

The Wallace Stevens Journal

Volume 24 Number 2

Fall 2000

Special Issue: Stevens in Late 20th-Century Culture Edited by Angus Cleghorn

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The Wallace Stevens Journal is published biannually in the Spring and Fall by the Wallace Stevens Society, Inc. Administrative and editorial offices are located at Clarkson University, Box 5750, Potsdam, NY 13699. Phone: 315 268 3987; Fax: 315 268 7117; E-mail: serio@clarkson.edu; Web site: www.wallacestevens.com.

The subscription rate for individuals, both domestic and foreign, is \$25 for one year or \$45 for two years and includes membership in the Wallace Stevens Society. Rates for institutions are \$32 per year domestic and \$37 per year foreign. Back issues are available.

Manuscripts, subscriptions, and advertising should be addressed to the editor. Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and in Works Cited format. Word-processed manuscripts will not be returned. Authors of accepted manuscripts should furnish a nonreturnable disk copy.

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

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



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ISSN 0148-7132

Charles Baxter, August Kleinzahler, Adrienne Rich: Contemporary Stevensians and the Problem of "Other Lives"

STEPHEN BURT

THE LAST FEW YEARS have seen books called *The Death of Satan*, *The Nothing That Is*, and *Farewell to an Idea*; none of the three concerns modern poetry. Andrew Delbanco's, Robert Kaplan's, and T. J. Clark's titles testify to the breadth of Stevens' presence in nineties high culture.¹ Stevens' achievement is now accepted by senior poets whose work could not have seemed more distant from his in their youth: Robert Creeley's 1998 *Life & Death*, for example, includes a fantasia on lines from "Anecdote of the Jar" (5).² Although Stevens' influence seems broader than ever, it remains deep: few critics who praise Mark Strand or John Koethe neglect to mention their Stevensian roots. A. R. Ammons' latest long poem, *Glare*, brings "Mr. Stevens" in, by name, over and over.³ John Ashbery's debts to Stevens have already been well traced: his recent *Wakefulness*, from its title (drawn from "Long and Sluggish Lines") forward, represents his saddest, most sustained engagement with the poetry of clarity and mortality in *The Rock*.⁴

A particular *kind* of Stevens poem has provided foundations and resources for some poets whose uses of Stevens are less well known; these uses, in turn, can shed new light on him. The kind of poem I mean is the poem of the empty landscape—the poem, usually, of a specifically American deprivation and impoverishment. It is a kind of poem that seems more central to Stevens' *oeuvre* the more we regard him (following Helen Vendler) as "a poet of human misery," of " 'Desire without an object of desire' " (*Words* 10–11). In this kind of poem, Stevens sees a town center where "The men have no shadows / And the women have only one side" (*CP* 221), or unpromising fields, where "Frost is in the stubble" (*CP* 208), "The leaves are dry" (*CP* 293), and only a crow, bright with malice, returns his gaze: the poem is prompted by the absence of "the romantic" in such a scene, the absence both of fruitful symbols, and of a perceiver who might share Stevens' wish to see them.⁵

This kind of poem exists in both rural and urban varieties. It begins with "The Public Square" in *Harmonium* and comes into its own in *Ideas of Order* and *Parts of a World* with "Sailing After Lunch," "The American Sublime," "Loneliness in Jersey City," "The Common Life," "No Possum, No

Sop, No Taters," and "The Dwarf," among others. All these poems might be described by phrases in Stevens' posthumously published "From Pieces of Paper": they are poems of "American Poverty" or of "A Spirit Without A City In A City Without A soul" (Lensing 181, 167). Their category feeds into the later, major lyrics of loneliness, metaphysical deprivation, and final reduction, such as "The Plain Sense of Things"; of the long poems, it impinges most on "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven."

The Stevens of these poems informs the three later poets I discuss here: Charles Baxter, August Kleinzahler, and (at greater length) Adrienne Rich. Randall Jarrell famously disliked *The Auroras of Autumn* for its "lack of immediate contact with lives" (Age 130); it is this lack that these later poets wish to remedy. Each revises Stevens' poems of American deprivation by infusing them with historical particulars and by trying to bring in the perspectives of precisely the other people Stevens fails to reach. Charles Baxter uses Stevens' symbols to describe other people's lonely lives. August Kleinzahler imagines himself at once amid Stevensian tropes and among other lives. And Adrienne Rich connects Stevens' remoteness from individuals to the remoteness from "society" that he also found and described in himself. The mature Stevens, as his poems describe him, was not naturally or happily social; as the penultimate section of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" has it,

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)

Some of Stevens' other poems of American deprivation anticipate the ways in which later poets reacted to that "absence," to the removal from "people" Stevens' critics have also described. In their admiring quarrels with Stevens' poetry of American deprivation, Baxter, Kleinzahler, and especially Rich can help us interpret and appreciate Stevens' late quarrels with himself.

The poems in Baxter's *Imaginary Paintings* sometimes conceive of entire life stories in terms of the needs and absences Stevens describes. We have only to reread "The Dwarf" to recognize the source of Baxter's couplets in "Sorrow":

There might be sun but, yes, it's gone, and the dew

is freezing so that grasses scrape their blades
together, a sclerotic sound. A sparrow pecks

at birdbath ice, then calls: a frozen melody iced
in frozen air. Sister word of "weary,"

sorrow separates the lovers' flesh with snow. . . . (IP 11)

As Stevens would, Baxter specifies the month, then cannot imagine progress from this chilly season to later renewal: "no one has a clue why it's November / all this year."

Baxter's more complex reworkings of Stevens add narrative time to scenes Stevens leaves static. The unpromising flatness of the public squares and rectilinear factories in "The Common Life" seem to Baxter to characterize his own Michigan landscape: yet Baxter's "Midwestern Poetics" takes off from that flatness and imagines, there, a generic biography. In Baxter's Midwest

The unpromising meets the unexotic,
and we are home again, alone,
with this image of the possible:
these hills that anyone can climb,
the lowlands, reeds perched with red-wing
blackbirds, leading painlessly
to cemeteries and small towns
where voices are subdued and have no region. (*IP* 20)

Baxter's sentences meander within the bounds of familiar diction ("unpromising" is the longest word in the stanza) as if to mime the Midwest's lack of resources, what Baxter would later dub (in a discussion of novelist and photographer Wright Morris) "a specific kind of American emptiness, an emptiness filled with things and pragmatism and people" (*Burning* 237). After another stanza of nonevents,

It's not that something has to happen.
A man writes a letter to himself
and excludes the absolute: he is four seasons,
paths in third-growth woods, nature
that is endlessly familiar. (*IP* 20)

The absence of the absolute, the lack of wildness in nature, looks like and stands for the absence of the erotic: if, as Stevens' "Arrival at the Waldorf" has it, "the wild poem is a substitute / For the woman one loves or ought to love" (*CP* 241), then Baxter's Midwest excludes a wilder poetry just as it seems to exclude erotic love.

What makes Baxter's "Midwestern Poetics" more than derivative are the ways he succeeds in imagining whole lives lived out amid these unpromising flatnesses. Baxter answers Stevens by reminding him that life-events, even marriages—however predicated on resignations—*do* take place in this unromantic Midwest. Stevens considered such life-events, such settlings-down, in the final sections of "The Comedian as the Letter C"; the residents of Baxter's Michigan lead Crispin's resigned life, without even Crispin's remembered voyages—they, too, resign themselves to

their biographies, to “plain and common things,” learning to live with the unexotic unerotic:

No horsemen raging down the mountains
flying banners, no vipers, just this and that
that could be anywhere but happen to be here.
The children grow up calm: they learn
about psychotic tantrums like tornadoes.
They plan. There is time, and more time
and more time after that to learn to love
the mild gifts—these apple trees, those
sparrows—in this marriage with a woman
who knows you, but will not kiss you back. (*IP* 21)

Baxter is now far better known for his prose fiction; he seems to me among the best, and perhaps the least known, of several poets who recast Stevens’ poems of American emptiness by giving them narrative shapes.

August Kleinzahler has produced, from the same Stevensian material, much odder results. Vendler asserts that Kleinzahler gets his poetics “from the unlikely combination of Ammons and Stevens” (*Soul* 152); other readers have adduced Frank O’Hara. Kleinzahler’s *Green Sees Things in Waves* filters Stevens’ epistemological and emotional concerns through O’Hara’s antiteleological gregariousness.⁶ Kleinzahler’s poem called “Sunday Morning” is as offhand as Stevens’ poem is stately: Kleinzahler’s begins “How oddly content, these dogs of the homeless,” and barely concerns religion. The secularization of the transcendent to which Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” looked forward has in Kleinzahler been achieved, so that his “Sunday Morning” imagines the sufficiencies of worldly companionship for even the most materially impoverished human beings: “All of his pleasure, all that’s left of love— / ridiculous, tragic, 45 lbs. of snoring dog” (48).

When Kleinzahler engages Stevens at greater length, what he engages are the poems of American deprivation, the ones that react to “a most unpropitious place.” Those are of course words from “Sailing After Lunch,” whose ever-receding “romantic” vista the self can project only by “expung[ing] all people” and sailing away from everyone else, leaving the deprived and populated scene behind (*CP* 121, 120). In “Napping After Lunch,” Kleinzahler falls asleep and dreams of sailing up a populated coast. The sailboat of “Napping After Lunch” is propelled by precisely what the Stevens of “Sailing After Lunch” rejects, the details of unromantic, inhabited, American places. Asleep, with “a breeze in the curtains,” Kleinzahler glimpses

so many towns
unseen at first then bend after bend revealed
the distant slap and creaking of tackle

the great cedar and the fountain's plashing
 I recall, don't you
 say so, say you do
 the bays, the teeming estuaries
 say to me how possibility's everywhere welcome. . . .
 (45)

Stevens' stanzaic organization permits—and, in "Sailing After Lunch," insists on—a division of time and experience into zones of stagnation and zones of mobility and freedom; Kleinzahler's looser strophic organization and his drifts of noun-phrases suggest the continuities between waking and sleeping, sessile and motile, and (most important) others' consciousnesses and Kleinzahler's own. The unmoored, befriended sleeper, the radio in the next room "adrift like a dinghy," seeks no epiphany but "possibility": he can be happy, as Stevens cannot, while the places he sees still fill his field of view, since their small scale connotes not a flatness or emptiness but a set of human-scale resources.

This is a difference between familiar ways of thinking about Jersey City or Hartford, on the one hand, and the San Francisco Bay area, where Kleinzahler lives, on the other; but it is also a choice among phases of Stevens, since Kleinzahler begins in the mode of "Sailing After Lunch" and ends in the quietly optimistic expansiveness of a later Stevens poem about sailing and napping, "Prologues to What Is Possible." When Kleinzahler ends "Napping After Lunch" by encountering—in his dream-boat—the details of other people's music and speech,

the fading steel guitar
 what sounds like Veronica's pattymelt song
 then clearly, the wind chimes on Nana's porch
 a clap of thunder
 and at last long last host upon host of mummers (45–46),

he seems to endorse and instantiate Stevens' guess that

between himself
 And things beyond resemblance there was this and that
 intended to be recognized,
 The this and that in the enclosures of hypotheses
 On which men speculated in summer when they were
 half asleep. (*CP* 516)

For Stevens' hypothesized "this and that" Kleinzahler fills in the overheard, guessed-at sounds of Nana and Veronica. Kleinzahler chooses to resolve the dilemma of "Sailing After Lunch"—how can one find "the romantic" among contemporary people?—not with that poem's own fast escape, but with the openness to minims of perception and experience that "Prologues to What Is Possible" describes.

Kleinzahler finds such openness harder to sustain in New England. In "Late Autumn Afternoons" it is "October, November . . . the beech tree bare now"; "across the river" stands a "broken-up city," perhaps Bridgeport, Connecticut: "a used-to-be-textile port, gutted" (76). Time of year, time of day, river and city all suggest American resourcelessness, a landscape in which "the romantic" cannot be found: Kleinzahler and his companion have toured the power plant, seen

the flame
through the thick glass, deep in the steel.
And then we went back into the wind,
past the Nightingale Metals truck
and across the bridge on foot. No one saw.
No one knows. The eyes of the beech. (76-77)

The poem of America's lack of nightingales (we have only Nightingale Metals), of American symbolic poverty, of actual, social poverty ("broken-up" Bridgeport), and of late autumn, where the orange flame of nature no longer warms anyone, make—for Kleinzahler as for Stevens—one aesthetic construct.⁷ We might recall, reading "Late Autumn Afternoons," the September of "The Dwarf," the "city slapped up like a chest of tools" of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" XVIII, or the later autumn of "The Green Plant," where "Otu-bre's lion-roses have turned to paper," and

The effete vocabulary of summer
No longer says anything.
The brown at the bottom of red
The orange far down in yellow,

Are falsifications from a sun
In a mirror, without heat,
In a constant secondariness,
A turning down toward finality—. . . (CP 506)

Stevens defers from that poem's "orange far down in yellow . . . without heat" to a bright green plant elsewhere, a "harsh" and "barbarous" resurgent nature. Kleinzahler does not change the scene this way: his insistence—carried over from "Napping After Lunch"—on continuities between his experience and other people's means that he cannot.

If (like Baxter) Kleinzahler wishes to put into Stevens' frames more of the literal, historical world we share with other people, in "Late Autumn Afternoons" that very attraction to the literal world ends in confinement. Kleinzahler's ordinary afternoons, where "the last leaf that is going to fall has fallen," yield no new scene—

We have examined these afternoons
like a slide taken from a petri dish,

spindles of living matter, degraded, fraying,
taking on new shapes, gray, opalescent.
The red lights in the distance, blinking.
The roar in the boiler house.
The drawn shades. (77)

Not even a dust traverses these shades. The consciously post-Stevensian poet, who ties his happiness and his sources of power more closely than Stevens did to particular places, people, and events, finds himself at their mercy: when they seem to shut down, so does he.

Adrienne Rich presents the most complex case of the patterns already traced in Baxter and Kleinzahler, which we might call the resocialization of Stevensian poetics. Even more than those other poets, Rich insists on bringing Stevens' own models and terms into contact with what she views as other people's experience.⁸ Stevens commands more entries in Rich's 1994 *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* than any other author. Rich writes, "Of the modern poets I read in my twenties, Stevens was the liberator," and she holds up "Dry Loaf" and "The Dwarf" as paragons of his achievement (*What* 201). David Bromwich wrote, in an insightful but hostile review of Rich's *Notebooks*, "One must have read a good many commentaries on Stevens, including appreciations by other poets, to see how uncommon these choices are, and how much they tell about Rich" (36). "Dry Loaf" presents especially striking parallels to Rich's own work, tying a beaten and harsh "tragic land," with its "sloping, mountainous rocks," to "the hovels of those that live in this land" (*CP* 199). Symbolic poverty and actual poor people stand for each other; their congruence provokes the poem, which ends when the wind becomes the cry of "the hungry," with "soldiers . . . marching," and "drums . . . rolling" (*CP* 200), as if for the Bonus March of 1932.

Rich's notebook entry concludes in a tendentious if strongly felt attempt to make Stevens' use of racially charged terms such as "darkies" "a key to the whole" of his work (*What* 205). It is hard to imagine the lock that would fit such a key, and Bromwich dismisses the idea. For more complex and rewarding dealings with Stevens, we can follow the "vein of sharp realism wrung out almost to drabness" (Bromwich 36) of "The Dwarf" into Rich's own late poems, her own efforts at (as she puts it) "shedding any predictable music" to "force you to hear music of [her] own" (*What* 201). In "Sunset, December 1993," Rich looks out from a boat in a cold climate—"It could freeze tonight"; "Dangerous," she decides, "to draw [historical] parallels," but

more dangerous to write

as if there were a steady course, we and our poems
protected: the individual life, protected

poems, ideas, gliding
in mid-air, innocent. . . . (*Dark* 29)

Readers aware of Rich's engagement with Stevens might well tie her boats to his: her winter season and her "course" answer the best known "course" in Stevens, "The Course of a Particular." Rich is concerned to make any life, any poem, not only aerial but grounded, to insist *against* Stevens' stark lyric that any cry we can hear must concern us, must be a "human cry" (*OP* 123).

Rich's "Late Ghazal" ("late" because she wrote ghazals thirty years earlier) makes the same argument much more insistently. "Late Ghazal" surveys Rich's career much as "As You Leave the Room" reprises Stevens'. This poem of a winter morning, of "cold and earliness" ("An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" XXII), nearly quotes Stevens for the space of entire lines:

Do you remember the strands that ran from eye to eye?
The tongue that reached everywhere, speaking all the
parts?

Everything there was cast in an image of desire.
The imagination's cry is a sexual cry. (*Dark* 43)

Rich's "cry"—uttered amid "First rains of the winter," at "morning's smallest hour," has to be the quintessentially Stevensian "cry" of the leaves in "The Snow Man," the "impassioned cry" of "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" VIII, the cry in "The Course of a Particular" that "at last . . . concerns no one at all" (*OP* 124). As always, Rich is concerned to reconnect Stevens' poetics to the other people whom she considers him to have left out, and whom she associates (as Jarrell also did) with the physical: after that sexual cry, she writes, "I took my body anyplace with me" (*Dark* 43).

Rich's 1989 *Time's Power* seems especially rich in Stevensian echoes: where (for example) in "The Dwarf" "Frost is in the stubble" (*CP* 208), in Rich's "Harper's Ferry" "the frost-star / hangs in the stubble" (*Time* 40); where Stevens remarks of his "Interior Paramour" "How high that highest candle lights the dark" (*CP* 524), Rich portrays herself snuffing out the "candles / of pure theory" (*Time* 45). The volume's most sustained negotiation with Stevens, the twelve-part poem "The Desert as Garden of Paradise," extrapolates from his hardened and unresponsive American landscapes to the apparently harder, less responsive, more "vacant" and "final" landscape of the Mojave desert. That desert is like "the real," the "leafless," "rainless land" appealed to in "Dry Loaf" and later in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" as an unreachable place of unglossed, uninterpreted facts, a place hostile to "the romantic." Rich takes that landscape as a proof-by-least-likely-case of her usual thesis that any symbol

can be made fruitful once it is grounded, tied to *others'* experience, and thus given an ethical meaning:

Desert says: What you believe
I can prove. I: amaranth flower,
I: metamorphic rock, I: burrow,
I: water-drop in tilted catchment,
I: vulture, I: driest thorn. (*Time 25*)

This Southwestern desert looks devoid of animation (as empty as Stevens' frozen fields) but only because its characteristic forms of life are well concealed or unobvious—xerophytes and burrowing animals. The desert's forbidding appearance, Rich suggests, keeps its knowledge and power out of places like New Haven, where interpreters might appropriate it: "Guard the knowledge / from the knowledgeable, / those who gobble," Rich advises, "make it unpalatable" (*Time 25*).

The dryer and harder a place, the less attractive it is to naïve aestheticization, and the fewer comforts it seems to provide, the more Rich can make it her own symbol for ethical connection. She reaches that connection, in parts 2 and 3, via historical and social narrative, invoking the Mexican singer Chavela Vargas and the controversial La Malinche, the Aztec companion or slave of Cortez, whom Chicano activists of the 1970s excoriated.⁹ The symbolic mode returns in part 4, where the plants of the desert have to make do with deprivation:

Every drought-resistant plant has its own story
each had to learn to live
with less and less water, each would have loved

to laze in long soft rains, in the quiet drip
after the thunderstorm
each could do without deprivation

but where drought is the epic then there must be some
who persist, not by species-betrayal
but by changing themselves

minutely, by a constant study
of the price of continuity
a steady bargain with the way things are. . . . (*Time 27*)

The plants that adapt to the desert suggest for Rich a way of thinking about La Malinche. (They survive without hurting their own kind; could she?) The succulents' problem is also Stevensian: it is, in Vendler's words, "the recurrence of desire even in the absence of the romantic, even in the absence of a secure place, whether in the past or in the present, in this world" (*Words 9*). It is Rich's solution that deviates from the patterns of

imaginative negotiation in the later Stevens, since the adaptable cacti and other desert plants in Rich learn to “persist” by minute attention to their external circumstances—by a kind of social engagement.

In later sections, the desert comes to stand for mortality, prompting Rich to ask, “What would it mean to think / you are part of a generation / that simply must pass on?” (*Time* 29). Stevens asked that question in “A Postcard from the Volcano”: how are we to accommodate the fact that “Children picking up our bones / Will never know” us? (*CP* 158). For the Stevens of that poem, “we” affected or created “The look of things”: our legends will belong to our descendants even if they do not know that we wrote them. Rich’s historical excursions entertain this view (as does a later vision of “carnivores’ bones”), but for her this is the wrong kind of social connection, extending across time rather than over space, and failing to prompt us to *do* anything now (*Time* 30). For Stevens in another mood, too, even the posthumous voice of “A Postcard from the Volcano” represented an overly optimistic way of thinking about human making, since some part of experience—identified with a dried-out, wintry landscape—will remain intractable to art: “The look of things” in such a flat empty place can be expressed, as he says in “No Possum, No Sop, No Taters,” only by “a syllable” that is “The savagest hollow of winter-sound.” Such an utterance causes us to fall back on the ethical: “It is here, in this bad, that we reach / The last purity of the knowledge of good” (*CP* 294).

A landscape seemingly intractable to art, a landscape entirely dry or entirely frozen, can cause us to turn from contemplating it toward deciding what we ought to *do*, away from the ostensibly self-completing aesthetic, toward the ineluctably ethical. This insight (anticipated, but never dwelt on, in “No Possum”) causes “The Desert as Garden of Paradise” to turn from its Spanish, Christian, Aztec, and Jewish legends and stories (which once gave meaning and shape to deserts) to Rich’s proposed project of living and acting without such inherited legends. Near the poem’s close, in section 11, Rich proposes to orient herself instead by means of the present and future she shares with others:

When it all stands clear you come to love
the place you are:
the bundle of bare sticks soaked
with resin
always, and never, a bush on fire
the blue sky without tale or text
and without meaning
the great swing of the horizontal circle
Miriam, Aaron, Moses
are somewhere else, marching
You learn to live without prophets
without legends

to live just where you are
your burning bush, your seven-branched candlestick
the ocotillo in bloom. . . . (*Time* 30)

Now this project of disbelief, of confrontation with an ostensibly unmediated reality in an inhospitable, infertile place, is the project of confronting the towns in "The American Sublime" and the fields in "No Possum, No Sop, No Taters" and in "The Dwarf" and in many other Stevens poems (perhaps even "The Snow Man"). Stevens' latest versions of such projects often end in a complex compromise in which the mind, the symbol-making observer, realizes that it can alter the terms it imposes, but that it cannot impose no terms at all, since even "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (*CP* 503). Rich's revision of that Stevensian theme attempts to make the imagination with which the desert is seen, the imagination with which the dry place is confronted, *social*, shared, and therefore grounded in ethics. "To live / in the desert" for Rich must mean not only to have the right attitude toward one's own experience, but also to leave "something / to hand on to the children / to take up to the Land" (*Time* 29). Replacing the burning bush and the ancient menorah, the local flora at the end of the poem will give Rich not just a sense of place, or of reality, but a direction for future praxis. What I have just called Rich's revision of Stevens—what her poems announce as one—has striking parallels in the Stevens poems Rich most admires. The Stevens of "Dry Loaf" had endorsed some of his own time's projects of political solidarity, but stood off from them rather than joining their marchers:

[I]t 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)

Rich takes, unwillingly, a surprisingly similar position: although her "you" wishes to be a plural you and associates itself with ancient Jews's "marching" and with later migrants, in the end she cannot bring herself to share their beliefs.¹⁰

All three poets' attempts to resocialize Stevens—to bring his terms and forms to a social world—can help us read Stevens' own poems about his distance from others. Jarrell and more recently Mark Halliday worry about Stevens' lack of contact with "other lives": Halliday's now well known volume argues that Stevens "largely tries to ignore or deny all aspects of life that center on or are inseparable from interpersonal relations" (3). Other readers attack his supposed distance from day-to-day politics and society.¹¹ Vernon Shetley once described a poem by another poet as a response to "The Man on the Dump," "restoring the social and economic contexts that Stevens veils" (177).¹² This is a common sentiment, and an unfair one, because it suggests that Stevens' poem manifests a willful veiling or ob-

scuring rather than an involuntary emotive remoteness or a problem the poet himself wants to pose. It would be more useful, and more just, to follow Vendler and others—most recently John Dolan and Douglas Mao—in seeing Stevens' remoteness as one of his subjects, a "problem" that animates rather than limits the poems.¹³ But the feeling that Stevens might give poets ideal models if only he could be made socially relevant—or, to put it another way, that to render Stevens socially relevant makes an ideal challenge for mature poets—is nonetheless a feeling poets can have; Rich has certainly felt this way.¹⁴

The insight Rich in particular can help us attain is that Stevens' sometimes feeling of chilly and involuntary isolation from other individuals and his sense of remoteness from social groups and their causes may be not two difficulties but one: a problem of too much remove from the ways in which people relate to one another, whether one to one or in larger groups.¹⁵ Stevens examined that problem in *Ideas of Order* and again in short poems from the last several years of his life. There the same Stevens who tended to see American, inhabited places as barren and infertile sometimes advised himself to seek precisely the "return to people" these contemporary poets enact. Stevens sought this return in the marching, hungry armies of "Dry Loaf," in the complex social negotiations of "Owl's Clover" (a poem notably fertile for recent critics), and in other, later, work.¹⁶

James Longenbach writes that "throughout *Ideas of Order* the [aestheticist and autarchic] world of Hoon is rejected . . . for a collective or social vision that protects us from the Snow Man's utterly inhuman existence" (154).¹⁷ But Stevens considers that vision almost as he considers the sublimely natural eagle he asks "Some Friends from Pascagoula" to describe: he can partake of it only vicariously (*CP* 126).¹⁸ Just as Stevens can admire the eagle he did not see, so he can admire, and long for, kinds of interpersonal or micro-social connections he cannot share. Stevens' intense awareness of what he is missing, his desire alternately to lament isolation and to live in it, create the "dialectic" Dolan has recently found in the late poems, a dialectic that, once recognized, makes Halliday's take on these matters seem insensitive.¹⁹

Although this felt distance from local belongingness—this withdrawal from people in small groups—has usually (and rightly) been taken as part of Stevens' own temperament, we might also consider such isolation symptomatically American. Alexis de Tocqueville believed that Americans typically lacked intermediary loyalties, small groups by which to define themselves: "Each citizen of a democracy," de Tocqueville wrote, "generally spends his time considering the interests of a very insignificant person, namely himself. If he ever does raise his eyes higher, he sees nothing but the huge apparition of society or the even larger form of the human race" (488).²⁰ The lack of psychologically credible mediating categories makes de Tocqueville's Americans either "bombastic" or lonely. Whitman's extroverted catalogue poems such as "A Song for Occupations," with their

long, enthused lists of kinds of persons, can be read as attempts to help build and strengthen precisely such mediating categories. What for de Tocqueville (and Whitman) was a general American problem becomes in Stevens a problem of personal temperament. Other sorts of Americans might feel at home in their families, towns, occupations, but can Stevens? (Can Stevens' sort of poet?)

A problem about isolated American people thus works itself out in poems on American places. "Adagia" declares with alarming simplicity "Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble" (*OP* 185).²¹ "Wild Ducks, People and Distances," from *Transport to Summer*, is one of the few late poems to describe a place in terms of its people, rather than the other way around. The poem begins with the generic "he" (standing in for "I") that marks so many of Stevens' late lyrics:

The life of the world depends on that he is
Alive, on that people are alive, on that
There is village and village of them, without regard
To that be-misted one and apart from her. (*CP* 328)

The "be-misted one" is perhaps a mountain beyond the villages, perhaps a missing or mysterious former lover, perhaps even death. Certainly she is an Absolute of some sort, and the villages full of villagers provide the intermediary concerns and affiliations that—here as in de Tocqueville—prevent too stark a confrontation between the single man and the Absolute.

But where will the poem go from here? Rich or Baxter or Kleinzahler might move on to investigate the villages, their surroundings, their needs, or the distinctions among them. The life of such a poem would consist in its ability to inhabit the lives of the villagers. (Such a poem might be, in fact, a "Midwestern Poetics.") "Wild Ducks, People and Distances" gets its own distinctive subject from its failure to inhabit the villagers' lives, and from the turn inward and upward Stevens performs instead. The poem asks—in its only one-line sentence—"Did we expect to live in other lives?" If we ever did, we have been mistaken:

We grew used so soon, too soon, to earth itself,
As an element; to the sky, as an element.
People might share but were never an element,

Like earth and sky. Then he became nothing else
And they were nothing else. It was late in the year.
The wild ducks were enveloped. The weather was cold.
Yet, under the migrations to solitude,

There remained the smoke of the villages. Their fire
Was central in distances the wild ducks could

Not span, without any weather at all, except
The weather of other lives, from which there could

Be no migrating. It was that they were there
That held the distances off: the villages
Held off the final, fatal distances,
Between us and the place in which we stood.

(CP 328–29)

Not quite a stanza on its own (and switching uneasily from “he” to “we”), the final sentence describes a mind or minds not quite satisfied with their position, accommodating uneasily their separateness from the communities in their locale. Almost the only critic to address “Wild Ducks,” Halliday finds in the villages only “a bleak and chilly value,” since “we” cannot live in them after all (83). He discounts, I think, a contrapuntal, nostalgic wish to be able to live in their warmth—if only other people and their groups *could* share our inward dramas of attention! But usually—in life as in Stevens—they cannot. For Stevens, “our” consciousness can no more remain in the villages—can no more remain with “other lives”—than wild ducks can fail to migrate come winter. “We” depend on other persons and the groups they form not as we depend on “elements,” but as intermediary categories—more fixed and longer lasting than a single human psyche, but less so than “earth” and “sky.”

Stevens returned to the “other people” and their groups in the 1950 poem “Americana.” Here a man on a hill tries to imagine its “first soothsayers”—perhaps Native Americans, perhaps early American preachers (OP 121). The four stanzas that follow, enclosed by parentheses, imagine the danger of identifying so vividly with other people in groups that one becomes a reflection of the group, losing a separable, interior self.²² The man on the hill and the dead soothsayers, Stevens says, are luckily

(Remote from the deadly general of men,
The over-populace of the idea, the voices
Hard to be told from thoughts, the repeated drone

Of other lives becoming a total drone,
A sense separate that receives and holds the rest,
That which is human and yet final, like

A man that looks at himself in a glass and finds
It is the man in the glass that lives, not he.
He is the image, the second, the unreal,

The abstraction. He inhabits another man,
Other men, and not this grass, this valid air.
He is not himself. He is vitally deprived . . .)

These things he thinks of, as the buckskin hoop-la,
In a returning, a seeming of return,
Flaunts that first fortune, which he wanted so much.
(*OP* 121)

A man overcome by the "total drone" of "other lives" is a man absorbed into a group of people and its perhaps militant or militaristic cause (a "general of men" being both an abstract classification and a military man). He has lost the relation to earth and air that in "Wild Ducks" separated "us" from the villages and has in consequence lost his sense of himself, been "deprived" of his own sensibility. (Bromwich comes close to claiming this has happened to Rich.) But a man who stands alone "on the side of a hill" in reverie will continue to yearn for just such connections to "other lives" as Stevens has already warned against.²³ David Kalstone has described Rich's "ardor for a knowledge of human relationship": her "language," he writes, "yearns for contact at the same time as it takes account of the dangers of those yearnings" (169, 168). His phrases—with a change of emphasis—might describe "Americana" too.

One of Stevens' last poems of American deprivation, "Americana" recapitulates Stevens' quarrel with himself about the worth and place of "the interpersonal," the quarrel Dolan sees in other late poems. It reexamines, also, the link between "the interpersonal" and social belonging that Rich sees elsewhere in Stevens. Here, finally, is a critique (a romantic critique, we might say) of the poets who, after and unlike Stevens, find themselves making their identifications with other people a primary basis for lyric. Could it be they, and not he, who have chosen an "unreal . . . abstraction"?

Stevens' late poems deal in careful and complex ways with the questions of resocialization his contemporary inheritors have explored. What Stevens' treatments of these questions share—and what distinguishes him from those inheritors—is his "failure" finally to close the distance between himself and others that the poems I have been discussing explore. (The scare quotes here signal that such "failure" by no means renders the poems aesthetic or intellectual failures. A poem such as "Wild Ducks," which contemplates distance from others, and poems such as "Late Ghazal" and "Late Autumn Afternoons," which try to close up that distance, are simply different sorts of aesthetic successes.) Often in Stevens (as in "Dry Loaf" and "Wild Ducks") resocialization is something to be desired but not achieved within the poem. Sometimes (as in "Americana") resocialization seems at first desirable but turns out to be a temptation Stevens wants to resist. Still other poems look forward to other situations (such as the "heavy nights" of "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery"), or other verbal agents (such as the "Angel" discussed below) who will accomplish the social engagements Stevens can only contemplate.

Baxter, Kleinzahler, and Rich all become, in their own ways, such agents. Baxter imagines other people's lives in his Stevensian Midwest. Kleinzahler finds himself happily or unhappily unable to disassociate himself from other people's experience of the surroundings he shares with them. And Rich discovers in her desert places not just a "new knowledge of reality" but an ethically freighted connection with others, even though she cannot share their inherited metaphysics.

Within Stevens' oeuvre, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" stands among the most hopeful treatments of "resocialization"; it comes closest in its declared aspirations (one might say its theory) to the programs Rich and others put into practice. That poem, with its earthly (and European) "*countrymen*," welcomes "the angel of reality," "the necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, you see the earth again" (CP 496).²⁴ That angel can seem to be clearing the social away from the natural, clearing the earth of "its stiff . . . man-locked set"; if that were all the angel ever did, then Rich would be right in her prose to attack Stevens' isolation. But that angel, arguably, clears away inherited misconceptions so that the paysans, and Stevens' readers, can see the *populated* earth, the real rather than the conventional, in a reality that promises to bring in (however mediated) others' experience, while leaving out the fixed ideologies "Americana" had feared.

Eleanor Cook has called our attention to Stevens' comments on his angel: "the angel is the angel of reality. This is clear only if the reader is of the idea that we live in a world of the imagination, in which reality and contact with it are the great blessings." Cook adds that "It takes discipline of thought to be able to imagine an angel of reality" (266). The return to the world we share with other people, the appeal from the Stevensian poet's experience of deprivation to other people's, thence to what Stevens called in "Adagia" the "feeling for reality" by which "poets acquire humanity," is a progression Stevens—for all his misgivings and distances—liked to imagine (OP 188, 196). It is that return and that progression that his terrestrial, necessary angel heralds, which Stevens elsewhere considers from afar, and which these later poets pursue.

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Notes

¹ Delbanco's *The Death of Satan* concerns religion, ethics and public culture; Kaplan's *The Nothing That Is* is a popular work on the history of mathematics. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea* gathers his essays on modern art.

² Though his early audience might not have guessed it, Creeley in fact read Stevens attentively during the 1950s, as both Creeley himself ("In Respect" 50) and Michael Davidson (141) have pointed out.

³ When iced-over trees slow rural traffic, Ammons describes the experience as "most remarkable, like reading a poem / by Stevens"; earlier in the poem he asks "whoever

/ could muster a hive of *in the's* and / of *the's* like Mr. Stevens. . . ?" (*Glare* 105, 25). For more references, see *Glare* 36, 116, 134.

⁴For Charles Altieri, Ashbery "uses the capacities of his medium to flesh out the psychological and interpersonal implications of Stevens' aspectual ontology" (80). Some other recent works linking Stevens and Ashbery are Davidson; Gardner, especially 212–17; Halliday 149–67 (attacking Ashbery for exacerbating Stevens' "irresponsibility in relation to others" [157]); and Vendler, *Music* 225 ff.

⁵Creeley's poem "Thinking of Wallace Stevens" envisions a space that would fit well in one of those poems—"empty at best, a fountain in winter, / a square of wasted, drab park, a battered nonentity" (51).

⁶For Kleinzahler and O'Hara, see my "Poetry in Review."

⁷Stevens' best-known poem of American nightingalelessness is "Autumn Refrain," where "the nightingale" is "not a bird for me / But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air / I have never—shall never hear" (*CP* 160).

⁸Jacqueline Vaught Brogan connects Stevens' war poetry to Rich's poems of the 1980s and especially to her poem "Eastern War Time," finding in Rich's title *An Atlas of the Difficult World* "a specific allusion to and subversion of Stevens' terms and themes in *Parts of a World*" (257).

⁹My thanks to Jeff Karem for information on Cortez, La Malinche, and Chicano activists.

¹⁰Rich has also dealt in earlier poems with her conflicted senses of belonging and not-belonging to Jewish tradition: see especially the meditations on affiliation and solitude in "Yom Kippur, 1984," in the volume *Your Native Land, Your Life* (where the solitary male poet addressed is not Stevens but Robinson Jeffers) (75–78).

¹¹"Despite recent efforts to the contrary," Harvey Teres writes, "no doubt many readers still see Stevens as an intensely personal poet . . . aloof from politics" (117–18). Lee M. Jenkins complains that many of Stevens' wartime poems "work to *subsume* the world and the war into [their] own autotelic 'world,'" "flirting with the aestheticization of history which is [Walter] Benjamin's definition of fascism"; such complaints drive chapters 2 and 3 of her book (53, 45). Brogan finds Stevens' "wartime volume, *Parts of a World* . . . abstract, removed, aestheticized and even anesthetized" in contrast to Rich's poems (258). For Michael Davidson, Stevens' "well-known difficulties in responding to the specific conditions of historical change reflect a willingness to uphold the barrier between aesthetic and material production" (157).

¹²The poem Shetley favors is David Ferry's "Dives." A sensitive response to such readings of "The Man on the Dump" is Lisa M. Steinman's essay on that poem: as Steinman writes, "The Man on the Dump" "juxtaposes various ideas about how actuality is always transformed by the discourses that frame history and poetry" (58). Another explorer of Stevens' influence would do well to trace the links between that poem and A. R. Ammons' book-length poem *Garbage*.

¹³Mao writes sympathetically of Stevens' "feeling of removal from life, whether that removal is figured temporally as a posthistorical existence, or spatially as a carrying on apart from the real struggles, real politics and real hardships in which life seems to recognize itself as such" (25). This is both a feeling readers can have *about* the poems, and one to which the poems themselves respond.

¹⁴Another discussion of Stevens and Rich might begin by comparing his "The Planet on the Table" to her "Blue Rock," a "chunk of lapis lazuli" on a friend's "table," about which she asks, "This is a chunk of your world, a piece of its heart: / split from the rest, does it suffer?" (*Native* 73).

¹⁵Dean Rader demonstrates the always available link between social (societal) engagement and knowledge of other individuals when he writes, "Stevens would say that our incessant desire connects us as humans, and he returns to . . . poetry as a

means . . . to illuminate why it remains a *social* reality" (182; emphasis mine). Poets after Stevens—notably Randall Jarrell and Frank O'Hara—would find it important to *break* this implicit link between "the interpersonal" and "the social," distinguishing relations with people in groups from intimate relations with individuals—but that is an argument for another place.

¹⁶Work on "Owl's Clover" continues to accumulate. Important recent treatments include Cleghorn, "The Statue at the World's End"; Filreis, ch. 6; Longenbach 146–71, 181–90; and Teres, ch. 6. Long poems other than "Owl's Clover" also consider various senses of "the social" and "the interpersonal": Longenbach writes that toward the end of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" "the visionary 'I' becomes the communal 'we'—and 'we' can finally hear the beauty of birdsong as 'I' alone could not" (268). I would want to add, though, that the "we" of the canto in question (III: ix) remains hypothetical, optimistically imagined: "we enjoy like men," Stevens writes, as if we could not quite yet have become them.

¹⁷Teres writes, in a similar vein, "A key toward understanding [Stevens'] poetry of the 1930s is that Stevens both refused to turn away from Hoon *and* refused to turn away from political actualities. He was intent on resettling Hoon. . . . Of course Hoon too would have to adapt" (121–22).

¹⁸This distinction between regarding groups from outside and from within is what Charles Berger sees when he distinguishes Stevens' depicted losses from authentic pre-modern tragedy. For Berger, Stevens' "personae are most convincing when they face calamity alone, whereas tragedy requires some communal backdrop to lend it authenticity. It also requires communal belief in an ideology of some sort" (20). One might add that such an ideology need not be explicit, a matter of credos, but can be a taken-for-granted, shared form of life. The point is that, although Stevens can admire or deprecate such forms of life, he almost always does so from outside them.

¹⁹Dolan comments quite rightly that "the concluding lines of part I of 'The Rock' are a dramatization of desperate, terrified rejection of 'the interpersonal,' . . . 'desperate' in [their] hopeless addiction to 'humanity'" (173).

²⁰Charles Berger has argued that Stevens' "we" almost always means "all humanity," rather than some smaller, intermediary group—precisely the American "we" de Tocqueville predicts (27). Berger extends to Stevens a distinction Richard Ellmann draws between "we" in Auden and in Yeats.

²¹Halliday uses that aphorism to open his book. When Stevens returned at the end of his life to questions about local belongingness—in the essay "John Crowe Ransom, Tennessean," in the poems "A Mythology Reflects Its Region" and "On the Way to the Bus," and in the prose "Connecticut Composed," which we can read as their companion—they were for him first of all questions about landscape and vista, about the physical more than the human geography of the places and states concerned. Thus Ransom, Stevens decides, "would say that he lives in Tennessee and among the Tennesseans and it would be the same thing" (*OP* 248).

²²Anticollectivist, or antitotalitarian, sentiments created important currents in the intellectual life of the late forties and early fifties. Such currents flowed from Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* and David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* out into essays, novels, films, and poems by Jarrell, Lionel Trilling, and many others. For recent studies, see, for example, Teres, ch. 7; Hanna Pitkin, ch. 8; and Eli Zaretsky.

²³Set on a hill, and built around an antithesis, "Americana" may well be the poem projected by another of the unused titles in "From Pieces of Paper," "Conversation on a Hillside" (Lensing 173). The poem may also be read against Emerson's best-known hillside or "hill-top" poem, "Each and All," which declares summarily that "Nothing is fair or good alone" (413).

²⁴In responding to an earlier version of this essay, Alicia Ostriker has pointed out that both Rich's "Desert" and Stevens' "Angel" are (in her words) "poems of religious annunciation which reject conventional religion."

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Mark Strand's Inventions of Farewell

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WALLACE STEVENS HAS many and diverse poetic heirs—John Ashbery, Jorie Graham, Charles Wright, and Mark Strand, to name a few—all practitioners of what Helen Vendler has called the “second-order poem” (12), or what Stevens himself called “The poem of the act of the mind” (*CP* 240). As opposed to “first-order” poetry of statement or narrative, such a lyric translates the particulars of lived experience into an abstract language of meditation; its central actor is the large red man reading, a spirit storming in blank walls, the transparent man in a translated world. After Stevens, second-order poets, like the imagined future generations in “A Postcard from the Volcano,” inevitably speak his speech; Mark Strand is particularly fluent. Like Stevens, Strand can strike some readers as too abstract, and one critic has gone so far as to disparage Strand’s early poems as “divorced from everyday truth” in favor of later ones in which the poet turns to quasi-autobiographical modes (Stitt 874).

The ultimate poem, as Stevens said, is abstract, and Strand seems to have taken this ethos to a further extreme: without Stevens’ exotic vocabulary or syntactic complexity, he draws from an elemental lexicon of Platonic forms—trees, darkness, light, moon, room, breath, sleep, dreams—as if beginning in the “plain sense of things” of late Stevens. As Strand’s mentor Donald Justice rhetorically asked in his “Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens” (1973), “Who borrows your French words and postures now?” (107). We might tentatively nominate Ashbery, whom Harold Bloom has called “the most legitimate of the sons of Stevens” (*Anxiety* 143), but not Strand. Yet Strand quotes Stevens more frequently than any of his contemporaries. For instance, he uses the famous refrain, “The world is ugly, / And the people are sad” (*SP* 79), as an epigraph; he muses on the far more obscure “Piano Practice at the Academy of Holy Angels” (*DH* 46); he inverts “A Child Asleep in Its Own Life” into his own title, “An Old Man Awake in His Own Death” (*SP* 128); and he borrows the notion from Stevens’ poem “Waving Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” that in a world without heaven all is farewell.

As Harold Bloom has argued, “Even the strongest poet must take up his stance *within* a literary language,” and strength is thus measured in

the degree of “usurpation” or “imposition” the poet exerts (*Poetry and Repression* 4). Is Strand, then, a “strong poet”? Not exactly in the strict sense of Bloom’s formulation, since Strand does not so much usurp as self-consciously quote, sometimes even representing himself in the act of meditating upon Stevens’ words. At the same time, Strand demonstrates Bloom’s axiom that poetry constitutes a form of criticism, and vice-versa: Strand has theorized his own anxiety of influence in *The Monument* (1978), a prose meditation on poetic transmission. These postmodern variations on the theme of the Death of the Author, with their extracts from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Stevens, Whitman, and others, propose that all reading is a form of writing, that all quotation is a form of translation, that every poet is belated. Stevens saw the world as meditation; Strand, through the lens of deconstruction, sees the world as text, an invisible “monument” temporarily constructed, or reconstructed, by future generations of readers.

If, as Stevens said, the poem is the cry of its occasion, Strand would define the “occasion” itself as the moment of reading, and only that, as in this commentary on a passage from Stevens:

*Shine alone, shine nakedly, shine like bronze,
that reflects neither my face nor any inner part
of my being, shine like fire, that mirrors nothing.*

Why have I chosen this way to continue myself under your continuing gaze? I might have had my likeness carved in stone, but it is not my image that I want you to have, nor my life, nor the life around me, only this document. What I include of myself is unreal and distracting. Only this luminous moment has life, this instant in which we both write, this flash of voice.

(M 3)

Strand’s quotation can be called second-generation borrowing, since Stevens was in turn commenting on a fragment from Williams (“Nuances of a Theme by Williams,” *CP* 18). In this poetic succession, Williams first finds “strange courage” from the sparkling of an “ancient star”; Stevens contemplates the star as a kind of First Idea devoid of human pathos; and Strand implies that the text itself is a kind of stellar radiance that exists only in the act of beholding it some light-years later. As if to demonstrate this point, Strand echoes Stevens even in the act of interpreting him, for in this projected “flash of voice,” he subtly invokes the elegiac “earthly mother” of “The Owl in the Sarcophagus” who “in the syllable between life / And death cries quickly, in a flash of voice, / Keep you, keep you, I am gone, oh keep you as / My memory” (*CP* 432). Throughout *The Monument*, Strand writes in registers of intellectual teasing, deconstructive knowingness, and surrealistic narrative; but here, where he aspires to elegiac sublimity, he turns to Stevens.

Stevens famously said that the American Sublime “comes down / To . . . / The empty spirit / In vacant space” (*CP* 131), and in this sense, Strand can be considered a poet of the sublime, but with a difference. If Stevens’ early statement of this theme is “The Snow Man,” Strand’s is the poem “Keeping Things Whole.” Stevens, with a sense of his own belatedness in the romantic tradition of meditative-descriptive landscape poetry, contemplates a landscape devoid of human meaning; but Strand goes even further by considering his mere physical presence as an intrusion. This is the difference between being postromantic and postmodern (or, more precisely, post-Stevens). While Stevens refracted the romantic poetry of experience through various alter egos and interior paramours, Strand typically speaks directly through the lyric first person, but he speaks as a spirit in vacant space, a bare Cartesian “I”:

In a field
I am the absence
of field.
This is
always the case.
Wherever I am
I am what is missing.

When I walk
I part the air
and always
the air moves in
to fill the spaces
where my body’s been.

We all have reasons
for moving.
I move
To keep things whole. (*SP* 10)

In its progression of deadpan observations, the poem renders the sublime encounter with the void as an existential joke. Bloom has said that “The Snow Man” revisits Emerson’s transcendental moment of crossing a New England common and becoming a “transparent eyeball” (*Poetry and Repression* 269); Strand’s poem continues this theme in a seriocomic vein. In Emerson’s binary terms, the “me” is the *cogito*, the monad that thinks and feels, the voice of the lyric “I”; and the “not-me” is everything else—people, places, things, even one’s own body. But in Strand’s wry rendering of this dualism, the “me” becomes the body and almost nothing else, an Archimedean object that displaces air. This is a far cry from Emerson, who turns the air into a trope for Spirit itself:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe
air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes.
I become a transparent eyeball, I am nothing; I see all. The cur-
rents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or
particle of God. (10)

In the arc of his epiphany, Emerson reimagines the sensual “blithe air” as the metaphysical “currents of the Universal Being” and transforms the surface play of bathing into the thorough soak of circulation. Emerson and Strand, then, have markedly different notions of “keeping things whole”: one whole includes the self, the other does not.

In comparing “Keeping Things Whole” with “The Snow Man,” we can see a fundamental difference in poetic procedure: whereas Stevens’ poem consists of a fifteen-line sentence riding gracefully on the currents of infinitives and subordinate clauses, Strand’s proceeds in terse subject-predicate increments. The difficulty and marvel of reading a Stevens poem lies in grasping its sinuous turns of thought; a Strand poem, in contrast, challenges us to construe complexity from simplicity. Like many Strand poems, “Keeping Things Whole” is structured by repetition: field/field, I am/I am, air/air, moving/move—strict binaries of presence and absence, before and after, the many and the one. For all the speaker’s self-effacement, the first-person pronoun appears six times, three times in the jehovan phrase of the first stanza, “I am.” It is as if the Snow Man were given a lyric voice, with this naked utterance as his one certain statement. It is a statement with subtle shadings, as the chiasmus demonstrates: “Wherever I am / I am what is missing.” The first line is a statement of location, the second of identity, and this is the crux of the poem: where you are will never be in perfect alignment with who you are. Stevens’ poem contains its own grammatical éclat: the thrice-uttered “nothing” of the final tercet, in which “the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (CP 10). Just as Stevens famously puns on the sense of “nothing” as both negating and positing, then, Strand plays with a binary sense of “I am.”

Strand’s repetition of “always” strikes another sardonic note: it is as if the speaker had empirically to verify the fundamentals of his existence as a body in space, as if he were constantly rediscovering the idea. “This is / always the case”: it is not that I occasionally feel myself to be an absence; I realize over and over that I am a thing apart from everything else I behold. “Always the air moves in”: I am constantly struck by the way that the world effaces all traces that I have ever lived in it. It is in Strand’s poetic temperament not to render this as an epiphany; rather, he treats simple movement as an obsessive-compulsive disorder, with the pop-psychology tinge to the phrase “keeping things whole.” So suggestive is this phrase that we are tempted, as with many of the elliptical, vaguely surrealist narratives of Strand’s early poetry, to construct some allegory about

loss, or love, or death; and certainly all manner of “things” might be worth keeping “whole.” But Strand’s laconic “I” strictly avoids the hint of any emotion at all; he has gone even beyond the mental exercise of purgation in “The Snow Man.”

Both “The Snow Man” and “Keeping Things Whole” implicitly respond to the creative challenge of writing a twentieth-century landscape poem; but in their gestures of abnegation, they represent only one aspect of their authors’ sense of self and world. Stevens, in fact, revises his poem in “A Postcard from the Volcano” by imagining a posthumous return to his wintry landscape a generation or so ahead and insists that he once had “a being, breathing frost,” and that “what we felt / At what we saw” has persisted in “The look of things” (CP 159). Here, Stevens restores the link between seeing and feeling, between beholding frozen trees and thinking of misery in the sound of the wind, and between dead language and living speech. Strand, likewise, wrote a sort of counterpoint to “Keeping Things Whole” in his poem “Breath,” from *Darker*. For both Stevens and Strand, breath serves as a figure for the physical and spiritual interchange between self and world; and here Strand humanizes the abstract self of “Keeping Things Whole” by suggesting what the earlier poem forgot to mention about the air—that it both suffuses and surrounds the body.

In both Stevens and Strand, breath becomes a trope for the nonverbal—the corporeal basis of poetry rather than the divine *spiritus* of traditional mythology. Characteristically, Strand develops his idea through chant-like repetition rather than Stevensian dialectic. To see how Strand appropriates the figure of breath, I will first consider Stevens’ meditation on the theme in “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” where it unfolds through appositional layering:

Our breath is like a desperate element
That we must calm, the origin of a mother tongue

With which to speak to her, the capable
In the midst of foreignness, the syllable
Of recognition, avowal, impassioned cry,

The cry that contains its converse in itself,
In which looks and feelings mingle and are part
As a quick answer modifies a question,

Not wholly spoken in a conversation between
Two bodies disembodied in their talk,
Too fragile, too immediate for any speech. (CP 470–71)

The strangely haunting urgency of that “desperate element” begins an arc from birth to adulthood; from mother tongue to paramour; from the first gasp of air to the erotic breathings of “recognition, avowal, impassioned

cry." Here, breath suggests what cannot be verbally communicated between any two people; it reminds us of the corporeal and earthly dimension of poetry even as it shadows forth the poem of the mind ("looks and feelings") that eludes any poem of the page. If all words are ultimately foreign to us, breath is our native "speech," the true lingua franca of immediate contact; it is the "converse" of verbal "conversation."

In "Breath," Strand echoes Stevens' theme of the speech beneath words, but he does so through first-person utterance. While Stevens avoids the first-person singular, Strand frequently embraces it, and yet this difference does not necessarily make the latter a more overtly autobiographical poet. If anything, Strand's "I" gives only the barest outlines of a stationed self or experiential base, as in the first lines of "Breath": "When you see them / tell them I am still here, / that I stand on one leg while the other one dreams, / that this is the only way" (SP 67). Who are the recipients of this message, and where is the sender? It seems as if the speaker is practicing some kind of yogic balancing act, intoning a string of mantras:

that as the sun rises and sets I know my place,
that breath is what saves me,
that even the forced syllables of decline are breath,
that if the body is a coffin it is also a closet of breath,

that breath is a mirror clouded by words,
that breath is all that survives the cry for help
as it enters the stranger's ear
and stays long after the word is gone,

that breath is the beginning again, that from it
all resistance falls away, as meaning falls
away from life, or darkness falls from light,
that breath is what I give them when I send my love.

(SP 67)

Characteristically, Strand's lines proceed through paratactic repetition rather than hypotactic complication. In Stevens' meditation, "breath" is the originating word in a chain of terms that begins with "element" and ends with "cry," which is in turn modulated by a series of qualifications. Strand's poem, on the other hand, unfolds a series of identity-statements. If the speaker begins the poem as if in a meditative stance, he sounds as if he were on his deathbed at the end—able to speak only the "forced syllables of decline," finally leaving only a valedictory breath. The odd inversion in Strand's metaphor of breath as "a mirror clouded by words" suggests this narrative: Lear's looking-glass arbiter between life and death—the thing that Cordelia's breath will never again "mist or stain" (V.iii.262)—becomes breath itself, a clearness obscured only by language.

If poetic language is traditionally supposed to hold a mirror up to nature, here it fogs up a more elemental mirror.

Helen Vendler has located Stevens' "truest sublimity" in "process rather than achievement," particularly in the heroic late effort to imagine summer in the midst of winter (12). Stevens' passage on breath gives us the sense of a mind in the act of finding what will suffice, of constantly defining and qualifying; Strand's poem, on the other hand, feels like achievement rather than process, an accomplishment of Zen serenity. In another, later meditation on middle age called "White" (1978), Strand borrows the patently Stevensian trope of whiteness to similar effect. Strand dedicated the poem to Harold Bloom, who has written about "The Auroras of Autumn" as a Wordsworthian crisis poem and particularly admired its "extraordinary fantasia upon the trope of whiteness" (*Poems of Our Climate* 262). Strand's development of the theme could be similarly called a fantasia, but like "Breath," it is less crisis-poem than meditative exercise.

In his famous passage on the desolate blankness of the deserted cabin on the beach, Stevens makes fine discriminations between past and present shadings of white, turning on the syntactical fulcrum of "or":

Farewell to an idea . . . A cabin stands,
Deserted, on a beach. It is white,
As by a custom or according to

An ancestral theme or as a consequence
Of an infinite course. The flowers against the wall
Are white, a little dried, a kind of mark

Reminding, trying to remind, of a white
That was different, something else, last year
Or before, not the white of an aging afternoon,

Whether fresher or duller, whether of winter cloud
Or of winter sky, from horizon to horizon. (*CP* 412)

The whiteness of the cabin is either a deliberate symbolic choice ("according to / An ancestral theme") *or* the inevitable result of fading, in which all colors bleach under the sun. The dried flowers remind *or* try to remind of a different whiteness, from last year *or* the year before, part of a winter cloud *or* a winter sky. Stevens registers the difficulty of articulating a changed sense of the world, of tracing the inflection of one whiteness into another. In the present, "white" is an adjective attached to the material world (cabin, dried flowers); but in the past, it is an elusive noun ("a white / That was different . . . not the white of an aging afternoon").

Strand, in contrast, states his present blankness of vision and proceeds through a litany of illustrative instances. Here, white becomes the adjectival tag for all the nouns of the world, and the monotonous sound of the

word itself becomes a poetic blankness. Though he adopts the quasi-romantic stance of a poet wandering through nature, he subordinates the experiential to an abstract meditation on the absence of color:

Now in the middle of my life
all things are white.
I walk under the trees,
the frayed leaves,
the wide net of noon,
and the day is white.
And my breath is white,
drifting over the patches
of grass and fields of ice
into the high circles of light.
As I walk, the darkness of
my steps is also white,
and my shadow blazes
under me. In all seasons
the silence where I find myself
and what I make of nothing are white,
the white of sorrow,
the white of death. (*SP* 119)

The poem's iterations continue in this manner, culminating in the apocalyptic fusion of inner and outer whiteness: "All things are joined / even beyond the edge of sight." Strand's meditation might be called, in a phrase from Stevens' passage on absolute whiteness, "the accomplishment / Of an extremist in an exercise" (*CP* 412). If Stevens is a poet of dialectical movement, Strand is a poet of catalogic accretion; Stevens' conjunction is the oscillatory "or," Strand's the paratactic "and." While Stevens distinguishes between two kinds of white and refuses to name their chromatic symbolism, Strand pointedly articulates "the white of sorrow, / the white of death." Stevens defers such explicit troping until the auroras arrive to replace whiteness with a new sublimity of "blue-red sweeps" and "polar green"—"The color of ice and fire and solitude" (*CP* 413). Here, Stevens finally uses "and," in an iridescent phrase that outshines the starkness of Strand's "the white of death." In terms of sheer imaginative complexity, then, Stevens' variations on the theme of whiteness easily surpass Strand's; but I do not want simply to claim that Stevens is the better craftsman. Rather, in making this comparison, we can see Strand making certain aesthetic choices: to adopt a first-person lyric voice rather than Stevensian personae and indirect discourse; to write a poem of mantra-like repetition rather than of assiduous qualification; to make the ideas of sorrow and death explicit rather than implicit; to engage in direct statement rather than weavings to-and-fro.

like the tropes of breath and whiteness, serve as the keynote for a meditation. Is Strand merely illustrating a Stevensian theme, or does he swerve from his predecessor in some way? Since he begins with the concessive phrase, "It is true," we would expect him to introduce the qualification of a "but" or an "and yet," but he seems intent instead on illustrating Stevens' premise, visualizing a setting for it. Toward the end, Strand introduces a choice of sorts: in a world without heaven, mere being becomes "an occasion for mourning" or "an occasion / Worth celebrating," and Strand refuses to arbitrate between these possibilities beyond suggesting that there are no others. The poem turns, finally, on a rhetorical question and a restatement of idea:

for what else does one do,
Feeling the weight of the pelicans' wings,

The density of the palms' shadows, the cells that darken
The backs of bathers? These are beyond the distortions
Of chance, beyond the evasions of music. The end

Is enacted again. And we feel it
In the temptations of sleep, in the moon's ripening,
In the wine as it waits in the glass. (DH 18)

How does one end a poem that begins with "farewell"? Both poets ask questions, but they ask different kinds, and in different orders. Strand's suggests a starkly binary choice between mourning and celebrating earthly mutability. Without preferring one or the other, Strand simply offers further intimations of mortality—tempting sleep, waxing moon, waiting wine—that echo Stevens' own infinitives of farewell ("to sip / One's cup and never to say a word, / Or to sleep or just to lie there still"). Stevens' adieux, however, lead to a different question: "Ever-jubilant, / What is there here but weather, what spirit / Have I except it comes from the sun?" (CP 128). In Stevens' symbolic lexicon, the sun is the archetypal First Idea, a constant presence in the poetry, from the "savage of fire" of "Gubbinal" to the "battered panache" of "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself." It is the hypothetical divinity to which the worshippers in "Sunday Morning" chant "boisterous devotion"; the "spaciousness and light / In which the body walks and is deceived" in "Anatomy of Monotony"; the "opulent" vandal of "A Postcard from the Volcano" that smears the abandoned house with gilt graffiti. In Strand's poem, however, the sun becomes yet another intimation of mortality, the energy that shatters chromosomes and causes skin cancer. Strand, who does not share Stevens' mythopoetic imagination, seems to suggest a counter-sublime here: the sun as destroyer rather than creator.

Strand is now approaching the age of what we associate with "late Stevens," and in his latest book, *Blizzard of One* (1998), he contemplates

what Keats called “the human seasons,” dwelling on late autumn and winter, and the Paterian flux of things that vanish as they appear. Two poems in particular, “The Night, the Porch” and “A Piece of the Storm,” sound like postscripts to “The Snow Man.” Like Strand’s earlier meditations on landscape and seasonal change, they are haunted by a sense of belatedness within a tradition; they ask what to make of a diminished thing, but they answer this implicit question in different ways. The first poem, I would argue, assumes a defensive stance of irony and suffers as a result; but the second manages to avoid this pitfall and achieves what Stevens called in a late poem “A new knowledge of reality” (CP 534).

Like “White,” the more recent “The Night, the Porch” is a meditation on a theme of blankness, but this time Strand takes the idea of “nothing” as his keynote. In effect, he picks up where the “The Snow Man” left off, with an echo of the infinitive that suspends Stevens’ poem in its icy atmosphere of supposition.

To stare at nothing is to learn by heart
 What all of us will be swept into, and baring oneself
 To the wind is feeling the ungraspable somewhere close
 by.
 Trees can sway or be still. Day or night can be what they
 wish.
 What we desire, more than a season or weather, is the
 comfort
 Of being strangers, at least to ourselves. This is the crux
 Of the matter, which is why even now we seem to be
 waiting
 For something whose appearance would be its
 vanishing—
 The sound, say, of a few leaves falling, or just one leaf,
 Or less. There is no end to what we can learn. The book
 out there
 Tells us as much, and was never written with us in
 mind. (B 10)

While “The Snow Man” begins with the visible signs of winter and ends in the beholding of “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is,” Strand inverts the process. He begins with a play on “nothing” as both presence and absence: to stare at nothing is either to look without focus or to gaze intently into a void. Like Stevens’ “listener” who “beholds,” Strand’s porch-sitter experiences the landscape in two sensory registers, describing a visual “vanishing” in terms of the sound of “a few leaves falling, or just one leaf, / Or less.” Stevens imagines thinking away “any misery in the sound of the wind, / In the sound of a few leaves, / Which is the sound of the land / Full of the same wind / That is blowing in the same bare place” (CP 10). In his chain of grammatical subordinates, Stevens reminds us that the

sound of the wind is always the sound of the wind *in something*—a tree or an ear—and that the sound of the land is the sum of smaller stirrings. Strand's sequence of sounds, on the other hand, more pointedly riffs on Shakespeare's Sonnet 73, which famously equates autumn with advancing human age: "That time of year thou mayst in me behold, / When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang" (64). In correcting "none" with "few," Shakespeare's speaker hopefully revises his own metaphorical reckoning of age; but Strand wryly eliminates this backward glance to perform a series of subtractions, from "few" to "one" to "less"—back, in other words, to "nothing."

Strand turns "nothing" into what Bloom would call a trope of pathos, as we can see when we reduce the two poems to their fundamental propositions:

Stevens: To behold nothing is to have a mind of winter.

Strand: To behold nothing is to learn our ultimate fate.

On the surface, Strand's conclusion, "There is no end to what we can learn," might seem too neatly to wrap up an elliptical *paysage moralisé*, but the word "end" can be read as both "limit" and "purpose": there are infinite ways to "learn" about nothingness, and there is no goal to any of them. Presumably, the "book out there" is the Book of Nature, which has traditionally been considered a companion text to holy scripture; but if this book "tells" us things, it does not do so "with us in mind." With that last word, Strand completes his inversion of "The Snow Man": while Stevens' poem moves from "mind of winter" to "nothing," Strand's moves from "nothing" to "mind." In either direction, a circle is traced: the mind contemplates nothing and is a sort of nothing.

Like the other poems of Strand that I have considered, "The Night, the Porch" sets itself the task of meditating upon a theme—in this case, "nothing" rather than "breath," or "whiteness," or "farewell." Despite its flashes of wit, however, the poem suffers from the sense that nothing new can be said on its chosen subject; it baldly states its trope of pathos but remains deeply suspicious of it. In "A Piece of the Storm," from which the title of Strand's recent book is taken, Strand achieves a more moving variation on "nothing"; he imagines a scene for "something whose appearance would be its vanishing." Here, the outdoor porch becomes the indoor study, the Stevensian emblem of consciousness; the deliberate act of waiting for falling leaves becomes the surprise of finding a single snowflake drifting through a window; and the figurative "book out there" becomes a literal book read inside:

From the shadow of domes in the city of domes,
A snowflake, a blizzard of one, weightless, entered your
room

The twinned ideas of disappearance and return recur throughout *Blizzard of One*, in relation both to the phenomenal world and to the world of the poem—both the “book out there” and the book of the mind. In a sequence entitled “A Suite of Appearances,” Strand asks, “Will the same day ever come back, and with it / Our amazement at having been in it. . . . ?” (B 26). Despite the appeal of such a fantasy, Strand knows that death is the mother of beauty, and that “To have the whole sunset again, moment by moment, / As it occurred, in a correct and detailed account, only darkens / Our sense of what happened” (B 26). As Strand has suggested in *The Monument*, poems are like sunsets in that they, too, repeat and yet change—because a poem is a temporal act of reading, because it cannot be held still. In another poem of “A Suite of Appearances,” Strand expresses this faith by naturalizing poetry as a corporeal event in time. Like the snowflake in “A Piece of the Storm,” the sound of an incipient poem briefly appears, vanishes, and returns:

How it comes forward, and deposits itself like the wind
In the ear which hears only the humming at first, the
first
Suggestion of what is to come, how it grows out of
itself,

Out of the humming because if it didn't it would die
In the graveyard of sound without being known, and
then
Nothing would happen for days or weeks until some-
thing like it

Came back, a sound announcing itself as your own, a
voice
That is yours, bending under the weight of desire,
Suddenly turning your language into a field unfolding

And all the while humming can still be detected, the
original
Humming before it was yours, and you lie back and
hear it,
Surprised that what you are saying was something you
meant,

And you think that perhaps you are not who you
thought, that henceforth
Any idea of yourself must include a body surrounding a
song. (B 23)

This is one of Strand's most emphatic statements of an origin-mythology; here, he sounds most like a Bloomian strong poet listening to his own interior paramour. Rather than being the "absence of field," the poet's language becomes a field unto itself. At the same time, Strand cannot escape the traditional tropes of poetic creation—wind, voice, song—in describing the genesis of a poem.

This poem might be read as an allegory of how the sound of a Stevensian adieu is modulated, through the voice of a later poet, into a new invention of farewell. We have seen Strand quoting tropes and even lines of poetry from Stevens and self-consciously theorizing his borrowings in the prose vignettes of *The Monument*. In this late poem, Strand neither acknowledges a debt to his precursors nor announces a creation *ex nihilo*, and this is its fascination. Rather than effacing poetic genealogy, Strand's elliptical syntax preserves its mystery, the phenomenon of a poem that is both familiar and new. The opening phrase, "How it comes forward," hangs suspended without completion or antecedent: Strand never says *how* "it" does, nor does he say *what* "it" is. The phrase might be completed by the predicate, ". . . is a mystery to me"; or it might be preceded by a declaration of intent, as in, "I would like to write a poem about . . ." In any event, Strand's omission of antecedent suggests that his poem, like any utterance, takes place in a pre-existing language, *in medias res*; but this becomes a source of wonder rather than despair. In its cycle of departure and return, the "it" becomes "something like it"—comes back, as Emerson would say, with a certain alienated majesty. Meanwhile, the "you" could be either a poet in the act of writing a new poem or a reader absorbing and remembering an already written one. Strand's discovery of the lovely phrase "body surrounding a song," might describe either poet or reader; and as we have seen in his various interpretations of Stevens, Strand imagines himself as both.

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Wallace Stevens, Armand Schwerner, and “The The”

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IN A CONVENTIONAL NARRATIVE of poetic influence, Armand Schwerner’s association with the ethno-poetics movement would place him among the followers of Ezra Pound. Pound’s understanding of the contemporaneity of myth and his interest in anthropology are crucial sources for the archaic workings of Charles Olson, the multicultural weavings of Robert Duncan, and for Jerome Rothenberg’s “symposium of the whole,” one of the terms Rothenberg uses to describe the enterprise in which he and an international cadre of writers, artists, and theorists have been engaged for over thirty years. As Rothenberg defines *ethno-poetics*,

On the one hand, this discourse explored an ongoing “intersection between poetry and anthropology,” . . . and on the other hand, between contemporary poets as the “marginal” defenders of an endangered human diversity and poets of other times and places who represented that diversity itself and many of the values being uncovered and recovered in the new poetic enterprises. The discourse opened as well to include . . . the “poetics of performance” across the spectrum of the arts, and it also tied in with movements of self-definition and cultural liberation among third-world ethnic groups in the United States and elsewhere. (xv)

Schwerner’s long poem *The Tablets*, begun in 1968 and still unfinished at the time of his death in 1999, certainly falls within the purview of this enterprise. On one level, *The Tablets* is a literary hoax: it purports to be a sequence of translations and commentaries, the work of the “Scholar/Translator,” an erudite schlemiehl who struggles with comic desperation to recreate the ancient Semitic world of the Akkadians from a series of inscribed clay shards dating from about 5000 B.C.E. To a greater extent than *The Cantos* or *The Maximus Poems*, *The Tablets* consists almost entirely—and materially—of fragments. The sections of the poem run the gamut of genres, from prayer to curse, elegy to satire, lyric to narrative, all framed by the notes, commentaries, and speculations of the Scholar/Translator. An insistently visual work that makes extensive use of different fonts,

images, and computer-generated glyphs, *The Tablets* also has a crucial performative dimension. The Living Theater Company produced a stage version of *The Tablets* in 1989; and Schwerner, who was a talented musician and ethnomusicologist, often presented the work using a wide variety of wind instruments from all over the world. (Fortunately, the most recent edition comes with a CD of Schwerner reading, and a video selection of his performances is in the works.) Thus, *The Tablets* may appear to be a hoax, a sendup of the very disciplines in which Schwerner and his colleagues are so invested, but the poem is one of our most authentic attempts to reconnect with the origins of Western culture. As Schwerner observes in an understated moment, "The uses of the past, by means of these found archaic objects, are thus more than ironic and other than nostalgic" (*Tablets* 134). Paul Christensen is more direct: as he puts it, Schwerner in *The Tablets* is "a worker on the motherlode of primitivism and the archaic" (155).

Despite this undeniably Poundian lineage, Schwerner always expressed great admiration for Wallace Stevens, who is the subject of one of his earliest critical essays and who remains a foundational figure for Schwerner's peculiar version of postmodern poetics. In this respect, Schwerner is similar to a number of other figures usually associated with Pound's poetics. Louis Zukofsky regarded Pound as his mentor, but in his late essay on Stevens, he writes "Reading him for the last three months I felt that my own writing, without my being aware of it, was closer to his than to that of any of my contemporaries in the last half century of life we shared together" (*Prepositions* 27). Likewise, Robert Duncan, the self-proclaimed "derivative" poet, declares in the *Structure of Rime XXVIII*, "In Memoriam Wallace Stevens," "I will willingly assume his numbers among my own" (*Ground Work* 56). Yet despite such assertions, Stevens is generally regarded as the representative poet on the other side of the twentieth-century divide in American poetry, the divide between romanticism and modernism, symbolism and objectivism. In her paradigmatic essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" Marjorie Perloff argues that the aesthetic represented by Stevens looks back to romantic and symbolist modes, with their emphases on a questing "visionary humanism" and the inwardness of the lyric imagination. The Poundian aesthetic, on the other hand, aggressively severs its ties with the nineteenth century and reclaims the external world by way of "collage, fragmentation, parataxis" (21, 22)—terms that apply perfectly to Schwerner's technique in *The Tablets*. This dichotomy, which tends to be accepted by critics on both sides of the divide, has on occasion been challenged through the proposal of different interpretive frames. Mutlu Blasing, for instance, attempts to decenter the Emersonian romantic tradition in American poetry, arguing that a "typology of generic rhetorics" (3) serves us better than narratives of tradition and inheritance recited by such critics as Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner and dialectically scrutinized by Perloff. As Blasing puts it, "Perhaps a typology such as I pro-

pose, which substitutes a systematic network of relationships for a dynastic tradition, can help us understand and evaluate differences that can reduce to mere value judgments within a one-directional, patristic understanding of tradition and literary history" (12–13).

Though I believe that "dynastic" traditions inevitably reinsert themselves in any discourse on literary influence, there is much to be said for reconfigurations of this sort, especially when, as in Blasing's case, they return our attention to the poet's rhetoric on either the synchronic or diachronic plane. This is one reason why Schwerner's relation to Stevens is both surprising and significant: rhetorically speaking, his mature work reads nothing like Stevens, and those who admire Stevens for his lyricism (either in its lush early phase or its more chastened later phase) are bound to be dismayed when confronted with the extravagant dialogism of *The Tablets*, in which lyricism plays a supporting role at best. In this respect, the influence of the Pound tradition on Schwerner, especially in *The Tablets*, is palpable, and much may be gained by comparing *The Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson*, or Olson's *Maximus Poems* to Schwerner's more recent masterpiece. Stevens' presence, on the other hand, is more subtle, more a matter of epistemology than of mode, technique, or theme. Schwerner's understanding of Stevens' thought—of his thinking through poetry—takes us beyond Stevens as a latter-day practitioner of subjective postromantic interiority, a stance that has little appeal for Schwerner, who states flatly that "there is no nuclear self" (*Tablets* 130). Indeed, this understanding poses a strong challenge to the conventional distinction between the school of Stevens and the school of Pound, stronger, perhaps, than those of the critics, since Schwerner's encounter with Stevens (like those of the older Zukofsky and Duncan) goes back well before the Pound/Stevens debate was inaugurated among academics.

In the mid-sixties, Schwerner was finishing an M.A. in Columbia University's Department of English and Comparative Literature, having switched to English after two years of graduate study in anthropology. His thesis on Stevens was the source for "Wallace Stevens: The Movements within the Rock," published in 1965 in the summer and autumn numbers of the avant-garde literary magazine *Kulchur*. Its appearance there, rather than in an academic journal, was not an accident, since Schwerner was deeply involved in the avant-garde culture of New York at that time through both writing and performance. Despite its scholarly tone and thorough familiarity with Stevens criticism of the period, Schwerner's piece represents an already accomplished artist's engagement with a major precursor, an engagement that shapes Schwerner's aesthetic on an abstract, philosophical level and on the level of artistic practice as well.

In his essay (which unfortunately has never been republished), Schwerner reads Stevens through what could be called a nascent postmodernism, favoring process over product, perception of the object over expression of the subject. He continually emphasizes "Stevens' predilections for the fluid

aspects of reality, for the shifting boundaries between imagination and reality, for the freedom found in play, for the dependence of imagination upon reality" ("Movements" II: 47). For Stevens, as Schwerner sees him, "the figure of the poet does not find realization in *making* changes; rather that figure becomes part of the process which itself is change" ("Movements" I: 66). "From the beginning," Schwerner observes, "Stevens would present the quality of the 'vivid' experience of a perception, of man involved in the object perceived, of the merest 'fluttering' as coterminous with change and practically unseizable" ("Movements" I: 73). Equally important, Stevens is a poet who "rejects the implications of the *act of power*" ("Movements" II: 54), although he "shares with Yeats, Eliot, Pound, an investment in some concept of personality; in his case the concept almost appears fortuitous, so skilled is he in creating a fabric of becoming-as-poem in which thing and idea, resemblance and correspondence discover a new reality" ("Movements" I: 71). The radical power of Stevens' work lies in the fact that it "is not the tacit or assertive presentation of a distinct 'self', not a demonstration of concern for the posited 'persona' as it may variously present itself in Browning's monologues, Pound's *Personae*, Eliot's 'Gerontion', Williams' 'Tract'. . . . Characterized by a mode of acceptance, Stevens' work, in its major patterns, inherits little of the rebelliousness of the nineteenth-century romantics, little of the overt committed criticism his great contemporaries directed at contemporary life" ("Movements" I: 69).

As should be clear from even this brief summary, Schwerner's reading of Stevens leads us directly to some of the most important issues in the criticism of twentieth-century American poetry. In what ways does the poet's experience of reality enter the imaginative production of the poem? Should the poet attempt to create, as Schwerner credits Stevens with creating, "a fabric of becoming-as-poem"? What is the status of the self in the presentation of the poem? Is poetry still an act of subjective will, or as Schwerner puts it, an "*act of power*," with an ongoing relation to what was called in an earlier, romantic mode, the "transcendental sublime"? And if that relationship has altered, as may well be the case, how is poetry to renew, through the powers of language, the human relation to the object world in which we still must dwell?

Critics, of course, are not the first ones to ask such questions; they are the questions that poets themselves pose in writing their poems. One way to (re)define poetic tradition is to note how the questions posed by a major poet of one generation are answered, or at least restated, by the poets of a succeeding generation. Consider then the way that Schwerner, some years after his essay, returns to Stevens in *The Tablets*, as a single witty allusion opens a site—an archaeological site—that proves crucial to the further development of Schwerner's project.

The allusion to which I refer occurs in Tablet X, which consists almost entirely of the Scholar/Translators's absurd diacritical symbols for "missing," "untranslatable," and "confusing" (see Figure 1). At the center of the

What then is one to make of Tablet X in relation to the linguistic ambiguities of the text and the anxieties of the translator, both of which, in case we need reminding, are Schwerner's creations? How are we to account for the Scholar/Translator's insertion of "[the the]," when he has already admitted that the Tablets might be a fantasy? Sitting there in the middle of a page of dots and plus signs, rather like the Cheshire Cat's grin before it disappears, the bracketed phrase is a taunting cipher, an invitation to interpretive befuddlement.

"The the," of course, are the last two words in Stevens' "The Man on the Dump," though there is no sign that the Scholar/Translator is aware of this. It is an expression of "the truth" (CP 203), the definite article, grammatical marker of the singular, which I would connect to "the wrapper on the can of pears, / The cat in the paper-bag, the corset, the box / From Esthonia" (CP 201) and all the other detritus of material existence that is identified earlier in Stevens' poem. "The the" and "the truth" are two phrases that have been the source of much critical contention. A. Walton Litz identifies "The the" with "a poetry of the irreducible minimum" (262), which I presume is what Stevens means by "the janitor's poems / Of every day" (CP 201). If such is the case, then "the the" signifies a poetic of the quotidian and the immediate—in other words, an objectivist poetic of the sort represented by Stevens' friend and rival William Carlos Williams. The postromantic poet, still wondering if he should "hear the blatter of grackles and say / *Invisible priest*" (CP 203), is highly ambivalent toward such a poetry: "One feels the purifying change. One rejects / The trash" (CP 202), he declares, yet the dump remains his ineluctable reality. "[I]t is indeed there that one first heard the truth," argues Harold Bloom, "when with a heightened sense of self one emulated Whitman by returning to the object, any object" (148). For Bloom, "The the" is any object whatsoever, outside the self, which is in the process of being taken up again into language" (147). It is because this Whitmanian process takes place that the man on the dump, even when fixated on trash, is still "the American High Romantic, perpetually at work reconstructing itself" (148).

Following these readings, we can say that "The the" produces a critical crux: is it a mark of Stevens' uneasy acknowledgment of (and probable resistance to) an objectivist aesthetic that he understood to be a rival of his own? Or is it the final gesture in another triumphant struggle for poetic transcendence, a sublime moment of linguistic transformation in the midst of the modern junk heap? "One beats and beats for that which one believes" (CP 202), declares the poet. But what does he believe—about the dump, which is our modern reality, and more important, about the sort of poem that is to be written on the dump? Should the modern poem continue to be a search for "the truth"? In *Parts of a World*, "The Man on the Dump" is followed by "On the Road Home" and "The Latest Freed Man," both of which continue the debate about "the truth." "On the Road Home" takes the form of a reported dialogue in which the two speakers progres-

sively deconstruct a unified conception of truth, resulting in a perception, once the truth has been dispersed, that “the night was roundest, / The fragrance of the autumn warmest, / Closest and strongest” (CP 204). In “The Latest Freed Man,” the figure of the title is freed because he has “just / Escaped from the truth” (CP 204). Observing the dawn in the landscape as he wakes, the freed man declares that the sun “bathes in the mist / Like a man without a doctrine”; likewise “the sun came shining into his room: / To be without a description of to be” (204–05). It would appear, then, that freedom from “the truth”—from a willful doctrine or description of objective reality—can be as strong a desire in Stevens’ poetry as the wish for linguistic transcendence of the object world, the romantic affirmation of the self. Stevens, in other words, vacillates between an older, romantic mode of perception and expression, in which the poem is the poet’s *act of power*, and a more recent modernist, or even postmodernist mode, in which the poet, as Schwerner notes, “becomes part of the process which itself is change.” As Stevens himself knew, what is at issue is the nature of the transaction between subjective imagination and objective reality and the kind of language-act that will result from it.

Let us return to “[the the]” in Tablet X. The appearance of this most vexed of modern signifiers in what is supposedly a text from about 5000 B.C.E. leads one to believe that “the truth” that the modern world finds so hard to comprehend was known at the beginning of civilization. Or was it? Since the Scholar/Translator supplies the phrase, we cannot know if our modern epistemological dilemma, what Stevens ironically calls “a philosopher’s honeymoon” (CP 203), is being projected back into our archaic origins. Schwerner’s Tablet thus becomes the site of a philosophical dialogue that the present must hold with itself, in the mute presence of an inscrutable but weirdly familiar past. Perhaps Schwerner’s Akkadians feel the same alienation from the object world that Stevens expresses in “The Man on the Dump” and likewise yearn doubtfully for transcendence. On the other hand, they may be more at home with quotidian reality, experiencing a kind of immanence in the presence of things that one associates with Williams and his fellow objectivists.

In Tablet X “[the the]” poses this problem but cannot in itself provide an answer, for just as there is no consensus as to the phrase’s meaning in Stevens’ poem, there can be no definite understanding of the archaic sensibility from its dubious insertion in Schwerner’s text. But if we read a little further, we find more clues. Tablet XIII, for instance, begins with these lines:

this chair this yellow table these pots this tablet-clay this
 lettuce this lettuce
 this stone jar these blue flowers this silver lioness this
 electrum ass on her rein-ring

here's my eye and here's the great emptiness surrounding the
object hating me
this tablet-clay hating me separated from its name
this stone jar hating me separated from its name outlining
a piece of the air to sliver me through this piece of blue
flower hating me (45)

These lines record a psychic, even a spiritual crisis, brought on by the loss of immanence and the recognition of a space, a "great emptiness," between the perceiving subject and the perceived object. The writer experiences the objects as hating him; they are named, but the act of naming has lost its magical, unifying power, for the objects are now "separated" from their names. Language, or at least written language, may be the source of this problem, which is why the tablet-clay, the writing medium itself, is the first object mentioned as hating the speaker. Derrida's distinction between speech and writing is appropriate here: "In every case, the voice is closest to the signified, whether it is determined strictly as sense (thought or lived) or more loosely as thing. All signifiers, and first and foremost the written signifier, are derivative with regard to what would wed the voice indissolubly to the mind or to the thought of the signified sense, indeed to the thing itself. . . . The written signifier is always technical and representative. It has no constitutive meaning" (11).

No longer able to experience the thing as lived, the writing subject in Tablet XIII suffers a loss of constitutive meaning. The Scholar/Translator's comment on these lines is particularly revealing, for he calls them a "psychotic rant; what surprises however involves the degree of non-analogical type of reasoning, atypical personally and culturally, of the thought-modes of archaic literatures, Sumerian, Hebrew, Ugarit etc. But the author of XIII was very likely a 'cured' schizophrenic looking back, intensely directed to assess her past" (45). As absurdly pedantic—and anachronistic—as this may be, the Scholar/Translator may be on to something here, which is typical of Schwerner's use of him. Terms like "psychotic" and "schizophrenic" may not be the best ones to apply to such an ancient text, but we are at a moment of psychic rupture or at least the recollection of such a moment. Perhaps one can say that the moment of unity with the object world, as far back in history as we can imagine verbal expression, is always already lost. The last "translated" lines of Tablet XIII consist of an exhortation addressed to the self, urging a renewed experience of the body and of the objects around it and calling for the lost immediacy of the naming process:

begin to begin
give the eye to the socket
surround the nostrils with the nose
encircle the cave of the mouth with lips

and the asshole with fat cheeks
 the mantis eats her lover after all is done
 neck first let it come down but begin
 begin to begin
 jar name table name lettuce object tablet-clay name
 name name
 eye mouth eye nostril lip cave ass tablet-clay mouth name
 take light wash away light together eye nose face name name
 (46)

What makes these lines so poignant is the recognition of loss that necessitates their very utterance. Because the process of naming has lost its magical potency, Schwerner's poem grows increasingly elegiac, and the language magic that was once a part of everyday life shifts toward the realm of divinity, or of the divinely inspired poet. Only here is an unmediated relation to the natural world to be found. One of the last passages in XXVI, the penultimate Tablet, begins:

He is someone else, perhaps an animal. He lives inside plant
 names.
 He races inside his messages of fleet means. He is the calling
 voice
 Of the names inside the wheat and barley. He can't say them
 Forever. He tells them +++++
 Through the inside of his eyes, he sees
 The inside of his eyes and describes the animal names of
 plants.
 He looks and tells. (93)

It is impossible to ascertain if these lines refer to a god or to a deified poet, but in either case, it is clear that the power he possesses is now out of reach of the ordinary mortal. This is the power to "receive the good names," to find "the sound, the proper / Voice for the saying, the murmuring, the uttering, the chant / Of wheat and barley changed by murmur into animal liveliness" (93). In a world that becomes increasingly uninspired—a dump—the magic of naming enters the domain of the transcendent, and the practitioner of that magic becomes a sacred figure, or as Stevens would put it, with only a little irony, an *invisible priest*.

Stevens' presence in *The Tablets*, as signified by one of the most curious and provocative phrases in all of his work, is there to remind us of what poetry will become in the modern world, although by modern I mean the last four thousand years or so. What is poetry? "Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead, / Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*"? (CP 203). It is indeed, although Schwerner, given his view of Stevens, may be telling us that this no longer need be the case. *The Tablets* returns

us to the origins of our current poetic circumstances and, in this respect, it is what lies both before and beyond [the the].

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Wallace Stevens and A. R. Ammons as Men on the Dump

GYORGYI VOROS

*poetry to no purpose! all this garbage! all
these words. . . .*

—A. R. Ammons, *Garbage*

WILLIAM RATHJE, PROFESSOR of archeology and anthropology at the University of Arizona and founder and director of The Garbage Project, uses traditional archeological methods to investigate modern landfills. “ ‘Archeologists study ancient garbage to learn about past civilizations,’ ” he says. “ ‘We look at our own refuse to learn about our own civilization, in terms of behaviors that produce the things we throw away. Our trash is the unvarnished imprint of our life-styles’ ” (“Archaeologist”). This same insight lies at the core of two great twentieth-century poems that, like Rathje’s work, seek the meaning in human cultural detritus: Wallace Stevens’ “The Man on the Dump” and A. R. Ammons’ *Garbage*. In these poems, as well as others throughout their canons, these poets consider the implications of “trash”—waste, excess, profligacy—in both human and nonhuman worlds. Since it is the human relationship to nonhuman physical nature that most passionately engages both poets’ philosophical inquiries and linguistic experiments, of particular concern to both is the potential disposability of language itself, the possibility that the “waste of words” (G 74), as Ammons puts it (“waste” meaning both overabundance and a desert place), merely effects yet another encroachment of human will and desire upon the world as Other. If, as Ammons says (sounding more like Stevens than Stevens),

reality is like
still water, invisible, spiritual: the real
abides, spiritual, while entities come and go (G 99),

what can language in general and poetic language in particular possibly add or elucidate? If, as Stevens himself says, “The plum survives its poems” (CP 41) and the poem of pure reality thrives “Without evasion by a single

metaphor" (*CP* 373), then is not language simply another human imposition upon a world always already "Venerable and articulate and complete" (*CP* 383)? Both Stevens and Ammons write poetry with strong undercurrents pulling toward the condition of silence: "reticence's fullness in emptiness" (*G* 112), as Ammons puts it. Both express profound ambivalence toward the ability of language to mediate between human and non-human worlds. How Stevens represents the position of "The Man on the Dump" after having cast language onto the trash heap of human conceptions and how A. R. Ammons revises and rewrites that man's endeavors reveal much about the evolving balances in human-nature relationships, given the ecologically informed realities of our times and the power of words to form and transform that relationship.

Given their apprehensions about the place of language in nature, think how vindicated Stevens and Ammons would both feel to learn that Rathje's work confirms what they, in metaphoric terms, have suspected all along. Among Rathje's many startling and unsavory archeological findings in modern day landfills (decades' old unbiodegraded hot dogs and such) is that their single most prominent component is neither disposable diapers nor plastic containers (as is popularly thought) but words: "newspapers make up 10 to 18 percent of the contents of a typical municipal landfill by volume," writes Rathje. "Even after several years of burial they are usually well preserved. During a recent landfill dig in Phoenix, I found newspapers dating back to 1952 that looked so fresh you might read one over breakfast" ("Rubbish!"). The freshness of a fifty-year-old newspaper is not, of course, the freshness of night described by Stevens in "The Man on the Dump," which, being an extra-linguistic natural phenomenon, has been "fresh a long time" (*CP* 202) and will continue to be. By contrast, human conceptions, codified and embodied in language, molder, decay, and disappear at best; at worst they remain undecomposed, cluttering up the landscape—the physical landscape (as the subject of and actual inspiration for Ammons' *Garbage* sullies the terrain along one stretch of I-95 in Florida) and the perceptual/conceptual landscape of the human imagination.

Trash, whether it be material or ideational, is what is left over, what can no longer be used, what has achieved that state of decay that precedes regeneration in the cycles of creation and destruction. Stevens alludes to this cycle in "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue":

the immense detritus of a world
That is completely waste, that moves from waste
To waste, out of the hopeless waste of the past
Into a hopeful waste to come. (*OP* 81)

Trash also connotes rank excess of production (again, let it be said, in both nature and in culture). In its material versions, it takes on special significance for post-World War II American consumer culture, whose garbage,

both because of sheer volume and because of its unbiodegradability, threatens altogether to clog both the physical and metaphysical cycles of degeneration and renewal. This last condition is more urgent for Ammons than it was for Stevens, who died in 1955 when twentieth-century middens—monumental either in size like Staten Island’s legendary Fresh Kills landfill or in destructive capabilities, like hazardous waste sites at Los Alamos or Hanford, Washington—were in their infancy. “Garbage has to be the poem of our time because / garbage is spiritual” (G 18), writes Ammons: if garbage means the possibility of transformation, then untransformed garbage betokens grave spiritual malady, a condition of stasis more repugnant than, but equivalent to, the one described by Stevens in “Sunday Morning” in which “ripe fruit never fall[s]” and rivers “seek for seas / They never find” (CP 69).

For Stevens, newspapers typify the irrelevance of human news (a concentrated expression of anthropocentrism) in the face of sweeping natural processes of death and decay. In “The Emperor of Ice-Cream,” “the boys / Bring flowers in last month’s newspapers” (CP 64) to the horny-footed embroiderer’s wake; in “The Man on the Dump,” they serve as wrapping paper for flowers, the bouquet of each day brought to a close and tossed away by the moon:

The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho . . . The dump is full
Of images. Days pass like papers from a press.
The bouquets come here in the papers. So the sun,
And so the moon, both come, and the janitor’s poems
Of every day, the wrapper on the can of pears,
The cat in the paper-bag. . . . (CP 201)

Oddly though, Stevens’ dump, a place for refuse, functions as a rather festive public square as well, where sun, moon, and all the days passing like papers from a press (as in the visual cliché for time passing in old movies) pile together convivially along with the bouquets and discarded wrappers on the “mattresses of the dead” (CP 203). Do “the janitor’s poems / Of every day” (CP 201) denigrate this company, or does the company elevate the janitor’s poems? In fact, is poetry trash? Or is trash a kind of poetry? It is all one: the dump disposes of hierarchy, among other things, even to the extent of including nature’s waste along with that of human, cultural waste. If the narrative of human history is a lot of hot air drifting away (the puffing Cornelius Nepos was the first Roman historian), then nature’s productions are equally ephemeral:

Now, in the time of spring (azaleas, trilliums,
Myrtle, viburnums, daffodils, blue phlox),
Between that disgust and this, between the things
That are on the dump (azaleas and so on)

And those that will be (azaleas and so on),
One feels the purifying change. (CP 202)

For the reason of this mutual ephemerality, Stevens scorns human propensities to mimic nature on the grounds of its eternal values, as a romantic might. The poem's second stanza mocks copying nature by setting up a series of ricocheting scatological puns. Willard Spiegelman has pointed out that when Stevens riffs on dew, he "goes so wild with punning that delicate dew has turned, aurally, into something else" (59):

how many men have copied dew
For buttons, how many women have covered themselves
With dew, dew dresses, stones and chains of dew, heads
Of the floweriest flowers dewed with the dewiest dew.
(CP 202)

"From early to mid-Stevens to Ammons, the course is clear," quips Spiegelman: "dew becomes doo-doo" (59). The pun on excrement as the final product of human desire is surely undeniable (and in Ammons will be considerably more explicit—

the heaven we mostly
want, though, is this jet-hoveled hell back,
heaven's daunting asshole [G 22])—

but Stevens' pun alludes also, and perhaps more so, to human action—dew = do (doing) = doo-doo: action as the imposition of human will upon physical nature can amount to a form of defecation. In "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens first equates human doing with the activity of any creature of nature:

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,
As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair. (CP 403)

But then he suggests the drawbacks to this imposition of the human point of view: "to impose is not / To discover" (CP 403). Since Stevens sees poetry as a kind of action—"To read a poem should be an experience, like experiencing an act" (OP 191)—he attributed to it the same redemptive or destructive potential as any other human "doing."

What the "purifying change" alluded to earlier allows the man on the dump to do is to discard entrenched anthropocentric conceptions and perceive physical phenomena as they happen. Elsewhere Stevens has suggested that the most useful function for the human imagination is to decreate itself to imagine a world without layers of human meanings impastoed by the imagination. In "The Plain Sense of Things" he observes, "the absence of the imagination had / Itself to be imagined" (CP 503). The

result of this act of decreation is the unmediated experience of nonhuman Other (even if the experience is inevitably imagined!):

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like an image of a man),
You see the moon rise in the empty sky. (CP 202)

Given the tranquil lucidity of vision the man on the dump experiences after his act of shedding, why, then, is the poem's final stanza fraught with insistent, even tortured, questions? Rending the veil of anthropocentrism appears to render the poet at least momentarily superfluous: like Shakespeare's idiot full of sound and fury, he "sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail" (CP 202). Sound (a trope for the poem)—whether it come from a tin can, a crow, or a nightingale—is painful and jarring: it "torture[s] the ear, / Pack[s] the heart and scratch[es] the mind" (CP 203). To be the poet on the dump is

to hear the blatter of grackles and say
Invisible priest; is it to eject, to pull
The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?
Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the. (CP 203)

The appellation of *invisible priest* appears to point at once to the grackles and to the poet, either or both of whom scavenge and carve up, rather savagely (sacrificially?), the accumulated materials of the dump, pulling the day to pieces. Elsewhere, I have discussed the multiple implications of the poet's outcry of *stanza my stone* in the context of his equivalences among the ideas of *oikos*/home, the Heideggerian notion of dwelling, and the poem as a chamber or a home. *Stanza* is Italian for a chamber or a room, thus a place of habitation or dwelling in Heidegger's sense: "The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *bauen*, dwelling" (Voros 90–91; Heidegger 325). The poet's cry conflates the images of the poem as the poet's only true home as well as the poem as rock, a tombstone, or a memorial (his stanza is his stone). Thus the poem (the house of Being) is equivalent to the earth (the house of mortal dwelling), which in turn is equivalent to both the womb and the tomb. On the dump, the waste place of decontextualized objects and artifacts, the poet is charged with recomposing the decomposing matter of civilization, in the process making for himself a dwelling place and a memorial.

The strange and brilliant last line of "The Man on the Dump" evokes an image of the poet (*invisible priest*) startled from the grisly task of pulling things to pieces for a moment as if to recall a distantly remembered notion or a faintly heard voice. "Where was it one first heard of the truth?" he ponders—not "the truth" but "*of the truth*," as though of something rumored. Aurally, the line's final phrase, which is set in apposition to the

truth—"The the"—is onomatopoeia for stuttering or for beating a drum. Semantically, "the" is a pointer; "the" suggests "that *one*." It implies the process of separating things from a whole, defining discrete particularity: not truth as an abstraction; not *a* truth among truths, but *the* truth. Only in dispensing with notions of truth's distinct definability and identifiability can the man on the dump see clearly, divested of images.

This conclusion is borne out by the poems in the *Collected Poems* immediately following "The Man on the Dump": "On the Road Home" and "The Latest Freed Man." The former further elucidates the enlivening effect of shedding anthropocentric adherence to human absolutes. "It was when I said, / 'There is no such thing as the truth,' " writes Stevens, "That the grapes seemed fatter, . . . the tree, at night, began to change," and

the silence was largest
And longest, the night was roundest,
The fragrance of the autumn warmest,
Closest and strongest. (*CP* 203–04)

"The Latest Freed Man," too, is "a man without a doctrine," able "To be without a description of to be" (*CP* 205). Images and descriptions, the material of poetry, it would appear, need to join the other refuse on the dump for the man on the dump to experience nature and the world fully.

It is only fitting that A. R. Ammons' book-length *Garbage*, a meditative jeremiad in the poet's signature mode of the onanistic sublime, should, in the process of its own composition, rewrite (compost, digest, consume, regurgitate, egest) some of its own poetic predecessors, including Stevens. This poem about culture's propensities for cycling through (exploiting, discarding and/or recycling) its products derives, in its totality, most conspicuously from "The Man on the Dump," but also from Whitman's "This Compost" and Shelley's "Ozymandias" (as has been well discussed in the critical literature, most notably by Willard Spiegelman). More subtly and allusively, *Garbage* also reconsiders, in its parts, other poems interrogating art's value to the human condition: section 16, for example, improvises on "Ode to a Nightingale" when it harks to Keats's sweeter unheard melodies and recasts them as "the unheard, the unsent, that which is around / the edges of whatever may be" (*G* 104). The same section's circling of the truth/beauty dyad rehearses the themes of "Ode on a Grecian Urn": "good writing," he writes, "contains if not in its matter, its manner, much / truth and beauty and beauty and truth" (*G* 100). As always, though, Ammons' most avid repartees engage Stevens, whatever his own protests to the contrary ("I have read little Stevens, and basically he is not one of my favorite poets, though I think he's a good poet," he has said in an interview [*On the Damned* 64]). In its improvisations on both human excess and nature's profligacy, *Garbage* paraphrases portions of Stevens' "Credences of Summer" as well as some of the Florida poems ("O Florida, Venereal Soil" and "No-

mad Exquisite," for example). The ninth section's presentation of the fable of the rabbit and the chipmunk—the savvy rabbit who eludes the yellow tabby and poor "chipmunkey" (G 62) who does not—rewrites Stevens' "The Rabbit as King of the Ghosts" in the rabbit's favor. The most significant area of overlap between Ammons' paean to the nonhuman world, increasingly infringed upon by the human, and Stevens' poems is the interrogation of the value and effect of language.

From the book's dedication forward, in the spirit of biocentric equality (as the phrase goes), Ammons aligns poets with a gamut of species fairly low on the food chain: "to the bacteria, tumblebugs, scavengers, word-smiths—the transfigurers, restorers" (G, dedication page). Shortly thereafter, he alludes to "the deities of unpleasant / necessities: refined, young earthworms" (G 18–19). Although the stanza shifts subject to return to the poet's ruminations about his own work, the positioning of the reference to "the best poem of the / century" appears to praise the worm's work. The poet, too, is a transfigurer and restorer of cultural detritus. The Ammons of *Garbage* is a latter-day man on the dump (one of the poem's subjects is literally a landfill); but the dump is in the man's mind, too. Like William Rathje in another context, Ammons discovers the felled Towers of Babble daily laid low and piling up—a state of affairs that gives the poet his work:

there is a mound,
too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
off to and burned down on, the energy held and
shaped into new turns and clusters, the mind
strengthened by what it strengthens. . . . (G 20)

This version of the poet as alchemist who transforms trash governs large sections of *Garbage*. But Ammons also aligns the poet with the problematic figure of the dump truck driver who both adds his load to the trash heap and presides over the dump as a high priest (or, in Stevens' words, as its *invisible priest*). If *Garbage* is just a poem "with a job to do" (G 24), the poet's work is at times akin to that of the driver whose scatological truck "spills its goods from / the back hatch" (G 27–28). Afterward, however, the driver wanders to a clifftop to survey a kingdom awash in transcendence: he

looks off from the high point into the rosy-fine
rising of day, the air pure, the wings of the
birds white and clean as angel-food cake: holy, holy,
holy, the driver cries and flicks his cigarette
in a spiritual swoop that floats and floats before
it touches ground. . . . (G 28)

Ammons is sardonic in this caricature, but not in the assessment of the dump's inherently mythic role that follows: "here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal / of renewing change" (G 28). The poem's following section puts the garbage spreader in a similar role: his transformative powers are made even more explicit by his association with fire:

how to be blessed are mechanisms,
procedures that carry such changes! The
garbage spreader gets off his bulldozer and
approaches the fire: he stares into
it as into eternity, the burning edge of beginning and
ending, the catalyst of going and becoming. . . .
.....
he stands in the presence
of the momentarily everlasting, the air about
him sacrosanct, purged of the crawling vines
and dense vegetation of desire, nothing between
perception and consequence. . . . (G 32-33)

The portrayal of the dump as a temple of transfiguration superintended by the poet as priest continues through the poem's first six sections; yet even in these early parts of the poem an uneasiness pervades in that the priestly director behind "the / black-chuffing dozer" is himself of the dump, contributing his load to it. Ammons' anxiety is that of Stevens'—that the poet's linguistic productions, meant to process and translate the cultural (and natural) matter, merely add to the mound of trash: "is a poem about garbage garbage" [?], Ammons asks (G 30).

As the poem progresses, Ammons' anxieties about the place of language in the world and on the dump grow more pronounced, the poem's tone more rancorous. Occasionally, the poem erupts into tirade, as in the passage denouncing contemporary literary theory in the academy—the "museums of our desecrations" (G 85)—a term that in the context of the poem describes both the garbage dump and universities:

for god's sake drop all this crap about words,
singularity and dominion: it is so boring,
when I hear it a hook of anger in my guts tears
the lining: the world was the beginning
of the world. . . . (G 51)

Elsewhere, too, Ammons has expressed his faith in the primacy of physical nature over human perceptions or conceptions and his impatience with the notion that consciousness constructs reality:

It seems obvious to me that things and the world came first. In spite of all philosophical sophistry and negativism and subjectivism, I believe what's "written" in the rocks. I believe that this planet is ancient, that it preceded man or manlike creatures by billions of years and preceded words and languages by at least an equal time. The center of consciousness for me is not verbal. I live in a world of things, not texts, not written texts. I feel that languages are arbitrary systems of intrinsic coherence and incoherence that arise, change and disappear in response to circumstance, taking nothing from and adding nothing to nature. (On "The Damned" 123)

This assertion of the superfluity of language is quite at variance with Stevens' deeply held conviction that human language is itself a product of nature with the capability of effecting a relationship with the nonhuman Other. For Stevens, language and world possess a wild, organic coherence: "It is / As if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem, each one the mate / Of the other, as if summer was a spouse, / Espoused each morning . . . denouncing separate selves, both one," he writes in "A Primitive Like an Orb" (CP 441). Ammons, however, evinces far greater uncertainty about the place and value of language in general and poetic language in particular than Stevens: if language is an arbitrary system, excessive and wasteful, it is a fit addition to the dump.

Two factors account for this difference in the poets' versions of the significance of language. First, wittingly or unwittingly, and despite his rejection elsewhere of romantic theories of nature in favor of the phenomenological, Stevens absorbed the nineteenth-century romantic view of ecology (one that continues to have great popular currency today), which posits that every element in the natural world fills a unique niche and fulfills a unique role. In this view, the alteration or removal of any one component alters the whole system. Ammons, by virtue both of his later historical moment and a strong, lifelong grounding in the sciences, is privy to developments in evolutionary theory that suggest that not all evolutionary change is adaptive and that nature is in fact given, at least in some instances, to redundancy and excess. Stephen Jay Gould terms such traits "exaptations" rather than adaptations; even in Stevens' time it was understood that many species have come and gone in the life of the planet without dire consequences to the web of life (171).

Ammons in *Garbage* meditates on all manner of excess and redundancy, from the natural to the social to the linguistic, and concludes that, indeed, the world and language are separate, and not equal, entities and that lan-

guage is extra, not a critical part of any ecosystem. Nature's profligacy is everywhere apparent:

what are we to think of the waste, though: the
sugarmaple seeds on the blacktop are so dense,
the seedheads crushed by tires, the wings stuck
wet, they hold the rains, so there's no walkway
dry: so many seeds, and not one will make a
tree, excuse the expression: what of so much
possibility, all impossibility. . . . (G 90)

From this depiction of waste, Ammons segues smoothly into a consideration of waste in the social world: "how about the / one who finds alcohol at eleven, drugs at seventeen / death at thirty-two," he queries, and continues a litany of lives misspent or wasted by misfortune and violence (G 90). Given his immersion in the consciousness of the prodigal in the natural and human worlds, it is not a far leap for Ammons to surmise that language is a lot less critical to the workings of the world than some theorists would have us believe:

whole languages, like species, can
disappear without dropping a gram of earth's
weight, and symbolic systems to a fare you well
can be added without filling a ditch or thimble. (G 51)

The second factor in Ammons' pessimism toward the ability of language to effect a viable relationship with the nonhuman Otherness of physical nature is both more figurative in the way it is embedded within the structure of *Garbage* itself and more literal, harking back to current scientific data like that of William Rathje's cited at the start of this essay. The figure of the dump as temple of transformation with the poet as its priest works only if the process of decomposition and regeneration continues apace. Modern landfills, as Rathje has shown, tend to embalm and mummify their junk, creating a sort of zombie trash that never truly dies. The linguistic equivalent is

the poem
itself; the minute its transmutations end, it
becomes a relic sometimes only generations or
sets of countrywide generations can degrade:
a real stick in the fluencies: a leftover light
that hinders the light stream: poems themselves

processing, revitalizing so much dead material
become a dead-material concentrate time's

longest actions sometimes can't dissolve. . . . (G 109)

In this mood of displeasure with the effectiveness of language, Ammons turns (in spirit if not in so many words) to the old adage that actions speak louder than words and demands a morality expressed in behavior. The eighth section of *Garbage* is a paean to fact and action:

I'm trying to mean what I

mean to mean something: best for that is a kind
of matter-of-fact explicitness about the facts:

best of all, facts of action: actions, actions,
actions, human or atomic: . . .

.....

here is the real morality, the economy of

action and reaction. . . . (G 54–55)

One interesting adjunct to Ammons' cavils with language and calls to action is that although his is the only contemporary literary work meditating on the meanings of trash, an entire subgenre of visual and performance art has sprung up around the subject. In 1987, for example, artist Ciel Bergman, with her collaborator, sculptor Nancy Merrill, spent five weeks collecting nonbiodegradable plastic on the beaches of Santa Barbara and created an installation at the city's Contemporary Arts Forum that employed not only the collected plastic, but also recordings of ocean, whale, and seagull sounds, a mural, a firepit of ashes, a Native American medicine wheel, and an altar of fresh flowers (Gablik 153–154). Much of the impact of this sort of installation is in its visceral, nonverbal nature; in this instance, though, visitors were invited to write down their fears concerning environmental degradation and attach their writings to prayer sticks that were then "returned to the ocean" whence the trash had come. Bergman's comments on the work may strike some readers as New Age philosophizing, but a Stevens reader will recognize a dynamic very much akin to the imagination/reality dialectic his canon probes:

Art may not change anything, but the ideas we have about ourselves we project into the world. . . . Negative images have a way of coming alive just as positive images have. If we project images of beauty, hope, healing, courage, survival, cooperation, interrelatedness, serenity, imagination and harmony, this will have a positive effect. Imagine what artists could do if they became committed to the long-term good of the planet. (Gablik 154)

The same year, 1987, Sante Fe artist Dominique Mazeaud began a seven-year-long performance piece entitled *The Great Cleansing of the Rio Grande River*. The piece, conceived as ritual (the artist sees herself as a “ceremonialist”), entailed visiting the river once a month over the course of seven years and collecting trash. Although the artist documented her work in journalistic writings and permitted, if not invited, audience participation, the action was conceived essentially as a private dialogue between herself and the Rio Grande. What makes such an action art rather than merely public service, according to critic Suzi Gablik, is “the [r]aising [of] a useful action to the spiritual (thus making it resonant and catalytic)” (143).

Possibly the best known of the recent garbage artists is Mierle Ukeles, official artist in residence of the New York City Sanitation Department. Ukeles’ works include *The Social Mirror*, a twenty-cubic-yard garbage truck covered in mirrors so that passersby may recognize themselves in their trash, and *Touch Sanitation*, a two-year performance piece in which Ukeles traveled the city of New York, shook hands with each one of 8500 sanitation workers, and said to each the words, “Thank you for keeping New York City alive” (Oakes 187). Ukeles has also transformed the 59th Street Marine Transfer Station, a garbage facility handling waste flow, by constructing a glass bridge from which to watch the processing of trash. Ukeles says, “They [the visitors] will be able to watch all of the things they worked so hard to buy go to waste” (Oakes 187). Of an installation in Taejon, Korea, in 1993, centered on densified polystyrene, aluminum, bottle glass and so on in the first stages of reprocessing, Ukeles says: “These surprisingly rich and abundant materials have all been thrown out. The desire that made people work to make them, and to purchase them, has passed. The materials have now been densified, and are in the first stages of reprocessing. They are not yet formed again. Visitors enter the place and see them, held for a moment in flux.” Identifying the same pivotal moment between decay and renewal that both Stevens and Ammons explore poetically, Ukeles, on a placard at the entrance to the installation, identifies it as “the land of NO-LONGER-AND-NOT-YET” (Oakes 187). Explaining the impetus for her work, Ukeles asks, “If, in a free culture, an artist could call anything art, then why not necessity itself, maintenance itself, the act and processes of keeping those precious things we’ve created precious—an individual, a life, a home, a system, a city?” (Oakes 184). Finally, to cite an example from outside the United States, Brazilian artist Bene Fonteles (also in 1986–87, apparently the heyday of garbage art) performed a work in Cuiaba’s public square in which he returned to the people of Cuiaba the garbage and litter they had left behind in the forest, creeks, and waterfalls during their weekend picnics (Gablik 142).

The four artists mentioned above all ceremonialize the act of garbage disposal. Like Stevens and Ammons, they recognize that a culture’s trash and the means by which the culture processes it reveal much about what it holds meaningful and valuable. In the United States, the interval of use-

fulness a mass-produced object has between the time it is produced and the time it is junked is ever shorter; some products (packaging, fast-food utensils) have useful lives measurable in minutes. It could be argued that, similarly, ideas, values, and images in our time possess an equal disposability ("The dump is full / Of images"). Oddly enough, on the global scale a phenomenon occurs that, speaking both politically and poetically, puts the United States and the West in the position of Ammons' landfill and the Third World in the position of the "transfigurers, restorers" (that is, poets). The refuse of the West is regularly transformed by Third World peoples into objects useful, playful, ceremonial, and artistic: colorful telephone wire is used in traditional basket weaving by South Africa's Zulu; in Marrakech, water carriers are made from old tire rubber; industrially produced metal chains are used in making traditional, decorative Kenyan belts; melted down and reformed red plastic phonograph records are made into necklaces in Ghana (Cerny passim). Suzanne Seriff, one of the curators of an exhibition entitled *Recycled Re-Seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*, from which the examples above were taken, defines trash in this way:

Rubbish is, by definition, an object that is not, or is no longer, owned by anyone, that falls outside all categories of economics, culture, and social control. As one of many things on the garbage heap, a discarded object even tends to take on a negative value as something unsanitary, dangerous, dank, and disorderly. The socially constructed value of the object has shifted over time from its finite life span of usefulness and meaning to a timeless and valueless state of socially sanctioned rubbish. (15)

This definition suggests that rubbish is material approaching a condition analogous to that of wilderness in nature and the subconscious in the human psyche. The poet Gary Snyder, a contemporary of Ammons' and equally concerned with the place of language in human ecology, puts the issue of garbage in terms overtly mythic and ones that Ammons, in a less curmudgeonly mood, would champion as a fit description of the metaphorical possibilities of the dump:

Wild systems are in one elevated sense above criticism, but they can also be seen as irrational, moldy, cruel, parasitic. . . . Life is not just a diurnal property of large interesting vertebrates; it is also nocturnal, anaerobic, cannibalistic, microscopic, digestive, fermentative: cooking away in the warm dark. . . . And there is a world of nature on the decay side, a world of beings who do rot and decay in the shade. Human beings have made much of purity and are repelled by blood, pollution, putrefaction. The other side of the "sacred " is the sight of your beloved in the underworld, dripping with maggots. Coyote, Orpheus, and

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Wallace Stevens' "Second Selves" and the Nostalgia of Discursiveness

WILLARD SPIEGELMAN

TWO CENTURIES AGO, Wordsworth, while still a young man, wrote "Michael" (subtitled "A Pastoral") "for the delight of a few natural hearts; / And, with fonder feeling, for the sake of youthful Poets, who among these hills / Will be my second self when I am gone" (146). Wordsworth was more assured, even sanguine, about his benefactions and his beneficiaries than Wallace Stevens, whose own retrospective assessment of his work was distinctly less confident of its permanence: "Ariel was glad he had written his poems. / . . . It was not important that they survive" (CP 532). Or, even twenty years earlier: "Children picking up our bones / Will never know that these were once / As quick as foxes on the hill" (CP 158). But his own plentiful successors in the almost half century since his death confirm the richness of Stevens' legacy. His inheritors have absorbed and reformulated it in ways that may affect our understanding of the nature of literary influence, specifically the variations on romanticism that continue to exercise the poetic imagination.

One could trace Stevens' spectral but powerful presence in contemporary poetry along many lines. One might first attend to tropes and figures (e.g., the falling leaves, the weather) or to quotations of, or allusions to, specific, characteristic words and phrases. When, for instance, Jorie Graham, in "Penmanship," a signature poem from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, refers to "labials and gutturals" (31), or, in her next-to-most recent book, *The Errancy*, speaks of a "glittery arctic yawn, effulgent, blazing" ("Spelled from the Shadows Aubade" 35), she weaves "The Plot against the Giant" and "The Auroras of Autumn" into her own poetic program. One could continue the tracing with regard to poetic themes (e.g., the pressure exerted by reality against the imagination) or philosophical traditions. Susan Howe, sometimes classified among the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets and always associated with the avant-garde, has claimed Stevens as her favorite poet; her latest book, *Pierce-Arrow*, focuses on the idiosyncratic philosopher C. S. Peirce, inventor of that crucial and much-used Stevensian term "the first idea." The whole book constitutes an extended

Stevensian experiment in “the poem of the idea” though not of “the words,” an effort to re-situate the founder of pragmatism at the center, instead of on the periphery, of late-nineteenth-century thought, and to test the lacunae, blanks, and gaps upon whose existence any concept of the centrality of “major man” depends.

Next, one might look closely at prosodic and stanzaic forms (the resilience of iambic pentameter or of tercets, for example), and, more generally, at the level of stylistic mannerisms, such as pronominal use. I am thinking of Stevens’ almost absolute avoidance of a poetic “I,” which may anticipate the Language Poets and their own, more politically motivated, efforts to disturb or dislodge the myth of the unified subject. Such avoidance, however, more generally reflects the Emersonian tradition that, according to Richard Poirier, calls us sometimes to witness “the disappearance of the human” (182). Finally (to continue in the matter of poetic style), one might follow Stevens’ example in regard to syntax and its relationship to personal identity (about which more work needs to be done): Stevens’ sinuous hypotaxis has snaked a path into John Ashbery’s poems, which playfully render a simultaneity devoid of contradiction or friction. Ashbery’s meandering results in a proliferation of identities but, at the same time, a paradoxical loss of all selfhood. Where Ashbery’s syntax moves fluidly from origin to surprising destination, coursing along a flow chart and taking unexpected turns, Stevens’ is more likely to circle back upon itself, doubling and redoubling terms, phrases, appositional constructions, and entire clauses.¹

In a previous generation one might have pointed to James Merrill’s and Richard Howard’s adaptations of the nacreous, ornamental, even baroque, side of Stevens’ temperament. For many young formalist poets, coming of age in the 1950s meant coming to terms with the elaborate artifice of early Stevens, what Gorham Munson called the “decadent hedonism” and the “grace and ceremony, the appropriate nimbleness of the dandy” of *Harmonium* (Doyle 79), and to the “essential gaudiness” (*OP* 212) of poetry. Such gaudiness and ornament, reflections of Stevens’ feeling for French art, were doubtless a welcome respite from the stable grayness of much American life—cultural and economic as well as poetic—and furnished an imaginative escape (as well as an actual one) to a continent that had been essentially closed to tourists since before World War II.² The man who never saw Europe, and W. H. Auden, the man who fled from it, became—appropriately as well as paradoxically—models of poetic cosmopolitanism to younger poets who veered away from the more politically conservative Eliot and Pound.

Poets flexing their muscles and establishing their own harmonies during the past two decades, however, have tended to respond to a different side of Stevens, especially to his later, post-*Harmonium* poetry. Perhaps the most salient and resonant aspect of Stevens’ legacy to younger poets in the 1990s is his “discursiveness.” I borrow the term from Robert Pinsky

who, more than twenty years ago in *The Situation of Poetry*, observed that “discursive” can be synonymous with either “epigrammatic,” “aphoristic,” and “pithy” (along the lines of J. V. Cunningham and Pinsky’s own teacher, Yvor Winters, a line stretching back to Ben Jonson), or “wandering,” “explorative,” a line that extends from Wordsworth, Coleridge, and their successors in the reformulations of the romantic nature lyric (134–176). Stevens, like the more homespun A. R. Ammons, is discursive in both of these senses, but it is the latter that has made him an important model for a certain form of ruminative poetic talk in the years since Pinsky’s book. Poets in a meditative frame of mind have often resorted to methods borrowed from Stevens’ own wrestling with speculative issues in long and leisurely sentences. Because he dramatizes the experience of thinking in poetry Stevens offers a ready example, one perhaps tarred with the brush of nostalgia, for today’s younger contemplative writers.

All of the paths I have not taken might figure in a reading of recent poetry by James Longenbach and John Koethe, the first a literary historian and critic, the second a professional philosopher, both of whom compose Stevensian poems of the earth that glance above and beyond it. They have revised Stevens’ themes, his tropes for thinking, and occasionally his diction, and refashioned them into a personal mode that accommodates a first-person speaker as well as colloquial speech. In other words, they harmonize Stevens and his characteristic themes with Wordsworth and the poetry of autobiographical reminiscence, in lyric or more extended meditative forms. Between Wordsworth’s claim to speak on behalf of humanity, in the “real language” of men, and Coleridge’s aphoristic definition of poetry as “the best words in the best order” (506), between the sometimes rival demands of fidelity to self and appeals to our commonality, all the major poets of the past two centuries have had to locate themselves. If one popular and resilient mode of the fin de siècle has been a casual thoughtfulness, it makes sense to ascribe it not to the workshopping of poems in professional writing programs but to the writers’ efforts to accommodate the intimacies of a personal voice (or tone or style) to the capaciousness of meditation. The unlikely combination of Wordsworth (in “lyrical” ballads, autobiography, blank verse meditation, diction that does not eschew abstraction) and Stevens (combining expansive syntax, abbreviated epigrams, visual precision and gnomic wisdom) ought to encourage a reconsideration of nostalgia as a discursive mode at once secondary or belated and authentically revisionary.

Liminality, that great Stevens motif, provides Longenbach with a theme and a title: *Threshold*. The book deals, in often anecdotal tonalities, with habits, habitats, and habitation, with belonging to and searching for home—Heideggerian issues without phenomenological pomposity or stylistic obscurity. For many of Stevens’ followers, earth is the place for love (in Frost’s famous adage) and the only possible place for jubilation. It is

An earthly mother, a regular suburban woman, here replaces Stevens' more majestic maternal presences.

When, in his opening poem ("What You Find in the Woods") Longenbach says "everything's reduced / To the chilled circle of its lesser self" (3) we know we are in the presence of someone in that Emersonian line reaching back from Stevens and his Snow Man, his Rock, and the First Idea, to the bare naked common in Concord. In the last stanzas of "Real Estate" (a poem with multiple echoes of both "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" and Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight"), Longenbach looks up at the stars:

We comb the stars in search of emptiness,
A place to begin again—reconstructing,
Rearranging what's thought or found into a space

That isn't distinct from what we own but seems,
Though the law's not on our side, more personal,
More incorporeal than anywhere we've lived before. (12)

He keeps coming back and coming back, like Stevens, to the "real." The situations Longenbach rehearses in many of his poems involve reduction, limitation, and what Harold Bloom calls belatedness; one has the feeling that the poems are deftly coded meditations on the young ephebe's sense of his vocation and his place (in many senses) in the world.

Of all the poems in this volume, the one most resonant with Stevensian tropes is also the one with the strongest obsession with liminality, "Threshold of the Visible World" (which the poet Michael Collier once said—according to the author as a compliment to him!—sounds like "Stevens under water"). The poem pays initial homage to the psychoanalytic theorist Kaja Silverman, to whom it is dedicated. It is from her that Longenbach has borrowed his title, although even here he sets himself in a chain of repetition, or at the threshold of a literary moment that looks backward as well as forward. Silverman takes the phrase from the famous description of Jacques Lacan of his "mirror stage": "the mirror image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world" (Lacan 3). Regardless of the nominal, or titular echo, Longenbach's poem pays greater homage to Stevens than to psychoanalysis, specifically "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" (CP 508–11), and the figure of Santayana who is poised "on the threshold of heaven" in Rome, itself another "threshold." For Stevens the moment before death "is a kind of total grandeur at the end, / With every visible thing enlarged" (CP 510). Bloom has linked "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" with "The Owl in the Sarcophagus" as "Stevens' most intensely visionary or transcendental poem[s]" (281), and I take Longenbach's re-doings of these two as proof of a desire to work toward transcendence while sadly acknowledging his secular limitations and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of encountering the sublime. At century's end, the godhead or even an ac-

ceptable, nonsectarian version of spirituality seems further out of reach than ever before. Thresholds may tempt and inspire, but the sad, inevitable truth is that we may never cross, or move beyond, them.

Longenbach's poem is a series of variations on the theme of crossing: six numbered sections, each with eight tercets, the last line of which becomes the first line of the following section. (As the poem's last line returns us to the first, the whole makes a pattern both circular and linear.) Liminality includes boundaries and thresholds above and below water, between water and shore, between city and country, between one world and another (even Charon makes a brief appearance), between heights and depths, inside and outside, and between life and death. The poem wavers; it seems to be, variously, a galactic tour of modified Dantean proportions, an epistemological investigation, and a lyric meditation. Each section is self-contained and also a part of a continuous whole.

At the intersection between the third and fourth sections, the poem and one of its characters make a powerful crossing. A small child (a version of Wordsworth's Lucy Gray?) strays alone in the snow,

3.
 . . . when all the natural world began
 To flow like water, colder than water,

 And each vague atom of light convened
 Within the image of her mother's face,
 The threshold of the visible world.

4.

 At the threshold of the visible world,
 Without shelter, without clothing or bread,
 Beyond the magnitude of human voices

 Or will to sing, or singing, to be heard,
 A cloud appeared to cover the hill
 In mysterious shade. The seasons changed. (61)

This is the point at which "the mind forgets itself and cries out sharply / At the sight of angels in the clouds." It is also the point at which Longenbach echoes "Connoisseur of Chaos": "And yet relation appears, / A small relation expanding like the shade / Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill" (*CP* 215). In Longenbach's world, as in Stevens', the mind presses against reality and reality presses back, but now to form a softer, more synthetic, *tertium quid*; the "meshwork of desire rises / undistinguished from its object" (63). Even a superficial mapping of the poem suggests its maker as a warmer Stevens, an Ariel residing more in earth and water than in air, a first-person subject challenged but not defeated by the prop-

erties of the world it everywhere engages. Longenbach looks, in other words, like Stevens without the chaos, the violence of his “old order” and his “immense disorder,” like Stevens as his own “pensive man” (CP 216).

Less abstract than Stevens, more grounded in their speculations, both Longenbach and John Koethe feel comfortable with an unembarrassed first-person casualness and with leisurely pensiveness, a rare quality in a poetic climate that prefers speed, intensity, and passion. They have crossed Stevens the metaphysician with Wordsworth the autobiographer. Claiming that “overwhelmingly good poets are overwhelmingly bad influences,” Randall Jarrell was for once, perhaps, wrong when he surmised that Stevens’ rhetoric would ruin the poems of succeeding poetic generations. He thought that “this generalizing, masterful, scannable verse of Stevens’ would become, if swallowed whole and undigested, oppressive to his followers” (Doyle 419). It is to the credit of the two younger poets that they can enfold Stevens’ ruminative, hermetic opacities and blank abstractions within a discursive “middle” style, neither overwrought and ornamental nor bare and ascetic.

The opening poem in Koethe’s latest volume, *The Constructor*, acknowledges his inheritance from the modernist masters. Entitled “Sunday Evening,” it is the melancholy but almost playful work of one who comes later in the day or the century:

Ideas as crystals and the logic of a violin:
The intricate evasions warming up again
For another raid on the inarticulate. And soon
The morning melody begins, the oranges and the tea,
The introspective walk about the neighborhood,
The ambient noise, the low lapping of water over
stones.
The peace one finds encounters one alone,
In the memories of books, or half-remembered songs,
Or in the mild enchantments of the passive mood:
To hesitate, to brood, to linger in the library and then,
As from some green and sunny chair, arise and go. (1)

This pastiche of Stevens, Eliot, and Yeats is more obvious, and more obviously “literary,” than anything else in Koethe’s four books of poems, and I take its position here as an announcement of homage and poetic program. It is academic in several senses: not only does it take place in a library but it also depends heavily upon its reader’s familiarity with canonical texts to score its points, to flesh-out its speaker, and to produce its mellow harmonies. It reproduces acts of creation—or recreation, rather—with an almost Wordsworthian insistence on the wise passiveness of receptivity. One finds peace but is also encountered by it. What Wordsworth called “an ennobling interchange / Of action from within and from with-

out" (1805 *Prelude* XII, 376–77) takes a surprising turn in Koethe's mellow nostalgia. Such nostalgia provokes what John Hollander would label "echo metaleptic" (113–49), a transumptive troping that moves away from origins to more attenuated versions of a first idea (just as Longenbach receives one version of thresholds—in addition to those he finds in Dante, Wordsworth, and Stevens—by troping on Silverman and Lacan). Whether the progression tends to strengthen or to diminish the original trope, to bleach or to darken the final product remains, of course, to be dealt with on an individual rather than a theoretical level. In this case, Koethe's library does not really contain a green and sunny chair but only a simulacrum, something *like* a green and sunny chair. The primary data of the world of Stevens' agnostic woman in "Sunday Morning" have been pushed farther back into the mind, the locus of Koethe's thought and the main arena of his poem.

Even at the start, in *Domes* and *The Late Wisconsin Spring*, Koethe worked in a unique mode of Wordsworthian recollection, Ashberyian randomness and Stevensian inquiry into the external world: "it seems / Like a fine day for knowledge: sunlight sleeping on top of the rocks / And lots of white clouds scudding by like clean sheets" (*Domes* 5). Inner and outer weather become joint partners in the soul's mystery:

Why is it supposed to be so important to see things as
they actually are?
The sense of life, of what life is *like*—isn't that
What we're always trying so desperately to say?
And whether we live in between them,
Mirror each other out of thin air, or exist only as
reflections
Of everything that isn't ours, we all sense it,
And we want it to last forever.
(*"Partial Clearance," The Late Wisconsin Spring* 14)

Everything seems to exist only in tropes and comparisons, what Stevens memorably called "the intricate evasions of as" (*CP* 486): "Like a fine day," or "what life is *like*." Koethe's poetry accepts, indeed revels in, its belatedness, responsiveness, partiality. Like Longenbach, Koethe accepts liminality, thresholds, our in-between status, as the major mark of identity. We can know nothing of ourselves except the fact that we exist, moving through time that is itself one continuous threshold: the world "holds / Something we are and cannot know we are / But as what passes" (*"The Narrow Way," Late Wisconsin Spring* 34). Whereas Stevens, or Dante, or any poet with a sense of the religious, would allow us to move *between* one side of a door and another, for Koethe even a threshold is a lengthened passageway, all in-betweenness.

Like Longenbach, Koethe absorbs the death of God from "Sunday Morning" and accepts it without question or lamentation, only muted regret:

There used to be this vague idea of God
Lurking below the surface of our lives, but it is all
words now.
And the lamentations of the lost, the poorly used, the
slowly dying
That used to play about the minarets of heaven
Have become a kind of discourse on the lateness of the
hour, a constant
Wistfulness masquerading as a form of
play
On absence, the absence of the imaginary
Words it used to be our simple happiness to say.
(*"The Narrow Way," The Late Wisconsin Spring* 30)

What used to be not God but a vague and "lurking" idea of Him has itself been succeeded by mere words: lateness and masquerade, like secondariness and simile, are co-partners in a poetic program that makes a virtue of weariness. The nostalgia derived from belatedness addresses itself to the past, and to our past selves, by forcing us constantly to re-adjust our perceptions of time and space, weather and landscape, as the years accumulate and all feelings come under scrutiny. Where Stevens could propose the death of one god or of all of them as a tragedy for the imagination, his epigones are more acquiescent. (One could make interesting comparisons between Koethe's melancholy, and his characteristic syntactic and figurative maneuvers, and that of Charles Wright, a more deeply descriptive and lushly observant but equally melancholic poet whose devotion to Stevens has taken him down different stylistic paths.)

Sorrow turns to nostalgia, despair to sadness, urgent protest (Stevens' "It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible" [CP 404]) to calmer acceptance:

The banality at the heart of things
In which the heart can rest and let its final feelings form
Lies on the surface, and the transitory moods that seemed to
deepen into life
Vanish like wishes now, like words. What remains behind
Is a kind of feeling of contingency, a gradual waning of the
present
Into a mere possibility, as though it were a dream of the
extent of life
In which there wasn't any tangible experience of finitude,
only a dull,

Unfocused anger as the words slide off the page and out of
memory,
And the faces wash away like caricatures on a wall, and the
sky fades. ("Mistral," *The Constructor* 21)

Where Stevens derived solace, like "a single shawl / Wrapped tightly round
us" from a final soliloquy of an "interior paramour" (*CP* 524), the more
sociable Koethe multiplies possibilities for compensation:

Scared of being alone,
Alone at the end; gathering the remnants of those singular
occasions
Like a cloak or shawl, drawing its raveled sleeve

Against a universe oblivious to care—
Is *this* how friendship tends? Where affection leads?
("Friends," *Falling Water* 19)

Koethe replaces Stevens' marriage or love affair with multiple friendships,
an *egoisme à deux* with less intense collegiality. He has moved from the
singularity of passionate love to the plurality of a more diffuse and out-
ward sense of friendship.

Part of the difference between the early candor and the late plural, be-
tween precursor and successors, can be attributed to changing times.
Koethe and Longenbach are products of post-1945 America; they grew up
without a Depression or a world war to threaten their own stability. Both
"Esthétique du Mal" and "Auroras of Autumn" are, in a deep sense, war
poems (Berger xi). Where Stevens saw apocalyptic threats to civilization
and intimated in much of his poetry of the '30s and '40s his own counter-
apocalyptic tendencies, Koethe and Longenbach find threat and fear only
within, not beyond, themselves. They have the greater leisure to meditate
on private sorrow in relative prosperity and tranquillity. They are aca-
demics. But history and economics alone can never explain differences in
style or temperament. If Stevens offers a model for poetic thinking, we
must look primarily to his poetry itself for an explanation of its appeal.
More than Eliot or Pound with their grandiose aspirations and historical
or theoretical proclamations, or Williams with his whipping effort to break
the back of the pentameter, or Frost with those "subjects" to which Stevens
so violently objected, it is Stevens alone who offers younger poets the
chance to wander discursively or even randomly—opening up, indeed
shaking up, syntactic and grammatical structures—while remaining
prosodically and formally conservative. Once again, Bloom points us sug-
gestively in the right direction by paraphrasing what he takes to be the
implicit, major question of Stevens' last phase: "How can the plain sense
of things allow for transcendental or visionary forms?" (283). As a parallel
to Bloom, I might propose an alternative question: How can the plain sense

of things find convincing aesthetic form when it expresses itself in the nostalgic tonalities of echo, allusion, and homage, and, more generally, in the nostalgia of a wondering, wandering discursiveness? These are questions provoked by a reading of some of our most thoughtful poets, and they are also questions that the poets themselves are asking implicitly and explicitly, a half century after the death of Stevens. Their experiments constitute answers-in-progress, even when they have no explicit, definitive answers to give.

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Notes

¹ See Berger 187–88, for provocative remarks on Stevens' syntax and on his legacy to Ashbery.

² See Merrill's moving treatment of a first European sojourn, and the several kinds of liberation it afforded, in the early fifties.

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Wallace Stevens' Influence on the Construction of Gay Masculinity by the Cuban *Orígenes* Group

ERIC KEENAGHAN

THE PUBLICATION OF Alan Filreis and Beverly Coyle's *Secretaries of the Moon* (1986), the collected correspondence of Wallace Stevens and Cuban translator and editor José Rodríguez Feo, opened new possibilities for the study of North-South relations in modernism.¹ Neither Latin American nor modernist studies, however, has taken full advantage of this opportunity.² Perhaps what has impeded further investigation is the editors' decision to frame *Secretaries of the Moon* as a personal dialogue. "The letters between these two very different literary figures tell their own story of the younger man's ability to draw out the more reserved and, on the face of it, less human and generous poet" (11). If we were to re-contextualize Stevens and Rodríguez Feo's exchange outside of this context of a literary friendship, it would be easier to measure the impact that Stevens had upon *el grupo Orígenes*, those poets and artists with whom Rodríguez Feo was affiliated.

Their epistolary relationship began in 1944 with Rodríguez Feo's solicitation of Stevens' permission to print his translation of "Esthétique du Mal" in *Orígenes*. Although their correspondence would become more intimate over the years, it began with Rodríguez Feo's acting as the magazine's "ambassador," just as he had acted as its liaison with other English-language poets (including T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Stephen Spender, and W. H. Auden).³ He embraced this ambassadorial role, signing one of his 1947 letters from New York City to the other editor of *Orígenes*, José Lezama Lima, "I write to you as your ambassador, Pepe" ["Te escribe tu embajador, Pepe"] (*Mi correspondencia* 51).

Suspicious of previous magazines' emphasis upon socialist realism, *el grupo Orígenes* envisioned metaphorical poetry as generating a politics that "would offer an efficacious resistance to that process of national disintegration that many of the group's members perceived in the contemporary environment of frustration, corruption, and predominant political skepticism" ["ofrecier[í]a un eficaz resistencia a ese proceso de desintegración nacional que muchos del grupo percibían en el ambiente de frustración, corrupción y escepticismo políticos predominante entonces"] (Barquet 62).

Rodríguez Feo's ambassadorial role was regarded as one means of creating such an alternative politics that countered the cultural and economic imperialism disregarded, and even encouraged, by the Batista Republic. *Orígenes'* internationalism was not an unwitting compliance with imperialist ideologies but an attempt to forge an international community through the "secret center"—the resistant transcultural and transhistorical *imago*—that they believed could be manifest only through sociohistorically specific deployments of poetic discourse. As one *origenista*, Cintio Vitier, has remarked, Rodríguez Feo's development of selective ties to English-language poets was a primary means of including "illustrious models from the other America, the Anglo-Saxon, without the slightest shades of neocolonialism but with the naturalness of a brotherly participation in our own adventure" ["egregios exponentes de la otra América, la anglosajona, sin la menor sombra de neocolonialismo, con la naturalidad de una fraterna participación en nuestra propia aventura"] (90).

Stevens would come to have a special place in this pantheon of "illustrious models" of foreign poets. In his 1952 essay "Aldredores de una antología" ["Outlines for an Anthology"], Lezama points to and transforms the nature of the personal friendship between the U.S. poet and his self-described "young disciple" ["joven disciplente"], Rodríguez Feo (*Mi correspondencia* 41). The essay demonstrates that Stevens was appraised by the group as a whole as especially invaluable to *Orígenes'* cosmopolitan yet anti-imperialist project. Lezama credits such foreign-language poets as Eliot, St. John-Perse, and Spender for contributing a sense of "the new" ["lo nuevo"] and for reinforcing what the collective thought to be "art's universal dimension" ["la dimensión universal del arte"] (155), but he shortly thereafter qualifies this appraisal:

But it seems to us that the fundamental acquisition of *Orígenes* is the concept of the *imago* as a force that is just as creative as the seed. The image operates in history with a force that is just as creative as semen in the dominions of creatures' resurgence.

That *imago* and its slow expansion could appear even in the most subtle and novel of forms. Have you read the poem *San Miguel de los Baños* [the title of the Spanish translation of "Attempt to Discover Life"] by the great poet Wallace Stevens? It was sent by the author of *Transport to Summer* in a letter to José Rodríguez Feo; in the poem, Stevens spoke of his [i.e., Rodríguez Feo's] stay at that resort through some parallel anecdote. In another of Wallace Stevens' poems, *Idea of Novels* [*sic*, "The Novel"], he cites a fragment of a letter sent by José Rodríguez Feo, in which the latter tells him of a friend who is frozen in Paris, reading with one black glove on, to capture the sensation of being covered by snow. The detail, the situation, the unthought-of groupings, touching the distant poetic imagina-

tion—like a scratch and its creative dispersal; an unequivocal sign of universalization, to appear in the transmutations and imaginary mysteries of other creators far removed from own latitude and country. The *imago* in the faith of its incarnation in history and in the mysterious successions of novelty.

[“Pero a nuestro parecer la adquisición fundamental de *Orígenes*, es el concepto de la *imago* como una fuerza tan creadora como la semilla. La imagen operante en la historia, con tal fuerza creadora como el semen en los dominios del resurgimiento de la criatura.

Esa *imago* y su lenta expansión aparecerían en su forma más sutil y novelable. ¿Habéis leído el poema *San Miguel de los Baños*, del gran poeta Wallace Stevens? Fue despertado por una carta de José Rodríguez Feo al autor de *Transport to Summer*, en la que hablaba de su estancia en aquel balneario de alguna anécdota transcurrida. En otro de los poemas de Wallace Stevens, *Idea of Novels*, cita el fragmento de una carta enviada por José Rodríguez Feo, donde éste le informa de un amigo suyo que se hieló en París, leyendo con un guante Negro puesto, para rechazar la sensación de estar cubierto por la nieve. He ahí el detalle, la situación, los impensados agrupamientos, tocando, como arañazo y despertar creadores, la ajena imaginación poética; inequívoco signo de universalización, aparecer en las transmutaciones y misterios imaginarios de otros creadores muy alejados de nuestra latitud y paisaje. La *imago* en el fiel de su encarnación en lo histórico y las misteriosas sucesiones de lo novelable.”] (155)

Lezama considered Stevens’ work exemplary because his image connects historical and geographical specificities to the imagination. The imagination’s crucial role in poetry permits boundaries to be transcended, generating a homosocial lineage in which the contextualized imaginings of one distant poet are reproduced in another’s writings. Such a poetics provides for a fraternal communality, one that contests cultural imperialism by stressing the importance of a participatory exchange. Although shared imaginings are not always freely given (Stevens’ “big scratch” from Rodríguez Feo connotes force), the exchange is desired because the resultant poem produces “unthought-of groupings,” both of the image’s metaphorical components and of those diverse cultures that contribute to a tradition.

How the *imago* functions as a poetic device for a mode of anti-imperialist, intercultural exchange only partially explains Stevens’ appeal to *el grupo Orígenes*. Underlying the manifest content of Lezama’s depiction of Stevens and Rodríguez Feo’s correspondence is a homoerotic subtext. If we return to the beginning of the cited passage, we notice that the *imago*’s “creative”

“force” is likened to “the seed,” which is then unambiguously specified as “semen.” Through this description, the *homosocial* model of imaginary influence becomes confluent with a *homosexual* model of poetic relations. Here Lezama balances a collective appropriation of Stevens’ poetics with a deeply intimate account of a personal exchange between two men. This personal dynamic qualifies, rather than negates, Stevens’ appeal to the group. Prefaced by a statement about the *imago*’s seminal power, the narrative that follows is queered, creating a slippage in which the correspondence slides into the paradigm of the amorous love letter. One writes of his personal experiences; the other returns the letter, refashioned into poems, some of which are directly addressed to the respondent.

This homoerotic recontextualization is subtle. Nonetheless, Lezama reinforces it with some odd lexical choices in his prose. Despite the distance between the poets (in both generation and geography), Stevens’ poem is described as “touching” [“tocando”] his correspondent’s imagination. *Tocando* itself has multivalent connotations: Stevens could be “taking” Rodríguez Feo’s offered anecdote, yet he might also be “touching” it, establishing a quasi-physical contact with the Cuban editor through words and images. In some contexts, “tocar” may be idiomatically rendered “to caress.” In this last sense, closeness exceeds mere contiguity or proximity and connotes homoerotic contact. What follows in Lezama’s prose reinforces this reading. The “creative dispersal” [“despertar creadores”] of which he writes also has several connotations. On the one hand, the phrase connotes a nonerotic exchange of letters between creative personalities; on the other hand, if this “creative dispersal” is the result of a figurative “caressing,” Lezama’s lexical choice supports a reading in which what results is an ejaculation of “seed,” of “semen.”

Likening the exchange between the two correspondents as such a “dispersal” of male germ opens the possibility of reading Stevens’ poetics as enabling a queer mobilization of metaphor. Some of the more prominent members of *Orígenes*—Lezama, Virgilio Piñera, Gastón Baquero, and Rodríguez Feo—not only were metaphorical lyrical poets but also were gay.⁴ What is at issue is less the homoerotic subtext of “Outlines of an Anthology” than the masculinizing potential that the essay’s author finds in Stevens’ *imago*. Writing in a culture where gay males are stereotyped as effeminate, submissive males, Lezama points to how queering Stevens’ self-described “virile” poetics might affect the cultural perception of gays. The question of his influence, then, ought not be: *How (or where) might we read traces or citations of Stevens in Orígenes poetry?* Rather, it is: *Why would Stevens’ poetics influence gay Cuban poets?* The answer to this lies in the intersubjective dynamics of what I shall call Stevens’ *baroque poesis*.

HOW THE STEVENSIAN BAROQUE RECONSTRUCTS GENDER

Defining the Stevensian baroque is crucial for understanding his significance in an international forum, especially when his foreign readers

were beginning to define explicitly a modern, Latin American baroque.⁵ What I am referring to as Stevens' baroque poesis supersedes those tropes we commonly think of as characteristic of the sixteenth-century, historical Baroque—metaphorical excess, *vanitas*, the primacy of the body, death, and *horror vacui*. In order to progress beyond a loose categorization of a poetic style, we must investigate how the baroque functions to restructure intersubjective and perspectival relationships in his poetry.⁶ The modern art and poetry that attracted his attention—particularly French symbolism and surrealism—are infused with what might be called a baroque sensibility, offering models for a new perceptual dynamic that Stevens would come to appropriate and transform so as to generate a pragmatic reconstruction of masculinity.

In her study *The Surrealist Look*, Mary Ann Caws rereads Surrealism as baroque on account of its "fascination with what is complex, multiple, clouded, and changeable" (4). At the heart of her argument is the historical Baroque's and Surrealism's similar uses of perspective, which result in what she calls a "fluid interpenetration," or a field of possible readings of a singular image (14). Perspective is the means by which one secures a consciousness of one's identity, but, according to Caws, *baroque perspective is especially dependent upon the object and upon discovering the otherly qualities of one's own self in relation to that object*. The changes that an object experiences over time have an impact on the subject's sense of self, resulting in a "recreation of the self in movement," or the production of a successive series of identities (22). This Surrealist baroque is founded upon a serial, nonteleological capacity for the artist to recreate herself. One of Caws's examples of this perpetual self-metamorphosis is the photographer Claude Cahun, whose self-portraiture she reads as an antecedent of Cindy Sherman's work.

By all accounts, Stevens cannot be accredited with such a playful or performative manipulation of his own identity, a fact reinforced by his essays' rhetoric of fixity. In "Effects of Analogy" (1948), Stevens insists that "[e]very image is a restatement of the subject of the image in the terms of an attitude." This formulation is refined with the complementary statement that "[e]very image is an intervention on the part of the image-maker" (NA 128). The poet's imagination effects an "intervention" in reality by introducing a new way of looking at the world. This innovative perspective originates in a certain "attitude," or the poet's fixed sense of self. Stevens emphasizes this notion of fixity, insisting that "[a] man's sense of the world is born with him and persists. . . . For each man . . . certain subjects are congenital" (NA 120).

Such fixity generates an apparent essentialism that seems to contradict any basis for reading Stevens' poetry as exhibiting signs of a baroque "fluidity." Caws, however, counterposes Cahun's serial self-recreation with the substantially different baroque perspective of such Surrealists as Man Ray. She argues that Man Ray's photographs are evidence of the artist's

forceful reimaginings of the object-world. The self most affected by these reimaginings is not that of the artist but that of the reader (or viewer), whose encounters with these transformed objects initiate a re-examination of one's preconceptions about subjectivity. When we confront his photographs, "[w]e are looking, in these pictures, at an icon maker skilled in representation; it is our own looking skill that we must refashion" (121). It is Man Ray's baroque perspective that is most similar to that of Stevens. "Effects of Analogy" argues that the poet's imaginary intervention, constructed as it is from a "congenital" position or "attitude," does affect a sense of self. This affected self, however, is not the poet's but the reader's. The poet's potency is founded upon his ability to transform society through the production of poetic analogy, which awakens imaginative parallels between the reader's and the poet's perceptions of the world. It is the reader's perceptions of the world that are changed by the poetic analogy.

In terms of gender identity, then, Stevens would believe that the poet does not construct a new reality of masculinity but points out for the reader the truths of and the potential for that identity, urging his readers to imagine gender differently. However, he never definitively articulates this masculine quality. The closest that he comes is his 1943 essay "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in which he equates poetic practice with a social masculinization. "The centuries have a way of being male. Without pretending to say whether they get this character from their good heroes or their bad ones, it is certain that they get it, in part, from their philosophers and poets" (NA 52). I will take up the question of "heroes" below, but for the time being I will concentrate on this notion of the poet's "masculinizing" ability. The modern poet's virility is not reflected by or reflective of his anatomical maleness; it is more a consequence of his imagination's ability to make an impact on his readers through revelations of contemporary truths. "[P]oetic truth is an agreement with reality" (NA 54), but this vision of reality is differentiated from an empiricism that notes only the passage of political events. "There is a life apart from politics," Stevens insists. "It is this life that the youth as virile poet lives, in a kind of radiant and productive atmosphere" (NA 57).

This figural poet's potency stems from his ability to transfigure society through routes that are unavailable to his counterparts (the logical philosopher, the empirical realist). This recourse to the imagination necessitates a hermeneutic reading of those artifacts that constitute his empirical reality. *Reading* generates the transformative analogues because it positions the poet-subject in relation to his object-world of which he is a part, yet from which he is apart. The brief poem "Theory" offers an uncharacteristically simplified scheme that illustrates how such dynamics tend to operate in his poetry. The narrator explicitly states, "I am what is around me. / Women understand this." Context imparts a social definition, a lesson the narrator learns by observing women, who know that "One is not duchess / A hundred yards from a carriage" (CP 86). This early example

points to a “feminized” mode of self-knowledge in which one’s identity is dependent upon one’s immediate context. Simply being at a distance from one’s carriage changes the subject: she is dependent upon the object to socially signify her identity. Although his theory is based upon the subject’s change (if she is no longer identifiable as a duchess she must become something or someone else), often Stevens is remiss in reinscribing a new identity to the subject.

What is more, I suggest that this hypothetical duchess is not so much the poem’s subject as she is its object. By imagining her change, Stevens’ narrator apprehends how his own identity is dependent upon *her* status as an object capable of change. This narrator is the product of Stevens’ imagination, and “Theory” is constructed as a reader’s reading of his “reality.” The poem is a *mise-en-scène* of imagined subject-object relationships, a point that is complicated by how Stevens offers it to his own reader as an object that will intercede in that reader’s apprehensions of reality. As such, the Stevensian baroque is based on an interdependence between subject and object for the subject’s self-definition. This occurs on three levels: (1) diegetically, in which the characters of the poetic narrative are affected and defined by their object-world; (2) metatextually, in which the narrator is affected by imagining the effects upon the diegetic object’s identity; (3) indexically, in which the reader observes the series of effects in the preceding levels and is then affected himself. The only subject who remains outside of this determination by an observed or imagined other is the author. *Stevens’ own fixity is necessary if he is to generate the hybrid of imagination and reality that produces the desired analogues through which his readers may reread their relationships to the object world.* His “virility” stems from his ability to negotiate and to sympathize with the duchess’ situation. In order to maintain his own masculine integrity, his narrators do the work of empathizing with a feminized position and feeling the effects generated by their objects’ change.

This early formulation of a baroque poesis is revised as Stevens turns his attention to constructions of masculinity. In “Theory,” women are defined by the inanimate objects of their surroundings. The duchess is socially defined by her carriage, and the other objects listed in the third stanza (a vestibule; a canopy bed) are capable of being “portraits” because they are domestic and inorganic. Women’s definition presumably is not so much a construction of gender, per se, but of other markers of identity (such as economic class and race). One can assume that even though the duchess may no longer be “duchess” once she leaves the proximity of her carriage, she is still gendered as “female.” This is not the case, however, when Stevens constructs masculine subjects. Masculinity—unlike femininity—is defined outside of the exigencies of class, race, or even sexual orientation. Much of the reason for Stevens’ belief in masculinity’s multiple definitions lies in how most men are defined by their object-world. The virile poet’s mediation models how baroque perspectivalism constructs

the rest of men; it is a pedagogical tool whereby the poet renders social change by offering readers analogues that will raise consciousness about most men's essentially "feminine" positions.

In order to suture this theoretical reading with the more immediate concerns of this essay, I now will turn to "Paisant Chronicle," a poem that contextualizes the interest that this reconfiguration and multiplication of masculine identities held for his correspondent, Rodríguez Feo. "Paisant Chronicle" was precipitated out of a series of letters sent by Rodríguez Feo in 1945 in which he repeatedly asks Stevens to explain who or what are "the major men" mentioned in his earlier poems. The Cuban editor initially associates the designation with occasional poetry (cf. Coyle and Filreis 38), and Stevens makes light of the phrase by insisting that it belongs to a period in which he was "triffl[ing] with the idea of some arbitrary object of belief: some artificial subject for poetry, a source of poetry. And major men are part of the entourage of that artificial object" (Coyle and Filreis 40). Despite Stevens' disavowal of the importance of the phrase "major men," Rodríguez Feo broaches the question of its meaning once again, significantly prefacing the repeated inquiry with a digression in which he ridicules Ernest Hemingway's overblown crisis with masculinity. "[I]f you are a real blood and bone latino," he writes, "you find absurd and a bit of an affectation those 'virile problems' which seem to bother him so much" (Coyle and Filreis 41). Rodríguez Feo's posturing does not belie his group's insecurities about issues of gay masculinity, but it does generate a gender-based context in which his questions about "major masculinity" might proceed to be re-asked. The recurrent inquiry causes Stevens to reflect more than he perhaps had when he first penned the phrase in "Repetitions of a Young Captain." He wrote "Paisant Chronicle" and sent it to Rodríguez Feo as the definitive answer. The issue still must have bothered Stevens, for the following week he sent another letter to clarify this idea that was once "triffl[ing]" but had become a nagging issue. (The fact that he felt compelled to write another letter so soon after he sent the poem indicates the issue's rapidly growing significance. Stevens rarely wrote Rodríguez Feo without the latter first having written him.) Before sending this letter, he rediscovered the phrase ("I came across the words *major men*," Coyle and Filreis 43) in the earlier poem. Upon this discovery, he refines his earlier definition: "In that poem the words major men merely mean the pick of young men, but major men as characters in humanism are different. Since humanism is not enough, it is necessary to piece out its characters fictively" (Coyle and Filreis 43). Stevens' need to raise the phrase "major men" to a previously unacknowledged level of importance indicates his own growing concern with the poet's effects upon masculinity, a concern that he had highlighted in the "Virile Poet" essay only two years before.

In "Paisant Chronicle," Stevens juxtaposes two types of masculinities. The first is that of "The great captain," who is an exemplar of the real man,

“the choice / Of chance.” “Men live to be / Admired by men and all men, therefore, live / To be admired by all men” (CP 334). This circle of admiration is a never-ending parade—“a multitude of individual pomps”—surrounding the posthumous celebrations of dead heroes. This first, heroic form of masculinity (what Stevens calls in his letter the “humanist” element) parallels the position of the duchess in “Theory.” Like the duchess, the hero’s status is dependent upon his immediate context. It is significant, though, that when the male subject comes to be defined by his surroundings, it is not by objects, such as those domestic articles that define the duchess and other women. Instead, these heroes are socially defined, most presumably by other men who manufacture the “pomps” as social events.

This heroic, social masculinity is opposed to that of the major men, who

are characters beyond
Reality, composed thereof. They are
The fictive man created out of men.
They are men but artificial men. (CP 335)

This second, idealized form of masculinity is “The easy projection long prohibited,” originating from the poet’s “congenital” position. Writing the fiction of major men is intended to affect readers’ perceptions of masculinity. In “Paisant Chronicle,” Stevens rejects what he calls a “baroque” and “abstract” perception of these major men, urging Rodríguez Feo to “see him for yourself” (CP 335). Heroism is supplanted with his reader’s apperception of a projected and idealized masculinity, a projection that serves as a testimony to Stevens’ own poetic virility. Although “Paisant Chronicle” categorically rejects the use of a baroque style to manifest major masculinity, the logos of realizing that masculinity does resonate with a baroque sensibility similar to Caws’s subject- (or poet-) centered effective manipulation of images.

In order to comprehend how this baroque poesis is similar to yet different from that of the *Orígenes* poets, I wish to introduce one more source that theorizes the intersubjective dynamics of a modern baroque. In *The Fold*, Gilles Deleuze appropriates Leibniz, the quintessential philosopher of the historical Baroque, and rewrites the *Monadology* according to his own readings of Alfred North Whitehead’s pragmatic process theory. He re-characterizes the subject as a “monad” whose very identity is dependent upon his interactions with his object-world, explaining that the baroque object is “no longer defined by an essential form, but reaches a pure functionality” (19). When an object becomes functional, it is no longer an inert presence acted upon but becomes what Deleuze calls the objectile, an entity that affects and acts upon the subject. Objects become objectile in the *event*, a present moment of interaction that mixes the public and the private:

[T]he data of prehension [of an object] are *public* elements, while the subject is the intimate or *private* element that expresses immediacy, individuality, and novelty. . . . Each new prehension becomes a datum. . . . [T]he event is inseparably the objectification of one prehension and the subjectification of another; it is at once public and private, potential and real, participating in the becoming of another event and the subject of its own becoming. (78)

Upon closer inspection, this dense passage bears similarities to Stevens' own ideas.⁷ Context and the immediacy of one's object-world (what Deleuze calls the public datum) prefigure the subject's identity construction. Here we are reminded of Stevens' duchess and her carriage or the "pomps" that define heroes as heroes. Both of these examples also highlight the subject's individual nature, what individuates one from the rest. Deleuze's explanation of how the objectile comes into being through the event, however, prioritizes the notion of prehension. Prehension is analogous to that position in which Stevens places the poet: the poet observes the object-world from a position that is simultaneously private (what Stevens calls "congenital") and public. This position lies somewhere between the "potential and real," according to Deleuze; one is here reminded of Stevens' notion of the poet as belonging both to the imaginary and to the social. Also, as in Stevens, what precipitates the event originates in a social setting external to the subject but to which he also belongs. Changes in this setting's objects prompt a reimagining of the object-world and its possibilities, establishing the point of a Stevensian intervention through the deployment of poetic analogy. Deleuze dubs this subject who prehends and interacts with objects the *superject*.

What Deleuze adds to Stevens, and what becomes pivotal for differentiating between the Stevensian baroque and that of the *Orígenes* group, is the concept that the subject's own status changes as a consequence of this reimagining. Because the intervention is returned to the pool of public datum, the monad's future prehensions can be changed by his own (and others') perceptions of social reality. Objectiles are not just inanimate objects: they are also animate, human individuals. All monads, therefore, function as both objects and subjects. When Monad A prehends Monad B, Monad B is presumed to be an objectile who has experienced change. Monad B, however, also prehends Monad A. Both are subjects *and* objects, constituents of an intersubjective community. One's own imagining can affect one's self since it becomes part of a circulating pool of prehended datum. As a consequence, one's own self is subject to change. The superject is not a constant, integral unity but an entity capable of being affected by how the community perceives him.

Shifts in objects eventually will instigate the poet's own change. Remember Stevens' warning to Rodríguez Feo: "humanism is not enough." The

subject's own changes are not only biographical (due to age, a failed marriage, etc.). Although he develops a poet-subject who more or less stands apart from "the rest" of society, Stevens knew but was unable to formulate how the poet-subject's congenitality is also partially social and dependent upon objects. The poet has a stake in his superjective mediations of objectiles' changes: offering imaginings of major men to his readers will eventually affect social perceptions of what it means to be a virile poet. The step that Stevens does not theorize but that remains implicit in his investment in changing masculinity is that these objectile readers who will be affected by his superject-poet's images of "new" masculinities, in turn, will become superjects themselves. Readers reintroduce into the public datum their experienced perceptual changes of their own and others' masculinity. These changes eventually will lead to the poet-figure's own modulation of his "virility" as a poet, creating a chain of perceptual effects that eventually will be experienced as a return to the poet. Because Stevens' own lyric privileges the synchronic eventful moment of the poet's imagination, however, we rarely bear witness to how this superject is affected in a diachronic frame. In other words, no one poem will exemplify how the superject-poet will become an objectile in his own turn, how he experiences the consequences of his intervention, since his poetry is concerned with the moment in which the imagination effects a change upon social reality.

Another reason why the superject's own change is not evident is that Stevens never specifies why it is important to change perceptions and identities of the masculine. A strong explanation is Frank Lentricchia's, who has outlined Stevens' early negotiation of feminine and masculine economic roles and the resultant conflict with precedents of effeminate aesthetic gentility. I do believe that there is more to it than a struggle with "the cultural powerlessness of poetry in a society that masculinized the economic while feminizing the literary," as Lentricchia states it (168). Stevens' confrontations with race and homosexuality and their impact upon his conception of white, straight masculinity, for instance, needs more attention.⁸ Part of the reason for the relative lack of critical inquiry stems from Stevens' own evasion of a concrete object of criticism. Lentricchia notes, "Stevens' writing [from his middle period] tends to wander unhappily between criticism and utopia. If his desire is without [a] clear utopian object, then so is his dissatisfaction, so is his frustration without [a] sharply viewed critical object" (198). This lack of an object—in both the senses of a thing to criticize and of a vision for transformation—contributes to Stevens' reluctance to explain why it is so important that "the centuries have a way of being male." The gay members of *Orígenes*, however, had a clear sense of a critical object, which provoked their need to redefine masculinity.

LEZAMA'S OBJECTILE POET

Most critical readings of José Lezama Lima construct a poetics strikingly similar to what I have outlined as a Stevensian baroque. Roberto

Fernández Retamar, for instance, argues that the *Orígenes* group in general, and Lezama in particular, advocated the creation of “a hyperbolic reality, already altered, through the creation of the poem” [“una realidad hiperbólica, ya alterada, para la creación del poema”] (90). This “hyperbolic” image is presented to the reader as “a new point of reference . . . like coming face-to-face with a strangeness that has already been established and actuated” [“un nuevo punto de referencia . . . como extraño frente a otro ya establecido y acatado”] (89). Such a reading is equitable to reading Stevens’ imaginary as an intervening analogue. Fernández Retamar, however, stresses that this re-visioning of the real is based upon “a will to transcend the architecture of words in order to arrive, through their medium, at a confrontation with the *unknown*, a reality that they irradiate from their innermost core” [“una voluntad de trascender la arquitectura de palabras, de llegar, por su medio, a enfrentar lo *desconocido*, una realidad que vislumbran más entrañable”] (86–87). Although this transcendence is intended to have an impact on society, it is based upon a very Mallarméan—and rather un-Stevensian—notion of a linguistic essentialism divorced from sociohistorical contingencies.

Some have reinvestigated *Orígenes*, critical of such essentialist or transcendentalist assessments, focusing instead on the group’s social and historical concerns. Most exemplary is Brett Levinson’s *Secondary Moderns*. Levinson argues that Lezama emphasizes the subject’s dependence upon the “eternal return” of an interruptive, inassimilable presence. This presence offers readers “an ‘historical’ resistance that de-secures their conceptual dominance, their existence as a priori ground or creative subject” (111). He proceeds to argue that, for Lezama, “the poet is more of a ‘postman’ than a transcendental ‘I’: he or she receives letters from the past (readable or unreadable) and sends works off to into the future, where these works are endlessly written and rewritten (reread), interpreted and misinterpreted, appropriated and misappropriated, generated and regenerated, preserved and lost” (119). This notion of the poet as “postman” creates a useful point of comparison between Lezama and Harold Bloom’s reading of Stevens’ “misprision,” the willful and subject-centered misreading of textual antecedents that clears a place in the poetic tradition for one’s own texts. The performative aspect of Bloom’s misprision offers a familiar analogue whereby Stevens’ baroque poesis emphasizes the Deleuzian *superject* position. Levinson’s assessment of Lezama, however, points to the Cuban poet’s willingness to subscribe himself to a future (mis)reading, thereby signaling his adoption of an *objectile* position. Although he, like Stevens, wishes to affect his readers through the intervention of the imaginary, he is not adverse to doing so by offering himself (or his poet-figures) to his readers as that object that experiences a change upon the occurrence of the baroque event. Unlike Stevens, however, Lezama is interested in tying this perspectival dynamic to the appellation “baroque.”

When discussing his baroque, most critics have focused upon the essay "The Baroque Curiosity" ["*La curiosidad barroca*"] (1957), in which Lezama characterizes the Latin American baroque as "an art of resisting conquest" ["un arte de contraconquista"] (303). This assertion has led critics to focus on his discussion of *mestizaje*, or racial hybridity, in Latin American architecture and the visual arts. Focusing on these examples, however, overlooks that figure whom he posits as the founder of Latin American baroque poetry—the seventeenth-century Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Lezama argues that Sor Juana models a poetic resistance that revises the gendered body, creating a "scholarship of the body" ["*escolástica del cuerpo*"] that "alludes to our own animated woods within the maternal profundity of the night. . . . Her obscurity descends into our depths, in order to fuse with the unexpressed, preventing the light, so as to invite it, to scare it away, and to favor its detachment through the descent to the depths that always rule the darkness" ["*aludiese a nuestros propios bosques animados con la profundidad maternal de la noche. . . . Su oscuridad desciende a nuestras profundidades, para fundirse con lo inexpressado, impidiendo que la luz, al invitarlo, lo ahuyente, y favorecer su desprendimiento por el descenso a las profundidades que siempre regala la obscuridad*"] (314–15, Lezama's ellipsis). This female precedent's poetry infuses her male readers with a "maternal" sensibility, through which they are compelled to recognize the cultural emphasis upon occluding the visibility of one's innermost secrets. The reader participates in transforming the other's buried gender identity, reading the shadows upon the represented body. In the process, even the most "macho" of readers learns a lesson in gender constructivism. Reading Sor Juana's poetry (or any baroque poetry of the Americas) leads to a feminization of the self, a point that uncannily resonates with Stevens' "Theory" that there is an object lesson for most men in how women "know" that their identities are contingent and dependent upon an other's interpretive perspective.

Whereas Stevens produces a baroque that privileges the *superject's* role in constructing new masculinities, Lezama would envision his own gay "major men" as *objectile* like Sor Juana's example. As such, they are dependent upon the apperceptions of other male subjects who participate in the construction of gay masculinity by reading the "obscure" "depths" of the homosexual object. Lezama's emphasis upon the objectile over that of the superject is due to Cuba's cultural precepts about homosexuality. In *Machos, Maricones, and Gays*, Ian Lumsden argues that through the mid-1960s Cuban culture did not repress same-sex desire so much as it dissuaded male effeminacy. *Entendidos*, men known to be gay but who are not effeminate, "had to live very private sexual lives" (35). This cultural insistence on privacy obfuscates homosexuality, sequestering it to an unseen, private realm. Given cultural proscriptions against gays' visibility, Lezama transforms the gay male into a hybridized gendered being. But this hybrid is not *obvio*, or effeminate and visibly gay; instead, Lezama

preserves an inner “darkness,” an element of secrecy. This obscured secret, though, is just legible enough in the poetic image that some superject might read and interpolate it. The semi-legible image allows for a revelation of homosexuality without necessitating the poet’s explicit disclosure. If gay men possess a hidden hybridity, this doubly upsets a heavily ingrained cultural *machismo*. First, it reveals the appearance of *machismo* as just that—appearance. The *entendido* performs a certain masculinity just as the *obvio* performs its supposedly feminized obverse form. Second, placing the onus of reading one’s gay identity upon another male subject is radical in that it implicates the general populace’s complicity in constructing this different form of masculinity.

Lezama outlines this intersubjective dynamic in his long poem, “How to Get to Montego Bay” [“Para llegar a Montego Bay”], which originally was published in *Orígenes* in 1954 and later was collected in *Drawer* [*Dador*] in 1960. What is most striking is that this poem conjoins both Lezama’s ideals for *origenista* poetics—a mobilization of queerness in poetic language and a resistance to an encroaching cultural imperialism. The poem begins with the narrator winding his way through a series of nonsensical images in the first third of the poem generated from a playful “slight start” (OC 1, 947) [“leve sobresalto”] of sound-based puns that echoes the phonetic play familiar in a Stevensian poetics of “A sound producing the things that are spoken” (CP 287). Eventually, he arrives at the poem’s diegetic scene, the Jamaican port of Montego Bay. A hotbed of foreign tourist industries, this locale was regarded at the time as symptomatic of the political and cultural corruption that many Cubans and other Caribbeans feared would occur in their own nations. Lezama’s narrator transforms this setting into a scene of linguistic aggression where “the dark adolescent furor hid its darts, / not withdrawing from participation in the essence / but lodged in the scrape and in the needle’s eye” (OC 1, 949) [“el oscuro furor adolescente escondía sus flechas, / y no el retiro de participar en la ausencia, / sino el aposentarse en el escarbar y el agujero”]. This archetypal teen’s counterimperialism substitutes language for material weapons. Lezama promotes a metaphorical obscurantism that counteracts the transparency of foreign product advertisement, encouraging a recontextualization of language so that even “the words of a cigarette ad / can be made into the initiation of a Minoan funeral” (OC 1, 949) [“el anuncio de un cigarrillo se hacen tantas pruebas / como en el inicio de un funeral minoano”].

Promoting such an obfuscating reappropriation of one’s own language, however, is not only a form of resistance to imperialist forces from abroad. The same metaphorical strategies that the narrator uses to denounce Montego Bay’s cultural corruption are deployed in the production of images that build the poem’s protracted polemic against a queer subject’s visible effeminacy. The narrator’s attack is depicted as a “scream” (OC 1, 948) [“grito”] against a Jamaican “*flamboyant*” (OC 1, 951). Like the trans-

parent cigarette advertisements, this *flamboyant's* message—the articulation of his sexual desire—is too *obvio* and must be countered with a succession of thick images that contribute to a mounting denunciation of such gay visibility. In order for it to be an effective invective, however, the narrator “requires the virgin’s hatchet” (OC 1, 948) [“el hacha de la doncella”] of sounds that create such absurd, nonsensical images as “the grapefruit vendor and the stalactite’s new station” (OC 1, 948) [“el toronjero y la nueva estación de estalactitas”]. Other examples of sound play include “the bee has to come from the ‘b’ in old broad,” a loose translation of the alliterative pun “[t]endrá la abeja de la vieja.” Such remainders of sound offer the narrator a metaphorical and phonetic mask to construct a queerness that is registered upon the images’ surface.

Do these images produce only obfuscating surfaces, or is there a hidden depth and significance? The narrator emphasizes the importance that his “scream” directed against the flamboyant be “deciphered” (OC 1, 948) [“descrifado”]. Upon close inspection, the chosen lexemes are seen to be linguistically androgynous. For instance, “the plum tree with its otherly lunar flesh” (OC 1, 949) [“el ciruelo con la otra carne lunar”] is a metaphor that hybridizes the linguistic genders of plum tree (*m.*) and lunar flesh (*f.*). This androgyny of diction is reinforced by the evoked visual images of testicular fruit and a menstrual body. Such bisexed images supplant the need for the social display of the disparaged “*flamboyant*,” whose effeminized posings are reduced to an “amusing androgyne coquetry” (OC 1, 950) [“divertida coquetería andrógina”]. The alternative to such an *obvio* display lies in the narrator’s image of “the branch that shows us the flower’s hallelujah” (OC 1, 949) [“el ramaje que nos indica la aleluya de la flor”], a natural surface that is marked with a forgotten writing, what the narrator later calls “the cuneiform traces of a palm trunk’s interior” (OC 1, 950) [“los trazos cuneiformes del interior de un tronco de palma”]. The pestilent swarm of insects nesting in the tree is transformed into something mystical, community building, and transcendent when the “truth” of the interior cause of the inscription is transmuted into a surface of indecipherable and resistant glyphs.

These superficial marks parallel the text’s own metatextual deployment of a Stevensian comedy of sound and metaphor, and they gesture toward what lies beneath the surface, the desire that is the very impetus for constructing such marks on the poem’s surface. Lezama battles the threat of a coquettish, overt homosexuality—a symptom of a general imperialist impetus on a “feminizing” linguistic transparency—with these hieroglyphed “palms [that] walked in the distant Eros” (OC 1, 951) [“las palmas (que) caminaban en el Eros distante”]. This trademark Lezamesque image resituates queerness away from the homosexual subject into a hermeneutic praxis of reading the distanced object, thereby avoiding the direct inscription of a socially undesirable effeminacy upon one’s own body. Adapting a Stevensian baroque poesis, Lezama uses sound, lexicographic

play, and images so that his narrator can assert that he is not like the gay man who submits to “tumultuous caresses and erudite scandals / laughing at himself with the hustlers who are afraid of the principal masculinity” (OC 1, 956) [“tumultuosas caricias y sus eruditos escándalos, / rindiéndose con los cortesanos miedos del varón principal”]. Instead, queerness is agonistically comedic and is signaled by “laughter’s cymbal that launches the attack” (OC 1, 949) [“cerrazón / del cimbalón de las carcajadas lanzadas al asalto”].

The gay objectile is implicated in an attack on cultural proscriptions but still remains true to the so-called “principal masculinity.” Constructing such an *objectile* gayness is an intersubjective enterprise, a process that the reader will find to be both pleasurable and painful. Pleasure comes from reconstructing a model of Cuban masculinity that can offer an adequate resistance to imperialism. But that model is painful because it comes from the most unlikely of sources—a queer poetics that demonstrates the value of obscuring one’s self through language. Queer poetic resistance is presented as a model for a general, national form of postcolonial resistance. This suggests that there is a virile potency in a queer mobilization of metaphor, one that is a more effective alternative for resistance than *machismo* in this postcolonial condition. By obscuring language, the straight Cuban male reader would learn to be like the gay narrator, transforming himself into an inscrutable objectile that resists foreign imperialism by frustrating the imposition of semiotic systems. As gay men, Lezama and the other queer members of *Orígenes* understood—perhaps more clearly than Stevens—how the individual is both the subject of and subjected to masculine redefinition. As “How to Get to Montego Bay” illustrates, this results in offering the gay male narrator-figure as an object to be read. Lezama’s reader, moreso than the poet, occupies the Stevensian *superject* position, bearing the onus of imagining through a hermeneutic confrontation with the gay *objectile*. Ideally, this would lead to an assimilation of the *entendido* gay male into domestic Cuban culture as a virile member capable of strategically deploying a resistance to cultural imperialism from abroad and modeling a new means of constructing oneself as “masculine.” Such a rewriting of Stevens’ baroque poesis is possible only because of the queer and anti-imperialist sociopolitical goals of Lezama’s project.

CONCLUSION: GAY CUBAN OBJECTILES IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Stevensian baroque continues to influence late twentieth-century gay Cuban literature. There is little evidence that generations of gay writers following the *origenistas* have read the U.S. poet, but Lezama continues to be a foundational figure for queer literary discourses, and it is through him that Stevens’ innovations of intersubjective dynamics, masculine self-definition, and the writer’s virilization continue to be negotiated. An expatriate who remained in Paris after his medical residency and who became affiliated with *Tel Quel*, Severo Sarduy often is read as the

heir of Lezama's gay baroque poesis.⁹ Through his essays, novels, and poetry he extends the queer potential of poetic language, refashioning the Lezamesque baroque into what he calls a "neobaroque" premised upon revolutionary perversity: "Barroco de la Revolución" (*Barroco* 104).

Sarduy's criticism is noteworthy in the context of this discussion because of how he reads the problems with Lezama's gay poesis. Favoring a constructivism that is nonteleological, he advocates a continuing confrontation of the reader and the queer subject, who is represented by the figure of the transvestite. Each confrontation entails a new reading of the objectile transvestite by the male superject reader, causing successive shifts in that reader's understanding of gender and sexuality. Building upon a Lacanian theoretical basis, Sarduy calls this encounter "anamorphosis." Unable to engage the queer objectile in a "frontal" manner, the reader is compelled to reposition himself in relation to this anamorphic object, forced to re-encounter both the objectile and the language that represents it in an *oblique* fashion. Such a repeated process of looking awry at the objectile denies the possibility of his absorption or assimilation.

This anamorphosis is opposed to the intersubjective dynamics of Lezama and, implicitly, of Stevens. "The fact is that in Lezama the seizing of reality, the voracious capture of the image, works by *duplication*, by *mirage*. A virtual double that will gradually beseige [*sic*] and surround the original, undermining it with imitation, with parody, until it is supplanted" (*Written* 50). Sarduy refers to this as "[m]etaphor as conjuring," through which Lezama exhibits his control of language. "What is cultural, linguistic, deciphers what is real," and "the second term [of the imaginary, of metaphor] devours its object, seizes its body" (53). Read as such, Lezama's use of metaphor as a means of exhibiting the poet-subject's mastery only begins to work toward establishing the queer subject as an objectile presented to the reader. Lezama's indebtedness to Stevens—his similar utilization of parody, sound play, and profuse imagery—results in a contradictory reestablishment of a "fixed" poet-subject who stands apart, confronts objectiles, imagines anew, and presents those *imagos* to others. Lezama's version of the baroque is not as differentiated from Stevens' superjective version as he may have liked it to be. The linguistic mastery of such poems as "How to Get to Montego Bay" distances the poet-subject from the diegetic scene. Lezama's masterful manipulation of language resurrects a Stevensian space in which the imagination interprets reality in order to advocate a predictable and controlled social change that eventually will benefit the poet's gender and sexual identities.

Sarduy notes the importance of such a Stevensian precedent in Lezama, yet he wishes to push the envelope and curtail the possibility of the baroque subject being fixed in a superjective position of mastering the object. To make the poet-subject even more objectile than Lezama's, he suggests a poetics of erotic excess that "signifies the presence of an unrepresentable object, which resists crossing the line of Alterity" ["sig-

nifica la presencia de un objeto no representable, que resiste a franquear la línea de la Alteridad"] (*Barroco* 100). Such an absolute resistance, he argues, can be arrived at only if the queer subject becomes even more obscured, a Lacanian partial object that remains outside symbolic language. The transvestite is such an objectile: neither straight nor gay, man nor woman, she is an amorphic figure who frustrates symbolic binarization. She is simply *perverse*, an inassimilable *queer* presence that forces a restructuring of all social conventions about gender and sexuality. "[T]ransvestism in the strict sense, stamped on the unbounded drive of metamorphosis, of transformation cannot be reduced to the imitation of a real, set model, since it strikes out in pursuit of an infinite unreality . . . to be more and more of a woman, until the line is crossed and woman is surpassed" (*Written* 93–94).

Sarduy's is a transvestitic impulse unlike Lezama's advocacy of a secret gender hybridity in gay subjects and unlike any of Stevens' examples of transvestism ("the softest / Woman with a vague moustache" from Canto X of "Esthétique du Mal" [CP 321], "the bearded queen, wicked in her dead light" of "Madame La Fleurie" [CP 507]). Androgyny in both Lezama's and Stevens' writing can generate a baroque shock to the reader, raising the issue of how gender definition is dependent upon intersubjective reimaginings of phenomenological reality. But such androgyny is always oriented toward a re-masculinization, a virilizing impulse whereby even the most feminine of ontologies, the "softest" of women, can be made to wear a telltale sign of masculinity and therefore become more "real." Sarduy wants to jar the reader even more; his transvestitic neobaroque calls into question any need for resorting to an assertion of linguistic control or a phallic investment in the symbolic. Taken one step beyond Stevens and Lezama, baroque poesis might be deployed to create a space in which the transvestite is said to sport a "cosmetic erection" (*Written* 93), acquiring the phallus of symbolic language and identity formation through a seemingly paradoxical cosmetic feminization of her body. Inscrutable and oblique language becomes a socially transformative accessory for the queer Cuban writer. Faced with such an objectile who defies definition, the superjective, straight reader does not try to reinvest this object with a heterosexual masculinity but is compelled to question the linguistic norms of gender and sexual definition that limit all subjective desires—even his own—to a series of binaries. In the latter half of the twentieth century, gay Cuban literature has begun to ask why it is necessary to masculinize queerness, to adhere to the so-called "principal masculinity" or the baroque of major men. Sarduy's "transvestism" marks a recent literary moment in which queerness is not simply a pragmatic means of shifting the parameters of who can be considered "masculine" or "virile" but also is a means of resisting the sociocultural prerogative that elevates straight masculinity and virility to the status of a "norm." In lauding

but resisting Lezama's precedent, Sarduy implicitly values but challenges the queerness of a Stevensian baroque of major masculinity.

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Notes

¹ This essay originally was presented as "Variations in Baroque Autochthonous Masculinity: Wallace Stevens and the Writers of the Cuban *Orígenes* Circle" at the 1999 Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago. I thank Angus Cleghorn for his invitation to participate and for his insightful suggestions. The other presenters, Willard Spiegelman and Stephen Burt, and the panel respondent, Alicia Ostriker, as well as the *WSJour* readers of the original draft of this essay, all provided helpful comments. Lastly, Robert Caserio, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and Lawrence Venuti have been an invaluable critical audience. All translations of Spanish-language texts are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Three studies use *Secretaries of the Moon* as a starting point. In Chapter 5 of *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, "Cuba Should Be Full of Cuban Things," Filreis compares Stevens' and Rodríguez Feo's different understandings of the *orígenistas'* responsibility for maintaining a Cuban realism or authenticity in their poetry. In his essay "Wallace Stevens y el discurso en La Habana: Palabras de José Rodríguez Feo," Roberto Ignacio Díaz assesses Stevens' encouragement of a primitivist "realism" as an imperialist gesture that the Cuban editor resisted by exoticizing U.S. culture. The correspondence's queer dynamics have been examined by David R. Jarraway in "'Creatures of the Rainbow': Wallace Stevens, Mark Doty, and the Poetics of Androgyny," which reads the letters as generating a camp discourse that is useful for understanding how gay author Mark Doty regards Stevens' work as a model for a contemporary poetics of queer androgyny.

³ It is worth noting that when Rodríguez Feo addresses a Cuban audience, he underplays his friendship with Stevens. In his introduction to *Mi correspondencia con Lezama Lima* [*My Correspondence with Lezama Lima*], he writes that early in their correspondence he realized that Stevens "was a highly reserved person" ["una persona sumamente reservada"], so he adopted an intimate tone to generate a "certain confidence" ["cierta confianza"]. This is portrayed as a diplomatic strategizing to win Stevens' trust and the much desired permission to print translations of his poems: "I chose to present myself in as effusive a fashion as I would if I were to run head-on into an old friend after many years" ["Opté por mostrarme tan efusivo como lo hubiera hecho al encontrarme de nuevo con un viejo amigo al cabo de muchos años"] (15). By recasting the friendly tone as a strategy, he underscores their correspondence's importance as a communicative medium between Stevens and the *Orígenes* group as a whole.

⁴ Coyle and Filreis allude to the "open secret" of Rodríguez Feo's homosexuality. By characterizing Stevens' advice to "outgrow his aestheticism, marry, and get a regular job" as offering "a set of North American conventions obviously beyond José's psychological framework" (25), they subtly imply Rodríguez Feo's homosexuality ("psychological framework"), with a possible explanation of cultural difference ("North American conventions"). Given political conditions for gays in Cuba this desire to leave the question of his sexual orientation ambiguous is not without its merits. (It ought to be noted that Filreis outs Rodríguez Feo for an American audience in *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*.) Guillermo Cabrera Infante, however, has deemed it important to open the issue, reading the tensions among Rodríguez Feo, Lezama, and Virgilio Piñera as a result of their disagreements about queer life-styles and poetics

despite their shared sexual orientation. "At the same time that it [homosexuality] separated them from Lezama, one thing united both [Rodríguez Feo and Piñera] ambiguously, a particular fault: faggotry" (340). Although I am not interested in Cabrera Infante's "scandalous" approach to outing gay Cuban literati, I share his opinion that opening the secret that hitherto has remained veiled or unaddressed in U.S. and Latin American criticism is important for reading the dynamics and tensions in queer poetics and literary formations.

⁵ Twentieth-century Latin American literature presents several essays, poems, and fictions that attempt to define a contemporary "baroque" style. Aside from the figures I discuss in this essay (Lezama, Severo Sarduy), other Latin American authors who have ascribed socioaesthetic significance to a modern baroque include Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier and Argentinian poet and fiction-writer Jorge Luis Borges. My reading of Lezama's baroque, then, stresses Stevens' influence, but I must acknowledge that he also negotiates Borges and Carpentier, as well as the historical Baroque. Including Stevens further enriches a complex international network of influences.

⁶ My understanding of the baroque's intersubjective dynamics is derived from several recent studies. These include Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*; Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*; Martin Jay, *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*. Other sources that implicitly have contributed to my analysis include Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible* and Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*. These last two studies do not address the modern baroque as such, but they have proven influential in both my and Bal's readings of its intersubjective and erotic dynamics.

⁷ *The Fold's* use of Whitehead and Leibniz resonates with Stevens' engagement with those two figures in his 1951 essay "A Collect of Philosophy." Stevens writes that Leibniz's concept of the monad is an "idea [that] transforms reality," but he concludes that "Leibniz was a poet without flash," "a man who thought like a poet but did not write like one, although that seems strangely impossible" (OP 269). According to Stevens, Whitehead offers a version of Leibniz more pertinent to modern poetry, stressing the shared project of philosophers and poets in rethinking perceptual dynamics. Whitehead is cited by Stevens as a philosopher whose work usefully illustrates how "poetry is to a large extent an art of perception and that the problems of perception as they are developed in philosophy resemble similar problems in poetry. It may be said that to the extent that the analysis of perception in philosophy leads to ideas that are poetic the problems are identical" (OP 273).

⁸ Lee Edelman's analysis of "Life on a Battleship" argues against Lentricchia's reading of Stevens as pursuing a validation of effeminate masculinity. He urges us to read that poem's gay rape scene "as a curious sort of apotropaic rape fantasy that phobically reflects the anxiety of the heterosexual male about the meaning of his desire for the phallus as *signifier* of autonomy and social entitlement," a fantasy scenario that uses homosexuality as the means by which to express the necessity of *re-enacting* a patriarchal violence in order to secure Stevens' sense of straight masculinity (39, Edelman's emphasis). This is not a renunciation of the phallic but an anxious embrasure and enacting of a phallic violence in order to secure one's potent masculinity in a homosocial economy. Edelman's insistence that we remember Stevens' investment in a patriarchal phallicism can help us understand why the *origenistas* were drawn to his work as a model for making gay poetic masculinity coextensive of culturally legitimated forms of Cuban masculinity.

⁹ Sarduy died of AIDS-related complications in Paris in 1993.

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The Theoretical Afterlife of Wallace Stevens

ANCA ROSU

IN *ARIEL AND THE POLICE*, Frank Lentricchia defines an anecdote as “a social form which instigates cultural memory” (4). It is by virtue of such instigation, Lentricchia thinks, that Michael Herr is able to quote Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” in *Dispatches* to describe his experience in Vietnam: “Once it was all locked in place, Khe Sanh became like the planted jar in Wallace Stevens’ poem. It took dominion everywhere” (107). This sort of quotation represents, for Lentricchia, a link in a chain of memories that hold the culture together. Without this cultural context, the anecdote will be meaningless: “when the relation between the teller of anecdotes to a potential audience ceases altogether to be unified by a single myth, anecdotes will lose their rhetorical power” (4). Herr’s reference to Stevens works because the poem is part of the fabric of the same culture as his memoir.

Michael Herr is not the only author to quote Stevens in an unusual context. “Anecdote of the Jar” is also quoted by Mark C. Taylor in *Notes* to explain Heidegger, in a delightful reversal of the protocol according to which literary critics resort to Heidegger to explicate Stevens. And if the philosophy of religion seems a congenial context for the poet, finding his verse quoted by anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, cultural critics such as Edward Said and Henry Louis Gates Jr., or scientists such as James Gleick should give us pause to ask: what makes Stevens so quotable in such texts?

Lentricchia’s explanation seems to me to rely on a reification of culture, of which he is aware when he encourages us to see “cultural . . . totality,” not as “a totality that is there, waiting for us to acknowledge its presence, but a totality fashioned when the storyteller convinces us to see it his way” (22). The qualification of the term does not entirely deny the implication that we are to see continuity between Stevens and Herr based on the “character” of American culture. But culture, as Lentricchia is ready to admit, is too fluid, transitory, and contradictory a phenomenon to support such continuities. It cannot explain why so many authors of non-literary, non-critical texts quote Stevens so often today, as their work is hardly continuous with that of the poet.

In Herr's book, Stevens' words are meaningful, but their meaning is different from the one they have in the poem, at least in most readings I am aware of. If they come to describe American intervention in Vietnam, it is because of the new context. To a large extent, any fragment of text can acquire a new meaning when integrated in another context. What I find particular to Stevens, however, is an acute awareness of this possibility. Stevens writes as if, in spite of his search for a meaningful whole, he were preparing his poems for fragmentation. In a way, his poems are already fragmented: the hints to a context that remains obscure, the collapses of sense doubled by the rise of sound patterns, and the syntax that runs oddly against semantics are only a few of the means by which he seems to get his verse ready for afterlife.

Judging by frequency alone, Stevens seems to have particular affinities with the scholars of our age. A very limited research I did in the *Social Sciences Index*, reaching back only to 1994, revealed that he has been quoted in *Advances in Nursing Science*, *American Anthropologist*, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, *Annals of Science*, *Arts in Psychotherapy*, *Boston University Law Review*, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, *Cultural Studies*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Futures*, *Human Nature: An Interdisciplinary Biosocial Perspective*, *International Journal of Obesity*, *International Journal of Psychology*, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *Journal of Nursing Education*, *Journal of Personality*, *Library Journal*, *Michigan Law Review*, *Political Science Quarterly*, *Politics and Society*, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, *Public Administrator Review*, *Social Research*, *Stanford Law Review*, and *Texas Law Review*.

Stevens' popularity among social scientists can easily be linked to that of deconstruction, as he seems to supply handy aphoristic formulations that fit poststructuralist theory. Even before Stevens could become popular among social scientists, literary critics had not only deconstructed his poems, but they had also found close correspondences between his pronouncements and the tenders of deconstruction. Paul Bové, for instance, not only finds "The Snow Man" to be a poem of aporias but also one asserting in unison with Jacques Derrida that there is no center. This apparent affinity to deconstruction may explain why, in the sample of journal articles in social sciences I looked at, the majority of authors who quote Stevens do so to accompany some deconstructive gesture. It is time to question paradigms and discover contradictions, time to reconfigure knowledge and lament how without center, foundation, or origin we are. Quoting Stevens in support of such endeavors has become almost a ritual. The sample I have chosen is small but revelatory.¹

Dale Ortmeier and M. Robert Gardner quote "The Man with the Blue Guitar" to make similar points, although in different areas of research. Both authors are psychoanalysts, but Ortmeier's article deals with questions of history and the way it is written, whereas Gardner makes a statement about the psychoanalyst's interpretation of the patient's story. The

lesson they both teach is that of deconstruction: we live in texts and interpretations, and there are no certainties or realities. As Stevens put it, they say: "Things as they are/ Are changed upon the blue guitar"(CP 165). Thomas H. Ogden, another psychoanalyst, ventures into literary criticism when he produces an interpretation of "The Snow Man" to support his demonstration that voice does not exactly express the self but actualizes it, presumably from a potential self. Again, the point is to deconstruct, not reality but the self this time, or rather, the assumption that the self pre-exists the act of speech.

If psychoanalysts deconstruct the self, other social scientists set out to question the very foundations of their sciences. Donald N. McCloskey in "Metaphors Economists Live By" quotes Stevens' "The Idea of Order at Key West" in support of the argument that, like everyone else, economists make up their own world out of metaphors and do not have a shred of solid reality to stand on. Miles Richardson exposes the lack of foundations in science and the rhetorical quality of all language, using as support Stevens' "Description without Place." Richardson also takes the unusual step of writing part of his article in verse and quotes Stevens within a poem. Mary Cipriano Silva and her co-authors use "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" in order to point out the shift from epistemology to ontology in theory in general and to speculate on the applicability of such a shift to the profession of nursing.

Stevens' popularity among theorists, as mentioned above, was preceded by his popularity among literary critics. In her book *Wallace Stevens and the Critical Schools*, Melita Schaum shows that Stevens has been a favorite with just about every critical school or theoretical trend: "[T]he poet is used as a vehicle, as an agonistic tactic and prize in the sphere of much larger critical arguments" (183). Although this may be true about other poets as well, Stevens has proven unusually popular, especially with deconstruction. Once he was consecrated as a deconstructionist *avant-la-lettre* among literary critics, Stevens became the best source of quotations to advance deconstruction in any other domain. However, the very possibility of deconstructing Stevens hinges on placing his verse in new contexts as much as any other interpretations do.

Both among literary critics and among social scientists, I shall argue, Stevens is easy to invoke for the same reason: the abstract quality of his poems allows for fragmentation and ready integration in new contexts. This may suggest the verse is fragmentary, in the way T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" is. But that would be wrong to say, for even when they seem aphoristic, Stevens' poems are integrated wholes. Perhaps the better adjective is "fractal"—made up of pieces held together by an abstract form. It is this type of abstraction that makes Stevens attractive as a source of quotations. If we look at the way his poems are quoted in some other contemporary contexts, where deconstruction is not the purpose, we may

arrive at the poet's own conclusion that the supreme (or the most quotable) fiction "must be abstract."

When he quotes Stevens in *Notes*, Mark C. Taylor relates "Anecdote of the Jar," the same poem in which Herr found the perfect description of a war's insidious expansionism, to Heidegger's "work of art." Unlike many of Stevens' critics, who are looking for Heideggerian ideas in his poems, Taylor uses the poem as an illustration, or rather instantiation, of Heidegger's concepts. Stevens' poem does not run parallel to Heidegger's argument but functions as a case within that philosophical frame. The jar in the poem exemplifies the work of art, as it cleaves up a space where a world comes into being.

The passages that Taylor selects out of Heidegger's essay for his interpretation speak about the power of the work of art that this poem exemplifies: "The cleavage opened by the jar on a hill reinscribes the clearing that Heidegger identifies with the origin of the work of art" (113). We are to look at the work of art as an event foundational of the world it occurs in and constructs at the same time. It is easy to see why Taylor chooses Stevens and not another poet to make the point. The abruptness with which Stevens opens the poem can give the reader a more accurate idea of the phenomenon Heidegger discusses.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee. (*CP* 76)

Stevens accomplishes the clearing/cleaving/rift Heidegger expects from the work of art by exploiting our expectation that a text be anchored in a context. This expectation is somehow betrayed, for we cannot establish the context. It is as if it were there, and we have just missed it. "I placed a jar in Tennessee. . . ." Who are you? What are you trying to do placing a jar? And why in Tennessee? We want to ask these and other questions, and we must turn to ourselves to get answers. Stevens' grammar, the pronouns, the articles, and peculiar syntax create blanks for us to fill.

The poem, as Lentricchia observes, is an anecdote, something anchored so strongly in a context as to seem unintelligible outside it. By that rule,

the poem should fail at being meaningful. But language does not work that way. If the context is not supplied, we grope for it, and eventually we supply it ourselves. The lack of context makes interpretations proliferate, the way mystery engenders legends.

The lure to ascribe meaning, where we cannot decipher it, is increased by the intuition that there is sense, and as Lentricchia himself describes it, the “aural imperialism” of the jar points us in that direction. The poem seems to push us toward constructing interpretations. There is too much missing, even as the sound gives too much sense of coherence for us to reconcile ourselves with obscurity. The poem shifts from an apparent intention to represent something real (and make sense through such a correspondence) to forming patterns. Maybe this is why we go on interpreting and reinterpreting the poem, steeling ourselves to the task of making sense. There is a pattern, and therefore there should be sense. Without any contextual ties, the pattern holds us tied in its abstraction.

Heidegger’s essay matches the poem in patterning. It is virtually impossible to read Heidegger’s later work without being seduced by its rhythms that the repetition of the same words creates. This is why it is also hard to gauge Taylor’s success in elucidating Heidegger with his appeal to Stevens. Before finishing his explanations or reaching his conclusion, Taylor himself begins to sound like Heidegger, or Stevens: “The site of cleaving is the Bridge that gathers together what it holds apart and holds apart what it gathers together” (114). “So the meaning escapes” (CP 19), Stevens would say.

Taylor’s difficulty resides in that Stevens’ poem unfolds at the same high level of abstraction as Heidegger’s argument. If we can get lost among Heidegger’s concepts, we can never find our way out of the combination of apparently ordinary words of Stevens’ poem either. The unexplained presence of the jar, the even less understandable behavior of the wilderness, the arbitrary choice of Tennessee as a locale are indications that something is going on that is not quite stated. If we understand, we do so on an abstract level, where the particulars of the jar, or of the work of art, if that is what we want it to stand for, do not matter. But if in Heidegger we may say that the reasoning is abstract, in Stevens, abstraction means the dominance of pattern—in this case, sound—over the particulars of sense.

I suppose to assert that “Anecdote of the Jar” is an abstract poem has taken some demonstration. Other poems by Stevens, however, are more obvious in that respect. For instance, “Description without Place” is so abstract a poem as to repel Helen Vendler: “*Description without Place* is Stevens at his most impersonal, his most logical, his most ‘objective,’ his most theoretical” (229). It is perhaps its apparent objectivity that makes this poem popular among anthropologists. Miles Richardson, whom I mentioned above, is not the only one to quote it. Nancy Scheper-Hughes actually makes a much more interesting use of a part of the poem as a

motto for the preface to the paperback edition of her book, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics*.

The preface is a reflection on the fate of the first edition of her book, a book that probes into the causes of madness in a small Irish rural community. Against her profession's ethic of impartial observation, Scheper-Hughes takes the unusual step of diagnosing a problem in the culture she observes. Also unusual is the fact that the villagers she writes about speak English and are able to read her book. The villagers' reaction to the book leads her to question her intervention in the life of their culture. She realizes that her work has had major effects. After reading the book and venting their anger, the villagers begin to look at their life in a new light and to make changes.

The lines from Stevens that Scheper-Hughes uses as her motto suggest to her and her readers the complex relations between perception, the thing perceived, and the language in which it is described:

Description is revelation. It is not
The thing described, nor false facsimile.

It is an artificial thing that exists,
In its own seeming, plainly visible,

Yet not too closely the double of our lives,
Intenser than any actual life could be. . . . (CP 344)

Scheper-Hughes' description is indeed without place, since her ways of perceiving are alien to the culture she is observing. Her values do not exist in that culture, and that culture does not easily fit within her values, until she describes it. Her description of the village life is thus revelation in more ways than one. To the villagers, it reveals the reasons for their problems, and to the anthropologist, the effect of her work. Her image of the villagers' life is almost literally neither "The thing described, nor false facsimile." It exists in "its own seeming," but exists intensely enough to change the villagers' image of the world, and ultimately their lives. Stevens' lines seem to have waited for the anthropologist to awaken them to meaning. Their bareness when read alone makes them all the more capable to absorb meaning under the very different circumstances of the anthropological text.

Scheper-Hughes' ideas about anthropology are not shared by many. Her book, as she puts it, "departs from the traditional anthropological stance of cultural relativism in order to examine the social and cultural contributions to psychological suffering" (vii). She does not try to represent Irish culture "from the native's point of view," as Bronislaw Malinowski would have done. Nor does she adopt Clifford Geertz's rather idiosyncratic interpretive method, or James Clifford's evasions and professions of uncertainty that atomize his research and turn anthropology

into confession. Instead, Scheper-Hughes focuses on the patterns of the culture, and this implies some disregard for her subjects as individuals. The reaction of the villagers is directed against this form of abstraction. They protest they have the right to lead “unexamined lives,” lives that preserve individuality and privacy. But the anthropologist’s abstraction enables her to make sense of the madness that plagues the village. The abstract pattern in her work is another way she connects with Stevens, for the poem fits her book not only through what it says, but also through its pattern.

“Description without Place” works somewhat differently than “Anecdote of the Jar.” It is a later, longer, and much more sluggish poem than the brief and cryptic earlier one. However, they both open with the same unnerving disregard for context, even though “Description without Place” takes a lot longer to draw its reader into the activity of making sense. Rather, “Description without Place” lulls us with explanations for a while. We could take it for an almost philosophical treatise, were it not couched in a maddeningly incessant rhythm. Helen Vendler describes it best:

To justify the ways of the mind to man is the polemic aim of the poem, but its rhetorical aim is a queerly hypnotic one. We take leave of sense here . . . in a steady guitarlike hum of reiterated syllables, aiming by and large not for the forcible enhancings of transfiguration, but for the intricate pulse and steadiness of self-involved major and minor premises. (218)

As it tries to go into specifics, the poem loses its connection to its “premises.” A similar transfer of meaning to the one we have seen in “Anecdote of the Jar” takes place here: from representation to pattern. This transfer of emphasis is characteristic of Stevens, for his patterns do not simply follow a prescribed prosody, but evolve at the same time with an apparent loss of meaning at a semantic level. As readers, we are directed, almost pushed, to look for meaning in the pattern, the way we do when listening to music.

Part VI, from which Scheper-Hughes quotes, is an aborted conclusion and thus a momentary convergence of rhythms and ideas, tying the poem into a knot of abstraction that reveals its pattern as a whole. It starts with the pronouncement of revelation, goes through explanations that threaten to lose track of what they want to elucidate, and gathers itself up at the end in “The thesis of the plentifullest John” (*CP* 345). It is here, where the pattern of the poem becomes its meaning, that the anthropologist is able to find, in the denuded, abstracted words, the truth of her experience.

Stevens’ poem is not only a quaintly adequate motto to Scheper-Hughes’ account of what happened to her research. It actually works in the same way her research did, through a shift from the ambition of representing reality to the dissolution of the image and then to the discovery of sense in

pattern. Both Taylor and Scheper-Hughes use the quotations from Stevens to promote a similar shift of attention from a mirroring of reality in all its complexity to the discovery of the abstract pattern that gives complexity its meaning. For what else could we see in the sudden cleaving by which the work of art engenders a world and in the equally “shattering vision” that changes the world for the Irish villagers, if not a reconfiguration, or the birth of a new pattern?

At the time Stevens was writing, a similar shift from objectivity to pattern was taking place in the sciences. Pattern came to the fore in the work of Norbert Wiener, the proponent of cybernetics, as he was trying to find similarities between humans and machines. In his vision of the world, the universe is headed to destruction and chaos, but there are islands of human endeavor that counteract the general entropy. He gave the mechanisms that resist negative changes the collective name of homeostasis, which in his view also defines human identity:

It is the pattern maintained by this homeostasis which is the touchstone of our personal identity. Our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breathe become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body every day with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves. (130)

In Wiener’s account, the solid anchorage of a human being in flesh and bone is transitory, while the pattern ensures stability and consistency. The identity or meaning of a human being is the pattern rather than the flesh itself.

His description of human identity applies to all other objects and can be extrapolated to reality in general: that which escapes change and entropy is pattern. Wiener moves from an understanding of the world as objective reality to an understanding of it as abstract pattern. This move is not surprising for a mathematician, and can sound like a species of new Platonism. N. Katherine Hayles agrees that, in the context of cybernetics, “disembodied information becomes the ultimate Platonic Form” (13). However, Hayles describes this new kind of abstraction as the “forehand of Platonism,” to be distinguished from its “backhand,” which is Platonism as we all know it:

Whereas the Platonic backhand has a history dating back to the Greeks, the Platonic forehand is more recent. To reach fully developed form, it required the assistance of powerful computers. This move starts from simplified abstractions and, using simulation techniques such as genetic algorithms, *evolves* a

multiplicity sufficiently complex that it can be seen as a world of its own. (12)

Obviously, the “forehand” does not rely on ideal forms and does not desire to reproduce eternal essences. Its very Platonism consists only in abstraction, and that makes it dubious as Platonism per se.

I have invoked Wiener here without any intention of making his work yet another theoretical model for interpreting Stevens. Nor does Wiener, in spite of the overlap between his and Stevens’ life spans, provide us with a cultural or historical context for the poet’s work. Rather, his theory enables us to understand the phenomenon by which Stevens’ abstractions develop into new complexities when he is quoted.

Wiener’s emphasis on pattern was forgotten for a while when theory became preoccupied with particulars, accidents, and contingencies rather than with the forms that exist beyond embodiment. But in the second half of this century, it resurfaced in another scientific revolution called chaos theory. The similarity between Stevens’ knack for driving his poems to pattern and Wiener’s confidence in forms that exist beyond flesh may explain why James Gleick, whose book *Chaos: Making a New Science* first introduced the concept to the general public, also quotes Stevens in an interesting way.

“Where chaos begins, classical science stops. . . . The irregular side of nature, the discontinuous and erratic side—these have been puzzles to science, or worse, monstrosities” (3). This is the way Gleick starts his introduction to chaos theory, as if to warn us that his subject is no more no less than a revolution in human thinking. This revolution has to do with moving from an objectivist, grid-like image of the world to the contemplation of patterns so complex as to appear chaotic.

In the chapter where he quotes Stevens, Gleick talks about the difficulties Albert Libchaber, a physicist studying the quantum behavior of superfluid helium at low temperatures, had in formulating his findings: “Scientific problems are expressed in the available scientific language. So far, the best expression of Libchaber’s intuition about flow needed the language of poetry” (196). The language of science, which aspires to be precise and univocal, actually bars the discovery of flow that is only intuited by the scientist. It seems that, like Schepher-Hughes and Taylor, Gleick has no recourse to explain new theoretical findings other than Stevens’ verse.

Gleick appears to be a thorough reader of Stevens, for he chooses little-known poems to give expression to Libchaber’s theory of flow. The first poem he quotes is “This Solitude of Cataracts,” in which Stevens pits his protagonist against the general flow and motion of the world. Gleick sees in Stevens the intuition that flow is patterned, that is, it remains the same while changing. “[T]he flecked river, / . . . kept flowing and never the same

way twice, flowing / Through many places, as if it stood still in one" (CP 424).

Stevens seems to struggle not with a new scientific discovery but with some old philosophical concepts. The notion that "you cannot step in the same river twice" obviously comes from Heraclitus. The science of chaos may thus have discovered the old metaphors of the Greek civilization, and Gleick may be resorting to unnecessary sophistication when he quotes Stevens' reworking of the old adage. On the other hand, Gleick may have a good reason to go to Stevens and not to the Greeks. Stevens works with the words of the old wisdom, but he gives them a twist. His river is not different at different moments but flows, "never the same way twice." It is not the river that has changed but its manner of flowing. This element of change is counter-balanced by the sameness: the river flows "Through many places, as if it stood still in one. . . ."

From a purely linguistic standpoint, one can see Stevens takes a well-known sentence and tosses the words around, repeating some and coming up with an extravagant combination that may not mean anything. Unlike "Anecdote of the Jar," this poem points to a context with which an educated reader would be familiar. We are left with the choice of trying to decipher what the poem wants to say or of amusing ourselves with the distortions. But Gleick does neither. He actually takes the scrambled words, generously gives them a new home in another context, and therefore gives them another meaning.

What generates Gleick's impulse to restore meaning is not the sound pattern, as in "Anecdote of the Jar." Rather, it is the syntax itself, which is a part of the larger pattern of language. We could say that Stevens takes the already ordered adage of old and throws it into chaos, but a chaos with an acceptable syntax. Quite fittingly, Gleick, the "connoisseur of chaos," restores it back to order and to sense.

The other poem Gleick quotes is "Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination." The poem describes to Gleick the conception that "dynamical shapes like flames and organic shapes like leaves borrowed their form from some not-yet-understood weaving of forces" (196). Stevens' poem also moves as if a not-yet-understood force were driving it toward a form that, in its own words, "den[ies] itself away" (OP 136). The poem starts conventionally enough as a narrative:

Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night,
We drove home from Cornwall to Hartford, late. (OP 135)

The statement of fact is marred by the very attempt at description. "Last Friday, in the big light of last Friday night" already creates a pattern by repetition and inner rhyme. The second couplet returns to conventional description only to say that there is nothing ordinary or conventional about this night. The poem's shape becomes dynamic, beginning with the third couplet. The lines move forward and return upon themselves without vio-

lating standard syntax, but all the same exploiting all its possibilities to create the impression of movement:

The vigor of glory, a glittering in the veins,
As things emerged and moved and were dissolved,

Either in distance, change or nothingness. . . . (*OP* 136)

The repetition of the pattern of enumerations, once with “and” and the other time without it, is helped along by the alliteration, the internal rhymes, and the alternation of long and short words. If the poem comes to speak to Gleick about the complex patterns of chaos, it is because it searches for a form always within reach but always on the border of chaos.

Pattern is, according to George Johnson, a notion comprehensive enough to include both cultural and physical forms: “Surely, if there is something fundamental in the universe besides matter and energy it is the thing we call pattern or form. Our science, our mathematics, our languages all are patterns of patterns” (323). Proclaiming this universality of pattern may look like a resurrection of Platonism, and it would be easy to conclude that Stevens’ poetry is simply an extension of Platonic philosophy. We could say, contrary to Lentricchia’s cultural explanation, that it appeals to the modern mind as it would appeal to any other mind, simply through its beauty and truth, in a sense as old as Keats’s Grecian urn.

The scientists of chaos or the anthropologists of madness are not Platonists, however, and they do not quote Stevens to invoke eternal forms. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to group them together with the advocates of the notion that all scientific discoveries and mathematical formulas are merely constructions of a culture. Johnson finds a middle path in information theory, a theory built on the foundations laid by Norbert Wiener:

[N]umbers, equations, and physical laws are neither ethereal objects in a platonic phantom zone nor cultural inventions like chess, but simply patterns of information—compressions—generated by an observer coming into contact with the world. They are configurations of bits, the simplest possible discrimination that can be made: a point in space is occupied or unoccupied, a quality is present or absent. And if information is physical, consisting of matter and energy, then we have come a long way toward exorcising Phaedrus’s ghosts. (325)

In addition to opening a middle path between essentialism and relativism, so far not traveled by literary theorists, Johnson’s clarification is helpful in explaining how Stevens’ poems work. Although they have the appearance of representational language, they rely on pattern for their sense. In order to achieve a pattern, the poet has to void the words of their mean-

ing, the way 1 and 0 are voided of meaning when used to encode a computer program. By this, I do not mean to suggest that Stevens' poetry relies on binary oppositions. One can manipulate the difference between 1 and 0 precisely because they no longer stand for their respective values, and only the difference matters. Stevens is voiding his words of meaning in complicated ways, only a few of which have been exemplified above, and the meaningful differences are many. But once this emptying of meaning is achieved, a poem, or bits of one, can be used to mean whatever a context enables it to mean. It heads, as the 1s and 0s do, toward new complexities. In this way, Stevens can formulate chaos theory, describe an anthropologist's interaction with her subjects, or explain the politics involved in Vietnam. To Edward Said he speaks of "the mere being" (5) of the Orient that is always buried under orientalism. Henry Louis Gates Jr. finds in the thirteen ways Stevens looks at a blackbird the perfect description of our reactions to the O. J. Simpson trial. By the same token, Stevens can re-write Heidegger and champion deconstruction.

Stevens thus appeals to those fond of deconstruction for more serious reasons than a number of phrases that can be turned around to make up a similar theory. His poetry belongs to this time that cultivates uncertainty and equivocation. But he also appeals to scientists that favor the pattern implicit in chaos over the structures of either ideas or material things. That is to say, he appeals to us, who, as N. Katherine Hayles argues, are becoming posthuman, the way Shakespeare appealed to humanists, Pope appealed to rationalists, or Keats appealed to romantics. As his afterlife continues, we may expect Stevens' ghost to accompany us through other new discoveries and theories in the future.

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Notes

¹I would like to thank Joseph Louderback and Jackie Maresch, of the DeVry North Brunswick Library, who helped me locate and obtain copies of these articles.

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Poems

Old Man Verity

Early on, his patent on futures flagged,
Looked certain to lapse like a dying wind.

It was as though an intention had not happened,
The royalties locked away in a Swiss account.

He stood among the trees. He felt the sun.
He listened for some bird that should be there.

Its chirr would surely come and a flash of blue
Fashion his woods into calm Paradise

In which Autumn would rise up, sweep back
And become Indian Summer pretending prime.

But the pale cottonwood leaves knew hesitations
And denials lifting and sinking in the sunlit quiet.

He watched his hands move as leaves move
Seeking to express sun and shade at once,

A few apologies for one so rapt
In a hand's heartlessness and mute reflections.

Among the many trees, the many, many leaves
Dropped down one by one and stirred to be seen.

Lee Gerlach
San Diego, California

One Way of Looking at a Pelican

A pelican sits on a parsonage.
From sun-bleached slate he eyes white marble chips,
the white walkway to the parson's door,

a Greek sculpture in pieces,
as if it met a great hammer
under the pelican's shadow.

The parson ties his two black shoes
in double knots and leaves his house
with wafers in his hand

to meet the pelican on his walkway.
He walks backward, doles his bread
over marble until the sun strikes him.

The pelican expands,
glides toward the glimmering marble,
the void of his bill ringing.

Richard Davis
Denton, Texas

After "Phases," II

*La dernière chose qu'on trouve en faisant un
ouvrage est de savoir celle qu'il faut mettre
la première. —Pascal, Pensées*

There's an even smaller square
perched where no one comes,
with a bench for the old, or the young who flag,
and never a hint of drums.

There's a tree for canopy,
a fountain sore reduced;
the houses lean for comfort, and
the parrot's gone to roost.

Soles will arch on cobbles
not yet gold with leaves,
while far below in the Place Pigalle
the summer season grieves.

Amy Hollins
Leeds, England

Evening Over the Hudson

The light rends the west,
and it is a clearing of sorts,
an erasing of all that was visible;

the spent eye, the rubble of all
appearance, burns on its own trash heap.

Then the vision of the dead,
those we see only by the fire of our dreams,
those to whom our prayers do violence.

And what we see is only what we say.
The dark that holds in the word for dark
and the darkness in its saying

is an inverted language,
and a portal, a placing of another reality,
upon the ridged lapses of New Jersey.

Rob Mond
New York

Barnegat

the sea walked back
from its confrontation with the factual shells
and blanched rock,
the consolements of the comber's hut,
and coiled again around its own depth,
a shell itself in the rim
of reaped blue and shot foam,
a broken beaker of sunlight;

perhaps a word could educe
the meaning from its dark, what was withdrawn
from the hot ashes of the beach,
as if the sea, called,

would be an accretion of that sound,
would wash the reeds with its echoes
and rise to this inept beckoning:
water and will, crest-held.

Rob Mond
New York

Stevens' Snowman Revisited

All images beyond the eyes
remain unseen till safe inside
a mind, unviewed yet known.

Until
whatever watcher takes a sight
away, no frozen field, gone white
and hard, exists on any screen,
but disappears like scattered stone
dispersed on rocky ground.

Beating
pulses manufacture worlds:
nothing moves or warms itself
against a wind, a cold, unless
some circulating blood can find it
good enough to linger. Who maps
dimensions thought exterior
plays blindman's chess through skull-holes, wraps
an impulse in a titillation,
closes universal gaps
with fleece-lined down, with dreams' old excitations.

Burton Raffel
Lafayette, Louisiana

Reviews

A Cure of the Mind: The Poetics of Wallace Stevens.

By Theodore Sampson. Montreal/New York: Black Rose Books, 2000.

Theodore Sampson's "treatise," as he defines this study, sets out to explore a number of insightful questions concerning Wallace Stevens' poetics: the function of Stevens' linguistic play, accusations of Stevens' solipsism, the relation of the irrational element in poetry to a "music" beyond words, the incorporation of "incomprehensible tropes" (x), and the poetic act as a means for attaining an "ontological renewal or higher elevation of the self" (xi). These topics for contemplation, announced clearly in the preface, punctuate an ambitious, researched study that, unfortunately, remains riddled with contradictions, egregious typographical errors and other textual gaffes (pointing to an absent copy-editor), and poorly defined terms repeatedly invoked to reinforce Sampson's central argument: that Stevens' poetry functions as a cure for his own "involved" consciousness. An adumbrating larger topic, glaring in negative relief in the web of intelligent assertions and carefully chosen quotations from Stevens, is Stevens' deeper philosophy of composition for modern poetry and the identity of the poetic subject as the poet leaving traces for future ephebes at the cite of the poem foregrounded as object (instead of the poet's private consciousness)—the larger world of the poem that Stevens so elegantly and successfully amplified.

Sampson argues that Stevens' poems, especially the longer ones, defy definitive interpretation and are therefore, open-ended, inviting both all possible interpretation and none, yet he accuses first-rate critics, notably those interviewed in Imre Salusinszky's *Criticism in Society*, of something he falls prey to: "valuations" of the poetry that are "embarrassingly evasive or downright tautological" (169). Sampson repeatedly invokes terms such as "perspectivist," "ontological," and "true" without historical, literary, or philosophical definition and contextualization. Some of the quotations are cited multiple times, serving as redundant refrains for an argument strung together by Stevens' quotations (albeit excellently chosen ones), a pitfall almost every Stevens critic acknowledges before falling into; Stevens is so good, it is hard to resist the temptation of allowing his own words to elucidate his poetic "project."

Given its lack of theoretical substantiation, Sampson's prose remains readable and clear if oversimplified or overgeneralized at times. The book is noble in its attempt to *begin* to argue for a Stevensian poetics of indeterminacy but suffers from a desire for "true" interpretations and meanings, acknowledged as "self-sealed" (66) in the poet's fragmented consciousness. The modernist employment of the poetic fragment, however, is not discussed; Stevens' version of poetic modernism, according to Sampson, is characterized by "a resistance" of the "poetic subject against all linguistic or conceptual systems of interpretation" (30). Sampson claims that Stevens' verbal play, a topic cov-

ered more thoroughly in Alison Rieke's *The Senses of Nonsense* and Eleanor Cook's *Poetry, Word-Play, and Word-War in Wallace Stevens*, books curiously absent from the lengthy bibliography, is indicative of the poet's obfuscating and kaleidoscopic, private mind. He argues that Stevens' "undecidability"

cannot be said to be the end result of an impersonal and consciously implemented aesthetic, as is in general the case with modernist poetics. Instead it is safer to say that Stevens' poetic indeterminacies have their root in the very structure and temperament of his poetic mind, and specifically in his epistemological obsessions, anxieties, and endless efforts to find what he believes to be the true nature and center of things. . . . Stevens' undecidability must be looked upon as the salient characteristic of a congenitally perspectivist and involuted mind . . . and not as constituting a distinct, formulated aesthetic that may be said to account for Stevens' poetic obscurities in general." (84)

This psychological and phenomenological interpretation that eschews a concern for aesthetics and poetics shifts the focus from Stevens' *poesis* to his inner psyche and the turmoil Sampson unequivocally projects there. The poems are read as proof of Stevens' anxieties and inner turmoil without an exploration of possible reasons for his need to foreground "the irrational element" in poetry (the chaos of contemporary war-torn society, for example).

Sampson argues against Benamou (whose name reads "Belamou" in the bibliography) that Stevens has no roots in Symbolism although he repeatedly quotes Paul Valéry's *The Art of Poetry*, a poetic manifesto post-Symbolism, perhaps Sampson would contend. Earlier however, Sampson claims that Stevens experimented with Symbolist "five-finger exercises," which he gave up after his "consummate performance" in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (71). A symbolist reading does not make sense in this book, given the focus on the world of Stevens' consciousness versus the object or subject of the poem as a separate world, built from the world as a separate structure for readers to enter. It remains difficult to extricate Valéry and Stevens from Symbolism because of their interest in the architectural, linguistic space of the poem to be imbued with mystery, the aforementioned indeterminacy, and music—which is, after all, a human music constructed from "modalities" of perception and "aesthetic feeling." Sampson's most disturbing categorical claim is that Stevens' poems lack a human concern, for his "radically interrogated consciousness" remains "devoid of all recognizable human content or meaning" (67), "reject[ing] all humanist stances" (92).

Poststructural interpretive possibilities are also ruled out by Sampson, who, as already mentioned, believes in "true" interpretations, demonstrating a trust in language that Stevens' poetry does not seem to share, a distrust examined by the deconstructive criticism on Stevens by J. Hillis Miller, Joseph Riddel, Roy Harvey Pearce, et al. Sampson attempts to dissolve the medium of language that Stevens thickened as a recondite surface to a transparent one, to mirror his "interiority" and as a means for attaining "ontological renewal," a

"higher elevation of self." One wonders what role the Stevensian reader, in general, plays in these solipsistic poems. Is the reader privy, also, to the "ontological renewal" the poems offer? Was that part of Stevens' plan?

The end of Sampson's third chapter (there are four chapters and a peculiar appendix) warns, "the price, however, for the kind of music Stevens so assiduously pursues by courting the irrational, in the end, proves to be quite high; since, according to Valéry, it is a process which ultimately results in 'the complete negation of language'" (158)—and perhaps, if believed, the complete negation of literary criticism and poetry.

Krysia Jopek
CUNY Graduate Center and City College

The Wallace Stevens Society Program

MLA 2000 Convention

Washington, D.C.

Thursday, 28 December 2000

10:15-11:30 a.m., Maryland Suite A,

Marriott Wardman Park

STEVENS AND THE ORIENT (PANEL 166)

Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society.

Presiding: Glen MacLeod, Univ. of Connecticut, Waterbury

1. " 'Nothingness' and Late Stevens," Zhaoming Qian, Univ. of New Orleans
2. "Teaching Stevens in China," Milton J. Bates, Marquette Univ.
3. "Stevens and the Meditative Mind," William W. Bevis, Univ. of Montana

News and Comments

* * *

Glen MacLeod reports that on June 26, 2000, the Hartford Court of Common Council voted that Wallace Stevens' daily route to and from work be officially proclaimed the Wallace Stevens Walk. The route includes the following streets: Asylum Avenue from the Hartford westward to Terry Road, north on Terry Road to its intersection with Westerly Terrace, and north on Westerly Terrace to Stevens' former home at number 118 Westerly Terrace. Signs will identify the route, thanks to the efforts of the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens, who proposed the resolution and have begun fund-raising for the commemorative markers along the WS Walk.

* * *

The Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens have published a Wallace Stevens Broadside of "The Plain Sense of Things." Printed in letterpress in three colors by Robin Price, the 16 x 22 inch artwork features a woodcut by Keiji Shinohara. Published in a limited edition of 75 copies signed by the printer and the illustrator, the broadside costs \$150, with some of the funds supporting HFEWS. A framed copy of the broadside, donated by the HFEWS, hangs in the Pond House at Elizabeth Park. To obtain one, contact Kevin Rita at Brick Walk Bookshop, 966 Farmington Avenue, West Hartford, CT 06107. Phone: (860) 233-1730; Fax: (860) 233-1932; E-mail: brickwlc@tiac.net.

* * *

The third annual Wallace Stevens Memorial Poetry Reading was held on Saturday, June 24, 2000, in the Pond House of Elizabeth Park, as part of Rose Festival Weekend. Featured poets were Susan Kinsolving and James Finnegan. Two student poets from Hartford area schools also read. The event is co-sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens (HFEWS) and by the Friends of Elizabeth Park.

* * *

Richard Howard was the featured speaker at the fifth annual Wallace Stevens Birthday Bash at the Hartford Public Library on October 7, 2000. Glen MacLeod reports, "The Birthday Bash was a success again. The program was terrific. Howard talked informally (and entertainingly) about Stevens' love affair with the French language, and then read most of his long poem "Even in Paris," in which he imagines meeting WS in Paris in the early 1950s. It's in the form of letters from two people—one of them an affected Eastern-European aesthete, the other himself—and Howard really PERFORMED them, complete with gestures and different voices, etc. I wish we'd been able to tape it." The evening is sponsored by the HFEWS and the Connecticut Center for the Book.

* * *

Yusef Komunyakaa will be the featured poet at the University of Connecticut's thirty-eighth annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Program in April, 2001, sponsored by the Hartford Insurance Company. On the evening of April 4 at Storrs, he will read his poems and present awards to winners of the annual student poetry contest. At noon the following day he will read his poems at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford.

* * *

"Eighth Blackbird," a chamber ensemble named for WS' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," performed in the Norfolk (Conn.) Chamber Music Festival in July this year. Devoted to new music, the group was the sole First Prize winner of the 1998 Concert Artists Guild Competition and won the 2000 Naumberg Competition.

* * *

Wallace Stevens held center stage this past spring as part of a cultural enrichment program launched for the New York City Board of Education by the interim schools chancellor, Harold O. Levy. Three poems by WS, including "Of Mere Being," were distributed to board members as part of Levy's effort to raise the level of debate on education policy by promoting intellectual discourse.

* * *

Poets House in New York will sponsor "A Conversation with Susan Howe and Susan Stewart" on Friday, January 12, at 7:00 p.m. (\$7, members free). They will "discuss modernist and postmodernist poetics, with a special emphasis on Wallace Stevens, one of the 'inventors' of the art in the 20th century. The evening concludes with a reading by both poets." Poets House, 72 Spring Street, 2nd floor, New York, NY 10012. (212) 431-7920/www.poetshouse.org.

* * *

Stevens books and autographs continue to appear on the market, although at a less brisk rate than in 1999. Two highlights: William Reese Company offered (July, catalog 195), for \$200, WS' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," the first appearance of the poem, published in *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences Sesquicentennial Celebration Proceedings*. In his catalog 18 last summer, London dealer Michael Silverman listed for £475 a TLS (typed letter signed), dated November 19, 1951, from Stevens to Henry Leffert, of The City College of New York, in which Stevens provides the title of his paper, "A Collect of Philosophy."

* * *

Thanks go to the Lannan Foundation for its continued generosity in supporting The Wallace Stevens Society with a \$2,000 membership contribution.

Sara S. Hodson
The Huntington Library

Call For Papers



THE WALLACE STEVENS JOURNAL

Special Issue:
The Poetics of Place
in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens



Life is an affair of people not of places. But for me, life is an affair of places and that is the trouble.

—Wallace Stevens

Essays may treat any aspect of this topic, from the function of landscape to the importance of the local, from ecological concerns to the relationship between self and scene that emerges in Stevens' poetics. All critical approaches are welcome.



Submissions/inquiries by June 30, 2001

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E-mail: serio@clarkson.edu
Web site: www.wallacestevens.com

Call For Papers



THE WALLACE STEVENS JOURNAL

Special Issue: Stevens and Pound

Essays may treat any aspect of the Pound/Stevens relation. All critical approaches are welcome. One focus of the issue will be Marjorie Perloff's influential essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" (1982), which established as a kind of dogma the division of Modern Poetry into two opposing camps: partisans of Ezra Pound (e.g., Hugh Kenner, Donald Davie) vs. partisans of Wallace Stevens (e.g., Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom). One critical tradition (the defenders of Stevens) thinks of modernism as an extension of the romantic lyric tradition and defines poetry primarily in terms of what it says; the other (the defenders of Pound) thinks of modernism as a fundamental break with romanticism and defines poetry primarily in terms of how it says what it says. To what extent, nearly twenty years later, does this dichotomy still apply to our present situation? Is it possible, in the present critical climate, to be both a Stevensian and a Poundian? The special issue will include a new essay by Marjorie Perloff reconsidering her original argument.

Submissions/inquiries by June 30, 2001

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Thirteen *New* Ways of Looking at Wallace Stevens



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