be still. The *summarius in excelsis* begins . . .  
Flame, sound, fury composed . . . Hear what he says,  
The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale. (CP 456)

This ending rewrites Macbeth's famous eulogy for his wife. Sound and fury (and even the tiny flame of Macbeth's "brief candle") are retrieved from meaninglessness, organized in the penultimate line: "Flame, sound, fury composed." The tragedian's view of life as an idiot's tale becomes the

human tale of a dauntless master. Stevens enforces a heroic beginning ("as he *starts* the human tale") where Shakespeare had focused on the tragic aspect of a life's end.

With this deliberate move, Stevens establishes a structure that neatly reverses the conventional passage of poetry from a beginning to an end. Apocalypse opens "*Puella Parvula*," and it ends in a prologue. This is an ingenious and profound revision of the conventional plotting of apocalypse, which Frank Kermode describes as featuring a strong directional movement from a beginning to an end:

Let us take a very simple example, the ticking of a clock. We ask what it *says*: and we agree that it says *tick-tock*. By this fiction we humanize it, make it talk our language. Of course, it is we who provide the fictional difference between the two sounds; *tick* is our sound for a physical beginning, *tock* our word for an end. . . . The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it a form; and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize. (44–45)

If most poems can be read as a *tick-tock* movement, "*Puella Parvula*" documents the neglected progression from a *tock* to the next *tick*, or from one story's apocalypse to a new tale's genesis. The passage of the spirit from one moment of finality to a new beginning is dramatized with a deep psychological accuracy here, as we are taken from the initial moment when disaster is seen from a distance (the calm first stanza) to the panic of recognition that one's immediate surroundings are at risk (the beasts encroaching on the poet's living room), through the climactic moment when composure is regained, ending with a new resolve to listen for the *tick* of life's next phase.

The interval between an ending and a new beginning is not always heroic, however. In the aptly titled "*The Beginning*," Stevens gives an elegiac account of summer's passage, implying that it is tragedy (and not the dauntless tale of a human master) that will follow. Here, complexities of voice, incident, and imagery are pared down to a skeletal minimum; the heterogeneity of animal life, geographical location, and changes in rhetorical mode of "*Puella Parvula*" are replaced by minimal pentameter couplets, a form more congenial to the subject of depletion and bereavement:

So summer comes in the end to these few stains  
And the rust and rot of the door through which  
she went. (CP 427)

The opening of the poem with "*So . . .*" places us in *tock's* region of aftermath from the outset. But where "*Puella Parvula*" had gone on to track

the present-tense struggle between chaos and the imagination, this poem gestures again and again with its deictic demonstratives toward absence and the past:

The house is empty. But here is where she sat  
To comb her dewy hair, a touchless light,

Perplexed by its darker iridescences.  
This was the glass in which she used to look. . . .

This is the chair from which she gathered up  
Her dress. . . . (CP 427–28)

The poem has a hollowness at its center, where summer used to be; no item's presence is affirmed without a corresponding mention of the summer goddess's departure. This absent female figure of summer is Stevens' answer to Keats's autumnal deity. If Keats writes that "sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find / *Thee sitting* careless on a granary floor," Stevens will say "here is where *she sat*" of his goddess; when Keats next moves to autumn's "*hair* soft-lifted by the winnowing wind," Stevens shows where summer used "to comb her dewy *hair*"; and the Keatsian autumn's final gazing in the lines "with patient *look*, / Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours" (1270–71, italics added) is matched by summer's habit: "she used to *look* / At the moment's being."<sup>6</sup>

But where Keats finally comforts his seasonal figure—"Think not of [the songs of spring], thou hast thy music too" (1271)—Stevens has forgone the apostrophic mode of presence and address from the start, and can only point out summer's discarded dress to us, like a belated visitor at the scene of an abduction. The poem is built upon a sequence of futile gesturings and a widower's nostalgia. So it is not surprising that we find a relatively mournful *tick* at the end of this poem:

Now, the first tutoyers of tragedy  
Speak softly, to begin with, in the eaves. (CP 428)

This is a far cry from the *summarius in excelsis* of "Puella Parvula." The tutoyers of "The Beginning" first appear gently, like cobwebs in the eaves of the vacated house; but it is also implied that disaster will eventually fall with a crescendo, as tragedy's first beckonings speak softly only "to begin with." Where he once stilled himself to listen to the dauntless master's uplifting (*in excelsis*) human tale, Stevens now braces himself for the onset of tragedy. In this way, "Puella Parvula" and "The Beginning" read like palinodes of each other.

An important feature of these "*tick* closures" is their pointed gesturing toward an incipient speech, whether it be the human tale of a dauntless master or the tutoyers of tragedy. Stevens even adopts a similar cadence in each final gesture, the double caesura of "Speak softly, to begin with, in

the eaves" in "The Beginning" echoing the "Hear what he says, / The dauntless master, as he starts the human tale" that closes "Puella Parvula." Each closure is a prologue; we never actually hear tragedy's first tutoyer, just as "Puella Parvula" ends before reaching the "once upon a time" that opens our human tale. In both poems, Stevens says, "Listen, a story is about to begin . . ." but the text closes before the story can commence.

To end with a prologue is to adopt an extremely open-ended mode of closure, suggesting that the true poem, tale, or tragedy is yet to come. Stevens first presents us with this strategy of ending in the brief *Harmonium* lyric, "To the Roaring Wind":

What syllable are you seeking,  
Vocalissimus,  
In the distances of sleep?  
Speak it. (CP 113)

Here, the prologue closure is applied not only to a single poem but to an entire volume of poetry: "To the Roaring Wind" is the very last lyric utterance in *Harmonium*. The placement of this lyric within the collection is of great importance. As Eleanor Cook notes, "To the Roaring Wind" bears many features of the poetic invocation, or prefatory lyric (113), and its position at the end of the volume overturns the generic convention of terminal lyrics. Stevens places a small *tick* at the end of his first book, suggesting that the elusive Ur-syllable has yet to be spoken, despite the voluble utterances of poems such as "The Comedian as the Letter C," "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," and "To the One of Fictive Music."<sup>7</sup> This is a bold poetic move, threatening to undermine or devalue all of the poems that precede "To the Roaring Wind," but it also demonstrates Stevens' deep affinity for the provisional over the dogmatic, the fugitive over the available, the open-ended over the resolved.

Since the advent of romanticism, our most vivid examples of this aesthetic of the open-ended can be found in the genre of poetic fragments, one of Stevens' favorite lyric devices. The fragment is necessarily a partial text, incomplete and unclosed. Early in his career, fragmentation is one of Stevens' favorite plays on the conventions of lyric closure; he sees the fragment as a witty way to avoid ending altogether. Many of Stevens' lyrics present themselves as partial excerpts from longer (though actually unwritten) texts, as in a poem like "Colloquy with a Polish Aunt," which trails off into a terminal ellipsis:

SHE  
How is it that my saints from Voragine,  
In their embroidered slippers, touch your spleen?

HE  
Old pantaloons, duenna of the spring!

SHE

Imagination is the will of things. . . .  
Thus, on the basis of the common drudge,  
You dream of women, swathed in indigo,  
Holding their books toward the nearer stars,  
To read, in secret, burning secrecies. . . . (CP 84)

Such a text cannot be said to really end; rather, it playfully refuses to take us through to its own endpoint, the resolution of the aunt and nephew's dialogue. This terminal ellipsis is an insouciant gesture of incompleteness. Later, Stevens returns to the excerpt-strategy in more substantial poems, from the excerpt-title of "From the Packet of Anarcharsis" to the longer "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," even suggesting that his great poem on the supreme fiction is merely an assemblage of notes. But Stevens goes on to develop "The faculty of ellipses and deviations" (CP 493) to allow even more nuanced valences of incompleteness into his poetry. In "A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream," for instance, a full and satisfying lyric structure is thrown into question by the substitution of an ellipsis for a period at its end. The poem opens with a sweet, bourgeois family outing, rendered with a pleasant luminescence:

It was like passing a boundary to dive  
Into the sun-filled water, brightly leafed  
And limbed and lighted out from bank to bank.

That's how the stars shine during the day. There, then,  
The yellow that was yesterday, refreshed,  
Became to-day, among our children and

Ourselves, in the clearest green—. . . . (CP 371)

This is one of Stevens' most buoyant moments; there is a rare ease (for Stevens) with physicality in the poet's opening dive, a conversational freedom in the first-person plural and the contraction "That's," and an unforced harmony between poet and family on the stream's bank. The subject is idyllic. (Both Whitman and Matisse took bathers as an occasion for celebrating vitality, innocence, and the human body's relation to nature.) But Stevens' poem quickly slips into ambivalence and disorientation, first expressed as a colorist's qualification:

—well, call it green.  
We bathed in yellow green and yellow blue  
And in these comic colors dangled down,  
  
Like their particular characters, addicts  
To blotches, angular anonymids  
Gulping for shape among the reeds. (CP 371)

As soon as the speaker ventures his first superlative (“the *clearest* green”), Stevens’ tentative, qualifying side rushes in to assert itself: “well, call it green.” The loss of this superlative moment swiftly degrades the entire memory of the day’s outing, as the swimmers suddenly “dangle” like victims of the gallows, gulping not only for breath but for a sense of their own bodily forms among the reeds. This morbid vertigo climaxes in a sensation of “floating without a head / And naked, or almost so, into the grotesque / Of being naked” (CP 371). Nakedness, however, is a defining characteristic of a “bather’s scene”; to recoil at being naked in this poem is like turning from an elegy because it features a dead person. Although he asserts that “The body is the great poem” (OP 194) in his “Adagia,” Stevens, like most people, cannot gaze on his own flesh for long without a feeling of unease. This poet’s prim, decorous side overtakes the Whitmanic moment here, and it is with a sense of relief that he returns to the architectural, bounded space of his bedroom that evening:

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

Yet the terminal ellipsis casts the validity of this final sentiment into doubt, implying that there is something left unsaid about the lesser pleasures of reentering the domestic space, which lacks the propensity to change that Stevens so valued in his idea of a supreme fiction. There is also the innuendo that the rooms’ stability is illusory, as they only *seem* never to change; Stevens’ poetry features many houses that fall into ruin, such as the “shuttered mansion-house” (CP 159) of “A Postcard from the Volcano” or the “minor house” whose “chimney is fifty years old and slants to one side” (CP 502) in “The Plain Sense of Things.”<sup>8</sup> This speaker cannot conceal his wish for the rooms to change, though when they do shift, it will surely be for the worse.

“A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream” is wary of any simplicity of feeling, and the initial loss of the superlative moment hangs over final statements “How good it was” and “which do not ever seem to change.” Such phrases can no longer function as “sincere” utterance; rather, they assume an air of innuendo. The ellipsis is the punctuation of innuendo *par excellence*, and Stevens rightly uses this mark instead of a period to end “A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream.” The ellipsis points toward the moment “just after” the poem, inviting the reader to dwell in this blank, white, critical space so he or she may reflect on the possibility of irony within the text.

The closure in an ellipsis can also signify a final deferral of a poem’s end, rather than its abandonment (as in “Colloquy with a Polish Aunt”) or its ironization (as in “A Lot of People Bathing in a Stream”); “Metaphors of a Magnifico” does just this. Helen Vendler has described the debate this

text conducts among various perceptual paradigms (22). The poem begins by proposing a romantic, individualist reading of a squadron's passage over a bridge, asserting that each man is crossing his own bridge into his own unique, subjective village: "Twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village, / Are twenty men crossing *twenty* bridges, / Into *twenty* villages" (CP 19; emphasis added). One soldier will see the span as the bridge to military glory, while another will think of it as a *pons asinorum*. This particularist's multiplication of one bridge into twenty bridges is quickly counterbalanced by a collectivist reading, which subsumes each individual crossing to an overarching experience of the whole, unitary group: "Twenty men crossing a bridge, / Into a village" becomes "one man / Crossing a single bridge into a village" (CP 19; emphasis added). After the luxuriousness of the romantic and the collectivist's depersonalizing rigor, the realist's conclusion is a display of simplicity and symmetry:

Twenty men crossing a bridge,  
Into a village,  
Are  
Twenty men crossing a bridge  
Into a village. (CP 19)

There is a natural stopping point here, but Stevens carries his study of perception into less tidy territory, and as Vendler notes, "the Magnifico ceases to be a philosopher of perception, ceases even to be a spectator, and becomes a participant" (22), joining the soldiers' ranks on their approach to the doomed village. Once the Magnifico abandons his dry metaphorizing and enters into the narrative mode, the poem becomes "Part of the res itself and not about it" (CP 473).

The enigmatic closure of the lyric defies a full explication, however, as vivid sensory detail suddenly appears in the fifth stanza, and the men, bridge, and village each acquires features through the genitive case:

The boots of the men clump  
On the boards of the bridge.  
The first white wall of the village  
Rises through fruit-trees. (CP 19)

We learn that the men wear boots, the bridge is made up of wooden boards, and the villagers grow fruit trees beyond their whitewashed walls. More important, this eruption of detail following the poem's earlier arithmetical arguments provides material for the expression of psychological crisis. The first white wall of the village ominously *rises* as if it had a will of its own, like the mountain peak that seems to lift itself to admonish the young Wordsworth's theft of a dinghy in *The Prelude*:

my boat  
Went heaving through the water like a swan;

When, from behind that craggy steep till then  
The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,  
As if with voluntary power instinct  
Upreared its head. (376)

Terror and moral guilt enter only "Metaphors of a Magnifico" in this oblique fashion, as the marcher attributes a kind of agency to the village walls, though it is actually he who is moving, bringing violence and suffering. At this point, the Magnifico tries to return to the poem's initial line of aloof speculation, and fails: "Of what was it I was thinking? / So the meaning escapes" (CP 19). The *res* of approach and conquest overtakes phenomenology and metacommentary, as the speaker's eyes return compulsively to the village wall rising through the fruit trees at the poem's end:

The first white wall of the village . . .  
The fruit trees. . . (CP 19)

The text stops just short of the climactic encounter between soldiers and villagers; the Magnifico's dry, speculative consciousness cannot accommodate the impending cruelty of the village's fall, and the poem drifts off into an ellipsis before the narrative moment of arrival and conflict. This limitation of the Magnifico's ability to speak is also a limit of the lyric mode in general, which tends to veer away from the scene of violent encounter, as we saw in "Earthy Anecdote." The poem finally refuses to accompany its marchers into the village, recoiling from military violence by returning to locodescription, cutting off each of its last two lines from even the slightest association with destructive action by refusing to enter into the active realm of verbs and predicate objects.

But this is not an abandonment of the poem's subject. After Stevens' fifteen years of extended investigations into violence and war in poems like "Martial Cadenza," "Examination of the Hero in Time of War," and "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," one of the Magnifico's soldiers returns home in *Transport to Summer*. In "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home," the returning veteran refuses to speak of the violence he has both perpetrated and endured, prolonging the reticence that cut short "Metaphors of a Magnifico":

the walker speaks  
And tells of his wound,  
  
Without a word to the people. . . . (CP 360)

The soldier's mere presence, his gait and demeanor, speaks volumes; the man's silence communicates his suffering "Without a word." But he is greeted by a compassionate woman who sings him a song of welcome, a lyrical, expressive response to the Stoic's reticence in the wake of violence and cruelty. At the same place where the Magnifico fell silent (the edge of

a village), this veteran of war finds comfort in casual conversation with another person:

And let it go, with nothing lost,  
Just out of the village, at its edge,  
In the quiet there. (*CP* 361)

Both “Metaphors of a Magnifico” and “A Woman Sings a Song” close by leaving their soldiers at the edge of a village, the first poem refusing to cross over to the site of violence, and the second returning its soldier to the threshold of community and recuperation.<sup>9</sup> The ellipsis ending of “Metaphors of a Magnifico” allows Stevens to move on to other subjects, to mature and continue the poet’s meditative work, before returning at last to finish the soldier’s story in “A Woman Sings a Song.” The fragmentation that ends “Metaphors of a Magnifico” is actually a deferral (and not a failure) of utterance.

Stevens actively explores issues that have always baffled the lyric, such as the problem of war in “Metaphors of a Magnifico,” often without having a poetic conclusion in mind. His use of deferral-endings frees him to raise these topics without necessarily resolving them by the poem’s end, so he may return to continue these meditations in other, later poems. One of the most rewarding experiences in reading Stevens is the moment when several poems coalesce into a “poem-group,” in which various lyrics point toward one another thematically, logically, or through allusion. In such poem-groups, less pressure is placed on the endings of individual lyrics, as no single text bears the full burden of resolving itself; rather, each poem can simply gesture toward one of its companions. Stevens explicitly directs us to read him this way: “One poem proves another and the whole” (*CP* 441). Just as “A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home” “proves” that the soldier of “Metaphors of a Magnifico” can be redeemed from violence, many of Stevens’ apparently unclosed poems are completed by other poems, or by the context of his whole corpus.

Stevens’ practice of grouping lyrics strongly informs his approach to longer poems; aside from “Montrachet-le-Jardin,” all of Stevens’ long poems are compilations of cantos and sections. This results in extended texts that lack the strongly narrative armature of Wordsworth’s “Michael” or Milton’s epics. A Stevensian long poem tends to follow a more odal structure, moving among anecdote, soliloquy, fable, and philosophical discourse without the overarching progression of a sequenced, full narrative. The odal aspect to Stevens’ longer verse can problematize closure, as the ode tends toward etiolation and variety, a feature of the form that Paul Fry points out:

The ode, that Great Auk among the birds that are themselves objects of the obsolete science of ornithology, the ode of all forms, has always known the ruptures of dissemination. The sheer textuality of the ode, its re(com)pression of alien generic

structures as the daemonic traces of lyric metaphor, yields a skepticism about the contentments of form that belies both occasion and vocation. (135)

What are the criteria of closure, and what achieves a “contentment[] of form” in a long poem that contains so many different lyric sections? At the most basic level, the poet faces a problem of arrangement or sequencing. In a poem that contains a fable section, a hymn section, an interrogative section, a prophecy section, and a confessional section, the poet must decide which genre provides an appropriate endpoint for the entire trajectory of the text. To place the hymn section last is finally to invite the reader to turn his or her eyes upward, to a deity or some kind of higher force. This gesture is very different from closing with a confessional section, in which the poet engages the reader on a direct, intimate, personal level. The ode allows itself to be rearranged more than other poetic forms. Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode,” for example, is the poem most susceptible to resequencing in that writer’s corpus.

The two versions of “Sunday Morning” play out this problem of odal closure in Stevens’ longer poems. The poem initially appeared in a five-stanza form in *Poetry*, with the stanzas chosen by Harriet Monroe and their sequencing decided by Stevens. It is worth noting that for Stevens, the deletion of sections II, III, and VI meant that he had to reorder the remaining stanzas into a new sequence. In the *Poetry* version, the poem moves from I to VIII to IV to V to VII. A deep reorganization of the text was necessary to mask the Procrustean cuts *en route* to publication. This shorter version of “Sunday Morning” is a more directed, architectural, schematic poem, as each section is coupled to the next by overlapping phrases, rhymes, and topics. These different tempos build to two very different forms of closure. The first published version of the poem ends with a prophecy:

Supple and turbulent, a ring of men  
Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn  
Their boisterous devotion to the sun,  
Not as a god, but as a god might be,  
Naked among them, like a savage source.  
Their chant shall be a chant of paradise,  
Out of their blood, returning to the sky;  
And in their chant shall enter, voice by voice,  
The windy lake wherein their lord delights,  
The trees, like serafin, and echoing hills,  
That choir among themselves long afterward.  
They shall know well the heavenly fellowship  
Of men that perish and of summer morn.  
And whence they came and whither they shall go  
The dew upon their feet shall manifest. (CP 69–70)

This is not Stevens' native diction. The gently wry, hieratic language of earlier lines like "maidens who were wont to sit and gaze" (CP 69) is amplified here to an oppressive pitch, as this outdated Hymn to Pan<sup>10</sup> reiterates archaic phrases such as "summer morn" and even ventures a line like "And whence they came and whither they shall go," threatening to undermine its own prophecy through self-parody. The orgiastic and the prophetic ("a ring of men / Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn") run against the strongly skeptical grain of a poem concerned with the dispelling of myths: "There is not any haunt of prophecy, / . . . nor isle / Melodious . . . / Nor visionary south. . . ." (CP 68).

More important, the poem's protagonist, the doubting woman, disappears as the ring of chanting men come to the foreground in this ending. The *Poetry* version of "Sunday Morning" forgets its beginning at the point of closure. In the final *Harmonium* text, however, the woman returns to hear an antiprophetic voice dispel the spirits of Palestine at the poem's end. Stevens moves into a series of nonprophetic statements, suggesting that there are not one but many possible interpretations of the modern condition: "We live in an old chaos of the sun, / Or old dependency of day and night, / Or island solitude, unsponsored, free" (CP 70). The word "or" is anathema to unequivocal prophetic statement. When the poem finally closes in an unassuming locodescriptive mode, the future tense of orgiastic chanting has been exchanged for a quieter present indicative. The pastoral topos of windy lake, trees, and hills is replaced by an American landscape of "our" mountains and wilderness, and the promise of morning gives way to an evening's trance of quietude, reflection, and memory.

In rearranging the stanzas of "Sunday Morning," Stevens was able to "try on" the prophetic, hieratic closure (albeit under mild editorial duress). The prophetic element had been present within the poem from the start, providing a subtext for the overt skeptical movement of its *Harmonium* version, but the poet ultimately realized that he could not end on this note. Stevens' poetics of deferral, qualification, and skepticism prevents him from ending the longer poems with conventional forms of poetic crescendo, such as apocalypse or prophecy. This affinity for quiet, understated closure also blocks the possibility of ending a long poem in the narrative mode<sup>11</sup> or with any of its subsets, such as the anecdotal or the fabular. This can be seen in the two printed versions of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the first version closing in a well-known fable of wandering mariners, and the final version ending with the "It may be a shade that traverses / A dust, a force that traverses a shade" (CP 489) canto.

The poem's first incarnation, like that of "Sunday Morning," was truncated, and reduction again led Stevens to end on a note of forced vibrancy. But a poem that stakes out the area "Neither of comic nor tragic but of commonplace" (CP 478) cannot convincingly end in an exotic land of lemon

trees and mocking birds. New Haven is nowhere to be found in the mariners' canto, as the poet's evening stroll gives way to a fantastic sea voyage, and the subdued propositional mode is forsaken for the *divertissements* of fable. But in the poem's final version, there is no narrative action, no quest armature or geographical exploration. Narrative is entirely suppressed as Stevens ends the poem with a canto composed primarily of lists.<sup>12</sup>

It takes a remarkable energy of mind to sustain a list for as long as Stevens does in this final version, and the virtuosic prolongation of this trope replaces the mariners' strenuous voyaging at the end of the text. (Ever since Homer's list of ships in the *Iliad*, the catalogue or inventory has been a convention of epic poetry; classical rhetoricians referred to this poetic practice as *coaceruatio*, or "heaping up.") But Stevens' list is an anti-epic catalogue of the fugitive, the unnoticed, and the unsung:

The less legible meanings of sounds, the little reds  
 Not often realized, the lighter words  
 In the heavy drum of speech, the inner men

Behind the outer shields, the sheets of music  
 In the strokes of thunder, dead candles at the window  
 When day comes, fire-foams in the motions of the sea,

Flickings from finikin to fine finikin  
 And the general fidget from busts of Constantine  
 To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank. . . .  
 (CP 488)

This inventory prizes the minute over the sublime, the temporary over that which lasts, the obscured over the effulgent. But the list is not only a haphazard bundle of exempla. Each item refers to a specific moment in Stevens' poetic history. It is a *coaceruatio* of the fluttering things whose distinct shades he has spent a lifetime pursuing and converting into verse. Stevens had explored "The less legible meanings of sounds" in the "Tum-ti-tum" (CP 20), "ki-ki-ri-ki" (CP 63), and "hoobla-hoobla-hoobla-how" (CP 383) of "Ploughing on Sunday," "Depression before Spring," and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction"; the bushes blooming "red blue, / Red purple, never quite red itself" (CP 225) in "Arcades of Philadelphia the Past" are only one among dozens of "the little reds / Not often realized" in Stevens' corpus; the "lighter words" of a girl's labials triumph over the heavy drum of guttural speech in "The Plot against the Giant." "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" anatomizes the inner man behind the outer shield; sheets of music lie behind strokes of symphonic thunder in "Thunder by the Musician"; candles burn through the night in poems from "The Valley Candle" to "The Auroras of Autumn"; the "flickings from finikin to fine finikin" began with poetry's definition as "a finikin thing of air" (CP 155) in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"; and poems such

as "The American Sublime" and the discussion of Andrew Jackson's statue in the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" examine the limits of political art, or "the general fidget from busts of Constantine / To photographs of the late president, Mr. Blank."<sup>13</sup>

In this final canto, Stevens points toward the expanse of his earlier poetry and says, "These are the edgings and inchings of final form" (CP 488). Every poem he has written has been directly and indirectly getting at what he had once called "the central poem," which collects

the miraculous multiplex of lesser poems,  
Not merely into a whole, but a poem of  
The whole. . . . (CP 442)

This is a deep desire of any aged poet as he or she looks back on his or her *oeuvre*. It is the desire to impose order on a life of observation, meditation, and writing, to find "The roundness that pulls tight the final ring" (CP 442). It is the impulse that caused Whitman to go over the configuration of *Leaves of Grass* again and again, and the same motive that prompted Auden to revise his earlier work in light of the later whole. In this moment of self-review, Stevens asserts that no creative act has been wasted, that like a philosopher practicing the piano or a woman destroying a rough draft, every poetic act, successful or not, has been integral to a lifelong aesthetic approach.

It is at this point that "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" takes its most surprising turn, as Stevens looks up from the collected poems he has been sifting through, and turns to the reader to communicate a last meditation on the essence of things. The final turn of the canto is as unforeseen and, ultimately, as warranted as Rilke's closing address to the reader in the sonnet "Archaic Torso of Apollo." Stevens tells us that the "final form" he has been approaching through a life of writing lies

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

It is impossible not to hear a note of Stoic self-elegy in this movement. Eleanor Cook has usefully pointed out Stevens' use of the word "shade" as playing upon "Virgilian *umbra*" (110), an observation especially relevant to the end of this poem. Elegy has been microscopically present in the dead candle and late president of the preceding list, and the aged Stevens finally shares in Shakespeare's response to the pageantry of fictions. "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" (1630) becomes the modern poet's wizened, ephemeral remark: "It is not in the premise that reality / Is a solid. It may be a shade. . . ." Stevens has been preparing for this late, magnificent, elegiac moment throughout his career, writing in this mode as early as "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle": "For it has come that thus I greet the

spring. / These choirs of welcome choir for me farewell. / No spring can follow past meridian" (CP 13). But here, at this late end, the poet sees the possibility of a starting point, if not for him, for the poets of the future. The key word in the canto's last tercet is not "shade," but "premise." The premise of the poem's final stanza is Stevens' bequest to the young poets of reality, a *tick* from which they may begin a new text of the world while the older poets pass into bodilessness.

In the last year of his life, Stevens made this comment on receiving the National Book Award for Poetry:

Now, at seventy-five, as I look back on the little that I have done and as I turn the pages of my own poems gathered together in a single volume, I have no choice except to paraphrase the old verse that says that it is not what I am, but what I aspired to be that comforts me. It is not what I have written but what I should like to have written that constitutes my true poems, the uncollected poems which I have not had the strength to realize. (OP 289)

In one way, those who see Stevens as incapable of reaching a poem's goal, or as writing "against closure," are correct. This poet most often treated the completion of one lyric as an opportunity to begin another, and if a poem's goal is ultimately to express a poet's total vision, then Stevens surely never reached this end.<sup>14</sup> The last line of this writer's text never demarcates the end of his imagination, and it is this aspect of Stevens that tends toward prologue, deferral, and continuation, even transforming elegy into bequest at the moment of closure. It is a mark of the poet's faith in his readers that he asks us to leave his poetry not with a sense of fulfillment, but rather with a glimpse of what he might have done, given another lifetime.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Timothy Bahti, for instance, makes this claim regarding Stevensian closure:

Stevens rarely if ever in his poetry comes to the point of a poem's goal and end. . . . Stevens' poems do not end with the attainment or achievement of a goal—an arrival at a target—so much as with their lingering ending upon words. (166–67)

I would argue that Stevens rarely *fails* to arrive at a poem's goal, though one might have to search through the entire *Collected Poems* before discovering the resolution of any given text.

<sup>2</sup>"Anecdote of the Prince of Peacocks" is an exception, staging a dream-encounter between the poet and his Berserk persona. But this poem ends with a wish for a sleep safe from the dream-terrain's bushy plain: "I knew the dread / Of the bushy plain, /

And the beauty / Of the moonlight / Falling there, / Falling / As sleep falls / In the innocent air" (CP 58). The poet longs for a dreamless sleep that falls innocently, undisturbed by the hallucinations of desire.

<sup>3</sup>Variation is restricted to prosody, as we see in the penultimate stanza of the poem, where the text-blocks "To the right" and "To the left," which previously had been separate, finally share a line.

<sup>4</sup>This rationale of closure is reversed at the end of "Montrachet-le-Jardin":

And yet what good were yesterday's devotions?  
I affirm and then at midnight the great cat  
Leaps quickly from the fireside and is gone. (CP 264)

The firecat's submission to sleep and the great fireside cat's abrupt, leaping departure at bedtime present adversarial models of the imagination's nocturnal work. The first model is a realist's, insisting upon the mind's need for rest, while the second might be termed "romantic," claiming that the mind must refashion itself every night.

<sup>5</sup>Poems that end in violent or unexpected death, or in a sleep troubled by insomnia or nightmares are quite different cases. A poem such as Yeats's "Cuchulain's Fight With the Sea," for instance, ends with the untimely death of its central figure, giving closure to a lyric tragedy of a Sophoclean design. I have already mentioned the alternate poetics of "dreamless" versus "dreaming" sleep-lyrics.

<sup>6</sup>This is not the first time Stevens revisits Keats's figure of Autumn. In the last canto of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," he visualizes his "fat girl" (also referred to as "my summer") in various poses reminiscent of the Keats ode: "when I think of you as strong or tired, / Bent over work, anxious, content, alone, / You remain the more than natural figure" (CP 406).

<sup>7</sup>Stevens returns to the syllable as poetry's minimal golden bough again and again in his career, from the "syllable . . . [that] / Intones its single emptiness" en route to "The last purity of the knowledge of good" in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" (CP 294) to the elusive "syllable / Of recognition" in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (CP 471).

<sup>8</sup>In fact, even as innocuous an agent as the light of day can alter a house in Stevens' verse: "My house has changed a little in the sun" (CP 385).

<sup>9</sup>To my knowledge, the edge of a village is never used elsewhere as a location in Stevens' work. "Metaphors of a Magnifico" and "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home" are strongly linked by this unusual poetic topos. My reading of the former text as being "about" violence need not be limited to the political violence carried out during times of war—epistemological violence, for instance, is equally behind the speaker's compulsion to reiterate some form of traumatic experience—though the shared setting with "A Woman Sings a Song for a Soldier Come Home" might point toward a military context for "Metaphors of a Magnifico."

<sup>10</sup>The Keatsian echo is loudest in Stevens' phrase "men that perish," which recalls Coelus' speech to Hyperion: "I see [actions of rage and passion] on the mortal world beneath, in *men who die*" (1233; italics added).

<sup>11</sup>Stevens may have been unable to successfully conclude "The Comedian as the Letter C" because it is such an overwhelmingly *narrative* poem, belonging to a genre that traditionally demands a climax (and, possibly, a subsequent denouement) at the point of closure. The absence of any dramatic conflict or adversarial *agon* within the text—Crispin has no enemies in the world of the poem—leaves Stevens without any means of staging the kind of climactic encounter that has propelled long narrative poems toward closure since the classical period.

<sup>12</sup>I count not only the poem's first three tercets as a list, but the penultimate stanza as well: "Like an evening evoking the spectrum of violet, / A philosopher practicing

scales on his piano, / A woman writing a note and tearing it up" (CP 488). Only six of the canto's lines do not participate in a list trope.

<sup>13</sup>This remarkable list prefigures Stevens' later retrospective self-allusions in the poems collected under *The Rock*. In those later texts, Stevens is even more explicitly self-referential, like Yeats in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," writing a "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," bringing back the rou-cou of his *Harmonium* dove in "Song of Fixed Accord," and recalling the "imagined jay" (CP 184) of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" in "Madame La Fleurie."

<sup>14</sup>Some of Stevens' endings seem to resolve the poetic text more fully than others, as in the trope of "completion" at the end of "Credences of Summer":

Free, for a moment, from malice and sudden cry,  
Complete in a completed scene, speaking  
Their parts as in a youthful happiness. (CP 378)

Or the superlatives that close "On the Road Home":

It was at that time, that the silence was largest  
And longest, the night was roundest,  
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,  
Closest and strongest. (CP 204)

Yet even these closural gestures are phrased provisionally; the superlatives at the end of "On the Road Home" are transitory, occurring only "at that time" in the past, and the fat, roseate characters of "Credences of Summer" are complete and free only "for a moment."

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## “Whose Spirit Is This?": Musings on the Woman Singer in “The Idea of Order at Key West”

BROOKE BAETEN

THERE IS A WOMAN at Key West, a woman who sings, a woman who makes a world. Or is there? Perhaps the question is not whether there is a woman at Key West (for the reader certainly identifies a woman in the poem), but instead whether that woman in fact does anything at all. To be sure, the narrator of Wallace Stevens' poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” tells the reader of a woman, a woman who “was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang” (*CP* 129), but in fact, the reader encounters that woman only as a vision of the narrator. Her actions and, indeed, even her existence as an individual distinct from the narrator are problematized for the reader seeking an understanding of her role as maker, as poet.

The woman singer cannot be understood as simply a woman who happens to be singing as she walks along the seashore. Though she is presented as an other observed by the narrator, from whom he learns the process of ordering chaos, the woman represents a complex manifestation of artistry and gender difference in relation to the narrator of the poem. For the narrator, the male poet, she acts as inspiration, as muse. For Stevens, however, the female “muse” is a complicated figure, a figure whose relationship to and interaction with the virile poet is ambivalent.

David M. LaGuardia and Janet McCann identify the woman at Key West as a personification of the imagination so essential to Stevens' poetry; however, as Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Mary B. Arensberg have pointed out, Stevens' delineation of the poetic process asserts exclusively masculine control. The woman at Key West, then, is not simply the imagination personified, nor is she simply a muse, inspiration for the male poet. She is rather a composite figure representing several poetic conventions: the poetic spirit, the imagination, and the traditional muse, of course, but also the poet himself. In interesting ways, this woman's image is strikingly similar to Stevens' own definitions of the poet—a mirror image of that definition, one might say. In Jacques Lacan's theories of the mirror stage of identity formation, the mirror image functions to engender a sense of confidence within the self, and it is just such a process that the male poet undergoes as the poem “The Idea of Order at Key West” progresses. The

woman at Key West, then, is significant not for what she is, but for what she reflects.

She is a manifestation of the imagination, which has the power to order the chaos of reality, at least within the mind. Reality is Key West, "the outer voice of sky," "the sunken coral water-walled," and, above all, "the dark voice of the sea" (*CP* 129)—the landscape (or seascape, more precisely), the setting, through which the woman travels. She is an entity unto herself, an imaginative power whose human voice in song transcends both humanity and reality, so that the narrator comments, "Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought and knew / That we should ask this often as she sang" (*CP* 129). What she is is imagination; the spirit the narrator seeks is that of poetry. As LaGuardia writes, "The imagination, in the person of a woman, walks beside the perpetually shifting sea (unformed reality) and sings her song. . . . The woman's word-by-word utterance matches the mode of the poet: words are the abstractions by which the poet temporarily orders his world into fictive things—poems. . . . [T]he woman by the sea engenders reality with her truth" (61).

As the imagination that generates the poetic spirit, the woman sings in order to enhance her own version of reality, to create a perception of the chaotic movement of the sea now both imitated and ordered. This perception is created with such strength, in fact, that her song alters the real within her experience, or as Stevens puts it, "there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made" (*CP* 130). But this ordering is merely perceptual; as McCann observes:

The woman identified only as "she" sings "beyond the genius of the sea" and in so doing changes nothing but what is in the mind; her song is like reality, but it is not the same as reality. The imagination is not the voice of reality, "the dark voice of the sea." Neither is it our own understandings of reality, "her voice and ours." Rather, it is the intensification of reality that is given from the imagination's engagement with it. (31–32)

It is thus the power of the imagination to make poetry, to alter perceptions within the mind, so that reality is no longer external and chaotic, "The grinding water and the gasping wind" (*CP* 129), but can become a private world, made private by its internalization, ordered through the intervention of the imagination. It is this that LaGuardia defines as "the woman's role: she translates the chaos of nature into a higher form, momentarily ordering it within the mind" (63). That is, she creates poetry.

The woman functions not only as the imagination personified, but also as the poet. Stevens could not be any more clear about the woman's role:

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.

She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (*CP* 129–30)

She is the maker, Stevens asserts; she is the poet, and the narrator quite clearly understands the implications of her singing, for once she has sung, the world becomes ordered in his eyes as well:

The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,  
As the night descended, tilting in the air,  
Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,  
Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,  
Arranging, deepening, enchanting night. (*CP* 130)

As the narrator observes this woman singing as she walks along the seashore, he comes to understand the process through which she orders chaos—to perceive, as she perceives, the opposite of chaos in its very presence. It is the “maker’s rage to order words of the sea” (*CP* 130) that generates the narrator’s enlightenment and that subsequently brings him to such a pitch that he calls this order “Blessed.” As McCann explains:

It is this “blessed rage for order,” the fierce vision of the “maker,” that is responsible for a life lived in full awareness. The “rage for order” causes the creation of that intense poetry (“keener sounds”) of our scarcely understood origins and points of departure. These portals are vague, barely discernible (“dimly starred”), but marked out. The blessed rage drives toward their articulation, their definition (“ghostlier demarcations”). . . . The results of this “blessed rage” are a redefinition, or perhaps a more precise understanding, of what it is to be human. (32–33)

It is thus this woman’s role as poet not only to transform her own understanding of the world, but also to transform the world of those who observe her. Hers is not a purely individual power, but a transcending force that reaches beyond her own mind and, through her song, into the minds of others.

The relationship between the woman and the narrator in “The Idea of Order at Key West” becomes clear. Without the narrator, the woman is a poet whose poetry is never “read,” whose expression of the imaginative force is merely internal. The very presence of the narrator draws the woman’s poetry outside of her mind. LaGuardia summarizes this process:

The observing narrator realizes that although the woman's song is distinct from the sea, it partakes of the sea's motion; by striving to understand the intricacies of the relationship of sea and song—obvious figures for reality and the imagination's rendering of it—the narrator participates in a crucial way in the evolving circumstance. The unraveling drama portrays an allegory of the poetic process, depicting poet, poem, and reader of poem. With the woman as poet and the sea as reality, the narrator as witness becomes a figure for the reader of poems, one who benefits from the poet's formative power and who shares directly in the poet's vision. (61)

To make this drama complete, the character of Ramon Fernandez can be read as the critic to whom the reader of poetry defers for an explanation for the overwhelming transformation of the world once subjected to the ordering imaginative force.<sup>1</sup> No answer comes; it is enough for the reader to comprehend the "Blessed rage for order," to hear the "keener sounds," the "Words of the fragrant portals" supposedly sung by the woman, the poet, the "maker."

There is a fundamental difficulty with this interpretation, however, a difficulty that hinges on that supposition. If the implications of Lacan's theories of linguistic signification or Stevens' own definitions of the poet are to be believed, it is not possible for a woman to "make" meaning in this way. This version of making meaning, of "writing" poetry by "mastering" the world, is not available to a woman, who is ideologically excluded from possessing the phallus. In "The Meaning of the Phallus," Lacan argues, "For the phallus is a signifier. . . . [I]t is to this signified that it is given to designate as a whole the effect of there being a signified, inasmuch as it conditions any such effect by its presence as signifier" (FS 79, 80). Taken at a purely theoretical level, the phallus as signifier is indeed gender-neutral; in Lacan's words, "the relation of the subject to the phallus is set up regardless of the anatomical difference between the sexes" (FS 76).

However, with the constant substitution of metaphor as well as the linguistic flow of metonymy, the phallus itself becomes more significant for what it implies. As Jane Gallop writes in "Penis/Phallus: Same Difference,"

The Lacanian *phallus* is thus a linguistic concept. Discourse is phallogentric. Therefore, to have the *phallus* would mean to be at the center of discourse, to generate meaning, to have mastery of language, to control rather than conform to that which comes from outside, from the Other. . . . But as long as the attribute of power is a phallus which can only have meaning by referring to and being confused with a penis, this confusion

will support a structure in which it seems reasonable that men have power and women do not. (246–47)

Because language is not a rigid system of articulation but rather a structure of sliding meaning and arbitrary signification, the phallus as a signifier, Gallop suggests, necessarily implies “penis,” and therefore necessarily implies masculinity, male domination, within the meaning making process.

Lacan’s language even invites this interpretation; he writes, “the signifier has an active function in determining the effects in which the signifiable appears as submitting to its mark, becoming through that passion the signified” (*FS* 78). Can this statement not be read as the feminine (the signifiable) passionately submitting to the masculine (the signifier, as represented by the phallus), thus becoming representable, signified? In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous offers a similar reading of the kind of signification Lacan discusses:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as *marked* writing; that, until now, far more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated . . . where woman has never *her* turn to speak. (249)

Just as the signifiable is marked by the signification of the phallus, the entire linguistic system in which meaning is made is marked by the “typically masculine economy” with which that system is inscribed. A woman, then, is both ideologically and literally excluded from “speaking” in this system; she is not able to command language in the same way that a man can signify, but remains always the Other within the symbolic order. She cannot “make” meaning, but serves only to deliver meaning, as represented Other, made by a male counterpart. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey argues, “Woman then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning” (15), and it is in that role as bearer of meaning that she remains.

This argument becomes especially pertinent to a discussion of Stevens, whose own view of the poet is exclusively and intrinsically male. The appropriate role of the poet is quite clear in Stevens’ essays in *The Necessary Angel*: the poet is responsible for making life more bearable, for transforming what is chaotic and threatening in reality into that which is enhanced and beautified through the intervention of the imagination. In “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens writes:

[The poet's] own measure as a poet . . . is the measure of his power to abstract himself, and to withdraw with him into his abstraction the reality on which the lovers of truth insist. He must be able to abstract himself and also to abstract reality, which he does by placing it in his imagination. . . . [W]hat makes the poet the potent figure that he is . . . is that he creates the world. . . . (NA 23, 31)

Like the woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West," the poet in this description is involved in a process of creation; here, however, that creative process is explicitly linked to potency, to virility, to masculinity.

Stevens traces the development of the poetic process through the centuries, eventually arriving at his definition of the "youth as virile poet":

The centuries have a way of being male. . . . In effect, what we are remembering is the rather haggard background of the incredible, the imagination without intelligence, from which a younger figure is emerging, stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, still half-beast and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur. (NA 52)

The female role in this process, according to Stevens, is limited to that of muse, she who enlightens the poet and urges him to create. Significantly, the muse in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" is distinctly inhuman, "half-beast," "somehow more than human," and reminiscent of the woman in Key West, whose song, according to the narrator, is composed of "Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred," in "ghostlier demarcations" (CP 130).

Yet, Stevens discards this muse and asserts that he is the only voice of his poetry, the only source of his creation; in so doing, Stevens emphasizes the virility and the ultimate authority of the masculine voice of the poet. He declares:

*No longer do I believe that there is a mystic muse, sister of the Minotaur. This is another of the monsters I had for nurse, whom I have wasted. I am myself a part of what is real, and it is my own speech and the strength of it, this only, that I hear or ever shall. . . .*

*Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur . . . I am the truth but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours. (NA 60, 67)*

Though originally the muse accompanies the youth as virile poet, here Stevens dismisses the muse as merely a trope, denying her existence as a poetic creator—his "speech and the strength of it" is all that produces his poetry. The muse as muse rather traditionally acts as a source of inspiration, and her coupling with the virile poet engenders poetry. As a figure of

femininity, however, the muse here is disregarded or rather claimed, possessed. Her influence becomes that which is never outwardly spoken, which exists only within exchanges that precede speech, precede poetry. Her words are appropriated by the male voice, who insists on sole authorship in the poetic process, and the oneness of poet and muse during their discourse/intercourse disappears once poetry comes into being.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the muse is cast aside; she is no longer a partner in creation, but an “inexplicable” monster and nurse, whose guidance is characterized by its “unfamiliar motion and manner.” That is, to Stevens, the sister of the Minotaur is Other, an Other whose voice is appropriated and absorbed into Stevens’ own voice. In effect, then, by denying the existence of the muse as a separate identity while simultaneously acknowledging her role as guide, Stevens internalizes the muse. Thus the youth as virile (that is, male) poet becomes master, sole possessor of poetic creativity, and the muse (representative of the female) becomes merely an internal voice who may speak to, but never speaks through, the poet.

It directly follows that the woman in Key West cannot be a poet, not according to a Lacanian analysis and certainly not according to a Stevensian one. She is, however, presented as the poet; the analyses offered by LaGuardia and McCann are not incorrect, but rather incomplete. The woman at Key West does in fact seem to be representative of all that Stevens considers the role of the poet: she abstracts reality, subjects it to the imagination, and in so doing, orders it, “makes” it into poetry, poetry that solely constitutes her world and transforms the world in her observer’s perspective. If, then, it is not possible for this woman to be the poet, what is her “true” role in the poem?

Since Lacan has already complicated this question, it seems appropriate to call upon him again to clarify the answer. Specifically, Lacan’s theories of the mirror stage of the development of identity offer an interesting explanation of the woman’s role in “The Idea of Order at Key West.” In the mirror stage, Lacan explains, the subject considers his<sup>3</sup> own image as reflected back at him through a mirror; in so doing, the subject conceives of himself as a complete entity rather than a collection of separate parts. This conception is empowering, in the sense that it allows the subject to see himself as unified and therefore capable of mastering the complexities of his body and his world. In “The mirror stage,” Lacan writes:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *Gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him. (2)

Through the mirror, Lacan suggests, the subject is comforted; he feels himself to be in a certain amount of turmoil, disjointed and incoherent, but sees himself as complete, unified, and organized as an individual. The subject thus experiences a kind of self-affirmation through the mirror. Or, as Lacan puts it, "The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality" (4). The mirror stage is, then, a function of the individual's search for identity by which the subject comes to anticipate his ability to master his surroundings.

The self, then, is not simply reflected in the mirror. In fact, the self does not exist in any kind of coherence before the mirror stage, despite the common understanding of the way a mirror works. In "Reading Lacan's *Écrits*," Gallop explains, "The traditional view of a mirror is that it reflects a self, that it produces a secondary, more or less faithful likeness, an imitation, a translation of an already constituted original self. But Lacan posits that the mirror constructs the self, that the self as organized entity is actually an imitation of the cohesiveness of the mirror image" (RL 38). The subject initially conceives of himself as a collection of unrelated fragments, but that conception changes when the subject observes himself in the mirror—he perceives a certain wholeness and thus comes to think of himself in relation to that wholeness. In essence, the subject imitates his mirror-image in order to conceive of himself as whole. Once this understanding is established, the subject can proceed to examine his relationship to others and to the world. The mirror stage is significant because it allows the subject to distinguish between himself and that which is outside himself, thereby allowing the subject to enter society (which will later require the forging of relationships through language).

Lacan states, "I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality" (*Écrits* 4), and it is through this explanation that the workings of the mirror stage become particularly relevant to Stevens and his writing of "The Idea of Order at Key West." The poem itself is an examination of the individual in relation to reality, which for Stevens requires that the individual abstract reality and employ the imagination to transform the chaotic relationship between self and reality into a relationship of order. But for Stevens to accomplish this ordering, he must be able to conceive of himself as capable of mastering his world. That is, in order for Stevens to fulfill the role of the poet, he must possess a confidence in his identity as a poet. In order to obtain that kind of coherent understanding of himself, Stevens must observe his own mirror image.

This, then, is the function of the woman in the poem: she is the projection of the male speaker's poetic identity, representative of the poet as

complete and therefore fully capable of mastering the world. She is his mirror image. This woman is an external representation of the cohesion of the poet's parts: the poetic spirit, the imagination, and the internalized muse. Hers is the voice of the sister of the Minotaur, that otherworldly monster and nurse who is a fragment of the male identity as poet. In " 'A Curable Separation': Stevens and the Mythology of Gender," Arensberg argues:

As she mirrors the otherness within the self of which she is a part, she also heals the separation between self and world. . . . Externalized as . . . the dark sensualist at Key West, she is a fictionalized presence within the text even as she signifies a construct outside the text such as nature, being, otherness, or sublimity. . . . [S]he emerges from the body of the mother (nature) in late spring and seems to incarnate the voice of the poet as virile youth. . . . [S]he is the poet, the mirrored "self-object" of his own femininity. (28, 29, 32)<sup>4</sup>

Though she is presented as Other, as a mysterious and unknown figure, the woman in Key West represents something intimately familiar to Stevens' male poet. She is on one level an external projection of the sister of the Minotaur. As a mirror image, however, she is whole and representative of the oneness achieved through the poet's exchanges with the muse. What the narrator (representative of the youth as virile poet) observes in her is a vision of wholeness. Like Lacan's subject, the narrator takes this vision to be representative of his own cohesion as a self and as a poet. As she sings, the woman becomes for the narrator the complete picture of the poet who transforms reality; thus, through his observation, his fragmented parts present themselves to him as unified and coherent, capable of mastery.

Thus the male poet sees himself, reflected through the poetic performance of the woman, as whole. This vision is empowering to the extent that once the self-affirmation is complete (that is, once the narrator triumphantly asserts that "she was the maker" and "there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made"), the woman disappears from the poem. Her world had been ordered through sound, but the male poet appropriates her "voice" and orders the world visually, appealing to Ramon Fernandez, the critic, for an explanation of the power of the imagination, but in his excitement rushing to continue the poetic ordering process rather than waiting for an answer. The supposedly autonomous female "maker" is cast aside, or rather, her projected image is repossessed and again internalized as the male poet exercises his own voice. In " 'Sister of the Minotaur': Sexism and Stevens," Brogan summarizes:

[T]he celebrated female figure of this poem is . . . supposedly vocal and dynamic. . . . [T]his "woman" is simply a figure for

(and thus a sign or empty cipher for) Stevens himself and the way *he* sings. The clearest sign of this is found . . . where he abruptly breaks in with, "Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know. . . ." This rupture is the most overt sign in the poem of the nature of the poetic "order" (even "rage for order") that Stevens has in mind. This thematic is inscribed throughout the poem: lights "master" the night, "portion" out the sea, "arrange" and "deepen" night, so that the words, in a kind of phallic "mastering," ironically create the "fragrant portals," essentially create the feminine. But what do we hear from this feminine voice, which is simultaneously created, disclosed in the portals, and repressed—silenced by the "mastering" as well as by Stevens' actual appropriation of the unheard feminine voice? (13–14)

What we hear from the woman, in fact, is nothing at all. What is given to us, as readers, is the narrator's account of what he heard, told through his voice throughout the poem, though more vociferously in the final sections. In this way, the female "poet" of the poem is relegated to her place as internalized muse, she whose voice is appropriated but ultimately unacknowledged in favor of the forceful expressions of the virile masculine master. She orders her world, we are told; but Stevens orders the poem, and thus the world at large, including her participation in it.

The poem itself, then, represents Stevens' own conflicting opinions of the sister of the Minotaur and her role in the poetic process. "The Idea of Order at Key West" attributes to a woman (and a woman obviously romanticized as a being similar to the classical Muse) the ability to order her world, and even exalts her mimetic mastery of the sounds of the sea as she creates her song, her poem. At the same time, the woman herself never speaks, and all the mastering she does is conveyed to the reader as a vision of the narrator, who ultimately understands her as a reflection of his own cohesion and mastery rather than as a reflection of the wholeness achieved through a partnership of muse and virile poet. The woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West," then, neither makes her world<sup>5</sup> nor participates in a cooperative effort to order that world, but rather delivers the message to the reader that the poet orders reality through his imagination—and that is a message "made" by the only "speaker" of the poem, the narrator who is the virile poet. In "The Idea of Order at Key West," as in *The Necessary Angel*, Stevens acknowledges the existence of his muse and then renounces his intercourse with her, asserting his own independence and masculine authority.

This ambivalence toward the muse, this invoking and renouncing of the female voice, belies a certain insecurity in the male poet (and here that poet becomes Stevens himself), a certain feeling of inadequacy. The woman on the shore functions to affirm the narrator's confidence in the poetic process, but it is significant that the poet's mirror image has only a limited

ability to enhance reality through the imagination. Her limited success seemingly persuades the narrator that if the female muse can transcend reality for herself, then as virile male poet he can abstract reality for both himself and others; however, the only "other" in the poem, Ramon Fernandez (representative of critic and reader) is never allowed to speak and never affirms that his reality is in fact transcended by the abstractions of the male poet. Indeed, the invocation of Ramon Fernandez is awkwardly incomplete, as though the poet instantly questioned his own momentary confidence engendered by the mirror image.

If the woman in "The Idea of Order at Key West" functions as a mirror to the insecure male narrator, representative of the youth as virile poet, then Stevens himself is drawing a certain parallel between the limited female voice and the male poet who needs the affirmation of a mirror image. Neither "maker" in this scenario is fully able to order the world without the intervention of the other, just as the artist in "So-And-So Reclining on Her Couch" can create only by considering images of a female projection. The inadequacy of Stevens' male poet is even more explicit in "The World as Meditation," in which the poet (who is exclusively male for Stevens) is played by a woman. As poet, Penelope creates images that order and resolve the chaos of her world, but the best she is ever able to conjure is the idea of Ulysses returning, so that "It was Ulysses and it was not" that "kept coming constantly so near" (*CP* 521) to her. Perhaps "The Idea of Order at Key West," then, is indicative of Stevens' inability (or belief in his own inability) to accomplish anything more than an idea. Perhaps the woman singer is more representative of Stevens than any male narrator-poet could ever be.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps too that is why she is so majestically presented, and so forcefully discarded, as the poet struggles to affirm his masculinity and mastery.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Perhaps, however, Fernandez, in a broad sense, is 'the critic' or the theorist of poetry. He is asked for an explanation of how it could come about that those who heard the song found nature reordered and rearranged. . . . It is the perceiver and not the critic, however, . . . who attributes the reordering of nature to desire so intense that it is designated a 'blessed rage' " (McCann 32).

<sup>2</sup> In her discussion of Stevens, Arensberg uses a similarly sexualized syntax in describing Stevens' relationship with his muse. As Arensberg sees it, however, the poet's desire to ravish the muse leads him to surrender his own authority as masculine maker in an attempt to possess and be possessed by the muse (as represented by the woman) and her "truth."

<sup>3</sup> I use the masculine pronoun here for two reasons: first, Lacan uses the masculine to denote his universal subject (since the mirror stage precedes the stages that will

differentiate the development of the sexes); and second, the "subject" in this context is the male poet, specifically represented by the narrator in the poem.

<sup>4</sup>Arensberg is concerned with the Freudian concept of desire and the interior par amour within Stevens' work. Her reading of "The Idea of Order at Key West" argues for Stevens' desire to possess and ravish the muse rather than his observation of her as reflection of himself. Still, she notes that the muse is part of Stevens' poetic identity, and her comments here support the function of the female as mirror who reconciles the subject with his world.

<sup>5</sup>The clash of perspectives between the Lacanian reader and the narrator of the poem here becomes significant. While the Lacanian reader recognizes the inability of the female singer to "make" meaning, the narrator, seeing her as an image of his cohesive poetic identity, believes her to be actively ordering her world, "making" meaning. This belief, then, indicates Stevens' overriding ambivalence to his female muse rather concisely; his male poet recognizes the woman's active role in the creative poetic process, but then retracts his admiration and appropriates her role as poet through his own ordering and "making" of *his* world.

<sup>6</sup>Brogan argues that "The Idea of Order at Key West" indicates Stevens' continuous struggle to incorporate his own femininity into his work: "But I think at least part of the explanation for Stevens' apparent need to break into the text—to silence this feminine figure, however lovely we may feel she may be—lies in her uncanny reflection, that 'sister of the Minotaur.' The lovely, virtually inhuman woman by the sea and the somewhat unsettling half-beast who is 'yet more than human' are two faces, as it were, of the same figure that, as figure, also means absence and repression" (14–15). In this argument, the muse is a sort of displaced self for the male poet, and her danger is that she embodies the chaos the male poet fears, so that if he allows her to speak that chaos will become uncontrollable. My suggestion is that in identifying with the female muse as mirror image, the poet realizes he never had control, and he recognizes his own inability to order chaos beyond the illusion he creates.

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## “The Mode of Common Dreams”: “Owl’s Clover” and the Social Imagination

ELLA OPHIR

THE DEVELOPMENT OF the poem “The Old Woman and the Statue” (1934) into the five-poem sequence “Owl’s Clover” (1936) was prompted by the 1935 review of *Ideas of Order* by Marxist Stanley Burnshaw and the challenge of the leftist literary-political movement that that review, to Wallace Stevens’ mind, stood for. “Owl’s Clover” is anomalous in Stevens’ work in the explicitness of its engagement with contemporaneous social and political circumstances, featuring in its cast of characters Burnshaw himself, the socialist “Bulgar,” and gun-wielding Europeans in Africa. Critical attention to the poem, which initially focused on the extent to which that engagement is aesthetically successful, has recently focused on the extent to which it is politically satisfactory. Some recent accounts have demonstrated that the poem contains fairly specific and not unsophisticated responses (some critical, some receptive) to certain aspects of the challenge of the left.<sup>1</sup> I propose to show that the poem also contains a broader argument about art that implicitly denies that the artist has an obligation to make such responses. Underlying any statement about the virtues or inadequacies of politically engaged art must be an assumption about the ideal function of art in society. Stevens’ response to what he understood to be the challenge from the left comes primarily, I believe, at the level of this more fundamental issue.

“Owl’s Clover” develops a conception of the function of art in society that I will call, adapting Stevens’ own term, “exponency.” An exponent can be one who expounds or interprets, a representative, an advocate, or a symbol. Stevens’ conception of the social role of the artist is a subtle compound of all these senses of the term. This conception endures throughout his essays on reality and the imagination and is closely related to his conception, developed in the early 1940s, of poetry as a source of supreme fictions. His first statement of this conception, written, as Milton Bates notes, just after the completion of “Owl’s Clover,” appeared on the jacket of the 1936 trade edition of *Ideas of Order* (Bates 192). “The more realistic life may be,” Stevens writes, “the more it needs the stimulus of the imagination”; and “in any society, the poet should be the exponent of the imagination of that society” (*OP* 223). The wording is significant: the poet is to

be the exponent not of his own imagination, nor simply of the faculty of the imagination in some general sense, but of his society's imagination. This, in concentrated form, is the central contention of "Owl's Clover." But what notion of "society" is Stevens implying, and what notion of social, or collective, imagination?

The idea of poetic exponency that emerges in "Owl's Clover" and, afterwards, in Stevens' essays is a conceptual relative of reflection theories of art and as such embroils itself in a number of the difficulties that reflectionism entails. A superficial sort of reflectionism is a commonplace in ordinary thinking about art. As Francis Sparshott puts it, "it is obvious that all art reflects the society in which it is produced, in the sense that the artist shares [to some extent] the beliefs and attitudes of his fellows and exploits a repertoire of themes and forms that he finds current" (268). In this sense the idea of "reflection" is indeed a truism with few implications for the understanding of the nature of art. But reflection has also been put forward as a theory of the *function* of art: "it is . . . sometimes said that it is the function of a culture's arts as a whole to provide a sensible and emotional counterpart for the configuration of their society: that is, to symbolize it" (Sparshott 268).<sup>2</sup> It is this conception of reflection as the function—that is, the social significance and importance—of art that Stevens' principle of exponency absorbs. This theory conceives the reflective nature of art as conducive to "self-knowledge," and this self-knowledge is in turn "assigned either a sustaining or a reforming function"—the sustaining effect being associated with pre-industrial, relatively homogeneous societies, the "reforming" effect with industrial societies (Sparshott 285).<sup>3</sup> Stevens has a similar understanding of art as productive of both individual and social self-understanding. His conception of the function of that self-understanding, however, is primarily sustaining rather than reforming, and it is related to a will to believe that in twentieth-century America there was a corporate imagination for which art could be the articulation and the sustenance.

All forms of reflectionism implicitly rely on a conception of the connection of art to its society as somehow organic and insofar as organic, necessary or inescapable. The modernists, however, had no such comfortable confidence in the relation of their art to its age. One of their pervasive preoccupations was concerned with how to create a genuine literature of the time, how to ensure that they would not find themselves the ghostly servants of a departed era. A poet might easily lose years, as Pound feared, "Observ[ing] the elegance of Circe's hair / Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials" (61). Stevens felt the threat of this spectacle no less acutely than his contemporaries, and his conception of poetry as the exponent of the social imagination seems to have developed at least in part as a response to it. His commitment to that conception was strengthened further by his consciousness of what he feared were the grievous psychological consequences—individual and social—of the collapse of that edifice of the West-

ern imagination, the Christian heaven. Stevens ascribes to an essentially reflectionist conception of the sustaining function of art in society, but, in an attempt to forgo reflectionism's untenable organicism (an attempt not always, as we shall see, successful), he proposes that function as a normative, rather than a natural, principle. In the form of the principle of exponency, he maintains a version of reflectionism as an ethical imperative—the sole ethical imperative of the artist.

This ethical imperative is dramatized in "The Old Woman and the Statue," which begins by confronting the specter of an art out of all spiritual alignment with its age. The section opens with an image of a statue in a park—a group of winged marble horses pushing off into flight. What is described is the sculptor's vision of how his creation would spring to life surrounded by a ring of trees in the shifting light of a windy autumn sky. Trees and light the sculptor envisioned, but no human beholder other than his own disembodied consciousness implicitly on the scene of its own imagining. So imagined, the marble is dramatically alive:

white forelegs taut  
To the muscles' very tip for the vivid plunge,  
The heads held high and gathered in a ring  
At the center of the mass, the haunches low,  
Contorted, staggering from the thrust against  
The earth as the bodies rose on feathery wings. . . . (OP 75)

That living force is abruptly obliterated at the entrance of the consciousness that does not respond to it. At the appearance of the eponymous old woman,

The mass of stone collapsed to marble hulk,  
Stood stiffly, as if the black of what she thought  
Conflicting with the moving colors there  
Changed them, at last, to its triumphant hue. . . . (OP 76)

The old woman is generally understood as a casualty of the Depression, her obliviousness to the statue a consequence of that, and this section of the poem as an account of art rendered impotent or irrelevant in the face of material exigency. Stevens' own comments support this reading.<sup>4</sup> Material poverty is of course, more often than not, accompanied by depression of spirit, and it would be wrong to discount either Stevens' intentions or the Depression-era context of the poem. But it is worth noting that insofar as the woman is presented as suffering from material poverty, that poverty is figured largely metaphorically, through terms of spiritual or psychological distress. Introduced as a "bitter mind," the woman walks

with chalky brow scratched over black  
And black by thought that could not understand

Or, if it understood, repressed itself  
Without any pity in a somnolent dream. (*OP* 76)

In cantos III and IV the woman's mind is described in terms of darkness, isolation, fear, and inarticulate straining—her trouble is the vast and shapeless night in which her mind endures; she walks “search[ing] for clearness” (*OP* 76). The strongest indication of material poverty in these cantos is the word “destitute” (“She was that tortured one, / So destitute” [*OP* 76]), but “destitute” in this context is at least as easily understood spiritually as materially. Two further possible indications of material poverty appear in canto V, which speaks of “a need that pressed like cold, / Deadly and deep” and of the “suffering, which fate assigns / To the moment” (*OP* 77–78). In the first case the “need” is conveyed in terms just as abstract as the terms of the earlier “destitution” and just as readily interpretable in spiritual terms, as there is, again, nothing in the immediate context that encourages the reader to do otherwise. From the latter instance, with its indication of external forces, of circumstance, the best case can be made for representation of the Depression. But this indication does not shift the emphasis of the preceding cantos away from the psychological suffering—the repressed thought, the mental night, and the search for clarity. The emphasis on the psychological is a sign of the tension between Stevens' undertaking to write a poem that would respond to social and political circumstances and his other, not wholly incompatible but somewhat distracting, undertaking to discount the need for that response by articulating his conception of art as the exponency of the imagination.

In canto V the narrative voice breaks into what Helen Vendler calls “a nostalgic crescendo,” “an apotheosis, irrelevant in its way, of evening untroubled by suffering” (104–05)—untroubled, that is, by the old woman. But following as it does the obliterating darkness of the woman's mind and including within it a compressed reiteration of her desolation and need, the vision of this canto is deliberately inflected, it seems to me, with futility and impotence. Though the narrative voice is not distinctly differentiated from that of the preceding cantos, there is a discernible distance between the poet's voice and this rueful vision. The vision is aligned with that of the sculptor in canto II, the descriptive vocabulary here being but a subtle variation on the first:

the legs  
Would flash in air, and the muscular bodies thrust  
Hoofs grinding against the stubborn earth, until  
The light wings lifted through the crystal space  
Of night. How clearly that would be defined! (*OP* 78)

The sculptor's cry for clarity lost is as abortive as the woman's search for the same. As the artist's work is inert, so is the woman destitute. Woman and artist by their failure to connect are mutually forsaken.

"The Old Woman and the Statue" does not make explicit the cause of the statue's failure to prevail against the darkness of the woman's mind, but it does suggest two possibilities, not mutually exclusive: that the sculptor, as I have suggested above, fashioned the statue for the audience of his own consciousness alone; or that the statue represents not the unintelligible product of solipsism, but a vision of sublimity to which the disenfranchised contemporary mind is unable to respond. Both of these possibilities are supported by the context of the poem as a whole, but I want to address briefly here the second.

Several critics have understood "Owl's Clover" as entailing an interrogation by Stevens of his own poetics, identified as "romantic." Rajeev Patke characterizes Stevens' years between 1915 and 1931 as ones in which "a mellifluous ventriloquism rehearsing fluent romanticisms had almost sufficed" (41). Harvey Teres, though not on an antagonistic note, argues that in the global political crisis of the early and mid-thirties Stevens "was forced to interrogate his own understanding of the imagination, his relationship to romanticism, and ultimately his role as poet" (154). The obsolete aesthetic represented by the statue does appear to be a romantic one—romantic in the derogatory sense of florid, overwrought, and impossibly transcendental. Such romanticism, however, should not be confused with the poetry of *Harmonium* or *Ideas of Order*. Although the first canto of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" records the Marxist's contemptuous dismissal of the statue as a "jotting-down of the sculptor's foppishness," and the second canto opens with the poet's call to "celestial paramours" to "Chant sibilant requiems for this effigy" (*OP* 79), the over-glorious, sky-aspiring statue is not an embodiment of an aesthetic that Stevens would have considered himself as having a stake in. Whatever one may think of *Harmonium* and *Ideas of Order*, the poetry of those volumes ranges from stark metaphysical skepticism ("Nuances of a Theme by Williams," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "Re-statement of Romance") to assertions of the possibility of a somehow strictly earthly experience of transcendence ("Sad Strains of a Gay Waltz," "How to Live. What to Do"). Stevens had aligned his imagination with the earth:

And the whole of the soul, Swenson,

.....  
 Still hankers after lions, or, to shift,  
 Still hankers after sovereign images.  
 If the fault is with the lions, send them back  
 To Monsieur Dufy's Hamburg whence they came.  
 The vegetation still abounds with forms. (*CP* 125)

His injunctions to the muses in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" not to "weep for peacocks that are gone / Or dance the death of doves" and to be "No longer of air but of the breathing earth" (*OP* 80, 83) are but reitera-

tions of one of his already most established themes. As it appears in "The Old Woman and the Statue" and in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," the statue is best read not as Stevens' reckoning, forced by the grim realities of the thirties with an intransigent inner romantic, but as an image of what once did, but will simply no longer, suffice. Stevens' conception of exponency entails, as I will show, a rather drastic view of the spiritual expiration of art. In the context of "Owl's Clover," that the statue embodies a romantic aesthetic is less important than that it has ceased to suffice, as all creations of the imagination, eventually, will cease to suffice: romanticism is not revealed to be a falsehood, only a superannuated truth.

"Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," which follows "The Old Woman and the Statue," develops this sense of aesthetic transience. It constitutes a rejection of the ancient equation of art and immortality and, by implication, the cultural and historical universalism of humanism. The idea of exponency at work in "Owl's Clover" does slip at times into organicism, positing a connection between art and society that Stevens would later describe as "umbilical" (*OP* 263). If art is umbilically related to its society, it follows that art, in an important sense, is truly alive only in the cultural moment of its creation. Canto V of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue" dramatizes the spiritual obsolescence to which, according to the principle of exponency, all art is eventually consigned and to which the artist must be reconciled. The result of change is "A trash can at the end of the world," where among human remains are the remains of art—broken columns and marble heads—all "Parts of the immense detritus of a world / That is completely waste" (*OP* 81).

Change here is conceived neither as progress nor degeneration; it is simply change, change in the form and sensibility of a culture. (Reflecting on modern poetry in 1951, Stevens would say: "It means nothing to compare a modern poet with the poet of a century or more ago. It is not a question of comparative goodness. It is like comparing a modern soldier, say, with an ancient one, like comparing Eisenhower with Agamemnon" [*OP* 254].) Such change is crucial to the distinction Stevens goes on to make between art that we can appreciate or "understand" and art to which we can "yield" (*NA* 5–7). Yielding, for Stevens, is the more-than-aesthetic response we have to some works of art; it is the giving up of oneself to it, the spirit's acceptance of the definition it gives to some aspect of experience. What distinguishes art one can yield to from art that one understands is that in the former one finds the expression or reflection of one's own sensibility: its apprehension is a form of self-understanding; one can accept it as an articulation of oneself.

In "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens uses Plato's elaborate image of the soul as charioteer in the *Phaedrus* as an instance of poetry in which we recognize "robustness, clearness and fluency," but to which we cannot "yield" (*NA* 5). Art to which one can yield is the art of the psychological or spiritual moment. It is the steady, incessant transmu-

tations of our psychological constitution, Stevens concludes, that “stand[] between Plato’s figure and ourselves” (NA 5). Six years after “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” Stevens makes essentially the same argument about the need for a psychologically contemporaneous art. “Effects of Analogy” contrasts the poet who writes for the future with the poet who writes for the present:

The proponents of the first theory believe that it will be a part of their achievement to have created the poetry of the future. It may be that the poetry of the future will be to the poetry of the present what the poetry of the present is to the ballad. The proponents of the second theory believe that to create the poetry of the present is an incalculable difficulty, which is rarely achieved, fully and robustly, by anyone. They think that there is enough and more than enough to do with what faces us and concerns us directly. . . . (NA 115–16)

Stevens defines himself unequivocally as a poet of the present, but his ethic of contemporaneity has more to do with a principle of presentness than with the particular constitution of his particular present—more to do with incessant change than with the substance of one point in that historical process.

One of the curiosities of “Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue” is that Stevens not only gives the figure of Mr. Burnshaw<sup>5</sup> very little to say, but he also does not construct Mr. Burnshaw’s perspective in such a way that it is a serious challenge to the one the poet is developing. Mr. Burnshaw is caustic where the poet is compassionate, but Mr. Burnshaw’s declaration that the statue is “dead” essentially accords with the poet’s own judgment. The version of Marxist theory of art that Stevens attributes to the critic Stanley Burnshaw here is itself something of an advocacy theory: Mr. Burnshaw’s objections to the statue are essentially the poet’s own, based on the same conception of the function of art, the same sense of the need of every age to have an art that is of itself. The disagreement between the two figures is about teleology: Mr. Burnshaw believes both that he can read in the present the nature of changes to come and that there will be thereafter an end of change; the poet believes neither.<sup>6</sup>

“Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue” repudiates the comforts of the equation of art and immortality and its implicit universalism and replaces them with a rather uncompromising view of the irrecoverability of the past—a stoic embrace of the implacability and finality of change. But this view of change is one significantly constrained by the lingering organicism in Stevens’ conception of poetic exponency. What does not emerge in this section is a recognition that change, in particular the changes of the thirties, might entail not just the transmutation of sensibility but also the fragmentation of it, the possibility of an irrecoverable loss of social unity and

geographically circumscribed identity. This lingering reliance on organicist conceptions of both society and the relation of art to society is something that Stevens would manifest some trouble with in his essays, though without ever quite relinquishing it. In "Owl's Clover," that reliance, discernible in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," is disclosed in "The Greenest Continent."

Stevens' fondness for the idea of art as the natural expression of a social unity had been manifest in *Harmonium*, where social unity was often cast in terms of climate and physical geography. The organic and inescapable relation of art to the social spirit or imagination is Crispin's "singular collocation":

The natives of the rain are rainy men.  
Although they paint effulgent, azure lakes,  
And April hillsides wooded white and pink,  
Their azure has a cloudy edge. . . .  
.....  
And in their music showering sounds intone. (CP 37)

"Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" is a miniature treatise on the principle that "There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / Of their places / As the cackle of toucans / In the place of toucans," and "The dress of a woman of Lhasa, / In its place, / Is an invisible element of that place / Made visible" (CP 51–52).<sup>7</sup> In canto V of "The Greenest Continent" the poet responds with incredulity to the idea of Europeans marauding jungles with the trappings of their alien theological imagination:

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

Canto V, as many critics have noted, was probably suggested by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and it does, in its knotty way, denounce European imperialism in Africa. It is alone, however, among the eight cantos of "The Greenest Continent" in having specific political resonance, and that resonance is slight, if not incongruous, in relation to the otherwise sustained and central subject of the section, which is the ineluctably social nature of art, as of religion. Cantos IV and VI test the statue—now a symbol of the European imagination—against the climate of the African imagination. The marble horses, we are told in canto IV, "are a part of a northern sky / Too starkly pallid for the jaguar's light" (OP 86). Canto VI addresses the question explicitly—"But could the statue stand in Africa?" (OP 87)—and the rest of the canto constitutes an elaborate "No." "The marble was imagined in the cold"; it "Was meant to stand, not in a tumbling green, /

Intensified and grandiose, but among / The common-places of which it formed a part" (*OP* 88). There, in the conditions of its creation, "it would be of the mode of common dreams," "The spirit's natural images" (*OP* 88). Art, we are told, cannot endure extreme cultural dislocation any more than it can temporal. African memory and African desire take "leopards' feet" and "florid messengers" (*OP* 88). To marble horses, African imagination would not be free to yield.

Stevens' conception of art as the vital expression of a living culture leads him, in canto VII, to a critique of formalist principles of aesthetic value: the "diplomats of the cafés," whose jaded sensualism is neatly encapsulated in their dictum, "Fromage and coffee and cognac and no gods," take up the poet's question, "could the statue stand in Africa?" (*OP* 88). "The statue has a form," they reply, "That will always be and will be everywhere. / Why should it fail to stand?" (*OP* 89). The diplomats represent the attempt to treat art as independent of the culture that produced it, to deny that cultural and temporal dislocation is also psychological dislocation, to deny the dimension of aesthetic reception that has more to do with the sympathies of the spirit than the discernment of structure. To Stevens the formalists are not simply wrong; they are, as artists, culpable. His sense of poetic exponency as an ethical imperative was fueled by his sense of the psychological precariousness of the Western world without the old "spirit's episcopate" (*OP* 85) of the Christian heaven. This sense pervades, of course, his essays, lectures, and aphorisms; we need only note his gloss on "The Greenest Continent": "If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else" (*L* 370). The diplomats believe it is possible merely to disbelieve. Their indifference to what Stevens sees as the vital relation of art to its time and place and to a fundamental human need is equated with a spirit-numbing indifference to the experience of being, to life itself: "Why think," Stevens has them ask in closing, "Why feel the sun [?]" (*OP* 89).

The final canto of "The Greenest Continent" introduces the figure of Ananke as "the common god" (*OP* 89). Stevens writes "the point" of the canto is that "if ideas of God are in conflict, the idea of pure poetry: imagination, extended beyond local consciousness, may be an idea to be held in common by South, West, North and East" (*L* 370). Following this statement, Ananke has been understood as a figure of "imagination"—or "poetry" in its most inclusive sense—conceived as the common element of all cultures. Lisa DuRose, most recently, has written that "Ananke, which symbolizes poetry and is indifferent to racial and regional differences, offers hope, suggesting that a merging between black and white is possible" (17). But Ananke is presented in terms much more convoluted and ambivalent than either Stevens or his commentators allow. Occasionally the lines in this canto are simply opaque, but we can make out at least that Ananke, the imagination, even here is still bound up with place and time

and “race” (I take Stevens’ use of the word “race” in this section to indicate cultural borders, not biological categories). Ananke is equally aware of and indifferent to “each necessitous cry” and the weeping of widows—he is “that obdurate ruler,” we are told, “who ordains / For races, not for men” (*OP* 90). Insofar as Ananke is some sort of god, he is a god not of the individual, but of the racial, or social, soul, and the inspiration, not of the individual poet, but of the race or society: “He, only, caused the statue to be made / And he shall fix the place where it will stand” (*OP* 90). Ananke appears as a revelation of the natural law of the imagination behind the contention of canto VI, which has already told us where the statue will not, and where it will, stand.

“The Greenest Continent” ultimately presents a deterministic view of the relationship of art to society. The section marks a disconcerting shift away from the idea of exponency as the ideal function of art and toward a cruder reflectionism of which Ananke is the inhuman guarantor. The section ends with obeisance to Ananke, this “Lord without any deviation, lord / And origin and resplendent end of law” (*OP* 90), but there the shift stops in its tracks, as perhaps, with the recognition of an erroneous path. “A Duck for Dinner” returns to promoting the principle of exponency as an ideal, this time in conversation with the skeptical Bulgar.

The figure Mr. Burnshaw represented what Stevens understood as the left’s attempt to prescribe the subject and style of art—“Russian animals,” as Stevens burlesques it, and “crusted outlines hot and huge with fact” (*OP* 78–79). The “Bulgar” represents a different challenge, also, to Stevens’ mind, a challenge from the left, though this time from those socialists who were “do[ing] very well by themselves now-a-days” (*L* 371), as he put it, with the ambivalence characteristic of so many of his statements about the left. The Bulgar appears to be a socialist really only in his solidarity with the working masses; he represents, as Teres suggests, “the working class . . . opt[ing] for reform rather than revolution” (155), or, just as well, as Robert Monroe has it, “a populist version of natural-rights individualism” (129). Mr. Burnshaw at least shared the poet’s sense of the central social importance of art; the complacent Bulgar challenges both this centrality and the very possibility of the poet’s principle of exponency. The Bulgar combines his faith in the smooth functioning of the machinery of economic meritocracy with a detached skepticism regarding the possibility of there ever being a unity among the mass greater than that of steady ascent of income and leisure—a unity higher, that is, than that symbolized by the obedient circulation of the masses through the paths set out for them in the park. The Bulgar is derisive when in canto III he refers to the poet (“‘This man’”) as “‘The admiral of his race and everyman’” (*OP* 92)—a sharp summary of what, if art is to be exponency, the artist must somehow paradoxically be. The Bulgar turns the poet’s vision of the social imagination into a parodic portrait of a single-minded mass:

“all men thinking together as one, thinking  
Each other’s thoughts, thinking a single thought,  
Disclosed in everything, transcended, poised  
For the syllable, poised for the touch[.]” (OP 93)

Composed and poised, that is, for the poet to articulate, or the sculptor to render, its being. Such unity the Bulgar dismisses as an “ ‘Apocalypse . . . not contrived for parks,’ ” holding the vision defeated by the superior force of implacably trivial reality, represented by the socialized nature of the park, the “ ‘Geranium budgets, [and] pay-roll water-falls’ ” (OP 93).

Canto IV opens with a burlesque of socialist realism that is somewhat out of place, as the “ ‘Concerto for Airplane and Pianoforte’ ” recalls the aesthetic stance of Mr. Burnshaw, rather than anything the Bulgar was promoting. Though dismissive of Mr. Burnshaw’s aesthetic (“Profound / Abortion”), the canto continues to contemplate the Bulgar’s objections, at least insofar as the poet considers the difficulty of any exponency when what has to be represented is the multiplicity of man in a “sea-wide country” (OP 93). Stevens uses the word “mob” here to speak of the millions, as in his comments on this section he uses the word “mass”: the terms suggest homogeneity, but it seems nonetheless that he wants to be referring to the intractable plurality of America’s millions. This is the sense that emerges when he explains to Hi Simons, “Given the mobs of contemporary life . . . it is impossible to project a world that will not appear to some one to be a deformation,” and that this is “especially true when the projection is that of . . . poetry” (L 372).

Canto V constitutes not a counter-argument to the preceding objections of the Bulgar, but an insistence, over the considerations he prompted, on the principle of exponency as an ideal. The statue reappears, standing no longer as a relic of a past time or the imposition of an alien place, but for the ideal art that would offer its society a coherent image of itself, a formulation of its spirit. “The sprawlers on the grass / See more than marble in their eyes”:

They see  
The metropolitan of mind, they feel  
The central of the composition, in which  
They live. They see and feel themselves, seeing  
And feeling the world in which they live. (OP 94)

Here in canto V emerges the troublesome implication of the idea of exponency that the Bulgar alluded to when he mocked the poet’s aspirations to be “The admiral of his race and everyman.” The principle of exponency carries over from reflectionism a difficulty in accounting for the individuality and agency—that is to say, the psychology—of the artist. The sprawlers on the grass see reflected in the statue themselves and their world, but “The statue is the sculptor not the stone. / In this he carved

himself, he carved his age" (*OP* 94). The suggestion, difficult to entertain, is that the artist must somehow, in effect, be his time and place, be it and project it entire. Years later, in "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," Stevens would again run up against precisely this difficulty. Considering "the function of the poet today," he writes "with his sense of the heaviness of the world," the poet cannot "elect anything except . . . to make his own imagination that of those who have none, or little" (*NA* 62–63). He then runs straight into the question, "And how will he do this?" and is able to answer only "It is not possible to say how an imaginative person will do a thing" (*NA* 63).

In "Owl's Clover" Stevens feels compelled to address that question, as he cannot allow the principle of advocacy to lapse (as it more or less did in "The Greenest Continent") into a crude reflectionism that would elide the artist altogether and present art as the somehow unmediated expression of the mass—which is what he has Mr. Burnshaw do in canto III of "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue":

The stones  
That will replace [the statue] shall be carved, "*The Mass*  
*Appoints These Marbles Of Itself To Be*  
*Itself.*" (*OP* 80)

But he answers the question only by abstracting the figure of the artist beyond all questions of individual psychology. In "Sombre Figuration" the artist is generalized into the nebulous figure of the "subman." Stevens himself explained the subman as "the sub-conscious"—"here [the imagination] is treated as an activity of the sub-conscious" (*L* 373). The subman is not presented as an individual subconscious nor as a social one; he is neither and both. "[B]orn within us" (Stevens here moves into first-person plural) "as a second self," he is yet differentiated from us enough that he can be used as a figure of the individual artist:

He turns us into scholars, studying  
The masks of music. We perceive each mask  
To be the musician's own and, thence, become  
An audience to mimics glistening  
With meanings, doubled by the closest sound,  
Mimics that play on instruments discerned  
In the beat of the blood. (*OP* 97)

The artist is differentiated from the organism of his society to the point that we recognize "The masks of music" (the forms of his art) as his own—a process, that is, in the later Stevens' terms, of his personality.<sup>8</sup> Yet, watching these masks of music, we are told, we are watching "mimics"—mimics, presumably, of ourselves and whose means of expression are "discerned / In the beat of the blood," presumably our blood. The subman, like the

ideal art represented by the statue in canto V of "A Duck for Dinner," allows us to "see and feel" not, or not primarily, the mind of the artist, but ourselves.

"Owl's Clover" begins with the image of the artist and the old woman mutually forsaken. It comes toward its end by generalizing the figure of the woman into an entire generation and her blackened thought that "could not understand / Or, if it understood, repressed itself" (OP 76) into the ominous portent brooding over the heads of that generation "that does not know itself" (OP 98). The portent hangs poised between destroying the cities and provoking the people to wrath and slaughter and "recreat[ing] for them, / Out of their wilderness, a special fane" (OP 98). It is an image of the imaginative need of a society lingering dangerously repressed, repressed for lack of an artist to give it articulation in form, a manifestation by means of which it may reflect upon and understand itself. This image of the destructive potential of repressed need, unarticulated thought, and ignorance of self is presaged in the last canto of "A Duck for Dinner," in which the poet asserts the psychological insufficiency of any merely "civil fiction"—"The Johnsonian composition, abstract man," and, implicitly, Marxism. "If these were theoretical people, like / Small bees of spring," the canto begins—and then breaks off abruptly, registering the nullity of that "If." It resumes with a foreboding:

A shade of horror turns  
The bees to scorpions blackly-barbed, a shade  
Of fear changes the scorpions to skins  
Concealed in glittering grass, dank reptile skins. (OP 95)

This image of the malignance that may erupt from imaginative deprivation is reinforced by the final image of the portent's destructive potential, and between the two we see that, as Stevens conceives it, in the artists' advocacy of the social imagination there is much more at stake than mundanity.

"Owl's Clover" ends with a question, and the question recalls the formalist diplomats of the cafés, who asked, indolently,

Why think,  
Why feel the sun or, feeling, why feel more  
Than purple paste of fruit, to taste, or leaves  
Of purple flowers, to see? (OP 89)

At the close of the last canto the poet answers the formalists by throwing their proposal at us. "[T]o feel again," the poet demands,

The reconciliation, the rapture of a time  
Without imagination, without past  
And without future, a present time, *is that*

*The passion, indifferent to the poet's hum,  
That we conceal? A passion to fling the cloak,  
Adorned for a multitude, in a gesture spent  
In the gesture's whim, a passion merely to be  
For the gaudium of being [?] (OP 100–01; my italics)*

The poet's question urges us to reject the complacent formalist aestheticism of the diplomats. "Owl's Clover" proposes in opposition to it the image of an art that is at once the reflection, the articulation, and the sustenance of the social imagination—the "spirit's natural images," "the mode of common dreams." The ideal is asserted compellingly and its alternative prefigured ominously, but the small matter of the implications of the ideal for the psychology of the artist is left addressed only by the quasi-mythical figure of the subman. In Stevens' later use of the principle of exponency, this lacuna would remain and, in the absence of a myth to fill it, the principle reverts to an implicit reliance on the organicism of reflectionism.

When Stevens began developing his conception of poetry as a source of supreme fictions in the early 1940s, he was reformulating the sense of the function of art in society he had expressed in "Owl's Clover." Like the principle of exponency, the supreme fiction idea holds the poet to the rather exalted and grave position of responsibility for the imaginative, which is to say, the psychological, well-being of his society. Also like the principle of exponency, the notion of supreme poetic fictions embroils itself in positing (or tries to will into existence) both a connection between the poet and society that is somehow organic and a society that is somehow an organic unity. In Stevens' essays and lectures, his emphasis on the poet's responsibility for the psychological well-being of his society is matched only by his emphasis on the poet's entitlement to write for no reason extraneous to the writing itself and according to no dictates other than the native impulses and aversions of his nerves. What enables Stevens to bind his twin senses that poetry both "moves toward the ultimate things of pure poetry" and "speaks to great numbers of people of themselves," being made "out of what they feel and know" (OP 253), is his enduring will to believe in those organicisms. As I have suggested, Stevens' principle of exponency, like reflectionism, conceives of psychological or spiritual change as an alteration in a unified sensibility, but not as a change from unity to irreducible plurality. A supreme fiction, as we know, "Must Change"; but Stevens seldom considers seriously the idea that it might shatter. The "incalculable difficulty" of writing "the poetry of the present" (NA 115) is rendered incalculably more difficult if there is no coherence of present sensibility: the exponent of the social imagination must have a coherent social imagination to represent. At least as late as 1951, Stevens was still treating America almost as though it could produce poetry in the way that ancient and tribal societies once produced gods: "the gods of

China are always Chinese; . . . the gods of Greece are always Greeks" (*OP* 263), and if "there is such a thing as an American[,] . . . the poems that he writes are American poems" (*OP* 315).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See particularly Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left* and Harvey Teres, "Notes Toward the Supreme Soviet: Stevens and Doctrinaire Marxism."

<sup>2</sup> The idea that art provides its society with an image of itself and that this image helps sustain that society by strengthening its identity and therefore its cohesion had currency, according to Sparshott, in the first decades of the turn of the century, largely through its application to primitive societies. This sustaining function, he notes, "seems to be an application to art of Durkheim's theory of the function of religion" and is similarly problematic (285).

<sup>3</sup> An example of a reflectionist theory that emphasizes the critical or reforming function of the resulting social self-knowledge, though it is not one Sparshott mentions, would be Theodor Adorno's. See Astradur Eysteinnsson for a critique of the tendency of Adorno's negative aesthetics toward essentialist reflection theory (43–45).

<sup>4</sup> In "The Irrational Element in Poetry" Stevens remarks on the lapse of his own interest in art during the Depression and writes "the subject that I had in mind [when writing "The Old Woman and the Statue"] was the effect of the depression on the interest in art." He adds, "The old woman is a symbol of those who suffered during the depression and the statue is a symbol of art" (*OP* 225–26).

<sup>5</sup> For clarity, I will use "Mr. Burnshaw" to refer to the character in the poem, and "Stanley Burnshaw" or "Burnshaw" to refer to the man.

<sup>6</sup> At least some versions of Marxist aesthetic theory partake of reflectionist principles, hence the partial coincidence here of the stance of Stevens' poet and that of his representative of Marxism, Stanley Burnshaw. Trotsky, for instance, holds that "Literature . . . expresses the thoughts, feeling, moods, points of view and hopes of the new epoch and of its class" (180) and that this is "not a state order, but an historic demand" and an "insuperable psychological fact" (171, 236). The example of Adorno I have noted above.

<sup>7</sup> A. Walton Litz has noted the appearance in "Owl's Clover" of this organicism, not without a degree of irritation, as "a rehearsal of familiar theories about man and his environment which can be traced back to the early poetry and experimental plays" (216). In his discussion of the passage from "The Comedian as the Letter C," which I cite above, Litz argues that Crispin's "dogmatic premise that 'The natives of the rain are rainy men' . . . should alert us that Crispin has once more swung unconsciously toward stale romance" (135–36). Though Crispin does go on to reject this ideal, its resurfacing in "Owl's Clover" is, I believe, more than an incidental or unfortunate rehearsal of the theory; it is an adaptation of it in the context of the developing idea of poetic advocacy.

<sup>8</sup> "[Poetry] is a process of the personality of the poet." Stevens is quick to add that to say that "does not mean that it involves the poet as a subject" (*NA* 45).

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# Nature and Ideology in Wallace Stevens

JUSTIN QUINN

## I

THE OUTSTANDING, NEW readings of the poetry of Wallace Stevens in recent years have come from critics who examine Stevens' relations to politics and ideology. In a class of its own is Charles Altieri's *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* (1989), which helps see Stevens through the prism of the political choices readers (and those in America above all) continue to make in their lives. In the work of James Longenbach and Alan Filreis we learn to see the gold-leaf reactions of Stevens' poetry to its time. However, the problem with these kinds of approaches, especially the latter, is that they are suspicious of statements such as that in his letter to Hi Simons: "The 'ever jubilant weather' is not a symbol. We are physical beings in a physical world; the weather is one of the things that we enjoy, one of the unphilosophical realities" (L 348–49). Talk of jubilation and the weather and, elsewhere in Stevens, exaltation, seems suspiciously ahistorical. Could there be hankerings after the bog of "universalism" lurking in such expressions? In the case of many poets in the romantic tradition, the hankerings are definitely there, but such is not the case with Stevens. The pastoral space in which these jublations and exaltations are experienced is also the space in which Stevens looks at politics and human history; further, it is the space that often occasions such thinking. Poetry must engage "the great interests of man: air and light, the joy of having a body, the voluptuousness of looking" (Mario Rossi epigraph, *CP* 136), but at the same time it must talk of Lenin, revolution, social change, and organization, which are also interests of man, albeit affording less pleasure. It is within the great amphitheater of air and light that Stevens considers Lenin and the rest, and we do his poetry a great disservice by not recognizing the oblique ways in which his political pastoral works.

Stevens' landscapes are not *beyond* politics and ideology, but instead provide a space to think about these things. Steven Miskinis says "for Stevens the imagination is never outside or distant from the political—rather, it is distinctive from the political—it opens the very possibility of such a distinction" (225). My terms are different but the drift is the same:

the natural spaces in Stevens' poetry are where the energies of the political are directed in order for both the poet and reader to see them more clearly. Our own choice of medium for such theorizing (and the word "seeing," incidentally, is etymologically related to the word "theory") is critical prose. But as Fredric Jameson observes, it is through landscapes that Stevens provides us with the room to theorize.

If my use of the terms "politics" and "ideology" in the following argument seems somewhat loose, it is because the phenomena they describe are hard to group together concisely. That is, in part, their advantage. Terry Eagleton quips that "Ideology, like halitosis, is . . . what the other person has" (2). I do not wish to argue here that Stevens' pastoral is a commentary on contemporaneous political events (who won the elections, or, for that matter, the war, etc.); rather I wish to show the ways in which pastoral is the space where he looks at the different ways society sees itself. This kind of envisaging is at the heart of any kind of ideological change. What did Marxism, American democracy, Fascism, and nationalism bring but new ways for societies to think about themselves, new social visions? Of course, a phrase such as "social vision" is completely debased these days (George Bush's "vision thing" dealing the deathblow), but the phenomenon it describes is very much alive—in America, where ethnic groups are seeking new ways to think about themselves within, or without, the framework of democracy; in Europe, where nationalism flares forth in certain quarters and is completely irrelevant in others, that is, in countries now entering what is called a "postnationalist" phase. Stevens is preoccupied precisely with the ways in which societies (American society and those of the West in general) change their visions of themselves, and this is what I mean by ideology in my discussion of Stevens' poetry.

In this article, I will outline two critical accounts of the place of landscape in Stevens' poetry and then go on to compare his work with that of Robinson Jeffers, widely known as one of the foremost nature poets of the twentieth century. Concluding with readings of "Dry Loaf" and "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," I will show Stevens' political pastoral at work as he encompasses moments of exaltation and despair in the midst of nature and connects these wider considerations of human society.

## II

Fredric Jameson and Bonnie Costello have discussed the role that landscape plays in Stevens' poetry. Costello, arguing against readings such as Harold Bloom's and Joseph Carroll's that figure the poet as a triumphalist of the human imagination over the contingencies of the material world, has shown how landscape represents a base to which Stevens often returns when consoling fictions fall away (204, 216–17). She shows also how Stevens reacted against the "totalizing space of classical and romantic landscape" by revealing its "constructedness and hence the contingency of [its] vision" (211). "Stevens' landscapes are," she argues, "pragmatic and

provisional, affording aesthetic and emotional if not intellectual arrival," a background that "defines not only an opportunity for the imagination but the limits of its independence as well" (204). Such a fresh emphasis in a reading of the poems, as Costello points out, implies a relocation of Stevens within certain cultural and social contexts, since attitudes toward landscape played such an important role in the construction of the national identity of the United States. Stevens' provisional passages begin to represent a way of reassessing the uses to which ideas of landscape are put, whether they be to bolster a national mythology or generate a tourist industry. Our landscapes are also the primary means through which our attitudes toward nature as a whole are formed. These attitudes owe much to this totalizing space of classicism and romanticism, which Stevens, in Costello's reading, tries to disrupt, insofar as we still presume to dominate nature for our own ends, whether to build nations, to provide holiday breaks in "unspoiled" natural surroundings, or to extract raw materials for the purposes of industry.<sup>1</sup> In each of these instances the message is clear that nature is at our disposal.

Jameson's essay would seem to promise to lead us in a similar direction with its opening gambit: "Stevens' *only* content, from the earliest masterpieces of *Harmonium* all the way to the posthumous *Rock*, is landscape" (178). But by the end of the same paragraph we see that there is a deep divergence between him and Costello:

In Stevens, nature is, however, nothing but a given, a ready-made occasion for speech—birds, wind, mountains, the sun, always ready to hand whenever poetic speech needs some kind of objective content for its own production. (179)

Stevens' landscapes are "laundered of their cultural and social semantics" (179), and his poetry, which uses these landscapes merely "as a set of neutral counters for the exercise of poetic speech," designates nothing beyond itself. (In the context of his overall critical approach, the pun on "laundering" is admirable as it passes off the poetry as some kind of "funny money.") This autoreferentiality does not, he goes on to say, collapse into the usual stances of high modernism, but is the moment when "an unusual permutation takes place . . . in which 'the theory of poetry' becomes at one with 'the life of poetry'" (190). Stevens' poetry, discoursing on nothing beyond itself, becomes the moment that poetry, "in its traditional sense, dies and is transformed into something historically new": theory (191). By taking nature as his subject, Jameson argues, Stevens is able to avoid the very issues that Costello claims Stevens' poetry engages (207). Stevens, in Jameson's reading, replicates the gestures and visions of classicism that viewed nature as a resource for human needs, be they aesthetic or social. Clearly, he would align his work with a meditative lyric such as William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis." If Stevens wants to write poetry, then nature is standing, waiting to be used (one thinks of Bryant's "couch") as a

pliant subject that will not disrupt his discourse on the true theme, that of poetry itself.<sup>2</sup>

Jameson's essay, though published in 1984, has made little impression on Stevens criticism. The probable reason for this is the glaring inaccuracy of the central statement that the poetry discourses on nothing beyond itself. Nevertheless, there is the wonderful intuitive observation (which unfortunately leads him to contradict himself) that Stevens' landscapes are locales of Ur-theory. The contradiction resides in that Jameson on the one hand says that Stevens' poems are about nothing beyond themselves, yet are the beginning of theory. But what is theory but the consideration of the relations between history, politics, and culture? It is true that a lot of the theory of the 1980s seemed to be discoursing on nothing beyond itself, but the best theorists always knew that something more was at stake.<sup>3</sup> This "something more" is a concern with ethics and culture and their interconnections at the deepest levels; that is, how should society organize itself? for what reasons should its members be told to sacrifice their lives (war? capital punishment?) and how, in the light of these issues, should communities represent themselves to themselves through the work of culture? These questions are fundamental for Stevens, and he engages them in the space of pastoral.

Jameson goes on to say that Stevens lacks "the visionary sense of many of the great nature poets, for whom the momentary epiphanies of place and object world are rare events, to be preserved over against the encroaching destruction of Nature as well as the alienating features of city or man-made environment" (178–79). But although Jameson's comparison of Stevens with visionary nature poets seems like a reproach, he is at pains to say that his comments should not "be taken as criticisms, not even yet as an ideological critique, of Stevens' work" (179). He would agree that Stevens does not employ landscape in the way that, say, Turner does (the British painter disrupts the charmed space of picturesque *vedute* to expose the social tensions of the time, much to the displeasure of contemporaneous critics [see Helsinger]). But his comparison of Stevens with the great visionary nature poets who use nature to castigate civilization (in other words, who use nature as an instrument of ideology) leads him to state that Stevens' poetry designates nothing beyond itself (191). The idea of nature *qua* ideological instrument is indeed anathema to Stevens, but it hardly implies that Stevens uses landscape and the seasons merely as pretexts for a poetic utterance that has no true subject but itself.

What I wish to do is investigate the polarity that Jameson sets up here in order to come to a better idea of what kind of nature poetry Stevens writes and the particular way that it includes within it questions of ideology. Arguing this point is not just a matter of setting one critic of Stevens against another, but rather it should extend our awareness of Stevens as a poet who is continually concerned with the orientation of the individual and the community within the landscapes and metamorphoses of the natu-

ral world. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that landscape “naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site” (2). Thus Stevens’ representations of landscape, which do not accord to our received notions of nature poetry, can be seen as challenging such a “naturalization” of nature through the way he depicts it as the site where fictions, be they religious, aesthetic, political, or romantic, contend with one another and so offer new ways for communities to think about themselves and their place in the world.

Robinson Jeffers is a poet whom I consider to fit Jameson’s description of a “great nature poet.” As Jeffers himself states, “to feel / Greatly, and understand greatly, and express greatly, the natural / Beauty, is the sole business of poetry” (*Selected Poems* 94). F. O. Matthiessen, who happened to be reviewing one of Jeffers’ books with Stevens’ *Ideas of Order* in 1936, remarked: “When Mr. Stevens comments on the present state of the world, you are not given Mr. Jeffers’s melodramatic vision of all mankind plunging down the hill to a darkened sea” (606). Jeffers felt that it was his mission to hymn the superiority of the natural world over the world that humanity was creating for itself in the forms of cities and towns and that could only end in apocalypse. The poetry is continually embattled: “civilization is a transient sickness” that in its lifetime goes about destroying the beauties of the natural world (*Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* 363). In one of his most anthologized poems, “Carmel Point,” Jeffers recoils in disgust at the construction of suburban houses in a place of great natural beauty and is haunted by memories of what that place was once like before being subordinated to social needs. These buildings clearly represent for him “the alienating features of city [and] man-made environment” that are encroaching on nature and making its beauty hard to apprehend. The poem ends with the instruction that, for all this, we must seek out nature in the place where it quietly endures these forays upon it and try to imitate its attitude. Nature is a wise presence that is represented as waiting for the disappearance of humanity: “It knows the people are a tide / That swells and in time will ebb, and all / Their works dissolve” (*Selected Poems* 102), and until that time nature’s beauty hides itself. With relish, Jeffers himself looks forward to the destruction of humanity itself, since this is the moment when nature will reassert itself. The following passage from “Their Beauty Has More Meaning” illustrates this point:

And when the whole human race  
Has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here:  
    storms, moon and ocean,  
Dawn and the birds. And I say this: their beauty has  
    more meaning  
Than the whole human race and the race of birds.

(*Selected Poems* 77)

Reading his poetry of praise for nature, we are continually told that the destructive powers of humanity are in the offing and could make incursions at any moment. The moments that Jeffers cherishes are those when nature is able to manifest itself as something pristine, something that humanity has not yet tarnished or appropriated. Even in a poem such as "The Place for No Story," when such a moment occurs, it is not sufficient for Jeffers that such a moment be witnessed, but the *volta* of the poem, the hinge round which it swings, is the statement that humanity has not yet made its mark on the spot.

The coast hills at Sovranes Creek:  
No trees, but dark scant pasture drawn thin  
Over rock shaped like flame;  
The old ocean at the land's foot, the vast  
Gray extension beyond the long white violence;  
A herd of cows and the bull  
Far distant, hardly apparent up the dark slope;  
And the gray air haunted with hawks:  
This place is the noblest thing I have ever seen. No  
imaginable  
Human presence here could do anything  
But dilute the lonely self-watchful passion.

(*Selected Poems* 55)

In this poem the "Human presence" is only mildly destructive: it would "dilute the lonely self-watchful passion." But what this poem shares with others is his sense that human agency is always lying in ambush to destroy the beauties of nature. In poem after poem (apart from the long narratives) the turning point occurs about such contrasts: nature is beautiful and will endure; humanity is sordid and, although it temporarily threatens nature, it will eventually be extinguished. No doubt it will, but to be continually told so in poetry or out of it is tedious.

Not only does Jeffers adequately fit Jameson's description but also in so many ways he would seem to represent the exact opposite of a poet such as Stevens. For Jeffers, the building of his house and tower on the coast of California was a poetic act in itself. He saw the United States as the endpoint of Western civilization: it had originated in the Orient and would end in the West (*Selected Poems* 40). Thus his tower gave him a vantage point not only on the Pacific Ocean but also on a vision of the world after humanity had vacated it. Stevens' house on Westerly Terrace in Hartford, which he certainly did not build himself, stands in stark contrast to this. It represents the bourgeois ideal of the successful businessman who does not think that "civilization is a transient sickness," but who on the contrary feels quite good about the whole human project. Opposed to this is Jeffers' deep-seated misanthropy against Stevens' appreciation of the

work of the human imagination in its many different manifestations.<sup>4</sup> While Jeffers consoles himself with visions of the erasure of humanity from the earth, Stevens sings the praises of the major man. Another difference, which would have been very noticeable during the years that both poets were at the height of their powers, was their differing public profiles. Jeffers was a hugely popular poet. *Tamar and Other Poems* (1924) was published to wide critical acclaim and a full-length bibliography of his work came out only eight years after his first successful collection (Carpenter 43). The book, enlarged to *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* (1925), was reprinted many times in the following years (Carpenter 40). In contrast with this, the royalties for the first half of 1924 for *Harmonium* brought in the princely sum of \$6.70 (L 243) and—for the most part—indifferent reviews. Although Stevens published very little over the next few years, by 1929 Jeffers had published four volumes in four successive years.

Stevens and Jeffers also differ in their attitudes to poetry itself. Jeffers, in the introduction to a selection of his poems in the late 1950s, reflects on his own poetry and its place in poetry in general:

Long ago, before anything included here was written, it became evident to me that poetry—if it was to survive at all—must reclaim some of the power and reality that it was so hastily surrendering to prose. The modern French poetry of that time, and the most “modern” of the English poetry, seemed to me thoroughly defeatist, as if poetry were in terror of prose, and desperately trying to save its soul from the victor by giving up its body. It was becoming slight and fantastic, abstract, unreal, eccentric; and was not even saving its soul, for these are generally anti-poetic qualities. It must reclaim substance and sense, and physical and psychological reality. This feeling has been basic in my mind since then. (*Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* xiv)

The diatribe is clearly directed against T. S. Eliot, but it is easy to imagine that Jeffers would not object to a book like *Harmonium* being described as “fantastic, abstract, unreal, eccentric.” The poems of Stevens’ first book, with their filigree ironies, contrast starkly with a poem like “Tamar,” which is the narrative of the incestuous and murderous Cauldwell family and is set in contemporary California. That poem is closer to the fiction of John Steinbeck and the drama of Eugene O’Neill than the lucubrations of the East Coast insurance executive. Jeffers clearly wants poetry to be *about* something and for poets to cease “from being the astute calligraphers of congealed daydreams, the hunters of cerebral phosphorescences,” to quote the epigraph from “Reply to Papini” (CP 446). When we read Jeffers’ work, we are supposed to feel his muscular grasp of his subject and be impressed by the strong lone voice speaking the truth while other writers simply cannot rise to this mark. He strives for the heroic tone. Although little

critical attention is given to him now, there is an energy in his poetry of a kind that will never be found in Stevens. For all his hatred of humankind, he has moments that are valuable for their brutal honesty and power of direct expression. "Hurt Hawks" stands as an example of these qualities; it is a poem where Jeffers' objectionable misanthropy is convincingly integrated in a poem of great pathos and beauty. Unfortunately, such moments are not abundant and quite often we find the same thoughts recycled in poem after poem. The typical curve that a Jeffers lyric takes is from meditation on the natural world to a comparison of this with humanity, in which the latter always comes off badly. After reading twenty such poems it is difficult to find reasons to read on.

Stevens displays no such tortured messianism. If we compare some of his playful thoughts on poetry in the "Adagia" with Jeffers' pronouncements in his foreword, the difference hardly needs expatiation. Stevens is playful, Jeffers is in earnest. Stevens is a self-conscious artist, Jeffers aspires to the primitive. Stevens dons masks, Jeffers draws no line between his speakers and his personal voice. Stevens ignores social concerns, Jeffers wants to be America's Cassandra. Stevens has been accommodated within the complex critical debates on modernism, Jeffers has not. Stevens likes humanity, Jeffers hates it. Stevens has no subject, Jeffers has.

In Stevens, too, there is an intellectual mobility wholly lacking in Jeffers, which probably prompted Jameson's contrast of Stevens' outlook with "the visionary sense of many of the great nature poets" (178). In Stevens there is no unchanging line of demarcation between humanity and nature. Sometimes looking at a landscape, the viewer hums a tune to the rhythm of the changing scene (*CP* 243). Sometimes the viewer is violently pulled apart, his eyesight falling to earth (*CP* 294). Perhaps Jameson would say that this inconsistency, this very unwillingness to fix its value, reveals that Stevens cares for it in a different way than a poet such as Jeffers, who values it above the incursions of civilization. But Stevens (to turn John Berryman on his head) was wider. He *includes* the concerns of a Jeffers in the scope of his poetry. Take a poem such as "Landscape with Boat" where Stevens criticizes a figure like Jeffers who aspires to an unmediated relationship with landscape. The "anti-master-man, floribund ascetic" (*CP* 241) is someone who does not realize that his own observation of the landscape is also an agency in it and that the truth of landscape cannot be broached until the figure admits this. As is obvious in "The Place for No Story," Jeffers does not consider his own presence at Sovranes Creek a human presence. He talks of the site as though it were pristine, discounting the way that his poem has represented it. His representation of nature, as he would have it, is innocent. His gaze accords with nature's and is not an intrusion. Jeffers' world-weariness gives him access, he thinks, to the finished gaze of nature, which can no longer be cajoled into believing human fictions. He now stands, in Stevens' phrase, "At the neutral centre, the ominous element, / The single-colored, colorless, primitive" (*CP* 242),

his gaze untouched by what it sees. He has brushed away “the colossal illusion of heaven” (CP 241) with its projection of human morality on the sky. But Stevens’ poem, although it discusses such a figure, cannot indulge its aspirations for long:

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. (CP 242; emphasis added)

Seen through the lens of Stevens’ poem, Jeffers’ monumental truth becomes “a thing supposed / In a place supposed.” Jeffers’ landscape is monovalent; it closes possibilities and is based on the “rejection” and “denial” of things seen and heard. There is no more work for the imagination to do in a landscape by Jeffers. The latter is blind to the many selves and sensuous worlds that are available to those who do not try to extract a moral for their times from the landscape. Whereas Stevens is always following the way in which the imagination expends energy metamorphosing the landscape, tracing the vicissitudes of its project for dominion, Jeffers describes landscapes as *faits accomplis*.

The precincts of Stevens’ poetry are not so impenetrable and exclusive as Jeffers’. No general practitioner of the landscape, Stevens is more interested in how these doctrines emerge, change, and disappear. Nature is never a refuge whose consolations are already carefully mapped; rather it is the site where the fictions spun by the imagination are most forcefully questioned and their contingencies revealed. In this way we can see Stevens as a more inclusive nature poet than Jeffers, one who is aware of the many possibilities that nature affords the human imagination. Since Stevens is a poet who is open to these possibilities, figures who close them off exert a fascination.

A few pages after “Landscape with Boat” in the *Collected Poems*, we come across more “rejecting” and “denying.” In “The Well Dressed Man with a Beard” Stevens refers to the relationship of a certain kind of poetic speech with a constructed landscape. Elements have been “rejected” and “denied” and brushed beyond the edge of our vision.

If the *rejected* things, the things *denied*,  
Slid over the western cataract, . . .  
.....  
a speech  
Of the self that must sustain itself on speech,

One thing remaining, infallible, would be  
Enough. Ah! *douce campagne* of that thing!  
(CP 247; emphasis added)

The “anti-master-man” of “Landscape with Boat” has to exclude parts of the landscape to reach his truth, and this is viewed negatively by Stevens. In “The Well Dressed Man” Stevens acknowledges that the poetic speech that Jameson ascribes to him would be possible if certain perceptions of landscape were to disappear into the cataract and be secreted from vision. Then the poet would indeed have a “*douce campagne*” instead of a landscape teeming with interpretive possibilities, exceeding the squamous mind. Stevens is suitably ironic about this prospect. Perhaps the well dressed man with a beard is one of the Fireside poets of the nineteenth century who rejected and denied the more distasteful elements of nature to present a “*douce campagne*.” Perhaps it is someone like William Cullen Bryant, who sports a beard on the frontispiece of an edition of his poems. The landscapes of Stevens’ poetry are neither such *campagnas* nor the monovalent ones of Jeffers, which are the instruments of his misanthropy. The title also indicates the way that Stevens is aware that landscapes are often employed by certain social formations: here the man of the title is respectably bourgeois and as a result his landscape is too. It is a *genteel* landscape that is predicated upon “rejecting” and “denying” the more anarchic elements of nature and those connected with a certain economy of social value.

But those who limit their experience of landscape by “rejecting” and “denying” are not only “floribund ascetics.” On one occasion, as I pointed out earlier, Stevens takes the figure of Lenin and characterizes him as a political leader precisely by the way that he organizes and excludes certain elements of a lacustrine landscape (CP 343). On another, discussing a conversation between other revolutionaries, Stevens portrays the fanaticism of one by the way he cannot perceive the landscape, the physical world that is surrounding him.

Victor Serge said, “I followed his argument  
With the blank uneasiness which one might feel  
In the presence of a logical lunatic.”  
He said it of Konstantinov. Revolution  
Is the affair of logical lunatics.

.....  
Lakes are more reasonable than oceans. Hence,  
A promenade amid the grandeurs of the mind,  
By a lake, with clouds like lights among great tombs,  
Gives one a blank uneasiness, as if  
One might meet Konstantinov, who would interrupt  
With his lunacy. He would not be aware of the lake.

He would be the lunatic of one idea  
In a world of ideas, who would have all the people  
Live, work, suffer and die in that idea  
In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the  
clouds,  
Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.  
His extreme of logic would be illogical. (CP 324–25)

Victor Serge was once a member of the Executive Committee of Communist International and Fyodor Vasilyevich Konstantinov a talentless philosopher and Communist fanatic, here standing for the ideologue. For Alan Filreis, here “Stevens merely repeats verbatim from Dwight MacDonald’s *Politics* Victor Serge’s claims against Konstantinov, post-ideological revisionism against murderous orthodoxy” (142). The problem here is in the “post.” The thrust of the passage is that it is reasonable to expect that Konstantinov would not be able to maintain the integrity of his idea when faced with the sea (unlike the doctor of Geneva [CP 24]), but he should at least be able to look at a lake.<sup>5</sup> Konstantinov, however, cannot, and he must “reject” the lake, suppress it from his perception. What follows directly in “*Esthétique du Mal*” is the much-quoted passage “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CP 325). Referring to this final section of the poem in her essay on Stevens and landscape, Bonnie Costello remarks: “Stevens suggests not only that creation overwhelms human capability, that the physical absorbs the metaphysical, but that our ‘supreme fictions,’ our metaphysical inventions, learn their changes less from autonomous compositional laws than from physical surroundings” (216). In this section of “*Esthétique du Mal*,” however, Stevens is making a recommendation rather than stating a universal truth: our “supreme fictions” *should* learn their changes from physical changes, but often do not, as in the case of Konstantinov. It is not to say that there can be a time of “postideology,” but rather better ways of thinking about ideology, that is, through the landscape. What confirms the idea that was the main way in which Stevens thought about ideology is the change he made in the account of the exchange between Victor Serge and Konstantinov. Yes, *pace* Filreis, the words are verbatim, but in Stevens’ source the original conversation took place in a tenement in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) (Pinkerton 128). Stevens’ arena for thinking about the ideological is the lake, the landscape, and that is where he transposes it to.

What is also of importance to note here is that landscape does not provide the opportunity to withdraw from social and historical contingencies; rather it is precisely when Stevens turns to landscape and the objects of nature that we should expect his acutest thoughts on history, politics, and culture. Konstantinov does not live in a physical world but the “ultimate politician” can hear the words of the storm and of the people (CP 336); the latter does not need to “reject” and “deny” certain elements of his

environment in order to bring into effect his political ideas. A better politics, better than those of Konstantinov and even of Serge, would show us how to live in the hermeneutic flux of the physical world.

We become aware of landscape not as a site where the individual imagination disports itself unfettered by wider social and cultural concerns, but rather as the space that foregrounds the questioning of fictions, both political and philosophical/aesthetic. Stevens does not thus avoid the political by taking landscape as his content: the political is also engaged, but only as one more "fiction-genre" among others. Strangely, we may adduce Frank Lentricchia's essay again. In his analysis of "O Florida, Vene-real Soil" he points out how Stevens' treatment of the ethnic minorities in the poem makes it part of "a modern lyric poetry . . . that could not successfully suppress the lost social ground of its emergence and its despair of social relation in America" (146). The assumption here is that Stevens wanted to be Emerson, wanted to forget social contexts in the midst of nature, but this is inaccurate. Insofar as Stevens revered the moment of exaltation in nature (the same one that Emerson hymned at the beginning of *Nature*), Lentricchia is correct; but evident throughout the poetry is Stevens' desire to relate such moments to wider public contexts. Granted, it is not often that this desire encompasses a discussion of particular social phenomena (such as émigrés in the United States) but it is more accurate to see a poem such as "O Florida, Vene-real Soil" against the backdrop of Stevens' lifelong meditation on the relations between the categories of the imaginative and the political.

### III

In "How to Live. What to Do" Stevens makes a connection between the exaltation experienced in nature and the ethical concerns implicit in the title. Of course some readers might hear irony in the title (which recalls Nikolay Chernyshevsky's *What Is To Be Done?* [1863]) and thus think that Stevens, at least in this poem, is bidding social concerns farewell in favor of the aesthetic consolations of landscape. James Longenbach, for instance, says that the poem is a dramatization of "the private self's victory over public adversity" (131). I would counter by saying that more important than the putative irony in the poem is the speaker's location between an exalted awareness of landscape and public concerns. These are the important poles of the imagination in this poem and many others. What I wish to do in the readings of the two poems that follow is show how Stevens moves between the poles of "How to Live. What to Do" as he returns again and again to the natural world as the site of revelation of social meaning. I should remark here that it is not all about exaltation in nature. There are often moments of despair and weakness, but these are parts of cycles of emotions that Stevens repeatedly connected with the cycle of the seasons, the despondency of winter followed by the exultation and pleni-

tude of summer, and so on. These for him are fundamental to human thought, and we have learned our emotions from the weather.<sup>6</sup> The weather, then, is not a symbol, nor are the mountains, the sea, the sky, the trees, the flowers in bloom.

In "Dry Loaf" Stevens' sense of how the arrangements of landscape are connected with social formations is acute. Yet, as I have argued above, his representation of nature is not in the service of any particular ideology. It is polyvalent and frustrates attempts to employ the landscape scene as validation of some particular hegemony. Rather, social powers enter the arena of the landscape and suddenly discover the ground to be treacherous. They are afloat in hermeneutic uncertainty. This is what has been missed by previous critics of Stevens, the role that the natural world plays in meditations on political and human history in general. The speaker of the poem is recounting a previous attempt of his to arrange the landscape as a background for his painting of the loaf of bread. One thinks immediately of those landscapes in Renaissance paintings that seem bleached of historical particularity (whether by the artist or the passage of time), serving only as featureless plain to set off the main object of interest (a person, a still-life arrangement).

Regard now the sloping, mountainous rocks  
And the river that batters its way over stones,  
Regard the hovels of those that live in this land.

That was what I painted behind the loaf,  
The rocks not even touched by snow,  
The pines along the river and the dry men blown  
Brown as the bread, thinking of birds  
Flying from burning countries and brown sand  
shores. . . . (CP 199–200)

Although he does not wish to present a sylvan idyll (the people live in hovels), he is intent on some version of the picturesque, in the sense that the poverty in Breughel's paintings can be picturesque. But then the landscape starts to go out of control. It gathers a motive force surpassing that of his organizing brush. The poem continues, picking up again on the image of the birds:

Birds that came like dirty water in waves  
Flowing above the rocks, flowing over the sky,  
As if the sky was a current that bore them along,  
Spreading them as waves spread flat on the shore,  
One after another washing the mountains bare. (CP 200)

In the next verse the repressed returns in gala panoply and the painter, another well-dressed man with a beard, is utterly vanquished:

It was the battering of drums I heard.  
It was hunger, it was the hungry that cried  
And the waves, the waves were soldiers moving,  
Marching and marching in a tragic time  
Below me, on the asphalt, under the trees. (CP 200)

Mention of the asphalt here is particularly surprising as it locates the poem in the contemporary world whereas before it seemed as though a Renaissance painter were speaking. This reveals that the painter is deliberately trying to be anachronistic in his representation of nature and to erase all marks of the contemporary in favor of a timeless sylvan idyll. But the contemporary returns to trample on his aspirations:

It was soldiers went marching over the rocks  
And still the birds came, came in watery flocks,  
Because it was spring and the birds had to come.  
No doubt that soldiers had to be marching  
And that drums had to be rolling, rolling, rolling.  
(CP 200)

It is the sigh of resignation in the last two lines here that endears the speaker to us more than the well-dressed man with a beard. Although his equation of the necessity of the birds' return with that of the soldiers is humorous, it takes an ominous turn with the last words of the poem ("rolling, rolling, rolling"): his humor and his painting will evaporate in the emergencies and alarms of war.

What is also of note here is the conflation of landscape with the social formation of the army. The equation of birds and soldiers is not completely serious, but it demonstrates a need to understand the action of armies against the panorama of the natural world. Also noteworthy is that the eruption of the drums and soldiers into the sylvan idyll does not augur some kind of social realist allegory of landscape. The world of the soldiers, the birds, and the mountains that we are left with at the end of the poem is curiously afloat and uncertain. No particular social meaning is affixed to the landscape. It is released into polyvalency after the speaker's attempts to restrict its symbolism. Thus, the poem records not only the speaker's failure to impress his meaning on the landscape but also that of the soldiers who are caught up in huge waves of birds and rocks. It is this overpowering rhythm of nature that the poem ultimately celebrates.

"Idiom of the Hero," which immediately follows "Dry Loaf" in the *Collected Poems*, would seem to turn all this on its head. The speaker here rejects social concerns ("I heard two workers say, 'This chaos / Will soon be ended.' / This chaos will not be ended" [CP 200]) in favor of skyscapes, "By which at least I am befriended" (CP 201). But what Stevens is really rejecting here are the crude configurations of the political: anybody who thinks that social chaos will soon be mended, as many figures on the left

did in the United States in the 1930s, deserves our ridicule. Stevens enjoins us to find better ways of thinking about the relations between skylscapes and politics.

This trajectory from land- and skylscapes to social relations is also witnessed in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery." The penultimate section of this poem states:

XLIX

It needed the heavy nights of drenching weather  
To make him return to people, to find among them  
Whatever it was that he found in their absence,  
A pleasure, an indulgence, an infatuation. (CP 158)

Then the last section adds:

L

Union of the weakest develops strength  
Not wisdom. Can all men, together, avenge  
One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?  
But the wise man avenges by building his city in snow.  
(CP 158)

This is the same kind of dismissal of the left that would resurface again in "Idiom of the Hero," but it is not a dismissal of the political in toto.<sup>7</sup> It demands the answerability of social structures to the natural world, the kind of answerability that Marxism and certain forms of capitalism can never provide because for them the natural world is primarily a resource, whether for industry or tourism. The city built in the snow will melt in spring time and then have to be rebuilt the following winter: such a dismantling and reconstruction of social forms in concert with the seasons might on one level be also deserving of our ridicule but on another demands our respect. For this says that all human fictions—cities, paintings, poems—eventually fail and we would do as well to anticipate such failure in their design (the city in snow I take here to be a symbol, unlike the "ever jubilant weather" with which I began this essay).

The body of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," set out in haiku-like observations that precede these conclusions, is brimming over with rich meditations on the relations between society and landscape. It is not considered one of his more important poems, perhaps because it does not have the sustained rhetoric of poems such as "Sunday Morning" or "The Auroras of Autumn": its tone jumps from the arch to the impassioned to that of the measured observations above. (It could also be simply because of the distasteful title.) But there are treasures here, for instance in the humor that flashes out occasionally:

XLIII

It is curious that the density of life

On a given plane is ascertainable  
By dividing the number of legs one sees by two.  
At least the number of people may thus be fixed.  
(CP 157)

The first three lines would be enough in themselves, but the fourth, with its pursing of lips and mordant second thought, is highly comic. The poem is also full of tiny but intense exaltations and bright moments of plenitude:

II  
Sigh for me, night-wind, in the noisy leaves of the oak.  
I am tired. Sleep for me, heaven over the hill.  
Shout for me, loudly and loudly, joyful sun, when you  
rise.<sup>8</sup> (CP 150)

.....

XXVI  
This fat pistache of Belgian grapes exceeds  
The total gala of auburn aureoles.  
*Cochon!* Master, the grapes are here and now. (CP 154)

.....

XXXI  
A teeming millpond or a furious mind.  
Gray grasses rolling windily away  
And bristling thorn-trees spinning on the bank.  
The actual is a deft beneficence. (CP 155)

The “loudly and loudly” is the kind of exclamation we would expect more from an exuberant Whitman, who is invoked in the preceding section, not Stevens. The abuse thrown at the Old Master is a more ebullient form of the disapproval for the speaker of “Dry Loaf”: “You pig! Look at the land and its fruits before your very eyes, not those of Belgium!” Then there is the calm, clear beauty of “The actual is a deft beneficence.” These are the declamations of a mind exulting in the natural world “from sheer Gemütlichkeit” (CP 152); these are the pleasures, indulgences, and infatuations (referred to in section XLIX) that must be comprehended as the poem progresses in relation to society.

Again and again in Stevens we read expressions of this simple, huge joy in physical things, in having a body, in tasting fruit, looking at flowers, in air and light, and not enough attention has been given to them. It is wrong to ignore these moments in favor either of talk about the imagination and reality or demonstrations of how Stevens was imbricated in his times. It is not that such characterizations are false, just that they are incomplete. They ignore the base from which all Stevens’ thought springs:

the joys and despairs of being in nature. One cannot look at the metaphysics or the relations with contemporaneous events without acknowledging that the arena Stevens repeatedly turned to in order to think about these things was landscape and objects taken from nature.

The penultimate section that I quoted above gives the impression that the return to society only occurs at the end of the poem, whereas it is present all along. Early in the poem is this instruction:

XV

Serve the rouged fruits in early snow.  
They resemble a page of Toulet  
Read in the ruins of a new society,  
Furtively, by candle and out of need. (*CP* 153)

Paul-Jean Toulet's poetry does not have the optimistic Marxist exuberance of an Eluard. Ironic, bitter, using condensed forms like those of "Like Decorations," Toulet (1867–1920) is the voice of decadence when read in a new forward-looking socialist society. Here Stevens criticizes the mind-numbing aspect of Marxist aspiration: it is simply tedious to talk of bright futures all the time. We also need decadence, irony, the expression of loss. This critique springs from a consideration of the rouged fruits against the backdrop of the cold season. Our relish for the fruits is the same as that for alternatives to monomaniac political systems.

But as canto XLIX, quoted above, points out, this is not just a case of analogy (fruits = Toulet; cold land = socialist society). The one who returns to the people has to find among them the *same* pleasures, indulgences, and infatuations as he found in nature. He must not lose sight of the exaltations and intensity of vision that he experienced in the midst of the landscape. It is not a choice between but of. Those exaltations are sponsored by his awareness of the polyvalence of the natural world. The *cochon*-master is instructed to look at the grapes before his very eyes, but once facing nature in this immediate way we realize that new visions begin to blossom, not wither away. Stevens is writing a new kind of sublime, one that reveals nature as polyvalent, the ground from which many different interpretive possibilities spring, and these have implications for the way communities figure themselves in their cultural works. This, after all, is what is being worked out in the poem. The figure of the artist/politician who moves from nature to society is one who will contribute to such cultural work, will offer his community representations of itself. When comparing Stevens' poetry with Jeffers', I commented that for the latter nature is monovalent whereas Stevens' treatment of landscape and objects taken from nature reveals their interpretive abundance. Nowhere could this be more true for Stevens than in "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," where the variety of tone and attack from one section to the next enacts this polyvalency. Good cultural work, like good politics (as we saw in the

criticism of Victor Serge and Konstantinov), will not suppress that polyvalency, but revel in it.<sup>9</sup>

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stevens comments on the idea of classicism in "The Relations between Poetry and Painting": "When we look back at the period of French classicism in the seventeenth century, we have no difficulty in seeing it as a whole. It is not so easy to see one's own time that way" (NA 172).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Lentricchia harmonizes with this opinion in the chapter on Stevens where he says that the moments of insight and vitality experienced in nature render meaningless those "social relations, even those obviously hinged on power. . . . In these moments we are most ourselves, wonderfully alone, cut loose from tradition and community" (137).

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Charles Altieri in the Acknowledgments to *Canons and Consequences* writes: "In my text I project a hope that the effort to get theory right is also in a limited domain an effort to get a life right, in the sense of taking responsibility for the values that govern one's work" (vii).

<sup>4</sup> Jeffers tried to mitigate this attitude once in an introduction to a collection by describing his "Inhumanism" as "a certain philosophical attitude, which might be called Inhumanism, a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man. . . . This manner of thought and feeling is neither misanthropic nor pessimist; . . . it has objective truth and human value. It offers a reasonable detachment as rule of conduct, instead of love, hate and envy. It neutralizes fanaticism and wild hopes; but it provides magnificence for the religious instinct, and satisfies our need to admire greatness and rejoice in beauty" (qtd. in Carpenter 127). Such statements ring hollow in the face of the poetry.

<sup>5</sup> When excerpting from the poem for a selection of his work submitted to Alfred A. Knopf in 1950 (but which remained unpublished), Stevens made sure section XIII was there also, preceding the final section (ms. in the Huntington Collection).

<sup>6</sup> In a letter to Hi Simons, 9 January 1940, Stevens remarks: "The state of the weather soon becomes a state of mind" (L 349).

<sup>7</sup> Once again, as in "Dry Loaf" and "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard," Stevens criticizes the figure who uses landscape and weather to abscond from society: "Men and the affairs of men seldom concerned / This pundit of the weather, who never ceased / To think of man the abstraction, the comic sum" (XXXV, CP 156).

<sup>8</sup> The phrasing here recalls one of Stevens' poems from his Cambridge days, "Self-Respect": "Sun in the heaven, / Thou are the cause of my mirth, / Star in the evening / Thine is my province since birth; / Depths of the sky / Yours are the depths of my worth" (SP 23).

<sup>9</sup> I would like to thank Bonnie Costello, Alan Filreis, and Stephen Matterson for comments on earlier drafts of this essay as well as the Fulbright Commission in Prague, which provided funding to enable some of this research.

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# Dominion, Order, Loss: Approaching Wallace Stevens' Poetry through Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology

RAINER EMIG

## I. THE SUBJECT OF IMPERSONALITY

**A**T FIRST GLANCE, Wallace Stevens' poems offer little scope for a psychoanalytic inquiry. The texts refrain from positing easily identifiable subjects; although they contain intentions, desires, anxieties, and seemingly individual memories, as Helen Vendler observes in *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, they generally refuse to attach these to traditional speakers. Rather than exploring subjective positions, they appear to be concerned with phenomenological issues, questions of perception and the establishment and transformation of horizons of expectation. But just as phenomenology in the Husserlian tradition is characterized by a blind spot concerning the perceiving subject behind its ordering processes, Stevens' texts can be shown to disguise a troubled subjectivity behind their concern for dominating objects, such as the "jar in Tennessee" in "Anecdote of the Jar." Poems in the manner of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" not merely expose multilayered perspectives in the construction of reality. When read in a deconstructive vein, they also posit an impossible subject that is forced to assume more than one position at a time—thereby severely putting its integrity at risk. Stevens' poems thus enact precisely the problematic maneuvers that classical modernist texts have to engage in to maintain their goal of impersonality.

As Maud Ellmann has demonstrated for T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, impersonality does not derive from an abandoning of subjectivity. It rather disguises a seemingly all-powerful subject that remains at work and theoretically in control in modernist texts. The subject of impersonal texts remains problematic, because its invisible control results from its attempt to avoid manifestation. This ambivalence of impersonality already displays an interesting analogy to the symptoms of psychoanalytic inquiry.

This essay will analyze the mechanisms of Stevens' poems with regard to the subject. It will scrutinize their positing of multilayered (and therefore inevitably fragmented) objects as well as the ensuing consequences

for a subjectivity they try (and must try) to hide. For this inquiry some established psychoanalytic paradigms will be employed. These will be linked with Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and eventually with the ideas of a theorist who fuses critical theory with psychoanalysis: Jean Baudrillard. Freud's groundbreaking essay "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in which he eventually topples his concept of a stable tripartite subject in favor of a fluid and self-destructive one (that anticipates Deleuze and Guattari's schizophrenic self in *Anti-Oedipus*) will be used as a lens through which the poetics of simultaneous multiperspectivity and impersonality will be read as a *mise en abyme* of the subject. Pleasure principle and death drive will be shown to echo through a poetry in which the concentration on abstract thought (visible in formulas such as "The Idea of Order") and miraculously appearing objects function as disguises of a complex onslaught on a coherent subjectivity.

## II. TRACES: WHO SPEAKS AFTER THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE SUBJECT?

Stevens' much anthologized poem "Anecdote of the Jar" of 1919 is often read as a humorous exercise in certain modernist principles, a text that consciously avoids a coherent narrative and opts for the irrational realm of nonsense verse. Equally radical (albeit in a nonthreatening way) appears the absence of a consistent speaker in such readings. The "I" that starts off the text with the seemingly determined "I placed a jar in Tennessee" (CP 76) is instantly abandoned in favor of self-determined objects, the jar and the wilderness. The text becomes the modernist equivalent of a nursery rhyme or a limerick, entertaining and linguistically challenging, but hardly worrying on the level of its message or implications.

What such readings overlook are the many sinister and threatening elements in the short poem. Already the jar of its title contains echoes of "urn" in its extended paradigm, an association supported by the poem's intertextual link with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The anecdote of the title furthermore introduces the theme of memory and remembrance. Its etymological meaning is "secret history" or "things unpublished," which hints at the suppression and repression of past events. Yet what could be the suppressed history of an apparently nonsensical verse? The jar is strategically placed on a hill, where in a strange image at the end of the poem's first stanza it "made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill."

The poem continues in its second stanza with images of uprising, sprawling around, and standing tall, in order to culminate in its third and final stanza in the remarkable claim "It took dominion everywhere." When the jar is eventually described as "gray and bare," this is not merely a hint at the bleakness of the American landscape (Vendler 46), but yet another indication that the text contains its own "secret history," here that of the violence that determines the relation of nature and culture. The poem is a modernist reminder of the destruction that underlies history, here Ameri-

can history. Its obscure central verses that mention a wilderness that, after responding to the imposition of the jar, is “no longer wild” point at the paradox underlying culture in general as well as American identity: both are achieved through acts of violence and (self-)destruction and are thus tainted with guilt. It is no coincidence that the poem emerged historically from the First World War, in which America had become involved late and reluctantly.

The anonymous and nondescript “I” in charge of placing this commemorative object inside a seeming wilderness achieves its problematic autonomy from this act of (self-)destruction. No matter whether read through Freudian castration anxiety or the Lacanian mirror image, all theories of individuation are also theories of (self-)domination, and all of them tell of a price that is to be paid for identity, losses that produce desire and traumas. “Anecdote of the Jar” achieves its apparent autonomy and freedom from a defined speaker through the simultaneous implication, exposition, and renewed suppression of cultural violence that finds its focus in the urn-like jar, but also in the anecdote that is, after all, the paradoxical telling of “secret histories.” The ghosts of the past become the foundation of the impersonal modernist text.

Stevens’ poetic works are full of anecdotes. Already the poem that opens his *Collected Poems* bears the title “Earthy Anecdote.” In this early poem again seemingly nonsensical images display order, dominance, and potentially violence. Although superficially engaged with bucks and a firecat, the text again specifies a location in its second line “Over Oklahoma” (CP 3). The anonymous “bucks” (an ambiguous term that also refers to young men) “went clattering, / Until they swerved / In a swift, circular line / To the right” and later “to the left.” These images once more recall military formations and maneuvers, and the confusing term *firecat* also invokes the fire to which soldiers are exposed. The earth of the poem’s title once again recalls the attachment of the poem’s complex metaphorical plot to the (home) ground—and evokes what becomes of individuals killed by fighting. Despite Stevens’ facetious claim “There’s no symbolism in the ‘Earthy Anecdote.’ There’s a good deal of theory about it, however; but explanations spoil things” (L 204), the poem is clearly not interested in pure denotation or the impressionistic reproduction of perception. Already its title presents a first metaphor, and the fact that its central and most confusing element is an imaginary creature, the firecat, clearly hints at a connotative, if not symbolic dimension of the text. We have already seen that the anecdote introduces memory and hidden narrative into the text. As in another poem about the limits of subjectivity, “The Death of a Soldier,” Stevens’ “Earthy Anecdote” sets up a paradox. “The Death of a Soldier” proclaims “Death is absolute and without memorial” (CP 97), while the text itself embodies exactly the memorial that it negates. In a similar way as the seemingly realist “earthy” animal images of “Earthy Anecdote,” “The Death of a Soldier” cleverly merges textuality and objectivity

by concluding ambiguously (and again potentially symbolically): "The clouds go, nevertheless, / In their direction."

The aim of the above readings is not to claim that Stevens' early poetry is predominantly about violence and war. It is evident that the texts in question are multilayered and concerned with objects and settings, with nature as well as with questions of objective relations. Inside their seeming objectivity there is an implicit history of the subject, a history that paradoxically talks about the subject after its destruction. Yet who speaks of the subject after its disappearance? This question is addressed explicitly in another of Stevens' anecdote poems. "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand" once again conjures up images of masses, formations, and mass destruction. Surprisingly, however, it does not start with an impersonal setting or an absurd pairing of objects. Its first couplet reads: "The soul, he said, is composed / Of the external world" (CP 51). Who is the speaker of this extraordinary line? He clearly supports an Aristotelian line of materialism, rather than a Platonic transcendentalism.<sup>1</sup> The consequences of his initial claim are worth investigating. If the essence of self is determined by the environment of this self, then how is an insight into this relation, i.e., self-reflexivity and self-awareness, possible? How is it in fact possible to make the very statement that starts "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand"?

The second implication of the poem's crucial claim is even more worrying, since it concerns practice rather than ontological foundations. If the relationship of self and environment forms the basis of existence, it must work in two ways. The second and third stanza of the poem support this view: "There are men of the East, he said, / Who are the East" (CP 51). One is one's environment—and one's environment is oneself. Yet where does individuality enter this equation, and where is the space for autonomy, history, and ethics? The circular logic of this radical materialism leaves no space for these tenets of Western thinking. Once again, we are faced with a poem that has seemingly written the self out of its equation. Yet in the same way as "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Earthy Anecdote," there is a secret history behind the impersonal claims of "Anecdote of Men by the Thousand." This history is linked to the gendered multitude of its title.

The phrase "Men by the Thousand" alludes to large groups as agents, objects, or victims of historical events and processes (the masculinist implications of "Men" cannot be overlooked in this context). At the same time, the notion of a multitude of anonymous men embodies a crucial contradiction inside the Western ethos of the autonomous individual: if all "men" are individuals, and thus of equal importance and value, how is it possible to speak of them as multitudes, as faceless masses? This is a major problem in concepts of society based on individualist principles and has proved the stumbling block of ideologies privileging community over the individual. In terms of self-definition, and thus of individual subjectivity, the contradiction relates to the problem of subjectivity as alterity, be it the alterity of the maternal body (as in the theories of Melanie Klein

and Lacan) or the alterity of the abstract Other (in Lacan, Derrida, and Levinas, as well as in postcolonial theories and ethics of alterity).

The poem goes one step further in its elaboration of the paradox of the autonomous self. In stanza three it adds language—and thus its own material—to the equation: “There are men whose words / Are as natural sounds / Of their places / As the cackle of toucans / In the place of toucans” (CP 51–52). These lines should not be misread as an essentialism that assumes (contrary to Saussure’s insistence on the arbitrariness of the signifier) the “natural” motivation of particular signs. What the verses refer to is a substitution: the toucans are replaced by their cackle, i.e., indexical signs hinting at a presence, according to Saussure, yet without being this presence. In a similarly indexical way, the words of *some* men (and obviously not all men) stand in for them in their “places.” Rather than developing a materialist conception of the soul, the poem functions in a way remarkably similar to “Anecdote of the Jar” and “Earthy Anecdote.” It posits subjectivity in a particular place as a trace—and not as a substance or essence.

The role of the jar in “Anecdote of the Jar,” a reminder of subjectivity after its disappearance and loss, is taken over in “Anecdote of Men by the Thousand” by language itself. In a self-referential way the poem now becomes the memory trace of a subjectivity that may have disappeared, but continues to speak (of) its presence. It achieves this by positing itself inside the dialectic of subject and object that it outlines. It is therefore logical and not contradictory that the self in the poem is its environment in the same way that the environment becomes the extended image of the self. Both serve as ghostly traces of a subjectivity that is absent in everyday practice—and present in communicative functions.

### III. MINDS AND THINGS: OBJECTIFYING THE SUBJECT—SUBJECTING THE OBJECT

Freud introduces the crucial hypothesis of his essay “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” by quoting G. T. Fechner’s *Einige Ideen zur Schöpfungs- und Entwicklungsgeschichte der Organismen* of 1873:

“According to this hypothesis, every psycho-physical motion rising above the threshold of consciousness is attended by pleasure in proportion as, beyond a certain limit, it approximates to complete stability, and is attended by unpleasure in proportion as, beyond a certain limit, it deviates from complete stability; while between the two limits, which may be described as qualitative thresholds of pleasure and unpleasure, there is a certain margin of aesthetic indifference. . . .” (“BPP” 277)

Limits and margins are frequent images in Stevens’ “anecdote” poems, and so is the notion of “indifference” once the subject has been written out of the poems’ equations—only to become all the more firmly inscribed in them as a trace. The editorial footnote to Freud’s above statement points

out that “ ‘Aesthetic’ is here used in the old sense of ‘relating to sensation or perception’ (“BPP” 277). This shows the thesis’ indebtedness to the German philosophical tradition, but it also highlights the link between the aesthetics of Stevens’ poetry of perception and the psychoanalytic text concerned with the tensions within the subject. In order to elaborate this connection, some of Stevens’ poems about this seeming state of indifference will be read alongside sections of Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in this section.

“[T]he mental apparatus endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant” (“BPP” 277). After “Anecdote of the Jar,” “The Snow Man” is certainly Stevens’ best known poem. It presents itself again in user-friendly shape: simple language, regular three-line stanzas with hints at half-rhymes, and a subject matter that a naive reading could mistake for an idyllic winter scene. But the poem is not concerned with a snow man, or if it is, the snow man is a metaphor for something else, as the poem’s first line makes evident: “One must have a mind of winter” (CP 9). It is once again concerned with the subject, and again this subject remains unspecified, yet thereby gains general significance. “The Snow Man” deals with the adaptation of perceiving subject to perceived object. The percipient is first an implicit spectator who “regard[s] the frost and the boughs / Of the pine-trees crusted with snow,” “the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter” and “the January sun.” Yet in order to become the subject of this gaze, he must become an object too: “One” becomes “a mind of winter” that must “have been cold a long time.”

Contrary to Freud’s insistence on the pleasure principle as the dominant force, the subject here conforms to what Freud labels the “reality principle” at a later stage of his essay:

Under the ego’s instincts of self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle. This latter principle does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of displeasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure. (“BPP” 278)

Stevens goes one step further, or rather, he takes the implications of Freud’s concept more seriously than its creator. In order for the self to realize the object(s) and goal(s) of its pleasure, it has to abandon the pleasure principle as an entirely subject-based impulse. In order to recognize an outside of the subject from which pleasure could derive, it has to acknowledge the existence of objects. In other words: it must subject itself to the object world. This is already evident in Freud’s essay on the consequences of the

self's refusal to enter this relation. In "On Narcissism," Freud makes the ability to enter object-cathexes the prerequisite of a healthy psychological development. He even goes as far as stating: "The highest phase of development of which object-libido is capable is seen in the state of being in love, when the subject seems to give up his own personality in favour of an object-cathexis" (68). Yet Freud also outlines that the resulting loss of power of the ego is a struggle and that the price to be paid for object-cathexes is paid by the subject.

In Stevens there is indeed no way of recognizing external phenomena before one becomes subjected by them. Only when this partial objectification of the subject is achieved can the subject become one in the Cartesian sense. With noticeable understatement Stevens calls this interaction "ambiguity" in "Three Academic Pieces." He writes: "The proliferation of resemblances extends an object. The point at which this process begins, or rather at which this growth begins, is the point at which ambiguity has been reached" (NA 78-79). In his essay Stevens outlines exactly the shift that characterizes Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Stevens first maintains "The ambiguity that is so favorable to the poetic mind is precisely the ambiguity favorable to resemblance. In this ambiguity, the intensification of reality by resemblance increases realization and this increased realization is pleasurable" (NA 79). Yet only half a paragraph later pleasure turns into a takeover of "reality" by the secondary reality generated by the pleasure principle of resemblance and harmony (two central terms in the above essay, of which the latter also forms the title of Stevens' first collection of poems, *Harmonium*). Quite distinct from the mere pleasure of recognizing resemblances, what now takes place is the following: "a sense of reality keen enough to be in excess of the normal sense of reality creates a reality of its own" (NA 79).

This corresponds to the decisive switch at the start of the central third stanza of "The Snow Man." Suddenly the impersonal subject is granted the power to "think," and this goes hand in hand with another shift, that from seeing to hearing: "Of the January sun; and not to think / Of any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves" (CP 10). Moreover, an adjective appears that contrasts starkly with the descriptive ones used earlier: "misery" is both a deeply subjective term and one that evokes cultural and even ethical norms. The poem outlines in extremely condensed form that the only way of becoming a perceiving, conscious, and responsible subject is objectification. The price to be paid is discussed in the poem's concluding fifth stanza:

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

This is a far cry from quasi-mystical "oneness with nature" readings that situate the poem in close proximity to the romantics. An example is

Daniel R. Schwarz, who asks: "Is not 'The Snow Man' a eulogy for Keatsian negative capability where the poet empties himself of his own ego as a prelude to responding with the full power of his imagination . . . to experiences outside himself . . .?" (64). The answer is "no," since in Stevens there is neither a poet (nor even an identified speaker) who could perform the stunt of pretending to abandon his ego in order to permit his imagination (which would then be miraculously disconnected from the ego) free range. In Stevens the paradoxical impersonal self (a passive percipient and listener at the best of times) is already "nothing himself" before it attains access to the object world. The dominance of this object world also forbids a reading of the poem as naturalism. An example is Milton J. Bates, who makes the snow man the representative of "the Lockean mind so detested by those laureates of the active soul, Coleridge and Emerson" (133). Yet in order to be an empirical rationality, the impersonal voice of the poem, who is neither a clear-cut speaker nor clearly identical with the snow man, would still have to retain its subjective dominance over the object world, and this is evidently not the case.

Rather than asserting subjective dominance, be it of the imagination or rationality, "The Snow Man" shows the objectified subject entangled in tautologies. It becomes "the listener, who listens" as well as a nothing that observes nothing(s). "[C]onsciousness," Freud states at the beginning of the speculative sections of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," "may be, not the most universal attribute of mental processes, but only a particular function of them" ("BPP" 295). Analogous to the formal features of Stevens' poem, which revels in repetition (of sounds and terms), Freud states "there really does exist in the mind a compulsion to repeat which over-rides the pleasure principle," and then he links this compulsion to "the dreams which occur in traumatic neuroses and the impulse which leads children to play" ("BPP" 293). What could be more traumatic than imagining one's mind to be made of snow—and what more typical of child's play than building a snow man?

Stevens himself alludes to compulsion and circularity as the effects of the interplay of subject and object in the imagination. Again in "Three Academic Pieces" he upholds that

Here what matters is that the intensification of the sense of reality creates a resemblance: that reality of its own is a reality. This may be going round a circle, first clockwise, then anti-clockwise. If the savor of life is the savor of reality, the fact will establish itself whichever way one approaches it. (NA 79)

A fact that establishes itself takes us back to "Anecdote of the Jar," and again the question remains at whose expense this takeover of reality happens. Lacan reads Freud's case study of Judge Schreber in the light of such a reversal. He also arrives at the consequences outlined in Stevens' poetry

and prose: repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*) as that which links memory with reality and practice, and as that which structures intertextuality and symbolism as well as the poetic function of language. Lacan writes: "The presence of the Other is, in effect, a presence usually closed to the subject, because it usually persists in a state of repression (*verdrängt*), and because from there it insists on representing itself in the signified by means of repetition compulsion (*Wiederholungszwang*)" (200).

The following section will continue to explore this repressed and yet continually present "Other" in Stevens' poetry, not, as Freud and Lacan attempt, as the trace of ultimately Oedipal desire, but as the point of violent contact between subject and object at which the subject realizes its object status. The image of the room will be used to point out the limits of the subject as demarcated by the seemingly least intrusive and yet all-decisive object, space.

#### IV. EMPTY ROOMS OF TRUTH: THE SPACE OF THE SUBJECT

Stevens' short poem "Of the Surface of Things" starts with the statement: "In my room, the world is beyond my understanding" (*CP* 57). Yet despite its vagueness, there is no apparent threat to the subject in the poem. Its image of a walk during which the view of "three or four hills and a cloud" seems to reassure the subject could even be read as belittling the romantic veneration of the outdoors. Yet the poem moves on through two further stanzas. The first focuses on a secondary reality compared with the primary one of empirical nature, that of writing: "From my balcony, I survey the yellow air, / Reading where I have written, / 'The spring is like a belle undressing.'" The stanza introduces what Stevens' above essay termed "ambiguity." The poem's third stanza then completes the take-over of primary by secondary reality: "The gold tree is blue. / The singer has pulled his cloak over his head. / The moon is in the folds of the cloak." Madness (and poetry) reign—rather than the apparent empiricism of the poem's beginning. Yet there is a price to be paid for privileging the imagination. It is the traditional one of blindness implied in the image of the cloak pulled over the head of the singer—an already objectified and externalized double of the speaker of the preceding two stanzas.

Although the traditional attribute of the poet, from Homer onwards, blindness in Stevens gains a decisive quality. In a poetics that is built around perception, the inability to perceive undermines not only the subject, but also the entire aesthetic endeavor, an endeavor that has aspirations to envelope reality itself, in the best and worst tradition of classical modernist expansionism.<sup>2</sup> The end of seeing is the end of the subject and thus the end of both primary and secondary reality. Yet the moon of the poem, the object, remains stubbornly present "in the folds of the cloak."

In the much later poem "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," language itself is the object that remains after the disappearance

of primary reality and the subject into imagination. In this poem it is the book that devours first "the reader," the representative of subjectivity in the poem, then the summer night as the image of primary reality. Charles Altieri recognizes this substitution in his essay "Why Stevens Must Be Abstract." Yet Altieri's emphatic reading prevents him from seeing the darker aspects of this merger of subject and object. He identifies it as a hubristic endeavor mimicking God's creation of the world through the word, when he writes about the poem's conclusion: "Then, as time turns back against itself, as reading self-consciously repeats its world and decides that it is good, it finds its culminating expression in a series of present participles transforming all that calm into a pure state for which the reading stands as its perfection" (115). If Stevens' poem envisages the creation of the world as the moment of making a world out of a text and vice versa, a text out of reality, then it re-creates (the doubling is important) not only creation, but also the biblical Fall.

His poem starts with the lines "The house was quiet and the world was calm. / The reader became the book; and summer night / Was like the conscious being of the book," in order to conclude with "The truth in a calm world, / In which there is no other meaning, itself / Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself / Is the reader leaning late and reading there" (CP 358-59). What it produces is Baudrillard's simulacrum, the doubling that sets itself up in the place of the real, masquerading the latter's disappearance and absence ("SS" 170). Although this might be acceptable from a purely aesthetic perspective (as it is in aestheticism), it nonetheless produces a crucial paradox for the subject. Not only does this textualizing imagination place the subject in two perspectives simultaneously: that of the starting point of the transformation as a percipient and that of the concluding stage of the process as reader. It also demands two impossibilities: that the subject create itself and at the same time perceive itself as not-itself—and gain insight, knowledge, and understanding (the "truth" of the poem) from this double paradox.

If Stevens' poems owe as much to phenomenology as they do to Emerson's crucial distinction between self and non-self, they also push Emerson's distinction further—into the direction not only of alienation (as Michael Davidson asserts [154]), but of a subjectivity that is paradoxically both pre-subjective and already post-subjective. What Altieri all too optimistically describes as a dialectic, when he writes "'There' and 'here,' the scene and the projected reader, then the projected reader and the actual reader, become dialectical functions of one another, all as exponents of this single figure who proleptically represents one hundred eyes seeing at once, and finding that we must lean further into this enchanting site" (115), in fact brings dialectic to a breaking point and turns it into self-destruction. Altieri consciously drifts into metaphor at the end of his statement to emphasize the romantic character of the mechanism. But even if this is correct, it not merely represents the romantic fusion of self and world,

but equally embodies the romantic dispersion of self in the world, epiphany and apocalypse, here the apocalypse of the subject. Moreover, to add to the confusion, the subject that is about to be doubled and dispersed in order to enable perception to become creation and poesis in Stevens' model is also the subject that not only "reads" about its own destiny as a text, but reports its fate back to the second subject involved in the poem, the reader.

Freud also eventually feels the need to contain the potentially fatal theories that he develops in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In the concluding seventh section of his essay he suddenly swerves back to assert the already abandoned pleasure principle. The obvious contradiction is the result of the implicit insight that a total abandonment of a structured concept of the psyche would also mean the end of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud writes in terms that also serve as characterizations of the double bind of Stevens' poems:

We have found that one of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus is to "bind" the instinctual impulses which impinge on it, to replace the primary process prevailing in them by the secondary process and convert their freely mobile cathectic energy into a mainly quiescent (tonic) cathexis. While this transformation is taking place no attention can be paid to the development of unpleasure; but this does not imply the suspension of the pleasure principle. On the contrary, the transformation occurs on *behalf* of the pleasure principle; the binding is a preparatory act which introduces and assures the dominance of the pleasure principle. ("BPP" 336)

It takes little transference skill to identify the assertion of the pleasure principle as the compound of imagination and subject that Stevens' poems strive to maintain, even at the price of paradox and repetition compulsion. The "quiescent (tonic) cathexis" of Freud's retraction is analogous to the curious "calm" in Stevens' "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," where the repeated "itself" of the final stanzas indicates a fusion of truth, world, meaning, and reader that can be achieved only through the total control of the self resulting from the total dominance of its imagination—even at the price of abandoning the demarcations between subject and object, word and world.

#### V. SHATTERING THE GLASS COACH: SPLINTERED SUBJECTIVITY

"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is Stevens' most programmatic assertion of his interest in perspectives. The plural is important, because it consciously subverts the romantic stress on immediacy and unity of the imagination in favor of plurality and seriality, features that are essentially modernist. The poem consciously plays with the expectation of a coherent view by inviting the reader, even after the tellingly "unpoetic"

title, to focus on a potential candidate for coherence, the blackbird itself—curiously represented by his eye in the singular, which is labeled “The only moving thing” (CP 92). Yet already the second stanza abandons any pretense at traditional coherence when it starts off with the confusing, because defamiliarizing line “I was of three minds.”

The reader’s attention quickly shifts from an apparently impersonal descriptive perspective to a potentially personal introspective view, only to be thrown halfway down its identificatory routines. First, the conflict of opinion that the expected idiom “to be in two minds about something” invokes remains obscure. Then the poem further confuses matters when it adds to the defamiliarized idiom a daring simile: the divided self is “Like a tree / In which there are three blackbirds.” A double objectification takes place: the mind is like a tree (a daring analogy), and three possible views (the three minds of the poem’s beginning) equal three blackbirds. At this point the reader is still not certain that the birds will not be charged with symbolic significance. As in many fairy tales they could be zoomorphic representations of humans—or allegories of human emotions and ideas.

This play with the reader is never completely abandoned in the poem. In its third stanza a seemingly objective description, “The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds” (CP 93), is coupled with a potentially symbolic explanation that fails to explain anything: “It was a small part of the pantomime.” This hints at an overall plot, and a well-known one at that. Yet the remaining poem, despite toying with fragments of knowledge and established “truths,” fails to deliver an overall picture of this rehearsed routine, the poem’s version of the repetition compulsion uncovered as a dominant principle of Stevens’ poetry above. It comes up with a formula such as “A man and a woman / Are one” in its fourth stanza, only to defamiliarize it instantly by adding a small variation to the series: “A man and a woman and a blackbird / Are one.”

The self, too, makes miraculous guest appearances after otherwise completely impersonal sections. Thus in part V a perfectly reconstituted self appears. It is no longer in two or more minds, although it is still uncertain: “I do not know which to prefer,” and its insecurity derives from the fact that it wishes to choose between the beauties of presence, of inflection, innuendoes, and whistling, and the apparently more exquisite, yet also deeply confusing beauty of absence, of the “just after.” This “just after” is indeed the moment of perception itself, when the physiological act of sensory stimulation is transformed into an imaginative act of recognition, recollection, and categorization that equals the “intensification of the sense of reality” that “creates a resemblance,” according to Stevens.

That “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” is by no means a pure exercise in phenomenology and equally distinct from an objective, impersonal poem becomes evident once more in the contradictions of its sixth stanza. An objective statement, “Icicles filled the long window,” is followed by a metaphor that reintroduces culture and its norms: “barbaric

glass." This paradox—perception is seen as the starting point of meaning and truth, and yet culture, which is constituted of these epistemes, does not follow perception but precedes and accompanies it—will become important in the conclusion of this essay. Stanza VI closes with a doubling of the paradox. Once more it is not content with pointing out its mechanisms once, but turns them into a series. It again introduces a seemingly objective description: "The shadow of the blackbird / Crossed it [the window], to and fro," only to undermine this objectivity by adding cryptically: "The mood / Traced in the shadow / An indecipherable cause." The subject that was seemingly neutralized is shown to have been the observer all along, and an observer that, far from registering empirical evidence objectively, has an agenda, indeed a mood, even though this remains as "indecipherable" (another reference to meaning and truth as text) as the rudimentary self was uncertain and of several minds earlier on.

The play on culture as that which precedes perception and perspective while also being constituted by it is continued in the poem's humorous seventh stanza. It parodies the biblical story of the Jewish tribes abandoning the true faith for the worship of an idol (Exodus 32.1–35). In Stevens' poem the idol assumes the shape of golden birds, whereas the banal but persistent blackbird of the poem appears as a reminder of truth ubiquitously hovering "around the feet / Of the women about you." Traditional symbolism (the golden bird—as in Andersen's fairy tale of the Chinese nightingale or Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium") is rejected, yet its substitute is also not entirely devoid of symbolic potential. The blackbird, as is pointed out by the poem's very title, becomes an allegory of "ways of looking," of the perception that Stevens wishes to link with meaning, truth, and a new view of reality. In order to achieve this programmatic aim, the blackbird as object must first be fused forcibly with the subject's vision. Although the title still distinguishes between perception and its object, this difference is increasingly abandoned as the poem progresses.

This assertion of the objectifying powers of the text (or should one say "its subject-generating powers?") is self-reflexively alluded to in stanza VIII. "I know noble accents / And lucid, inescapable rhythms" (*CP* 94) starts the section and reminds the reader of the power of textuality that, as in "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," forms the basis not only of subjectivity in Stevens' thinking, but of reality and truth.<sup>3</sup> The involvement of the object (the bird) in the establishment of knowledge becomes explicit in this stanza. Yet it is by no means clear who or what is the active subject and who or what the passive reified object in this epistemological activity.<sup>4</sup> Subject and object roles are at least potentially interchangeable, and this creates an atmosphere of tension, in which the two inextricably related sides of the equation enter a power struggle that is not normally perceived at the heart of phenomenological processes. Here lies one of the great achievements of Stevens' poetry: it does not merely em-

phasize the role of perception in the creation of reality, truth, and the subject, but it also hints at the violence that is part and parcel of this process.

At first glance, stanza IX of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" merely appears to reiterate the foundations of the poem's phenomenological exercise by pointing out that the movement of the object ("When the blackbird flew out of sight") is perceived through multiple systems of spatial and epistemological reference ("It marked the edge / Of one of many circles"). Its echoes of Imagist poetry are not coincidental, since Imagism, too, is concerned with the oscillation of subject and object, in which—in language—the Image is paradoxically created and suspended.

A closer look at the image of circles and edge reveals that it, too, is not completely devoid of symbolic remainders. The bird's flight through circles also reminds the reader of the telescopic sight used for shooting. Once again, potential violence is inscribed in the process of recognition that becomes cognition in Stevens' epistemological model. Since recognition is the "just after" of physiological perception, as we have seen above, this takes us back to the traces of past aggression and destruction that emerged in the analysis of the anecdotal poems at the beginning of this essay.

Stanza X takes up this threat to the presumed harmony of "nature observation" and makes fun of traditional views, also of poetry, that postulate an inherent harmony in the human subject's seemingly unrestrained exposure to objective nature. The "green light" in which the blackbird of this stanza appears is both a reminder of this concept and its defamiliarized contradiction. The effect of this deconstruction of "natural perception" is that "Even the bawds of euphony / Would cry out sharply." Harmony as a naive view of the interaction of subject and object world is denounced as a commodification of experience and ultimately as a reduction of art to prostitution. Nonetheless, the stanza is more than an intellectual critique of subject-centered art in the romantic tradition. By casually introducing sensation through the adverb "sharply," it once again paves the way for what Baudrillard terms "the revenge of the objects" (see *FS* 81–99). Not only is the subject questioned in Stevens; it is also continually reminded of its object status by the intrusion of objects into its seemingly calm subjective realm of established views and knowledge.

The most drastic evidence of this view of the subject as object appears in the dramatic images of the eleventh stanza of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." It presents an unidentified "He" riding over Connecticut "In a glass coach." The fairy tale image is loaded with symbolic significance. The protagonist's gender is not coincidental either. It relates the exploratory truth-creations of Stevens' poems to the fact that the modern subject has been conceived as male since its emergence in the Renaissance. Riding is another coupling of subject and object that approaches a merger, yet "overriding" is also a pun on the violence that this appropriation of reality entails. Even Connecticut is again not a random ascription of geographical location. It contains "connect," "I," and "cut," and thus

mirrors as well as deconstructs the phenomenological exercise within the poem.

The glass coach is evidently the most explicitly symbolic image of the stanza. It combines movement with observation (the ideals of phenomenology), but is also eerily reminiscent of the glass coffin in the fairy tale of Snow White and therefore stands for the immobilization and potential undoing of the subject through and in the object world. If the glass coach in Stevens' poem symbolizes the subject as seen through the theories of phenomenology, it combines potentially unlimited scope (i.e., seemingly unrestricted access to the object world) with the insight that such a view is viable only when the perceiving subject is itself perceived as an object, encased in the coffin of its own perception. The result of this insight is fear: "Once, a fear pierced him." As in the "sharply" of the preceding stanza, the description of this fear as physical through the metaphor "pierced" reiterates the intrusion of object into subject.

It also recalls the penetration fantasies of Freud's patient Schreber. Although Schreber's case is obviously too complex to represent a simple analogy of Stevens' poetics, certain parallels are nonetheless illuminating: Schreber's fantasy of being anally penetrated by God is, despite its absurdity, not very distant from the fear of the unidentified "He" in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The "He" is also in awe of the possibility that the reality principle might pierce and penetrate the glass coach of his subjectivity, Stevens' allegory of the human body. Yet the fear in Stevens' poem is already a self-reflexive double-edged one. While Schreber still hovers between fantasies of unlimited power (being raped by God as participating in God-likeness) and humiliation, Stevens' "He" fears mistaking an already reified and known object for another. His pleasurably threatened power is already that of perception, and although the equipage is a domesticated object with clear overtones of power, it is not really the case that the presumed shadow of blackbirds is unknown, since perception already functions through knowledge and is capable of creating analogies, potential identifications, and labels. Once again knowledge follows perception as much as it precedes it, and the subject is caught between what has constituted it and what creates it anew with each perception.

"The river is moving. / The blackbird must be flying" is consequently both a return to the repetition compulsion observed earlier and the acknowledgment of the process that brings subject and object world into being through their interaction. The river is an old analogy of time and eternity, yet the blackbird's flight is not simply its reduced equivalent. The "must" that forms part of the statement is odd, since it does not correspond to the reality principle. It can be understood in connection with the earlier image of the circles from which the bird escapes. Its escape, however, does not signal the liberation of nature. The seeming disappearance from view both challenges and confirms the perceiving subject and is there-

fore vital for its constitution. The intertextual reference of this section is Emerson's essay "Circles," which states that the eye represents the first circle of understanding while the horizon forms the second (Schwarz 53).

Established perception and simultaneous knowledge consequently form the thirteenth and concluding stanza of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." "It was evening all afternoon" introduces established categories before an objective observation appears in "It was snowing" (CP 95). This seemingly neutral perceptual claim is instantly linked with knowledge. From the facts that it is snowing and that it is already getting dark, the unidentified voice infers "And it was going to snow." Again knowledge precedes perception, but also follows it. The cryptic conclusion "The blackbird sat / In the cedar-limbs" then presents a riddle whose solution is again exactly: observation is not neutral; it does not emerge from an already constituted subject; it continually constitutes this subject and yet always has to deal with already established subjectivity and its constitutive epistemes.

In an essay entitled "A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis," Freud describes an act of perception that strikingly resembles those in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." The anecdote tells how Freud and his younger brother see the Acropolis in Athens for the first time. Freud reports his immediate response as: "So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school!" ("DM" 449). Freud explains this surprising and yet common response by stating "I was only now acquiring a conviction that 'reached down to the unconscious' " ("DM" 449). A little later he calls the response *Entfremdungsgefühl*, a "feeling of derealization":

These derealizations are remarkable phenomena which are still little understood. They are spoken of as "sensations," but they are obviously complicated processes, attached to particular mental contents and bound up with decisions made about those contents. . . . These phenomena are to be observed in two forms: the subject feels either that a piece of reality or that a piece of his own self is strange to him. In the latter case we speak of "depersonalizations." ("DM" 453)

The function that Freud attributes to these sensations is defense, mirroring the power struggle at work in Stevens' poems:

they [the phenomena of derealization] all serve the purpose of defense; they aim at keeping something away from the ego, at disavowing it. Now, new elements, which may give occasion for defensive measures, approach the ego from two directions—from the real external world and from the internal world of thoughts and impulses that emerge from the ego. It is possible that this alternative coincides with the choice between derealizations proper and depersonalizations. There are an extraor-

dinarily large number of methods (or mechanisms, as we say) used by our ego in the discharge of its defensive functions. ("DM" 454)

The double bind that links perception to the object world as well as to already stored experiences (knowledge and memory) has been shown to be at work in Stevens' poetry. Derealization and depersonalization are the equivalents of "defamiliarization," introduced by Russian Formalism into literary theory in the early twentieth century. Freud outlines the link with memory as the second characteristic of derealizations and claims that it is obvious yet often disputed: "their dependence upon the past, upon the ego's store of memories and upon earlier distressing experiences which have since perhaps fallen victim to repression—is not accepted without dispute" ("DM" 455). He eventually manages to integrate the issue in his model of the Oedipal conflict in a somewhat disappointing way. Yet in an even later and unfinished essay, "Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense," which seems to continue the debate in a way that mirrors Stevens' poetics, he uses a mythological parallel that permits a broader reading. Freud refers to Chronos, the father of the gods, who swallows his children out of fear that they might usurp his power. Zeus escapes through the intervention of his mother, eventually castrates Chronos and frees his siblings.

If one abandons for a moment the Oedipal perspective and reads the characters involved as allegories of the subject and the objects of the object world that threaten the subject's complete autonomy, one instantly returns to the scenario of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," where the perceiving self tries to contain, categorize, and control its object world, only to be shown to be deeply dependent on and eventually part of it. The last image of the poem presents the sitting blackbird. Yet neither is the total control of the object established, nor has the perceiving subject stabilized and reified the object for good.

#### VI. SYMBOLIC CONTROL: FROM WAYS OF SEEING TO IDEAS OF ORDER

In the above readings, a conflict became visible between the demands of autonomy of the subject and the simultaneous awareness that this autonomy can be achieved only through denial, the denial of the impact of the object world and the eventual recognition of the subject's object status. This conflict proved analogous to Freud's tug-of-war between pleasure principle and reality principle. With regard to modernist poetry, one could label this conflict that between poetics (the libidinal realm of the imagination and the play of signification) and mimesis (the recognition that imagination is itself conditioned and that the play of signification has rules). Stevens himself acknowledges this in an essay entitled "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

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

Despite Stevens' optimistic assertion that the pressure can be canceled, Freud maintains that in terms of the subject, which is simultaneously poetic by continually generating itself in an act of autopoiesis and realistic by remaining tied to the object world, this pressure leads to a split that is the only way of maintaining the subject's balance and control:

everything has to be paid for in one way or another, and this success [in overcoming fear and continuing potentially dangerous pleasurable activities] is achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on. ("SE" 462)

The boy whose case study Freud uses to illustrate his point deflects his anxieties by hallucinating and fetishizing. The fetish is a symbol, and symbols play a great part in Stevens' poetry, despite his denials. In "Nomad Exquisite" something happens that is at first glance quite similar to the romantic merger of nature and imagination. In its first stanza "the immense dew of Florida / Brings forth / The big-finned palm" (CP 95). In the poem's second stanza this natural production becomes a cultural one when the new creations are "hymns." There, as in the poems discussed earlier, a similar switch takes place that oscillated between the control of the subject and that of objects. The exact phrasing of the lines depicts this uncertainty principle: "the immense dew of Florida / Brings forth hymn and hymn / From the beholder."

It is unclear who is in control and even who is active in the process. Nonetheless the passage could still be read as a harmonious interaction of subject and object—if the poem did not, from its first word, prepare the reader for an encounter with exactly the danger that Freud describes. In Stevens' poem all processes "Meet for the eye of the young alligator." Once again an animal acts as the focus of imagination and perception, and once again it is represented via the old pun "eye"/"I" as in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." An alligator, however, has rather different connotations from a bird. It embodies the slumbering violence that was already implied in a line in the poem's first stanza about "green vine angering for life." Life (and this encompasses imagination as well as the world of objects, plants, and alligators) is not designed for harmony with human subjectivity. When the poem therefore doubles the "eye" of the alligator with the "I" of its speaker (who appears for the first time in its final stanza), it assigns to this speaker both the vestments of imagination and those of

destruction in images of “lightning colors” and “Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.”

Again, the rift becomes wider exactly when it is meant to be harmoniously healed, and it is expressed in as well as produced by symbols. *Poeisis* in Stevens relies on fusion—of pleasure principle with reality principle—and de(con)struction—of the distinction between subject and object. The beginning of Stevens’ poems is the end of its subjects. Similarly, the origin of their modernism lies paradoxically in a pre-modernist device, the symbol. But just as the symbol reminds the imagination of its inevitable (inter)textuality, so objects remind Stevens’ subjects of their object status and their entanglement in memories, stories, and constructed truths and histories. The poem that embodies these ruptures and entanglements most clearly is “The Idea of Order at Key West.”

The poem’s title is a first hint that the text strives toward a radical departure both from mimetic poetry and from the emphasis on perception noted in poems such as “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.” It contains no discernible object. Neither does it hint at sensuous activity. It is almost completely abstract. Yet there are symbolic overtones in the poem, and not even its abstract title is completely devoid of them. Key West is both part of Florida, a state that features repeatedly in Stevens’ works (in “Nomad Exquisite,” for instance) and a symbolic term. “Key” hints at a solution to the riddles in Stevens’ texts. It also evokes locking away and repression, a tendency observed in the anecdote poems. As a key to the West, Key West also becomes a synonym of Stevens’ attempt to write about the American self and to establish a specifically American view of culture, indeed an American poetic (of which poems such as “The American Sublime” are humorous evidence).

The “She” who by no means “walks beside the ocean” at the beginning of the poem, as Frank Dogget would have us believe (94), is therefore not necessarily a person. “She sang beyond the genius of the sea” (CP 128) could refer to the imagination or any other allegory as much as to a person. The position of the voice is also far from clear, since we have to deal with “the genius of the sea” rather than an identifiable ocean and the complication that the voice is located “beyond” it, which could mean distant and distinct from or even removed, detached, and potentially superior to it (Vendler 67–69). This last impression is supported by the equally cryptic second line “The water never formed to mind or voice.” It is tempting to read it with recent feminist positions concerning a fluid subject in mind (Kristeva, Cixous, and Irigaray). Yet the subject that fails to constitute itself via objects is that of all of Stevens’ poems, which leads to the interesting possibility of regarding his works as the expression of a feminine subjectivity.

The subject-object relation in the opening lines of “The Idea of Order at Key West” is at least two-sided (despite the programmatic singular of “Idea” in its title). Not merely does the subject fail to achieve coherence in

it; the object, the sea, also never fully achieves subject status, a “mind or voice.” The anonymous and female-identified voice, however, already possesses this subject status miraculously—or not so miraculously if one bears in mind Freud’s ideas concerning the symbolic solutions to subjective anxieties. As in Freud, the projection of anxieties takes place on the very foil that generates them: the body. The lines “Like a body wholly body, fluttering / Its empty sleeves” (CP 128) are interesting in many respects. This simultaneously present and absent body apparently belongs to the sea. The seemingly tautological doubling of “body” and “wholly body” introduces not only *ex negativo* the idea of a body that is exactly not whole, i.e., dismembered (Freud would offer “castrated”). It adds to the ambiguity a further one by punning on “wholly” and “holy.” The body that is not quite there (see “Its empty sleeves”) is also holy, i.e., charged with symbolic significance and power.

Still, this symbolic body is not so much a solution as part of the problem, or at least part of the process that Freud describes as a “rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on.” In the same way as the blackbird must fly in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” the body that has not formed to mind or voice nonetheless “Made constant cry” as well as “caused constantly a cry.” Active and passive are again interwoven; the body is the agent as well as the passive trigger of activity. Yet the cry it produces is instantly separated from the now miraculously present speaker who includes the reader in the plural “ours”: “That was not ours.” Despite the separation, understanding and recognition are apparently possible, another indication that knowledge precedes perception as much as it results from it. Despite the Emersonian distinction between self and non-self (“That was not ours”), the poem can claim “we understood.”

“The Idea of Order at Key West” represents a struggle between the imaginary and the symbolic, yet—in accordance with Julia Kristeva’s claims—it also realizes that it can depict this conflict only in an already symbolic form.<sup>5</sup> In Freudian terms, this conflict is again that between the pleasure principle, which in its ultimate refinement means the ultimate pleasurable fantasy of complete autonomy and self-generation of the subject, autopoiesis in short, and the reality principle. The twist here is that the reality principle, too, already possesses symbolic shape—as a poem. There are no objects present, only their signifiers. As much as subject becomes objectified, the object world becomes symbolic—and thus to a certain degree subjective. Adorno describes this tension in the following terms in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

Art works are things which tend to shed their thing-like quality. The aesthetic and the thing-like do not form distinct layers in a work of art; spirit is not superimposed on some supposedly solid objective basis. One of the key characteristics of works

of art is, on the contrary, their ability to undo their own reified shapes in such a way that reification becomes the medium of its own negation. The two things are mediated through each other. The spirit of art works evolves from their thing-likeness, and conversely their thing-likeness—i.e., their existence as works—springs from spirit. (AT 389)

Adorno's claims are the exact equivalent of Freud's conflict of pleasure principle and reality principle and Stevens' poetic conflation of perceiving subject and perceived objects. Adorno continues to emphasize the inextricable link between the two elements, one that not only produces works of art, but also challenges its constitutive elements:

One reason why works of art are things is that they *qua* autonomous objectifications are like an in-itself—a determined and fixed entity which is at rest—patterned after the world of empirical things. Objectification is brought about by the synthetic unity of spirit. Works become spiritual only by being thing-like; their spirit and their thing-likeness are products of their reciprocal relation. Their spirit which serves them as a means of transcendence also brings them death. Implicitly, they have had this mortal quality all along but it is the need for reflection that brings it out into the open. (AT 389–90)

The second stanza of "The Idea of Order at Key West" derives its complexity and obscurity from the negotiation of this (con)fusion. "The sea was not a mask. No more was she," its first line, seems to repudiate symbolic readings (the mask is probably a reference to Nietzsche). But if the reader expects mimetic, i.e., realist imagery as a result, he or she is in for a disappointment. The poem first tries to continue its artificial separation by negation, only to drift quickly into circularity and merger: "The song and water were not medleyed sound / Even if what she sang was what she heard." Perception and utterance are seemingly linked, and the former seems to precede the latter in a realist fashion. Yet this reading is rapidly undermined when the utterance becomes split (as was the perspective in "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"): "Since what she sang was uttered word by word" (CP 128–29).

The poetic subject (the singer) is translated into an impersonal utterance, a text, and as a result the subject becomes object. Objects indeed seem to take over in the following two lines: "It may be that in all her phrases stirred / The grinding water and the gasping wind" (CP 129). Following the complex subject-object entanglement observed above, a unilateral realist drift of the argument is impossible, and as a consequence a muddled, split, and dismembered subject closes off the stanza: "But it was she and not the sea we heard." Dismemberment is emphatically denied, but only at the price of turning the voice as the representation of subjectiv-

ity into a symbolic fetish (or spirit into thing in Adorno's terminology). This is where gender becomes important: the female body as a disembodied ("castrated") one serves as a fetish that ensures the dominance of idealized ("masculine") subjectivity.

This reading is only seemingly contradicted by the autopoietic image that opens the poem's third stanza: "For she was the maker of the song she sang." What could be the representation of an alternative subjectivity, feminine and autonomous, is quickly shown to be contained by a traditional masculine rationality that dreams it up as a fetish: "Whose spirit is this? we said, because we knew / It was the spirit that we sought and knew." The double emphasis on knowing is crucial. Yet the knowledge of the impersonal subject in Stevens' poems is always also an awareness of its anxieties and shortcomings, the threat of objectification that produces the repetition compulsion implicit in the question—and explicit in the stanza's final line, which presents anxiety as knowledge: "we should ask this often as she sang."

The struggle of knowledge that affirms both the subject and the awareness of its limitations structures the long irregular fourth stanza of "The Idea of Order at Key West." There a charm-like repetition conjures up the threat that the ultimately man-made symbol of the voice represents its own variant of the revenge of the objects. By pinpointing the poem's earlier assertions, its unidentified speaker now rationalizes as well as symbolizes this threat: "If it was only the dark voice of the sea. . . . If it was only the outer voice of sky. . . . But it was more than that." The threatening "more" is exactly the elevation of the voice above object status, a version of Hegelian *Aufhebung* that makes the fetish a threat rather than reassuring, an elevation that also disturbs the implicit gender hierarchies in the poem.

It was her voice that made  
The sky acutest at its vanishing.  
She measured to the hour its solitude.  
She was the single artificer of the world  
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,  
As we beheld her striding there alone,  
Knew that there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made. (CP 129–30)

That this complex section contains the nucleus of the poem's argument is indicated by its typographical semi-detachment from the stanza, the only such liberty in the poem and a rare one in Stevens' works. The section contains a shorthand formula of modernist autopoiesis in which world-making is ascribed to the utterance, here the song. Yet the real challenge of

the passage lies in that in it the autopoietic voice renounces its fetish status and assumes the potential hitherto reserved for the impersonal speaker. She measures and thereby usurps the knowledge that has so far contained her, and she also assumes the role of the single artificer.

One could challenge the last claim by recalling that singularity in Stevens can also act as a ploy (see the respective "eye" of blackbird and alligator). Although perspective is occasionally depicted in the singular only to be included in a list of views, labeling creation as singular is a daring statement concerning what is constantly present but rarely named in Stevens' text: art and artifice. The radical line "She was the single artificer of the world / In which she sang," however, refers not merely to the singularity of the position of the "she," but also to its exclusiveness. It excludes the "we," the plural speaker, who makes a weak appearance at the end of a long line that reaffirms autonomy: "That was her song, for she was the maker. Then, we. . . ." "[M]aker" is a loaded theological term, but wholly appropriate for the world creation that becomes the poem's image of autopoiesis or the triumph of the pleasure principle. Yet it also acknowledges in its construction that symbolizing the pleasure principle in a fetishized and feminized image separates it instantly from the fantasizing subject. Rather than healing the rift generated by the conflict of pleasure principle and reality principle, it is once again widened. What the plural speaker then "Knew" is merely "that there never was a world for her / Except the one she sang and, singing, made." This is affirmation masked as denial.

Since access to the pleasure principle is barred by the very symbolic means that make its visualization possible, the torn subject completes the separation (connect and cut again) and declares it to be there and not there at the same time. This paradox recalls the wholly empty body at the start of the poem. But it is also an emblem of the poem itself, and, one could go further, of all modernist poetry that celebrates and laments the absence at its core that it enlarges by trying to fill it.

"The Idea of Order at Key West" tries to present a brave face after its admission of separation and lack. By invoking the fictional Other "Ramon Fernandez," its impersonal speaker reaffirms what has been suspected all along, that the poem's impersonal "we" disguises a masculine subject that views (or hallucinates) the feminine voice as a fetish.<sup>6</sup> Suddenly in the singular, the speaker addresses Ramon Fernandez as a possibly ethnic other, yet also as a collaborator in an act of gender solidarity: "tell me, if you know. . . ." Knowledge is not an individual achievement, but social. This is yet another significant twist in the convoluted tale of perception, knowledge, and utterance. When the poem's penultimate stanza therefore uses its attempt at a masculine reaffirmation of rationality to signal a return to the reality principle (after significantly declaring "the singing ended"), its move is disingenuous. The trappings of realist imagery are in fact loaded with symbolic overtones once again, starting with "the glassy lights" and

concluding with the image of the “enchancing night” that reintroduces the magic of the voice that has just been abandoned.

The poem tries to fuse rationality and the poetic—and to elevate this fusion above (or beyond) the realm of the fetish by turning it more obviously into religion in its final stanza: “Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon, / The maker’s rage to order words of the sea.” Yet the religion it refers to is yet another fetish and one that is well known in poetry. The text fetishizes poetic creation. The rage is for ordering words, the maker poetic imagination, and the world of the poem (one that includes “Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred, / And of ourselves and of our origins”) indistinguishable from the words that produce it. Still the convenient tautology fails. There are leftovers, of anxiety and compulsion, in the poem’s conclusion. They are reminiscent of exactly the anxieties observed in earlier poems such as “Anecdote of the Jar.” When the poem speaks of order, it speaks of a “rage to order,” and its results are not knowledge and measure, but “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.” By trying to escape into its own textuality, the poem neither manages to leave behind (or outside) memories and traces of the past, of violence and guilt (the ghosts of texts and of psychoanalysis), nor does it manage to include and submerge the object world, whose presence within as well as outside the text’s words is indicated by “keener sounds.”

In “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu,” Stevens sums up the problems of the subject in his poetics. The meaning of farewell, the poem explains, is “Farewell in the eyes and farewell at the centre, / Just to stand still without moving a hand” (*CP* 127). Eyes and center represent elements that constitute phenomenology: sensory perception and rational demarcation of horizons, lines, and circles. But as the title already indicates through its repetition of “Adieu,” such a farewell is not really possible, nor is the standing still, of which its first stanza dreams, viable. The blackbird in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” had to fly, and in a similar way the phenomenological subject has to move on. The price it has to pay for the movement that makes it a subject in the first place is exactly the loss of definition and unity. The choice is between not becoming a subject and becoming a mutilated and split one as well as one that is painfully aware of its rifts—the “mortal quality” that, according to Adorno, reflection brings into the open. Baudrillard turns this failure of subjective constitution into success in his concept of seduction. There he writes in terms that could also characterize the fragile and self-destructive subjects of Stevens’ texts:

We seduce with our death, our vulnerability, and with the void that haunts us. The secret is to know how to play with death in the absence of a gaze or gesture, in the absence of knowledge or meaning.

Psychoanalysis tells us to assume our fragility and passivity, but in almost religious terms, turns them into a form of resig-

nation and acceptance in order to promote a well tempered psychic equilibrium. Seduction, by contrast, plays triumphantly with weakness, making a game of it, with its own rules. (*Seduction* 83)

“To be one’s singular self” in “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” is such a death wish fantasy that is aware of its eventual impossibility, and so is “never to say a word” (*CP* 127–28). What the subject in Stevens’ poetry endeavors when it seductively speaks its impossibility (or rather its only possibility as an impossibility) becomes explicit in “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” in a way that mirrors Baudrillard’s claims. The poem takes up once again the paradox of the subject-generating undertaking, the repetition compulsion that results from its effort, and—in a humorous vein that recalls the ambivalence of deadly threat and child’s play in “The Snow Man”—the very serious game “with its own rules” that results from it and whose name is poetry: “One likes to practice the thing.”

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Daniel R. Schwarz characterizes Stevens’ Aristotelianism in the following way:

Stevens, like Joyce, is also an Aristotelian who is impatient with the globalising answers of Christianity and the other versions of Platonist ideology that privilege a world beyond this one. Yet he is tempted by the possibility of an imaginative world coterminous with this one, a place to which the mind might escape; his poems, particularly the early ones which privilege art over life and belong to the Ivory Tower and Sacred Fount tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—point to such an imaginative place or state of mind, even as they enact the process of building that world. (20)

<sup>2</sup>I have explored this tendency in greater detail in *Modernism in Poetry*.

<sup>3</sup>For a general assessment of the role of objects in modernism see Douglas Mao.

<sup>4</sup>Gerald L. Bruns challenges the idea of epistemology in Stevens’ poetry in his essay “Stevens without Epistemology.” What his complex essay achieves is a deconstructive questioning of the truth-generating processes in Stevens’ writings, however, that affirms as much as denies them.

<sup>5</sup>See Julia Kristeva’s *Revolution in Poetic Language*, especially chapter 1, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic.”

<sup>6</sup>On the ambivalences of fetishism outside Freud’s narrow model, see Naomi Schor’s “Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand” and “Fetishism and Its Ironies.”

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## Poems

### Considerations

Even monkeys  
sometimes fall from trees,  
tickling morning clouds fleeing west.  
A solitary crow  
silently struggles east,  
as if life depends on it.  
Pelicans abandon  
shadows to a cement wall.  
A twilight breeze stirs the pages of a book.  
Spanish moss and oak leaves wiggle.

Ken Smith  
Old Chatham, N.Y.

### Twenty-Seven Below Zero

Weather brings  
a half sentence, frozen in air.  
A flicker of light shudders,  
then flies out of the sky.  
  
In the language of the familiar  
what was, no longer is.  
Reason has taken leave,  
pardoning itself for departing.  
  
An unexplored zeitgeist,  
this edge of comprehension  
trembles in the last gray latitude.  
Forgiveness comes late.  
  
Winter has brought  
nothing that was not  
already lost.

Harriet Susskind  
Pittsford, N.Y.

## Urban Idyll

Gas station streamers—  
Fringed grass skirts  
Hula in gray wind;

Swishing, swirling leaves  
Rustle limber trees—  
Banner springtime.

Jaded, winter scowls,  
Concrete looks angry,  
Green trees have died  
On this barren block.

But in that tired house  
Imagination lives quietly.

Marcus Smith  
San Francisco, Calif.

## Imaginary Knowledge

This is the short view: saved by some guy  
Who knew you in your prime, just as the lights  
Came on and the old woman read your mind  
And pinched you with her third eye. For now,

You're safe in the warm rain of summers past,  
In a time when a person could become an animal,  
And northern springs filled you with green liqueurs—  
Before the rich bought up all the best properties.

All this, and yet you long for real trees, real rain.  
So before the hero can confide in the doll who knew  
The secret of his lost love, you stop reading too.

This is not our way of knowing, they tell us.  
And we fear them, these cold drones  
In white coats who talk in baffling languages.

David Wyman  
Leominster, Mass.

## Reading Kafka on Sunday Morning

*The intelligence is part of the comedy of life.*  
—Wallace Stevens

I'm not saying that there aren't  
those odd Sundays when the wine  
really does become the very blood  
of all that I hold sacred,  
when the sweet bread breaks through  
the hard crust of daily life. . . .

Still, it's so much more fleeting,  
so bloody less predictable, than  
the secular solace of a great book.  
For one thing, culture has room  
for comedy—while most religions  
rely too heavily on tragedy.

Isn't the soul just a touch ironic,  
the deep intelligence part of the comedy  
of life on this pretty blue planet?  
And doesn't the spirit, like the mind,  
seek out the warm corners and good  
lighting of the familiar room?

Jeffrey Boldt  
Madison, Wis.

## Reviews

### Wallace Stevens: A Literary Life.

By Tony Sharpe. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.

Tony Sharpe's neat volume is a delightful addition to Stevens studies that will be much used for its concise yet comprehensive treatment of the man in his work and moment. It is the most recent in the series of Literary Lives under the general editorship of Richard Dutton. "This series," following the fly-leaf description, "offers stimulating accounts of the literary careers of the most admired and influential English-language authors. Volumes follow the outline of the writers' working lives, not in the spirit of traditional biography, but aiming to trace the professional, publishing and social contexts which shaped their writing." Indeed, Sharpe's carefully drawn portrait more than fulfills the expectations set up by this description. From his elegantly deft detailing against a rich background of fact emerges an accessible and astute sense of Stevens and his work, especially remarkable for its being more than adequately accomplished in 198 pages.

It is obvious from the ease with which Sharpe manages his material that he is not only a long-time inhabitant of the fluent mundo of the poet's imagination, one who understands how to read, what to do with the flickering meanings of Stevens' words and prosodic shifts, but also completely conversant with the body of Stevens scholarship to date and with all aspects of the American scene necessary to perceive, borrowing Raymond Williams' aptest term, the "structure of feeling" Stevens' work represents. It is as though Sharpe has elaborated what Stevens meant in saying that his only form of belief was *explication de texte*. Drawing gracefully from earlier studies whose arguments he extends with his deeply informed knowledge of literary, social, and political contexts, Sharpe is especially good at historicizing, in just a few lines, individual poems, volumes, and their particular cultural climates. One of the many excellent examples of this sort of thing is from the concluding paragraph of the chapter covering the years 1923–47, "From the Edge to the Centre":

And this, finally, may be what happened to Stevens in the 1930s, and what that highly politicised era accomplished for him. . . . The polarising debates of these years defined his artistic mission for him, as nothing in the previous decade had: he saw his role as poet to be that of resisting the constrictive forces brought to bear, by functioning as spokesman for the people who, he believed, needed more than the definitive ideologies on offer. The purpose of his poetry became precisely that of opposing itself to political or economic determinisms, by asserting a "world elsewhere" of imaginative transfiguration: the 1930s gave him the opportunity to assert his notions of poetry as a "slight" transcendence *within* rather than—as with *Harmonium*—in detachment from, a social context. The animating sense of his life, that poetry and econom-

ics were at odds, became a message of the relevant irrelevance of art that centralised it rather than marginalised it (nobody, after all, bothered to tell Crispin what sort of poems they wanted him to write). Out of this period, for better or worse, came Stevens's increasing concentration on notions of the poet as a kind of necessary hero and secular priest; and we would be justified in applying to the 1930s in general the comment Stevens made about his involvement with *New Masses*: "merely finding myself in that milieu was an extraordinarily stimulating thing" (L 296). (145–46)

In addition to being exquisitely informative, this kind of balanced, judicious, synoptic observation is perfectly suited to Stevens' manner and method.

Yet another indication of Sharpe's attunement to Stevens is his attention throughout to shaping phrases and sentences that appropriately and captivantly reflect the poet's sensibility. An instance of this comes in his delineation of the fine integration of Stevens the insurance lawyer and Stevens the poet: "The end product of this concern with paper realities is a man 'who comes almost to believe that he and his papers constitute a single creature, consisting principally of hands and eyes' (OP 239). Having brought this odd monster to birth, however, Stevens dismissed it as representing the truth; which, he insisted, was that the real 'human interest' of the situation lay in the humanity of the surety claims man himself" (147–48). Or this terse, piquant analysis, "A great deal of what is valuable in Stevens's poetry has to do with the ways in which behaviour becomes obedience to conventions which we weren't initially aware of; how the fresh becomes the stale and the living thing consents to die: one has one's jar and one's wilderness, and then something ominous seems to happen, as structure deadens the unaccountable in this coldest of pastorals" (51).

Although Sharpe's erudition is abundantly evident, another grace of this volume is that it is revealed quietly, unobtrusively adding a scholarly texture. After making a fine connection between Stevens' experience as a young man in the Canadian Rockies as recorded in his journal and the closing of "Sunday Morning," "In other words, deer walked upon the mountains, grouse were spontaneously plentiful, and sweet berries ripened in the wilderness" (47), he goes on to note that Stevens' sense of vastness, first felt crossing the Canadian prairies, was similarly experienced by T. E. Hulme. Along the way, as well, in the context of describing the growing appeal of Stevens' poetry, Sharpe provides an excellent practical analysis of the emergence of New Criticism. Similarly, but looking backwards, he is most astute in hearing, accurately to my mind, echoes of Emerson's "Experience" in many of the poems of *Ideas of Order*.

For those who have been immersed in Stevens for a long time, reading this well-tempered, sharp volume will prompt smiles of pleasure and nods of recognition. For those new to Stevens, it is the ideal introduction.

Joan Richardson  
The Graduate Center, CUNY

### Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order.

By Lee Margaret Jenkins. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2000.

*Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* presents a British perspective on Stevens, which author Lee M. Jenkins believes to be different from the American view. Discussing Stevens' work in the order of its composition, this book presents an overall look at Stevens that is more judgmental critically than most such overall looks—this too may be part of the attempt to distance this discussion from American assessments.

Of course, the issue immediately arises of whether there can really be a British/Irish Stevens that can be compared with the American Stevens. The plurality of assessments and perspectives here would suggest that there is no American Stevens, but rather different views generated by varying schools and perspectives, providing a Marxist view, a new historicist view, varied feminist views, and so forth. Since there is no agreement here, it seems unlikely there would be an identifiable, characteristically British Stevens. It is, of course, certainly possible to focus on British/Irish sources and analogues in an analysis, and this Jenkins does. The book also looks at Stevens' American geography from a British viewpoint, while it scrutinizes his mythologizing of places outside the United States.

The book is divided into five sections, each dealing with a segment of Stevens' writing life and the poems that were written during this time. The sections focus on particular concerns during the writing period, comment on how critics have generally interpreted these concerns, and provide alternative interpretations of them, often with a focus on figures from British or Irish literature or with reference to British philosophers or artists.

Perhaps the most interesting section is the analysis of Stevens' relationship with the poet Tom MacGreevy. (A portion of this discussion previously appeared in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, Fall 1994.) Stevens' preoccupation with the Irish poet has not previously been accorded extensive discussion, and this chapter is interesting for what it shows about MacGreevy's own poetry and for speculation about how MacGreevy functions in Stevens' mythology of place.

In an unpublished letter to MacGreevy, Stevens unequivocally celebrates the regional, when he states that "Whatever I have comes from Pennsylvania and Connecticut and from nowhere else. That to no doubt is why Ireland, green as it is, seems to me so much greener than it is, and why you seem to be the best of all my correspondents." In "Our Stars Come from Ireland," the topography of Stevens' own Pennsylvania boyhood is ghosted by that of MacGreevy in Co. Kerry, and yet set against this topographical specificity and against this paralleling of experience, is a curious elision of American Stevens and Irish MacGreevy into a composite figure. (102)

Stevens appears to have appropriated MacGreevy as a convenient symbol of his place, as he did others; MacGreevy seems to have been aware of Stevens' attitude, as (before they actually met) he commented, "Wallace Stevens was never in Ireland, I was never in America, so we became very good friends" (102). The mysticism in MacGreevy's poetry melds with Stevens' sense of Ireland and the Irish, to make MacGreevy the representative of an important place on Stevens' interior globe. Jenkins' study is interesting for the focus on MacGreevy in this relationship as she discusses what he meant to Stevens.

*Wallace Stevens: Rage for Order* is both an intriguing and a frustrating book. No hagiography, it finds awkward ambivalences and flaws throughout Stevens' work; some of this commentary will find a sympathetic response, even among readers whose final judgment of the poet may place him a good deal higher than Jenkins'. For instance, much has been said to explain Stevens' treatment of World War II, and some have even made of him a war poet. Jenkins I think rightly puts her finger on Stevens' "tension between epical ambition and defensive abstraction" (81) as he attempts to mediate poet-hero and war-hero in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." The "coda" to "Notes" simply does not, in how it figured in the composition and in Stevens' comments on it, function as the crux of the poem.

Other claims may be justified, but they are not really explored or defended. Has *Harmonium* been undervalued, as Jenkins suggests? Perhaps recent critics have done less with the earlier poems because they were so fully treated initially; certainly, anthologists do not neglect them, nor do university courses or graduate reading lists. But perhaps it is time to turn again to reappraise the *Harmonium* poems with the more complete information time has brought. It may turn out that they are less at variance with the later work than even Stevens would have thought. This book, however, says little about the *Harmonium* poems; it discusses the sexual verve of some of them and touches on their more obvious and fully discussed theme of sexual disappointment, but it does not demonstrate that they have been undervalued or that they should be read differently.

The chapter "Conclusion" is really another essay rather than a conclusion, in fact a discussion of the conclusion of Stevens' writing life. Part of it is an analysis of "The Rock" with reference to the later Yeats. Jenkins mediates between Frank Lentricchia, who suggests a strong analogy between the two, and Marjorie Perloff, who finds dissimilarities. It is easy to find Jenkins' comments in this section cogent without agreeing with her conclusions, which privilege Yeats.

Indeed, Stevens' temporary closures and retreats, his affirmations and fancy-footwork withdrawals, are seen in a more negative light by Jenkins than by others. For many readers—European as well as American—Stevens' adept avoidance of closure, his belief that the mind can never be satisfied, is one of his most attractive characteristics. That closure falsifies is axiomatic with Stevens; it is for this reason that his speculation is flexible enough to be used to support notions of chaos theory, process philosophy, new historicism, even radical Christianity.

The concluding section gives brief and thought-provoking comments on some of the last poems and also places Stevens within the American tradition, as it shuttles back and forth between poetics and Stevens' practice:

The liminal quality of Stevens' late poems may bring to mind, not Yeats, but Beckett and his obsession with liminal states. Beckett's postwar poetry, which shares with that of the late Stevens the climate of existentialism, is, as in "my way is in the sand flowing" from the late Forties, a "minimal landscape," often a room, "walled and roofed in." And yet, if Stevens' late poems, like Beckett's, are a "treading these long shifting thresholds," are the poems of a "Closed place," then these poems also signal an emergence from the closed world of his Forties poetics, and in so doing may indicate a break with that strain of modernism which privileges the autotelic artwork. (131)

This book makes use of a wide variety of sources and its notes are extensive and valuable. The indices seem incomplete; they do provide titles of works and names, but since the underlying premise makes much of Stevens as a poet of place, more subject headings are needed. Overall, the less-than-perfect Stevens who looks out from the pages of this book is an intriguing acquaintance.

Janet McCann  
Texas A&M University

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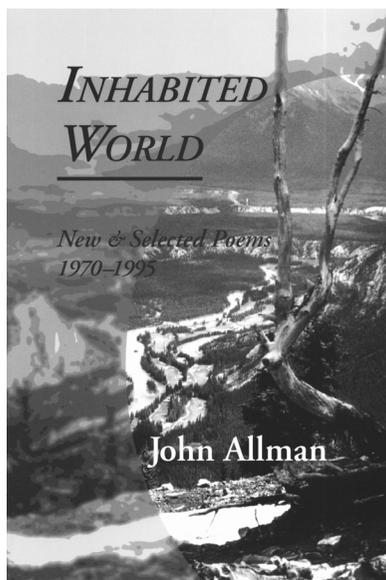
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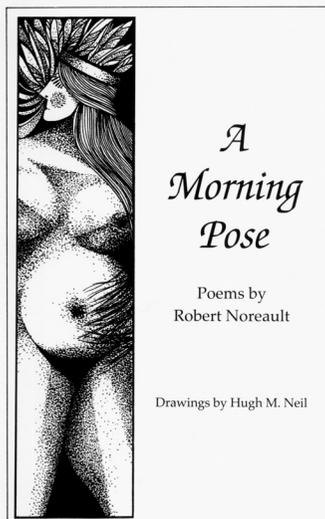


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