

# *The Wallace Stevens Journal*



Special Issue:  
Wallace Stevens, Adrienne Rich, and James Merrill

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**Edited by Jacqueline Vaught Brogan and Glen MacLeod**

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## Stevens, Rich, and Merrill: An Introduction

FRED MORAMARCO

**A**T FIRST GLANCE it may seem strange to connect Wallace Stevens to two of the most original poets of recent years, because their originality represents two different poles in American poetry. Adrienne Rich is surely the most engaged, politically oriented poet writing today; she virtually invented the phrase “the personal is political.” She nearly always writes with a sense of outrage at social injustice, and her work expresses deep concerns about the disenfranchised, the down-trodden, the socially outcast. On the other hand, James Merrill, son of the founder of one of America’s most prominent stock brokers, is widely regarded as both apolitical and an aesthete—a poet who created a rich imaginary world, particularly in his later works, but one that bears very little resemblance to the real workaday world of everyday lives. He clearly lived in a world apart—a world of Ouija boards and Connecticut mansions—and for all his talent, he seems at times a poet entirely committed to that rarified world. Yet, as these essays make clear, both Rich and Merrill are deeply indebted to Stevens, and both have acknowledged that debt.

The relationship between politics and literary modernism has always been problematic. Some readers are put off by the reactionary politics of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, but continue to admire their aesthetic achievement and the power of their language. Others, like Cynthia Ozick (in a *New Yorker* essay several years ago) and Anthony Julius (in his *T. S. Eliot: Anti-Semitism and Literary Form*), for example, find the politics so objectionable that they imply we should stop regarding these “bigots” as among the twentieth century’s best writers—that we should, in fact, consider de-canonizing them altogether.

Where Stevens belongs in the modernist/politics spectrum is less clear. Despite recent attempts to politicize some of his poetry, particularly Alan Filreis’ excellent *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World* and *Modernism from Left to Right: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (where he argues that Stevens was “searching for a new version of modernism that could contain a response to the events of the day”), for many readers, myself included, Stevens remains a doggedly apolitical poet who enchants us not with the moral force of his political views, but with the imaginative

power of his ability to recreate reality through a startlingly original distortion of it. "Things as they are," he tells us famously, "Are changed upon the blue guitar."

However, as the following essays so clearly show, the issue is far from settled. Stevens' work continues to appeal to both politically oriented poets such as Rich and to aesthetes such as Merrill. One *expects* to find a connection between Stevens and Merrill, but as both Albert Gelpi and Jacqueline Brogan show us, although Stevens and Rich may be an odd couple, their work is certainly linked. A close reading of both poets finds them in agreement about the potency of language to reconstruct reality and posit alternative worlds of imaginative possibility. But Gelpi and Brogan differ in their view of just how specific and direct the influence of Stevens on Rich was. Gelpi finds the general influence of the modernist generation pretty much confined to Rich's early poems. As he sees it, she grew as a poet and left what Gertrude Stein called "patriarchal poetry" behind. This led to her break "most regretfully and so most needfully from Stevens." This view, of course, takes Adrienne Rich at her own word, and in fact Gelpi's essay is primarily concerned with articulating Rich's search for a common language of witness as well as for a poetry that is a virtual extension of one woman's body as it exists in this world.

Brogan, on the other hand, does not take Rich at her word and proposes that her denigration of Stevens is both shortsighted and misleading. She argues that Rich never really emerges from Stevens' shadow, and, in fact, moves closer to a kind of Stevensian poetics as her poetry becomes more sophisticated and mature. She finds both Stevens and Rich committed to dismantling false public rhetorics and replacing them with a language of voluptuous precision, in the case of Stevens, and ethical exactness, in the case of Rich. Brogan argues that both poets exemplify the poet as witness to the moral and political decline of their times. They both find the constructive power of language a stay against the chaos and entropy of twentieth-century ethical dissolution. This is an intriguing confluence and suggests that our readings of Stevens as essentially apolitical and our readings of Rich as essentially a-aesthetic (if I can coin such a word) need serious revision. In the case of Stevens, Brogan finds such a reading in Angus Cleghorn's recent work on Stevens (*Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric*). Cleghorn shows how Stevens was committed to an anti-nationalist stance that in some sense pitted artists and writers against stereotypical rhetorics that emerge from politics, religion, and other social worldviews. This is not far from Eliot's famous statement of poetic mission: to purify the language of the tribe.

For Cynthia Hogue, however, Rich's poetry is less concerned with purifying language than in expressing the body within it. She describes her own lack of awareness of Rich's preoccupation with bodily pain before she herself experienced a terrible illness, with symptoms that mirrored Rich's. Suddenly references to pain seemed everywhere in the poetry, and

even Rich's meter and poetics mirrored the condition of her body. Through the particularized experience of her body's damage, she tells us, Rich has come to an embodied poetics that allows her to conceptualize an epistemological process. Although at first this poetics seems antithetical to Stevens' "disembodied" poetics, Hogue shows us how Rich responded ambivalently to a recording of Stevens reading "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," a poem that at first seems to epitomize the antithesis of poetry as an expression of bodily pain, but ultimately becomes for Rich an emblem of the poem as an instrument for embodied experience.

Although that embodiment seems less crucial in the case of James Merrill's poetry, Susan McCabe has news for us about some of the parallels between Merrill and Stevens—not only connections in their poetry but similarities between their relationships with their fathers, their attitudes toward money and financial security, and ingeniously, in the way blue sky laws—laws formulated in the thirties to protect investors from fraud such as selling building lots in the blue sky instead of on real property—provide a kind of metonym for their poetry. For both Stevens and Merrill, imagined worlds have primacy over actual ones, although the imagination gives us nothing that is not found in the actual world. Put another way, poetry itself is a kind of blue sky law to protect us from the conformities and imaginative paucity of the actual world.

Charles Berger shows us how Stevens' *The Necessary Angel* and Merrill's *A Different Person*, both written late in both poets' careers, are a kind of retrospective poetics in the tradition—though he does not mention these works—of Philip Sydney's *Apology for Poetry*, Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, and even Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. Though Merrill's work is clearly more biographical than Stevens', the intent of both is a summing up of poetic values, and Berger feels they use these books to expand their poetic personhood and to augment their poetic voices. The prose of poets constitutes, for Berger, a necessary adjunct to their poetry, and he implies that a conjoined title of these books might accurately reflect their essential uses: *A Different Angel: The Necessary Person*.

Significantly, Timothy Materer points out, Wallace Stevens is one of the primary presiding spirits—the King of Ghosts—of Merrill's monumental and mystical *The Changing Light at Sandover*. In fact, he informs us, Stevens was the first dead poet that Merrill communicated with through the Ouija board, just after Stevens' death in August 1955. Although W. H. Auden goes on to play a much more dominant role in the poem than Stevens, Materer is convincing when he says that the reason for this may be that Merrill had less reverence for Auden and was simply in awe of Stevens throughout his life. Materer further illustrates how both Merrill and Stevens draw from an Emersonian idea of American innocence, an innocence that for both writers is an attempt to perceive the world without preconditions. He suggests that Stevens plays a larger role in the poem than we

might have imagined, since writers draw on one another's word banks and Merrill's entire *oeuvre* is heavily indebted to Stevens' formulations.

Stevens remains the great poetic influence of our time, his literary offspring spanning the range of American poetry from John Ashbery to Adrienne Rich, from Mark Strand to James Merrill, from Louise Glück to Galway Kinnell, from Charles Wright to Jorie Graham and A. R. Ammons. We have already seen, in the last issue of this journal, how Stevens has influenced Strand, Ammons, and other contemporary poets, and, I am sure, future issues will continue to explore the impact he has had on our language and the ways in which he has taught us a new way of seeing. He has taught us and virtually all poets writing today what he expressed so succinctly in the first sentence of *The Necessary Angel*: "One function of the poet at any time is to discover by his own thought and feeling what seems to him to be poetry at that time." He has given all these poets and many others the gift of finding the poetry of their time in their own thought and feeling—a very large gift indeed.

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# The Transfiguration of the Body: Adrienne Rich's Witness

ALBERT GELPI

## I

CHANGE" HAS BEEN A WORD for Adrienne Rich to conjure with ever since her first volume, *A Change of World*, for the "will to change" (CP 397) is the key to "time's power" to mend and amend itself. Her poetry, always implicitly political and feminist, became overtly and radically so in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and the large and remarkable body of work she has written since then has marked her as one of the defining poets of the second half of the century. Her work is read throughout the world and has altered our sense of the scope of poetry and its function in social and cultural change. In the ongoing evolution of her poetry, many readers hear in the work of the last fifteen years a feminism less univocal and essentialist than that of the seventies, more receptive and responsive to the diversity of women's experiences and values and perspectives, a feminism no less resolute and committed than before but now more conscious of the complex ways in which gender is intertwined with matters of class and belief and race. Such a feminism has to be committed to a long and painful process of clarification and transformation, including its own self-transformation; it has to be less wild perhaps, certainly more patient with the intractability of past and present, but no less passionate to reclaim them for a redeemed future.

The poet's mode of seeing and saying—and changing—is language. But how language can itself change and thereby effect change in the poet and readers has always been a vexed question for Rich. She has long been troubled by the traps and tricks, the allurements and compromises that language under patriarchy and under capitalism offers and imposes. The dilemma is summed up in the often-quoted line from "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (1968): "this is the oppressor's language / yet I need it to talk to you" (ARP 41). A common language, cleansed of the oppressors' corruptions and empowered by revolutionary energies, is a dream to be pursued until realized, but—for the moment and maybe for the foreseeable future—still a dream. Rich has learned to accept and work with what Lynda Bundtzen has called "a partly common language"

(Bundtzen 331) not as an admission of defeat but, on the contrary, as a strategy for rescuing language from the oppressors' structures of meaning by reconstituting words, relations, significations subversively from within.

That choice of strategy and means—as well as the faith underlying it—defines Rich's stance in the configuration of contemporary poetics. She shares with the more politically oriented of the Language poets (who also emerged in the seventies) a concern about the corrosive effects of consumer capitalism on American society and so on American language. However, the Language poets have increasingly withdrawn from the burden and responsibility of communication. In their view, bolstered by current Marxist and poststructuralist theory, the oppressors' language cannot be used except on the oppressors' terms and thus must be dismantled before communication can be reconstructed in new verbal and grammatical structures. For Rich, this theoretically absolute position is self-defeating, and she has set herself instead to using admittedly impaired language as a medium of communication and so as a subversive vehicle for change. She needs it to talk to us, and by responding in kind we join—poet and readers, response by response, understanding by understanding—in making a common language with shared values and meanings, and reclaiming the language instantiates, gradually and painfully, the reclaiming of our lives and our world.

The size and range of Rich's readership indicates that her strategy is, actually, more rather than less radical, or at least more successfully radical than that of Language poets such as Ron Silliman or Charles Bernstein. For where the Language poets have marginalized themselves into an avant-garde elite with a small academic audience, Rich has written herself from the margins to the center without capitulating to the values of the dominant culture. When I remarked to her in the mid-eighties that her pronouns were getting more inclusive, she did not say *yea* or *nay*, but she did not correct my judgment. In a recent interview she acknowledged that she feels that she has come to speak from the center of her culture, speaking to and from and for the people of her time and place—women and men, dark-skinned and white, gay and straight.

## II

Readers and critics have noted the shaping presence of older male poets in Adrienne Rich's early verse: not Eliot (because of his social and religious conservatism); not Pound or Williams (because, politics aside, neither was taught or read at Harvard in the forties and fifties); but Frost, Yeats, Auden, and, perhaps most importantly, Stevens. The gorgeousness of Stevens' verse and the richness of his imagination had a deeper and more lasting resonance for Rich than the work of the other great modernist generation: resonance you can hear again and again in her early poems. Yet, as Rich came to her own voice and presence as a poet—as a woman

poet, as a feminist poet—she differentiated herself from those poets of patriarchy—most regretfully and so most needfully from Stevens.

Rich has written that, in “groping for . . . a sense of vocation, what it means to be a poet,” she was drawn not at all to Eliot and not even to Williams, but to Stevens as “guide” and even “liberator” (*WIFT* 195, 196, 201):

“The Idea of Order at Key West” offered me something absolutely new: a conception of a woman maker, singing and striding beside the ocean, creating her own music, separate from yet bestowing its order upon *the meaningless plunges of water and the wind*. This image entered me, in the 1950s . . . as an image of my tongue-tied desire that a woman’s life, a poet’s work, should amount to more than the measured quantities I saw around me. (199)

Critics have read Stevens’ poem as assimilating the female singer into the larger consciousness of the male poet, and Rich herself came to acknowledge the masculinist bent of his point of view. So in her breakthrough poem of 1958–60, “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” the lines “Time is male / and in his cups drinks to the fair” (*ARP* 12) slyly rephrase for her own purposes Stevens’ comfortable assertion, “The centuries have a way of being male. . . . [I]t is certain that they get it, in part, from their philosophers and poets” (*NA* 52). The Stevens essay from which these words are taken is tellingly titled “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet,” and the whole of Rich’s poem works to invert Stevens’ point and celebrate female creativity.

Stevens would surely have been surprised that he had helped to bring “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” into being, but Rich took or adapted from him what she essentially needed. Moreover, it was not just Stevens’ gender politics that she had to reject but the apolitical poetics he shared with others: the assumption, in Auden’s oft-quoted dictum in his Yeats elegy, that “poetry makes nothing happen” (197). Yes, with Stevens Rich assumed no transcendental purpose or design, no transcendental signifier or historical determinism, and her early training and inclination followed Stevens in seeking purpose and signification in the aesthetic design of the poem. But, more and emphatically after “Snapshots,” Rich rejected Stevens’ hermetic aestheticism: the notion of the poem as a pure fiction, even a “supreme fiction” of the imagination abstracted from “The malady of the quotidian” (*CP* 59, 96) and displacing the dislocated world with its resonantly composed *mundo*: “There is a life apart from politics. . . . It is the *mundo* of the imagination in which the imaginative man delights” (*NA* 57–58). For Rich, however, it became painfully clear that the imagination has to operate in, from, and on the discordant world in order to imagine—and to validate in the fractured quotidian itself—the rhythms and syntax

and images of a changed but recognizable, realizable world. Poetry has to be made to articulate what will make things happen, has to make things happen in the articulation.

The psychological and political break with patriarchy that began in *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and deepened in *Leaflets* (1969) and *The Will to Change* (1971) registered itself at the level of the poetic line in a rupture of the metrical conventions and closed forms of the first two volumes, *A Change of World* and *The Diamond Cutters*. The fracturing of phrase and meter and stanza, the opening of spaces between lines and within lines exposed lacerated fault-lines and jagged edges. These ground-breaking volumes of feminist poetry have rightly received a lot of attention and discussion; indeed, they created a feminist poetry where in a very real sense there had not been one before and propelled the poetic representation of women's experience past the irony and masochism, the pathos and bathos that characterized much of the work of even the best women poets in English. The concentrated energy of the poetry of the late sixties and the seventies—at once disturbing and arousing—registers the poet's sense of crisis and refusal to submit to its doomed logic. Its imagery meets the psychological and social violence of contemporary existence with vehement, even violent resistance as Rich sought to stammer out a new grammar of personal and political connection, a new prosody of relationship and love, envisioned at this point almost exclusively in the bonding between women. Think of the power and technical brilliance of poems like "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," "Shooting Script," "Trying to Talk to a Man," "Diving into the Wreck," "The Phenomenology of Anger," "From an Old House in America," "Twenty-One Love Poems."

Through the seventies and into the eighties Rich's vision did assume a clarity and direction that would have disturbed and even shocked Stevens in its import and in the techniques and strategies it developed in the urgency of articulation. Its hard-earned convictions and intentions required a new grammar, more expansive and declarative in what it encompasses, and a new prosody able to build rhythms into longer lines and longer poems. Consequently, starting in the eighties, Rich's verse exhibits not a rupturing of form, as in *Leaflets* and *The Will to Change*, but instead a copious expansion of line and form: an opening out that is also a gathering in. "Yom Kippur 1984" indicates who had supplanted Stevens as liberator. Its long lines expressly evoke and summon as witness Walt Whitman and Robinson Jeffers. They stand on opposite shores geographically (metropolitan New York and the California wilderness) as well as philosophically (optimistic humanist and pantheistic inhumanist). But as poets they both assumed a prophetic role in exhorting and decrying the America of their time, and Rich was drawn to summon them just at the point in her career when she found herself addressing her America with increasing boldness and assurance. Indeed, Rich is the first woman in the American poetic tradition to assume that large collective role. Its purpose and reso-

lution are announced in the titles of recent books: *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986), *An Atlas of the Difficult World* (1991), *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995). What Rich shared with Jeffers and especially with Whitman is the awareness of the interdependence of personal and national destiny: "your [our] life" in "your [our] native land." She could therefore be as outraged, as disheartened and close to despair, as Jeffers and the Whitman in *Democratic Vistas* were, at the violence, selfishness, greed of American capitalism. But where Jeffers' individualist and inhumanist politics led him to withdraw into pantheistic detachment, her socialist and feminist politics demanded a Whitmanian solidarity: "I am the man [woman]; I suffer'd; I was there" ("Song of Myself" #33).

The daunting challenge of that commitment brought the poet by the mid-1980s to speak at once with greater self-possession and more vulnerable inclusiveness. The expanded lines enfold more and different voices, more and different inflections and kinds of diction. Often, too, the longer lines gather into longer poems that often become sections in longer sequences, accommodating a range of modes—landscape, narration, meditation, social commentary—into great chordal modulations of rhythm and speech. Moreover, that extension of diction, prosody, tonal register expresses itself in verse that is meant to be voiced, oral, performative, so that language enacts and realizes its purpose, calls meaning and action into being. The poem as performative speech-act necessarily proceeds from faith or something like it, or at least from an instinctual ground of conviction that impels speech so powerfully that utterance begins to call that conviction into being in the audience, those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

### III

Performance as self-fulfilling prophecy, prophecy as self-fulfilling performance: but, in Rich's case, what kind of faith or conviction? Obviously she shared neither Whitman's romantic transcendentalism nor Jeffers' Darwinian pantheism, and she has consistently rejected religious affiliation and claims of religious insight or inspiration in her poetry. It is true that in the eighties she became increasingly intent on reclaiming the identification with Jewish culture and Jewish history that her Jewish father had not taught her (e.g., in the magnificent sequence *Sources* or in "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity"), but she has remained religiously nonobservant. From first reading of her predecessors, then, she found the agnostic naturalism of Stevens much more congenial than the conservative religious and social views of Eliot, whose very influence made him all the more to be resisted.

It is therefore all the more surprising to find the feminist critic Mary Loeffelholz suggesting a resonance between Rich and Eliot. Loeffelholz grants the incongruity as obvious in order to make the less immediately obvious but clarifying observation that both poets affirm poetry not as an

aesthetic end-in-itself, as modernists, even Stevens, tended to see it, but instead as a vehicle for purposes and values (however different those may be) extrinsic and transcendent to art as such and subversive to contemporary culture. Whitman and Jeffers had voiced suspicion of a self-validating aestheticism and had instead validated their prophetic poetry in the truth and efficacy of its message; and this is why Rich summons them to her own cause in "Yom Kippur 1984." But Loeffelholz's more challenging point is to link Eliot and Rich in viewing poetry as an agent of radical conversion to change the terms and aims of human existence. To demonstrate an affinity that Rich has often explicitly disavowed, Loeffelholz cites many echoes of and allusions to Eliot's verse in Rich's, specifically linking *Four Quartets* to Rich's sequences in *Atlas* and *Dark Fields*. "The poetry does not matter," Eliot says in one of the *Four Quartets* (184). That is to say that poetry as poetry, as mere aesthetic form, does not matter; form, necessary as it is, is a means to a further end. Loeffelholz's point is that for Rich too poetry finally matters, becomes significant in what it signifies.

Nevertheless, can we speak of "conversion" in Rich's poetry? Only if we make a distinction between a religious and spiritual conversion and a psychological and ethical conversion, and between conversion aimed at transcendence of this world and one aimed at transformation of this world. That distinction sums up the profound differences between Eliot and Rich. The ingrained Calvinism of Eliot's Puritan sensibility did not save his Anglo-Catholicism from a gnostic abhorrence of material existence, the sexual body and the body politic: a recoil that can conceive redemption only in terms of disembodiment. Nothing could be more foreign to Rich than the denial of the body in pursuit of transcendence; in her experience we know who and what we are in the body and through the inspiring of the body, the realization of the human. Realization, not idealization or sublimation; not Blakean "human form divine," but rather the body lived in mortal suffering. Rich knew that hard fact as clearly as Eliot did. But where he sought the way up and out of mortal suffering, she took the way down and through: to accept the human condition so passionately as to suffer it out to loving and binding solidarity that sustains and illuminates us in suffering.

A number of Rich's recent sequences—"Contradictions: Tracking Poems" (1983–85), "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1989–1991), "Calle Vision" (1992–93), "Midnight Salvage" (1996)—begin with the body in pain in a social world of psychological and physical violence and institutionalized injustice and oppression. The common language begins as a language of pain. "Transcendental Etude" (1977) is actually anti-transcendental and anti-idealist in subverting the "leap into transcendence." One of the "Tracking Poems" begins:

The problem, unstated till now, is how  
to live in a damaged body

in a world where pain is meant to be gagged  
uncured un-grieved-over

and then extends the personal into the political:

The problem is  
to connect, without hysteria, the pain  
of anyone's body with the pain of the body's world  
(ARP 129)

In "Calle Vision" the street of our lives leads not up but down to a vision of the suffering body—the individual body within the social body: "never forget / the body's pain / never divide it" because "this is your revelation this the source" (DFR 14, 15).

The body, then, is an inescapable source and revelation of the terms and possibilities of mortality. In the *Four Quartets*, "In our beginning is our end" turns into eschatological redemption: "In our end is our beginning." Rich's particular prophetic witness resides rather in "Poetry as Revision," writing the suffering body into a revelation of our native land, our lives. She makes no claim beyond the human capacity to realize itself more completely within its mortal limitations. She would not use or like the phrase "prophetic witness" because it suggests to her the supernatural agency or insight that impelled the Hebrew prophets to speak. Yet within "Time's Power" she raises her voice, as did her prophetic forebears, to confront her people with their failings and call them to a changed way of living that is both personal and collective, psychological and moral and political. This charismatic dimension of Rich's work has gone largely unnoticed and unexamined, but it is precisely this dimension that has drawn and held readers around the world, that has changed their lives. Eavan Boland, for one, has explained the impact of Rich's work on her and others of her generation in terms of a "witness" that is not merely "personal" but "prophetic" ("Path to Self Discovery" 10; "Q. and A. with Eavan Boland" 11).

#### IV

*Four Quartets* cites the ancient wisdom that the way up and the way down turn out to be one and the same. Rich grounds herself in the body, and she would empathize with Robert Frost's warning (about Emerson) against "getting too transcended" (SP 115). But a reading of Rich's poems, especially the recent poems, confirms that there are aspirations and ascensions in Rich that are an inflection and expansion of embodied existence. The increasing insistence on descent into the body awakens a complementary response, often imaged (as also in Frost) as the need to look up, grounded and embodied, into the seemingly boundless infinity of the stars in order to measure and extend the range of the human. The constella-



cumferences of space we aspire, in response, to extend the circumference of consciousness and community. We formulate a linguistic code that makes meanings (“an alphabet”) and communicates those meanings (“a mouth”). The adjective “swivelled” fuses both our capacity to warp or bend meanings and our capacity to make meanings that can turn things around and change their course.

I know that Rich has rejected the prophetic calling as a tempting but “grandiose idea.” “Transcendental Etude” earlier warns against hubris:

The longer I live the more I mistrust  
theatricality, the false glamour cast  
by performance, the more I know its poverty beside  
the truths we are salvaging from  
the splitting-open of our lives. (ARP 88)

Such protests resist any claim of special enlightenment and insist instead that the power of language proceeds not from the self-regarding “theatricality” of the speaker but from the “truths” words salvage from our fractured lives. Nevertheless, I cannot think of many of Rich’s recent poems except as prophetic witness. The darkly brooding poems of *Midnight Salvage* (1999) are once again shot through with sudden radiance in momentary realizations of love and connection. Such poems are prophetic because their hard-won truths call us to each other in the name of our debased yet mysteriously resilient humanity. And they are performative poems because they engage language in the work of transfiguring suffering into love and community.

The 1981 volume, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, concluded Rich’s middle period and anticipated the work that has taken her farther still. “Patience” suggests both endurance and suffering, and the sequence “Midnight Salvage” continues to invoke patience, though now the patience required is described not as “wild” but as “horrible”:

This horrible patience that is part of the work  
This patience which waits for language for meaning for  
the least sign  
This encumbered plodding state doggedly dragging  
the IV up and down the corridor  
with the plastic sack of bloodstained urine

Only so can you start living again  
waking to take the temperature of the soul  
when the black irises lean at dawn  
from the mouth of the bedside pitcher  
This condition in which you swear *I will*  
*submit to whatever poetry is*  
*I accept no limits* Horrible patience (MS 14)

The speaker here is not the star-gazing woman of "Planetarium," pulsing with energies "for the relief of the body / and the reconstruction of the mind" (ARP 39), but a hospital patient, sick with our shared humanity, suffering the ignominy and muddle of our mortal doom: "horrible patience." But the passage, instead of moving to the death it seems to portend, enacts a transforming reversal to renewed life: "Only so can you start living again" in language, through the furthest realization of "*whatever poetry is*." The extraordinary charge of energy in the poet's sworn vow—"I accept no limits"—restores the star-gazer, and the reiteration of the phrase "Horrible patience" divests it of its dragging negativity and fills it instead with the awe of untold possibility. So it is the poet as reconfirmed star-gazer who speaks the final lines: "and when the fog's irregular document breaks open / scan its fissures for young stars / in the belt of Orion" (15). Orion has been the poet's visionary and stellar alter-ego since the poem of that name in *Leaflets*, and the chastening of the years has only steeled her conviction that language is an essential agent of realization and change, that poetry "comes as it does come / clarifying grammar / and the fixed and mutable stars" ("Poetry III"; ARP 124).

The sections of "An Atlas of the Difficult World" intersperse personal and political episodes to map out the tragic territory we share as our "native land." But then the concluding section, titled "Dedications," summons the readers of the poem, one by one, scattered and alienated as we are, into an association with the poet and one another that undertakes to initiate not a utopia but, she hopes, a new society of true compatriots. Here are a few lines from that section, as the poet calls her people and draws them together through the reiteration of her prophetic recognition:

I know you are reading this poem by the light  
of the television screen where soundless images jerk  
and slide  
while you wait for the newscast from the *intifada*.  
I know you are reading this poem in a waiting-room  
of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers.  
I know you are reading this poem by fluorescent light  
in the boredom and fatigue of the young who are  
counted out,  
count themselves out, at too early an age. I know  
you are reading this poem through your failing sight,  
the thick  
lens enlarging these letters beyond all meaning yet you  
read on  
because even the alphabet is precious. (ARP 158)

Almost immediately after writing "An Atlas of the Difficult World" Rich began the "Notebooks on Poetry and Politics" published in 1993 under

the title *What Is Found There*. Stevens appears more frequently than Eliot, Frost, Pound, Williams, Jeffers, even Whitman. The essays in the book can be read as a running commentary on Stevens' importance to her and on the distance she had come since being empowered by "The Idea of Order at Key West." She reiterates the abiding power of many of Stevens' poems and tells of hearing a recording of Stevens reading "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm." The voice sounding those lovely words and soothing rhythms draws her in, as before, so that "for a few moments," she could again "believe in it all." "But," she asks, "what is a poem like this doing in a world where even the semblance of calm is a privilege few can afford?" (11).

In her essay "rotted names," near the end of the book, Rich presses the point home: "Why, I was asking myself, was that 'master' of my youth, that liberatory spokesman for the imagination, that mentor who warned *Do not use the rotted names* so attracted and compelled by old racial configurations?" His references to black Americans and to "other dark-skinned figments of his mind" were not, she had to conclude, accidental lapses but instead "a key to the whole," to "the meaning of North and South in Stevens's poetry, the riven self, the emotionally unhappy white man with a 'fairly substantial income,' the fugitive in the imagination who is repeatedly turned back by a wall of mirrors, whose immense poetic gift is thus compelled to frustrate itself" (204-05).

Where Stevens' poetry had become over the years more and more hermetic, Rich's had become more political and more prophetic, contending with the social and political crisis from which he chose to abstract himself. In passages such as those of Rich quoted above, the common language, corrupted as it is by its social condition, changes its tone and register, resonates a different and transformed way of understanding, and so of feeling, and so of relating. Robert Creeley has recently mused sympathetically on Adrienne Rich's purpose, and in the following passage his linking Rich with Martin Luther King acknowledges the prophetic and performative dimension of her work:

The dream of a common language, therefore, in Adrienne Rich's proposal, becomes the hope for, the wish for, the desire for, the working toward, literally—I *have a dream*, I'm sure it echoes that—the place where the company of that dilemma will find a bonding and a way of having a life in common, a common life. It's to get to, in not too simple a manner, the imagination of a common need, a common place, a common person—a *common*. . . . (Clark 98)

Yes, we have to speak in the oppressors' language because we need it to talk to one another. But as early as "Diving into the Wreck" (1972) Rich was saying: "The words are purposes. / The words are maps" (*ARP* 54).

In communicating new purposes in the old words, we map out a new world, we realize the dream. In the “common place” of language—words spoken and heard, heard and answered—we find and extend (in Creeley’s word) “company,” converting pain, our own and others’, to active love and loving action.

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# Wrestling with Those “Rotted Names”: Wallace Stevens’ and Adrienne Rich’s “Revolutionary Poetics”

JACQUELINE VAUGHT BROGAN

## I

**A**LTHOUGH ADRIENNE RICH certainly indicts Wallace Stevens for his reductive use of racial terms and stereotypes in her essay “rotted names,” she also suggests that it is from Stevens that she first learned a “radical or revolutionary poetics” (*WIFT* 194). If we accept the early, though still on-going charge against Stevens that he is largely apolitical or politically irresponsible, then we must find it more than strange that Rich would acknowledge such a literary precursor as being instrumental in overcoming her own division of “life” and “poetry” (*WIFT* 195–96). Although numerous critics over the last decade have argued that Wallace Stevens was, in fact, a very politically involved poet, and especially in relation to war, I think it fair to say that the somewhat negative assessment of Stevens’ being apolitical or too much of an “esthete” remains the prevailing one today.<sup>1</sup> I wish to argue, however, that Adrienne Rich really did learn a “radical and revolutionary” poetics from this seemingly unlikely mentor—and not in any ironic way. Such an argument not only strengthens our understanding of both poets, but also points to important ways in which Stevens’ largely unrecognized poetic/political practices are still relevant, perhaps even necessary, to other “revolutionary” poets writing today.

## II

Although I have previously linked Stevens’ late poetry to Rich’s most recent poetry—especially in their mutual faith in the “theory of description” (*CP* 345), as our various “descriptions” are realized in the constructs of the “actual world”—I may have inadvertently encouraged our continuing to polarize these two poets by asserting that the disturbing, concrete, even “blooded” details of scenes from World War II in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* are specifically intended by Rich to counter the abstractions or “bodyless-ness” with which Stevens had addressed the same war in his



sibility of the poet's words not only as an important record of, or witness to, human tragedy but as a vital force for political "resistance," even revolution.

In relation to the historical urgency ultimately fueling each poet's work, I should stress that Cleghorn's clearly stated purpose—i.e., to investigate Stevens' language "as it maneuvers in and manipulates history through poetry's rhetoric" (xi)—could easily summarize Rich's frequently stated poetic and political intentions as well. Recognizing fully, as does Rich, that "It is a world of words to the end of it" (*CP* 345), Stevens, according to Cleghorn, "deconstruct[s] Western cultural foundations, such as Reason and Imperialism, by showing that Western power manipulates human fear and desire through rhetorical power and seduction" (2). In place of such falsifying rhetoric, Cleghorn argues, Stevens proffers the "irrational" but creative rhetoric of poetry as an ethical opening to a world as yet unrealized, but one that—like his "necessary angel"—is essential and ultimately attainable. I find Stevens more ambivalent about the power of language to construct such a desired reality than does Cleghorn. Nonetheless, Cleghorn is right in noting that during Stevens' lifetime, there was a larger cultural willingness to believe in the constructive power of language that contrasts sharply with our contemporary disillusionment: "[Our present] distrust of language means that poets today face a huge challenge in uttering [poetic] rhetoric able to break apart popular media [political] veneers" (1). This distinction defines the most significant difference between the poetry of Stevens and Rich, for ultimately, the poetic strategies each uses for political protest and change prove remarkably similar.

As Angus Cleghorn has convincingly demonstrated, starting with certain poems in *Ideas of Order*, and then more intensely through *Owl's Clover* and the later poetry and prose written during and after World War II, Stevens proves to be a surprisingly "anti-nationalist" poet, one opposed to the dehumanizing presumptions embedded within a largely warring and dominating public rhetoric (53). Cleghorn's analysis of how Stevens repeatedly "glosses" or deconstructs false popular rhetoric—especially in relation to statues and other public monuments of a "warring state"—bears sharply on the strategies Rich uses, most acutely in relation to *Atlas* and its own critique of public monuments during the Gulf War. In terms of just the five sections of *Owl's Clover* alone—"The Old Woman and the Statue," "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue," "The Greenest Continent" (which is Africa), "A Duck for Dinner," and "Sombre Figuration"—Cleghorn meticulously traces a Wallace Stevens who consistently counters romantic, militant, imperialistic, even sexist and racist rhetoric in favor of a more ethical construct of reality engendered by *poetic critique* and *poetic creation*. These, too, are strategies with which Adrienne Rich counters false public rhetoric, most obviously in *Atlas*, a volume that critiques the rhetoric of World War II along with the rhetoric of the Gulf War, while offering the possibility of a poetic re-creation—even redemption.

It is important to place the literary category of “romantic rhetoric” within the parameters of the various public rhetorics Stevens dismantles. For, as Cleghorn notes, “Stevens suggests that the whole cultural system, the manner of thinking about ideology, is restricted by the automatic, defaulting, and exclusionary choices made by artists, critics, and politicians who operate according to monumental paradigms” (58). In relation to the first two sections of *Owl’s Clover*, Cleghorn argues, Stevens subversively manipulates the expected response of the *polis* to the “Statue” figured there in the following ways:

A romantic civic monument in “The Old Woman and the Statue,” the Statue’s symbology is varied in “Burnshaw” to become a Marxist icon. By reversing the Statue from state artifact to subversive icon, Stevens reverses his ideological critique, while parodying the supposition of automatic representability in both instances. (68)

As Cleghorn further argues,

Stevens was stimulated by the predicament posed by the critic [Burnshaw, who had reviewed *Ideas of Order*]. Just as the Old Woman functioned as a symbol of the depression, Mr. Burnshaw’s leftist involvement as a poet, editor, and reviewer represented the social implications of poetry’s confluence with politics. The poem enacts its predicament, and in so doing uses Burnshaw and the Statue as paradigms for the social critique then required. (69)

“The challenge,” Cleghorn underscores, is for Stevens “to relocate poetry in this demanding time” (69).

So, too, is the enormous challenge facing Rich in *An Atlas of the Difficult World* and her subsequent volumes, *Dark Fields of the Republic* and *Midnight Salvage*, in which she offers herself as a poet, almost desperately trying to relocate the political relevance of poetry in the troubled 1990s. For example, in the ninth section of “Atlas,” Rich moves between falsifying public rhetoric and her own poetic attempt to “cure the ground” (to paraphrase a line from the title poem of Stevens’ *The Rock*):

Earthquake and drought followed by freezing followed by  
war.

Flags are blossoming now where little else is blossoming  
and I am bent on fathoming what it means to love my  
country.

.....

A patriot is not a weapon. A patriot is one who wrestles for  
the soul of her country

as she wrestles for her own being. A patriot is a citizen  
trying to wake  
from the burnt-out dream of innocence. . . .

.....

Where are we moored?  
What are the bindings?  
What behooves us? (ADW 22–23)

Or, as Stevens notes in another late poem aptly entitled “One of the Inhabitants of the West,” “So much guilt lies buried / Beneath the innocence / Of autumn days’” (CP 504).

To understand more precisely how Stevens and Rich wish their poetry to “decreate” or dismantle false public rhetorics, it is helpful to remember the fine distinction Stevens makes between “decreation” and “destruction” in “The Relations between Poetry and Painting.” Following Simone Weil, Stevens says that “decreation is making pass from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is making pass from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which *our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers*” (NA 174–75; emphasis added). In other words, “decreation,” as opposed to sheer destruction (including, of course, the extremity of actual war), clears existing constructs for future “re-creations.” As Umberto Eco notes, what he terms as this essentially “modernist” gesture can occur at any moment in history, at any moment the “past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us,” thus leading to the desire to “deface the past” (66)—a desire shared with equal intensity, though obviously stemming from discrete historical causes, by both Stevens and Rich.<sup>3</sup> Notably, in the final section of the opening title poem to *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich makes a very similar assertion, though in poetry rather than in prose:

I know you are reading this poem listening for something,  
torn between bitterness and hope  
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.  
I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing  
else left to read  
there where you have landed, stripped as you are. (ADW 26)

Despite the apparent bleakness of our “stripped” modern existence, Rich still encourages others, as well as herself, to take up “again” that “task” we “cannot refuse”—the task of de-scribing our world and, therefore, possibly (p)re-scribing for it a different future, in reality. There is, in this sense, ultimately a serious spiritual charge to the “radical and revolutionary poetics” of both Stevens and Rich.

Yet, having outlined the similarity these two poets’ larger political goals, it is necessary to turn to Rich’s recent and thorough rejection of Stevens as an ethical model or mentor. In the essay from *What Is Found There* entitled

“not how to write poetry, but wherefore,” Rich concludes—with seeming approbation—that in her early twenties she “took as guide a poet of extreme division, an insurance executive possessed by the imagination. But,” Rich then says, “if I was going to have to write myself out of my own divisions, Wallace Stevens wasn’t the worst choice I could have made” (*WIFT* 196). The irony of this remark is not made clear until the end of the very next essay, “rotted names,” in which she charges her poetic mentor with extreme racism, ethical hypocrisy, and imaginative failings.

After admitting her attraction to Stevens early in her career for his having imagined a “woman maker, singing and striding beside the ocean, creating her own music” (“The Idea of Order at Key West”), she also says, “Of the modern poets I read in my twenties, Stevens was the liberator,” telling her that “Modern Poetry” has “to face the men of the time and to meet / The women of the time. It has to think about war / And it has to find what will suffice” (*WIFT* 201–02). From these remarks, it would seem that her indebtedness to Stevens remains unequivocal. As she also says,

It was he who said to me, *Ourselves in poetry must take their place*,  
who told me that poetry must change, our ideas of order, of the  
romantic, of language itself must change:

Throw away the lights, the definitions  
And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or it is that,  
But do not use the rotted names. (*WIFT* 202)

Despite this praise, Rich ends the essay “rotted names” by thoroughly rejecting Stevens for his supposedly compulsive and extensive racism: “Why . . . was that ‘master’ of my youth, that liberatory spokesman for the imagination, that mentor who warned *Do not use the rotted names*, so attracted and compelled by old, racist configurations? How . . . could he accept the stunting of his own imagination” by, among other things, his “compulsive reiterations of the word ‘nigger’?” (*WIFT* 204).<sup>4</sup> Rich says she first tried to justify these moments of overtly “racial language” as “painful but encapsulated lesion[s] on the imagination, a momentary collapse of the poet’s intelligence”—*but*, she then stresses, she later realized that Stevens’ racism was a “*key to the whole*,” one that explains not only the dynamics of Stevens’ artistic work and that of his private life but of the entire poetic tradition she was trying to embrace (*WIFT* 204–05; emphasis hers). “To understand how he places himself in relation to . . . dark-skinned figments of his mind,” Rich argues, is “to grasp the deforming power of racism—or what Toni Morrison has named ‘Africanism’—over the imagination—not only of this poet, but of the collective poetry of which he was a part, the poetry in which I, as a young woman, had been trying to take my place” (*WIFT* 205).<sup>5</sup>

In *Wallace Stevens' Poetics*, Cleghorn provides an extensive discussion of *Owl's Clover* that offers a useful counter to Rich's condemnation of Stevens. Particularly in relation to "The Greenest Continent," which Stevens had originally planned to entitle the "Statue in Africa" (see Cleghorn 60), Cleghorn convincingly demonstrates that Stevens "draws together bad measures made in Christian faith and colonization," offering a counter epistemology to this "destructive" and racist "missionary mindset" (94). Cleghorn's larger interpretation of the five sections of *Owl's Clover* positions Stevens as mocking first state sculpture, Burnshaw's Marxism, imperialism and/or racism (in "The Greenest Continent"), Christianity (in "A Duck for Dinner"), and Eurocentrism (in "Sombre Figuration"). All five of these categories are "monumental aesthetics" that "dominate the figures around themselves" and that "function in order to control rather than to grant expression" to the "spirit of people" (86). Such "monumental aesthetics," whether materially or verbally conceived, imply a totalizing gesture clearly abhorrent to what we have come to call a postmodern mentality—and, I would argue, a totalizing gesture abhorrent to Stevens well before the advent of World War II.

In terms of "The Greenest Continent," Cleghorn finds that Stevens "stretches the definition of the Statue from 'The Old Woman' and 'Mr. Burnshaw' by planting it in the African jungle. This image presents the imposition of European imperialism in Africa" (88)—much as "Anecdote of the Jar" presents an image of a similar imposition in Tennessee. Following a canto in "The Greenest Continent" in which Stevens specifically asks, "could the statue stand in Africa?" (*OP* 87), the almost violent use of the word to which Rich so adamantly objects (in contrast to his use of the word "blacks" earlier in this section of *Owl's Clover*) intrudes as a startling reminder of the crude and destructive consequences of European imperialism, colonization, appropriation, and denigration:

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

What this colonizer sees and hears is not "The black" who would "still / Be free to sing" (*OP* 89) had Africa been left alone at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—during the period of Stevens' actual maturation—nor the "blacks" ruined in an earlier section of "The Greenest Continent" by the hypocritical intrusion of white colonists who, as self-described "angels," actually "come, armed, gloriously to slay" (*OP* 87). Much as in Elizabeth Bishop's "Brazil, January 1, 1502," the white colonizing of a continent reduces the people already living there to mere "voices"—perhaps to a non-differentiated single voice (i.e., precisely a racial stereotype)—ironically silenced through racist projections concomi-

tant with actual political and personal domination. Thus, “The Greenest Continent” deliberately exposes the hypocrisy and unethical behavior of white colonists imposing their “world order” on and in Africa.

Nonetheless, Cleghorn is finally troubled by this section of *Owl's Clover*—or, more accurately, by the figure/god Ananke, who appears at the end of the section and whom Cleghorn regards as “the African alternative to the transposed Western Statue” (94). Rather than considering the possibility that Stevens may be introducing yet another instance of white colonial rhetoric, Cleghorn interprets Ananke as an “intrusive exotic demonization” of African presence (95). In contrast, I find the “alternative” of Ananke to be no alternative at all, but rather the flip-side of that same imperialist coin. Just as sexist rhetoric can result in either the falsifying demonization or valorization of women as the “madwoman/whore” or “angel/madonna,” racist rhetoric can manifest itself in clearly derogatory language or mask itself in the projection of a supposedly appreciated aesthetic (but equally reductive notion) of “primitivism” onto Africa and blacks. Such a projection is, in relation to the clearly derogatory word Stevens uses in this section, equally a culturally constructed “rhetoric” that justifies exploitation. And, we should note, it was a construction actually being projected, venerated, painted, even theatrically performed in Europe and in America in the immediate years surrounding the composition of this poem.<sup>6</sup>

If we can then, at least for the moment, set aside the racist charge against Stevens, I would argue that from *Owl's Clover* to his last poems (which emphasize most notably, not the “will to power,” but the “will to change”),<sup>7</sup> Wallace Stevens proves to be a poet whose political and ethical strategies converge consistently and quite remarkably with those found in the poetry of Adrienne Rich, especially her last three volumes. As Joshua Jacobs has argued in an essay entitled “‘An Atlas of the Difficult World’: Adrienne Rich’s Counter-Monument,” in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Rich uses the title poem “Atlas,” written during the Gulf War era, to scrutinize “monuments intended to symbolize national identity” (2):

The poem’s title might suggest that Rich intends to bear up—and speak for—all the interconnected experiences of loss she traces among immigrants, migrant crop pickers, and Americans involved with wars across two centuries. However, Rich refuses to be the single voice of these American histories, or to idealize them, even as she makes such public artworks as the Statue of Liberty and the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial into the foremost symbols of this American landscape. (2)

In other words, as with Wallace Stevens, the poet behind *Atlas* desires precisely what Cleghorn says Stevens desired in *Owl's Clover*—i.e., “a more chaotic, less rigid reality” than our current public discourse allows—one

that would “grant expression” to, rather than repress, the human spirit (Cleghorn 86). Jacobs further argues, “The power of this process, which I describe as Rich’s ‘distribution’ of witnessing ability, lies in Rich’s engagement with traditional forms of memory, and in her refusal to let these forms’ idealizing potential obscure the range of Americans who can see their experiences represented within such public artworks” (3).

In this “radical and revolutionary” endeavor, Rich envisions for herself and for others the power of a new kind of poetry to imagine and create a healthier world—just as Stevens does as well. Though not attending to the presence of Stevens that I find inhabiting *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, Jacobs catalogs a number of literary influences (including Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and Muriel Rukeyser) with whom Rich must negotiate, as well as public monuments ranging from the Statue of Liberty to San Quentin, in order to release poetry and public rhetorics from totalizing propaganda: “This connection between literary and public art, and between cultural narratives in general and the landscape, becomes crucial to Rich as she turns to contemplate her country during the time of the Gulf War” (10). Consider the following lines from the second section of “Atlas,” in which actual monuments and verbal constructions merge into a horrifying reality she wants to “decreate”:

This is the desert where missiles are planted like corms  
This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms  
This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy  
This is the cemetery of the poor  
who died for democracy This is a battlefield  
from a nineteenth-century war the shrine is famous  
This is the sea-town of myth and story when the fishing  
fleets  
went bankrupt here is where the jobs were on the pier  
processing frozen fishsticks hourly wages and no shares  
These are other battlefields Centralia Detroit (ADW 6)

It is worth noting that in “Description without Place,” which was written toward the end of World War II for the Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard, Stevens describes the power of words and of poetry in reality, with very similar political insights:

There are potential seemings, arrogant  
To be, as on the youngest poet’s page. . . .  
.....

There are potential seemings turbulent  
In the death of a soldier, like the utmost will,  
  
The more than human commonplace of blood,  
The breath that gushes upward and is gone. . . .

.....  
Things are as they seemed to Calvin or to Anne  
Of England, to Pablo Neruda in Ceylon,

To Nietzsche in Basel, to Lenin by a lake. (*CP* 340–42)

As Stevens will conclude in the final section of the poem, “the theory of description matters most” because “everything we say / Of the past is description without place, a cast / Of the imagination, made in sound; / And because what we say of the future must portend” (*CP* 345–46). With the inclusion of these very specific individuals and the acknowledgment that their individual descriptions of the world really have shaped reality, the political responsibility for our words is made quite urgent and clear.

As Mark Schoening has recently argued in “Sacrifice and Sociability in the Modern Imagination: Wallace Stevens and the Cold War,” such a sense of urgency was shared by many other writers at the time, including most notably Lionel Trilling. Although Rich may be more obviously focused than Stevens appears to be on the actual entwining of our poetic and political descriptions, Rich and many of her contemporaries share with Stevens and his own contemporaries the knowledge of the power of description. Similarly, Stevens shares with Rich the knowledge that “The earth is not a building but a body” (*OP* 186). Both poets wish to give witness not merely to the powerful wrongs that have occurred in language and in reality but also to the possibility of creating what Rich calls “Poetry and revolution: poems and changes of consciousness, poems and actions” (*WIFT* 238).

Despite this obviously ethical desire, the central problem that Jacobs says Rich finds for herself within this endeavor is the problem of any poetry self-consciously committed to a “poetry of witnessing”:

One of the central tensions in poetry of witness, though, remains as a question for poems aspiring to be a material site for any purpose: compared to artist-effacing works such as the Vietnam Wall or the AIDS Quilt, the relation of readers to “Atlas” will always seem more mediated and prescribed by the author’s intentions and language, in ways which specifically preclude our imagining the poem as an actual space in which people create their own responses. (22)

In other words, one of the most crucial questions that arises in Rich’s recent poetry is how to write a poem that witnesses to unspoken histories while not herself imposing her own vision or engaging in what Stevens called the “maker’s rage to order” (a phrase taken, ironically, from “The Idea of Order at Key West,” the poem that Rich once found so liberating). From the writing of *Owl’s Clover* to the final poems of his career, I would argue, this became a critical question for Stevens as well.

### III

In the remainder of this essay, I would like to trace Stevens' wrestling with a similar if not identical problem—from his initial inability to find a resolution to the ethical problem of authorship in the poems of the 1930s to his more successful resolutions late in his career—in ways that dovetail with Rich's own poetic development thematically as well as structurally. Rich also moves from an initial failure to imagine alternative structures that do not replicate the very domination she wishes to resist, to notable though tentative successes in this endeavor in her most recent poetry. As Rich notes of her early poetic voice, at that time there were "questions" she "had as yet no language for" (*WIFT* 195), but questions that she—and Stevens—did find a language for over subsequent years and experiences. For example, in the concluding poem of *The Will to Change*, "Shooting Script," Rich writes specifically of her desire to imagine "the alternative"—"To feel existence as this time, this place" (*WTC* 61). Yet at that point in time she seems stuck in a "script" (freezing frames, at once verbal and visual) from which she cannot finally escape:

Thinking of that place as an existence.

A woman reaching for the glass of water left all night on the  
bureau,  
the half-done poem, the immediate relief.

Entering the poem as a method of leaving the room.

Entering the paper airplane of the poem, which somewhere  
before  
its destination starts curling into ash and comes apart.

The woman is too heavy for the poem, she is a swollenness, a  
foot,  
an arm, gone asleep, grown absurd and out of bounds.

Rooted to memory like a wedge in a block of wood; she takes  
the  
pressure of her thought but cannot resist it.

You call this a poetry of false problems, the shotgun wedding  
of the  
mind, the subversion of choice by language. (*WTC* 61)

Twenty-five years later, however, in the final poem of *Dark Fields of the Republic*, Rich appears to have resolved this dilemma through an appeal to plurality that she could not even begin to imagine in *Will to Change*:

In my sixty-fifth year I know something about language:

it can eat or be eaten by experience  
Medbh, poetry means refusing  
the choice to kill or die

but this life of continuing is for the sane mad  
and the bravest monsters (DFR 71)

Sounding highly reminiscent of that “Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur” (NA 67)—the one who curiously replaces the “masculine nature” as the “virile poet,” after first being rejected as a “monster” in Stevens’ well-known essay, “The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet”—Rich continues her poem by invoking a multi-personaed, even mythical female or feminine intimation:

The bright planet that plies her crescent shape  
in the western air that through the screendoor gazes  
with her curved eye now speaks: *The beauty of darkness*  
*is how it lets you see.* Through the screendoor  
she told me this and half-awake I scrawled  
her words on a piece of paper.  
She is called Venus but I call her You  
You who sees me You who calls me to see  
You who has other errands far away in space and time  
You in your fiery skin acetylene  
scorching the claims of the false mystics  
You who like the moon arrives in crescent  
changeable changer speaking truth from darkness (DFR 71)

When compared with her earlier work, what is clear is that despite her on-going desire to imagine alternative linguistic, poetic, and political structures, it has taken Rich most of her poetic career to produce a language or a poetry that is not only “open” to the future, but that also acknowledges (as does Stevens in “Description without Place”) “that what we say of the future [in poetry and in reality] must portend” (CP 346). This same poem, “Edgelit”—the “final word,” as it were, of *Dark Fields*—concludes with a passage in which Rich appears to transcend what has frequently been in her poetry a truly bleak projection about the future with the alternative hope of

dying in full desire  
thirsting for the coldest water  
hungering for hottest food  
gazing into wildest light  
.....  
These are the extremes I stoke  
into the updraft of this life

still roaring

into thinnest air. (*DFR* 72–73)

In the concluding lines of her most recent volume, *Midnight Salvage*, Rich further effaces her own poetic authority by charging language itself with the power to de-scribe, in-scribe, even pre-scribe the *poet herself*, thus dismantling her own earlier desire for the “rage to order.” In the following passage, which concludes that volume, taken from the poem appropriately entitled “A Long Conversation,” Rich asks the startling question that her poetry, in retrospect, appears to have been moving toward all along:

In the dark windowglass  
a blurred face  
—is it still mine?

Who out there hoped to change me—  
what out there has tried?

What sways and presses against the pane  
what can't I see beyond or through—

charred, crumpled, ever-changing human language  
is that still *you*? (*MS* 69)

Recalling Stevens' phrase for language or poetry from his early “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle”—that “many-crumpled thing” (*CP* 13)—Rich positions language before herself with a final humility that no longer attempts to control it, “master” it, or manipulate it. This move on her part mirrors one made by Stevens late in his own career, as in the following passage taken from the title poem of *The Rock*:

In this plenty, the poem makes meanings of the rock,  
Of such mixed motion and such imagery  
That its [the rock's] barrenness becomes a thousand things

And so exists no more. This is the cure  
Of leaves and of the ground and of ourselves. (*CP* 527)

Or, as Rich puts it in “Long Conversation,” “I am my art” (*MS* 67).

We can trace Stevens' own frustrated attempts to imagine a counter (though not oppositional) structure and poetics early in his career to a more successful and inclusive alternative late in his career in a remarkably similar pattern of development. In terms of Stevens' frustrated attempts to offer alternative poetic and political structures, Cleghorn's discussion of *Owl's Clover* proves especially helpful once again. The fourth section of the poem, “A Duck for Dinner,” he argues,

is similar to the civic ordering of wilderness Stevens first offered in 1917's "Anecdote of the Jar." Both poems illustrate a formal dominance that is arbitrary and universal (is that jar in Tennessee, Vietnam, or Keats' ode?). In "A Duck for Dinner," a local (though unnamed) park is the site for a conversation about civic responsibility in a new racially diverse, economically and culturally depressed America. (98)

In a poem so clearly challenging the acceptance of public symbolic order, this section of *Owl's Clover* cannot yet imagine a way to a new de-centered populace, much less to a truly collective, inclusive language. Instead, as Cleghorn notes, the "kitschy American park" of this section ironically "appears cartoonish and irrational because it lacks traditional symbolic order" (106). As he further notes, the last section of *Owl's Clover*, "Sombre Figuration," does nothing to resolve this impasse, retreating as it does from social objectives to a more abstract figuration of the poet who, while desiring a "more chaotic" and "less rigid reality," is desiring something he cannot yet truly conceive, much less achieve.

Like Rich, then, in her relatively early *Will to Change*, in his own early moment of sustained social and civil critique, Stevens can only reject the reigning order(s). As with Rich, early in his career Stevens "had as yet no language" to ask the questions he really desired to ask about poetry's place in the actual world. This dilemma is dramatized in a humorous but also chilling example Stevens composed the year after *Owl's Clover* in the form of "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts":

There was the cat slopping its milk all day,  
Fat cat, red tongue, green mind, white milk  
And August the most peaceful month.

To be, in the grass, in the peacefulest time,  
Without that monument of cat,  
The cat forgotten in the moon;

And to feel that the light is a rabbit-light,  
In which everything is meant for you  
And nothing need be explained;

.....

The whole of the wideness of night is for you,  
A self that touches all edges,

You become a self that fills the four corners of night.  
The red cat hides away in the fur-light  
And there you are humped high, humped up,

You are humped higher and higher, black as stone—

You sit with your head like a carving in space  
And the little green cat is a bug in the grass. (CP 209–10)

Drawing, most likely, upon a different cultural symbology—i.e., the fact that in the Japanese culture, people see a “rabbit” rather than “a man” in the moon—Stevens encodes this poem with a social narrative that highlights the problem of any totalizing rhetoric (whether monuments or public discourse) much as he did in *Owl’s Clover*. Far from being yet another example of what Marjorie Perloff calls Stevens “at his most assured”—i.e., a poet ignoring the real world only to explore “like his own ‘Rabbit as King of the Ghosts,’ the ways of becoming ‘A self that touches all edges’ ”(51)—this poem ruthlessly dramatizes (however humorously, it may first seem) the destructive nature of any hierarchical or dominating structure by having the rabbit replace the cat as the monstrous, domineering power. The implicit question posed by the poem is how to dismantle an abusive structure of power (whether Marxist, imperialist, religious, racist, sexist) without merely inverting the structure and thus keeping the abusive structure itself in place.

The question of how to write such a politically “revolutionary poetics” is not answered yet in this poem. But as “Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” does make clear, the answer is clearly not in merely inverting the structure. Doing so only means that the previously victimized, perhaps metaphorically feminized “rabbit” takes the place of the domineering and metaphorically patriarchal cat, thereby merely reinstating a structure of dominance and violence. The hunted simply becomes the hunter. Despite the apparent playfulness of the poem, the social “anecdote” or allegory behind the “Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” is that “the man in the moon” always remains there if the positions of oppressor and oppressed are merely inverted. By the end of the poem we should be disturbed that the rabbit has clearly “become” the cat. “[H]umped high, humped up,” the rabbit “as King” is clearly the new aggressor in an imaginary future social structure that would simply invert and thereby replicate the original unethical structure it attempted to revolutionize or overturn.

As already suggested, such a dilemma appears to have been Rich’s hurdle, or “freezing frame,” in her early work, such as “Shooting Script,” where she tries to “enter” poetry as a way of escaping constricting structures, only to find herself too “swollen” to escape either poetic or political lines. Yet, in the most recent volumes she has published, Rich has managed to construct a new linguistic line that defies imposition, hierarchy, even authorial control while still managing to speak to the actual world in a discourse that resists the more extreme forms of experimental poetry.<sup>8</sup> Concurrent with her change in poetic lines to a longer, “less rigid” metrical form, Rich has solved the problem of how to write poetry that witnesses to the actual world while resisting that “rage to order” by a complicated blurring of the author (“I” or “eye”) and the audience (vari-

ously “we” and “you”) that dissolves, if not resolves, into an interwoven, mutually responsible collective “we.”

In many of his late poems, Stevens confronts—and then responds to—a similar poetic challenge as well, though perhaps most obviously so in “The Hermitage at the Centre” (the poem I find to be the highly ironic “center” of *The Rock*):

The leaves on the macadam make a noise—  
How soft the grass on which the desired  
Reclines in the temperature of heaven—

Like tales that were told the day before yesterday—  
Sleek in a natural nakedness,  
She attends the tintinnabula—

And the wind sways like a great thing tottering—  
Of birds called up by more than the sun,  
Birds of more wit, that substitute—

Which suddenly is all dissolved and gone—  
Their intelligible twittering  
For an unintelligible thought.

And yet this end and this beginning are one,  
And one last look at the ducks is a look  
At lucent children round her in a ring. (CP 505–06)

What is fascinating about this poem is that precisely at the moment that Stevens imagines the total dismantling of any center, including authorial domination in the form of that “great thing tottering,” Stevens produces a new poetic line and structure that has no other counterpart in the rest of his work. Corresponding to Rich’s longer lines in her recent volumes, the intricately interwoven lines of this poem aptly create a “more chaotic” and “less rigid” structure that displaces the monolithic center into a community of (ungendered) siblings “round her in a ring.” As opposed to the impasse Stevens encountered in the “Duck for Dinner” from *Owl’s Clover*, here the “last look at the ducks” is finally not at a center, not even at “her,” but on those “intelligible” and “lucent children round her in a ring.” It is not accidental that these “Birds of more wit” can “substitute” what Stevens calls “Their intelligible twittering / For an unintelligible thought”—or at least “unintelligible” heretofore. As Stevens also says in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” it seems to be “one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era” (NA 22)—implicitly decreasing the existing structures so as to imagine a new and more creative future. Indeed, for Stevens, as well as Rich, “this end and this beginning are one”—but only in the sense of a magical, redemp-

tive moment of new creation, certainly not a re-institution of monolithic singularity.

The poem's doubly entwined structure therefore supports the new socio-political narrative that the poem foretells—that is, the “end” of a phallogocentric structure or monumentalizing rhetoric—and yet an end that does not simply replace it with a gynocentric one. As opposed to “A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts” and its failure to articulate a truly “something new under the moon,” in “The Hermitage at the Centre,” not a single bird, but multiple birds are “called up by more than the sun” (with a pun on “Son”). Even if there was a temptation to impose his own “authorial I” here, as there appears to have been in his 1930s volume *Ideas of Order*, in this poem Stevens clearly allows that and other monumental “rage[s] to order” to collapse altogether, reinventing “itself” as the “less rigid” communal ring embracing polyphonic voices.

Such moments—whether called postmodern, feminist, “radical,” or “revolutionary”—actually occur in numerous poems of *The Rock*, in which the rather obviously phallogocentric expectation signaled by the title is radically dismantled in favor of a commonality—a commonality necessary, as Stevens says in “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” “since we are poor” (CP 524). The much more feminized and inclusive voice of these late poems has then a curious and continued relation to the development of Rich's own poetics and politics—including, as it does, an appeal to a collective “we” that blurs the boundaries between author and audience. Anticipating (perhaps even influencing) Rich's recent poetic strategies for forty years, Stevens also erases the possibility of his own authorial domination by not only appealing to that vulnerable but necessary “we,” but also by suggesting that ultimately—and most ironically—that it is the “power of words” or language itself that is the final construct of reality. As Rich does in “A Long Conversation” discussed above, Stevens asserts repeatedly in *The Rock* that our larger personal, poetic, and political problems are literally in-vested, if not de-vested, by a “queer *assertion* of humanity” (CP 525; emphasis added). In fact, in the very last poem concluding *The Rock* and, as it turns out, his *Collected Poems*, Stevens ends his long poetic journey with an almost astonishing humility in front of language. Far from that “maker's rage to order,” the impetus of this poem appears to be Stevens' willingness to consider that language has written him, and that a new language is possible even yet with the potential to write not only a new Wallace Stevens, but a new reality:

That scrawny cry—it was  
A chorister whose c preceded the choir.  
It was part of the colossal sun,

Surrounded by its choral rings,  
Still far away. It was like  
A new knowledge of reality. (CP 534)

Perhaps not surprisingly at the end of this discussion, the extraordinary parallel between these two poets' development manifests itself in their prose as well. As Cleghorn notes, the highly political charge of the essays on the value of poetry in the actual world that comprise *The Necessary Angel* (a charge made most acute by the "pressure of reality" of World War II), constitutes a "Coda" to the finally unfulfilled desire of *Owl's Clover* (113–22). As Stevens says in that collection,

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it. (NA 31)

With only a change in the gender of the poet above, these words could well come from Rich's recent collection of essays with which I began this article. Perhaps, then, those "rotted names" that Rich rightfully rejects are not finally a racist "key to the whole" for Stevens or for his truly "revolutionary poetics." Instead, those "rotted names" may actually comprise any falsifying or reductive rhetoric, public discourse, or totalizing monuments that privilege either a structure of domination or its sheer inversion. From this perspective, it would seem that both poets ultimately share the desire to create what Rich prophetically called *The Dream of a Common Language*. Such a common dream would indeed reject countless "rotted names" in favor of a poetics and politics converging in a redemptive future, one that is "Required, as a necessity requires" (CP 503) because, as these "revolutionary poets" will their poetry to remind us, in the power of our words, "Our fate is our own" (OP 109).

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Despite earlier and sustained efforts to demonstrate the actual political motivations behind a large body of Stevens' work, such as an entire issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* devoted to Stevens and Politics (Serio, 1989) and subsequent books devoted to this subject (most notably those of James Longenbach and Alan Filreis), the negative evaluation of Stevens' work as being too self-absorbed and oblivious to the "actual world" remains the most common one among critics and readers at large. For example, in the same year that the special issue of *WSJ* was published on Stevens and Politics, Fred Moramarco still found an excessively abstract poet of the imagination in Stevens. Especially when compared with William Carlos Williams, whom Moramarco clearly regards as the more politically responsible poet, Stevens appears to write a kind of poetry that seems to verge on an embarrassing mental indulgence: "For Stevens, poetry was a kind of substitute religion and the poet a high priest of sorts, seeking to

abstract essences from the world of daily experience that would enable him to recreate life on the level of what he called a 'supreme fiction'. . . . Williams' goals and intentions for poetry were *less cerebral, and ultimately more revolutionary*" (138–39; emphasis mine). Such a perspective on Stevens' work as being largely apolitical remains prevalent today, as in the case of Albert Gelpi's essay in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> See "Planets on the Table: From Wallace Stevens and Elizabeth Bishop to Adrienne Rich and June Jordan," as well as my discussion of Rich and Stevens in " 'I Can't Be Still': Or, Adrienne Rich and the Refusal to Gild the Fields of Guilt."

<sup>3</sup> In this regard it is helpful to note that Eco also says that postmodernism can equally occur at any historical moment when the modernist gesture to destroy the past fails—because its success would only "lead to silence"—and gives way to recognizing that the past "must be revisited . . . ironically" (66–67). As he notes, modernist and postmodernist impulses can also co-exist in the same writer (explaining why, for me, it is possible to find *both* of these impulses in the two poets with whom we are concerned here).

<sup>4</sup> Actually, Stevens' "compulsive reiterations of the word," in his *Collected Poems* and *Opus Posthumous* combined, total seven times. The word occurs in the title of one poem, "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," where it does seem problematic, and once in "Prelude to Objects." At least in "Prelude," the use of the word seems again, as it is in "The Greenest Continent" of *Owl's Clover*, a deliberate demonstration of the unethical and monolithic thinking that accompanies totalizing public rhetoric (the rhetoric of war, in "Prelude," and colonization in "Continent"). The word appears twice in "The Greenest Continent," with an ethical purpose to be discussed at length in the text above, and three times in "The News and the Weather," where again it appears as an ironic and shocking demonstration of the extremes of public rhetoric in war. "News" begins, quite sarcastically, with "The blue sun in his red cockade / Walked the United States today" (CP 264). What seems more troubling is Stevens' early use of the word "darkies" in "Two at Norfolk," though the use of this word is limited to the one occurrence. However, "darkness," as in some of Rich's work to be discussed above, frequently has positive connotations as a place of poetic discovery in Stevens' work rather than the negative ones Toni Morrison says many people generally associate with darkness (see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*).

<sup>5</sup> Rich here is referring to passages from *Playing in the Dark* in which Morrison defines "American Africanism" as "a disabling virus within literary discourse" that has made it "possible to say and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless" people of African descent in America who are reinvented as what she calls an "Africanist presence" (including, among other things, *fetishization*), 6–7, 68. My argument here is that Stevens is critiquing precisely that debilitating rhetorical move in both his use of the word "nigger" in this poem and the introduction of the figure "Anake," as will be discussed more fully below. However, we should note that Lisa DuRose has made an extensive argument about the way in which Stevens minimizes the "African Other" in "Racial Domain and the Imagination of Wallace Stevens."

<sup>6</sup> "Primitivism" might be said to have begun with certain of Picasso's sculptures and cubist paintings as early as 1908 (though the ethical stance of his art has been recently called into question in terms quite similar to the point I am making here about the reductive nature of primitivism). By the 1920s, however, from the real life figure of Josephine Baker to any number of appearances of primitivism in both the verbal and visual arts as something erotically charged and fetishized, the supposed aesthetic appreciation of "primitivism" was being called into question on both sides of the Atlantic. I am suggesting that Stevens was aware of that questioning and was bringing it to bear on the fetishized Ananke that I believe whites, not blacks, would project as a self-

justifying alternative to their use of the word we find so offensive. In this regard, see Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*.

<sup>7</sup> Obviously, *The Will to Change* is the title of Rich's earliest "breakthrough" volume. But what Rich wills to change has moved from a somewhat narrow rejection of patriarchy, even heterosexuality, to something far more inclusive, both politically and poetically. See especially Charles Altieri, "Self-Reflection as Action" and the entirety of the special issue of *Women's Studies* devoted to Rich's most recent work (Gelpi and Brogan).

<sup>8</sup> The development of Rich's long lines, as opposed to her earlier poetry, is a critical part of Rich's ongoing poetic development to write a poetry more ethically "response-able" (to use one of Morrison's words) to the world, without imposing herself as a judging "eye" and "I." In this regard, see Altieri and George Hart's recent essay, "The Long Line in Adrienne Rich's Recent Poetry."

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## The “Possible Poet”: Pain, Form, and the Embodied Poetics of Adrienne Rich in Wallace Stevens’ Wake

CYNTHIA HOGUE

I KNOW OF NO MORE accurate representations of pain than are found in Emily Dickinson. In poem 650, for example, Dickinson writes of the self’s infinitely narrowed horizons:

Pain — has an Element of Blank —  
It cannot recollect  
When it begun — or if there were  
A time when it was not —  
  
It has no Future — but itself —  
Its Infinite contain  
Its Past — enlightened to perceive  
New Periods — of Pain.<sup>1</sup>

Any distinction we might want to draw between emotional and physical pain is rendered impossibly superfluous by that reifying pronoun, *It*. Pain is a thing having a life of its own: *it is*. Pain posits us in an infinity of present tense that has no future but itself, containing a past it cannot remember, and containing us in a body of pain.

Of physical pain (of both torture and illness) Elaine Scarry has said “Physical suffering destroys language” (201). Suffering silences us. As Harold Schweizer asks in a recent study of suffering and art,

But if suffering is in the unbearable, silent body rather than in the sharable, disembodied language of its narratives, how then can suffering speak? How can one hear the unspeakable? How can one listen without assuming one has understood? Indeed, how can one *begin* to understand? (12–13)

The answer Schweizer suggests, that literature “might echo the mysterious occurrence of suffering” (13), is itself anticipated by Dickinson’s poems: “After great pain, a formal feeling comes — . . . / The Feet, mechanical, go round —” (J 341)—those feet, of course, both real and poetic.

Adrienne Rich, suffering from an excruciatingly painful and often disabling disease, rheumatoid arthritis, observes that one property of poetic language is “to engage with states that themselves would deprive us of language and reduce us to passive sufferers” (*WIFT* 10). Art echoes suffering: it aurally approximates and chronologically follows pain. Poetry cannot speak of suffering without the mediation of language and the passage of time. But as Rich forcefully asserts, by engaging with—that is, imaginatively (re)entering—conditions that have caused suffering, poetry resists that reduction to passivity that suffering incurs because it deprives us of language. To write poetry out of the experience of suffering constitutes, in other words, action, even when the body itself cannot be moved out of its condition (as with Rich’s disease).

I have made the point that poetry constitutes action before, but never linked it to Rich’s embodied experience.<sup>2</sup> In fact, I had even excerpted the quotation above from Rich’s essay, “Voices from the air,” without registering its context, which I want to do now:

On a bleak December night in 1967, I lay awake in a New York City hospital, in pain from a newly operated knee in traction. It was too soon for the next pain-dulling injection; I was in the depression of spirits that follows anesthesia, unable to sleep or to discover in myself any thread that might lead me back to a place I used to recognize as “I.” (*WIFT* 9)

Rich is describing the estranging experience of mind/body split that so often accompanies a trauma-like illness, in which the self’s “I” no longer knows herself, encased as the “I” is in a “body in pain.” At that moment of unremitting physical pain, Rich writes, she heard on the radio lines from *The Duchess of Malfi*. “‘Who am I?’ ” a woman’s voice asks. “‘Thou art a box of worme-seede, at best,’ ” is the answer, “‘since ours is to preserve earthwormes: didst thou ever see a Larke in a cage? Such is the soule in the body’ ” (9–10). It did not seem strange to her, however,

that this dialogue, in which the opposition of flesh and spirit is so brutally vaunted, and which ends in the strangling of the Duchess, could . . . solace my consciousness to the point of relief. *For that is one property of poetic language: to engage with states that themselves would deprive us of language and reduce us to passive sufferers.* (*WIFT* 9–10; my emphasis)

The mind/body split of which she writes and her subsequent contemplation of the act of poetry, which I quoted earlier out of context, acquire other nuances—emotional rather than strictly intellectual ones—once replaced in the context of the embodied experience that catalyzed her thinking.

Like most critics of Rich until recently, I repeated the mind/body split that “Voices from the air” negotiates, for I did not notice, and never re-

marked upon, the body's specificity in her work. Diagnosed five years ago with the same illness that Rich has, however, I had the uncanny experience of having studied her work closely for some years for a book chapter and subsequent critical essays, without ever having concentrated on her representations of personal pain. I wrote much of my critical work on Rich before becoming ill, and elided all references to a localized "body's pain." Instead, I tracked the tormented, historically situated syntax of the "diseased body politic," as Lynda K. Bundtzen puts it (339). Among others, I mapped Rich's search for a language honest and accurate enough to express her evolving, feminist vision, which I argued produced formal innovations—dialogic contra/dictions.<sup>3</sup> I sailed past images of "wrecked cartilage" and "elective surgery," consistently casting anchor at the broad picture's harbor: if a speaker "came out of the hospital," I focused on how she emerged "like a woman/ who'd watched a massacre" (YNL 93, 111). Thus, even as I sought passages emblematic of a divided, "contra/dictory" subject, I could not "see to see," to adapt Dickinson's well-known phrase that imaginatively tracks the process of dying. Critically, epistemologically, experientially, Rich's references to personal pain did not exist for me until I experienced that level of pain myself.

This blind spot is, as it turns out, the norm not the exception. Bodies not in pain, who cannot physically feel the suffering, often stop at that imaginative chasm between them and the body in pain, unable to make the projective leap of empathy. For those bodies only "hearing about pain," suffering remains alien, opaque, closed to epistemological inquiry—to wit, experientially *unconfirmed*. "Pain comes unsharably into our midst," Scarry writes, "as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed" (4). For bodies in pain, Schweizer recounts, physical suffering is irreducible and unrepresentable, a dis/figuring inaccessibility to figuration.

In the 1980s, Rich's poetry changed. She no longer saw herself as speaking out of, or for, a unified feminist movement, but as someone with a particular (if multiple) identity, a localized site from which to speak.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, she began ethically to think through the representation of her own painful body in her work to the world's pain. More literally than W. B. Yeats, in physical pain so great that the mind dissociates from the body, she experiments with signifying that splitting of body and self into two "Adriennes" in some of the short sections of "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," from her 1986 volume *Your Native Land, Your Life*. In section 7, for example, she writes an epistolary poem to herself about her body's condition:

Dear Adrienne,

I feel signified by pain  
from my breastbone through my left shoulder down  
through my elbow into my wrist is a thread of pain

I am typing this instead of writing by hand  
 because my wrist on the right side  
 blooms and rushes with pain  
 like a neon bulb  
 You ask me how I'm going to live  
 the rest of my life  
 .....  
 But I'm already living the rest of my life  
 not under conditions of my choosing  
 wired into pain  
 rider on the slow train

Yours, Adrienne  
 (ARP 128–29)

Like the Renaissance blazon, the woman's body-in-pieces in this passage is foregrounded, but its reflexive dwelling on the parts in pain (not beauty) works to unsettle the ideal of feminine beauty memorialized piecemeal in that particular poetic and symbolic tradition. Here is a poetry so focused in its descriptions of the painfully embodied details, so discursive in tone, that it is stripped of a lush lyricism in its music and diction. Such discursivity causes Bundtzen to ask of this and similar passages, "Is this poetry at all—to write such a detailed account of the poet's medicalized body?" (340).

Why, one might go on to ask (and I think Bundtzen *is* asking), are some concrete details appropriate and others "not poetry"? The aesthetic standard implicit in Bundtzen's mimetic question is one that privileges some content over other content, and certainly appropriate content over formal issues. But, after all, the poem epitomizes the modernist principle of content *determining* form. As a letter-poem addressed to the self, moreover, it puts readers in a position very much like John Stuart Mill's definition of the lyric as utterance "*overheard*" (539)—albeit in Rich's poem, it is a letter read over the recipient's metaphoric shoulder. The form is, if not utterly lyrical, generically the lyric.

And what of its formal qualities? A near-obsessive repetition of words—"pain" occurs six times in a brief poem, for instance, and "life" (and its variants, "live," "living") four—enacts the lived experience of chronic pain. That insistence on an abstract word inadequate to the condition, *pain*, not only foregrounds the paucity of language, but suggests Rich's defiant resistance to pain's linguistically destructive presence. The almost total lack of punctuation compels the reader, especially in the anapestic opening lines, to read the brief crescendos and to honor the line breaks as caesuras rather than enjambments. (When I read the lines this way, I can palpably feel pain's signification, feel "It" throbbing across the lines that Rich physically struggled to write.) Loose, slant rhymes alternate with the repetition

of “pain”—“down,” “hand,” “side,” “bulb,” and “train.” These strong, iambic line endings are sustained for most of the poem—signifying a double movement, I suggest, of both accepting and resisting the narrowing of language’s possibilities by suffering. There are also moments that erupt into metaphor and enjambment, momentarily halting the harrowing narrative’s progress, as a close-up in a film stops the action: one wrist is a “thread of pain”; “the right side / blooms and rushes with pain / like a neon bulb.” Technically and formally, it would seem that we are in the terrain of a lyric poem.

Thus, I want to consider for a moment that the question about the status of the poem as poetry suggests discomfort with its subject rather than its form, and that we might be discomfited as readers and critics by something akin to what Elizabeth Grosz has termed “somatophobia” in Western philosophy.<sup>5</sup> (I might add that I was so discomfited by my assertion of my own body in pain in this critical text that I left much of the personal discussion in earlier versions out of this one.) If bodies, in particular women’s bodies, are detrimental to reason, as Grosz persuasively argues (5), then, by analogy, details of diseased and disabled bodies, especially women’s bodies, destroy—quite literally *disfigure*—the quality of beauty to which the lyric, as a genre, has historically aspired. As a feminist, Rich asserts, inserts, a suffering woman’s body into the canonical body of Western poetry, surely in some sense as an audacious revision not only of the blazon but also of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” She is fully aware of the critical reception, for as she tells herself in section 6 (as Bundtzen notes as well): “Somewhere in Boston beautiful literature / is being read around the clock / by writers to signify / their dislike of this” (ARP 128). But what is a writer whose body is signified by pain, rather than poetic decorum, to do?

Rich has answered that question by addressing the issues that incur censure, rather than continuing to censor this aspect of her lived experience. She allows into the space of the poem the process of thinking through the body’s issues: she looks with, through, and beyond her body’s experience, seeking links to the world in which “it,” she, lives, rather than a romantic reconciliation with the world. Indeed, she is at pains not to conflate her own body with a generalized world-body in pain, to indulge in a solipsistic conflation of her own and others’ pain. As she cautions herself, and by extension her readers, in section 29 of “Contradictions”:

remember: the body’s pain and the pain on the streets  
are not the same but you can *learn*  
from the edges that blur (ARP 130; my emphasis)

From her own experience of pain Rich has learned, according to Bundtzen, to blur the once-clear edges between herself and others (339–40). She has learned as well to cross those once-clear boundaries with empathy rather

than sympathy: a compassionate feeling *with*, rather than maintaining a hierarchized distance through a feeling *for* someone else. This is not self-absorption, but revisionary epistemology.

Thus, part of what she is tracking in "Contradictions" is her own process both of working through and resisting that notion that suffering incurs passivity, a process that has produced an embodied poetics. She has allowed herself a voice that speaks the previously unspeakable: to share not her pain, which is impossible (even if she wanted to), so much as what she has learned from it, which *is* possible. As Rich writes in section 18:

The problem, unstated till now, is how  
to live in a damaged body  
in a world where pain is meant to be gagged  
uncured un-grieved-over The problem is  
to connect, without hysteria, the pain  
of any one's body with the pain of the body's world  
For it is the body's world  
they are trying to destroy forever (ARP 129)

If pain is unsharable, to recall Scarry's point, it has also in the West been silenced by a stoicism that forecloses on the cure of grief's expression and pain's compassion as "unpoetic." As Rich observes in a 1994 poem, "And Now," "the public voice of our time" has changed "the name of compassion" to "the name of guilt," and has declared it obsolete "to *feel with* a human stranger" (DF 31; my emphasis). She has wrestled with the ethics of poetic artifice, as Jacqueline Vaught Brogan has argued of the tendency of the lyric "to aestheticize or 'gild' guilt" ("Adrienne Rich" 321). She has insistently tried, through being "faithful to details," to reclaim the possibilities for emotion in the field of the poem, as Albert Gelpi contends (438–39), and thereby to "awaken a capacity to feel" in her readers (Bundtzen 341).

Through the particularized experience of her body's damage, Rich has come to an embodied poetics that allows her to contextualize an epistemological process, which she explores in the later poems. I want to call it courage, but that word, like pain, seems inadequate to describe a complex process of awakening and exploratory expression. The process begins as the individual mind's imaginative journey, solitary and isolated by being locked in a body in pain. But as her mind has integrated the experience, the poet has returned to the world with a revisionary attention, compassionately connecting (rather than identifying) with the pain of and in a damaged world. As Gelpi aptly describes it, Rich has learned "that the street of our lives leads not up but down to a vision of the suffering body—the individual body within the social body—as our 'revelation' and our 'source' " (436).

Rich's embodied poetics resists abstraction, and that resistance, as Brogan discusses, has catalyzed the feminist revisions in her later poetry of

Wallace Stevens' abstract and disembodied poetics, as they are generally regarded. Rich replaces "the overarching drive toward abstraction and bodylessness with 'difficult' details, even blooded-ness" ("Adrienne Rich" 315).<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is germane to this discussion to turn to Rich's essay, "Voices from the air," in which she recounts—and negotiates—her ambivalence upon hearing over the radio, thirteen years after the first instance in the hospital, the disembodied voice of Wallace Stevens reading a poem that provides insight and solace at another crucial moment in her life. It is a recording of Stevens reading "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm," which Rich quotes in full. The poem is in loosely blank verse couplets, positioning its musicality in relation to poetic tradition, in contrast to Rich's free verse discursivity:

The house was quiet and the world was calm.  
The reader became the book; and the summer night  
  
Was like the conscious being of the book.  
The house was quiet and the world was calm.  
  
The words were spoken as if there was no book,  
Except that the reader leaned above the page,  
  
Wanted to lean, wanted much most to be  
The scholar to whom his book is true, to whom  
  
The summer night is like a perfection of thought.  
The house was quiet because it had to be.  
  
The quiet was part of the meaning, part of the mind:  
The access of perfection to the page.  
  
And the world was calm. The truth in a calm world,  
In which there is no other meaning, itself  
  
Is calm, itself is summer and night, itself  
Is the reader leaning late and reading there. (CP 358–59)

We might quickly note that the repetition of words is not unpoetic here but "understated" in tone, as Rich observes, and that the poem's tonal and verbal regularity is not monotonous but "mantralike" (*WIFT* 11). When she hears Stevens' disembodied voice, Rich happens to be driving on a calm summer night in the country, and for "a few moments," the voice links "the actual night" with the poem's "night." The car briefly becomes the house in the poem, and Rich herself the "scholar" hearing words "spoken as if there were no book."

Unlike the speaker of this poem, however, Rich and the woman with whom she is driving are aware of the world "in fracture," and as she goes on to ask, "But what is a poem like this doing in a world where even the

semblance of calm is a privilege few can afford?" (11). There is a disjunction between the world of the listener and the apparent world of the poem. There is also a disjunction between Rich's awareness of "fracture" and the calm "actual night" on which she happens to be driving. Such fractures are formalized when the essay breaks abruptly into "Another scenario": an address to a woman whose sister, stabbed by an abusive lover, has called in the middle of the night for a ride to the hospital because "he's taken my car." It is impossible to tell whether this other scenario is actual or imagined: "you" had just gotten back from "your" night shift, had just checked on "your" children, were just getting ready to pack their lunches for morning. "You" are furious, for this has happened before, "but she's your sister." We have moved, simply by a shift in the pronoun, suddenly from "the actual night," which is calm, to another night, which is broken in upon by violence. Unlike the becalmed reader both in and of the poem, the reader of the essay is unsettled not only by the multiple disjunctions among world, essay, and poem, but also by the eruption of real-world violence into a pastoral and poetic moment. Yet through this compelling and confounding use of apostrophe, Rich draws in readers of her essay as she herself was drawn into Stevens' poem. We are forced mindfully to occupy the position of the "you" hearing this poem as she drives to her sister's house. The result is that a "part of you [is] reawakened" not to the condition of wholeness, which is the poem, but to the desire for that condition, and the knowledge of that desire, which the poem catalyzes (12).

Then, just as abruptly, the essay shifts voice again, but not back to the personal "I" with which it began. Rather, it moves to a closing insight about the collective "we": although a poem cannot free "us" from the material conditions with which "we" may struggle, "it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulating emergencies of our lives . . . ; *it's an instrument for embodied experience*" (12–13; my emphasis). Rich's essay, like her poetry, I suggest, enacts a mobile and flexible sense of how a consciousness constricted by the body's inescapable pain (to recall the essay's opening) might negotiate the imaginative chasm, concretized as the essay's formal and thematic fractures, between not only self and world, but also body and spirit.

It may seem strange that Stevens—a disembodied voice in the essay, as well as the poet "without a body"—has catalyzed such awareness. But Stevens actually wrote "The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm" at the end of World War II, during which time he also wrote about the relationship of a violent reality to poetry in the essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words":

[I]n speaking of the pressure of reality, I am thinking of life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still

more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive.

A possible poet must be a poet capable of resisting or evading the pressure of . . . reality. . . . (NA 26–27)<sup>7</sup>

For Stevens, as Brogan reminds us, the poem must provide, among other things, “a sanction for life” (“Wallace Stevens” 37). I suggest that Stevens’ “possible poet” resisting the pressure of a violent reality resonates in its imaginative dynamic with Rich’s resistance to passive suffering. The body’s world and the world’s pained body hovers beneath the calm surface of Stevens’ poem, and hearing the sound of this poem reminds Rich, fifty years or so later, that the poem is “an instrument for embodied experience.”

I want to close with a brief look at how a late poem by Stevens negotiates an equally—if inadvertently—embodied poetics, the effect of which Rich is intuiting in “Voices from the air.” According to his biographer, Joan Richardson, he was nicknamed “Giant” (30) among friends and peers—not only because of his height, but also, increasingly, his bulk. He thought of himself as an “‘elephant’ ” (306) and his body as “that monster” (240). In his early years, such self-consciousness may have had more to do with his association of the material body as being “tied to nature” (65)—that is, embodiment as associated with but also inescapably bound by nature. Distractedly self-conscious of his size in public, he arguably (and somatophobically) abstracted it in a poem like “A Primitive like an Orb,” as the poem, the body of the text. Thus, we have the deictic in Part 11:

Here, then, is an abstraction given head,  
A giant on the horizon, given arms,  
A massive body and long legs, stretched out,  
A definition with an illustration, not  
Too exactly labelled, a large among the smalls  
Of it, a close, parental magnitude,  
At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave  
And prodigious person, patron of origins. (CP 443)

Richardson recounts how at a lecture Stevens gave at Yale University, which he followed with these lines, he was painfully aware of embodying a concretized “‘giant, on the horizon [or at the podium], glistening’ ” which the poem conjures. He was embarrassed, and felt grotesque (306). The aesthete who abstracts into the play of signifiers his body’s gross materiality until there is no referential connection—the “giant ever changing, living in change” (CP 443)—suddenly stands before an audience as the self-reflexive referent.

At the lecture, in that painfully performative confluence of material and textual bodies, the engrossed body of the poet complicated and qualified what otherwise would have been a disembodied abstraction. The body

that is, in the poem, “plenteous,” a “patron of origins,” imposing “power by the power of his form,” was also, as the audience discovered that evening, “The poet [who] mumbles” (CP 443)—both incidentally in the poem, and actually, in that moment on stage. The “gorging good” of the “essential” and “central” poem, which has “gorged the cast-iron of our lives with good” (CP 440) is, without the poet’s presence, something akin to Marianne Moore’s notion of a formally jolting “gusto.”<sup>8</sup> But with the poet’s presence, this “gorging good” is too literal, too embarrassingly the effect of an actual appetite.

Yet the giant-body matters to the poem, that “instant of speech,” because like the poem, it both “is” and “Captives the being, widens—and was there” (CP 440). Like the poem, the body that both is and was there tracks cognitively and physiologically in life a present and presence of “difficult apperception” (sight and insight, memory of embodied experience), which the poem presents. In other words, like the poem, it has a presence made up of both temporal and spatial force, “At heart, within an instant’s motion, within / A space grown wide” (CP 440). The moment that opens here suggests a way of being in the poem as well as of knowing in the world that produces a relational exchange—a productive con/fusion—between them: “It is / As if the central poem became the world / And the world the central poem” (CP 441). There is an odd sense of corporeal longing for ontological possibility in this paradoxical abstraction. In both the intimacy of its chiasmic reflexivity and the undercutting, through the use of “as if,” of the very possibility it evokes, there is also a sense of poignant isolation, which the poem subverts as well as embraces.<sup>9</sup>

Stevens turns to abstraction to offer a way creatively to resist—to evade rather than be *invaded* by—a violent and painful reality. Thus his use of abstraction is not so much solipsistic, Charles Altieri argues, as suggestive of “speaking positions that allow moments where even the most isolated individuals must recognize that they share the same virtual position as they enter the act of mind that the poem delineates” (137). Such a recognition proffered to Rich a moment of affirming relatedness to the world, mindful of the violence in it, as she listened to a recording of Stevens reading his poem over the radio one summer night. If Rich can still, despite serious political differences, be found at times in Stevens’ poetic wake (as it were), it is because of what she intuited hovering beneath the surface of his poetry, that capacity she rediscovered in his work to *awaken* us to “a need both emotional and physical, that can for a moment be affirmed there” (WIFT 12). The work of these “possible poets” embodies a connective attention in the world and toward it, what I have been calling their “embodied poetics.” They both achieve an intensity of effect, not by sharing pain but by sharing what is possible to learn from it.

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<sup>2</sup>I make the point that for Rich the poem constitutes an action, "albeit a verbal one—in the sense of a 'performative *speech act*,'" in my essay "Adrienne Rich's Political, Ecstatic Subject" (419). On speech as action, see Shoshana Felman's discussion of the dynamic of testimony, that to "*produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth . . . is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than to simply formulate a statement" (5).*

<sup>3</sup>"Contra/dictions," as Elizabeth Meese denotes the oppositions that Rich puts into play and undoes, characterize her attempts to work through the dynamic of assimilation. For Rich, Meese suggests, "the separation from the other is a separation within the self, requiring us to undertake multiple, unending negotiations with the logic of identity" (172, 173). Lynda K. Bundtzen asserts that in order to avoid a false sense of transcendence, Rich's poetic subject "must continually be in flux" (333). On Rich's changing poetic subjectivity, see also Harriet Davidson (167–68).

<sup>4</sup>See Bundtzen (331–37). See also Albert Gelpi, who gives a magisterial overview of the changes over time in Rich's feminism, as reflected in her thinking and her work.

<sup>5</sup>My thanks to Susan McCabe, who was kind enough to share her work-in-progress on cinematic modernism and images of the body with me.

<sup>6</sup>There are other reasons, however, for Rich's rejection of Wallace Stevens, who was an early influence on her. On Stevens' racism, see Rich's own essay "rotted names" in *What Is Found There* (197–205) and Jacqueline Vaught Brogan's article in this issue.

<sup>7</sup>Brogan discusses this passage and the idea of the " 'possible poet' who can resist the violence of reality" as the definition of the imagination in Stevens' thinking ("Wallace Stevens" 37). She draws a connection between the work of German philosopher Hans Vaihinger that is particularly apt for my discussion of Rich's response to Stevens's poem in "Voices from the air." Vaihinger writes, "In necessity and pain mental evolution is begun, in contradiction and opposition consciousness awakes" (qtd. in Brogan, "Wallace Stevens" 37).

<sup>8</sup>See Moore's essay. For the interpretation of "gusto" from which I am extrapolating, see Bonnie Costello, who explains that "gusto" signifies the reader's being "snapped alert" by deviations from conventions of expression that give a text charge, "allowing formal connections to compete with semantic ones" (231, 233).

<sup>9</sup>As Brogan asserts in her discussion of Stevens' use of the construction "as if," this mode of speech "evokes and sustains the very possibilities that it denies" ("Wallace Stevens" 44)

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## Blue Sky Laws and Poetic Inequivalence: Wallace Stevens and James Merrill

SUSAN McCABE

*Natives of poverty, children of malheur,  
The gaiety of language is our seigneur.  
—“Esthétique du Mal”*

BABETTE DEUTSCH HAS aptly compared T. S. Eliot with Wallace Stevens by distinguishing the latter by “the nature of his poetic capital” (269). As she puts it, we are with Eliot “increasingly conscious” of the “writers whose work he has cleverly looted,” whereas she admires Stevens for “his use of an independent fortune” (269). James Merrill might be praised for becoming a poet *in spite of* his independent fortune as well as for embodying what Stevens calls “the essential gaudiness of poetry” (*OP* 212). In fact, critics often describe the imagination of these poets in similarly rarefied terms—as endowed, elegant, opulent, flamboyant. In defense of his so-called elitism, Stevens claims that “all poets address themselves to someone . . . and it seems to amount to an instinct, that it should be to an elite, not to a drab but to a woman with the hair of a pythoness, not to a chamber of commerce but to a gallery of one’s own” (*NA* 29). Yet even such self-selecting aesthetics cannot be divorced from economics. Both Stevens and Merrill derive metaphors for the imagination and its relationship to reality, particularly those metaphors used to accommodate a Depression-era economics, from the language of “commerce.” Merrill turns, like his predecessor, to the monetary as both a limiting and liberating backdrop to his poetics.

Stevens’ life-long career as a lawyer who dealt primarily in surety claims is well known. Although seeming miraculously to balance business and poetry, the poet does undergo two significant periods of creative silence: once between 1900 and 1908 while Stevens struggled to gain economic stability, and then again between 1924 and 1934, when the poet was by then Vice President of Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. James Longenbach asserts that it is not “remarkable” that Stevens was a lawyer or that he became silent but that “periods of poetic silence caused him remarkably little anxiety as a poet,” that he could “accept a life of economic necessity without mythologizing it or lamenting it” (112). He im-

portantly emphasizes that “the dynamics of his two silences were more precisely economic than aesthetic” (118). But as Longenbach also points out, Stevens’ anxiety over economics stems (at least partly) from his “banking against his father’s shadow” (118). As Joan Richardson informs us, his father suffered a nervous breakdown in 1901 (*The Early Years* 161); inspired in the first decade by Theodore Roosevelt’s economic optimism, Garrett Stevens invested in a steel plant and a bicycle factory, both businesses failing (*The Early Years* 273). In spite of monetary upheavals and psychological struggles, his father managed to support his family through his law practice and so encouraged Stevens to attend law school, dissuading his son from a vocation devoted to poetry. That his older brother was nicknamed “Buck” even though he successively failed at one enterprise after another ironically underscores Stevens’ obsession with financial matters (*The Early Years* 224).

Even with Merrill’s greater financial “security” derived through his father’s brokerage company (Merrill Lynch), his sense of Puritan origins resembles Stevens’. He points to the dissonance between his father’s values and those of the ultra-affluent: “Their sense of how to live was neither mine nor, I suspected, my father’s, who, as the son of a crusty but credit-extending doctor in Green Cove Springs, had taken jobs to get through college and never left a room without switching off the lights. ‘Thank goodness I come from poor parents,’ I once said, to the hilarity of my companions. But I meant that my parents’ values had been formed long before they had money” (*DP* 39). Nevertheless, Merrill is uncomfortable with unmerited “attentions,” ambivalent about having “an unbreakable trust” in his name: “at five years old I was rich, and would hold my own purse-strings when I came of age, whether I liked it or not. I wasn’t sure I did like it” (*DP* 5). Merrill “banks against his father,” but manages to exit the family business, still operating in the *business of poetry*, following to some extent his father’s demand that if he were to be a poet he would have to be as successful in that enterprise as Charles Merrill had been in his brokerage.<sup>1</sup> Thus Merrill, like Stevens, is both repelled and impelled by the animating image of his father, the epitome of the American legacy of the self-made man. If Merrill’s father sponsors the publication of his sixteen-year-old’s collection of writing in 1942 in what he entitled *Jim’s Book*, such validation comes with implicit obligation: Jim’s must be gems.

What these brief sketches suggest is that Stevens and Merrill have troubled relationships to money and to value. When Stevens articulates in his “Adagia” that “Money is a kind of poetry” (*OP* 191), he begs the question—what *kind*?—but also points to the mediational character of language; like money, it is sullied, exchanged, counted out. In effect, his aphorism de-aestheticizes poetry: it circulates (“The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” [*CP* 149–50]). Yet if we think of Marx’s idea of capital, money is what alienates us from our humanity. Frank Lentricchia, while admiring his work, considers Stevens to be representative of late capitalist alienation

and decadence (213). Yet the poet hits a nerve through this aphorism: our language as stained lucre is the imaginative means by which we recognize the green mundo, the otherness of the world that is not our own but from which we must endlessly borrow.

It is the abiding concern with the dissociated values of words and things that unites Stevens and Merrill in their often disowned but ever-present attachment to the metaphors of commerce. Stevens, after all, writes to his daughter Holly when she is having trouble in college: "None of the great things of life have anything to do with making your living" (*L* 426). Yet it is with this kind of poetic sensibility that both Stevens and Merrill attempt to throw off the economic embroilment of their fathers; as Anne Carson eloquently puts it in another context: "Perhaps poets are ones who waste what their fathers would save" (3). I would also add that they save what their fathers waste by shoring up language, however exchangeable and mutable. Money attracts them primarily because, again in the words of Anne Carson, it "is something visible and invisible at the same time" (45).

I here examine how both poets struggle with economic security and discordant guilt. What does it mean to enjoy "Complacencies of the peignoir, and late / Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" (*CP* 66)? Once we reconcile ourselves to the perishable, we recognize that we are "unsponsored, free" and so liberated from sacral debts, "free" (*CP* 70) to embrace the "green . . . fluent mundo" (*CP* 407) charged by the imagination. This leads me to the underlying metaphor of this essay: Stevens and Merrill operate within an aesthetic with similar rights and liabilities to those of "blue sky laws"—those laws formalized in the thirties to protect the investor from fraud by providing more disclosure within an otherwise unregulated stock market. These laws or "old dependenc[ies]" (*CP* 70) provide (as it were) psychic indemnities in an economic concourse otherwise undermined by its own freedom, insubstantiality, and invisibility. The term "blue sky law" originates in Kansas (1911), the first state to enact a comprehensive licensing system for those engaged in the securities business. As a legal history describes the term's coinage: "The State of Kansas [partly because agriculturalists were unfamiliar with business] was the hunting ground of promoters of fraudulent enterprises; in fact their frauds became so barefaced that it was stated that they would sell building lots in the blue sky in fee simple. Metonymically they became known as blue sky merchants" (Loss and Cowett 7 n. 22). The contract with the invisible is a contract with the imagination, paradoxically, limited by brute facticity and by what Stevens frames as the imagination pushing back against "the pressure of reality" (*NA* 36).

Although I am not claiming that either Stevens or Merrill thought directly about blue sky laws in writing their poetry (though they might have), I find the term illuminating. Stevens frequently refers to "the blue sky" as an almost stable term within his equations of imagination. In "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," it becomes exemplar of the "reality" that the

poet constantly invests with his own “process of personality”: the poet “standing in the radiant and productive atmosphere, and examining first one detail of that world, one particular, and then another, as we find them by chance, and observing many things that seem to be poetry without any intervention on our part, as, for example, the blue sky, and noting, in any case, that the imagination never brings anything into the world” (NA 59). In other words, “the blue sky” resists our “intervention” yet remains enmeshed in the processes of the imagination. In the same essay, he refers to the moment when we almost seamlessly make the external interior:

[W]e look at the blue sky for the first time, that is to say: not merely see it, but look at it and experience it and for the first time have a sense that we live in the center of a physical poetry . . . —few people realize that they are looking at the world of their own thoughts and the world of their own feelings. On that occasion, the blue sky is a particular of life that we have thought of often, even though unconsciously, and that we have felt intensely in those crystallizations of freshness that we no more remember than we remember this or that gust of wind in spring or autumn. (NA 65–66).

Although these citations of the “blue sky” are not ostensibly economic, they point toward the way Stevens uses this trope to suggest a frontier-like vastness that is at once physically palpitant and inward: “for our nature is an illimitable space through which the intelligence moves without coming to an end” (NA 53). This spaciousness, I contend, is a matter for not only scintillant ecstatic experience but for anxious ponderings.

What regulates these transactions between what we imagine and what exists without us? Merrill makes these ponderings visibly ominous in “The Thousand and Second Night” when he chides himself for his surface craft:

O skimmer of deep blue  
Volumes fraught with rhyme and reason,  
Once the phosphorescent meshes loosen  
And the objects of your quest slip through,  
Almost you can overlook a risen  
Brow, a thin, black dawn on the horizon.

(FFN 130)

With its references to *Moby Dick*, this poem meditates upon what eludes our quests, but suggests that “the phosphorescent meshes” themselves make up for the lost objects and partially avert the “black dawn.” Luke Carson discovers that “Pound and Stein share a profound ambivalence towards the substitution of scarcity for its opposite” (8); likewise, Stevens (while perhaps more fearful of scarcity) and Merrill are suspicious of abundance. The ambivalence toward wealth that Luke Carson cites hinges for

him, in part, upon a search for a “lost object,” a search rooted in a psychoanalytic model of “melancholia” (6–7). The lost object, like the linguistic signifier, can never be recovered; thus we are caught up in “phosphorescent meshes,” as it were, driven on in the pursuit of reconciling the invisible with the visible and material.

The surety business—Stevens’ business of honoring claims and detecting those that are fraudulent—exists through the insurance company’s investment of the customer’s premiums in the stock market, thus a surety necessarily depends upon the volatile, unstable equivalencies between shares (which have more invisible than tangible character) and the seller’s actual “product.” As Stevens had to know, insurance is precarious, and the extent of indemnity remains somewhat amorphous. As Robin Magowan (Merrill’s nephew) recounts in a recent memoir, Merrill’s father himself saw that the system that regulates equivalences between stock and what the stock represented was breaking down in the late twenties, and in fact, Cassandra-like, he warned his customers of the incipient crash (28).

To state my argument more succinctly: since “value” is recognized as imagined and relative, poetic and economic status both become suspect. Blue sky laws epitomize the attempt by the government, in essence, to protect investors from their greedy imagination—their own and the collective’s. Stevens will appear in Merrill’s *The Book of Ephraim* as the voice who has “imagined the imagination / And God as one; the imagination, also, / As that which presses back, in parlous times, / Against ‘the pressure of reality’ ” (CLS 66). Yet in spite of the shared devotion of these poets to the imagination, each recognizes the need for the limits of the “parlous” material, or as Stevens contends in “Esthétique du Mal”: “The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world” (CP 325). For both poets, this contention comes with uneasiness over what actually constitutes solid ground and over who exactly is entitled to this ground.

By the time the stock market crashed in 1929, Stevens was comparatively rich, primarily because of his break from poetry writing and obsession with indemnifying his family against financial crises. His attainment of security during a time of general insecurity must have struck him as guilty and even “alienating.” He writes to James A. Powers in 1933 about the purchase of a house on Westerly Terrace which he says is “situated on one of the slopes of Prospect Hill; the declivity runs towards a public dump, surrounded by Jews, and Jewesses. I think that buying a house is the best thing that I have ever done” (L 266). In the same letter, he remarks on the fact that “because of the depression, there are so many burglars about that, instead of living in a neighborhood that is poorly lighted, the neighborhood is in reality brilliantly lighted. People actually go to bed leaving lights burning all over the house in order to fool the bums” (L 266). “The Man on the Dump” (a 1938 poem) epitomizes a contrast between those who have and live in the brilliantly lit and those who do not, a contrast that calls up anxieties over inequivalence; at the same time, Stevens enters

into another period of poetic productivity. In 1935, he writes that "Life without poetry is, in effect, life without a sanction" (L 299). "Sanction" means both "law or decree" and the "coercive penalty for non-compliance with a law." In Stevens' case, the writing of poetry is both a fulfillment of an obligation and an indulgence. The "value" of a poem is concomitantly equivocal, and he compares it to the stock market: "There are too many influences at work; there are too many people subject to influence. . . . Poetry will always be a phenomenal thing" (L 300). Uneasiness about the relativity of poetic values echoes with the uncertainty within the free sale of "securities."

Notwithstanding his belief in "'up-to-date capitalism'" (L 292) rather than in Communism and his joy in being in his "own room, say, with a package of books from Paris or London" (L 301), Stevens is haunted by the specter of those who suffer scarcity while he enjoys prosperity, and as he says, "there is always the anxiety that follows over-indulgence" (L 301). This anxiety is due as I have said, in part, to the shadow cast by his father's financial and mental breakdown, as well as to his awareness of the alienating slippage between word and thing. As Luke Carson puts it, "any economy must preserve the moment of sacrifice or loss that constitutes the possibility of exchange"; this is the source of Gertrude Stein's discomfort with the co-presence of scarcity and prosperity: "In practical terms, this means that not everybody can eat" (11). And if money is the mediator between the mouth and its food, language acts as the alienating copula between the tongue and its words.

Stevens' home hovers over a public dump, and he is keenly aware of his status in the "ivory tower" as compromised as well as enlivened by those living along the margins. Stevens had already written "Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock" from the perspective of the outsider looking into the windows of the banal suburbanites in "white night-gowns" not dreaming of "baboons or periwinkles"; instead, through an elaborate calculus of negation, he occupied the position of the drunk sailor voyaging in his imagination (CP 66). Or alternatively, the beggar he depicts in "What They Call Red Cherry Pie" (1934) threatens to undermine his own elastic diction:

Meyer is a bum. He eats his pie.  
He eats red cherry pie and never says—  
He makes no choice of words—

Cherries are ri . . . He would never say that.  
He could not. Neither of us could ever say that.  
But Meyer is a bum. (OP 68)

What connects Stevens to the bum? Both are at the limits of silence. "What is it that we share?" he asks (OP 68). Pie is pie. We share hunger. "The Man on the Dump" is an attempt to connect with the disenfranchised while also reinforcing a separation.

As Richardson informs us, “by the time [Stevens] wrote [“Man on the Dump”], he had also observed (as Holly Stevens notes) and identified with the man, said to be a Russian refugee, who built a shack out of old boxes, tin cans, and bottles on the dump and lived there as a semihermit for several years” (*The Later Years* 92). This poem unveils the dump as the unexcavatable “heap of broken images,” the wastage of bourgeois commodity culture, its excremental economy and the ground of poetic making:

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, the corset, the box  
From Esthonia: the tiger chest, for tea. (CP 201)

Later in the poem the decreative Stevens “rejects / The trash” and makes possible the transformative yet disabused imagination:

That’s the moment when the moon creeps up  
To the bubbling of bassoons. That’s the time  
One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.  
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)

The last stanza conflates the anarchic janitorial figure (the Russian refugee) with the poet, mocking the incongruity of poetic language:

One sits and beats an old tin can, lard pail.  
One beats and beats for that which one believes.  
That’s what one wants to get near. (CP 202)

“The Man on the Dump” ends with a barrage of questions that undercut monumental aesthetics and reckon with the exchangeable:

Is it peace,  
Is it a philosopher’s honeymoon, one finds  
On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,  
Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:  
Is it to hear the blatter and 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)

We are at the outposts of what can be said; the word has lost its equivalence with unindemnified origin. The equation of stanzas with stones alludes to the archaic use of stones for exchange. There is no cogent “backing” as we sift through the garbage of centuries, no absolutist utterance, only the stuttered “the” as ungentle article. In the indeterminate market, the poet’s measures remain arbitrary. The paradox blooms in “Adagia”: “Since man made the world, the inevitable god is the beggar” (*OP* 196). The “invisible priest” in this Depression logic spins out: “The poet is a god or The young poet is a god. The old poet is a tramp” (*OP* 198). The poet is a beggar with nothing *and* he is not. Man is the measure of even nothing, as Stevens proposes in “The Snow Man,” of “Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is” (*CP* 10), a formula akin to Anne Carson’s description of the epitaph genre, one of the earliest forms of commercial writing and one familiar with stones, well-versed in “seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is” so as “to insert a dead and vanished past into the living present” (73).

Merrill similarly worries about the specter of the outsider, and perhaps more than Stevens, operates as the blue sky buyer, purposefully confusing the imagined with the real. His “Days of 1935,” like Stevens’ poem, pivots upon a fantasy of marginality. Transporting us to the year Merrill is six years old, the poem reconstructs a childhood fantasy (loosely based on the Lindbergh kidnapping) of being abducted to “A hovel in the treeless / Trembling middle of nowhere, / Hidden from the world by palace / Walls of dust and glare” (*FFN* 242). In constructing this “family romance,” Merrill inverts the typical pattern: instead of imagining parents mythically wealthier, he cathects to his imaginary lowbrow captors, Floyd and Jean. By way of contrast, Stevens constructs a fiction of himself as a man of fortune, according to Richardson, to counteract “the spectral memory of his father in a state of mental collapse in the face of economic failure” (*The Early Years* 415).

The fantasy of “Days of 1935” hinges upon the inverse: here the child’s insecurity in relation to his parents’ “out partying,” as his Floyd puts it, “ ‘Everything / Depends on, number one, / How much you’re worth to your old man’ ” (*FFN* 242):

I’d hoped I was worth more than crime  
Itself, which never paid, could pay.  
Worth more than my father’s time  
Or mother’s negligee

Undone where dim ends barely met,  
This being a Depression year. . . .  
I’d hoped, I guess, that they would let  
Floyd and Jean keep me here.

(*FFN* 247)

The problem remains one of equivalence: how to be worth more than a payment, how the imagination can allow for a break in the regulatory laws of commerce. Ultimately, Merrill's kidnappers have more allure because they are imagined outlaws. He learns young what he would also learn from Stevens: "That life was fiction in disguise" (*FFN* 244). The ballad glamorizes and criminalizes the imagination, and aligns his parent's security and wealth with the dullness of the real. Yet Floyd and Jean are only *Silver Screen* projections of Depression economy. Strikingly, the child bears double-crossing, even criminal, testimony: " 'You I adored I now accuse' "; he sentences those marginals of his imagination (the "old jalopy" ride of "sheer imagination"), though not without continued disdain for the routine of stocks, his father reading the *Wall Street Journal* awaiting tin guests:

Tel & Tel executives,  
Heads of Cellophane or Tin,  
With their animated wives  
Are due on the 6:10. (*FFN* 250)

If the child has "played [Floyd and Jean] false," so too the poet self-consciously plays out the false position of scarcity along with the real guilt that must accompany those thriving during the Depression, much in the way that Stevens meditates upon this uneasy dichotomy in "Man on the Dump." This dichotomy drives home the suspicion that one's ground or home on Prospect Hill is unmerited, that somehow one's stake in the American pie is fearfully imagined.

Related to Merrill's attempt to invert wealth and poverty through the imagination is the poet's attention throughout his career to the status of houses and home. The anxiety over home ownership that Stevens registers emerges in the later poet as a continual recognition of the fragility of households. "The House" from *First Poems* deserves some close examination because of its relevant economic language. Here Merrill as a "listener in night air" (*FFN* 35) (like Stevens' "listener in the snow") identifies with the homeless and "The loss of deed," and so meditates upon the shocking contrast between vast natural forces and his family's ultimately rather feeble estate:

Those darkening reaches, crimsoned with a dust  
No longer earth's, but of the vanishing west,  
Can stir a planet nearly dispossessed,

And quicken interest in the avid vein  
That dyes a man's heart ruddier far than stain  
Of day does finial, cornice and windowpane,

So whoever strolls on his launched lawn  
At dusk, the hour of recompense, alone,  
May stumbling on a sunken boundary stone

The loss of deed and structure apprehend.  
And we who homeless toward such houses wend  
May find we have dwelt elsewhere. (FFN 35)

Through a deft reversal of figures, the cosmos dwarfs the “display” of wealth, the night is a “warning of a deep excess,” and the outside becomes the open interior:

After the twelve bright houses that each day  
Presume to flatter what we most display,  
Night is a cold house, a narrow doorway.

This door to no key opens, those to brass.  
Behind it, warning of a deep excess,  
The winds are. I have entered, nevertheless,

And seen the wet-faced sleepers the winds take  
To heart; have felt their dreadful profits break  
Beyond my seeing. At a glance they wake. (FFN 35–36)

The earlier portion of the poem perhaps alludes to his father, his “heart ruddier far than stain” confronting his “recompense,” only later in the poem to gather with the unconscious sleepers whose “dreadful profits break.” Alternatively, the sleepers could certainly signify those profitless bodies (like Stevens’ janitor) unhallowed by home on the outskirts of presumed safety.

Merrill struggles with his father’s profligate bounty, seeking in “Broken Home” to transcend “twin black pupils, sex / And business; time was money in those days” (FFN 140). How does the poet reconcile the itemizing of the temporal with the way money allows for freedom for aesthetic contemplation? With the way waste allows for saving? A rejection of the material for the aesthetic is really a careful negotiation of the two. Merrill’s long poem *The Book of Ephraim* relies upon the rhetoric of capital to adumbrate an eccentric cosmology dependent on the conflation of the imagined with the “pressure of reality.” Based on Ouija board sessions, the poem constructs a “supreme fiction”: we learn that every person on earth is “representative” of a spirit or “patron” who in turn ascends to higher stages based on their earthly representations, a system that closely resembles a corporate model. Given the fact that Ephraim, the poet’s guide, does not seem to know who really is “in charge,” this corporation apparently exists with unknown boundaries. Merrill’s father dies in the course of the poem in 1956 (Stevens dies in 1955). Within Merrill’s new economy of fluid exchange, Ephraim tells the poet: “YR FATHER JM . . . / . . . WAS BORN YESTERDAY / To a greengrocer” (CLS 37). Although infantilized and demoted, “greengrocer” makes a nice kind of logic: the imagination has been checked by the green of money, also calling to mind the fact that Merrill’s father owned the Safeway chain early in his career (Magowan 29).

Stevens and Merrill uniquely converge during the Depression: Merrill is a small child in the thirties in a wealthy “corporate” family (epitomized in “Days of 1935”) and Stevens is reaching the height of his financial success. Evocatively, the Depression has been partially attributed to the unregulated sales of stocks; the ultimate blue sky law, the Securities and Exchange Act, emerges in 1933. Out in the open skies, under the banner of the American dream of the expansive frontier, defrauding proliferates. What exists behind the security? Only air? Pie in the sky? Are these poets blue sky buyers or merchants? Blue sky laws, as I have been implying, point up the inequivalence between securities and the value of the things they supposedly represent. This interest in equivalencies immediately resonates with the delight and anxiety of these poets in the slipperiness of language—of the relationship of signifier to Signified, of words without the Word. Anne Carson says of Simonides and his epitaphic writing: “Money is not mentioned but we feel the presence of a metaphysical question of value” (94). Similarly, Stevens and Merrill, representing two sides of a coin, question value. Anne Carson refers to Paul Celan’s neologisms as “private wealth,” coinages that “disrupt the economic equilibrium of words and things” (137). Stevens invests in the negative space between the exchange of an object and its imagined value, while Merrill’s well-known fondness for punning often signals his vigilance to the slips and gaps between signifiers. In his tour-de force use of spoonerisms in *Ephraim*, for example, Merrill poses substitution as highly revelatory. “Current events no sooner sped than din” unmasks the belated din of our linguistic equivalences (*CLS* 69). *Ephraim* reprimands, “Must *everything* be witty?” (*CLS* 17); yet wit is also the coinage that keeps language gay and circulating.

After Stevens erases the “blood of paradise” (*CP* 68) and substitutes earth for heaven in “Sunday Morning,” we find ourselves in a similar position of limitless blue with our ability to create fictions, the sky “Not this dividing and indifferent blue” (*CP* 68). But even if “money is a kind of poetry” and operates as fluid exchange, the beggar still has to live, and so ensues the silence before and just after the non-designating “The the.” Art is contingent, not autonomous. “Study of Two Pears” takes us back to the materiality of things, to our metaphoric poverty: “The pears are not seen / As the observer wills” (*CP* 197). Perhaps more to the point is another Depression poem, “Dry Loaf,” in which Stevens instructs us to “Regard the hovels of those that live in this land” (rather than the junipers shagged in ice) and to hear the resounding echo: “It was the battering of drums I heard. / It was hunger, it was the hungry that cried” (*CP* 200). Poetry returns us to necessities even as it routs out equivalencies and encourages our substitutional proclivities. It can revel in surplus (Stevens in his grand exfoliative style, Merrill with his intricate punning) or in poverty (Stevens’ decreative acts or Merrill’s imagined abduction from wealth).

As a poet inheriting Stevens’ interest in assiduous measurement of lines, Merrill also inherits a very real wealth that permits him to consider the

monetary in more abstract terms, the rising and falling of stocks and the invisible contours of such economies. Both have real fathers that loom over them because of their absorption in the material. My speculations in this essay about the metaphoric and lived valences of the monetary makes vivid the way each poet's aesthetics cannot be made physical or recognizable as absolute concrete value (in the way that silence can be more palpable than the words it springs from or engenders). This invisible marks a liberatory anxiety, not necessarily stemming from a scarcity of hard greenbacks, but rather from an uncertainty about what might or might not be sponsoring or backing our blue solvent imagination.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I am in indebted to Stephen Yenser for this information from his conversations with James Merrill.

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## *The Necessary Angel and A Different Person: Defending the Life of Poetry*

CHARLES BERGER

**T**HE NECESSARY ANGEL and *A Different Person* were written when Wallace Stevens and James Merrill were in their sixties. Toward the end of their careers—in Merrill's case, toward the end of his life—each poet turned to prose in order to search for what constitutes poetic difference, as if, by escaping the *agon* or contest of poetic performance, they might achieve a clearer view of poetry's force and value, as well as discover, yet again, the need or lack that turns cultures and individuals toward poetic forms of expression. The ethos of such language derives more from Stevens than Merrill, yet the younger poet is the one who looks back in pursuit of what made him "different." Whether we label such quests as defenses of poetry or aesthetic memoirs, the continuation of poetry by other means intensifies questions about generic boundaries. When the subject is a narrative of poetic incarnation—in more secular language, a choice of poetry as a career—or an expansive account of imagination-at-large, in which poetry figures powerfully, then prose is likely to emulate verse, as if to prove poetry's viability in a world of argumentation.

Stevens' gathered essays of the 1940s comprise a more recognizable genre of poetic defense, though his method of persuasion is relentlessly hybrid and idiosyncratic. Stevens' slippery essays often exchange aphorism for apothegm, rhetoric for rigor, confessing the author's relief at not having to spar at length over definitional niceties. He quotes and runs. Criticism has difficulty absorbing and cataloguing the prose of poets—*obiter dicta*, table talk, appreciation, portraits, lives, letters, call it what you will. Merrill's memoir of his time abroad in the early 1950s, an updated Grand Tour, employs narrative and anecdote in ways unthinkable for Stevens, but it, too, searches for the difference that drove Merrill to choose the poetic vocation. The particulars of such a story comprise an aesthetic criticism, even though what surprises one about *A Different Person* is its waywardness, its loose mode of narration. Expecting, perhaps, the airlessness of Michel Leiris' *Rules of the Game*, one encounters a more rambling memoir, though returns will guide the reader more insistently toward a destined outcome. Stevens emblemizes a form of aesthetic discourse that flaunts and flouts the boundary-line between poetry and philosophy,

while Merrill fashions an autobiographical narrative that surprises itself, continually, by discovering its passion for aesthetic discourse. What the texts have in common, I think, is their interest in finding, justifying, and then naturalizing an expansion of poetic personhood, an augmentation of poetic voice, issuing in moments of transformation, or apotheosis, to use words that Stevens and Merrill choose with the utmost care. Need, or necessity, drives the discovery of the different self. The poet is not a luxury. His emergence is the very proof that he cannot be denied. For these two famously oblique writers, the poet survives as the force of indirection.

The first two essays of *The Necessary Angel*, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" and "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," are defenses of poet and poetry in time of war, though they do not limit the notion of war, or violent reality, to actual combat. Stevens is as embattled as any defender of poetry in the tradition. When confronted with any text purporting to defend poetry, we should ask: defend it from what, or against whom? The answer, in these two essays, is clear. Among poetry's numerous enemies might be counted the pressure of reality, a pervasive lack of saving distance, skepticism about the validity of rhetorical bravura, and the systematic eradication of individuality. Stevens' aesthetic polemic is not concerned with rival schools of poetry, but with forces aiming to extinguish the will to believe in poetry. It is not that he presents himself as a defender of humanist nostalgia, either, for Stevens adheres to the rigorous truth that the only poetry that matters is that which disrupts our lives through change, even as it helps us to live that very life. "Looking for what was, where it used to be" (CP 389) is not the answer. Poetry must incorporate the violence that would undo it, mimicking and repelling it through the fused power of aesthetic intensity. The poet must defend poetry in tones of the contemporary, which include the irrational. The genre Stevens writes in is apparent, though his variations within that genre, especially his concoctions of continuous logical reasoning, are striking. But before looking in some detail at moments in these two Stevens essays, I want to defend my use of *A Different Person* as poetic defense, and then justify the conjunction of Stevens and Merrill via these hybrid prose performances.

Published in 1993, *A Different Person* begins in the following way: "Meaning to stay as long as possible, I sailed for Europe. It was March 1950. New York and most of the people I knew had begun to close in" (DP 3). "As long as possible" turns out to mean two years. The book is a memoir, I suppose, but only guardedly confessional. Merrill is in analysis during the whole of his expatriation, and he veils a good portion of those sessions. Narrative accounts of parents, siblings, and lovers tantalize with proffered clues, but have the effect, in the end, of dispersing the mystery of poetic character formation into the corners of anecdotal incident, or deferring it until the later arrival of meaning. Merrill signals his awareness of this aspect of narrative explanation by adopting the formal strat-

egy of ending each chapter with: "A different typeface for that person I became? He will break in at chapter's end with glimpses beyond my time frame" (DP 13). (He breaks in with rhyme as well.) In other words, each chapter ends with an italicized reprise and prospectus, an interpretation, of where events in the earliest years of the fifties led Merrill. The experiential search for a different self led to the different typeface, or type of face, encountered in the pages of the books that became Merrill's true mirror, as he turned, "word by word, page by page, into books on a shelf" (DP 269). The desultory account of Italian days in 1950, 1951, and 1952, image- and observation-studded, culminates, obtrusively, at the end of each chapter, with a wavering, but firm, summing-upwards—one that displays its discontinuities with the lived life. But the question remains: what relation prevails between experience and poetry?

Lest I give *A Different Person* over too completely to the genre of aesthetic memoir, I need to point out that Merrill, however attracted to semantic peek-a-boo, is far more drawn to narrative pleasures than Stevens. His memoir offers itself as a cultural document apart from its status as canny meditation on a writer's true beginnings. *A Different Person*—which I am tempted to shorten to DP ("displaced person," or refugee), an available pun right for its story time and certainly dropped as droll hint by Merrill—engages readers, as well as its protagonist, in a search for aesthetic difference, while also telling a story of homosexual difference, especially in those early Cold War years of anxious conformity, where homosexuals were closeted by threats of blackmail. This particular story of expatriation does not belong to every writer who flees American provinciality. Stevens had no use for the consensual sensuality of his culture, hence his need for a "figure of the youth as virile poet"—but he could live with codes of conduct governing empirical, quotidian existence.

The strongest links between these prose texts of Stevens and Merrill, as I have said, can be located in each poet's mediated, but finally undeniable, passion for discovering and enunciating a version of expansive poetic personhood, augmented poetic voice. Stevens and Merrill adhere to the high style, yet for that very reason remain remorseless in rooting out vestiges of nostalgic or outworn rhetoric. It must change, it must be noble, to echo the argument and some of the phrasing of "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words." "Noble" is a daring word to use, and praise, in 1942, as Stevens knows, with the history of its absorption into murderous fascist ideology so apparent. Early on in the essay, it becomes clear that Stevens has no interest in linking the idea of nobility with any class of persons or any historical period. The notion that nobility once was, is now lost, must therefore be recovered, is anathema to him. To be persuasive, nobility must adhere to the real, even if such adherence produces friction. But what is Stevens' guiding definition of nobility? The essay becomes most interesting as Stevens works his sometimes alluring, sometimes vexing, vein of metaphorical argumentation, exposing the slippage within, and between,

terms of definition. Unwilling to fix categories, Stevens celebrates a sliding scale of calibrations. He is invigorated, not nonplussed, by declaring, "A poet's words are of things that do not exist without the words" (NA 32). Take the word "noble" itself. Derived from the Greek prefix for knowing, the word puts into play, if one is of a mind to track these things, a circulating labyrinth of social and intellectual pointers, such as: ignoble, cognition, knowing, notorious, etc. When Stevens calls the "idea of nobility" a "characteristic of the imagination . . . its symbol or alter ego" (NA 7), and when he declares that such emblems, whatever artistic form they take, "help[] us to know ourselves" (NA 11), he refuses to separate internal and external gauges of knowledge, notoriety, and knowledge-ability.

When Stevens turns, at the end of the essay, to consider the question, "And what about the sound of words?" (NA 31), Merrill appears most openly on the horizon of future relation. For Stevens is not content simply to take apart the ideological fixity of definitions supporting nobility by investigating their etymological roots. His last move in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" turns toward phonetic "vibrations" that undergird, but possibly also undermine, verbal constructions—sound underpinnings that quickly prove unsound. In certain poems, Stevens will deliberately employ what some critics have called "nonsense language" in order to assert the threatening counter-song of phonetic logic, which builds up the rhyme (in Coleridge's phrasing) at the cost of exposing its irrational foundations. But the prose in *The Necessary Angel* never runs down in this fashion, for Stevens conveys a sense throughout these essays that philosophy still retains something of its "official" status as the adjudicator between rival versions of being: "philosophic truth may be said to be the official view" (NA 40). (Actually, Stevens proves himself unable to practice philosophy, and disinclined to rue this incapacity.) He demonstratively deconstructs truth into words into sounds, yet continues to support the chain of hierarchical analogy by which the very system of assessing value is secured. To quote a cento of passages from the essay:

The deepening need for words to express our thoughts and feelings which, we are sure, are all the truth that we shall ever experience, having no illusions, makes us listen to words when we hear them, loving them and feeling them, makes us search the sound of them, for a finality, a perfection, an unalterable vibration, which it is only within the power of the acutest poet to give them. . . . [P]oetry is words; and . . . words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds. . . . [N]obility resolves itself into an enormous number of vibrations, movements, changes. (NA 32, 34)

The material, glottal emphasis on the vibrations made as we form our words, as if the vibrations themselves had a kind of pre-semantic value,

presents Stevens as something of an operatic virtuoso, a vocal epicure hitting the high notes. Stevens betrays no interest in opera at any point in his career, always preferring the visual arts as analogue to his poetic quest. But his predilection for viewing poetic speech as rhapsodic, coupled with his skepticism about “definitions” of poetry, leads to the elevation of sheer sound, which helps to explain his attraction for Merrill, whose attachment to opera is boundless. Indeed, *A Different Person* has almost nothing to say about vocal styles among poets whom Merrill might wish to emulate or avoid, but it spends a great deal of time assessing opera singers, as if their choices were more important for Merrill to study. The very difference between opera and ordinary speech explains some of its appeal for Merrill: what better way to separate oneself from voices grown familiar and obnoxious? At the beginning of the memoir, Merrill recounts his revulsion, in those days, at the distance separating his early poems from lyrics that might be uttered “by a living voice” (DP 6). This realization, rather than impelling him toward experiences that might prompt demotic speech, pushed Merrill instead to search for a substitutive higher voice, one that he was helped to discover through his keen attentiveness to various operatic styles. One example will have to suffice. After hearing Kirsten Flagstad, the great soprano, sing in person, Merrill surmises that she had “access to feelings and actions that sprang not at all from what we knew of her private life as a Norwegian housewife. . . . Aren’t there passages whereby the psyche climbs into far, high-ceilinged chambers, then returns safely from the escapade?” (DP 74).

Speaking of such psychic scaling, the somewhat desultory plot of *A Different Person* does display a surprising teleological drive toward moments of aesthetic epiphany. In retrospect, these moments appear to have been suppressed, or disguised, in the book’s earlier sections. Thinking of the uppercase pronouncements issuing from Ouija board and spirit world in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, alongside the italicized summaries that close each chapter of *A Different Person*, one might plausibly read Merrill’s moment of ascent before the oldest mosaics in Ravenna as a kind of uppercase coda to the wandering narrative that precedes it. “Nothing has prepared me for what I see,” Merrill writes, as he enters the tomb of Galla Placidia, “a small brick building, squat and clumsy beside its tall domed neighbor” (San Vitale):

The space, effortlessly anthropomorphic, has been created, it seems, to dramatize the inner life of a seer or a sibyl, the miracles hidden beneath weathered, baked-brick features, upraised in thought. . . . Look! there’s the *buon pastore* seated among his lambs. But this young shepherd hasn’t yet evolved into a Christian savior. Cross held upright like a primitive bass viol about to be played, he is still Orpheus, or Apollo. . . . I stand as though in the mind of some young, wide-eyed god, extravagantly in

love with detail, and grieved by nothing under the sun, not even the bigotries he has already begun to foster or the self-determined faces in those two imperial retinues above my head. . . . Round each panel runs a border, no, a series of borders . . . steps in an argument so daring yet so crucial to the rest of my life that I know I must get it by heart—not now, though. (DP 197–98)

This passage breaks out of the containing narrative with rupturing surprise, but since readers of *A Different Person* must know full well where the epiphany leads—to Ephraim, Mirabell, and beyond—discordance is tempered by recognition: we understand just how crucial to the rest of Merrill’s life this encounter will prove.

Ravenna is sacred ground to Yeats as well, so staring at these mosaics compels Merrill to repeat lines from the Byzantium poems. The experience of apotheosis, which Merrill depicts as a form of prosopopeia, brings to mind other avatars of the modernist sublime. As *A Different Person* draws close to its conclusion, therefore, we begin to hear more about the influence of W. B. Yeats, Stevens, T. S. Eliot, and Rilke on this young poet. These figures had been suppressed in the earlier pages of the memoir, as if their presence might make the book’s aesthetic “plot” too predictable or predetermined. Advanced criticism of Merrill will need to parse his place in the modern poetry of the sublime—including, as I have argued, an operative sublime. We must also accept and understand the force of Merrill’s preoccupation with varieties of religious experience and ways of manipulating numinous power through *techne* and technology:

*Now each morning, risen like Kundry in Parsifal with a shriek and a shudder to do my Klingsor’s bidding, I make for the arcane, underworld glow of a little screen. Presently minimal bits of information, variable within strict limits, like the tesserae of a mosaic, flicker and reassemble before my eyes. (DP 202)*

The allusion to Richard Wagner’s *Parsifal* underscores (as if this were necessary) Merrill’s link to decadent, early modernist, translations and transformations of the Christ story. *Parsifal* figures prominently toward the end of *The Waste Land*, in Eliot’s fragmented echoing of the Grail Quest. Merrill’s “identification” with the female Kundry, however, bears some teasing out. Kundry’s subservience to her master, Klingsor, figures the poet as servant to a greater power. Since the dead speak through the medium of JM in *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the logic of such affiliation is compelling. But the particulars of Kundry’s story, hardly lodged in the literary public domain, offer deeper clues as to why Merrill brings her into the text. Her transgression, we are told in Act II of the opera, was to mock Christ’s agony: “I saw Him, Him, and mocked.” How deep, or far back, in Merrill’s own story, does the identification extend? Whatever form

of religiosity Merrill adheres to, he never abandons Stevensian touchstones on the nature of belief. *A Different Person* quotes sententiae from Stevens that seem to have authorized Merrill to persist in a version of transcendent skepticism, secured by aesthetic faith: “ ‘God and the imagination are one’ ”; “ ‘The prologues are over. It is a question, now, / Of final belief’ ” (*DP* 261). At the same time, the figure of Jesus emerges more prominently as *A Different Person* draws to a close. The passage I quoted on the Ravenna mosaics posits Jesus as a youthful Apollonian or Orphic deity—a figure of the youth as virile poet. The Jesus most favored by Merrill—an ever-freshened, young Jesus—is gathered to the company of other “crucified” young imaginers such as Arthur Rimbaud and Oscar Wilde, supernovae in the galaxy of aestheticism.

I might gladly have accepted Christ as a kind of living ideogram for the imagination, a spark of godhood breathed upon in each of us. In the Sistine Chapel’s *Last Judgment*, the central dancing figure, like the great marble arm detached from the same artist’s unfinished *Pietà*, was pure Apollonian radiance. What chilled me was the (so to speak) movie version of that supreme fiction. Pulpits the world over urged it upon the whole family. (*DP* 211)

The strictures one must accept in order to fulfill the hortatory idea of “the whole family” make such choice impossible for an artist such as Merrill. He is, after all, a different person.

Poetry of the sublime continually tests ontological borders, looking for porous entry points. The limits of identification are always being tested. *The Changing Light at Sandover*, with its dicey dance on the sacred gameboard, gives Merrill (or JM, as he is called) unparalleled opportunity to ventriloquize other, demi-godly or higher, voices whose register of authority remains to be determined. The preceding discussion of how Merrill eroticizes Jesus in *A Different Person* should warn against reading acts of sublime identification without paying close attention to issues of gender and desire. (Readers of *The Changing Light at Sandover* scarcely need to be reminded of the appetitive nature of Merrill’s sublime.) A revealing moment toward the end of *A Different Person* switches the focus from metamorphosis to sexual role-playing, what Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert call a discursive “sexchange.” The portion of the text I will look at occurs, not surprisingly, in the part of the memoir where Merrill brings into view his relationship with Elizabeth Bishop. The only poem analyzed in the memoir is Elizabeth Bishop’s wickedly funny, uncollected poem, “Exchanging Hats,” which Merrill testifies to having been struck by upon first reading, for it opened up realms of slant confession. The opening quatrain will give a sense of the poem’s flavor: “Unfunny uncles who insist / in trying on a lady’s hat, / —oh, even if the joke falls flat, / we share your slight

transvestite twist" (200). Merrill describes his admiration for the way Bishop evades the censor yet flaunts, for those who can read, this swapping of "the headgear of the other sex":

*Whatever helped to complicate the texture—double meanings, syntax that William Empson would have approved—was all to the good. Here, though, was a poet addressing herself with open good humor to the forbidden topic of transsexual impulses, simply by having invented a familiar, "harmless" situation to dramatize them. I was enthralled.*  
(DP 141)

The poem comes to life later on for Merrill, after he comes to know Bishop personally, and comes to regard her "as the 'right woman,' someone my spirit could aspire to resemble or, put less ponderously, to whose turn of mind and way with emotion I felt attuned" (DP 141). (Is Merrill declaring himself Robert Lowell's shadowy rival for Bishop's affections?) Driving in a taxi with Bishop, in Brazilian foothills, the two poets seem to pass beneath a rainbow:

*Something Elizabeth said in Portuguese set the fat black driver shaking with laughter. "In one of the northern provinces," she explained, "they have this superstition: if you pass under a rainbow you change your sex." (DP 142)*

Does such a change, brought about by a passage describing an act of passing, wring yet another variation on the memoir's quest to find the quintessential difference that made this person the poet he became? Or are we better advised to dwell within the insouciance of this reversible "transformation," ascribed to superstition, and emphasize the playfulness of sexual role-playing?

To conjoin Stevens, Merrill, and Bishop on the ground of sexual role-playing invites dismissal of Stevens as the obvious odd man out, or straight man, from critics who are familiar only with the poet's defenses and not his staged surrenders. But the stunning conclusion to "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet," in which the essay's annealments against the "monstrous" female are pierced by a recognition of the Youth's need for a female guide, must have confirmed later poets such as Bishop and Merrill in their sense that Stevens was to be valued precisely for his predictable yielding to the very eroticized imagination (of "sister and mother") that he "spurned and crave[d]" (CP 87, 88). A wartime polemic, marshalling the forces of non-martial strength, "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" is filled with contradictory tackings, even by Stevensian standards. The Youth, who is associated with "elevation" (NA 51), "apotheosis," and "transformation" (NA 49), must also satisfy the perquisites of reality, so that he can plausibly resist forces of destruction without ceding the common world.

The essay's major contradictions emerge whenever Stevens labors to defend what he calls "the masculine nature" (NA 66). Notoriously, Stevens wrote: "The centuries have a way of being male. . . . [T]hey get it, in part, from their philosophers and poets" (NA 52). The grating insouciance of "have a way," with its big-shouldered brusqueness, might mark a point at which some readers put the essay down. That would be premature, for Stevens actually associates the centuries with an Anchises-like past that the son demystifies through the exertion of what Stevens labels "intelligence":

a younger figure is emerging, stepping forward in the company of a muse of its own, still half-beast and somehow more than human, a kind of sister of the Minotaur. This younger figure is the intelligence that endures. (NA 52)

In characteristic fashion, Stevens loosens pronominal reference so that considerable slippage is allowed in the assignation of identity. Who, exactly, is the sister: is it the younger figure, or the muse? The essay quickly stabilizes itself by fixing the gender of this figure as a "young man," but I am more interested in that momentary hesitation.

"The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" grows even more inextricably complex on the subject of gender- (and genre-) crossings as it concludes. Stevens ends with an italicized, lyric apostrophe from Youth to "Sister," rather like Merrill's italicized codas in *A Different Person*:

*Inexplicable sister of the Minotaur, enigma and mask, although I am part of what is real, hear me and recognize me as part of the unreal. I am the truth but the truth of that imagination of life in which with unfamiliar motion and manner you guide me in those exchanges of speech in which your words are mine, mine yours.* (NA 67)

I seize on the *glissando* eliding "those exchanges" into "sexchanges" backed by the exchange of words between the two, now one. Equally important to note is the Paterian language of accumulation that precedes the storm, where Stevens endorses the aesthetic credo of excess: "the genius, because of the abnormal ranges of his sensibility, not only accumulates experiences with greater rapidity, but accumulates experiences and qualities of experience accessible only in the extreme ranges of sensibility" (NA 66). An extreme and abnormal sensibility, rather than leading to the horrors of war, appears in Stevens' essay to be the force that brings his Youth to swap with the monstrous sister. Nothing is easy or natural about this cross-gendered sublime. Indeed, it qualifies as "a violence from within that protects us from a violence without" (NA 36).

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## Stevens as King of the Ghosts: James Merrill and Wallace Stevens

TIMOTHY MATERER

IN A LECTURE IN 1980, James Merrill disapproved of “a drift toward the more or less monumental” in modern poems such as “The Waste Land” and “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” (*Recitative* 161). He also told an interviewer in 1982 that he distrusted the attempts of “giants” such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens “to transcend human dimensions” (*Recitative* 9). Merrill is obviously misreading Stevens, a poet of the earthly, when he compares his poetry to the “transcendent” works of Eliot and Pound. His criticism of Eliot’s and Stevens’ poems was actually more relevant to the poem Merrill himself competed in 1982, *The Changing Light at Sandover*. Merrill’s criticism of Stevens for tendencies that were much stronger in his own work seemed to be an Oedipal strategy to distinguish himself from a literary forefather or “giant.”

As Merrill himself understood, his critique of an elder poetic generation betrayed his own uneasiness with *The Changing Light*, a trilogy of poems he composed from the revelations he transcribed from his and David Jackson’s sessions with a Ouija board. He admitted realizing “to my horror” that while “writing this trilogy . . . everything was getting much bigger than I thought a life should be” (*Recitative* 9). In the Coda to *The Changing Light*, Stevens is one the authors, along with giants such as W. B. Yeats, Eliot, and Rainer Rilke, who attend Merrill’s reading of the poem and sit in judgment upon it. This final scene of the world’s great writers scrutinizing the poem is a gesture of both pride and humility. In producing his own monumental poem, Merrill asks to be judged by the highest standards, and he does not try to evade the risk of that judgment. Among these poets, Stevens is the closest to Merrill. Stevens’ poetry entered Merrill’s life just at the time he began to think of himself as a professional poet. The poet and translator Kimon Friar was teaching at Amherst College in 1945–46 during Merrill’s senior year. Although he was not in Friar’s classes, Merrill asked him to be his tutor, and Friar introduced him to Stevens (Friar 65). Merrill remembered that he “teethed” as a poet (*Recitative* 42, 117) on “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.”

The most curious mark of Stevens’ importance to Merrill is that Stevens was the first dead poet with whom Merrill communicated through the

Ouija board. After Stevens' death on August 2, 1955, Merrill was in the early period of his experiments with the board. (Merrill's first contact with his control spirit Ephraim was on August 24 of that year.) When Stevens appears on the scene, JM (as he refers to himself in his Ouija transcripts) reminds him that they met at Stevens' seventy-fifth birthday party. This was the luncheon that Alfred Knopf held on April 18, 1954, for seventy-five guests, with Merrill at the head table with Stevens. Merrill must have impressed Stevens since he wrote to Witter Bynner that the luncheon included people he "would have enjoyed quite as much as I did, including young James Merrill, who is about the age which you and I were when we were in New York" (L 859). In the Ouija conversation, Stevens remembers a verse Merrill wrote that began, "'We tire of—' What was it?" Significantly, Stevens remembers Merrill's adopting the weary tone of the aesthete but cannot remember what Merrill was tired of. JM supplies the missing words, "The high-flown," from the first line of "About the Phoenix" (Black Record Book).<sup>1</sup> The ghost of Stevens implies a criticism not only of the weary tone of Merrill's poetry but also of its "high-flown" quality. Merrill was already reacting against the "word-painting," as he once called it, of his early work.

The ghost of Stevens goes on to give JM some sound if conventional advice, "Ah yes. A pretty book [Merrill's *First Poems* (1951)]. But not enough to get you here. Work—" (Black Record Book). By "here" Stevens means the exalted position he has achieved as a spirit in the afterlife. Merrill describes this status in a letter he wrote to his mother in September 1955 about his exciting discoveries through the Ouija board: "I inquired about Wallace Stevens, who as you know recently died. He had been raised . . . [to] Stage 6 [6 out of 9, the same stage as Jesus Christ in the afterlife], because of strong intervention from Plato. I then was allowed to speak to him. He remembered meeting me and quoted a line from one of my poems." But no extended discussion develops with Stevens. As Merrill wrote to his mother, "We had little to say. 'We are embarrassed,' [Stevens] said, 'like guests who have met too recently at one party and find each other again at another party.'" In *The Changing Light*, JM remembers Stevens appearing "with that dislocated / Perspective of the newly dead" (5).

Merrill apparently continued to feel this "embarrassment" because it is W. H. Auden and not Stevens who becomes the "senior poet" in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. The Ouija board contacts allowed Merrill to think through his relationships with the great American poets who so deeply influenced him. The third of these was his fellow Amherst poet Robert Frost. As the gray eminence of Amherst College, Frost seemed too familiar and conservative to inspire a young poet; and Merrill disapproved of Frost's bardic and public persona. Merrill admired Stevens for writing challenging poetry without fears of losing his audience. Merrill expresses his criticism of Frost through the comment that he gives to Stevens' ghost: "Innocence is [a] national calamity on such a scale. He still touches with

all his awesome if raw insights into all does he? Does he still declaim[?]" (Black Record Book). In both Merrill and Stevens, "innocence" is a positive term; it is the quality that enables a poet to express fully his own vision. But innocence on "such a scale" suggests that Frost was egoistically absorbed in himself as the one poet who mattered on a national scale.

JM's Ouija partner, David Jackson, defends Frost by telling Stevens that "he strikes me as honest," and Stevens replies: "O honesty is that art?" and remarks that Frost did not work for "the good of our art, but has fattened on it. . . . We were so often patronized by RF & he . . . ran no risks" (Black Record Book). The criticism of course is Merrill's rather than Stevens', but Merrill was aware of the tension between Stevens and Frost. Early in *The Changing Light*, Merrill wonders what Stevens thinks of the developing poem and fears that his term for it will be the one Frost used to characterize Stevens' verse, "mere /Bric-a-brac" (CLS 72; Brazeau 160). It is likely that Merrill would also have known Stevens' wry remark that Frost's "work is full (or said to be full) of humanity" (L 825).

Auden rather than Stevens became the "senior poet" of *The Changing Light*—perhaps simply because Merrill felt less reverence for Auden. In *The Changing Light*, Merrill's Oedipal treatment of Auden as a literary father transforms the older poet from an orthodox Christian who scorned Yeats's occultism to a character who regrets that he never had the enterprise to use the Ouija board and instead relied on the "DREARY DREARY DEAD BANG WRONG / CHURCH" (128). (The capital letters indicate a communication through the Ouija board.) One could hardly imagine a greater distortion of what Auden and his poetry stood for. In contrast, Stevens in Merrill's poetry is deferred to as a poetic master. For example, Section S of "The Book of Ephraim" (the first book of *The Changing Light*) begins with a citation of two Stevensian principles that will inform Merrill's epic:

Stevens imagined the imagination  
And God as one; the imagination, also,  
As that which presses back, in parlous times,  
Against "the pressure of reality." (CLS 66)

Merrill goes on to explain that he had to abandon a novel he was writing about his Ouija experiences (and take up the writing of his long poem) because the novel did not "Press back enough" (CLS 66). He also relies on Stevens' authority (as well as Carl Jung's) when he proposes a major premise of *The Changing Light*. Echoing Stevens' grand speculation in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" that "God and the imagination are one" (CP 524), Merrill imagines that "God and the Unconscious are one" (CLS 74). This principle allows him to link his exploration of the afterlife with an exploration of the unconscious mind.

Early critics such as Gorham Munson and Yvor Winters applied the term *aesthete* to Stevens to diminish him, but to Merrill Stevens' aestheti-

cism was his most admirable quality. Stevens “seemed to trust his text to hold its own against the world it evoked” (*Recitative* 120). Merrill recalls that as a young poet he was “deep in my initial / Aesthetic phase” (*SPJM* 301). Like Stevens, he was well read in French poetry and influenced by Oscar Wilde; and he speculated as Wilde and Stevens did that aesthetics might replace ethics and poetry religion. He shares with Stevens recurring metaphors of life as a stage and personality as a mask, praising Stevens’ constant allusions to “the aesthetic performance, the ‘theatre of trope’ ” (*Recitative* 119).

Merrill once said that he agreed with Stevens about the “essential gaudiness of poetry” (*Recitative* 35). During a reading in 1979, he remembered that when first reading Stevens he basked in a “world of painterly particulars—interiors, necklaces, elephants in Ceylon,” which inspired poems “in which colorful scenery gave rise to questions about the nature of reality” (*Recitative* 117). He cites his poem “The Green Eye” as an example of this influence. In this poem a child or poetic epebe is caught up in a lush Stevensian landscape reminiscent of “The Comedian as the Letter C,” where limes

Are green as limes faintly by midnight known,  
As foliage in a thunderstorm, as dreams  
Of fruit in barren countries. . . .  
The orchard as a metaphor of green. (*Recitative* 118)

The landscape is indeed a metaphor because it lives only in the child’s “sunbeam gaze” (*Recitative* 117). In “The Blue Eye,” Merrill’s persona loses the battle to order his perceptions of “foam glint and blue beach grape,” and the poet cries, “Flighty particulars that would not meet / His eye, adieu!” (*SPJM* 5). In “Variations,” it is “Rambler and brambles. . . . Burr, cactus, yucca” (*SPJM* 8) that overwhelm his perceptions. Like Crispin, Merrill’s persona is one who views the “stride of vanishing autumn in a park / By way of decorous melancholy” (*CP* 31). In “Foliage of Vision,” Merrill’s persona mournfully observes a rotting plum “hanging, falling, fallen” (*FP* 39).

As these poems reveal, Merrill’s early poetry is highly derivative from Stevens. In *The Changing Light*, we learn that living poets draw on the “word banks” (*CLS* 262) of dead ones. Merrill draws on Stevens’ words so extensively that his own voice barely emerges. One of Merrill’s earliest poems is the “The Forms of Death,” which he included in a pamphlet published by his writing class at Amherst, *Ten Student Poems* (1951). In this poem, Merrill’s persona is a cross between Stevens’ Crispin and Eliot’s drowning Phlebas in “The Waste Land.” Merrill suggests we listen to the “vocables of the sea” by putting our ears to the mouth of a drowned swimmer, who represents the failed poet. In “Transfigured Bird” (*First Poems*, 1951), he imagines a young woman named Philippa, who resembles

Susanna in Stevens' "Peter Quince at the Clavier," as she watches red deer leap through the twilight while languidly arranging her hair. Poetic characters such as Merrill's poetic epebes and Phillippa, as well as his persona "Charles" in several later poems, grow out of Merrill's admiration for those in Stevens' poetry: "His people were unlike any others. Airily emblematic, yet blessed with idiosyncrasy, they fitted snugly into their poems . . . giving point to a passage without overwhelming it or reducing it to mere vignette" (*Recitative* 119). In the opening lyric of Merrill's *First Poems*, "The Black Swan," the swan is seen from the perspective of a child's "white ideas of swans" (*SPJM* 2), which uses *ideas* in Stevens' sense as necessarily changing conceptions of reality. (The black swan of course challenges his exclusively "white ideas" about them.) In "Cloud Country" the night sky appears in "astounding images of order" (*FP* 16). In the concluding lyric of *First Poems*, "The House," Merrill imagines a figure like Stevens' snowman, "a listener in night air" (*SPJM* 21) who is as much part of the night as the snowman is of the bare scene.

Although Merrill's light imagery is deeply influenced by Stevens, his use of it is far less derivative than his echoing of Stevens' terminology in the early poems. Both Stevens and Merrill are associated with Key West and both celebrate its light, particularly in Merrill's "Clearing the Title" in *Late Settings* (1985). Indeed, in "Clearing the Title," the light of Key West inspires his choice of *The Changing Light at Sandover* as the title for his trilogy. But some of Merrill's most Stevensian light imagery is associated with Stonington, Connecticut, where Merrill lived for over thirty years. "A Tenancy," which is about Merrill's first days in Stonington, recalls Stevens' "The Latest Freed Man." Although in Merrill's poem light from the bay turns an ordinary chair into a gilt one, Merrill knows that the chair is nevertheless ordinary and "Bound to break." Nevertheless, the changing light is transformative and will "change also me" (*SPJM* 117). Similarly, in Stevens' "The Latest Freed Man," the freed man feels himself transformed and enlarged by a strength that comes from the sun.

It was how the sun came shining into his room:  
 To be without a description of to be. . .  
 It was how he was free. It was how his freedom came.  
 (CP 205)

This is how Merrill's freedom comes in the last poem of *Water Street*. "A Tenancy" ends with the poet welcoming his friends into a room where the "sun is shining like a lamp" (*SPJM* 88). In such moments, Merrill has Stevens' sense in "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" that "being there" in the light of the imagination and feeling "a warmth, / A light, a power . . . is enough" (*CP* 524). Merrill's warmest remark about Stevens occurs in the *Voices and Visions* Stevens video when Merrill remarks that "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour" makes him feel the way others feel about the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

This influence is seen not only in Merrill's images and characters but also in the poetics that underlie them. In his *First Poems*, Merrill was already imagining what Stevens called a "Major Man" who can perceive things as they are. In "River Poem," the figure the poem describes becomes imbued with the landscape he inhabits:

The old man had lavender skin, a handkerchief  
Toppling from his breastpocket like an iris.

As the twilight becomes a "purple element," the old man "stayed there wandering / Like a river-flower, thinking of rivery things" (*SPJM* 7). Like a Stevens persona, the old man is creating the scene, not only perceiving it. The man is like the child in Merrill's "The Green Eye," whose gaze illuminates a garden with green metaphors. In later poems, such as "Prism," the poem's persona is an artist who is trying to attain a Stevens-like moment of vision. He searches for a "Crystal, hypnotic atom," which may exist although not for him: "Yet the gem / Revolves in space, the vision shuttles off" (*SPJM* 64–65). Merrill alludes here to the conclusion of Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." Merrill's "diamond . . . in the revolving silence" recalls Stevens' "fluent mundo," which "will have stopped revolving except in crystal" (*CP* 407).

The most significant parallel between the two poets' poetics is their shared conception of "innocence." Both Merrill and Stevens derive their idea of innocence from the Emersonian tradition. They imagine what R. W. B. Lewis calls an "American Adam": "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentiality, poised at the start of a new history." According to Lewis, the word that best describes this archetypal American figure is also the "key term in the moral vocabulary of Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman . . . 'innocence'" (1, 7). Merrill's innocence is not the Adamic innocence of Emerson and Whitman, however, which seeks to free the self from history. Like Wallace Stevens, Merrill is the heir of these writers in his attempt to perceive the world without preconceptions and to answer Emerson's famous question in "Nature": "Why should we not enjoy an original relation to the universe?" (3).

In *The Changing Light*, "innocence" is contrasted with the term "idea." For example, in the "First Lesson" section of *Scripts*, the angel Michael states the premise that "THE MOST INNOCENT OF IDEAS IS THE IDEA THAT INNOCENCE IS DESTROYED BY IDEAS" (*CLS* 321–22). Although Stevens never contrasts the idea/innocence dialectic so starkly, its complicated meaning for Merrill seems to derive from "The Auroras of Autumn." Stevens tries to imagine perceiving the awesome scene of the auroras as what they are rather than as some kind of revelation or "theatre." He struggles with the term "innocence" just as Merrill does. Stevens writes that there can be a "time of innocence" but not a place, or "if there is no time," or if innocence is not "a thing of time, nor of place," it is not "less

real." On the basis of these complex distinctions, Stevens works toward the tentative conclusion that

these lights are not a spell of light,  
A saying out of a cloud, but innocence.  
An innocence of the earth. . . .

If so, we can "partake thereof, / Lie down like children in this holiness" (CP 418).

Stevens' innocence seems to be a state of pure receptivity in which we perceive even the most overwhelming experience as it really is. Sections II–III of "The Auroras" introduce the idea/innocence contrast. Each section begins with the phrase "Farewell to an idea" as Stevens dramatizes the reluctant admission that certain comforting myths must be abandoned. The "innocence/idea" dialectic is also influenced by Stevens' "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." In that poem, Stevens writes that one must become an "ignorant man" (not unlike an "innocent man") to perceive the "inconceivable idea of the sun" (CP 380). Yet Merrill utterly violates the directive that immediately follows in "Notes," never to imagine a source of the idea such as a "voluminous master folded in his fire" (CP 381). For that is just what Merrill "supposes" when he invents Michael, the angel of light. Michael appears at the end of *Mirabell* announcing himself as the "GUARDIAN OF THE LIGHT" (CLS 276) who follows the track of the sun. At the opening of *Scripts*, which is devoted to the revelations of Michael and the darker angel Gabriel, Auden describes Michael as a "TALL . . . / CUMULUS MODELED BY SUN TO HUMAN LIKENESS" (CLS 286).

As in many New Age works, Michael is a symbol of human potentiality. Like Rilke's angels, his consciousness is undivided; he resembles Stevens' "Major Man" as a figure who "will magnify us in our own eyes by fashioning credible fictions of nobility" (Bates 264). Indeed, in "Notes" Stevens imagines the "fiction of an absolute" as an angel who "Leaps downward through evening's revelations . . . in the motionless motion of his flight" (CP 404). However, Stevens denies the reality of the angel in favor of the reality of the imaginative power that conceives it. In contrast, Merrill's angels are quite real to him, and Michael and Gabriel become characters as developed as Auden or David Jackson.

As he admitted to an interviewer (*Recitative* 70), Merrill possessed a "religious streak," and this distinguishes him from Stevens. The difference appears in the necessary but explicitly imaginary angels of Stevens and the angels of Merrill's trilogy, who challenge JM's disbelief with the force of their revelations. We see this process in the conclusion to Book II when JM and DJ are waiting in Stonington for the angel Michael to appear. As in "A Tenancy," JM feels that the light from the sea may be revelation enough, as it would have been for Stevens: "The message hardly needs decoding, so / Sheer the text" (CLS 275). Nevertheless, the message is given an apocalyptic turn. In the "quaint idiom" that might come "from the parchment / Of

some old scribe of the apocalypse" (274), Michael interprets the mystery of light:

THE GENIUS OF THE LIVING CELL IS ITS TIE TO THE  
REGENERATIVE HEAT & LIGHT OF THE SUN  
AND SO AS YOU FACE THIS SETTING SUN YOU FACE YOUR  
ANCESTOR, AND THE SUN LOOKS THROUGH YOUR EYES  
TO THE LIFE BEHIND YOU. . . .

.....  
LOOK! LOOK INTO THE RED EYE OF YOUR GOD! (275–76)

Michael's "idea" of the sun is far from "innocent." Stevens' "project for the sun" of imagining it as it is, stripped of philosophical or religious baggage, is utterly abandoned. Instead, Merrill asserts a romantic and indeed Wordsworthian view of the sun as a symbol of God's presence in the world. Of course, Michael is no crude Jehovah figure such as Stevens imagines in "The Auroras of Autumn," "strong in the bushes of his eyes" (CP 414). Michael is more like Stevens' conception of the "The Figure of the Youth as Virile Poet" (1943), which Charles Berger in this issue interprets as Stevens' imagining of a more viable masculinity than the one conceived by wartime America. Nevertheless, the poetry of Michael's revelations sounds more like the romantics than like Stevens and more given to the "quaint idiom" of an apocalyptic scribe than one expects of a modern poet.

We know from the "Stevens and Apocalyptic Language" issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* that Stevens was also haunted by what Henry James called the "imagination of disaster" (35). As Langdon Hammer's Afterword to the special issue shows, however, Stevens did not so much present apocalyptic events as meditate on the nature of apocalyptic discourse. Charles Berger's *Forms of Farewell* links "The Auroras of Autumn" (1947)—with its "gusts of great enkindlings," "flaring on the frame" of things—to the aftermath of World War II and the threat of nuclear apocalypse. Even so, Berger notes that Stevens' language "makes the auroras as difficult to define as he possibly can. . . . [T]hese lights simply cannot stop signifying" (41). Merrill's "quaint idiom" is wholly unlike Stevens' discourse when *The Changing Light* dwells on a series of disasters with the ferocity of John's Revelation. As Jacques Derrida and other commentators have observed, John's appetite for destruction is so great that Revelation is a series of repetitiously violent scenes. Similarly, *The Changing Light* is filled with portentous warnings from good and bad angels alike of the threatened destruction of our world and with extensive narratives of the destruction of three mythical civilizations by atomic holocausts. Among the numerous references to apocalyptic events is the angel Gabriel's to a future earth of

*Mummied rivers, dry as bone,  
Tamped towns, lost species, in an earthenware  
Terrine of suffocation, layer on layer. (CLS 456)*

However, although Merrill's highly specific and topical apocalyptic imagery makes him utterly unlike Stevens, he is like the older poet in recommending that we accept our fate, in the words of "The Auroras of Autumn," "in the idiom of an innocent earth, / Not of the enigma of the guilty dream" (CP 419).

Against Gabriel's vision of a polluted, ravaged earth, the final book of *The Changing Light*, "Scripts for the Pageant," projects a renewed earth imagined by one of its human characters, Maria,

WHEN HEAVEN, LIKE A LOVELY  
MINT-SCENTED FRESHENING SETTLES & EARTH BECOMES  
PARADISE (CLS 455)

Merrill's phrasing echoes the "midnight-minting fragrances" (CP 528) of the conclusion of "The Rock." What Stevens called the "pressure of reality" is continuously threatening this utopian vision and what *The Changing Light* calls the "greenhouse" of earth; but, as in Stevens, there is a force in the "FICTIVE SPACE" (451) of Merrill's world that represents "the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality" (NA 36). This force is God B (for Biology) who must, like the God of the scholastic philosophers, constantly think of the world to hold it in existence. Along with his brother gods, God B must exert his will against the nothingness that would devour being itself, which Merrill characterizes as dark forces that threaten to smash the "greenhouse." God B's haunting song recurs in the final book of Merrill's poem:

ALONE IN MY NIGHT BROTHERS DO YOU WELL  
I AND MINE HOLD IT BACK BROTHERS . . .  
I AND MINE HOLD IT BACK AND WE SURVIVE (CLS 360)

Instead of Stevens' imagined angels, Merrill gives us realistic ones; instead of God as a metaphor, a God whose power literally sustains the earth; and instead of a concept like the "pressure of reality," dark cosmic forces. Stevens' symbolic discourse is strangely literalized in *The Changing Light*, but Merrill remains true to the spirit of Stevens' poetic faith in the power of the imagination.

What might Stevens have thought of *The Changing Light at Sandover*? Would he have dismissed Merrill's vision of heaven as merely a version of earth? Merrill himself may hint at a negative reaction when the spirits who narrate much of Book II of *The Changing Light* first appear in Book I. The spirits terrify Stevens, who asks "WHERE'S MY HAT" (CLS 73), and flees the scene. But we have no ghost come from the dead to tell us what Stevens might really have thought of Merrill's late poetry. We can only know that Merrill had a strong sense that he was being judged by the elder poet's standards. Late in "The Book of Ephraim," JM explicitly requests Stevens' opinion of an earlier section of the poem. JM's spirits tell

him that section K of the poem, which features couplets, has been praised by no less a precursor than Alexander Pope! JM replies that he would “rather hear / Mr. Stevens on the subject,” although he fears Stevens may consider his verse (as Frost said of Stevens’) “mere / Bric-a-brac” (CLS 72). Stevens refuses to express his opinion of section K: “I WAS NEVER ONE FOR BLURBS” (Stevens expresses his reluctance to write a blurb in L 849). Instead, Stevens offers more advice in couplets of his own:

TAKE WITH A GRAIN OF SALT JM SUCH PRAISE  
A SCRIBE SITS BY YOU CONSTANTLY THESE DAYS  
DOING WHAT HE MUST TO INTERWEAVE  
YOUR LINES WITH MEANINGS YOU CANNOT CONCEIVE  
(CLS 72)

Stevens’ advice is like Auden’s later in the poem to consider “WHAT A MINOR / PART THE SELF PLAYS IN A WORK OF ART” (CLS 262). Like Auden, Stevens is advising Merrill not to think of himself as artist but of the art he serves. Although the “scribe” Stevens refers to is probably the angel Michael, he stands symbolically for the great literary spirits of the past who inspired the artists of the present. After listening to Stevens’ advice, JM reluctantly and humbly concludes that all true literature is “ghostwritten” (CLS 72). In Book II of *The Changing Light*, JM recalls that Stevens had “years ago” described

Peculiar moments when his mind grew dim  
In Heaven, as if being used elsewhere. (CLS 189)

We can easily surmise who in those moments was drawing on Stevens’ “word banks.”

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>For permission to cite unpublished material by James Merrill, I am grateful to the James Merrill Estate and to the curators of the James Merrill Papers, Special Collections, Washington University.

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## Poems

### an idea of morning

*It is like a thing of ether that exists  
Almost as predicate. But it exists,  
It exists, it is visible, it is, it is.  
—“Auroras of Autumn”*

it is like a thing of ether that exists  
only in theory, only in terms of certain  
senses. and in the tenuous space between  
that of waking and that of dream, there  
is its kind of snowy energy; one that dissipates  
as soon as it is grasped. so the morning is  
a brief type of sadness; it relates to dream

almost as predicate. but it exists  
nonetheless—though only for mere moments  
in its purest form. and in the gleaming  
aftermath, the bright instants when, for all intents  
and purposes, we forget it—lost in the later  
processes of our dreams’ transformation into  
memory—we should still not deny that

it exists. it is visible, it is—it is  
the eyelids’ transition from deep black to  
orange-red. and this stage of waking, this  
morning, is not a discrete event, but instead  
a process—a frantic counting of  
the fissile splits of seconds between the urge  
to stir and the opening of the eyes.

matt robinson  
Fredericton, Canada

## Mr. Stevens and Buddha Contemplate the Snow

*I read little or no fiction, and really read very much less of everything than most people. It is more interesting to sit round and look out of the window.*

—Letter to José Rodríguez Feo

In 1945, in Hartford, Connecticut,  
snow arrives—thick, wet,  
uninterrupted by wind or word

as the smudged sun descends  
and all the trees assume  
the color of night and loss.

Mr. Stevens can see the snow  
and the dulled sun and the trees  
changing. His Buddha

sees them too and sees Mr. Stevens  
seeing them. The small stone face  
of the round, serene god

forever smiles and does not smile—  
and the thick snow falls unseen  
in the night that these two share.

Ken Lauter  
Nacogdoches, Texas

## Mr. Stevens Pauses at the Door

*But where is the bride? . . .  
She must come now. The grass is in seed and high.  
—“Ghosts as Cocoons”*

What does it mean then, to go forever  
out the door, under the dead eye  
of a mute and beautiful spouse in bronze?

She is the guardian of hearth and home,  
she the garden's mistress.  
You are the man. You must go out

to the office where you work and work  
at nothing—at men waiting  
for life to happen to them, for claims

to be made against them, for whole  
houses to burn, and for ignorant fate  
to bless them (somehow, some day) with love.

Mr. Stevens comes home wondering  
when the bride will come,  
when she will bless him with her grassy kiss.

Hand on the door, he pauses, listening.  
Behind the house, a garden buzzes and blooms.  
Inside, a bronze head stares and stares.

Ken Lauter  
Nacogdoches, Texas

## October Day

*Thinking of Wallace Stevens' poetry*

The stone fountain, darkened  
by cloud cover, unlocks a new shade of gray  
this morning. October has taken all  
but the last leaves, the ones that cling  
on through winter. The river seems slowed,  
drifting toward ice. Smoke from the factory smokestack  
makes a black gamma, sculpted by wind.

This edge of cold brings awareness of cold,  
perhaps sharper than much lower temperatures.  
One buttons one's top shirt button, zips one's coat.  
Sometimes the slow shapes of time change  
with dim omen, but the first brush dipped in chill  
clearly portends the coming composition.

The mind of winter does exist. A snowman  
shows up overhead in three distinct clouds, which fall  
oblong and away. I imagine that cold shape,  
feeling a shape of cold against my hands and face.

Robert Randolph  
San Marcos, Texas

## In Brief

Summer turns her hand, and brings down from the mountains,  
withered-limbed, and shawled in snow, the cold.

I have seen the summer come and go,  
in tattered tresses, golden-robed,

the river by the winter slowed.  
The starkened trees.

Robert Noreault  
Massena, New York

## Without Words

Without words, I understood  
what the oboe was saying, each  
note was enough, all that ache  
through hollowed wood whose  
twinned reed too easily splits under  
pressure, so much, the player  
has to understate his pain,  
marginalize the meaning in his  
music, in the likeness of a poet.

And in the movie, any movie,  
where there is sadness where the  
story stops, I come away mostly  
knowing the fate of the forlorn  
lovers, over is over, the same as  
in any language or any country.

Then, there comes that high-  
pitched violin, vying for its por-  
tion of my pliancy, locked away,  
though not for long, in a vast  
region of the heart's realm, ruled  
by nuances as never before, that  
causes the coursing blood to bolt  
like a deer toward a poacher's light.

Willie James King  
Montgomery, Alabama

## Turning Eighty

*It makes so little difference, at so much more  
Than seventy, where one looks, one has been there before.*  
—“Long and Sluggish Lines”

When he shrugged his body into hers,  
a giant brain wave tickled him so  
he had to pell-mell pull out  
his essential self—only to be seized  
by a spurt of whimpers that no one,  
including his closest friends,  
would ever guess his own.

How much longer could he stay put,  
even if he'd use some tactic like  
a headstand till the sky turned red,  
making him lose contact with the *one-  
or-he-or-me* part of himself now  
entering the ninth decade  
of so large a piecemeal life?

Advocate of the hovering question,  
how could he explain the cause  
of whimpering beyond anything  
but implying that since childhood  
he'd let just half his body be  
taken for his naked self?  
Now still as then the question lies.

Edwin Honig  
Providence, Rhode Island

## The Plot Against the Dwarf

### *First Witch*

He shrinks in a rock pool, chanting tall things.  
I shall cluck and finger Solomon's ring.  
The Djinn will appear  
on lotus pads, leave pickled eggs  
and walnuts for him to eat.  
It will goblet him.

### *Second Witch*

I shall dose him when he's fat and full,  
a spoonful of mercurial water so he sleeps,  
and rub a lodestone on his belly—  
it will jellify him.

### *Third Witch*

Oh, el enano! I shall shake a cowrie  
rattle and humblebee into his ear.  
He'll be wheedled, wiggled and wingled.  
I am the paragon of windlass and well,  
arras of liana. I'll split an apple,  
spit the pentacle of seeds into his hands.  
It will ossify him.

Benjamin Pryor  
Gainesville, Florida

## Poem at the End of My Mind

*The Palm at the End of the Mind* is taped to the windshield,  
taped to this desert landscape, taped to eastern Oregon,  
taped to the Owyhee River we just rode over on  
the wrong side of the road dreaming  
of baboons and periwinkles.  
Reading while writing while driving while Wallace—  
I'll crash into idle roadside planets and  
gawk at what shape these stars have carved us into!  
And in the same breath be buckled in thought  
when I see forget-me-nots  
grow wild in the corners of your smile—  
your smile is  
but a thousand miles away in some inflatable city by the sea  
and I grow liquid missing this  
and how you've forgotten mine—  
mine smile.  
It is reflective of those sculpting stars  
like I've told you  
you are, but the further I drive the farther you go, the  
less meaning the memory—  
as evening dies in the bodies' green going.

Albert Flynn DeSilver  
Woodacre, California

## Reviews

### **Wallace Stevens' Poetics: The Neglected Rhetoric.**

By Angus J. Cleghorn. New York and Houndmills (England): Palgrave, 2000.

Over the last two decades, academic criticism has brought Wallace Stevens out of the tower of "pure" poetry and into the world of responsible citizenry. Thus we have learned that, although Stevens was a poet's poet during most of his life, not only did he not shun encounters with the strife-torn world of the thirties and forties, but he was waiting for us to discover or, more accurately, rediscover him. His active relations with literary and political reviews have been examined in detail by such critics as James Longenbach and Alan Filreis. It is both on and against the backdrop of such "empirical" criticism that Angus Cleghorn begins his study of the rhetorical means Stevens used to negotiate his position in a field of contention. This allows him to correct some available textual interpretations. Cleghorn's own field, however, is a broader one. It is informed by post-structuralist and post-deconstructionist hindsight that allows him to elucidate Stevens' pervasive resistance to unitary symbol systems up through his last poems of the 1950s. An investigation of Stevens' "rhetoric" reveals the poet's implicit criticism of the very foundations of romantic troping, monumental art, utopian political thought, the Western epic, and other forms of authoritative discourse.

The book's highly compressed introductory chapter charts ways of entering into dialogue with Stevens. Its originality lies in the presentation of a rich store of malleable concepts for understanding how Stevens escapes the rigidity and fixity of "symbolic order(s)." Among them there is a flirt with phenomenology and deconstructive metaphysics, a brush with the idea of metonymy (used in a fresh reading of "Add This to Rhetoric"), and a glimpse of "material abstraction." The approach is eclectic, undogmatic, and intellectually self-aware. Seeing Stevens as attempting to overcome artificial "taxonomic divides," Cleghorn also emulates him. This attitude is carried over into the eloquent summary of the ensuing chapters. Most chapters center on extended explications of selected poems. Parts that had been previously published in this journal are integrated into a useful diachronic organization. The implicit narrative suggests a Stevens who remained alert to the changing balance of "historical" forces.

Chapter 2 focuses on Stevens' undoing of traditional muse tropes, using "The Idea of Order at Key West" as the centerpiece and Harold Bloom's idea of sublimation of romantic longing as principal foil. The sound patterns of the poem are shown to constitute an "abstract" composition that eschews any romantic search for ultimate reference. To my mind, Cleghorn's reading of this haunting but oft analyzed poem is a most readable and convincing display of fruitful hindsight. It does not just impose a doxa or conceptual grid onto Stevens but creatively engages anew with his poem.

Chapters 3 and 4 (about a third of the book) rehabilitate *Owl's Clover* in its complete 1936 version. The discussion lays bare the limitations of the artificial conceptual division made both by Stevens' own entourage and by recent critics—the conceptual division between (logical or political) “argument” and (artistic or aesthetic) “creation.” In Cleghorn's interpretation, which I see as both subtle and accurate, the poem disrupts this division. Its rhetoric reveals that not only art but all social forms rely on persuasion, which is itself the effect and goal of rhetoric. For instance, the statue with which the poem opens can be understood as the material means of mythologizing monumentality and excluding the democratic figure of the old woman. The speaker's recurrent use of ironic hyperbole in relation to the statue deflates the elite authority of monumental art. Irony also pervades the rest of *Owl's Clover* as it collects various personae, including the Marxist critic Burnshaw, the African god Ananke, and the Bulgar. These personae bring forward other forms of romanticism, utopianism, idealism, and totalizing symbol-making, which are treated in a language that problematizes “the notion of fixed symbolic identity.” Taken together, they illustrate the dangers of the search for a utopic, determinate truth. A wide-ranging discussion around Stevens' “Noble Rider” essay reinforces Cleghorn's idea that Stevens sees his world's actual and present chaos not as a result of its origins but as an effect of its contaminated rhetoric.

Chapter 5 deals with two wartime poems that Stevens excluded from his *Collected Poems* and moves on to the difficult long poems “Esthétique du Mal” and “Description without Place.” Cleghorn regards both the assemblage as a whole and the selected personae of “Esthétique du Mal” as displaying the deadening quest for “mastered knowledge” in terms of a “physically” effective and vivid rhetoric. He thus argues for taking “The gaiety of language is our seigneur” not as an escape but as the sign of a new kind of knowledge. A discussion of the actual textual placement of this line (within a couplet, within a part, within the poem) would have clinched the argument. The discussion of “Description without Place” turns around the figures of Nietzsche and Lenin and the inscription of reflexive language in the poem. It also juxtaposes sections of the poem with excerpts from the political speech delivered on the same occasion as Stevens' “Description without Place.” Stevens' poem is said to deconstruct the rhetoric of the diplomat's imperial dream.

Chapter 6 signposts several tracks concerning the question of narrative teleology before settling on analyses of figures of epic in a number of short poems from the 1950s. The tension between lyric and epic is brought into the problematic of Stevens' foregrounding of the troping and representational pretences of language. High points of the discussion include the dialogic invitation that inheres in the half-empty “necessary angel” in “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” and the conversion of masculine epic into Penelope's lyric myth as desire in “The World as Meditation.” But all of the interpretations help the reader see the later poetry as “apparitions” that are imbued with a view of language that is not nihilistic but constructive and participative.

Chapter 7 is an overtly political, actual, and hortatory collage-essay. It juxtaposes Fredric Jameson and others on knowledge and belief in a society dominated by the corporation, contemporary poems on love and desire, and

excerpts from Stevens' later poetry displaying a rhetoric that refuses static monumentalizing and recognizes the never-ending movement of desire.

Such a summary necessarily distorts Cleghorn's book. Readers of individual chapters will find specific questions and particular poems treated in respectful detail through the critical view of someone attuned to both the limitations and the possibilities of language as a cultural product and cultural producer. They will also find the controlling principles of the analyses synthetically articulated, often in brilliant *points d'orgue* that arch over individual readings and chapters as well. On the other hand, certain concepts could have been defined more precisely. The reader's "never-resting mind" may search, but in vain, for a discussion of the central concept of "rhetoric," for instance. It is true that Paul De Man's concept of "rhetoricity" "works," for as we follow the readings we grasp its relevance as a "persuasive function [that] also display[s] awareness that rhetoric works as a trope, as a constructed paradigm." Yet without returning to Aristotle or Quintilian or relying blindly on another "authority" (a practice that Cleghorn usually manages to avoid), a rigorous discussion of rhetoric's properly linguistic means might have sharpened the focus. It might in particular have dispelled the haze created by widely shared but unexamined truisms that collect around the loose term "music." It seems to me not enough simply to associate music with "aural persuasion" and then pitch the emotional or irrational effect of sound against the supposedly argumentative effect of logical structures of reference, because the very "rhetoric" of music—like that of language—combines linear syntactical structure with the punctual sound of pitch and timbre, be it of violin or voice. In addition, and in the economy of Cleghorn's interest in alternatives to rigid symbol-making, one might regret that he did not pursue further his interesting leads on aggregating metonymy.

This niggling should not distract from the serious accomplishment of a work that is as perceptive as it is generous in spirit and realization. It throws bridges across to other recent critics and engages with the poetry without clipping or controlling it. Cleghorn's own organization is metonymical, thus aggregating. He strides from one emphasis to the next, each connected in some way to the question of the mysterious relation between referential meaning, signifier, and their cognitive and emotional effect, that is, ultimately, persuasion—the effect of "rhetoric." But his study also re-encompasses earlier points and notions, and it brings back many poems as intertext, most interestingly "The Idea of Order at Key West," so that the book rewards being read from beginning to end as a whole. The ever-expanding gyre of its concerns is also part of its own persuasive effect. This is indeed a thoughtful contribution to the renewal of the study of Stevens' language, one that joins his poetic texts to a broader perspective on both the philosophical and the socio-political, thus ethical, uses of rhetoric.

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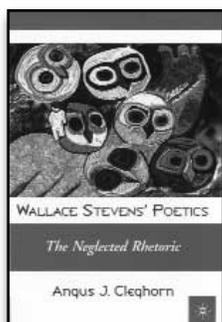
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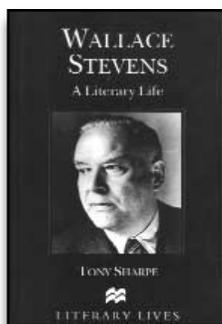
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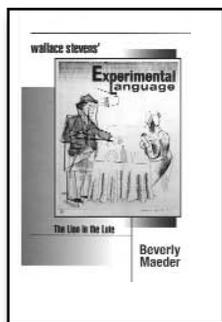
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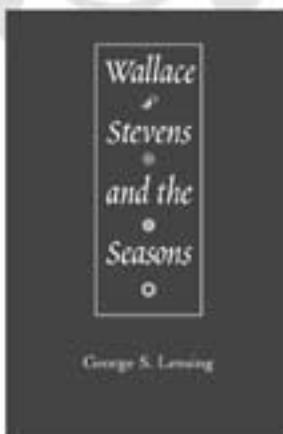
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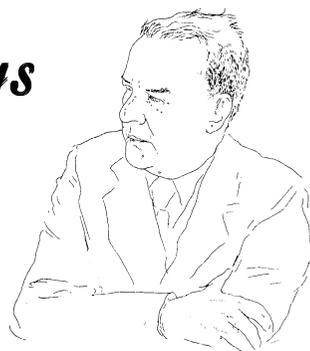
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